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Duxpress 2015

The Prometheus Project

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'Aude Sapere' – Dare to Know ! – the Motto of the Prometheus Project



forward

It once basked in its reputation and ranked fourth on the 'World List of Liveable Cities'. But the time of proud plaudits has passed and New Midland has been left with a divided society. Growing extremes of wealth and poverty have been banished to parallel worlds; those in a privileged enclave, the Cadena, live in uneasy proximity to the dispossessed, once middle-class population which has been decanted into carbon neutral 'Eco-Tainers'. The once prosperous city centre, reduced to an interstitial zone, an area now regarded as the dangerous 'Stits', is no longer deemed fit-for-purpose and has been carved up between land speculators who await profitable opportunities for future sustainable redevelopment.

This is a society where a free market economy has revealed that there is very little economic value to be derived from many inhabitants. However compassionate social planning practices have been applied to manage a frictionless transition towards a 'new product definition' for humanity.

Cyber-intelligence, has recast civic life. Those who once proudly styled themselves 'Noomidians' have lost political aspiration to anything more than 'inhabitant' status. A city once envisioned as an efficient, well-oiled machine has at least succeeded in imposing a dispassionate, unerring machine administered justice upon its inhabitants. Trend analysis is undertaken with precision to anticipate and neutralise anti-social activity. Pervasive consumer data profiling provides a realistic assessment of an individual's true social value and enables distribution of benefits accordingly. Cyber-intelligence administers community affairs with a scrupulous impartiality that the great law-givers of the

past could only envy. Justice is seen to be done. This is a community which can boast that the arrows of cyber-intention rarely stray from targeted outcomes.

The New Mid populace has been rendered socially compliant through enlightened schemes for debt management. Originally the high efficiency 'Tainer' dwellings were designed to manage a period of orderly transition while unsustainable debt levels were written down. But the advantage of the 'Tainers' in securing social stability was soon recognised. Tainers provide secure homes allowing residents to enjoy early retirement and while away their remaining time in comfortable torpor.

Cultural identity has supplanted religion in defining a new patchwork of social fabrics. The Tainer concept allows intolerant communities to nurture their animosities without ever encountering neighbouring anathema.

Meanwhile the masters of this society live sequestered lives in the fabled Golden Cadena, a chain of luxurious residential towers overlooking the now-desolate waterfront. But even these residents live in fear of losing their closely-guarded privileges. Few dare to cross their secure thresholds into the perilous world of the Stits beyond.

Despite these inequities, New Midland is regarded as an urban success story, one of a handful of cities worldwide that has achieved a 'sustainable' future by fostering investment in controversial technologies. Foremost among these, the Prometheus Project, lies at the heart of a renaissance focussed on bio-genetic engineering that embraces cyber intelligence.

Genetic scientists pursue technology which has radical implications for the future of human society. They jealously cling to their professional mandate, uncovering the painful truth of human insignificance as they work to bring to market a mix of genetic enhancements that are expected

to thrive in a much changed future world.

Success stories such as New Mid rely not only on good cyber-government but also on the practicalities of enforcement. Security and stability are at the core of a determination to avoid the chaos that has engulfed so many other parts of the world. Es-Tech, a once minor security agency, Securitech, has grown in stature to embrace every aspect of New Mid life. Es-Tech secuocrats work tirelessly to promote an environment in which cyber-intelligence can survive and flourish.

Es-Tech works hand in glove with Media-Net, the media giant, to ensure a stable productive population. Media-Net, with limitless access to data gleaned from every transaction in daily life, ensures that its 'clients' are shielded from counterproductive influences or any sense of impotence and failure.

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There are however, individuals who have failed to integrate into this smooth running machine. Mara and her community know as Trenchers are among those that have been left behind in the Stits clinging to a marginal existence amidst the ruins of a once vital middle class neighbourhood. This group of relicts has been dubbed 'Trenchers', a name suggestive of their defiance.

Admittedly most of Mara's colleagues have no alternative recourse. As paperless 'illegals' they are deemed economically dysfunctional. They do hold one advantage however; they have escaped the heavily indebted 'safety net' imposed upon so many others who have been dispatched to stable eco-Tainer environments. The Trenchers' welfare is no one's obligation.

The Diary

Leather bound! The dessicated flaking skin of a dead animal! Handwritten fragments of a life lived long ago, battered by years of travel, tumbled about in one of those old handbags that they once used to lug about. After her death it may have lain for years half-forgotten in the bottom of some forgotten drawer. How her world has changed beyond recognition! They used to value such privacy in those days.

Yet it remains my greatest treasure! Its last entries were made over 70 years ago. Nowadays keeping such an off-the-record account would be regarded as a subversive act, an attempt to maintain a secretive parallel life, probably even worse than being a Trencher in the Stits!

No one would take the time to fashion such a handwriting style in these days of cut and paste. Her writing tools have become as anachronistic as I suppose the quill pen was to her. Not long ago I found an old pencil stub between the floor boards in the kitchen but there is nothing to sharpen its point; everything in the kitchen is blunt and plastic.

I never actually met my grandmother; she died long before my birth. Yet in reading through her scattered entries some seventy years later I suspect that I have inherited some of her spirit. Her name too was Mara. Perhaps it was more common then than it is now.

Her handwriting is loopy and confident, but often hard to read. It is a script that presents a challenge for optical scanners. Her quirky letters reveal something that we have lost in the intervening years since her last entry. She lived in a time when it was possible to take pleasure in individually shaping letters. Most people nowadays have no such patience and soon resort to auto-dict.

Handwriting skills have completely disappeared; my hand would be much too undisciplined and shaky.

In a curious aside she alludes to a sense of separate identity arising from her being left-handed. How extraordinary that such things once divided people into separate camps! Nowadays people would only look at you blankly if you asked whether they were left or right-handed.

This diary was one of the few pitiful things that I salvaged in my little hand bag when I walked out on Gilb. At the time I feared that walking away would become the story of my life. But I hold onto this fragmentary continuity at least. Perhaps that's why the Trenchers are now so important, my determination to cling to my last chance.

In her scrappy entries she uses her writing to bring order to her private thoughts. She reveals anxieties that make little sense in a modern context. It was a time of dissenting movements, dangerous, divisive politics and even organised warfare. She keeps critical notes of articles she has read or events attended. All this was not a record for posterity or justification of her choices. It was a kind of personal musing. She would be horrified to see that this scrappy remnant has unexpectedly survived as her only testament.

It is a battleground of contrary forces within her; often she returns to pour derision on some earlier assertion. She expunges words, looking for simpler vocabulary. In some cases whole pages have been defaced with words of exasperation. Others have been ripped out entirely.

Through all this her character emerges. She remains pathetically hopeful that she will be able to address widespread social problems by somehow reforming herself. She lists items that she intends to 'boycott' (a quaint term) and then quite poignantly records disastrous failures of resolve. She

mentions her determination to be 'part of the solution' and yet she also seems to remain solitary in a society that is collapsing around her. She resorts to extended diatribes against the 'Industrial Military Complex'. Chimeras! Where is that military today? Where and what that industry?

My heart missed a beat when I encountered her entry about a movement in San Francisco that she had been reading about, the 'Diggers'. It is amazing now to think that in those days a person could consider travelling far afield and as she says 'check them out'. I have searched the database to try and get a flavour of those times.

Her interest in these Diggers almost seems too much of a coincidence. Is it possible that some phantom intent has been passed down directly to me through her genes? Those obsessions have mysteriously reappeared in her granddaughter and in the Trenchers.

The imagination that induces me to open up the dark soil and plant a seed seems to exist in some core of my genetic coding. But I can't discover much about what the Diggers hoped to achieve. Such information may be classified as special access and it would only draw unwelcome attention to myself if I were to pursue it too directly.

What a fantasy! To live with freedom, travelling to faraway places, countries which only crop up today as calamities to be avoided. She seems remarkably free and unencumbered by social constraints. She calls herself a 'feminist' and talks about a 'sisterhood of the free spirit'. What could that mean?

That was a time long before the massive indebtedness that now engulfs our society and keeps us rooted in our places. Nowadays her debts seem to have been laughably miniscule; she agonises over tiny amounts owed on a credit card. She planned to cut back on cigarettes! And it was all hard

currency then. She is also utterly unguarded in expressing her opinions. But of course she was writing in times before universal data storage. She wrote down ideas that she wanted to explore, heedless of how her thoughts might be revisited and reconstructed in later times, how her opinions might be brought back to haunt her. She records impressions of contemporaries now long forgotten; people whose lives are of no further interest. They will never know of their own immortality or be grateful for her insights.

Despite all her exploration she makes little mention of the huge issues that have come to dominate our own times. There is no mention of climatic turbulence or undisciplined population growth or the general breakdown of security. She may have sensed these great issues facing humanity and yet she prefers to dwell on her efforts to renounce a certain brand of chocolate 'for ideological reasons'.

Often I find myself opening her journal at random and leafing through, expecting to alight upon some passage that will address present quandaries. What would she make of her granddaughter sitting huddled in this ramshackle kitchen, poring over her handwriting trying to apply her thoughts to my own context?

But then when I consider my own case; what are the overriding issues I might fail to mention in spinning my own story? Since I don't do handwriting, I am obliged to input my musings on a discarded stand-alone. This is my own secret world, a poor approximation of the private realm that she created and embodied in her notebook.

In her time, like me, she regarded herself as a rational, modern woman. But she was also curiously superstitious. Am I not as well? - riffling through her pages at random expecting some magical parallel relevance to emerge? Her fears of black cats, of passing under ladders, expectations

at full moons, apprehensions about certain numbers; all figure in her musings about 'turns of events' as she called them. She alludes to silly rituals, like stirring tea counter-clockwise three times as a factor in influencing the future. But then I also have begun to develop such quirks. She would undoubtedly have been a prime candidate for one of New Mid's weekly Lotto-Jackpots.

Nowadays we have outsourced our memories. I forget what I was doing yesterday, let alone what I might have been up to last week. With amassed data retrieval systems, no one needs to remember anything. We're not held responsible for what we have forgotten. Few today feel impelled to hold private opinions; democracy has achieved the right to pay no attention to anything. Expressing personal opinion has always been dangerous. But nowadays no prudent person would dare go on record out of fear of being quoted out of context. All that amassed data that can be used indiscriminately, as anyone who accesses it sees fit. The data revolution has transformed everyone into public property.

In her effort to highlight her own freedom she claims 'The things you own end up owning you.' She did not want to be owned. But now our data profiles define a new type of bondage that none can escape. We have become possessed by our pasts. Perhaps there was a parallel then when people imagined an omnipotent, judgemental God, ruling from the heavens, an omniscient data repository! How long ago we lost her sense of a collective destiny! Now each person is presented with the challenge of charting personal survival.

What would this long-dead woman have thought of my world, lifetimes later? We have lost our appetite for personal privacy. We have little desire to reflect on what we have lost. But perhaps we should mourn the disappearance of some of these old notions of private speculation.

The Chapel

New Midland had obliterated so much of its turbulent history and replaced its recent conflicted past with the fanciful Cadena, an exclusive chain of architectural foibles strung out like a necklace along its waterfront. Few could claim precise knowledge of the history of the chapel standing at the gateway to the Grey Nuns orchards. This was an area which lay outside the Cadena Security Zone and was part of that welt of abandoned territories, known as the 'Stits', where only the brave or foolhardy roamed the decaying ruins of abandoned city streets.

In fact the Grey Nuns chapel long predated the move of the mother house from a gritty, industrialising waterfront to a fertile rural landscape on the outskirts of town. This site had once been a wild outpost hemmed in by tangled woods where the reclusive sister, Agnes, in retreat from her community had embraced a solitary penitent's life. For anyone interested, a murky watercolour, signed modestly *Sister Bean*, could be viewed in the declassified Data Banks. It depicts the recluse's humble hovel surrounded by neatly arranged herbal gardens, ordered, defiant against the grand sweep of the River Eme valley below.

Many though were aware of the legendary powers that this saint had exercised during her lifetime and long after her death. The hour of her death had been recorded by two attendants as a moment when a miraculous shaft of dawn sunlight slashed across the sick room to lodge as a burning globe over her heart as she expired. Many also had heard of the crystal reliquary still reposing in the dim recesses of the Chapel crypt which contained that same heart that had inspired much healing during her lifetime and still floated free as a grisly reminder of her continuing power.

At some time after Agnes' death, the mother house had exonerated her wayward life and the humble hut had been replaced with a brick chapel, deemed a more prepossessing place of pilgrimage. Eventually the convent relocated to take practical advantage of the fervour of the continuing stream of pilgrims.

The architecture of the chapel, though severe on the exterior, was gloriously excessive within. The ragged brickwork outer shell of the oval enclosure was crowned by a ring of twelve clerestory windows. The tomb-barrow shaped roof had once displayed an austere cross at the east end, fashioned from gnarled limbs salvaged from the original hut. But now no more than a broken stump remained and the rusted fixings dribbled blood red down the slates like an untreated wound.

The old recluse was interred in the chapel crypt under a massive stone slab inscribed 'Agnes Dei'. A narrow flight of stone steps, polished smooth by generations of barefoot supplicants, led down to this dimly lit room. Set into a wall niche within a polished crystal reliquary, reposed the grey heart that had become an object of veneration for generations of pilgrims. Some had even claimed to witness its continuing pulse as it swam in liquids warmed by votive candles. Once reverently illuminated by a perpetually tended candle set into the recess behind, an Ener-Save20 bulb was later found to do the trick.

The surrounding foundation niches of the crypt were crammed with crutches and sticks of the infirm that had come seeking miraculous intercession. These artefacts had been woven into elaborate patterns like bones in an ossuary. There were no ledgers recording details of these miraculous intercessions, only crumpled notes of thanks stuffed into every cranny.

The chapel above was the pride of an order that had abjured all worldly

temptations. It could accommodate the four score sisters who had once subsisted within the embracing motherhouse. The sisters could peer out from their bleak cells and contemplate the noble outline of the cross on the chapel roof silhouetted against the breathtaking sweep of the Eme valley. They could watch as chaotic nature was replaced by agglomerations of industrial buildings that gradually crept up the valley slopes to engulf their sacred precinct.

The chapel's grey brick walls had been scarred with many subsequent accretions, buildings that had once borne upon it and had been torn away. Time never quite heals such thoughtless wounds. But this ravaged exterior belied the playful exuberance of the exquisitely wrought detail within. Here simple wood had been carved into fantastical traceries to filter the clerestory light through a filigree of delicate natural forms and suffuse the sanctuary with magical radiance. Visitors could spend hours exploring a bestiary of tiny animals to be coaxed from concealment within the entangled carving.

Some questioned whether these extraordinary traceries were the product of genius or peculiar flukes of a deranged mind. It was a miracle that such fantastical figures had not succumbed to the many prioresses who had sought their removal as confusing a simple message with unnecessary ambiguities. But fortunately in more recent years these details had become a source of income for the order. Post card artists edited selections to suggest comical faces. Other visitors were able to acquire a treasure house of prurient imagery discreetly offered in boxed collections at the central sales kiosk. Led in by parents, successive generations of children had had fantastic shapes pointed out to them. Then they would tumble down the steps to the crypt to stare in horrified silence at the crystal reliquary containing the dreadful grey organ that had once embodied Sister Agnes' love.

The Grey Nuns Order was on its last legs, five of them. Few relicts staggered down to attend morning prayers in the unheated space. Later in the day a volunteer docent would open it to groups of indomitable tourists who had trekked over from smart Cadena hotels. The so-called 'Stits' surrounding the Convent had acquired a dangerous reputation that only added a frisson of adventure to their visits.

Despite the desuetude, the Church Commissioners had resisted exploiting the economic potential of their extensive holdings. Perhaps they were waiting until the last of the sisters could no longer manage the ordeals of subsistence. The cynical suggested that they were also astutely awaiting a turnaround in the property market to dump their strategic asset. There had been no shortage of interests lining up with generous offers. Periodically plans were published that demonstrated its development potential as an expansion of the Cadena. Landscape designers proposed cascades of gracious terraces stepping down to reinstated wildflower meadows of the River Eme.

Certainly all parties agreed that the chapel could not practically remain in its strategic position restricting 'modern desire lines'. There seemed no viable alternative to the relocation of this quaint anachronism and perhaps its 'reinstatement' it in a position of prominence, at the gateway to the New Epitome Technology Plaza or on a spit of reclaimed waterfront. Continuous debate addressed the logistics of reinterring the old saint in more salubrious hallowed ground.

Yet none of the forces seeking to control the destiny of this chapel imagined the subtle role that the captive heart of Sister Agnes would play in unfolding events. The murky outlines glimpsed through the crystal lens had inspired many to throw aside crutches once imagined inescapable. Her heart had inspired craftsmen to create a fantasy world that was beyond mundane imaginings. In its quiet niche it continued to

exercise its subtle power. Inexorable forces rampaged around it, certain of practical solutions to intractable problems; politicians paying lip service to a nascent society, urban planners intent on discovering a viable future for their city, genetic scientists designing a more sustainable human species. Underlying all this discordant controversy this dimly lit room bore witness to one who, sustained by her mystical faith, had ventured beyond the pale to embrace a vast, chaotic inexplicable world.

Trencher.com

What a bizarre following has converged on our Trencher website! Often it's the same three voices, lurking on the sidelines, obsessively readying for the fray. Though I've never met any of them, each conjures up a strong mental image through their casual reactions. Zebr@, (or he really trying to style himself Zee Brat?), is often the instigator, a polariser and probably a desperately lonely recluse, who tries to deflate everyone with his cynicism.

Someone styled 'Norle', rising to the bait with his fervent religious views, is a Creationist. I imagine him comfortably withdrawn and happily sheltered amidst his unsubstantiated certainties. Perhaps he is one of Rev El's flock, his intuitions veer towards 'vibrations' and 'resonance' with other dimensions.

Then the truculent A>Z surfaces from his murky depths, determined to pick apart the others' arguments from a condescending science geek's perspective, claiming that human intelligence is on the brink of radical transformation. Throughout these exchanges Zebr@'s world remains starkly black and white. There are no compromises in his life of stark contrast. Like his avatar I suspect he could be very exposed, relying on unlikely camouflage to disguise himself from predators.

And here I am cast in their midst, supposedly the moderator!

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Like so many in New Mid, Mara would be reluctant to admit that her closest confidant remained her Data-Pac. But she resisted the urge to free stream her musings directly onto the social networks. Perhaps she

wanted to recall some of the humdrum qualities of her daily life in the same way that her grandmother's diary seemed to elevate the mundane. She reserved time to reconsider her message before uploading passages onto the Trencher website. In these post-articulate times when interpersonal transactions were executed through staccato bursts of expletive laden text, few people retained any facility for sustained engagement. The data banks stored away all snippets of input with relentless efficiency for future reference.

Considering her grandmother's talent for describing her mundane existence in compelling detail, she began anew:

Bin Street remains relatively safe for people like me, I just scrunch up my hair and pull my hat down over the ears when I leave Trencher Camp and proceed with a broken limp, mumbling to myself. Those I encounter drifting around derelict premises usually go out of their way to avoid me. Few would want to be captured in one of the still-functioning surveillance cameras along the Cadena boundary.

Today I made the trek down to Grey Nuns looking at the tattered signs of long defunct businesses. Imagine three florists positioned side by side! What could they have been thinking? such a failure of imagination in a society obsessed with competition, even if prosperity had to be wrested from the neighbours.

It all proved illusory; it was not wealth that had grown; only indebtedness that had sky-rocketed. People found themselves compromised to the hilt. Few heard the death knell for their way of life as they shuffled off to the Tainers, burdened with their debts.

Today my destination was the neglected landscape of the Grey Nuns Convent that can be glimpsed through breaches in the old brick walls. It is

a tangled paradise I would love to explore. Imagine the confidence of the sisters who created this exclusive worldly paradise. Now it is abandoned to rampaging nature with roots shifting paving stones willy-nilly.

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The trencher.com website had proven an unexpected success; so many contributors' opinions skirted on the brink of the outrageous. Few denizens of the Interstitials had anything to lose in espousing truculent views. Mara, however, never imagined that her role of moderator would require such vigilance. The site often attracted maverick advertisers. It was difficult to pilot a fine line of what was acceptable while refusing opportunists that were keen to commandeer the Trencher message and provoke a renewed wave of outrage.

But what was this 'Trencher message'? There had been considerable disagreement within the ranks. The group had originally formed from scattered remnants of the Saint Ag's neighbourhood, a disparate protest group that had been thrown together during the period of mass evictions. New Midland was no longer able to tolerate alternative lifestyles. There had been too much festering acrimony, in recent years. Even the fact that a group like the Trenchers was 'allowed to get away with it' stirred bitter resentment among those who had compliantly accepted re-housing in the Tainers as the only solution to their crushing debt problems.

Many resented that the Trenchers had been permitted any voice at all. They demanded closure of a subversive website. Others though astutely recognised the value in monitoring such contrarian sites. They understood the power of the information network that now regulated New Mid society and kept a close eye on contributors to the *trencher.com* social network.

A Conflagration

They were called *Stits*, the human flotsam left adrift in the Interstitial zones. For various reasons, illegal status, criminal record or sheer misfortune of being caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, they had found themselves ineligible for rehousing in secure enclaves. There were some among them who had obstinately chosen to live outside the regulated world of the Tainers. They prided themselves in pursuing lifestyles that were off-the-radar and had banded together into like-minded groupings. Originally a derogatory term, 'Stits' had subsequently been adopted as a badge of defiance. Without fixed address they were not eligible for trading in virtual currencies like Goldies which necessitated elaborate transaction data trails. Because they were untraceable, Stits had to resort to proxy traders. Consequently some of the Stits groups had developed into direct barter sub-economies, one even resorting to roofing nails, or 'Naileys', as a common currency.

The Trenchers were one such group. Shoestring funding had been set aside for the Trencher Centre on Mayne Street. It stood out among the blackened shells in an area which had been at the epicentre of the Repossession Riots. The Centre became known as 'Trenchers' for no other reason than a large mural depicting a garden paradise had been signed by the artist T. Trencher. The centre was equipped with solar panels that powered several workstations with net access and made it a beacon to vagrant Stits attempting to maintain vestigial links with worlds beyond.

Mara felt uncomfortable referring to any of her clients as 'Stits'. So many were dyslexic. However adept they were at keying in short, angry diatribes, they had never been taught how to read sustained sentences.

Mara had been fortunate in securing a modest stipend for managing this

community information hub. Her weekly publication of foraging tips '*4-Free*' was a popular resource and revealed the potential of a wide range of plants, roots and mushrooms that could be harvested for an improved diet. They also published advice sheets on growing a range of vegetables that were not restricted by local G M patent controls. To participate in the programme all that was required was registration and a willingness to participate in attitudes surveys. Mara recognised that in their security obsessed society this was just another instrument of outreach intended to keep closer track of potential sources of dissidence.

Discreet monitors were positioned to ensure the security of resident workers. The gathering of information extended far beyond the recording of mundane interactions. Iris identification, body mass indices, vocal tremor analysis as well as skin galvanic reaction data, created a wealth of ancillary data that helped to identify persons of interest and winkle out potential malefactors.

She was grateful for her little lifeline. The Centre provided a modest income, if only in virtual Goldie currency, but it was just enough support to avoid resigning herself to one of the Tainer communities. There was usually something left over for seeds, basic tools and netting.

Many of the drop-ins proved only too eager to respond to questions from anyone interested in their drab lives. Few however, dared rise to the bait in offering political opinions about controversial social issues. Reckless opinions were known to be dangerous for people who lived on an economic knife edge.

Participants were also eligible to purchase lottery tickets for the monthly lottery. Stits flocked in to take advantage of such offers. Participation in the fortnightly lotteries with their massive Goldie jackpots stretched everyone's resources. But such dreams were the last resort of the

destitute. It was indeed ironic that she had never bought one of these popular lottery tickets herself but was now obliged to feign being an old pro in encouraging participation.

Mara occupied the ground floor of an abandoned house that backed onto the Trencher's Centre. Typically at midday she stepped out through the back door and walked down a short path to her own experimental garden plot to undertake some therapeutic weeding.

On this sultry July morning she sank into the warm earth and stared up at the sky. Despite the countless new barriers and hoardings that had been erected in New Mid, this exhilarating empty sky space remained open to ease a troubled mind. Her thoughts returned to the suffocating house that she had once shared with Gilb. She remembered it as being without any natural light and breathed a sigh of relief that she had put that terrible period of gloomy claustrophobia behind her.

She recalled how only a decade earlier this neighbourhood would have been full of the excited cries of children at play as the summer holidays began. But such sounds were now a distant memory. Those families had long ago fled their homes and their overwhelming debt obligations. Neighbourhood homes, with their deep shaded porches, had been vacated and the windows tinned-up; opportunistic weeds were invading every chink of their rapid decay.

Across the street there had been a sudden new eruption of buildings, an expansion of the Cadena, well protected behind electronic gates and set within incessantly sprinklered parklands, an exquisite landscape maintained by targeted herbicides. Such 'eco-ghettoes' with platinum plus sustainability ratings were extolled as the future of New Mid. Her new neighbours hurtled past in high-speed convoys negotiating intersections without stopping, anonymously encased in armoured 'cocoons' behind

deep tinted glass that betrayed nothing of the cosseted lives within.

But this was to be an afternoon that changed the Trenchers community forever. Bent double, she was cursing under her breath as she tried to root out a pestilential weed that had suddenly invaded the whole plot. She tried to suppress her paranoid suspicion that this was a genetic strain specially engineered to deter local agriculture. She could not identify it in any catalogue and had christened it 'skunkweed' due to the noxious odour of its striped leaves. There had been so many rumours about 'designer' super weeds contrived by botanical imagineers to sweeten soils and fix long established pollutants. Such tailored products were reputed to respond only to specific herbicides held under secret Prometheus patents.

At first Mara did not hear the young man rattling her gate for attention. This was a mere formality as the fence alongside had fallen apart. Nobody ever bothered with the gate on its squeaky hinges.

A self-effacing young man was peering anxiously into a little yellow hand held screen.. He appeared nervous, his pale skin flushed and blotchy in the heat.

"Dead", he said miserably, "totally dead ... can't even raise a service provider. The gypsies down the street said that you were the only one with signal. Can you oblige? I daren't abandon my wheels for long."

Mara looked at the beads of sweat on his anxious brow and his nervous eyes darting about the garden perhaps in fearful anticipation of lurking 'gypsy' thugs.

At the time this had seemed a perfectly reasonable request. A net blackout had been imposed throughout the Interstitials to discourage anarchists.

She understood the fears of those who hailed from gated enclaves and imagined brutish lives in the Interstitials.

“Oh I was hoping that you were coming to volunteer and help me get rid of the noxious weed”, Mara answered blithely as she led him into the chaos of her shady front entry. This taciturn young man seemed tongue-tied, unable to make any further conversational foray. Everything about his demeanour betrayed winsome vulnerability. His pastel yellow T-Shirt revealed the bony fragility of his slim shoulders. The oversized clothing seemed contrived to cover up his contorted skeletal structure, a questioning ‘S’ stance that he affected. His smooth, muscle free limbs dropped, unsocked into impeccable red trainers laced in white and a petite hand with delicately crooked wrist held the defective device aloft like an elfin shield, intended to ward off arrows of doubt. He turned and smiled at her encouragingly, revealing a row of dainty milk white teeth. But she noticed how he levelled the top bar of his glasses to protect himself from direct eye contact.

She glanced down at his dainty trainers with their pristine laces neatly tied and toes pointed inwards, all so touchingly self-effacing. What a contrast with Huggie, who had bundled by earlier that morning, with his unkempt beard, his truculent posture and rotund belly cinched in by an optimistic cord that negotiated only some of the belt loops. Huggie was of course everyone’s nightmare of what a Trencher ‘gypsy’ might look like.

The young man’s egg-like head was crowned with a fringe of lank hair which dropped vertically from the crown imparting a monkish appearance. Mara could not imagine purposefully contriving such an effect, the styling seemed to have been achieved by natural gravity alone. As he plugged in his phone and inspected the screen she noticed him peeping conspiratorially at her over the tops of his glasses as if noticing

her for the first time.

“The name’s Jay-Bee by the way,” he announced as an appeasing afterthought.

It was only in later reflection on the morning’s events that Mara began to feel misgivings about all these peculiarities. But subsequent events had unfolded so quickly. Within an hour of his visit, her comfortable routines were gone forever and the weeds in her garden would become an irrelevance.

A devastating fire that originated in the fuse box in her front hall spread quickly to engulf the photovoltaic installation and then the whole building.

Despite the constant background wail of fire sirens relentlessly patrolling the Interstitials, Mara knew that the only assistance she could expect from these services would be in securing the aftermath of a blaze, to prevent it from engulfing adjacent ‘investment properties’.

She had seen only too often what happened when local buildings succumbed to fire. In many cases the fires had been set by their owners, desperate to be quit of intolerable debt obligations. As if complicit in the tenant’s desperation, the fire services usually arrived on the scene much too late. Their only recourse would be containment as their axes smashed into every cranny where fire might lurk and their noxious chemicals flooded the premises.

Mara attempted to fight the fire herself. Several neighbours, the so-called ‘gypsies’, arrived shortly afterwards and attempted to be helpful. But no one had equipment to deal with an electrical blaze. Piles of soaking blankets and earth shovelled in from the garden could only suppress

peripheral outbreaks.

When the fire department finally did arrive, the brusque officers displayed little sympathy for her plight, assuming that like so many others she had contrived the fire deliberately to be quit of untenable commitments. How would they know that she was one of the few people in the Stits who could actually claim a modest income?

The officers salvaged clothing and utensils and heaped them in her front yard. Then the commander delivered his standard message condemning the building as too risky to permit her re-entry and presented her with papers to confirm her satisfaction with their intervention. He treated her with the utmost condescension, contemptuous of her tearful performance which he imagined was intended to expedite her speedy relocation at public expense to an assisted Tainer community.

And so Mara was left sitting, dazed, amidst her cardboard boxes in the back garden. Shortly after, a gentle, bearded young man flashed his credentials and announced that he could arrange temporary accommodation. He pulled out a long check list and officiously began to ask questions about family, medical history, political and religious affiliations. He seemed to relish asking the same routine questions in various guises as if to catch her out. Still shaking and enduring sudden flashbacks of the moment when the flank wall had suddenly erupted into a sheet of flame, she answered robotically, wishing only to be left alone. When this agent started describing the accommodation available at Tainer Agincourt she quickly realised that she was in danger of losing control of her life completely. She needed time to think, to outmanoeuvre the system. "Oh no, my family are on their way over to pick me up. They have a cart that will take these boxes – what's left, that is."

The young man, disappointed at the rebuff of his generosity, gathered

names and contact details which Mara fabricated on the spot. She began to feel the added weight of new suspicions falling upon every detail of her confabulation. But she certainly was not going to admit that she had no such recourse.

Even before this fire the future of the Trenchers Centre was uncertain. This neighbourhood was no longer deemed sustainable. Arson and looting during the foreclosure riots had rendered much of it unliveable. Wholesale renewal of neighbourhoods was reckoned the only viable option, but few investors were capable of initiating such investment. Abandoned houses had been tinned up and left to rot until comprehensive renewal could be undertaken. Yellow 'Danger' cordon tape had proliferated, advising that squatters would be prosecuted 'to the full extent of the law'. Ingenious chemical sprays had been applied to many properties to induce 'squatter rash' that some likened to rolling in stinging nettles.

She mulled over her options. The Help Centre was no more than a single room, she could not move in there. Nor could she imagine being relegated to a Tainer eco-home located in some far-off reclaimed suburb. Many of her old neighbours had resigned themselves to such accommodation, never to be seen again.

The boarded-up Evans house next door offered a tantalising possibility. They had been a local family of long standing in the community and for many generations undertakers of funerals. The Trencher community had tended to give them a wide berth. Proud and aloof they had been disdainful of her horticultural experiments and noisy collaborators. Suddenly one summer morning contractors arrived in a white van and boarded up their windows with corrugated steel panels.

She was aware that one of the rear shutters was loose and she had peered in to view the murky interior. All their furniture was still in position, as if

they hoped to return and resume their lives. She resolved to take up a temporary perch in their rear kitchen, drawing fresh water across from her own well.

Goldies

The advantages of the Tainers were not solely in offering a reduced carbon footprint when building stock throughout the Stits had been rendered obsolete. Their success as a social solution to New Midland's catastrophic dislocations also lay in the opportunity to group like-minded populations according to their data profiles minimising the internal frictions that had recently torn mixed city communities apart.

Some Tainers, still recognised as economically productive, were given access to a wider range of services, while in other communities inhabitants, superfluous to the productive economy, 'enjoyed early retirement' and could be sustained on a comfortable diet of digital entertainment. Ethnic Tainers drew together people who shared similar cultural roots and religious prejudices. Those with intransigent religious views were encouraged to nurture their intolerance in exclusive enclaves. Such communities enjoyed self-administered, faith focussed retributive justice.

Globally recognised hard currencies were no longer accessible to most Tainer residents. These local economies had to be sustained on locally regulated virtual currencies. The pre-eminent currency recognised across the New Midland communities was the 'Goldie', a virtual currency managed through a ubiquitous One-Stop Gold Access card.

Theoretically the Goldie was linked to 'hard currencies' but rarely exchangeable at anything approaching published rates. But this currency had become a proud badge of belonging among Tainer who received regular Wellbeing Credits which allowed them to pay unit rental, services, transit costs and local purchases. Ever rising levels of debt were offset effortlessly through Goldie inflation which took the pressure off

the hard currencies employed elsewhere in the Cadena community. The Goldie relied upon a seamless, automated system which minimised administrative bureaucracy and allowed mainstream banks to speculate profitably while side-stepping any taint of association with the high debt levels sustained within these communities.

Another aspect of this virtual currency appealed to political powers intent on maintaining stable, law-abiding communities. Relying on meticulous tracking technology, all transactions were closely monitored and any purchase deemed anti-social could be disallowed instantly. A Goldie could not be used to purchase services deemed socially destructive or injurious to health or proscribed within a particular Tainer community. Foods could be rationed, diets controlled, addictions profitably managed and anti-social cravings sedated. Access to entertainments or recreation could be allocated through reward points for approved social behaviours, particularly those deemed good for the local economy. All this was achieved through rigorous, neutrally administered cyber-intelligence.

The Goldie offered the advantage of a comprehensive data stream of all previous transactions. Such a data trove proved invaluable in predicting the aspirations of Tainerites. Because their behavioural patterns were predictable within narrow margins of deviancy, debts could be transferred to suitable speculators adroit at repackaging risk. Most Goldie card holders remained permanently mired in debt.

The Goldie based economy was rendered crime free through rigorous data tracking. The provenance of all moneys could be fully certified. All transactions were automatically scrutinised and unusual spending or travel patterns, could be flagged up for cyber security intervention. Vigilant investigators were able to determine the whereabouts of anyone straying from their expected comfort zones. Ingeniously equipped with a proximity detection functions, 'Goldie Plastic' had proven an ideal ways

of keeping track of people's movements, lost children, wayward teens, senile parents and other loved ones.

One of the more liberal aspects of the Goldie management strategy was in its very relaxed attitude towards online gambling. People were encouraged to nurture their dreams of sudden, unwarranted good fortune. Occasionally Tainerites succeeded in their gambling enterprises and were able to sail off over the horizon. Such legendary successes ensured an avid and steady market for lottery tickets.

Cradle to Cradle

Miraculously, Colonel McCubbins, for once in her life, had found herself to be the right person in the right place at the right time. She had succeeded in transforming the fundamental ethos of ES-Tech, the security agency now charged with comprehensive responsibility for social welfare in New Mid. Security, now synonymous with good government, had become the obsession of an era plagued by turbulence and adversity. The citizens of New Mid had learned to appreciate how fortunate they were to enjoy such stability in a world enduring constant upheaval. Details of disasters abroad judiciously filtered in via the international media only served to reinforce this sense of privilege born of combined good luck of geography, a fortunate climatic niche and an efficient security system based on cyber-profiling which enabled Es-Tech to neutralise problems before they got out of hand.

Long gone were the days of bulging biceps in ill fitting uniforms whiling away the hours in lonely lobbies all night. ES-Tech had found itself positioned to provide the basic services still expected under the strictures of 'Taxpayer Light'.

Under the Colonel's auspices, Es-Tech had stepped into the funding vacuum as government services disintegrated under heavy debt burdens. Expanding its school security role, the organisation had found itself well positioned to assume responsibility for the complete education service, seamlessly integrating it with the penal system. This had evolved into McCubbins' expansive vision of a comprehensive custodial organisation, truly '*Cradle to Cradle*'.

However this morning the Colonel sat staring apprehensively at the empty desk in her dimly lit office. An errant shaft of brilliant warm light

slipped furtively through a crack in the enshrouding curtains and nudged her hard shod foot. Beyond, a dazzling summer day was unfolding and the morning sun was sparkling on the waves of the vast empty lake. But the Colonel found the flat, empty surface of the lake dispiriting. Not many years ago it would have been enlivened by recreational sailors with nothing better to do with their lives than skitter across the horizon, or tourists setting out for a picnic on the *Island Queen*. But now, like so much of the urban landscape that lay prostrate at her feet, it had been wiped clean of purpose, nature in the raw, a blank slate awaiting a reviving, re-animating message.

She was apprehensive about her scheduled meeting with a man who was undeniably an unreconstructed, old-school, sexist bully. Burrell de Vere was the worst kind of chauvinist, one who deviously concealed his deficiencies behind a mask of supercilious urbanity. He evinced little respect for her elevated role in this halcyon aerie on the sixty-eighth floor of the Hyperion Plaza.

Some of the Colonel's current apprehension may also have stemmed from her just concluded briefing with her agent, Justin Brattoné, or 'the Brat' as she secretly styled him. His fluting voice still seemed to permeate the room. In an almost inaudible whisper he had wittered on about Algorithms, his pet obsession of the moment. The Colonel remained a refusenik when it came to cyber issues. The thought of any artificial intelligence that exceeded her own terrified her and sent her scurrying for her pencil sharpener. The very word 'Algorithm' conjured up an enveloping squid-like creature with tentacles and pulsating suckers, each limb equipped with an independent, free-thinking, undisciplined brain. A modern Hydra, if you cut off one of its heads, dozens more, each with an uncontrollable opinion, would grow instantly in its place.

The Colonel had tried to impress upon Justin the magnitude of ES-Tech's

the expectations ES-tech placed upon him in his posting at Media-Net, the most important source of public opinion in New Midland. “You should realise what a privileged position you occupy. It is very few of us who enjoy such freedoms in carrying out their prescribed roles.”

Justin had minced evasively “Believe me, I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardise that trust. Burrie fully appreciates the wide range of technical expertise that I bring to the table.”

The Colonel looked doubtful. There seemed to be something deeply subversive about his department, something that she would like to see rooted out and exposed to the parching sun. “You must recognise that you have been placed in a position of trust by the most powerful person in this City. He’s a *world-class* person. We cannot disappoint this trust.”

As Justin nodded and smiled sweetly assuming the vacuous face of a benign cherub. His averted eyes caught a satanic dart of light that had penetrated a curtain fold.

Justin had been debriefing her on the work undertaken in his secondment to de Vere. He relished his role as a security expediter to this luminary which offered astonishing insight into the staggering powers wielded by Media-Net as the co-ordinator of consistent public opinion across the city. Under de Vere’s wing he had been given direct access to ‘deep-pocket’ information. Nor was he reticent about proclaiming their ‘match made in heaven’. Media-Net enjoyed direct access to the records of every public transaction undertaken in the city. Justin Brattoné relished a ringside seat at this extraordinary circus which manufactured the issues and ordained the appropriate viewpoints to engage New Mid society.

Under the astute vision of Burrell de Vere, Media-Net had built an astonishing power base by mining the data troves of the long established

social networks. But whereas the networks had once seen their role as entertaining, titillating and selling, De Vere had recognised that power lay in securing comprehensive information about clients. He realised that people could be induced to accept such invasion of privacy when they perceived that it was inevitable anyway. Media-Net analysts could cut through their rampant self-delusion to secure the stability that everybody craved.

And so Media-Net prided itself in having ‘levelled the playing field’ so that every person could be assessed dispassionately, and undergo a fully nuanced risk profile on the basis of true behaviour and real net worth to society. What had once been pejoratively decried as ‘invasion of privacy’ was now accepted as a necessary actuarial assessment administered by neutral and non-judgemental artificial intelligence. ‘Trending analysis’ had proven a powerful weapon in anticipating social disturbance, to ensure a stable, smooth functioning, well-integrated society.

In this capacity Media-Net worked for the public good in tandem with its security sister, ES-Tech, the latter being entrusted with more aggressive data collection methodologies wherever an ‘intervention issue’ was identified.

While Justin babbled on, it alarmed McCubbins to reflect that her own life would not stand up to much *algorithmic* scrutiny. There had been several murky moments around the removal of her predecessor, Hellana Nix. Justin may have sensed her malaise as he ladled out details of the range of what ‘anyone can source these days if he puts his mind to it.’ He seemed utterly confident that once anyone was identified as a *P.O.I.* or *Person of Interest*, then there could be no place to hide. *POI* rang a bell with vaguely remembered language skills. The acronym suggested to McCubbins a little green nugget rolling around happily in a protective pod. But she knew that Justin would be unimpressed with her naive grip

on the cyber world.

And so throughout the interview she had found herself beaming condescendingly without the vaguest idea of what he was talking about. In general she grasped the principle that he was able to programme a team of Algorithms to sift tirelessly through a tsunami of data that sloshed through the Media-Net servers and latch onto toothsome morsels, drawing them in with long tentacles and binding them into manageable packages for later delectation.

Did de Vere understand a word of this either? Did he fully comprehend what he was harbouring in his bosom? Currently he was preoccupied in securing ES-Tech's assistance to neutralise threats to a visionary project to revive the moribund city economy. The scope of such ambitions was staggering and included the amassing of large tracts which had fallen into the hands of diverse land banks. Secrecy was paramount at this delicate stage to prevent land values on adjacent lands from sky-rocketing before his own position was secure. It was necessary to create deflective counter-intelligence, and promulgate diversionary rumours.

* * *

Nurturing his reputation as 'a force of nature', de Vere was nevertheless astute enough to keep his coercive character disguised under a veneer of truculent bonhomie. He relied upon his large frame and great mane of perfumed white hair to distinguish him in any crowd, perfectly aware that people would discreetly eye each other whenever he entered a room.

This morning barging his way through a discreetly marked service door and following the priority access route which avoided all tiresome confrontations with security staff, he emerged in the terminal reception area, hustled heedlessly past the protesting security guards and thumped

on the Colonel's door. Without awaiting a response he entered trailing the apologetic security cordon.

Jolted from her reverie, McCubbins leapt up pointing to the two attendants and snapped "Get out you two!" Shoulders hunched, chins in rictus, they crept back to their ineffective control zone.

"Ah! Always the gracious hostess, Cubbie, my little treasure," De Vere laughed disingenuously and strode across the room to widen the crack in the curtains. "What is this you're running here - a bordello or is this supposed to be dim, religious light? Dear old Nix used to keep this room lit up like the inside of a refrigerator! You're not going all spiritual on me are you Cubs?"

McCubbins distaste for blatant ebullience was evident in the wringing of her hands and the noisy rattling of bracelets which she normally subdued to acoustic neutrality. De Vere was the only person with whom she met on a regular basis who so condescendingly affected the long suppressed familiarity of 'Cubbie', a name that represented a forgotten period before she had assumed that august helm.

She responded querulously, "Do I need to remind you that there are strict security protocols that must be maintained in this office? Protocols for everyone's benefit, including yours, in fact this is exactly what you are entitled to demand in relations with us."

"But Cubs, where is your sense of adventure, embracing the moment?" The Colonel drew her two exquisitely encased feet into perfect alignment with prim modesty.

De Vere, however, was not to be deflected. He was never satisfied until everyone was treading on eggshells, hoping to avoid arousing his further

attention.

“You know darling girl, we’re like a marriage made in heaven! The Security-Pimp and the Media-Monster. Shall we just call ourselves ‘S’ and ‘M’? or is that a little too Bond-girlie for you?”

Cubbie, who hadn’t the faintest idea of what he was talking about, threw herself back down into her swivel chair with a sigh of despair as De Vere continued to stare out the window assessing the jagged skyline of architectural follies in the foreground and the sublime empty horizon of the lake beyond. “I remember when it used to look like luncheon at the Imperial Club, white napkin sails on the blue table cloths. Remember? - those were happier times - certainly more profitable times!” He yanked the curtain open wide overriding the grating protest of the electric track controls. “Don’t you find it ironic that the two biggest Luddites in the city are so dependent on artificial intelligence in order to maintain our fading powers? Doesn’t that strike you as a crazy ‘eSSey’?”

McCubbins quietly pulled out a single sheet of paper from her drawer and placed it defiantly on the empty desktop opposite her.

De Vere sighed, “Ah yes always the Madame ... business first, then pleasure - if at all. Well I suppose I still admire such rare qualities in a woman.” McCubbins cringed visibly as he crossed the room and dropped down in front of the sheet. He began to scan the list of names.

“Typewritten – on your old clunker, you’re practically mediaeval!”

Cubbie rose and attempted to close the curtains as De Vere continued to mutter to himself. The control mechanism was jammed.

He cleared his throat and turned the paper back towards McCubbins. “You’re not going to move on number two, I can tell you right now. He

is a trusted business colleague and I can vouch for his probity. You'll be doing yourself no favours if you stumble over his rotting corpses." De Vere chortled in delight at his own drollery. "Who the hell is asking for this anyway?"

The Colonel only winced and pursed her lips. Looking askance a hand stole up to tug at the safety curtain of her even-clipped front bang.

De Vere's countenance suddenly flashed with dangerous exasperation. "Sometimes I suspect that you don't comprehend the advantages of teamwork. I asked you civilly who is asking for this data, and you should know me well enough that you will be obliged to tell me."

Reluctantly McCubbins lifted a pencil from her drawer and doodled a single initial upside down at the top of the paper without saying a word. "L? – you mean that sanctimonious fraud, Elron! So prayers aren't enough for RevEI? ... his little god can't come up with what it takes to square with the other bidders? God-damn cheat! Sanctimonious little weevil!"

McCubbins voice rose in defiant indignation. "He is also a client. I should remind you that we do have others you know. We have a wider social responsibility. Perhaps he feels that he needs to level the field. Perhaps he sees that others are playing with an unfair advantage."

With a chill in his voice de Vere added, "This is one client that you're going to lose pronto – for your own good. Anyway I'll have Justin look into this for me."

Cubbie looked decidedly deflated at having released this confidential information. Elron had been her little secret, providing a comforting frisson of bolshiness that she had intended to conceal from the ferret before her. She had been most unprofessional. But how could she

maintain her composure in front of this bull-dozer? She wished that she could summon up one of Justin's *Algorillas* to wrestle him out of the room.

"Okay, so now we'll turn to my own particular agenda for the week ... I've got Malyn geared up to take on the Trencher's. We're currently expediting the repossession of some prime territory along Mayne Street. Malyn will kick off with a sympathetic interview with whoever we can dredge up. Justin's got some dynamite ideas. It's going to be friendship bracelets all around. But meanwhile I'll need you to source as much background information on these characters as you can lay your hands on. We are always a bit data shy on vermin festering in the Stits; most of them subsist totally off radar. I want you to arrange for a slew of new initiates who look plausibly keen on the Trencher message and infiltrate the centre of their shenanigans to dig up the dirt. We need a compelling expose in our back pockets so we need to lock onto some choice characters, anyone who can string a couple of controversial words together ... Shall we say, 'rough diamond' types - psychotics, psychopaths, cases to add yeast to the mix. Justin has put forward several names worth exploring."

The Colonel began to rally at the mention of Justin's secondment. "He reports that you've established a solid working relationship. He certainly admires your media savvy. He's pleased with what he's already been able to do for you."

"Well I like the Brat's idea of embedded - at least it doesn't involve screwing my wife," de Vere added sotto voce and then broke into a raucous guffaw.

McCubbins inspected a broken fingernail apparently impervious to such off-colour asides. De Vere leered at her maidenly foibles. He relished keeping a woman, colonel or not, in a state of constant alarm.

“Occasionally little J-Boy scares the pants off me though, little too good to be true, he sometimes buckles down rather too *zestfully* to any project at hand. I sometimes wonder what hold you’ve got over him. I mean talk about embedded; the guy’s a supine whore.”

The Colonel batted her eyes self-righteously. “Perhaps it’s what we, at ES-Tech, call professional integrity?”

“My ass it’s professional integrity! But still I can’t fault the guy; can’t say I trust him either. I would certainly like a peek at what you’ve got on him. It’s not as if a guy in his position is going to have a long shelf-life, and he’s smart enough to know it. People like him soon know too much.”

“Well, why don’t you just ask him about it yourself?” McCubbins tossed her head back defiantly. De Vere tugged at his fragrant mane and grimaced. She found this confrontational array of dazzling teeth repellent, particularly in light of her own dental challenges. De Vere chuckled at some unpleasant passing thought. “I’ve put him to the test more than once ... run rough shod over a few remaining scruples. He’s no doubt reported our ploys to destabilise the Trencher ringleaders?” McCubbins nodded distractedly. She was not in favour of such confessions even in the privacy of her own office. But De Vere disregarded her malaise and churned on, “So he rises to the occasion, dons the fake moustache ... hey whatever! and sets off to torch her home. Just like that! It’s not like this guy is a born actor; but he fell in with the brief without flinching.”

“Well perhaps he sees that you might offer him a significant role if you come to appreciate his dedication. Perhaps he likes the idea of your looking out for him.”

“Not likely if I can’t trust the guy. Let’s put it down to bad chemistry. This guy’s smart enough; but he doesn’t need me – or you for that matter.

It all seems to add up to some other agenda. So we'll both continue to watch him like hawks."

McCubbins knew what De Vere was talking about. She too recognised her own personal malaise in dealings with her agent that went far beyond his carnal knowledge of those dreaded *Algorithms*. Perhaps it was that reedy, self-righteous tone of voice, or that he always seemed to be working too hard to cover up his own embarrassment at being so much smarter than everyone else in the room. But there was absolutely nothing in his profile that extensive background checks had turned up. His data file was intact from birth. He seemed to be just one of the world's innocuous geeks, incomprehensible to her as so many of them were; someone who would make compromises as long as he was allowed to indulge in the skulduggery he liked with the best equipment available. There were times when she wondered whether this might be diagnosed as some form of autistic disorder. A 'condition' might make her a lot more comfortable about him.

She also knew what De Vere meant in referring to 'a short shelf-life'. Justin had already been with ES-Tech long enough to see several colleagues inexplicably disappear. He must have drawn his own conclusions.

Full of renewed purpose, De Vere rose abruptly from his seat, flicked an open palm in her direction and walked out through the way he had entered, past the cringing guards.

* * *

At that moment the object of their deliberations was to be found marching along Bin Street. Justin was musing over his recent debriefing with the Colonel as he picked his way along the derelict street, peering into the looted, burned-out shells of what had once been a string of

chic tourist shops. His nervous, apologetic mien and waif-like physique were well adapted to passing unremarked through the desolation of the Stits, just another undernourished drifter, profitable to no one. Closer scrutiny though might have found mystifying the dainty red trainers and neat T shirt, unnaturally pristine for one dispossessed. But that he was wandering through such streets at all indicated that he had nothing to lose. None of the vagrants harbouring within the shattered shop fronts would have imagined that within the hour this passer-by had been lording it above them in one of a mighty city fortresses, a palace of unimaginable opulence.

Justin snorted at the thought of 'Cubbie'. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen an old typewriter, perhaps as a child at his grandparents' cottage; yet there was a prime example parked in a windowless cubby-hole in Reception, a venerable Remington stand-up with its hard little keys, just another instance of McCubbin's misplaced confidence in resisting the invasion of the electronic world. He had relished rattling her cage with persistent talk about Algorithms, and quickly perceived that he had penetrated her weakest front. Had she absolutely no conception of the sophistication of modern reconnaissance techniques, or the growing general obsession with forensics? He had delighted in explaining to her that her typewriter ribbons could be analysed, remote electronic ears could decode the subtle sound differences between key strokes as her messages were entered. Old Cubbie simply had no idea of the fragility of her pathetic wall of privacy.

Oh! Had that name '*Cubbie*' again resurfaced? Not so very long ago there had indeed been '*Cubbie's*' sprinkled condescendingly throughout office gossip. At that time, detailed to 'the ECG', the Ethical Counter-Surveillance Group, he and his colleagues used to joke that they could be able to recognise each other on a dark alley by the luminous glow of personal radiation. '*Cubbie*' was reputed to exist in a time warp and her

reported antics were relished like the foibles of some eccentric maiden aunt. 'Cubbie'! Could there be a less suitable name? It conjured up generous, unguarded rotundity; not this sharp-angled harridan in grey metallic business armour. Those thin lips were set like a steel trap; she was as humourless as one would expect a machine to be.

Anyone who could recall her old guise as 'Cubbie', Hellana Nix's brow-beaten minder, had enjoyed a conspicuous withdrawal from the front lines. Wiser personnel quickly adapted to the rechristened 'McCubbins', a name that contained connotations of an assertive scouring product.

Despite all the invasive technology at her command, McCubbins had remained paranoid about every form personal electronic invasion. They used to joke that if she could, she would have chosen to work by candlelight, and sent bottled smoke signals; such was her suspicion of wayward electromagnetic energy. Her instructions, written long-hand, were expected to be viewed and digested in silence. Perhaps she was concerned that the great expanses of plate glass of her lofty office were being targeted by sophisticated reconnaissance equipment that could pick up the minute vibrations of her voice. It was amusing too that her office window blinds were always drawn tight closed. The room was like a pharaonic tomb. Justin recalled once being summoned into Hellana Nix's presence in the same space, so dazzling bright that it was impossible to see anything without blinking. But now, no stray sunbeam softened the mechanical chill of the same room. From his seat opposite, he had observed McCubbins' two golden hoop earrings dimly reflected on the lacquered finish of the separating desktop. Despite her angular, taut features, the reflected face remained blurred, indistinct. She pulled out her notebook from a desk drawer and jotted down some reminder with school girl precision. How he would love to root through one of those notebooks, so secretive - and he imagined so revealing of transgressive thoughts about him and other courtiers.

Justin acknowledged his own discomfiture in confronting faces. Perhaps that was why many suspected him of duplicity. In rising to personal communications he had adopted a habit of flashing a quick glance, a moment of brash complicity which he hoped would appear terrifyingly intelligent. But in McCubbins' case, he rarely offered even that. There was perhaps a fear of discovering reflections in the lacquer before him of something he was loath to encounter in himself, an ultimate lack of empathy that led so frequently to accusations of personal ruthlessness.

Only when she was focussed elsewhere would he stealthily evaluate her equine features, so ineffectually mollified by an implausible coiffure that suggested layers of parted theatre curtains. Her precisely trimmed central bang hung like a safety curtain ready to descend over very makeshift carpentry below.

He was keen to get back to his station. Embedded within Media-Net, Justin commanded a work group that had access to all major conduits of information passing through the city. The genius of the programme lay in the application of self-activating filters capable of picking up interesting web chatter.

As Justin picked his way along Bin Street, he passed by the hulking ruins of Grey Nuns Convent. Few of the old sisters were still in residence, old crones wandering about the empty corridors like lost souls. He had encountered one of them taking a shortcut through the tangled gardens. She was talking to herself, or possibly praying, he couldn't tell. He was avowedly one of the post-prayer generation.

It was hard to believe that the future of these lands should induce such contention – or that the man that he was working with was at the epicentre of a secret campaign to secure this property. But De Vere's ValleyViewVision or *VEE 3* was being set up to attract hard currency to a

society where the great majority of the population relied on un-indexed virtual currencies which were sustained in public credibility only by the most ingenious sleight of the banker's hand. If *VEE 3* was a success, world recognised hard currencies could be expected to flood in to reinstate New Mid's lost reputation as a 'world class' city.

As he mulled over events of the previous day, Justin was admittedly at a loss to understand De Vere's sudden interest in the Trenchers. He himself had quite liked the look of the woman that he had met talking to herself and wrestling with weeds in her garden. She obviously enjoyed some private world, something that he admired when he encountered it so rarely. She seemed a little like him.

But he suspected the De Vere might be playing with fire.

Embers

The fire, which had so swiftly curtailed Mara's daily routines, seemed to unleash an onslaught of further adversities for the Trenchers. They suddenly came under intense public scrutiny as Media-Net sponsored a series of exposés about the collapse of land values across the Stits. Paranoid pundits claimed that the Trenchers were spear-heading a co-ordinated effort to destabilise the Interstitial Zones and make them economically unviable for generations to come, in order to allow an anarchist community of criminals and misfits to flourish in the vacuum. Es-Tech published a map showing a pattern of arson strikes that was tellingly centred upon the 'Trencher Venture', as it had come to be called. Out of heightened concern for the security of their holdings the land banks had moved swiftly to revoke the Trenchers' temporary licence on the Mayne Street premises, claiming that they were putting huge investments in jeopardy. They insisted that the Trenchers find alternative accommodation immediately.

Vehicles laden with hoarding materials appeared on Mayne Street and under the protection of ES-Tech armed agents began to erect 'Exclusion Zone' barricades. Regular visitations to the Trencher Centre dropped away immediately. No one wanted to be recorded as dependent upon their services.

Pondering the advantages of possible relocation sites while poring over an old city map rescued from the Evans library, Mara was startled by the crunch of footsteps on the path outside. Someone rapped officiously on the shutter. Apprehensively she went to the side door she had prised open, considering how to explain her presence in the building. Someone evidently knew that she had not yet evacuated and had reported her.

Through his reflective visor, the courier pronounced her name with pedantic precision. Formally he passed over a package, scanned her face and captured a body-cam receipt. Such commonplace security precautions seemed utterly ludicrous for someone in Mara's position.

With growing foreboding she tore open the envelope and found a carefully bound legal dossier. She riffled through it, dumbfounded at who could have been bothered to collate such details of her past with such meticulous diligence. It was a time of life that she had made every effort to obliterate.

Some of the details of her traumatic break up with Gilb, she didn't even remember herself. The dossier included statements from long-forgotten neighbours who seemed remarkably well-informed about a life that she scarcely recognised. She took umbrage at such phrases as 'relentlessly self-serving' and 'without the slightest regard for' which popped provocatively out of the prose. It all suggested lawyers assigning culpability in absentia. She recalled how, in desperation, she had just signed all Gilb's papers without dwelling on details; she was so disgusted by the injustices of the painful process that she felt no compunction about abject surrender. She remained focussed only on a promise of future freedom. She had been determined to sweep it all aside at any cost.

But now, years later, she was again reading through the list of Gilb's grievances. Had he honestly suggested that 'the state of the carpet on the stairs' was one of the key reasons to the breakdown of their marriage? She vaguely remembered a pitched battle that they had waged relentlessly over some weeks.

She had just abandoned everything without deigning to defend herself. That break had been a decisive turning point in her life which drew a line under events that should never have happened if she had been less

susceptible to Gilb's marital delusions.

She never imagined that all this information, rife with inaccurate innuendo, would still be publicly available. But this was one of the peculiarities of the emerging data world. Information, even spurious neighbours' opinions had achieved immortality. It was all stored away, ripe for the picking. If you knew what information you needed, and the desired slant it only required the right search strategy to dig it out. In this data rich world, only the most privileged could expunge such details from the public record and command them to oblivion.

The covering note was signed 'J. Brattoné' in a prim font. A mailbox address was included with the postscript - "You'll probably need time to digest this – but let me assure you that I'm only here to help. Drop me a note to let me know when we can get together."

"It's you Mr J. Brat, that's going to need the damage control!" In a smouldering rage Mara dropped the sheaf of papers into the waste pile. Whoever this Brattoné pest was, he had picked the wrong person to provoke. She would pay no attention.

But as the day progressed everything that she attempted seemed to be skewed by her underlying anxieties. Finally she returned to the bin and fished out the distasteful dossier. "This little busybody's not going to forget me in a hurry!" She threw herself down and tapped out off a furious response. "Meet me - Embers on Bin Street at 3 O C sharp" and pressed Send.

Embers, a low life Stits dive still operating from among the charred shells of Bin Street, would be an ideal place to create a 'scene' and savage this stalker. She knew the bartender, Dal.

She turned up nothing in a subsequent identity search for 'J. Brattoné' which seemed rather curious in an age when even her own misspelled name would churn up reams of uninteresting drivel.

She arranged to be a half hour late for the appointment and stormed breathlessly into Embers primed for battle. But to her disappointment there was nobody waiting expectantly. Only a wispy balding, young man, with his back turned, was sitting in the window poring over an info-puzzle and daintily sipping a glass of pink lemonade. Dal, behind the bar, only shrugged. She threw herself down petulantly into a stall and started to read beer mats in rising indignation. Gradually her humour began to return as she surveyed the mangled mats and saw the absurdity of her situation. She glanced around to locate the cameras witnessing her performance and began to compose herself to leave with dignity.

Suddenly the young man in the window gathered up his effects and stood up. As he turned in the light and approached her table, his hesitant gait struck her as curiously familiar. The diffident manner and willowy posture ... the red trainers ... yes ... it was the same young man who had come into her house on the morning of the fire.

Mara burst into a bark of dismay, "You! You! ... you are this squalid J. Brattoné? A blackmailer as well as an arsonist? It's you that owes me an explanation. And I'd rather have you do it with my legal advisors present." At least this sounded plausibly indignant, though she had no idea who these advisors might be.

J. Brattoné smiled sweetly but stood his ground flourishing his dainty finger tips. "I know that we *really, really* got off to a bad start," he made a bubble bip with his lips, "and I am *really* sorry about that. But it isn't at all like you think. Besides I am the police, in a manner of speaking ... Justin Brattoné ... at your service. " He flashed a card before her eyes.

“I can only say that there was absolutely nothing personal about what happened, you have to see yourself as just unfortunate collateral damage. I felt so badly after that I would like an opportunity to patch it up a bit. That’s why I sent you the note – to give you a flavour of what you’re up against.”

Mara could not believe what she was hearing. “You collect a load of spurious opinions and tiptoe around in the margins of my life? A stalker? And now you’re offering help?”

“In fact, believe me, I’ve *really* been focussing on getting the Trencher Venture back on its feet.”

“Believe you? Collecting this drivel? Let me tell you that I couldn’t care less what you dig up. It’s water under my bridge. Gone boy!”

“I only sent along some available background to demonstrate the vulnerability of your position. You definitely need my help, and I can offer it – no charge! You don’t realise it but there are currently a lot of people digging up whatever they can find on your case. In this world no one walks away from their past; reinvention is not an option. But I’ve a proposition that you will find compelling if you take the time to listen.”

“Compelling? So this exposé is ‘*really, really*’ only a warning? Or are you ‘*really, really*’ intending blackmail? And why should I ‘*really, really*’ trust anyone who destroyed my home?” At least she scored some satisfaction in hurling his insipid childish speech back at him. In fact nothing about this cipher of a man seemed real or substantial; he was more like some cartoon embodiment of hapless eagerness.

But Justin Brattoné remained surprisingly persistent. “You really do need protection - and you are not alone; we should all see ourselves in a similar

predicament, victims of our own data trails. In days past such things were soon forgotten and the scent would grow cold. But no longer.”

“Who cares about the scent of my insignificant past? Am I supposed to be flattered?” Mara scrumpled up the papers she was waving around and stuffed them back into the envelope.

“Well some people do care. Have you ever stopped to consider who might be helping to sustain trencher.com and what their motives might be? Who, do you imagine, provides those payments to keep your Trenchers on line? And who funds your polling work? – especially when they can get such information from a plethora of other sources?”

“Trencher-dot-com fulfils an important community need. We bring people together and give them a voice. We have no shortage of well-wishers.”

“Wellwishers? Here’s me laughing out loud! From a security perspective have you considered that there might be parties determined to keep track of those who show on your doorstep spouting opinions? Undoubtedly they regard you and your band of Trenchers as a handy magnet, one they can deploy nicely.”

“But what interest would anyone have in my past? I have left that half-formed person behind.” Mara realised that she was trying to justify herself by engaging with this odious manipulator. She resented becoming enmeshed in his web.

“Nobody now can escape judgement day. There are new gods in the e-heavens. Each and every one of us chucks up a lode of data on eternal ledgers by which we will all ultimately be judged.” He smiled innocuously, revealing an array of dainty milk-white teeth. “We’ve all

achieved unexpected immortality. I suspect that future generations will be able to find out much more about Mara 'Greene' - spelt with that tell-tale 'e' by the way, than they will ever be able to discover about Jesus or Socrates – and in considerable detail if they care to look."

"If they care to look? ... it could hardly be worth their bother! None of my information is criminal."

"In our society, every action, even this moment is being recorded, even in a place like this ... see those cameras over there levelled on us behind the bar?" Justin pointed out the swivelling oculus behind the bar. Mara looked over her shoulder apprehensively.

He burst into a merry guffaw, "Well actually I've already had them deactivated in case our interview went off the rails. You are at liberty to talk candidly ..." he winked, "Had you scared, I guess?" He suddenly beamed at her, like flipping a switch. "But I am only telling you all this because I recognise that we are really kindred spirits, we are both outsiders." Justin caught her eye for a fleeting moment then blushed in embarrassment, evidently losing his train of thought. "Actually from the moment we met I realised that we have so much in common and ..."

Mara flared up again. "I'll just call it stalking." She hurled the crumpled envelope onto the table.

"You need more background to appreciate my motives. Your days in that house are most surely numbered. My intervention has only helped to provide some options for a transition."

"So am I supposed to thank you for hurrying fate along? You've chosen the wrong patsy." She turned to storm out.

Justin touched her shoulder and danced round to face her, still avoiding direct eye contact. “Mara, I’m not here to blackmail you, and I’m certainly not acting in Gilb’s interests. I only want to offer your Trencher Venture a little succour. I admire a person of moral principle, someone who shares my instincts for what is right. I saw that in you as I was watching you pulling out those weeds in your garden. But now I need your help in undertaking a very important project that will benefit both of us. The stakes couldn’t be greater.” He was lapsing into a cajoling tone, his thin shaking shoulders, suddenly seemed artlessly pitiable.

Mara’s eyes crossed in disgust and she blew out her cheeks in exasperation. “I have no sympathy of your arsonist crusade and I’m certainly not planning to enlist in your pathetic whatever campaign.”

“Oh but I am in a position to help you ... I can advance the cause of your Trenchers.”

“You’ve picked the wrong trench.”

“In the past it was the victors who wrote history, but today it’s the data junkies who construct whatever spin they want, and they can be very persuasive,” he hazarded a conspiratorial glance over the top frame of his glasses, a flicker of pale blue pupils.

Mara pushed him back. “I’m no candidate for your mind games. Anyone hoping for entertainment in following me would get very bored. I tend to pilot along in automatic mode without any conscious plan – just like everybody else.”

Mara felt furious that she was still allowing herself to become further entangled. Despite his feeble demeanour, he was undeniably persistent. She sensed inflated self-righteousness, which allowed him to stand

brazenly before her.

She recoiled as Justin suddenly threw out his hands as if about to embrace her with an effusive air hug. “In today’s world there is no innate right to privacy ... not that it ever existed. Even in the past the privileged lived public lives surrounded by their attendants. Privacy is a recent concept. But for most of us it’s a fading memory. Now few of us can afford it.”

“Well no one’s clamouring to get a piece of me, and I intend to keep it that way.”

But Justin only blinked his pale empty eyes with exaggerated suggestion of complicity, “You think that you can fly under the radar but that is your delusion.” He paused and hazarded another glance, “But I think that there are some decisions you can make that will radically change the course of events ... just like you did in abandoning Gilb for your Trencher Venture.”

“Stop calling it that!” she screamed. “My first decision will be to slam the door in the face of a repulsive busybody.” Mara had imagined a brief violent altercation, an opportunity to savage a blackmailer in a humiliating crescendo and perhaps hurl around some furniture with biblical gusto before marching out. But the time for such theatrics had long passed.

His voice became so soft and indistinct that it was doubly annoying that she had to strain her ears to make out what he was saying. “Perhaps I am compulsively drawn to those with something to hide.” Justin admitted coyly. He seemed to be drawing imperceptibly closer to her.

He smiled winsomely, displaying dainty, pearly teeth usually kept primly hidden. “You can find out anything if you know who to ask. I am one of those people who know where to find things. Most data miners just don

their hard hats and set off exploring at random. But unless you know where you are headed, it's a trivial pursuit. You need a moral perspective."

"There's absolutely nowhere I want to go with you, or your moral perspective."

"You are not considering about what we might both be able to achieve for your Trenchers ... together. I *really, really* regret what happened but, in all honesty, I did not cause that fire. I only knew it was on the cards ... I thought I should have a look in ... just in case."

"In all honesty? In all honesty, you're a criminal!"

"Admittedly we still have much to prove to one another. But we are really on the same wavelength and I know I can persuade you to help with something that is going to make a difference to all of us. It will be the making of your Trenchers."

"So you burn down my house, spy on me, and now you want my help?" Mara was incredulous.

"Yes! ... your help ... in bringing down a great house of cards. It will be satisfying revenge for what they've done in displacing you."

"Good well I will expect your cheque in the mail." Mara got up to leave. But Justin grabbed at her wrist. Mara shook off his grasp with a contemptuous shudder.

"Mara, I need a partner, who will help me blow a whistle that will begin to change our society radically ... I know that you are that person."

"You are completely deluded." Mara nursed her burning wrist.

Justin touched her arm again with a soothing immediacy. “I have privileged access to one of the most powerful people in this city ... perched right at the top of Media-Net”, Justin paused a moment to let this sink in. “Such people decide what the rest of us are expected to accept as fact.”

Mara looked unimpressed. She suspected who he was referring to so obliquely. “So you are one of de Vere’s stable of stooges?”

Justin suddenly looked around nervously; his eyes narrowed and he lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. “More like his assassin! But that is for when you come to see the nature of my crusade.”

“And such an altruistic crusade! crosses held high? ... as you set fire to people’s homes, you assassinate others?”

Justin continued in his scarcely audible tone, “It’s no secret that de Vere has his sights set on the Grey Nuns Convent with a very big project under wraps, his so-called *VEE 3, ValleyView Vision*. He only needs the consent of the church commissioners. However even they have a residual conscience about such things and feel that they should be more warmly disposed to cede their title, to Reverend Elron McBride’s populist church, his despicably triumphalist People’s Palisade.”

“Even though I expect that he is a sanctimonious fraud, I too would probably prefer to see Rev El’s Palisade than de Vere’s VEE 3 ... it sounds more like the Valley of the Shadow of Death.”

Justin nodded smugly, “Actually, neither option is particularly palatable. The Palisade is a deeply emotional, ego-driven, impractical movement, flying impotently in the face of what’s really happening in the modern world.”

“But at least it cuts across a wider society; he unites disparate souls, even those locked away in isolated Tainers.”

“But united around what? It’s just a personality cult, one which I suspect will only too soon be revealed in its true squalor.”

‘And de Vere?’

“De Vere will disguise his true colours until VEE 3 emerges as a fait accompli. But I have tuned into his shadowy connection with a group called Trojan House. While they’re paying lip-service to a balanced community, I suspect that they could be brought to see advantages in including a role for Trenchers. What do you think of that?”

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire is what I think!”

“But you could step into the void and persuade them to let you take on the regeneration of the lands to help create a more integrated community. Fed the right perspective, I think even de Vere will persuade himself.” In a single lithe movement Justin stooped to retrieve the battered envelope and made for the door leaving Mara behind in a state of self-disappointment.

Over his shoulder he tossed back, “I’m going to help you position yourselves. You’ll see! You’re going to thank me someday. Big time!”

The Troll Army

Every morning a small army of ravaged, hungry souls emerged from their make-do overnight shelters in the Stits and drifted down Bin Street to converge upon an unremarkable building that had been left relatively unscathed by the repossession riots. In its heyday it had housed an influential advertising agency but now the top fifteen floors with gaping glass windows had been cordoned off and the lowest walk-up levels, repainted in an optimistic pastel green, now faded and flaking. Few spoke to one another as they filed morosely through security clearance procedures. Most were suspicious of their colleagues or too embarrassed to accept their own defeat, to admit that they had been discarded as life's losers. Ineligible for any other form of public welfare, they had been obliged to enlist in what outsiders scathingly referred to as 'the Troll Army'.

ES-Tech managed this operation, officially known as *INFILT*. Its purpose was to divert the public mind from any sense of impotence in addressing earnest realities and manufacture instead uplifting messages about the renaissance of New Midland. These messages were carefully tailored to reinforce 'a positive life experience' in a multiplicity of Tainers, each with its divergent ethos and lifestyle.

In this building reality news stories were 'accessed', real-life event photos 'enhanced' and newspeak 'doctored', tailoring a message to suit a variety of persuasions.

Worldwide, people had deluded themselves into believing that they were living at the Dawn of an Information Age that would empower a long suppressed reform of human aspirations. The reality was very different. Traditional armies had been disbanded as unpredictable and expensive;

they required a consistent political message and a steady stream of tax funding which no one with power felt inclined to supply when there were much less expensive ways. Their purpose in affirming ancient hierarchies was now much more effectively managed by a new generation of information warriors. ES-Tech with its mantra 'To Secure and Protect' had become pre-eminent in this field of managing information to ensure a compliant public.

These ragged guerrillas were engaged in ceaseless battles of disinformation, to enrich the psychosphere with a panoply of confabulations to ensure that potential dissidents would soon retreat exhausted. They were engaged in creating an alternative reality. Their mission, to sabotage the foundations of rational discourse by creating an enveloping white noise of disinformation, had proven highly successful in thwarting any attempt to hold potentially divisive rational argument.

There has always been an unquenchable consumer demand for news that's free. People could be easily led to renounce coherent joined-up thinking and retreat into their steady wash of music, visual diversions, cultivated outrage and entertainment when these services were provided gratis. Veracity is of little import when people crave stories that reinforce their own predilections and prejudices.

Despite ragged appearances and emaciated physiques, the fertile minds of the trolls toiled to reinforce a dream world, with perspectives specifically targeted to suit individual Tainers. Fanciful reports, recipes and general messages of aspiration were churned out for some audiences while in other instances tales of grievances and the tragedies of lives lived far away were confabulated to keep minds focussed on their own good fortune. They manufactured details of cultural triumphs. Faith focussed Tainers received a diet of uplifting stories about the sacrifices of distant martyrs or received images of corpse strewn Armageddons, while music

ghettoes and sports reality Tainers could partake vicariously in the lives of their idols and heroes.

* * *

In his dim recess on the fourth floor of *INFILT* Clay glanced up surreptitiously from his desk. Justin, his manager was safely hunkered down within his tinted glass ‘Fish Bowl’, deeply engrossed in a strictly confidential campaign. Russ, a lippy ringleader in the outer office, glibly referred to Justin’s retreat as ‘The Bowl’. The humour of this was wearing thin and Russ’s days in *INFILT*, were likely numbered.

Habitually, Justin positioned himself, back to the wall with a barricade of screens to prevent others from approaching unobserved. Not that anyone would willingly seek out his condescending advice. Clay’s colleagues speculated that Justin could be constructing some imagined porn cyber-mate or playing Doom Dudgeon all day. The boss was known to be adept at circumventing monitoring filters that might sully a spotless reputation. Sadly, however, a haggard countenance, baleful eyes washed with ghastly pale light usually suggested drearier preoccupations.

Clay was a poor communicator, never adept with words. He supplemented his banal vocabulary with scarcely more expressive hand gestures. On the rare occasions when he was actually summoned into the Bowl, standing awkwardly awaiting Justin’s attention, he would burble some inane sally like ‘how’zit goin’, in reaction to the turgid atmosphere. After a painfully long pause and Justin’s indifferent shrug - “Triple A” was the usual sardonic response. Justin was masterful at quashing all glimmers of spontaneity.

Despite his minions’ efforts at evasion, Justin kept a close eye on *INFILT* team activities through indirect surveillance. Nothing escaped his

scrutiny. His team had learned from bitter experience to ensure that no private preoccupations impinged on work time. Stray personal emails or unwarranted forays onto the net were pounced upon immediately and could result in a humiliated colleague being summarily escorted out the door between armed guards. Colleagues recognised that their position was too precious to be jeopardised by even minor infractions of the rules.

Clay had learned that it was never good to appear to know too much in dealings with his boss. Justin was better left to discover what he wanted through his preferred devious means. He trusted information that was stealthily snatched through uncharted back doors. Personal opinions were certainly unwelcome. This had been amply demonstrated recently when Justin had instructed his group to do a check on an obstructive 'individual' flagged up by client property speculators. 'Individual', in Justin's vocabulary implied unsavory and unpredictable. Having conjured up a wearying harridan Justin flashed up a photo and announced that the subject's name was Mara Greene.

Clay's response was typically guileless. "Oh! but I already know *that* Mara! I can find out what we need to know. Fact is ... she's a kind ova' quaintance ... practically arrived on the same bus." Justin began to uncoil his delicately poised posture, like a reptile readying to strike. Clay did not perceive the sudden hardening of his gaze. This was information that Justin did not want to hear, perhaps because it demonstrated that his own research had been deficient.

Unlike many of his *INFILT* trollmates Clay had been encouraged to take full advantage of Stits life. Justin clearly perceived some merit in matching Clay's feckless appearance with that anarchist environment and exploiting his ear to the ground. Clay rather revelled in the danger premium that he was paid to live in a way that he would have naturally chosen for himself.

In any event Justin chose not to pursue Clay's advantage in approaching Mara. Instead he assigned him to a more conventional 'gleaning' job, the riveting task of intercepting correspondence surrounding Angèle McBride, wife of a local 'holier than thou nut-case'. Her husband was a charismatic leader known to his followers as 'Rev El' leader of what Justin referred to as 'the crackpot People's Palisade'. His celebrity had attracted substantial wealth and the attendant opportunities were by no means lost on his wife, the beautiful Angèle. Clay revelled in his role, positioned on the sidelines in his invisibility cloak, playing voyeur, trying to figure out what shenanigans his 'crazy coot of a client' would likely next attempt.

Clay wisely never questioned who had commissioned this surveillance contract; such background information was outside his remit, or as Justin would say, 'Triple X'. But he had little compunction about collecting tantalising details of a life which appeared increasingly bizarre. His colleagues assisted in doctoring photos and collating sensational stories to create a riveting tale. Even her analyst was threading together a lurid blogseller. Clay had already downloaded captivating data raids from this book. He was delighted that his own dyslexia proved little hindrance in catching the drift in such quality 'literature'. He was jealous of those who could write with such verve.

He could hardly wait to uncover the latest daily fixes that 'Angie' had fallen into. Not only was she stringing along a stable of opportunistic lovers but she seemed to have a rather airy head for complex financial deals, transferring substantial funds, presumably purloined from the collection plate, to an obscure Cayman bank. All of Justin's team enjoyed the considerable challenge of enhancing all these surreal strands in her messy life.

As he sat staring catatonically at his screen pondering the latest data, a rabbit appeared on the right hand side and loped insouciantly across

from right to left before his eyes. Someone had evidently hacked into his account. A message flashed up with lightning speed then disappeared. "HIYA ... STITSBOY", was all it said. He glanced around the room surreptitiously to spot the joker and wondered whether Justin was already alerted to someone's silly games. But his boss remained locked in baleful concentration.

Clay was reluctant to make a fool of himself by rising to this bait. But when this incursion began to recur with increasing frequency he worried that there might be a more serious security breach. He knocked diffidently on the door of the 'Fish Bowl', but found his boss only marginally interested. "If it's gobbledygook, stash it in your own folder until we can zero in on this joker. Don't worry, we'll get him," he added chillingly. Curiously, this was one of the rare moments when Justin raised his voice above a whisper, evidently intending to make everyone in the control centre aware of his displeasure.

Shortly afterwards a flurry of email messages began to land on Clay's screen. Messages formed from random letters swilling around the screen; they momentarily became intelligible as an assembled text. Though slow of speech, Clay's reflexes had been finely honed by his extraordinary gaming prowess and he had a natural intuition about choosing the moment. It took but a second to capture the assembled message. Sometimes he recognised names or a vaguely coherent relationship diagram. Filaments connected complex skeins of coded numbers that suggested a reference to some explanatory index. He stored it all away as instructed.

Meanwhile Justin was far too preoccupied with more important affairs to pay any attention to Clay's problem.

A 'Go-To' at the People's Palisade

Unlike the pompous 'signature starchitecture' strung out along the Cadena waterfront, the People's Palisade near the airport had a squat, subversive massing. Low undulating tentacles extended across a desolate parking wasteland to draw in visitors arriving from the surrounding Tainer settlements. This baking terrain, coupled with adjacent abandoned airport runways, could accommodate almost limitless parking for any 'Go-To' service of celebration. But in these days of heightened austerity most visitors relied on Tran-Zip buses which disgorged the congregants at the edges of this bleak expanse. The sea of broken asphalt which had once formed part of an abandoned airport runway, remained empty and featureless aside from a pink Ferrari, the 'First Lady's Flight of Fancy', which was parked beside an ancient, insolent, battered Kangoo.

New Midland's International Airport had been 'repurposed' from its energy profligate heyday. A new business climate of efficient information transfer no longer favoured personal mobility. Physical displacement was now the prerogative of a tiny elite. The old tourist terminals had been the first to close down when security concerns necessitated a cordon sanitaire to address epidemiologists' growing concerns about health risks posed by migrants.

Beyond the Palisade control zone, hard up against electronic boundaries, one of the earliest Car-Tainer camps occupied a disused parking lot. Known as *Flamingo-5*, a name inherited from some baffling, long-forgotten airport orientation system, this camp had grown into a warren of interlinked vehicles and containers. Originally populated by those stranded in their attempt to flee the growing anarchy of the city, this camp was now celebrated as one of the earliest Tainer prototypes. What had started as a makeshift squatter community had been successfully

transformed into a proud estate where inhabitants could boast the fixed address necessary for entitlements and participation in the new virtual currencies.

Eventually this high density solution had been successfully adopted by private investors and morphed into the eco-Tainer enclaves which now lined redundant suburban streets.

Having surrendered all distracting communications with the outside world, congregants passed through a security portal into *Go-To Hall*. Here they immediately became aware of the cushioned silence of the vast domed space enveloping them. The muffled atmosphere was suffused with a tantalising pot-pourri fragrance, ‘attar of rose’ favoured by the First Lady. The overpowering sense of transcendence relied on the latest technology including sophisticated acoustic engineering to negate any distracting outside noise. Nor could an unscripted internal effusion disrupt this profound peace. A team of environmental engineers managed all these delicate balances. For most congregants, plugged into an unrelenting cacophony of transmitted imperatives in daily life, this space presented a silence that was truly ‘other-worldly’.

Thick, mauve carpet covered the floors and complementary textured upholstery ascended the walls to cushion the dome overhead. This was reputed to be the largest upholstered dome on the planet. Like heavenly stars, tiny fairy lights twinkled as unidentifiable constellations amidst the heavy shag. (or so trilled the pundits who broadcast the *People’s Palisade Welcomes the World - Please Respect Our Silence* messages on entering.

Opposite the main entry the carpeted floor plane rose in a congratulatory tsunami towards a dais from which the charismatic Reverend Elron McBride, known to his flock simply as *Rev El*, would address his flock. Ingeniously concealed speakers ensured that his speech was delivered

directly in a calm avuncular tone to everyone present.

Rev El's message provided solace for a rising tide of the beleaguered who had been relegated to eke out an isolated subsistence in the Tainers. It was a message of positive uplift, stripped of disturbing images of ordeal, crucifixions, beheadings, or harrowing visions of hell in afterlife. He preferred a personal manifestation that was well-nourished and benign; clearly his own rosy skin tones owed nothing to an austere diet of desert locusts. His legendary helmet of flowing golden hair, regarded by jealous naysayers as perhaps too good to be true, firmly aligned him with both the spiritually and physically aspiring, although he preferred to style himself modestly as 'a mere servant of the *Aeturnum*'.

At a time when the division of wealth had never been more unequal, Rev El's message resonated among the throngs of dispossessed. It was a message of good news about the spirit of *Aeturnum* that suffused the dimensions hidden to human perception and resonated throughout the universe.

It was a message that even attracted mavericks from the upper echelons on whose consciences the new social order sat uneasily. Brave souls from the Cadena were known to attend incognito and occasionally leave hard currency 'guilt money' on the collection table.

Part of Rev El's genius in maintaining firm control of his message lay in an insistence that the Go-To experience should be delivered live. To preclude scrambled statements being taken out of context, unedited recordings were forbidden, an astonishing achievement in an age when data everywhere was 'religiously' gathered and filed away for future reference. Nevertheless, despite his precautions, Es-Tech agents had been detailed to infiltrate the venue, discreetly 'connecting the dots and the dotty' as Colonel McCubbins glibly liked to claim.

The 'Go-To's' were always well attended, particularly in torrid summer weather. The comfort-cooled interior of Go-To Hall was an inviting inducement for many who would otherwise be locked away in their Eco-pods agonising over the expenditure of another unaffordable Goldie on personal comfort.

On this particular mid-week July morning the hall was at full capacity, all congregants expectantly awaiting the appearance of their mentor. He always entered via a modest vomitory and his ascent was greeted with thunderous cheering, skilfully amplified to a hysterical crescendo by the acoustics maestros. Emerging into the limelight in one of his signature pastel vestments, he would stride forth into his congregation to shake hands with invited supplicants gathered around the offerings table. Two vast video screens overhead projected all this informal bonhomie.

At the foot of three steps ascending to the podium were ranged twelve broad-shouldered elders dressed in deferential charcoal pinstriped suits, with gleaming footwear and pristine white open necked shirts that displayed the entwined 'PP' emblem against virile chests. Nearby on an upholstered, peach-hued throne with delicate golden buttons, was the station of his First Lady and help-mate, the incomparable Angèle McBride, alongside an unvarying spray of pink gladioli which seemed to compliment her explosion of russet locks. At the height of ensuing collective effusions it was her habit to beckon a favoured escort to assist her up to preside at Elron's side, flashing her exquisite gilded talons as she picked her way up the steps.

Supplicants who had come to throw themselves at her feet were designated a reserved area around this throne. Unremarkable among them was a young man dressed in a modest T-shirt, oversized jacket and trousers which helped to disguise his waiflike physique. His red liveried trainers with golden laces were the only suggestion of the care that he

had exercised in contriving such a winsome appearance.

But in contrast to many whose waving limbs milked the benisons of the overhead galaxy of twinkling lights, Justin's hands were shoved resolutely into his pockets. He was not quite ready to go the full distance to experience Aeturnum.

On this particular July morning Rev El was greeted with the customary tide of rising jubilation as he emerged into the feverish hall. After a dramatic delay Angèle followed, ravishing in a rhinestone studded turquoise gown and train of fluttering lace. Her legendary head of auburn curls bounced with preternatural splendour, sunset colours that would strike joy into the heart of any sailor. She daintily picked her way through the crowd to her habitual enthronement, solicitously assisted by three competitive elders.

Ever the showman, Elron stepped forward, grasping his lectern with both hands, like a captain taking command of his helm. A long pause ensued while he scanned the sea of expectant faces lapping below with benign self-confidence. The vast hall fell respectfully silent, not a cough, murmur or low flying jet could be detected thanks to the genius of modern acoustic wizardry.

Rev El pulled off his antique, pale-tinted glasses, folded them carefully and placed them on the lectern, then looked up abruptly; the lights above were perfectly angled to kindle sparks in his eyes. It seemed for a moment as if he were lost for words. But such ploys were transparent to such as Justin who was well acquainted with the pseudo vulnerability exuded by the man. He braced himself for the thunderous declaration which he knew would not be long in coming.

Elron suddenly lurched forward as if a tightly coiled spring had suddenly

released. In an agonised voice he declaimed, “This is a critical turning point in human history! A decisive moment when we are called upon to stand up and reassert our humanity.”

Then he broke into a sudden derisive laugh and others around the podium followed suit, ever quick to anticipate what might be in his mind. “I remember how not long ago triumphalists declared the end of history, claiming that liberated markets had prevailed over alternative models. The pundits claimed that this unfolding world was the inevitable destiny of mankind.”

“But now we witness the demise of their preposterous delusions. And we are all left with a certainty in our hearts that there is something essential that we have been overlooking.”

His hands flew outwards as his head tilted upwards to address the starry heavens in an anguished voice tinged with disappointment. “A new, more insidious force has arisen to annihilate the subtle ethical foundations of humanity. It portends a basic shift in the nature of our very humanity. It is propelled by such breathtaking arrogance that it could indeed make the whole human story to date quite irrelevant. We are now confronting a very different end to history than that envisioned by the free-marketeers of yesteryear.”

Justin tried to look wrapt by the performance and keen to align himself with every nuance. But the self-aggrandising deportment of the leader grated upon him. He loathed such sweeping sanctimonious pronouncements from one who was only too prone to talk about ‘morality’ and yet who could do no better than resurrect desiccated tautologies from long dead religions. If that was the sort of history Rev El was recommending, Justin felt that it was just as well abandoned. If he wanted to roll out that kind of moral foundation for society why did he not retreat into one of the

fundamentalist Tainers where fanatics roamed confirmed in their own mind numbing moralities? He could experience Aeturnum there to his heart's content.

But Rev El proceeded magisterially, fortunately unaware of Justin's cynicism. "In our modern society, we have replaced subtle human judgements of right and wrong with cyber-evaluation. We have lost the subtlety of human mitigation in making judgements. We have been left vulnerable to that divisive world concocted by Promethean scientists who intend to bestow their new 'gift' on mankind. But this is a dangerous gift that will tear us apart and leave our beleaguered societies in ruins. They intend to divide us on the basis of our genes between those who have a future and those who will ultimately be discarded."

Justin could only think 'Yeah, yeah, yeah'. The Prometheus Project was becoming an increasingly emotive touchstone in Elron's homilies. He too loathed those all-too-clever scientists as much as the next man. But he certainly did not want to be instructed by this preposterous charlatan, and have his own deficiencies in perceiving the imperatives of the Aeturnum rubbed in his face. Rev El would never comprehend that Justin's own code of subversive subterfuge was just as valid a response as standing up and making pronouncements to a hall of addled minds.

RevEl suddenly modulated into his famous candid fireside tone. Gently he cajoled those near at hand "You see, this is the purpose of our Palisade; it is a defensive encampment that we have planted in a moral wilderness. We must draw our strength from the vibrations of the Aeturnum. Morality is not about mechanical precision! It is about nuanced accommodation and rebalancing. As we look beyond what we think we know, we realise that we know so very little."

Justin looked discreetly around him. The preacher had certainly drawn in

a mixed rabble. Some were quite distinctively garbed, hailing from more fanatic Tainer enclaves.

Rev El's voice suddenly lashed out again, "The Palisade is not a house of religion; we have no scripture or inscrutable holy writ. We have torn up those archaic bibles. We are confident that we can think more clearly unencumbered by faith. Unencumbered, we are laying ourselves open to the subtle benisons of the Aeturnum. We are here to tune into other vibrations, other dimensions."

"We must create our *Palisade* in a moral wilderness." Elron paused and sighed as he lifted his eyes imploringly to the shag dome. "There are alas forces in our city which are not aligned with our aspirations. Media-Net thrives by setting us, one against another. It profits from discord. It creates controversy and places itself as interpreter between opposing parties."

Those present were well aware of the dangers he was flouting in singling out Media-Net, that many headed hydra. In a time when so many felt themselves suffocating in a world that no longer made any sense, adrift on a sea of turbulent data, unable to find anchors for their lives; Media-Net, however resented, at least provided a convenient, readymade viewpoint with easy answers to difficult questions. It set out its stall in black and white, stark opposites that made complex choices so much easier.

"Today I propose to launch a battle to take back the moral heart of our city. I proclaim the launch of the *Palisade Rally*."

Justin smirked inwardly imagining a rapid corruption to the '*Pally Rally*'. Could these self-righteous demagogues never imagine how people's minds really worked?

“Like Prometheus of legend, modern science is challenging the natural order. Prometheus stole the fire of the gods to bestow upon mankind. For his crime he was condemned to everlasting pain. But our modern Prometheans inhabit a twilight world bereft of moral compass. Yet they dream of bestowing a much more dangerous gift upon mankind. They are setting out to challenge the very nature of our humanity, and destroy the roots of our human compassion. Everything that we sense flowing into us from the Aeturnum should help us to counter their hubristic arrogance.”

Angèle lifted an exquisitely manicured hand to touch her chin pensively as Rev El delivered a practiced glare of smouldering purpose. “Prometheus is positioning itself in the twilight of the human race. This is evil in our midst parading as scientific advancement. We must reaffirm our moral centre, and proclaim our value as human beings.”

“Though Prometheans claim to be servants of their science, in reality they merely pander to those funding their research. Need I remind you, this is science that is considered reprehensible in most parts of the world. Zwielight and his Promethean hench-team dream of abominations whose genetic endowments will exceed the capabilities of anyone present in this room ... including me!” he added as an afterthought. Angèle lifted a dainty finger to her mouth in shocked contemplation of this admission. The more cynical present, and Justin should be included foremost among them, may have speculated that it was easy for Elron of the exquisite flowing golden locks, who had so evidently triumphed in the genetic stakes, to make light of others' adversities.

“Some may question why we would resist producing a healthy, emotionally well-adjusted humanity, which has jettisoned deadly proclivities of our past, the rage, the greed, the bloodlusts, to initiate a new era of cooperative scientific advance? Well the answer is that these will not be your children or those of anyone that you know.”

Most of those present had intuitively realised that Promethean science was not being conducted for their benefit. From their retrenchments within the Tainers, they could see only the bleakest of futures for their descendants quite divorced from any concept of an enhanced human nature.

“Will we surrender our humanity? Not by a long shot!” Elron suddenly thundered out, “We will focus on re-occupying the moral heartland of our city.”

When Rev El began to talk about reclaiming the ‘moral heartland of our city’, many realised that he was advancing one of his more practical objectives in setting his sights on the Grey Nuns property.

“We must affirm that we are not mere creatures of entropy, given intelligence only to hasten our own dissolution!”

Justin’s attention began to drift as he speculated about hidden cameras monitoring these proceedings. He discreetly noted the faces of fanatical acolytes whom he might waylay at the exit. He only resurfaced as Elron’s voice rang out, “The extraordinary thing about our universe is not its infinity ... but that we are present at any scale. The concept of infinity is only a delusion of human minds, for the universe however vast is nevertheless finite; it may be unfathomably large, and expanding, but it is nevertheless at all points in time forever finite. And it is amidst this finite nature that we, *tiny beings* in a vast Aeternum, must assert our own relative morality.”

Justin kept dipping his hands into his empty pockets experiencing sudden subliminal panic before remembering that electronic devices had been removed prior to entering the hall. So rarely parted from such crutches, he felt exposed and bereft. The comforting reminder that new messages

were streaming into his mailbox was one of the great compensations of this *'tiny being's'* life.

Elron rumbled on. "The man who has lost his soul is the commonplace of our modern world. We descend to mere biological agents, subjugated to another's will. For a human soul is born in a crucible of internal conflict, it is born of our perception that there are vying alternatives, dimensions and vibrations to which we can give no names. The monomania of the fanatic is only the expression of an agent who has lost his soul."

Elron paused momentarily to admire the sight of Angele lost in thought, twisting her glorious auburn locks.

He launched in a gentler tone. "I don't need to remind you that Noah's Ark was not built for everyone, just the chosen few. Modern Noahs are already making their own choices about who of us will be booked for the cruise and what sustaining ecosystem is to be carried with us."

Justin stooped with ostentatious insouciance to retie his golden shoelace. There was little doubt in his mind that his place on any such vehicle of salvation was assured.

There was a long pause as the bewildered congregants inspected each other sideways attempting to determine whether they could move on to less challenging activities like the sing-along, or a warbling vocal affirmation from Angèle. All were looking forward to the bacchanalian excesses of the approaching *Moment of Release* and following refreshments.

It was becoming increasingly clear to the crowd management maestros that the congregants were becoming fidgety. Rev El sensed this as well. In a sudden extravagant gesture he caught all by surprise extending his hands dramatically outwards above his head as if garnering benisons

from the heavens. The tips of his fingers began to quiver. A frisson of electrical excitement charged the hall.

The 'Moment of Release' had arrived.

The First Lady reached out to extract single gladioli from the vase alongside. Suddenly with a dramatic shriek she lurched forward and collapsed in an apoplectic heap amidst a pile of presciently prepared pillows. Others threw up their hands gabbling hysterical imprecations as if embracing the shaggy domed universe overhead. Some dropped to their knees.

The mass ululation began, a concerted imprecation to the invisible Aeturnum. There was furtive twitching in various parts of the room, a disturbance that began to ripple out in ever increasing circles. These waves clashed to create nodes of competitive hysteria. Knots of ululating congregants fell on their backs in a tangle of flailing limbs.

Suddenly with a piercing scream a woman in a drab track suit tore herself free and, vaulting over the heads of her colleagues, she forced a path to the front where she cast a sequinned bag of treasured possessions upon the offering table.

The moan became a deafening roar, an outpouring of pent-up frustration. This was a general release of the hidden force harboured within them, undisciplined, terrifying. Elron, head visibly shaking on his shoulders gazed at the shaggy universe overhead, smiling ecstatically, having opened these flood gates into a more numinous world. Though it was a place of temporary pandemonium and terrifying confusion, he was confident that an uplifting sense of oneness with the Aeturnum would emerge.

With uncontrollably shaking hands Rev El picked up his spectacles and haltingly descended to console the First Lady in her abject state. Huddled together he led her off back stage into the inner sanctum.

What Justin would have given for an invisibility cloak to witness what really took place the moment they passed beyond that little door!

* * *

One of the surprising aspects of Elron's very public life was the skill with which he maintained his personal privacy. It was indeed a startling achievement that the public media were uncorrupted by any scandalous rumour against his character. Searches for any biographical information or trivial stories about his past life drew only a remarkable blank. But Justin knew that such freedom from taint could only be purchased at considerable cost. He was setting out to raise these stakes.

As they passed out of the public eye Angèle dropped her hand despondently and let fall the gladioli stalk that she was clutching. Two silent attendants approached apprehensively to help her disrobe. In a sudden apoplectic fury she whipped out at the face of the young intern who ducked with prescient agility. The other retreated swiftly to summon Jeroen, the Dutch masseur with exquisite lips, who alone had the ability to ease away the wrinkles of Angèle's pain.

Left alone in her dressing room, she threw herself onto a cushioned divan with a heavy groan and lifted the lid on a box of liqueur chocolates which she inspected with disgust. Timidly her dresser reappeared to signal silently that Jeroen was on his way.

Rev El however, strode off purposefully into his private study. He required no attendants when engaged in private meditation. His aide,

Walter, ensured that all materials were in their proper place and that no compromising detail ever left this realm of rigorous control. Walter arranged the delivery of a restorative lunch from the kitchens and scheduled Elron's private instruction sessions with chosen acolytes, one of the onerous obligations of the church outreach programme. Only the most promising were invited back to the private apartments after a service.

Later, among the congregation, the few stragglers who had no other recourse than loiter around the soup kitchen, might have observed the departure of the pink Ferrari at high speed towards the fabled Excelsior Tower in the Cadena. The car carried only a dispirited Angèle who had ravished most of the box of chocolates in her lap. Rev El had made alternative arrangements for the afternoon and, donning a coarse black wig, left in his battered Kangoo. He was embarked on a therapeutic departure from routine, entering the circles of the dispossessed, in order to better comprehend the growing alienated world that lapped against the gates of the People's Palisade.



www.trencher.com/go-to

- zebr@ > You have only to look around at the Palisade congregation to know that the flock is being led by the nose, cleverly duped by vibrations from the Aeturnum.*
- A > Z > But who cares? RevEI's world view is quite irrelevant when science is crossing amazing new thresholds. Science is not looking for vibrations or the Aeturnum. Science is intent on transforming human nature by jettisoning behaviours that no longer serve us like Palisade mumbo jumbo.*
- mara > We make poor revolutionaries - such limited future vision.*
- Argot > Look outwards at the vast emptiness of the universe and its impossibly inhospitable extremes. You soon realise that we are already blessed with an earthly Eden. We were never banished. Yet we remain paralysed by fear of being evicted. It is we ourselves who seem determined to destroy this paradise. We do nothing to rein ourselves in, focussing attention instead on our pathetic diversions, preferring to dwell on trivialities and revel in diversionary fantasies.*
- zebr@ > Meanwhile the real race for human survival is taking place secretly within the locked gates of the Prometheus Project where scientists are engineering the ingredients of a new reality.*

Parallel Elron

The following excerpts from de-classified handwritten records of Elron McBride, self-styled 'Rev El' of the People's Palisade, have been seized under the Public Security and Anti-Terrorism Act, redacted by ES-agent Zebr@ and placed in the public domain as being germane to cases currently pending the New Midland Security Review Board.

... all this Go-To hysteria makes me queasy. Surely they practice in a mirror beforehand; and it's always the same ones who kick off, like that flirt with the tremulous earrings, flinging herself around. It goes straight to Angèle's head too. I wish that she would not egg them on.

... such pathetic desire for self-abandonment, dropping into auto-pilot, seeking safety in numbers grovelling before the unknown. Self-abnegation is their life story.

... they throw themselves around with such abandonment yet their euphoria will evaporate the moment they confront that wasteland of baking asphalt outside. Then they realise that their reality is a circumscribed life in the Tainers. The Go-To was merely time away from reality.

... some dismiss the Palisade as a religion, a quaint throwback to an intolerant past. But it is quite the opposite; we intend to counter the benighted religiosity that is sweeping other parts of the planet, the last resort of people grasping at straws.

... but now people are being assailed by the new false gods created by science.

... but what are we actually discovering through science? ... only our own insignificance, that we are mere victims, buffeted by vast, incomprehensible forces that control the universe and rarely jibe with human well-being. We are discovering to our horror that such forces

actually operate beyond the human capacity to understand them ... human evolution is neither inevitable or preordained. Our scientific adventurism only throws up the spectre of our own future irrelevance.

... and were those ancient gods, those omniscient busybodies watching and tallying up scores for judgment day any different from the data hell-hounds monitoring behaviour today?

... our modern data omnipresence supersedes those old deities. Ever lurking in the background, laying up eternal profiles, those data profiles are our eternal rewards. We have shifted our ancient paranoia onto the new cyber gods! ... Yet through this data revolution we have achieved a new lease on immortality, one that ancient pharaohs could only have dreamt of. Bound by our event histories, instead of becoming disembodied spirits, we are fated to become eternally mummified data profiles.

... we are managed by algorithms, controlled by the inevitable logic of machines ... and so we are exonerated from making personal moral judgements ... such self-shackling has been the dream of dictators dependent on armies of unquestioning followers. Now they require battalions of data jockeys to do their bidding, to manage their distorted truths ... cyber data once thought to be under our command, has become an exacting master.

... but I'm a fraud, deflected from the questions that the Palisade should be posing. I have become complicit in accepting their adulation, afraid to rein it in, and succumbing to the myth of my own celebrity. People cling to such assertive self-confidence, yet they make no effort to engage with ideas. They are so terrified by the uncertainties in their own lives that they don't want to glimpse any in mine.

All Change

Mara found her life suddenly carried along on a torrent of precipitous change. She could not directly attribute ensuing events to her confrontation with Justin but the coincidences seemed too great to ignore.

The morning after her confrontation at Embers, the same sinister courier again appeared and rapped officiously on her shutter. “Meeting like this is becoming a habit” she blurted inanely. Without a word he passed over a slim letter, turned on his wheels and roared off.

Mara opened it apprehensively and extracted a communication from solicitors acting on behalf of a company, *Trojan House*, which claimed to have secured a ‘licence to occupy’ the Grey Nuns properties. They enquired whether the Trenchers would be in a position to accept a contract as provisional caretakers of this property which included the old kitchen garden and extensive orchards. Mara’s hand began to shake with excitement as she examined further details of their offer which included temporary accommodation in the old convent buildings in exchange for general maintenance duties

Trojan House was unknown to Mara or everyone else she consulted later that day. Somehow they had succeeded where so many other developers had failed with proposals for land stewardship that eased the consciences of the Church Commissioners.

Huggie was elated when the intent of the proposal began to sink in and let out whoops of satisfaction punching the air aggressively. Recalling the evasive countenance of Justin and his parting words, Mara mistrusted his naive faith in serendipity.

Within a week a hardy group of venturers had moved their chattels into the battered premises. They soon realised the magnitude of the task ahead. The convent buildings were in ruinous condition and scarcely fit for occupation. Vagrant Stits regarded them as haunted and avoided the area after dark. Braver souls who had taken up residence in empty cells had gradually burned their contents for warmth. Extensive roof damage had let in the rain and the dormitories had been invaded with pervasive mildew. The wreckage reeked of musty decay mingled with the acrid odours of charred timber. Two remaining nuns, paralytic crones, still occupied rooms within a labyrinth of mouldering cells and stumbled through the debris strewn corridors to the chapel every morning before it opened for tourist visitations.

Only Huggie seemed to be totally elated by the move. He spent his time wandering the orchard, reporting enthusiastically on hidden botanical treasures discovered in the undergrowth.

The old refectory became the Trenchers' social centre; its doors opening directly onto an overgrown tangle weeds. A sombre hall with high north facing windows, it seemed purposely contrived to thwart the frivolous pleasures of direct sunlight.

Despite these adversities, new Stits began to drift in, keen to join the Trenchers and establish a legitimate base in the city. Among the first arrivals was Clay Clancy, once an acquaintance of Mara's, who had been detailed by Es-Tech to monitor security on behalf of Trojan's insurers. A longstanding inhabitant of the Stits, his anarchist lifestyle seemed ideally suited to roll with the uncertainties of Trencher living. Nevertheless, he seemed to her an unconventional security agent; an obsessive geek, focussed on gaming in a virtual world. Whenever he was not undertaking his dubious daily functions at an Es-Tech outpost, he positioned himself in a messy corner of the kitchen twitching and turning, engaged in feats

of virtual prowess. Though he rarely addressed her with any coherent words, Mara came to appreciate his company in an otherwise desolate space. She had first encountered him many years before. Over the intervening time he had acquired a heavy layer of metal paraphernalia, piercings and distensions which seemed to stultify the performance of every limb and organ of communication.

When she asked him about his duties on behalf of the Trojans he stared at her blankly. “I guess it’s like ... part of our general remission!” Mara noticed a rather dilatory exploration of frontiers in vocabulary. Was this intended to impress her? The results were invariably awful. He flopped down despondently at the refectory table and applied his forehead to the cool surface.

“I suppose that you mean your *remit* in that paranoid, security obsessed world that you try to sustain?” She felt an urgent need to challenge this semi-supine posture.

She attempted to discover why Justin appeared to have been so helpful in rebuilding the fortunes of the Trenchers. But Clay remained impervious and just nodded dumbly. “Ya better not go there.”

She confronted him directly, “So why do you continue to work for such control freaks?”

“Not likes as I have the choice – like I’ve n’t got other options. No papers, not even debts, they’d just send me back to some god-forsaken Tainer in Newd.” Clay always referred to his home town, New Dundee as ‘Newd’. She imagined New Dundee to be another of those thousands of habitations in the outback that had been consolidated under the Exxin Land Trust. Their populations had been largely decanted to practical, zero carbon accommodation so that industrialised hinterlands could be

most effectively exploited. Vast tracts had also been set aside to create carbon trade reservoirs, 'Carb-Belts' as they were called, through which carbon cap and trade mechanism provided so much of the prosperity that underlay the fortunes of New Mid's Cadenites.

But then he piped up and gazed at her with those direct blue eyes that she found so compelling and unsettling. "That's why I got relinquated to the Stits. But you though, you are like different, you've seen a lot and besides yer kinda impossible." He plunged back into his gaming.

Mara's ears began to glow, even with this stinting assessment. She felt curiously pleased that she had been registered in at least some of his erratic perceptions.

The Prigs

Mara had to admit that despite his seemingly fey, tentative nature, Justin was proving a fast operator. Or, she had the uneasy thought, perhaps he had already arranged the ensuing course of events prior to their meeting at Embers, knowing that she would have no alternative but fall in with his plans. He certainly seemed to demonstrate unshakable faith in his own power to achieve his desired outcomes.

Yet again the now familiar, taciturn messenger roared up to the refectory door and presented her with an invitation to represent the Trenchers' at the New Mid Planning Review Group meeting.

Shortly afterwards Justin sent a text explaining that his 'personal client' Burrell De Vere, would also be attending. He mentioned that De Vere and Media-Net had thrown their very persuasive resources behind a vision for renewal of Grey Nuns as a vibrant mixed community, the ValleyView Vision or *VEE3*. Justin counselled that she should restrict herself to answering direct questions about the Trenchers and project the image of a confident, plausible organisation dedicated to conservation objectives. He added as an afterthought that De Vere privately referred to the city Planning Review Group facetiously as 'The PRIGS' and added a sly, winking emoticon:

;~)

Given the short deadline, she and Huggie scurried to produce an informative 'triptych', three conjoined panels setting out *Trenchers Past, Present and Future*. Even enhanced, Huggie's photo images were less than riveting; his plots of recently sown potatoes looked hardly inspiring. She felt uncertain about the inclusion of his off-colour cartoons featuring 'Haynik Humour'.

She took great pains to prepare a business-like appearance, pushing the limits of her registered security profile. She quietly delighted in imagining Gilb's astonishment at what she could pull off when she put her mind to it. Huggie, however, was another order of challenge. At least she ensured that he had been provided with a belt, conspicuously marked 'BRONKO' and a shirt with most of the buttons aligned. Nevertheless he still somewhat resembled a ruffled hedgehog ejected from a water cannon.

They set off in plenty of time for the appointment the following morning. Having been photographed, fingerprinted and vetted in an arctic security zone, these two mismatched colleagues were collected by a button-mouthed agent and ushered up to a room high over the city where they were formally announced at 'Ms Mara Greene and Mr Hugh Jones' and indicated where to sit.

Burrell De Vere was prominently ensconced at one end of the table. He turned his head and merely nodded at them appraisingly as if the waiter had just presented him with two savoury dishes.

A large scale map of the city was hanging on the wall over his shoulder. Mara viewed it with dismay as she compared its slick, confident graphics with their own gauche triptych, now discreetly kicked under the table. Optimistic colour fields set out concepts capable of engaging even the most impervious imaginations. A cordon of sunny ochre, the Golden Cadena, extended languorously alongside the joyfully azure waterside which was punctuated with exuberant landscaping follies and colourful fish lying prone on the water's surface. This much lauded 'String of Pearls', a collection of architectural fantasies, each shrieking 'look at me!' had become deeply embedded in the civic mind as the image of resurgent New Midland. Boundaries of repossessed tracts were designated with elegant, dotted lines indicating, The Excelsior, the Grand Epitome, the Elysium, and Paragon Plaza, a host of names synonymous with the city's

fabled elite. Beyond this Cadena delineated by the sharp edge of Bin Street, stretched the vast grey sea marked 'Interstitial Zones'. Once the heart of a prosperous city, this had become the domain of ferocious security dogs pacing behind chain link fences that arbitrarily divided old neighbourhoods according to the land assembly logic of vying land banks. From a central point in the Cadena, a single sharply defined transportation line traversed this sea of grey pabulum to access the peripheral 'Tainer Eco-belt', comprised of cheerful pastel-coloured zones of low energy, high efficiency accommodation where the vast majority of the city's population was now billeted.

Displayed over each of the Tainer zones was an Avatar symbol to facilitate orientation in a post-literate age. The genius of the Tainer concept lay in the political stability achieved by keeping natural antipathies well separated. Different ethnic groups had been distilled into homogenous neighbourhoods that would best sustain their own particular cultural or religious prejudices in isolation.

But the map's most assertive shade of pro-active spring green was reserved for Prometheus Park, already an acknowledged world-class centre of excellence in bio-technical research. It stood in proud isolation, on the peninsula which had sheltered the city's once thriving port. Its avatar resembled an encircled cluster of connected up happy-face blobs, presumed to be genes displayed on a petrie dish.

Fostered by advantageous tax arrangements, the Prometheus redevelopment of these polluted industrial lands had been the pre-eminent triumph of the Planning Review Group. The Park was depicted fringed with a delicate lacework of exclusive yacht clubs and water sporting facilities, a forest of colourful, if empty exuberance. Of course the reality was somewhat different; the depleted River Eme dribbled its silted dregs into the lake which caressed a noxious smelling shoreline

that Prometheans wisely turned their backs on.

De Vere smiled condescendingly as he surveyed the pile of scrappy papers littered across the table; notes and jottings, records of random communications. Before him he had carefully positioned a single pristine report elegantly bound and titled with the words:

ValleyView Vision

Resuscitating the Heart of New Midland



On the report cover was a photograph of the famous Grey Nuns' Chapel, rendered in sepia tones as if it was already a distant memory. Mara's mind careered unhelpfully to a mental image of the grisly reliquary in the crypt.

De Vere rotated his shoulders like a pugilist and flounced his white mane slowly from side to side, challenging the room with a dangerous flash of the eye. "As planners entrusted with resuscitating New Mid, our task remains huge. As visionaries we must consider the heritage that we will bequeath to future generations. I have made a profound personal commitment in bringing the resources of Media-Net in line with this Trojan vision."

Mara began to fidget under the table. The room was hot and airless, the

rigorously enforced poverty of the public realm. Perceiving the general malaise de Vere turned to address the two recent arrivals. “Trojan House has embraced the energies of a dynamic conservation group, the Trenchers. We have taken the liberty of inviting representatives to this meeting. These are citizens who are tuned into the illustrious past of our city. Trojan House has tapped into their energies to help re-stabilise a landscape that is too precious to squander on uncontrolled piecemeal exploitation. These are our guys in the front lines, diggin in, working to protect what’s left of this incredible urban resource.”

When he began to wax lyrical about the Trenchers as ‘a beacon in an anarchic wilderness’ that had managed to create a stable community around ‘ambitious agricultural pilot schemes’, Mara and Huggie suddenly found themselves basking in a general warm glow of approval. She also began to feel relieved that their belaboured ‘triptych’ would probably not be required to see the light of day. Mara nudged Huggie under the table but received only a glazed glance in return.

De Vere continued in an authoritative drawl. “This is only a first move in an ambitious re-colonization of the Stits.” He then outlined the key points of the ValleyView Vision without actually opening the report, which, he explained, would be released ‘in due course’. As he caressed the tome before him he was only too aware of the titillated souls so keen to catch a fleeting glimpse of its contents.

“Above all we must maintain the trust of our business community. If we fail to accommodate their demands, they will simply move on to more favourable investment opportunities elsewhere. I shudder to think. This is a rare moment and we must make every effort to reach out and grasp it.”

De Vere proposed that the Trenchers Cooperative (it was the first time

that Mara had heard this description) headquartered in the derelict Refectory, would bring considerable added value to VEE 3. Mara and Huggie glanced at each other, both astonished by his display of authoritative paternalism.

De Vere took care to downplay any suggestion of planning coercion. Such talk would only send the wrong message to the international business community that they were trying to attract. After all many of the beneficiaries of this sea of foreclosed mortgages were banks and major investment funds themselves, to whom the idea of political intervention prioritising any social agenda was anathema. An endorsement from the Planning Review Group that resulted in creation of a fast tracked Global Enterprise Zone would foster property renewal and transition away from anachronistic land uses.

The group picked up his disparaging reference to anachronistic land uses. For indeed there was a fly in his visionary balm. The Grey Nuns properties still remained in the possession of the church. Though Trojan House had secured an option, there were others keenly vying for these lands. In particular the People's Palisade was inveigling the Church into parting with its lands for a sympathetic land use. De Vere alluded to these other interests as being 'quasi-religious'.

The Planning Chairman, Denny, nodded reluctant affirmation, his sparkling bald head bobbing like a hinged marionette. "Believe me if I could think of a better way to achieve our objectives without wholesale expropriation, I would be the first aboard."

De Vere bridled at the word, "Discussion of expropriation must be avoided at all costs. We are courting the trust of the international business community. If we bandy around ugly terms, they will only find somewhere else to stash their hard earned cash. Almost every world-

class city I can think of is up against the wall, crying out to attract the kind of opportunity that is knocking at our door. We must roll out the red carpet before others beat us to it.”

Jimmy, an eager intern positioned at Denny’s side, piped up. “I don’t actually see why the People’s Palisade could not also be included in the bigger vision if needs be.” The whole room seemed subsumed in De Vere’s gasp of contempt for ill-considered blasphemy. “The difference in vision lies in the cold hard cash that our city needs to survive. The ValleyViewVision will attract the internationally recognised currencies required to keep New Midland on our world class trajectory. We do not need a bevy of sanctimonious soothsayers, a deranged morality squad, on our doorstep. The Palisade is part of the sub-economy and it relies on local virtual currencies. Our city has been starved of hard resources for too long. Let me tell you that nobody is going to jet in to gawp at the bones of some defunct saint.”

With these dismissive words, De Vere examined his watch and then began to consolidate his papers and the report into his briefcase. “My Lord! Got to go! Sorry gents! My next bout beckons. Got to get a bead on what Starkers is planning!” The Planners leapt up in unison hands extended for a joint clasp as he quit the room.

As the room silently emptied, Denny straggled over to the window to scan the empty harbour while Jimmy hunkered down glumly expecting a reprimand from his boss for his thoughtless remarks. “I guess it’s better not to know what he’s really planning,” he whispered over his shoulder. Mara and Huggie looked at each other not entirely sure whether they were relieved to escape unnoticed. Neither had been invited to say a word. But perhaps that was the point. Mara retrieved her battered triptych. They waved to the distracted Denny and made their way out silently down the hall.

The Diary - The Party's Over

'THE PARTY'S OVER!!' is the cryptic scrawl over one of her last entries, then nothing ... just empty yellowed pages stained by squashed insects. She seems to have been suddenly confronted with her delusions, a deep, unexplained disappointment.

Whenever I alight on that page I try to imagine what led her to the precipice. Something has clearly changed. Her few following entries degenerate into random notes and casual expletives. I suspect that she died shortly afterwards, leaving her young daughters, my mother and her sister, both in their early teens, to be brought up by cousins.

Those were times of uncertainty. The turmoil of the Debt Riots occurred shortly afterwards. The status quo that she had once lamented as immutable was so suddenly torn to shreds.

One of the recurring themes in her diary is her growing despair at the failure of the system to create the equitable society that she believed would emerge from her own and others' likeminded positive energies. Instead there is creeping hopelessness, the terminal disease of someone who holds a rapidly diminishing stake in the surrounding world.

She lashes out at the cabal controlling an increasing proportion of the earth's resources from within their ever diminishing circle of privilege. That tiny minority had suddenly perceived that there was no economic benefit in sustaining her middle class culture or way of life.

What she so often reviled as the 'age of the consumer' ended abruptly. Goods that she had taken for granted became unaffordable. Consumption was replaced by a rising tide of debt which proved a surprisingly effective form of social control. Those who have racked up heavy debts would

be reluctant to spare time fomenting change. I guess that it was then that the Goldie emerged, initially a currency of defiance regulated by people rather than banks that proved so determined to impose fiscal responsibility on those who had nothing. But soon these virtual currencies were discovered to suit both agendas; the hardnosed fiscal engineers could deftly conserve their own wealth while transferring risks over to the new virtual currencies.

Despite all her worthy boycotting and her consumer prejudices, the system at the centre of her life was brazenly material, and necessitated the consumption of goods. But that system proved utterly vulnerable when the wealthy lost their appetite to participate.

Now none of the Tainers produce any useful goods or services. The Tainers themselves are shipped over as flat packs from impoverished Europe. But it seems that the priority has always been one of security and control. Everyone was so ill-prepared for the sweeping changes that occurred.

My mother never found the kind of defiant identity that her own mother had stitched together, nor did she ever bask in her optimism. It was hardly surprising that my own mother so cynically supported the idea of my marriage to Gilb, and turned a blind eye to his arrogance and cossetting wealth, everything that her own mother would have found repellent. She saw Gilb as a solution to my problems, an instant fix in a very troubled world. The writer of this old diary proves to be much more my kindred spirit than my own mother ever was.

Her diary embodies the expansive spirit that the Trenchers should rekindle, even if we are drawing to the end of our own 'Party'. We are like excavators uncovering vestiges of that old society, those aspects which fired imaginations that went so far beyond economic values.

Invasion

The mild summer weather had given way to a torrid heat wave. Mara was settled into a corner of the bleak kitchen with the doors to the garden flung open gasping for any relieving air current. The foreground view was gradually becoming more ordered with beds of herbs and legumes planted out. At the further edges it rapidly degenerated into chaos where Huggie had clobbered together sundry bits of wood and wire mesh to create a hen coop. At least he was delighted with such landscaping challenges. He regularly blitzed in and out with armfuls of fresh green firewood for cooking which filled the kitchen with acrid smoke. The refectory seemed conceived for self-mortification. The festoon of old pipes overhead dripped with condensation splattering the broken flagstones around the rusted out burners of the smoking stove.

Mara was attempting to establish some consistency to the Trencher blog site. Cast into the limelight in their new role, they had attracted many maverick visitors with divisive views that had to be challenged or reined in. It was alarming how many people had nothing better to occupy themselves than expressing paranoid distortions of Trencher objectives. But this had become the character of most social networks, the dumping grounds for unreasonable hatreds and divisive opinion. Monitoring such excesses required constant vigilance. Mara was determined to measure up to her Trojan sponsors' expectations, though she had only a vague notion of what these might be.

As she scrolled through Huggie's recent effusions about discoveries in the arboretum, a new message dropped onto the site with a sonorous warble. The text began to reassemble itself rapidly before her eyes, backtracking over spelling errors. At first the letters seemed alien and tangential, until she realised that these words appearing across the ether were in fact her own, a word for word transcription the secret journal

that she had been modelling on her grandmother's. She blanched in horror; who had hacked into her private files? The whole process had the engulfing logic of an irrational dream, with déjà vu inevitability in the arrival of each letter.

She read with growing horror:

Her diary was one of the few pitiful things that I salvaged in that little plastic bag when I walked out on Gilb. Has running away become the story of my life? At least I still have my grandmother's diary. Perhaps that's why the Trenchers have become so important. I feel a determination to make this work, as if I am clinging to one last chance to redeem my life.

She rushed to erase the paragraph but immediately another embarrassing passage popped up in its place.

Nowadays keeping an off-the-record account would be regarded as a subversive act, an attempt to maintain some kind of secretive parallel life. It's probably even worse than being thought of as a Trencher!

Again she hurriedly erased the message but again further words popped up. This stalker was undeniably persistent in his efforts to turn her into an object of derision.

At least it's my own secret world, if a poor approximation of the private landscape that she created in her notebook.

She quickly installed a moderator's note about on-line harassment and compliance with community standards. But more provocative words immediately danced upon the screen.

Gilb was soft, not a single sharp bone in his body, but he contained such

supine menace, like a suffocating blanket. I laugh though when I think of Clay, more like his alter ego - armoured with that clunky, protective exoskeleton. All those bars laced through his ears scream out 'don't touch', the silly lip ring mocks anyone getting close enough to ...

Mara gagged. How could she have written such drivel? She hastened to erase it and add a moderator's note. But another essay popped up:

Embarrassing to find myself yet again hovering over Clay's shoulders sharing his drone-bot experience – feeling a ridiculous urge to pull on that little tuft of hair trailing down the nape of his neck. Skin so smooth and innocent ...

Fortunately it was unlikely that dyslexic Clay would ever encounter this cringe-worthy guff. But what about all her other readers? What would they be thinking? She felt positively ill and shuddered that she could have been so self-indulgent, even in her most private thoughts. She considered pulling the plug on the server entirely but realised that she would only surrender control of expunging further embarrassments as they arose.

Why had she ever attempted to keep a diary? It was so self-indulgent, so transparently broken and lovelorn.

She quickly typed in a response, "I don't know how you have hacked into these private files, but and you have no right to release any of this."

The message returned, "*Consider it therapy! Just sit back and let your little Zebr@ set it out in black and white, telling it all like it really is.*"

Obviously this 'little Zebr@' was relishing every moment of her torment. Her only resort could be calling in site security. At least, she knew, Clay was unlikely to review the content.

“I don’t see how this Zebra character accessed my private notes. They’re all kept in an old stand-alone,” she wailed.

Clay shook his head in his irritatingly know-it-all manner. “No such thing as stand-alone these-a-days, I’d say. Y’ kin access anything y’ need. Upgrades automatically take file dumps as a precaution. Y’ upgrade an there you have it; bobs y’er uncool, they grabs the files – like takes seconds.”

“But journals are supposed to be private! Why would anyone be interested?”

“It’s probably just what we like call do-diligence, or part of somebody’s risk assessment. Perhaps they wanna track the Trenchers in case they’re gonna hatch a terrorist incident.”

“I can see what it’s supposed to achieve - total humiliation. It’s a hatchet job! Zebra is trying to wreck the Trenchers and make me out as a complete buffoon.”

Clay added with unnecessary sagacity, “Well as they say if ya have nuffin to hide then ya have nuffin to fear.”

Mara felt a sudden urge to lunge at him and tear the silly ring out of his snout. She screamed, “I don’t have anything to hide you twit. I’m entitled to mull over my life and move on. But someone’s rooting around in my personal details. These are not neutral machines in action; Zebra is out there, dead set on blackmail.”

Clay thought a moment. “Well don’t ya find it kinda neat that there’s someone who even wants to watch? - makes ya feel wanted. I don’t have anything I specially wants to hide.”

“If you thought about it for a moment, there is a lot that you ought to suppress; your life is an utter shambles. What have you achieved beyond your stratospheric scores in *Doom-Dudgeon* or whatever idiocy it is you’re playing?”

Clay snapped shut his tablet and stared at her wide-eyed.

“Well p’raps they wanna round out some story.”

“But what story?”

“Okay! Okay! Leave it to me. I can rekit around and see what they’re up’ter. This guy Zebra’s gotta have links. He’s likely the culprit. Like leave it all to me!”

Whistle Blower

How Mara pined for the homely intimacy of her old kitchen in the Stits with the cats staking claims to transient pools of sunlight. It would not be easy to build a community with the same vitality as the one they had lost. But hoardings had already gone up around their old locale, now an 'Exclusion Zone' patrolled by roving packs of guard dogs.

She was also beginning to have misgivings about becoming so beholden to Justin in all these sudden changes. He seemed to have single-handedly set the Trenchers on their new track. With increasing frequency he would 'pop in' just to see how she was 'hanging' and enthuse over the latest improvements, always spreading his praise a little too liberally.

At least he never sent her personal messages. As he explained it, "I'm obliged to live below the radar. In these days of heightened security I can't afford to do social media. I've got to protect my identity; the best I can manage is a stable of aliases to piggyback on others."

As she stirred a cooling grey viscous potage composed of some vaguely identified root stock Huggie had discovered in the walled garden, she heard a light tap on the window pane and looked up to see the delicate outline of Justin silhouetted against the glass. She had an unpleasant sensation that he may have been observing her for some time.

Unlatching the door she returned to her pot without a word. He approached and tapped her on the shoulder and she turned to receive a desiccated kiss on the cheek, the faint impression of an annoying insect alighting briefly. She shuddered at his stilted affectations, then took momentary pleasure in imagining her own skin unpleasantly splattered with the soup.

“Just thought you might welcome a visitor bringing thrilling news,” he touched his nose self-effacingly. Justin often seemed troubled by an invisible fruit fly circling about his nose. Mara had come to realise that it was his way of deflecting focussed attention.

Mara’s response was to ladle out some of the lumpy grey sludge and present it to him. “It’s supposed to be cool and summery.” He peered at it despondently muttering something about ‘domestic goddess’ then dropped into a chair assuming his characteristic bent willow slouch. Mara imagined with some dread that he was attempting to look ‘available’.

“I just thought that you might like a progress update. It looks as if your Trencher-Trojan contingent has at last secured a firm option. The only other contenders, Rev El and his Palisade Pals seem to have been sent packing. Looks like you’re here to stay! Queen of the castle!”

“Trencher-Trojans? Is that what you’re calling us now?” Mara turned towards him in some dismay. “Besides, I don’t think anyone really wants to stay - it’s like a mortuary here, worse than haunted.”

“How can I convince you that you’re *really, really* on the right track? This is your big opportunity! Admittedly I’m better placed to see the whole picture. But if you think you’ve got problems, spare a thought for poor ole Rev El!” he chortled, “that guy makes so many mistakes. The poor sod and his angelic trollop will soon be packing their bags for Timbuktu.”

Mara turned to confront him in a sudden rage. “Well if you have worked out all the details, perhaps you can tell me what’s up your sleeve for us? Why you have organised our exile in this god forsaken place ... and perhaps you could tell me exactly who Zebra is? He seems very tuned into our case here. I suspect that he might be one of your stooges, or at least according to Clay.”

“According to Clay – eh? Is he supposed to be some kind of expert?” Justin was clearly caught off guard at her outburst. “Clay should keep baseless opinions to himself.”

But had Mara noticed a flicker of complicity in his eyes when she mentioned Zebra? Justin assumed his most soothing tone of voice. “It’s probably all part of the deal, an agent just demonstrating your vulnerabilities to help you address them. Like assessing the services you need.”

“What deal? What services do we need?”

“We all need to take stringent security arrangements. Nobody wants to return to the anarchy that so recently blighted our city? The waste of recent years stemming from that welter of disinformation has been horrifying.”

“But I don’t want to be target of some data masseur called Zebr@, whatever he hopes to prove.”

Everything that Justin uttered sounded over-rehearsed and patently false to her ears.

He continued, “But you’ve got to realise it’s the way of our contemporary world. Even the folks in the Cadena get fully profiled. No transaction goes unrecorded. But at least now it’s all achieved through dispassionate cyber-intelligence, observation without any axe to grind. Pre-emptive intervention is perhaps one of the most successful aspects of our society. Good profiling helps to preclude conflict and it helps to shape positive thinking.”

Mara noticed a marked change in his tune, no longer presenting himself as the altruistic crusader for change. But she had suspicions that he was

testing her with this cynicism. “But what society? Our Trenchers don’t want to be managed by ES-Tech, or Zebra, or any of the people calling the tunes at Media-Net.”

“We all remember those days of painful chaos, that reign of terror, before ES-Tech stepped in to their very necessary role in social stabilisation. Then we used to delude ourselves, pretending that we could manage multiculturalism or at least some sort of bipartisan society that engaged in open dialogue. Those old political delusions have completely collapsed; we required new weapons in our arsenal to maintain stability and put as much distance as possible between ourselves and that recent destructive chaos.”

Mara realised that she was not getting through. “Of course no one wants to return to the repossession riots, but nor would anyone vote for a world where all future expectations are constantly managed by you and your goons.”

Justin blinked obligingly and drew unpleasantly closer to Mara. She noticed with revulsion a milky sourness to his breath. “But you see Mara, I’m convinced that at heart we’re both kindred spirits. You should consider where I’m coming from. I’ve always admired your free spirit. Even though I have to toe the official line, I like to think that behind the scenes, I have similar altruistic objectives fostering social justice.”

“There are real issues here. We need to tailor people’s expectations to achieve the greater public good. You’ll see it more clearly when you begin to comprehend our plan.”

“Our Plan?” Mara exploded, “I don’t even want to hear about your plan!” Justin’s voice shifted from the wheedling to the peevish. “Even if it involves your little pal Clay?” Mara tried to conceal any obvious reaction

to this provocation. She regretted that she had ever volunteered anything of Clay's hunches about Zebr@. Clearly Justin was not pleased with Clay's intervention. She suspected that he had imagined some romantic connection between Clay and herself which had inflamed jealousies. Nothing could seem to her more ludicrous.

Justin announced officiously, "Anyway, we are setting up Clay in an important new role. He's going to have to pull his act together in order to hobnob with pretty stratospheric high-flyers."

"I can certainly picture that!" Mara added sarcastically. "Do you suppose that they'll figure out what he's talking about?"

"Es-Tech has just picked up a key contract to manage diplomatic security for a VVIP visitor, one of the business titans of the planet ... a potash potentate or something like that. His interest in New Midland is supposed to presage a new chapter in our economic renaissance. I have put Clay forward as a candidate. In fact he's already been assigned a furlough aboard a super-lux yacht, *Shazzam*, managing a communications firewall."

Recently Mara had been hearing far too much about *Shazzam*; its dimensions, the list of the celebrities it had entertained had become common knowledge. Media sites had been abuzz with tantalising details of the privileged world of its owner. The gossip had been inescapable.

"I'm sure that Clay will have a very jolly time aboard." She added sarcastically. "He's so good with foreign languages."

Not without an evident pang of jealousy, Justin noted the defensiveness in Mara's tone whenever he touched on Clay. How ineffectually she concealed her feelings with her tart throw-away statements. But he only smiled smugly, "We must all take our parts in a grander vision and Clay

should be thrilled to play his role. I know how you like having him around, however hard to fathom. A lot of people regard him as a bit of a liability; not for all tastes, I guess.”

“It sounds as if you are setting him up for something that would be repellent to anyone in his right mind.”

“Ah, Clay’s right mind, that would be a challenge to identify! Certainly whatever it is, it’s malleable. But you’ll soon be proud of your little pal, he’s being set up for quite a heroic role ...”

Mara turned to face him in some alarm. “He’s not my ‘little pal’ and none of this sounds like Clay at all. What exactly are you hatching? Does Clay know?”

Justin hastened to reassure her. “He’s in no danger. He’ll be gaining new friends ... I gather the Emir’s son is a bit of a handful, one of those classic closet cases, locked himself away. They should get on like a house on fire.”

Considering her recent experiences this was an unfortunate allusion. “Why don’t I trust you?”

Justin flashed a fleeting look of amused complicity over the top of his glasses and added, “Clay’s role is helping to keep a lid on this guy; a bit of a space cadet. Clay should be in his element.”

“And what will you be doing meanwhile?” Mara asked truculently.

Justin dipped the top of his glasses and levelled his eyes at Mara in an artful moment of candour. She could only wish that he would desist from these posturings. “Well to be perfectly candid, I am counting on

the Emir's son to advance our plan. There will be advantages in bringing even a fruit loop like him, over to our side."

"our side?"

"Yes our side, which is only trying and do some good in the world."

"Now you sound a bit like your Rev El, I suspect." Mara added sniffily.

"My Rev El? I expect that you'll be getting a truer insight into the real nature of the Reverend Elron McBride in short order."

Abandoning the lumpy grey 'root-soup', Justin stood up abruptly and began pacing about the room. "But I need to agree practicalities. We'll need to communicate off the record in the coming days and we'll have to do this through Clay's mail server. I have priority access and can pick up anything you need to discuss before he gets his paws on it." He laughed disingenuously, "For my part I'll look forward to playing a demented dyslexic role to the hilt. But there is one rule to get straight... you must never under any circumstances allude to me in any of your correspondence. We would only jeopardise everything that we both hope to achieve; and I might add, you could put your little pal into considerable danger. Get my drift?"

Mara shrugged defiantly and stuck her tongue out at him as he turned and passed out into the garden. She regretted that she had mentioned Clay at all. Justin so evidently saw him as a rival. And Clay was certainly not in any position to reject any compromising position assigned to him. Though Clay was often a bit of an idiot, Mara felt that he really did need her protection. She imagined that he might come to appreciate her skill in looking after his interests. Poor deluded girl!

Seeking Zebr@

The temporary firewall against further incursions into *trencher.com* seemed to be effective. To Mara's relief Clay had shown no interest in the actual content of Zebra's messages. She realised that this blindness was at the root of his technical proficiency, an intuitive understanding of how things work but a total obliviousness to actual content. He preferred to leave value judgements to others, or preferably to automatic cybernetic controls. Her own curiosity however had been piqued by Justin's evident annoyance that Clay had offered help in dealing with Zebra.

As she sat in the gloom staring despondently at the screen, Clay breezed in and tossed down his bag. He was quivering with excitement, his metal adornments flashing with zealous purpose. He grabbed her by the arm, "Guess what! I gotta bead on Zebra!" He flashed a screen at her, "and I got the passes, soas I figger we can make a scursion 'n see just where's hiding. I kinda wanna see for myself. So! Pack yer six guns!"

However reluctant to be caught up in some confrontation, Mara was nevertheless astonished at how quickly Clay had been able to arrange clearances for Tainer Galax, one of the more notorious centres of political ferment. It was one of the 'laboratory Tainers', a Prometheus seed ground, and a community where controversial experiments were undertaken.

They set off shortly after to confront Zebra. It was a tortuous route on Tran-Zip to reach the 'Galax' enclave. Clay had triangulated upon a particular address as the source thought to be Zebra.

Mara had had very limited exposure to Tainer life. She had once received entry clearance to a genteel retirement resort called 'Tainer-vale', one

of the early 'Valhalla' communities. On a mission of condolence, she had agreed to accompany a friend on a visit to relatives living in that mind-numbingly quiet community. They had spent the afternoon sharing digital reminiscences of some long abandoned summer cottage out in the Exxin. Although immobile, locked into life support systems, these two old women claimed to be enjoying enviable social lives surrounded by a network of virtual friends and admirers. They clung tenaciously to their enhanced virtual memories of happy times long past. Tainers like these, which successfully blurred the boundary between the living and the dead, had done so much to sow acceptance of the Valhalla concept for dealing with aging loved ones.

Most Tainer communities were self-policing and jealously guarded their social charters, managing their own welfare. In some even armed ES-Tech operatives risked serious danger in clashing with local policing. Often they had to be deployed as commando forces charged with deftly removing divisive malcontents. Other notorious Tainers were simply written off as black-spots harbouring communities of turbulent dissidents who had to be maintained in perpetual 'lock-down'. Pervasive data profiling had permitted creation of model homogeneous neighbourhoods distilled on the basis of racial characteristics, creed or educational attainments. The more secure one felt among one's neighbours the less the need to communicate with them. In many such communities data apportioning had proven just as effective in social control as the pharmacological ministrations.

The genius of the Tainer concept lay in the recognition that hatred of neighbours can be a powerful cohesive glue in defining a community.

Because legal systems were administered locally, fundamental laws could be tailored to suit different communities. Security remained the primary objective. Admirably, cultures imposing strict religious observance, their

women shrouded modestly from head to toe, coexisted placidly with clothing optional communities or those which respected only the palest of skin colours on the other side of a virtual firewall. Behaviour such as apostasy that might incur capital punishment in one community would pass uncensored among neighbours separated only by invisible data barriers.

With huge advances in gene profiling many 'Tainees' were recognised as economically 'unviable' and had been drawn together in communities that could enjoy comfortable subsistence with well regulated medical support.

However, their present destination, T-Galax, was reputed to sustain a younger and more enterprising demographic. It was one of the exemplary equalised communities which demonstrated the beneficial application of Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALY) and efficiently allocated scarce resources to those who would generate the most profit. On the down side, it was also recognised as potentially politically volatile and occasionally dangerous. Many of its inhabitants were supposedly engaged in active self-education and enjoyed less restrictive access to information gateways. The community even boasted the Galax Open University, an on line self-education resource (affectionately known as the GOONY) and widely recognised as a passport to greater things. This was the academic community which hosted the pilot group which worked closely with Prometheus in their genome enhancement research.

Trans-Zip deposited Mara and Clay at a bleak entrance gate which slid open sharply when Clay presented his clearance card. Mara immediately realised that they had entered a world very different from the leafy Tainervale. Within the gates they encountered a great battery of outdoor lockers, the depot from which local residents retrieved their weekly entitlements. Solid waste that could not be removed via the pneumatic

waste network was returned in the same pale blue delivery hampers, all neatly stacked for recycling.

Like many of the new high density Tainers, Galax had been established in old suburban hinterlands exploiting redundant roads and parking lots. Streets once profligately over-scaled for local traffic needs had been lined with these neat prefabricated dwellings. Long batteries of identical units were interrupted only by the occasional service relay station, supplying energy or pumping out waste through surface lines.

Following Clay's GPS they proceeded along 'Main Ave'. Identical Eco-pods were precisely located at a prescribed distance from its neighbour. At the end of each dwelling little engraved plastic signs, slid into open frames, provided a list of registered occupants and their specific status levels. Mara peered down long side alleys, paved in scorching gravel, lit by bright reflections off the metallic cladding, trying to imagine the occupants' lives.

As they proceeded through this maze of units, they encountered no one. "At least it makes me appreciate our dreary refectory," she remarked. Clay's only retort was on the strength of the local broadcast signal. "Ya don't get signal strength like this anywheres 'ceptin the Cadena" was his sole contribution. "It's like so ...!" his imagination failed to complete the thought.

"What really surprises me is that we have walked for ten minutes and haven't met a living soul."

"Yeah, it's like very high-class. Total life-support! Everything's laid on ..."
Clay's attention remained locked on his GPS. "Justin's always cagey about Galax. That's why I kinda wanted to see for myself."

Alarm bells were beginning to ring in Mara's mind. "So who actually

authorised this little excursion?”

But Clay remained evasive. “It’s collaboration project between Es-Tech and Prometheus ... Even Justin doesn’t know the whole picture.” Clay mumbled, “Some kinda experiment in swarm intelligence where everyone is merged into a network mega brain.”

Mara looked around bewildered at the rows of identical separated tainers. “It certainly doesn’t look like a linked up community.”

Clay slapped one of the protruding corners “But that’s part of the beauty of it. It’s all zero carbon.”

“But what do they do for recreation, do they ever get out? – or see one another?”

“Don’t needer. Everything’s laid on.” He repeated as if that explained everything. “Like they’re carbon neutral to the max, don’t need exercise, everyone’s connected, ... one of the world’s most powerful super-computers, all organic!”

Every unit was tightly secured with windows firmly shut. The only noise was a pervasive hum of the roof mounted air cooling equipment which ensured tolerable internal environmental conditions in this sweltering heat. Down each slot between pods Mara could glimpse the fenced off No-Go’s, elsewhere referred to as the ‘Nogs’. They supported an eruption of scrub in overgrown suburban gardens among the ruins of unsustainable abandoned buildings.

Clay mumbled over his shoulder, “Guest we’re now gettin’ pretty near.”

“I don’t see how you can tell. It all looks the same. No wonder Zebra has

to entertain himself romping through other people's lives!"

Clay stopped to inspect the corner seam of a unit. His only comment was "Never seen that kinda screw before, like, totally tamper proof." Ingenious design was known to discourage consumer interference and minimise tenant risk. "Like this is a delux community ... what everyone wants to trade up'ter. Shipped over from Yerp ... totally carbon neutral and running a profit in five years."

Mara could do without such details. "Someone might at least have planted a tree ..." she muttered, surveying the bleak scene.

"What's the point, it's all like transitional. Everybody's happy to be looked after while they're gearing up for the next thing."

Following Clay had been rather like being guided by a Ouija planchette. He rarely looked up as he stumbled along the avenues then turned off suddenly into a side alley.

The summer sun beat down on them. It was strange to imagine that merely steps away, silently wired into their various windows on the world, inhabitants were whiling away their time in comfort-cooled seclusion. Mara eyed the nearby security cameras. She would love relay some photos to Huggie; but notices posted next to CCTV cameras on transmission poles admonished '*PLEASE Respect our Privacy!*'

It was the unlikely sight of the clump of pale blue hydrangeas planted against the reflective metallic blue and gold siding of an Eco-pod that remained vivid in Mara's memory following their visit. This patch of exposed soil sustaining an effusion of bloom, must have been left over from the boulevard planting of a now forgotten suburban avenue. Some subversive resident, heedless of management strictures discouraging

'individuation', must have defiantly nurtured the shrub to bloom in this wasteland of metallic surfaces, asphalt and glittering crushed glass paving.

They had arrived at a Unit marked B-3142. Clay cupped his hands and tried to peer through the tinted glass. "I don't think that anybody's home" Mara suggested with a hint of relief. She realised that she was now dreading the thought of confrontation.

As he stumbled up to the entry door, she held back to admire the wall of bloom that almost obscured the gigantic lettering HAVENSWORTH extending the full length of the Tainer. "Someone at least has a green thumb" she mumbled. But Clay would not be distracted from his hand held screen.

She spied a scooter near the door. It had black and white plastic tassels fixed to the handles. "I didn't think that children were allowed." Children were now so uncommon in New Mid that it was generally deemed best to secure them within designated child friendly enclaves.

Clay grumped distractedly, "Prolly justa growdup pertendin."

He pocketed his GPS, took a deep breath and thumped twice on the enamelled door. There was no response. He thumped again with his open palm and they heard a faint rustling inside.

"Perhaps we've caught them at an awkward time?" Mara had lost all appetite for the impending confrontation.

"More likely they're just layin' low," Clay suggested elliptically.

With a squelching sound of a decompressing rubber gasket, the door suddenly opened a crack emitting a waft of refrigerated air.

On first impression the face that opened to them was one of the most angelic she had ever encountered. Mara held her breath in amazement. Her pulse quickened. Some indistinct longing stirred within her. The young man had the appearance of a matinee idol from one of those ancient films, a generous head with immaculate bouffant hair, a square jaw with just a hint of danger in its chiselled shadows. The facial skin was buffed to an effulgent bronze and the eyes were an unnaturally piercing blue. He was the very image of 'come get me' sexual availability.

It was only when she began to take in the rest of his physique that disappointment crashed in. The image of perfection stopped abruptly mid torso and tapered off into the scrawny body of a waif with twig thin arms and bony limbs, all excessively revealed by an unflattering tank top. His body seemed jointed into improbable angles like a marionette. Over his shoulder Mara glimpsed other faces sitting at perimeter benches craning to glimpse the unexpected caller. Most seemed to be wearing bathing caps like a swim team preparing to take to the water.

Suddenly even the cameo appearance of the upper torso seemed too good to be true. The searing eyes seemed too luminous to be natural, the hair more like a jaunty cap. It was as if they were addressing a perfectly contrived puppet's head. She almost fancied that she could detect a seam at the hair line like a cap.

Clay took it all in at a glance and summoned up his full authority announcing, "We're like lookin' for someone called Zebra..." He added helpfully, "at these co-ordinates," and flashed his GPS.

"You're out of luck. He's not here; and anyway we don't take cold callers." The man attempted to pull the door closed but Clay deftly inserted his foot. "This girl here wantsa talk t'him about hacking."

Mara added emolliently, "We want to find out why he's accessing my personal information and publishing it on my website." She kicked herself inwardly for sounding so pedantic.

Clay, not in the least deflected, wrenched the door open further. "Like we've caught'im red handed transmittin' from this address."

Puppet man just shrugged and tried to wrench the door back.

" – you know ... we're gonnaget some perfessional heavies to look into this." Clay's threat sounded improbable. "We want Zebra to get that message ... like."

Mara attempted to establish a more co-operative tone, "My colleague," she nodded towards Clay, "works for ES-Tech. We don't want to have to raise a complaint."

Puppet man leered at her, "Okay, message received, I'll let him know you drifted by. As I say he doesn't usually come this way, so I guess you're just out of luck." With a triumphant smile and surprising agility he kicked Clay in the shin and pulled the door shut in one sweeping gesture. A 'thunking' sound announced engagement of a security bolt.

In a rage Clay began to pound on the door and looked around for something to inflict damage. Immediately a siren went off and a disembodied voice announced, "You are now being recorded on video relayed back to security. A Community Response Unit will attend shortly to escort you from the premises. With all due respect, I advise you to leave immediately."

Mara pulled back on Clay's shoulders which were quivering with rage. "Well at least we've confirmed that Zebra does exist. Let's get your

people to sort all this out.”

“My people?” he looked puzzled. With reluctance Clay turned back and they made their way back along the interminable avenue of identical units.

Clay’s only comment was, “That was sure some dreamboat. Bet he’s hot on line!”

“But his hair! It looked too amazing for words.”

“It’s just a neutron cap. Most people just do Cee-Gee-Eye.” He pointed to his eye to make his point.

Mara puzzled a moment and then questioned, “Is that something to do with neurons?”

Clay patted his own hair and just sighed. “He’s gotta look the part. But didja catch the side view ... like all struts and braces. They’re all defoliated ... just part of the brain net. That’s what Galax is all about. And it’s what you’re up against.”

The Sting

Justin's *INFILT* workgroup assigned to '*Operation RevEal*' had been very busy. Whoops of delight erupted periodically as yet another rich vein in Angèle McBride's heady life was brought to light. Information flooded in about her ongoing transactions as they unfolded and her whereabouts was charted continuously on a various screens. Russ would leap up suddenly and shout, "Oh! Oh! No Angie don't go there!" as they caught her hovering before some doubtful address. She had taken such pathetically transparent precautions to avoid detection. "Zero nous for self preservation!" Russ crowed. "Like a babe in the woods! Man!" False email addresses, a silly parallel identity as 'Darlene Lonestar (Ms)', resident of a fictitious apartment at the back of the Grand Epitome, made them weep with delight. "Ah! It was ever thus! - wealth and privilege lead to deluded belief in invincibility,"

Justin snickered. His informants at the front desk in the Grand Epitome relished participating in the unmasking of what was assumed to be a major trafficking ring. Justin arranged that all comings and goings to Darlene's little nest were monitored in detail. Discreet web-cams were installed by ES-Tech's maintenance engineers while 'balancing the airflows' in her apartment ducts. She had no inkling of the co-ordinated powers of reconnaissance that had suddenly besieged her life.

Justin chortled to observe the nervousness of her young lotharios recorded in moments of imagined privacy as they ascended in the lift. Some of these hilarious assignments would be worthy of commercial exploitation in the future. There was indeed plenty of material; Angèle quickly tired of emotional baggage and the constant turnover of beaux suggested a very fickle nature. She evidently had a predilection for a certain type of young man, often a massage therapist or struggling interior

designer, crowned with unkempt dark locks and endowed with, among other things, startled, hope-filled blue eyes. None of these relationships lasted long. Russ plotted out timelines on a bar chart with pictures of the various protégés and invited his colleagues to place bets on longevity of any current flame.

In his frequent updates for De Vere, Justin laid out his rapid progress in mining such a trove of compromising information. “It’s a total killer – the stories are almost print ready. We could sell tons of air time. Our punters always revel in a portrait of hypocrisy exposed ... let alone the dysfunctional marriage of one of our most eminent citizens!”

But he found De Vere’s enthusiasm for these gleanings difficult to gauge. Too often he was greeted with an unpleasant flicker of condescension. De Vere was prone to hum little snatches of light opera distractingly during their debriefings, as if he were not fully appreciative of the devious genius sprawled out before him.

So uncertain had he become of whole-hearted approval that Justin prudently decided to gauge his client’s satisfaction with an additional feedback loop by discreetly keeping track of de Vere’s private correspondence. Installing a ‘back door’ that circumvented encryption procedures, he could discreetly monitor exactly what tickled De Vere’s fancy. All this was done with the totally laudable intention of providing his boss with more of any winning formula but it had had the unexpected advantages of providing a captivating view into the complexities of the media baron’s life. Many intriguing avenues with unexpected turnings opened up suddenly to explore.

However, the challenge of unmasking Elron himself was proving altogether more problematical. Justin remained utterly convinced that there was indeed an ingeniously concealed ‘real Rev El behind the mask’

that would eventually be exposed with the right strategies.

Despite regular attendances at the Palisade and vociferously expressing his admiration for the 'Great Mentor', no opportunity arose to penetrate into the inner circle and discover just what transpired behind closed doors. He lashed out a considerable sum to attend a dreary seminar series '*Myths and Moralities*' and attempted to adopt the vocabulary and appearance of a passionate acolyte. But Elron evidently regarded excessive diligence among his 'seekers' with suspicion and held them at a distance. He was evidently supremely security savvy, a master at guarding personal privacy.

Justin began to consider other ways of 'fleshing out the profile'. Elron often spoke publicly about 'embracing righteousness', using metaphors which were dangerously open to misinterpretation. Such high flown turns of phrase often left the flock somewhat bewildered. Justin realised that he might score big points with de Vere with some judicious editing from these florid homilies. However, because of the strictly enforced rule prohibiting electronic devices within *Go To's*, he was obliged to make a great display of surrendering his communications in the reception lock up zone, meanwhile contriving a discreet recording system which masqueraded as a pacemaker. Such 'incontrovertible evidence' in the suspect's own voice would always be given the benefit of the doubt if presented with authority and skilful timing.

Justin reckoned that the best way to accelerate the exposure of his elusive prey would be in engineering a proactive sting. He knew that once this barbican had been breached a slew of compromising details would tumble forth. He began to construct the fanciful profile of a fervent young acolyte, tragically trapped in an abusive Tainer family. His vivid imagination warmed to pull out all the stops in drawing Elron's sympathy. He based his fabrication on a certain young 'Liam', a cheery

eleven year old neighbour's son frequently encountered playing with his pet terrier under the vigilant eyes of security staff at the Excelsior. He curried favour with a display of affection for both these eager pups and picked up relevant background details.

After attending a particularly fervent *Go-To*, Justin contrived to ambush one of the be-suited, favoured acolytes and embroidered the plight of the mythical 'Liam lad'. He provided a hand scribbled note addressed directly to 'Father Elron' complete with photo and email address. He sat back with bated breath.

A rather nerve-wracking week passed before the first email response pinged into 'Liam's' box. This was from a sympathetic man purporting to be Argot Smith offering solace on behalf of the Palisade together with an invitation to attend the *Getting to Know You Go-To*.

Justin chortled delightedly at such painfully transparent evasions. The fatal die had been cast and he lost no time in setting up a parallel account under the name of *Argot N. Smith*, creating suitable correspondence linked with the most lurid of profiles. Elron's ridiculous fantasy, this 'Argot Norle Smith' would soon become embedded in the swamp of modern life, his feet squelching through the sewers of some of the most degenerate of Tainers. In a masterstroke Justin was able to install captured images of Elron into the closed circuit reconnaissance of these infamous Tainers.

Not for a moment did Justin doubt the legitimacy of his campaign to reveal an unquestionably perfidious character. Frequent attendance at the Palisade had nurtured a visceral loathing for the preacher's cloying self-righteousness. Justin yearned to lay bare the sham of wholesomeness and reveal egregious hypocrisy. The public imagination would soon fill in the missing blanks around their beloved pastor with a little help from the mythical Liam and Argot Norle Smith.



trencher.com/cyber-genetics

zebr@ > A cybergenetic revolution has completely exposed our old delusions about democracy. Cyber-intelligence now provides our impartial judges. So we can jettison erratic human moralities.

Argot > But who is going to be invited to participate in this cyber-democracy? I'm certain that it won't be those we've parked in the Tainers.

A > Z > You can't turn back the clock on science. It's going to happen. And if we don't pursue such cyber-genetic enhancement our competitors will leave us grovelling in the dust.

Argot > Promethean scientists are leading humanity over a precipice. They intend to remake us in their own image of what they think that we should be, a sneaky one up on God.

mara > we seem to be opening a Pandora's box of genetic options. Evolution doesn't follow blueprints. Nature usually finds a way to launch a new and totally unpredictable course – probably without us.

Starkers

Grudgingly, Mara had to admit that Justin, or 'Jay-Bee' as he kept insisting, was proving surprisingly effective in transforming the Trenchers' horizons. References to a 'Trencher Venture' began to appear across the social media. Hits on their blog site began to burgeon. They were even being picked up by Media-Net radar with increasingly frequent references to the Trencher Trojan developers. They were no longer being referred to dismissively as 'anarchist Stits'.

However it was not without considerable misgivings that she received an invitation from Media-Net's Director of Public Services inviting her to discuss the Trencher Venture on the weekly Staryk Report. Innocuously this was proposed as a 'just an informal chat ... an insider's view from the Trenches'.

Mara knew the dangers that a powerful pundit like Malyn Staryk presented. Her weekly Staryk Report was eulogised as 'World-Class Journalism'. Most Media-Net programming tended to be elevated with such self-congratulatory epithets. Behind Malyn Staryk, or 'Starkers' as she was affectionately called, stood the shadowy authority of a corporation that assiduously controlled the local news content and purchased as much international sports and diversion as was deemed profitable. Media-Net catered to the apolitical predilections of a community which preferred to have its *world-class* opinions delivered in a comfortably manageable form.

Every Thursday evening Malyn took delight in prodding the foibles of New Mid society. It was a role which earned her powerful enemies and only the most cowed of friends. Her wan complexion, piercing black eyes and emphatic grey streak of upswept hair tied in a severe chignon, coupled with evidence of growing physical fragility in her fluting, querulous voice,

aided a strategy for catching her guests off guard. Only too often they found themselves unburdening ill-considered confessions and launched on a relentless slide to humiliation which provided such engaging world class entertainment for her audience.

Mara felt a rising tide of anxiety as she processed through onerous security clearances to access the Media-Net Studios. On all sides the stress of constructing the daily news offering was palpable. A host of stricken interns were rushing around with refreshments and props. Nearby a cameraman was erupting in frustration over 'defective surveillance links' and a self-important stage manager was lashing out at a luckless cleaner who had failed to polish a table top. Mara felt that she had just entered a terrible purgatory with hysterical, control-freaks raining abuse upon their impotent minions.

Mara had further strong forebodings, however, when she was whisked into the so-called Soft-Room by a brusque guide who indicated a cosy corner for their 'informal chat'. It included a grotesque sofa, upholstered in a rough textured orange hessian threaded with sparkling metallic sequins. Its undulating contours seemed designed to embarrass interviewees into impotent inconsequence. In contrast the interviewer's practical swivel chair and lectern suggested a more dynamic, inquisitorial role. A polished glass table parked between in no-man's-land displayed two downturned glasses, positioned just out of reach.

Mara tentatively sank into her designated seat, knees rising to eye level, and awaited the arrival of her hostess. In the background she could hear the famous querulous voice, upbraiding an attendant. She had just made up her mind to skulk off when Malyn breezed in throwing her hands out in effusive welcome. "Darling girl! You couldn't have come at a better time!" Malyn waved her arms blithely into the empty space and flung herself with an unnatural girlish bounce onto her inquisitorial machine.

She batted her long lashes encouraging a response.

Scanning the empty studio Mara felt relieved that no cameras or audience were required for this interview. Malyn browsed through a notebook, scribbling memos while engaging in parallel distracted chit-chat to put her quarry at ease.

The first telltale sign that some form of interview might already be underway occurred when Mara realised that her hostess was suddenly clarifying some background history with curiously pedantic precision. “I guess that we should start by confessing that we’re already old acquaintances. How many years has it been since I carried that piece about your City Farm fiasco? Eight? – No! Even more! Lots of water under that bridge! It certainly must be painful for you to witness Hyperion’s success against all your better judgement.”

Mara blinked, “I never understood why their development had to be quite so exclusive, why City Farm could not have co-existed.”

“Well that’s hardly how regeneration works, is it dear? There are times when a clean slate is the only viable option. But you must have learned a lot from that old stand-off and become a much more seasoned campaigner? So let’s hear about your new *chapitre*!”

Mara tried to look composed despite wrestling with a mental image of herself awkwardly displayed on overstuffed sequined cushions.

Malyn savoured the vacuum taking full advantage of Mara’s loss for words. She pressed on encouragingly, “But you’ll concede that Hyperion has more than lived up to its promise; it has attracted world class expertise. The Valley View Vision will most certainly put New Midland back in the spotlights. Even you must admit that this has to be good news.”

Mara shrugged and offered tentatively, “Well Hyperion residents tend to remain off my radar. They are such an exclusive community; in fact I don’t know anyone who has penetrated those security gates ... or lived to tell the tale,” she added glibly.

Malyn only looked at her stonily, “Well that’s hardly the point is it, dear! If you choose to be a Trencher, an outsider that is what you can expect.”

“Trenchers haven’t chosen to separate ourselves. If anything perhaps nowadays we are taking inspiration from Sister Agnes, the old miracle worker. She sought a fresh perspective from the outside and then welcomed all who beat a path to her doorstep.”

“I’m hardly beating a path to your doorstep,” Malyn sniffed at this mention of Sister Agnes and shook her head, suggesting that she intended to elevate the conversation above such maudlin perspectives. “Nowadays some of us must summon the courage to embark on bolder solutions to our planet’s problems.”

Mara grimaced, “The planet’s problems ... or our problems? I’m inclined to think they are our problems, mainly about not adapting to fit into the world we are recasting for ourselves.”

Malyn ignored this avenue of exploration and touched her forehead as if suddenly recalling a perplexing question. “But Trenchers ... it’s such an interesting choice of name ... sounds like a barricade intended to arrest development in its tracks? Have you declared war on anyone recently?” she smiled winsomely.

“Actually the name came about inadvertently. ‘Trencher’ is the *nom de plume* of a local artist.” She relished the opportunity to drop in a casual French phrase in response to Malyn’s ostentations. “He signed a mural

at our Drop-In Centre with that flourish. Somehow, it just caught the imagination.”

“So your movement is named after a graffiti artiste?” Malyn’s startled eye brows receded above her hair line.

“Actually he calls himself a data artist. He assigns complex algorithms to data sequences, like the constituents of the human genome, and lets them determine his projections. The results are quite spectacular. In effect he finds poetic order in apparently random number sequences.”

Malyn rolled her eyes wearily and sighed in evident exasperation. “I’m sure that it makes sense to someone with an artist’s background.” She always made a point of finding such obtuseness hard work. “No one could dispute that our society faces serious problems. But new solutions have certainly been advanced. We can claim with justifiable pride that in New Mid we have met equality benchmarks for 99% of the population. Insta-polling coupled with scrupulously sourced cyber-intelligence has provided the foundation for a society that can adjust itself continuously to social pressures. We have done away with those once divisive politics which led to so much destruction during the Repo-Riots, truly a horrendous, self-inflicted wound. Now we can boast that our emergent system is administered with cyber-precision that past democracies could only envy. Yet your Trenchers seem determined to stand defiantly aloof from all of that.”

“It’s not that we are aloof of our own choosing. Many of us have simply not been invited to the party. We are only making the best of what we’re left with.”

“You mean that many of your cohorts would be deported as illegals if they became known to authorities - so instead they resort to squatting ...

and at public expense?”

“... hardly public expense! We grow surplus produce to supply Stits food banks. We provide a very useful service. Many of the Trenchers are terrified of getting absorbed into the Tainers, imagining them as a wasteland for redundant populations with nothing further to offer ...”

“Those views are hardly shared by many Tainees who feel very grateful for a sheltering roof and place in society.”

“We feel that the New Mid economy has failed all but a privileged few. Everyone claims to be awaiting a turnaround that shows no sign of emerging.”

“On the contrary, I would maintain that New Midland has demonstrated to the world how to create a positive, stable society. We undertake scientific research that is the envy of the planet. We attract the brightest minds through ventures like Prometheus. I suppose that you’ve heard of that?”

Mara nodded, adding “But not without misgivings in contemplating the inequality between those who can afford eugenic enhancements and cyber implants and the rest who can only expect to be superseded.”

“I can’t quite comprehend your rancour. Every generation should expect to exceed the last. That is the human story, the story of progress.” Malyn trilled, “But perhaps it is Trenchers who have a limited vision. I am sometimes amazed that you can even describe yourselves as a movement. You aren’t actually going anywhere. You have no stake in directing the future; you don’t *own* anything.”

Malyn paused to take a graceful sip of water and gestured to the glass

positioned out of Mara's reach. With the tip of her tongue she daintily polished the brim.

Mara rallied and added a little too crisply, "We undertake practical things, like publishing a foragers' guide to help others take advantage of ingredients growing wild. We provide access to a database that supplies advice on growing basic foods. We provide an information hub, which is a beacon in the Stits blackout zone."

"But, you'll have to admit that the rest of us can't all just go off and grow our own beans?"

"We're not claiming that the Trencher lifestyle will suit everyone. We only make use of what we find available."

"But isn't that rather like pathetically clinging to the bad old days when we used to indulge such anarchic freedoms? Admittedly we all need to shoulder the blame for creating a world that was so utterly unsustainable. But most of us have come to measure up to the consequences ... and our responsibilities. But your Trenchers seem to remain in perpetual denial."

"I think that we have been misled by people that we once thought experts. We were not thinking for ourselves."

"But the Trencher free-for-all is hardly a concept that could be sustained in the densities that we have achieved in the Tainers. New Mid boasts the most carbon neutral habitations on the planet and at the highest densities! Our vast Exxin hinterland has achieved an extractive efficiency that is the envy of the world. No one goes hungry here. Would your Trenchers be willing to jeopardise that kind of success?"

Mara tried to explain, "When I walk about in the Stits I am continually

amazed by the energy I glimpse embodied in every ruin. Every single brick has been carefully placed by someone long ago. We once built beautiful, imaginative, even extravagant things ... joyful, ridiculous things. We accomplished so much when we had a collective mindset to expect the most from one another. But this is an energy flow which has been disrupted and now seems entirely forgotten. Instead we live paralysed by fear of the worst from each other. There has been a disastrous disenfranchisement. People no longer have either the skill or the will to create such things.”

Malyn smiled sweetly as if addressing a challenged child. “Fortunately we have long since evolved into a high level service economy and we can leave that kind of work to the less advantaged. Personally I have no regrets about my lack of bricklaying skills.”

Pursing her lips and shaking her head, Mara stared at the smug, bobbing head before her in disbelief. She knew that she was being dragged into dangerous territory and might soon be ad-libbing ill-considered opinions.

Malyn started on a new tack. “So you say that you are emulating the charitable work of the legendary Sister Agnes, handing out freebies to the indigent?”

“Sister Agnes is one kind of model for us. She chose a difficult path by withdrawing from her order. But when I glimpse of the sweep of the Eme Valley I can still see what must have inspired her. She became part of that greater landscape, integrated with everything around her. Perhaps she too ‘dug in’ like a Trencher, and the thousands of discarded crutches of those who came to her for healing are still a testimony to her powers.”

“But now we are left with a grisly relic in a jar, a titillating experience for tourists no doubt. But for the rest of us she is an embarrassing

irrelevance. Imagine her organ on display as a freakish sideshow in some future country club or fancy hotel. What would the punters make of that? I ask you? She should be laid to rest, given a decent burial along and all those crutches recycled somewhere in Africa. They are a testimony to the self-delusions of the past, far better off to jettison them.”

Mara though persisted, “Though no one comes nowadays for healing, there is something about the crypt the still strikes awe into visitors’ hearts. It would be so wrong to move the chapel and forget her achievements.”

Malyn sighed, “New Midland prides itself in being one of the most secure global cities. We still take pride in being once adjudged the world’s fourth most liveable city. We sustain a stable local economy founded upon innovative virtual currencies that are the envy of others.”

“Yet the only vision I have seen for revitalising the heart of the old town seems to be some ValleyView tourist trap ... that’s hardly building a diverse local economy.”

Malyn shook her head with weary authority. “That’s hardly my point dear. Many are concerned that your Trenchers will again try to block a visionary redevelopment. They will only come to blame you if New Mid loses our pre-eminent status.”

“Most people are desperate for change. They just don’t realise that the power is still within them to shape the direction of that change.”

“Well would you prefer to see someone like Rev El take root in the strategic heart of our city? In your opinion would he be a more suitable torch bearer for the inheritance of Sister Agnes? I certainly think not! What is your Trenchers’ attitude to the People’s Palisade anyway? You are competitors for the same lands you know.”

“At least Elron McBride offers a pro-active perspective in a world that has imploded for many. I admire his courage in criticising Prometheus research ... pointing out that it is likely to benefit only a tiny elite.”

Malyn smiled wanly and ventured, “Clearly a kindred spirit! Another disturber *de la merde*! It seems a vague arrangement. Doesn’t it seem odd that the Church Commissioners rejected the Palisade, and instead parked their confidence with a group of radical communitarians?”

“Perhaps they hope that we can do something to help them to regenerate that heritage.”

“Nonsense dear, our heritage is our capacity for reinvention. It can hardly be reduced to the faulty memories of some old crones pottering about in a derelict religious house tending a grisly relic floating in formaldehyde.”

Mara was aware of Malyn’s curious tendency to swivel around dramatically when making telling points; but not being able to glimpse any camera points in the shadowy realm beyond she felt rather silly following her example.

Malyn levelled piercing eyes on her. “I have to confess that many suspect you have a well-hidden agenda. But from what I see, with your heads plunged in the soil growing potatoes or whatever, you are hardly beacons of progress.” She clasped her hands across her heart, a dramatic gesture that her regular audiences would instantly recognise as the prelude to her most dangerous summations. “I should lay my cards on the table! Last week I had the distinct privilege of interviewing Dr Zwielight, the brilliant leader of the Prometheus Project. I must say that in the course of our discussions I could only come to sympathise with his altruistic vision of a better world.” She began to warm to this heartfelt riff. “He has the spirit of an inveterate optimist, someone who believes that apparently

intractable problems can be overcome. He is not out there digging potato trenches or erecting defensive palisades.”

“He envisions a transformation of human nature by jettisoning atavistic characteristics wholly unsuited to modern civilisation ... and he claims astonishing success in enhancing human intelligence, making it conducive to cyber-extension. He foresees a day when we will be able to expunge destructive primordial proclivities and reconstruct ourselves as progressive beings, suitably endowed to sustain a stable society focussed on scientific achievement. Given the right ingredients there will be no limit to the aspirations of the human spirit.”

Mara shrugged, to Malyn’s considerable annoyance. “But progress towards what? Isn’t it a world that he has already decided would be best for us?”

“Naturally, I would expect you to be sceptical about such altruistic intentions. But only a minority descry practical visions that seek to address serious challenges. This doctor is indeed a man of genius who sees our salvation in a future where we have achieved better synchronisation with the ambient intelligence that motivates all living things. He is not looking for some outside god like that Elron cult might seek define. Instead he convinced me that the seeds of intelligence lie already within us, waiting to grow and flourish as an enhanced life form.”

Mara mumbled, “Unlike Zwielight, I don’t think that human beings can be trusted to manage our own evolution. We are not fledgling gods. His assumptions about ‘knowing the mind of god’ are preposterous.”

A wave of impotent frustration suddenly washed over her. To Malyn’s evident surprise, Mara suddenly leapt up exclaiming. “This sofa is torture! I’ve got to find something more comfortable!” From the sidelines she

retrieved a plastic technician's chair which she plonked down next to her water glass on the table. She sat down, grabbed the glass and took a generous swig to Malyn's evident distaste. "Ah ... better ... sorry?"

Malyn slowly shook her head and grimaced in disgust.

Mara launched her own initiative. "Do you know what I consider one of my most prized possessions?"

Malyn fluttered with disengaged hopelessness, "I couldn't possibly guess ... a shovel?"

Mara laughed gaily, "No! It's only a little notebook, a scrappy diary kept by my grandmother, recording her daily life, over seventy years ago."

Malyn smiled condescendingly, "No one nowadays would have either the time or inclination to keep a personal record, or read one for that matter. Besides we are privileged to live the best documented lives in human history. The human story has literally exploded in recent years."

Mara continued undaunted, "But all that is just data. What is remarkable about her journal is her dialogue with herself. Opinions! She wrestles with opinions. She discusses everything from becoming a vegetarian to her ambivalent feelings about attending an opera gala.

"What charming insights! Opinions! and so long ago! You should check her out in the ancestry database. Perhaps some of those riveting *opinions* have already been captured in the public domain!"

Mara disregarded her note of sarcasm. "But for me the greatest insight is in the issues that go unmentioned. I consider what I would attempt to address were I to keep such a diary today."

“But would you have a descendant willing to read it? Will there be some interested granddaughter, with time on her hands?” Malyn shrugged dismissively. “But since we are suddenly pursuing a family theme, perhaps you can give us a little insight into domestic life in the trenches. What keeps your group together in the absence of any recognisable family structure? I imagine that you’ve got more than your fair share of predators out there. Of course to someone like me it only smacks of those old hippie communes, fortunately long before my day.” She batted her eyes chastely. “I confess! Recently, I toured your old territory on Mayne Street. I noticed how many historic property lines had been obliterated to create your so-called community. People seemed to have been experimenting with crops willy-nilly. Of course I couldn’t vouch for the legality of any of them.”

“Probably Huggie’s potatoes ...”

“... and evidence of unregulated businesses, people wandering freely in and out of each others’ squats? You talk about families but there didn’t seem to be any evidence of that in such a community!” Suddenly Malyn turned to face Mara candidly, “Tell me, dear, are you married yourself ... or in a solid relationship?”

Instantly Mara became flustered. She could imagine Gilb’s sadistic delight on tuning into this interview. She confessed hesitantly, “I was married at one point, but that is hardly relevant to Trencher objectives.”

Malyn crowed with evident satisfaction at her discomfiture “Oh but it’s very relevant indeed. Surely there are serious concerns about the quality of life that you Trenchers are offering in this *soi-disant* community.”

Mara added in a thin defensive voice, “You might have asked for a guided tour. We could have shown you some highlights.”

“Antiseptic, no doubt! No I always want to see what really happens in the unguarded moments and make up my own mind.”

“You mean by spying on us?”

“Dear girl! Always such confrontational pejoratives! Nowadays we prefer to call it due diligence.”

Mara began to feel explosive in the face of this torrent of condescension, but she would only lay herself open to further exploitation if she became angry. Malyn suddenly seemed to perceive that she had achieved a suitable climax, leaving Mara anxious and exposed. She turned abruptly to address a gloomy vacancy. “Let me conclude by thanking you for taking time away from those potatoes. Our whole community is keen to see how the Trencher venture is likely to pan out. And good luck with those Trojans!”

“Oh!”

“Thank-you Mara Greene – That’s Greene with an ‘e’ mind you!” she added punctiliously.

Malyn rose magisterially from her seat, laid a cold, thin hand over Mara’s and bid her an abrupt good-bye, claiming that she was already late for her Cockpit encounter.

In fact she returned apprehensively to her office where she knew that de Vere would be on line ready to review the interview in detail. The Trenchers had become his preoccupation of late. Despite his legendary ‘arms length’ editorial policy, he always prudently arranged for editorial wardens to ensure that the correct ‘live’ message was delivered.

* * *

Later that evening, huddled in a corner of the cavernous kitchen, Mara reviewed the session that Clay had accessed for replay. She was astonished to discover that even early snippets of her jousting with a supercilious valet had been included in the broadcast. The exchange about her failed marriage had achieved unwarranted prominence.

“The treacherous reptile!” She felt herself shrivel at Malyn’s scathing remarks in complimenting her ‘fresh’ appearance. As she imagined, her summer clothes looked ridiculous displayed against the enveloping sequinned orange chair. “That sofa looks considerably more interesting than I do!” she fumed. She wished that she had made an effort to blink less, a nervous trait suggesting extreme shiftiness.

“Well that’s the media for you. Always gets their story”. Clay, who couldn’t imagine anyone ever wanting to view him on camera, tried to cheer her up, laughing uproariously when she leapt up to retrieve the other chair. “Lookit the old git watchin’ you! You packa load more reality ‘n she ever did.”

Mara glanced over and thought how much she liked being with Clay even when he was being so hopeless in his efforts to buoy up her spirits. His silly laugh seemed to ease some of her intense disappointment.

“But perhaps Malyn is right, we are a society of misfits”, she sighed. She glanced over at him. But Clay had already become engrossed in a solitary game of digital dexterity. “What is the point of all that? What does he think that he is winning? And who will ever care?”



trencher.com/starkers

zebr@ > Strange how Staryk steered the Trencher interview onto the Prometheus reefs full of praise for Zwilicht and his genetic science.

Argot > Prometheus are just modern alchemists crowing over random discoveries without the faintest conception of how they might be applied within any moral context.

A > Z > Humanity cannot turn its back on the magnitude of the problems of our own creation. A fundamental shift in human nature is our only hope for any future. Without that change we are unsustainable as a species.

mara > The pundits claim that we are on the brink of the Post-Anthropocene Era; I guess that we have just lived through the Anthropocene. Perhaps we have to tap into a collective intelligence and create a whole new ecology.

zebr@ > Call it the Post-Anthropo-GENE – LOL But it'll be short-lived. Prometheus has reduced our conception of ourselves to a stack of faulty genes that require correction.

Shazzam

For the citizens of New Mid, from the grandees ensconced in the luxury of their Cadena penthouses, to the humblest of Tainer folk locked in penury, all social intercourse took place electronically. Cliquish on-line camaraderie had replaced any real access to current news from the world beyond. Keeping track of unfolding local trivia had become a universal compulsion and allowed the citizenry to feel engaged and enfranchised. Across the town there was an almost palpable ripple of excitement as the news began to percolate that a '*world class celebrity*' was to drop anchor in a splendid vessel on the Cadena waterfront. There were allusions to royal connections, rumours about a gilded harem and massive retinue of attendants. For a public raised on a constant diet of celebrity dreams this visitor fulfilled all the necessary credentials, truly a representative of the world's Uber-wealthy, beyond the realm of even the most privileged local Cadenites.

There was a great upsurge of enthusiasm when this philanthropic visitor proposed a spectacular waterfront fireworks display for the enjoyment of all citizens. In a gesture of benevolent public spirit, a security corridor had been cut across the Cadena to allow the general public, including even Class 3 Tainerites, or at least those with roaming privileges, to witness the spectacle. Curiosity was kindled by this rare opportunity to penetrate the Cadena enclave and glimpse the lives of 'great and good' from afar.

As the evening cooled crowds streamed down to gawp at the arrival of the fabled *Shazzam*. Their curiosity was contagious. Even Mara, who had earlier scoffed at the attention being paid to a 'pretentious potash potentate', soon found herself amidst the gawping crowd. She had given in to Clay's irrepressible excitement about a possible posting. He announced proudly that the fabled Shazzam was 'the second largest private yacht on

the planet'. The arrival of this self-styled 'emir' from 'Wadever-stan' was intended to bring desperately needed foreign re-investment to New Mid through one of the world's most cherished sovereign investment funds. His arrival in New Midland seemed to portend a turning point in the city's flagging fortunes.

A mixed crowd surged along the protected route and gathered on a well policed promontory overlooking the harbour. Extra ES-Tech agents, dauntingly uniformed in jet black with orange piping, had been called up to manage the crowds.

The Cadena boasted a 'World Class Green Ecology'. As she passed Mara peered through the chain link cordon at the astonishing tropical plantings that surrounded the Excelsior Plaza and glimpsed exotic trees, producing tropical fruits in this most intemperate of climates. These were sustained by automatic misting and cosseted within invisible air curtains. All mechanical sound pollution was skilfully masked by a lively cacophony of bird calls which even included the occasional real living bird. This was conceived as a veritable Eden to welcome the eco-beleaguered. Though most of the apartments overhead were possessed by non-dom tax refugees, Mara could make out shadowy figures that had emerged onto their terraces to view the proceedings silhouetted against their glowing treasure houses. Following the privatisation of the city's once legendary museum and galleries, these residences had become repositories of unimaginable opulence.

And there it was! She had to admit grudgingly that even among the world class architectural excesses looming overhead, this was a breathtaking sight! Shazzam, its iridescent blue hull floodlit against a louring purple twilit sky, exemplified a world far removed from the broken, dispirited streets that these crowds had traversed. This glorious plaything of an Emir with an unpronounceable string of names, floated disdainfully before

them like a vain water fowl. Its bowsprit was cut back like a voracious shark, two serried ranks of portholes suggested voracious glistening teeth. Layer upon layer of bright work suggested a well-ordered army of attendants required to maintain such extravagance. She overheard pundits in the crowd spouting staggering statistics about its high ranking in the pecking order of yacht obsessed plutocrats. The staggering amount of fuel required for a single Atlantic crossing was supposedly sufficient to maintain 190,000 Tainers for a year at full climate amelioration levels. And who could afford that nowadays? Nor was this a mere pretty plaything. Martial experts, pointing out the battery of ports near waterline and knowledgeably proclaimed that they concealed missile launchers. Others excitedly pointed out details of the crowning crystal Xanadu enjoyed by 'the Royal family'.

At 9 o'clock precisely a cannon exploded on the foredeck and a battery of seductive lights plied across the hull imparting a subtle pink glow. The advertised *Feu de Joie* began and built up to dazzling pyrotechnics that rivalled the waxing moon in the starry skies overhead. There was a collective gasp of appreciation from the shore as the delighted audience cheered each outburst. The sight of all the faces, upturned in wonder however, unsettled Mara. Why was the human race so easily seduced by explosions and vanishing trails of light? This poignant desire for conspicuous destruction, this communal longing revealed by their oohs and aahs baffled her. It seemed crazy that none had paid any heed to the waxing moon and sky full of stars which shimmered over even the most deprived of Tainers.

After the 'Feu' had fizzled and the crowds began to disperse, the rippling sounds of fireworks continued to tear through Mara's mind like a migraine. When she blinked she could still see trails of light etched on the backs of her eyelids. What were all these people hoping to see? Was all this just a momentary diversion from their individual cacophonies. One

by one, they would be dragged back into their regular preoccupations, a daily grind of 'getting by' against a rising tide of debt.

Her appetite whetted by the garden paradise surrounding the Excelsior, Mara decided to test her limits and spin off from the crush of the returning crowds to explore the waterfront boardwalk. She enjoyed full Class B2 security clearance for work and a clean record. As long as she 'kept to profile' and avoided divergence from her recognised palette of behaviours, she was usually able to enjoy access to control zones that were off limits to average Tainerites. She approached an automated security gate that gave access to the *Earle J. Rayward II Memorial Promenade* and found herself being funnelled into a narrow laneway where strategically positioned monitors undertook automatic profile analysis. Within the Cadena's sophisticated security umbrella such tasks were managed effortlessly without erratic human intervention.

Most people, even fabled Cadena 'non-doms' would not have had the confidence to run such a security gauntlet, fearing humiliation. The glass doors closed noiselessly behind her and she remained penned for anxious moments as her details were assessed by invisible cyber-analysts. She laughed as her mind turned to Clay who even though equipped with a privileged ES-Tech profile, would not have got past first base.

While hidden equipment undertook iris and saliva identification and recorded abnormalities in her breathing, heart rate and anxiety levels, she waited in suspense, apprehensive that some alternative door might open and introduce her to an embarrassing personal confrontation? But to her relief the great sheet of armoured glass slid silently open and admitted her to the *EJR2MP*.

She passed a surveillance hut raised high on stilts glowing a luminous, ghostly grey in the moonlight. There was not a soul around, only the

relentless rhythm of waves crashing upon shingle. Initially she looked around for hidden speakers and then decided that this regular comforting rhythm might even be the real thing.

Chaotic images of the past week flooded through her mind. The irritating smugness of Justin, the brazen condescension of De Vere at the PRIGS meeting, purporting to exemplify a life of enlightened civic purpose ... and then the disaster of her own humiliating interview with Malyn.

Across the curving bay she almost felt assailed by the ostentation of the Cadena, each of its strident, attention seeking structures outlined in luminous accent strips, each competing to be more startling than its neighbour. In the middle distance terminating the grand Esplanade, she caught an arresting glimpse of the Cobra Crown Plaza, its great triangular head poised to strike, every patterned scale picked out in luminous outline in the fading sunlight. It was ranked as one of the wonders of modern design. The patterned iconic hood was nothing less than a gigantic array of heat rejection panels for the power reactors within. The serpent's ghostly glowing green eyes were reputedly windows into bio-forest preserves, a secluded sanctuary for privileged residents and a feature that shrieked 'sustainability'. Below, tucked amidst its coils were luminous eggs which contained the habitations of some of the most cosseted souls in the hemisphere. The eccentric genius of the design had put New Mid firmly on the itinerary of virtual architectural tourists.

In the foreground Shazzam basked in regal certitude untroubled by the steady beat of the waves lapping its hull.

The boardwalk came to an abrupt end at a narrow channel. On the other side of these slimy turbid waters lay the vaunted Hyperion Centre, with its floodlit waterfront promenade in the foreground extolled by architects and planners worldwide as a sustainable benchmark. Fantastical

pavilions punctuated the opposite shoreline; glass bubbles, playful rustic gazebos and band shells. Not a soul was to be seen wandering amidst this cacophony of delights. The towers rearing up behind this twinkling mantle were washed in a seductive pinkish light. A lofty red crane was parked, interrupted in its task of hoisting full grown trees up onto the roof gardens of these eco-extravaganzas. Huge lettering down its flank proclaimed, '*A Greener Solution*'. Here greenery would thrive, adorning aeries of privilege, a world away from the debasements of nature that ran rampant and unchecked in the Stits.

As she turned to retrace her steps, she glimpsed the shadowy silhouette of an approaching couple. Their conjoined outline gave her a momentary wrench as she considered how she would like to be sharing this moonlight with a like-minded spirit. Gilb would never have risen to such an occasion, nor, she reflected sadly, could she imagine Clay in this role. As the couple approached she began to feel awkwardly self-conscious, imagining their condescension for a waif exorcising her lonely plight. She considered skulking off tangentially to feign interest in a scenically placed broken tree trunk; but then resolved to proceed defiantly. "I cannot allow myself to live through others' eyes! I don't need to explain myself."

The couple approached. Both were exquisitely dressed, both plugged into separate soundscapes. The young man's eyes remained downcast, avoiding any suggestion of engagement. A slow bass beat was faintly audible through his ear buds. The girl, dressed in an exotic zebra skin print and laden with sparkling jewellery, only stared at her blankly. Her mind was evidently focussed on different preoccupations from her partner's. They passed without a word or smile. Meeting in this wilderness, they had nothing to exchange with her or with each another. Both remained locked into their separate private prisons; both excluding a mutual dissonance behind isolating walls. This cold separation mirrored her own experience in her disastrous relationship with Gilb.

Storm

On the following morning the sultry interlude collapsed with a sudden, cataclysmic crash. A clap of thunder rippled the length of the Eme Valley and echoed through the Cadena canyons. Shaken from their torpor, startled citizens rushed to their windows triggered with the spectre of of terrorist devastation. Mara leapt from her seat in the dreary kitchen and flung open the door into the garden just in time to witness the ensuing onslaught. A great curtain of rain descended, completely obscuring the valley view.

Citizens of New Mid felt deep malaise about such violent weather ructions. They had been undeniably lucky in avoiding the catastrophic climatic disruptions that had afflicted most of the world. In the great gamble in so completely altering the earth's climate, they had emerged among the winners. But none were confident about how long such unwarranted luck might hold. Tales from abroad were too dire to contemplate closely. The predictability of old seasons had disappeared; snow no longer fell in the wintertime; even here summer weather swung to violent extremes. New invasive plant species had established themselves everywhere. New animal species had come to colonise the altered climatic niches from which familiar birds and insects had disappeared. These changes had brought a raft of new challenges, new pests and diseases, a chaotic new ecology which promised only the most fragile of equilibriums. Climate Change had also become a convenient explanation for all the economic necessities that had propelled radical social reorganisation of New Mid.

Mara watched spellbound as the trees of the orchard were suddenly pummelled with massive hailstones. The pulsating waves of ice thundered upon the roof; a constant drumming evoked half-forgotten childhood memories, lying snug under the covers in her bedroom with the windows

open to the storm. She took a deep gulp of air that tasted of natural decay and felt her long forgotten yearning for something ever unattainable. Tempests had once seemed deeply satisfying, an invitation to resign oneself to the overwhelming power of nature which overwhelmed all transient human presumption. But now nature was no longer counted an ally or a respite. It had become an affront. For most it was regarded as a feared enemy, a dangerous aggressor.

She cast her mind back to the suffocating house that she had shared with Gilb. 'Shared' was hardly the right word. It had been designed to isolate and keep at bay any reminders of such powers of nature. Soundproofed to exclude the irritating constant hum of the neighbours' air conditioners, it remained impervious to the outside world. Its environment was held at unvarying temperature and humidity. Its windows were so layered with exclusionary materials that she had soon lost any instinct to look outwards. She remembered how she used to emerge from this incarceration in the morning and be astounded to find a puddled streetscape.

At the refectory doorway she pulled up seat to listen and felt a joyful renewal of life's possibility. For a moment the dreary, lifeless kitchen behind her seemed to have rediscovered its sheltering purpose.

Startled suddenly, she leapt back as Clay burst through the opening. He was soaked to the bone, "Sure weren't expecting this!" his only comment as he stood before her. Her heart missed a beat. He was always so modestly dismissive of his own body, hiding behind his array of awkward metal studs and bars. But as he stood before her, the saturated clothing defined every detail of a spare frame underneath; he seemed almost naked – or she considered, possibly better than naked, for his riot of tattoos remained covered.

"Isn't it fab!" she exclaimed as she reached out to touch his soaked shoulder. He winced and looked very doubtful. She felt a sudden desire

for contact that was less restrained, to grab him by the arm and drag him out into the orchard to celebrate exhilarating release. Instead she let him flop down in her chair as he gasped “Sure didn’t see that one coming”. She was aware of the scent of his flesh mingled with a heart-achingly poignant odour of decay. The green smell of the grateful foliage wafted in on cool gusts from beyond.

She gently squeezed his hunched shoulder. He flinched at her warm touch. Deflected to more practical pursuits she exclaimed, “You’re drenched! I’ll make you a hot tea.” So she busied herself in efficiently assembling ingredients while Clay remained immobile.

“Give me your clothes and I’ll dry them by the stove.” He modestly complied and draped an old tablecloth over his shoulders. She averted her eyes to preserve his little cocoon of rectitude. Then carrying the mug of hot drink, he thanked her distractedly and retreated to his cell leaving only a wet trail of footprints.

She had a desperate sense that she had missed some heaven-sent opportunity; a moment to act irrationally and demonstrate feelings she could not explain, a moment that would not soon come around again.

But the storm passed as quickly as it had arrived. A radiant light suffused the kitchen through the north light clerestory. Glimpsed through the doorway, a huge double rainbow traversed the Eme Valley below, shimmering against the louring sky. The rain clouds were buffeted away.

As she stood transfixed, a figure in pale lime-coloured foul weather gear could be seen struggling up the path. It could only be her ‘persistent suitor’. She imagined the faithful Penelope resorting to her knitting. But to whom was she being faithful she wondered?

“Just thought I’d nip over for to see you were alright! I can see your place from my office and keep track of comings, goings to make sure that you’re okay.”

Mara shrugged and turned to admire the rainbow.

Justin rabbitted on, “Have you ever seen anything like it? De Vere’s off on the Shazzam, up to no good I’d say ... so as they say when the cats away! ...” With a rending sound he released himself from Velcro bondage and carefully patted the synthetic material into neat rectangles. “Thought I caught a glimpse Clay coming through earlier.” he pursued disingenuously, “He must have called it quits early. You must find him a bit of a handful. Not exactly aligned with your Trencher venture I imagine.”

Mara refused to rise to the bait and only added non-committally “None of us take much notice of him around here.”

Justin pulled out a card ticket and placed it ostentatiously on the table in front of her. “I got you a hot ticket; sadly not a hot date though.” He chortled inanely, “There’s a little exhibition that I think you ought to see. This will get you in. It’s strictly invitation only ... not open to the great unwashed obviously. But I think you’ll find that it reveals ValleyViewVision in a new light ... all the stuff that you didn’t see at the PRIGS presentation.” Mara stared at the ticket disdainfully.

Justin shivered violently, beginning to feel the chill of the space. He unfolded his gear and assembled himself in it carefully aligning the Velcro tabs. “Well as I say, the cat’s away ... but not for long; got to get back to the old Play-station! But go and enjoy the show!” With that he stepped across the threshold, hailed her nonchalantly over his shoulder and with a self-conscious bounce in his step returned along the path.

Parallel Elron - Hubris

The following excerpts from de-classified handwritten records of Elron McBride, self-styled 'Rev El' of the People's Palisade, have been seized under the Public Security and Anti-Terrorism Act, redacted by ES-agent Zebr@ and placed in the public domain as being germane to cases currently pending the New Midland Security Review Board.

... venomous snake, so aptly named 'Zwielicht', a lethal creature lurking in the fading twilight. He harbours enough venom to poison the whole human race yet thinks that he himself is inured to the poisons that he carries within.

... he is mocking our old moralities, those religions that constructed palisades of faith around jealous gods. For him such religious anachronisms are an impediment to the irrepressible expansion of science.

... he imagines that humanity can abandon all sense of the ineffable and take our position at the hub of a rational, anthropocentric scientific universe.

... but he is deluding himself, too readily forgetting those vast realms that will always lie beyond human comprehension. Human beings are simply not equipped to ask some questions. Our questions relate to ourselves alone, we have so little appetite for an absolute overview.

... but his science is an insidious new alchemy; Prometheans mix their potions in a random quest for a new elixir, but they do not know what the touchstone would look like if they stumbled on it. They do not know what questions to ask, so they will never find the answers.

... they are deluded in thinking that the future of humanity can be redirected by redesigning genetic characteristics. But like mountebanks, they are only dabbling with magic powders, unclear in

their objectives. These scientific opportunists wander in this wilderness, picking up pleasing baubles.

... ensconced within his security cordon, Zwiëlicht and his Prometheans propose a more sustainable human life. But their ideal humanity will be only be conceived through the vagaries of fashion and they will find themselves ever more enslaved by the dictates of the marketplace as they produce idealised genetic strains ... fair hair, blue eyes, longevity, perhaps a resistance to the latest, trendy medical affliction.

... but they will only be tailoring people to suit an amoral society. How could they ever aspire to accommodate the unfathomable bounds of the human heart?

... some realms can only be explored in the spirit.

... It is a dazzling flight of hubris ... a false confidence that they can purport to know what we ought to become, what destiny Nature intends for us. They only see evolution as a process to an end, and we are the ultimate apogee.

... how can we delude ourselves that we have been elevated by our intelligence above all other sentient beings. What we consider our greatest achievement, human consciousness will only prove to be a blind alley.

... Sister Agnes fled into the wilderness to escape the meaningless incantations of her mother house. She rejected an ordered, comfortable life to offer a different kind of service. I see the Palisade attempting to create a modern version of that hermit's retreat.

... we are planted firmly on this side of the abyss. We defend ourselves

against both the facile surety of religious faith and the arrogance of these twilight scientists who claim that they can 'know the mind of god'.

... in our divided society most people now realise that they will not be invited on this journey into the future ... they will only be relegated to the Tainers ... abandoned to their own irrelevance.

... the Palisade must confront the seductive visions of the Prometheans. They are promising a gift more fateful than the original bearer of fire. But it will not open our horizons; the modern Prometheus will only redefine the destiny of our species within its own narrow terms because they have no moral touchstone. Their science is merely a pursuit, an eternal treasure hunt in which they are writing the clues themselves.

... they imagine that we can transcend our human limitations and supplant our delusionary gods, but they will only sacrifice the essential nature of humanity, our vulnerability and our need to find balance within ourselves and our genius for compromise with powers we will never control which gives us an adaptive ingenuity to survive.

... ironically we have lost our relevance just at the moment that we have succeeded in conquering the planet by bending every other species to our will, just at the moment we have declared an 'Anthropocene Era', and achieved the fleeting moment dominance that our ancestors could only imagine in dreams.



trencher.com/Prometheus

zebr@ > look around you! The degradation of human life has been appalling, yet the Prometheus scientists suddenly announce that they are at the threshold of expanding human lifespan. If you do the maths you soon realise that not all of us are booked for their ride.

A > Z > Certainly in your world of black and white. Is it not evident that extended life will give us all a fresh perspective and encourage longer term planning? I believe that this is our only hope of becoming enlightened stewards of the planet that we imagine ourselves to be and ultimately sustaining our species.

mara > Our species? Only if! It will be Promethean patented species!

Argot > Morality is a human concept, purposed to sustain human collective values. We don't look for morality in other animals in their struggles for survival.

zebr@ > Everything we observe tells us that we are operating in an amoral universe. Human attempts to discern moral order bestowed by the gods are only intended to benefit our own species.

- Argot > Prometheus is usurping the natural order. Other animals engage the opportunities of the present. But human aspirations have always focussed on fantasies of the future. This can only bring the pain and separation that are behind our myth of ejection from the Garden of Eden.
- A > Z > If we cannot reconstruct the human psyche, then our days are numbered.
- Argot > I expect that human life will come to an end in due course and it will be replaced by another form of intelligence better able to make use of the niche that we have sullied. Humanity is only a episode in a continuum of change, a lesson to other evolving species what to avoid.
- A > Z > Exactly! That is why we must push our envelope and shape a new form. We must fight for a continued role in creation.
- mara > We are only designed to occupy a limited time and space. If we lose that temporary context then we lose everything that is human.
- Argot > Agreed! We cannot be trusted to redesign ourselves. We are tiny specks in a colossal continuum and we have only a selfish perspective. We can have no sense of design for future purpose because we cannot comprehend any purpose.
- mara > perhaps you find yourself sympathetic with Trenchers desire to fit into the ecology, without rewriting the rules.
- zebr@ > and the Prometheans will continue to churn out tempting baubles to seduce and sell.

A Challenge

The sultry summer weather made even the gloomy refectory an appealing refuge for listless Trenchers to congregate near the food and drinks fridge. Even Huggie had found the heat unbearable and contented himself indoors with sketch dreams of fanciful hydroponic networks. The streets in the Stits remained utterly deserted. Out in the Tainers, residents only reluctantly ventured out of their retreats for essential supplies.

Clay would usually return from *INFILT* in the late afternoon and ensconce himself in a dark corner playing his interminable games of challenge, twitching involuntarily with each evasive move.

Justin got into the habit of dropping by regularly at the 'close of play' as he like to call it. Mara found all these affectations, suggesting dynamic teamwork quite ridiculous. As she had soon discovered, Justin was a one way street. There was no such teamwork, only the paranoid manipulations of a control freak. The other Trenchers glanced at each other shiftily when he breezed in and tried to ingratiate himself, insisting that all address him with a comradely 'Jay-Bee'. He always made his appearance unruffled and freshly laundered, as if impervious to the heat. Engaging in innocuous banter with Mara, invariably he cast a disparaging glance towards Clay in his dark lair and dramatically shrugged, rolling his eyes.

A message arrived in her post box with a cheerful squelching raspberry sound.

Trench-Troj hiccup > sigh ;-) off recrd - mt in chapl at 5 XO J-B

Mara shrugged and rolled her eyes. Justin's message was so typically terse. But there was something about the new arrangements that did

not suit him. The thought that Justin might be jealous of Clay seemed totally ludicrous. She slipped out of the kitchen unnoticed by the others and made her way to the chapel for their appointment. Closing the heavy door behind her, she stood in the muffled gloom picking out stray beams of light that lit up odd bits of tracery overhead, mulling over all the chaotic changes in her life that Justin had apparently authored. Perhaps her dissatisfaction with their new environment stemmed from her sense that the Trenchers were becoming too beholden to Justin's interventions. As she settled on one of the plastic chairs, her thoughts were troubled by an insistent hum emanating from the crypt below; the flickering light behind grisly chalice needed servicing. She was dimly aware of the muffled click of a carefully closed door.

Justin drifted into the space like a silent wraith, his attentions focussed on the filters of a tracking device in his palm. Without once raising his eyes to the fantastical universe overhead, he dropped nonchalantly onto the neighbouring chair in a single fluid movement and assumed his signature, willowy 'S' posture. His spine seemed improbably curved and his right hip lifted off the seat with a knee raised to support his right arm. The left leg shot forwards in silent recognition of Mara's salute, its red trainer winsomely pointed inwards. Mara was determined to say nothing until he at least acknowledged her. Marriage to Gilb had provided some useful lessons in countering passive aggressive behaviour.

As if muttering to himself, Justin suddenly blurted out, "I've logged off my positioning recorder, so we are completely off the record. Hope yours is too." Mara, who had left all her monitor on the refectory table, made a non-committal gesture. Justin continued to mumble under his breath, "Anyway, we're about due for a one to one. In fact I've recently discovered something that I wanted to make available to you ..." he paused for dramatic effect as if he were suddenly having second thoughts, "... a tiny, tenuous thread, but a thread nevertheless... at first I didn't understand

the implications when certain names popped up in my researches ...” Like an oracle caught in a trance, he prattled on as if talking to himself, “Trawling, you never quite know what gate will suddenly open and let in some unexpected light ...”

“For God’s sake what have you discovered?” Mara snapped in irritation. She loathed his affected diffidence. Justin always expected people to await his pleasure with baited breath. He was never hurried. He had not once taken his eyes off his tiny screen. At last he muttered, “It’s about your Trojan sponsors. I’d have to say that you’ve got yourself into treacherous waters.”

Mara lashed out, “If they’re treacherous waters it is you that has steered us there. You’ve set me up in everything, including our move to this dank purgatory.”

Without raising his eyes, Justin smiled, benignly exposing his array of dainty teeth. He performed best in dealing with impatient people who were annoyed by his enigmatic posturing. “Recently in my position as de Vere’s personal assistant and trusted confidant I chanced upon some correspondence with your so-called benefactors. I have discovered that Trojan House, supposedly a reputable offshore bank in the Caymans has some surprising links much closer to home. You may be astonished to learn their funding sources. I’ve been rather curious about their motives, and particularly why they would be so interested in the Trenchers.”

Mara’s voice rose in annoyance, “You mean you’ve found out that they’re all crooks? ... hardly a surprise that you’ve arranged to have us strung along to suit someone’s secret agenda!” Justin paid no attention to her querulous outburst. “I’ve discovered compromising connections to some of our more colourful locals.” Justin summoned up his most imposing tone of voice and glanced up furtively, “But why are they going to all this

trouble? I ask myself, what's their agenda? I've begun to realise that the story is much bigger than mere tax evasion." He licked his lips and looked very pleased with all his vague revelations. "They've got a much bigger agenda; perhaps I've got a real whale in my sights." He paused and cast a crooked glance her way. "But", he paused as if deliberating whether she was worthy of the revelation, "I think that with your help, we can position ourselves and bring the whole pack of cards tumbling down."

"And are we going to go down with the pack?" Mara added in a voice dripping in sarcasm.

Justin was undeflected, "I've been able to trace substantial transfers of funds from key accounts in this city. It is amazing what you can access when you ask the right questions!"

"So who is hiding what?" she pleaded in exasperation.

But Justin seemed determined to take his time and spin a tale to reveal his detective genius. "It's all part of a web that binds many unlikely people ... and according to my hunch Burrell de Vere is the spider at its centre."

"But that's no surprise. Everyone knows that he's the force behind the ValleyViewVision."

"So it appears. But who actually understands his real agenda? And why did this an eager Emir appear out of nowhere? What does he want?" Mara sighed, "Well you are obviously going to tell me."

"The story about creating a balanced community including your Trenchers, a community focused on land stewardship is most certainly a smokescreen to allow Trojan House to consolidate control. But there is a deeper issue here, a story in which the Trenchers are ultimately quite

irrelevant. It is highly unlikely that a person like the Emir has travelled around the globe to fund the Trenchers' community revival aspirations."

"Then what's the real agenda? What is he really hatching?" Mara resented all these guessing-game tactics.

"At first I was wondering whether De Vere was indulging in market manipulation, playing up some bidding war. He is a man who thrives on creating debt for others, you know."

"Well it seems to me that you too thrive on nurturing indebtedness," Mara added irritably.

"But I play a game with much higher stakes for all of us." He placed a finger to his lips and looked smugly Delphic. "... an information game. When we secure the right information, interesting opportunities open up and we can step into a controlling position."

Mara noted his insistent and unwelcome use of the 'we'. "But aren't you playing a risky double game, exposing your own boss?"

Justin smiled aside at some incidental thought, "That is why I would appreciate *your* help."

"But what role do you imagine Trenchers playing in your murky world?"

"Well this is what we're going to do. I've decided to do you a favour and get Clay out of your hair for a while. He's less than useless on the Trencher team and probably driving you all to distraction. So I've secured him a posting aboard the Emir's yacht Shazzam, he'll be administering the communications firewall, Director of Onshore Coms ... has a lordly ring, *n'est ce pas?*"

Mara shook her head in disbelief at the silliness of this man.

“Relax Mara! We’ll have a foot in both camps. Clay’s role is basically managing a transmissions firewall. Diplomats, more than most, have to be fastidious about information control,” he added glibly.

Mara suddenly glimpsed where Justin’s jealousies were leading him. “So now it’s all up to Clay, to act as your front man? ... while you safely hide in the background?”

“Trust me! I’ll be backing him to the hilt; but I’m obliged to manage a bigger scene without compromising our long term objectives. Above all I’ve got to maintain de Vere’s confidence. There are many good people whose safety relies on my discretion,” he added darkly.

Mara did not like the way that he was suddenly leaning into her in this conspiratorial manner. She had the unpleasant sensation of his sour milk breath on her cheek. “Somehow I always find you less than plausible.”

Justin gasped in righteous surprise, “I’m obliged to honour the confidentiality agreements that I’ve signed, at least until the time is ripe. If I were exposed now, the scope of our coup would be severely curtailed.”

Seething under the burden of all the chaotic developments that he seemed to have orchestrated in the past weeks she hissed, “You think nothing of torching my home, setting me up in this purgatory ... why would I want to have anything to do with your coup?”

Justin smiled evasively, the frames of his glasses always perfectly aligned to shield his pupils. “You see, Mara, like you, I am a crusader! We *do* have a lot in common. But you’ll just have to trust me.” He touched her knee with lingering endearment. “You see I need someone onside, a helpmate.

It's a lonely battle."

Mara puffed, "Only because you've chosen to isolate yourself."

"I'm only using the tools, or should I say weapons at my disposal, intelligence and information. But I have a vision that extends beyond ineffectual blogging and watching beans grow."

Mara shuddered at the thought of having anything in common with this imploded mass of contradictions. "But what will happen to Clay? Aren't you putting him in danger? Does he understand what you are setting up?"

"ES-Tech will rehabilitate Clay in a trice after this operation. This will be the making of him. He is in a position to make a big difference and can afford to be flexible at his age. He'll get recognition, a career move. I guarantee that he'll enjoy his allocated moment of fame."

"Well I'm certainly willing to forego mine, if that's what you're planning to bestow." She was certainly not convinced by Justin's altruistic ardour.

"You'll come around, and then you'll admit that we really are like peas in a pod. We've both made unconventional choices in life, not just taken the easy path. We are in this together. Trust me!" Justin extended his pale pink palm and squeezed her knee. For one millisecond his pupils slipped over the tops of his frame barrier revealing a conspiratorial twinkle.

This was the first time ever that their eyes had met directly. Mara experienced only their chilling vacancy. Clay's eyes were also furtive but his shyness invited further attention, and induced her desire to step forward and help shake him out of his diffidence. Justin's did not.

Supertrees

With Justin's pass in her pocket, Mara set out to locate the ValleyView marketing suite. As she was leaving she mentioned her destination to Clay and was astonished to discover that he already knew all about the installation. An Es-Tech team had been detailed to the gala opening and afterwards he had scrounged boxes of canapés which 'just were going begging'. Apparently there had been no attendees due to an unfortunate misdating of the invitations. Certainly there had been no publicity surrounding the event.

She pumped Clay for his impressions, but all he was able to offer was, "Looks like kind ova narmadillo". Pressed further she achieved only, "Sort ova gold narmadillo in a forest of eco-trees that can do whatever you want. Huggie'd prolly be interested."

Being tucked away within the Cadena security cordon, the rigmarole of gaining security clearance would be particularly arduous for anyone who lived beyond the Pale. Even those with passes could expect elaborate security clearance procedures. Such precautions are always two way affairs, an occasion to assert authority by humiliating and excluding undesirables as well as an opportunity to glean information about visitors who might develop opinions that warranted closer monitoring.

Apprehensively she presented Justin's timed visitor pass half-expecting humiliating rebuff, but the bored guard, fingering his ostentatious pacifier, only glanced at the signature, yawned and pointed down the corridor. "Door's at the end" was all he could offer.

A well-refrigerated space with a wall of floor to ceiling glass, the marketing suite provided a strategic vantage point over the sad dereliction of the

Convent grounds sprawled out below. The grey tinted windows provided a drab panorama of scraggy foliage clinging to decayed brickwork. Broken roofs revealed glimpses of sodden mattresses, rotting furniture and rusting equipment dumped in mildewed heaps. Beyond, the gardens were unkempt and overgrown. Mara could glimpse the area where Huggie had made impetuous progress hacking through decades of scrub growth to release a magnificent gnarled chestnut. She imagined the sisters who had planted that tree more than a century earlier. They had bequeathed a heritage much more enduring than the short-lived signature posturing of Cadena architectural confections casting deep shadows across Bin Street.

A shimmering model of the proposed development was spread across the centre of the room. Spotlights overhead drew her towards the welcoming warmth. The elegant oval shape of the Grey Nuns Chapel was immediately identifiable. But this was the only familiar element. The ramshackle convent buildings had been swept away and the old chapel was now embraced by the golden mirrored tentacles extending from a huge undulating building which crested into a mound of golden tessellated coins. Clay had been surprisingly accurate, it did somewhat resemble the scaly, domed back of a golden armadillo. Cut away into the undulating flank of the beast, a delicate skeletal framework revealed a vast interior hall, replete with hanging plants and exotic trees. A blue canal traced from a floating garden emerged from under the central canopy, divided respectfully either side of the Chapel, which had been neatly flagged as 'Heritage Zone' and then reunited in an exuberant cascade tumbling down a series of hillside terraces into the river valley far below. Each terrace had been meticulously planted to achieve every patterning extravagance that overwrought landscaping genius could devise.

It certainly did not look like the inclusive mixed community, the VEE 3,

that De Vere had alluded to at the PRIGS briefing.

Huggie's chestnut tree was also conspicuously missing. Instead, shading the terraces were the precisely aligned Supertrees that Clay had mentioned. She soon discovered that this enhanced life form was designed to outperform conventional botanical species, providing shading and greenery within a maintenance free environment. They were described as 'the latest addition to the eco-vocabulary of a sustainable city, an inspired fusion of the natural mysteries of biological growth with mechanical intelligence.'

In the background a cheerful disembodied voice hailed her with an unctuous message extolling this 'empowered Eco-scape'. This pundit launched into a sonorous eulogy "... instant modular greening provides an eco-focus for the whole development. Full scale Supertree prototypes fusing certified botanical material integrated with patented cybernetic controlled robotic armatures are being tested as we speak. The first trees are already in fabrication. This brilliant autarchic paradigm will provide a protective canopy to rival the Amazon rain forest." The voice averred candidly, "But there will be no leaves to sweep and provisions will be made to harvest precipitation before it reaches the ground, so you can all leave your umbrellas and safari suits at home!" The narrator chortled merrily.

A screen behind flashed up a detailed section through one of these structures, which resembled a slice through a giant mushroom. Tiny human forms occupied the structure on all levels, obsessively drawn by an irrepressible urge to visit all public viewing points provided.

"... the genius of the Supertree concept is its seamless integration of natural and cyber intelligences to transform past limited expectations of the urban tree!' the voice explained excitedly. "An integrated canopy

of high efficiency photo voltaic crystals will provide low energy lighting to sustain a wonderland rivalling displays in other world class cities ... and of course when the Superforest is fully commissioned it will be absolutely carbon neutral.” (To illustrate the power of this eco-point, the screen displayed an immense image of the city with a pale green blob obliterating Grey Nuns.) “... and no need to wait decades for real trees to grow - only to find that they have been planted in the wrong place! The Supertree prototype is entirely demountable. Standardised lightweight components and our patented Eco-Multiclip System can be redeployed as planning requirements evolve. Patented ‘Acro-branches’ ...”

All this information seemed to instill instant exhaustion; Mara’s mind began to drift. The screen dutifully displayed a busload of children romping in a benign jungle wilderness. “...areas of the Superforest have been themed to represent the world’s most challenging ecosystems and will provide a virtual learning insight into complex ecologies. Bird song and even live animals will be called upon to impart authenticity to your experience.”

In a sudden change of scene and a soundtrack which sounded like a leaky tap, the presentation suddenly moved to dwell on a desolation of decaying fruit on leafless November trees in the old orchard. The camera zoomed in on a bushel basket of apples, blasted with cankers and riddled with worms. “... our vision will address the rehabilitation of the derelict Grey Nuns orchards.”

A now familiar publicity image of the city skyline taken from mid-lake flashed across the screen and the camera caressed the highlights of the Cadena. “... above all *VEE 3* will restore Nature’s beauty to the core of our world class city. We will rebuild the heart of New Midland as a place of recreation and delight.”

The screen went black with a jolting electronic crackle.

Mara caught a disappointing reflection of herself hunched over the display and realised how inconsequential she appeared amidst all this smoothly engineered glamour. She was undoubtedly being watched on someone's remote screen; a minor diversion from a vacuous daily routine. Unknown eyes would be ceaselessly probing and judging her appearance and deportment.

Suddenly she was aware of a rising voice in the outer hallway. She felt a rush of relief that she might be relieved of someone's bored attention. There was a cracking sound as a door was wrenched open and a man burst petulantly into the room. He glanced around wildly like a fearful animal fleeing the hunter, his eyes drilled into Mara and he let out an exasperated hiss. "And I don't need a minder either ...". Disdainfully he crumpled up the piece of paper in his hands and hurled it at her feet. "This is my designated time slot".

Mara held her ground with a steady gaze. Her marriage to Gilb had trained her to counter such aggression with cool passivity. But as she stared back revelling in his increasing discomfiture she perceived something oddly tentative about the appearance of this new arrival.

He seemed a concoction of unlikely ingredients, none of them entirely convincing; the luminous Euro-suit with dazzling shirtfront, ostentatiously assembled accents of wealth, all ridiculously crowned with wrap-around, deep shaded sunglasses looked like props from central casting. His curiously misshapen head that seemed to bulge out of proportion with its features, but the shaggy coiffeur of black curls suggested something beyond even the ministrations of the most artful hairdressers in the Cadena. Could it possibly be a wig?

It suddenly crossed her mind that this might be an actor, someone hiding behind an implausible disguise. She could feel a wall of resentment as she turned and brazenly addressed him, challenging his misanthropic vibes. "I've every right to be here."

Throwing his arms upwards palms upturned to the heavens in a gesture of exasperation, he almost shouted at her "I don't need a guide. I can see this without your help".

Perhaps it was this gesture of exasperation, the hands aggressively thrust outwards as if commanding a bolt from heaven, but she sensed something familiar about his deportment. She turned abruptly and exclaimed defiantly, "Wait till you see the Super-Trees!"

He shoved his hands into his pockets truculently. "I just came to check out what we're all up against," he growled.

"Everyone seems to have a plan for Grey Nuns. But I can't see anything here for any of us."

The man harrumphed and turned his back on her to pour over the model, glowering at the terraces labelled 'Pleasure Gardens'. "Not much consolation there ... after they've lost everything in the casino," he grumbled grimly.

"Casino?" Mara exclaimed in surprise. "So that's the mound of gold bits? My friend described it as a golden armadillo. Its purpose certainly isn't mentioned in the promotional spiel." Mara pointed at the little chapel caught up in the open mandibles. "I guess the old nuns held out too long, and now there is no one left to prick this balloon."

The man, observing her reflection in the glass, began to relax as he

realised that as another incredulous visitor she presented no challenge.

“The nuns imagined themselves to be laying down the moral heart of the city. They’d be horrified to find a casino at the core of its renewal.” As he sighed Mara began to perceive a note of shyness behind his assumed truculence. “The saint’s legacy has become red hot real estate, available to the highest bidder. But perhaps market value is somewhat compromised by her bones. Not a big draw for the well-heeled gambling elite.” he snickered in cynical delight at the thought.

“But our Trenchers have been given a role in stabilising the site and restoring some of the landscape. ”

The man, who had evidently heard of the Trenchers, erupted in derision, “You! Trenchers? You guys are positively mediaeval! Urban dairy maids ... with too much time on your hands!”

“Everyone’s got too much time when there is nothing to do.”

“Except gamble.”

“I always thought that the ghost of Sister Agnes might approve of our Trencher lifestyle.” Mara added wistfully.

The man erupted in a condescending snort, “You won’t draw the hard currency though. That’s what they all want. Who’s going to benefit from your activities? They will always insist on returns commensurate with their inflated land values.”

Mara was surprised at his bitterness. Intuitively she began to explore a hunch. “And would the *Palisaders* be any more resilient? I imagine that the Church Commissioners have proven wary of the Palisade message.”

The man looked at her oddly at her provocative mention of the *Palisade*. Had she detected something? He withdrew to fester in a cocoon of irritability. His behaviour only seemed to confirm Mara's suspicions that she was talking to their famous Rev Elron, travelling on cognito. But she decided to play along with his disguise.

However, unable to contain himself he erupted once more in another apoplectic outburst. "It's all just resentment! The church commissioners refuse to acknowledge the Palisade's success in luring away their congregations. But none of us have any hope of taking on this ValleyView Vision. With Media-Net promoting them they have the resources to manufacture any public opinion they need." he grimaced ominously.

He waved at the model in disgust. "I've always thought that doubt was an essential ingredient of the human spirit. But there is not much doubt in the minds of the crooks who proposed this gangsters' paradise."

Mara laughed, "There were few doubts in the designers of those Supertrees. They've designed a tree that will outperform Nature."

"Just the same way that we're replacing all human doubt, with an artificial intelligence which is doubt free."

"But do they believe for a moment that they are doing the right thing?"

"It is all a scam. It has never been in our power to husband nature. Mankind has never been granted stewardship over creation as so many religions used to claim. Ours is only a tiny bit part."

He sighed, "Yet that is exactly what Prometheus is attempting with their genetically enhanced humanity." He pointed at the neat array of research buildings on the Hyperion peninsula. "Prometheus, is contemplating the

equivalent to Valley View for the human genome. They are inviting us to gamble with our very nature.”

Mara glared at him defiantly. “But none of this qualifies us to be the stewards of our own destiny by removing characteristics which we suddenly deem unsuited to modern circumstances.”

“Modern circumstances? Recent events have only demonstrated how quickly we can sweep aside our idea of progress ... just at the moment when it is taken for granted.”

The man became increasingly spooked by Mara’s penetrating gaze. He announced abruptly “I’ve seen all I can stomach. I’ll leave you and your Trenchers to your vapid dreams of a better future. But this certainly isn’t it!” With that he turned abruptly and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

Mara gazed sadly at the model. By arranging the pass, Justin had evidently intended her to enrage her and demonstrate the insignificance of Trenchers, mere pawns in a much bigger game.

She stooped to pick up the ball of crumpled paper that had been hurled at her feet by the impetuous visitor and distractedly she flattened it out. It was a pass like hers, which bore an identical ES-Tech authorisation bar stamp. Justin’s? she wondered. Inscribed at the top was the name of the bearer, *Argot Norle Smith* along with a Personal Identity Number.

A side door slid open and a caricature of an upwardly mobile property agent poked his head in. He sized her up unfavourably, and brusquely announced that the show suite was closing for lunch. She was obliged to complete an electronic survey on her way out.



trencher.com/ValleyView

- zebr@ > So now you see that Trenchers were only invited to the table to disguise others' actual intentions for ValleyView.
- mara > where is this balanced community that de Vere claimed to be presenting? Saint Ag's Chapel, clutched like a toy in the arms of a possessive child, is barely identifiable amidst all this crass new construction.
- zebr@ > and does anyone think it's a co-incidence that Shazzam has suddenly dropped anchor? They are all positioning themselves for the kill.
- mara > ValleyView Vision was supposed to transform the city - but certainly not in any way that Trenchers envisage. Who is all this for? What little nature is left is manicured and totally subservient to man.
- zebr@ > no tiny plots for the Trencherous to grow their mouldy potatoes! LOL
- mara > look for yourself! Is there anything in ValleyView for you? It's simply a one-armed bandit, designed to stream wealth systematically into someone's pockets.
- zebr@ > ah yes, a Trojan Horse.

Parallel Elron - ValleyView

The following excerpts from de-classified handwritten records of Elron McBride, self-styled 'Rev El' of the People's Palisade, have been seized under the Public Security and Anti-Terrorism Act, redacted by ES-agent Zebr@ and placed in the public domain as being germane to cases currently pending the New Midland Security Review Board.

... sometimes I think that Rev El is merely a mask and the real Argot Smith lurks beneath, embarrassingly revealed when my disguise slips.

... but there are freedoms behind a mask. Best of all I don't have to submit to the intolerable expectations of my flock. I can think freely and act without fear of being judged.

... my visit to the ValleyView presentation has confirmed my worst suspicions ... McCubbins must have forwarded the entry pass anonymously to let me know what I am up against.

... De Vere's little joke, his Trojan House, placed tantalisingly beyond the pale, will be dragged into our midst by gullible fools who think it a gift.

... I ran into one of those insufferable Trenchers who make a virtue of roughing it in the Stits ... decked out in god-awful homespun, determined to look worthier-than-thou. She claimed that some of her acquaintances attend my Go-To's. Give me Angèle and her damned diamante stiletos any day! ... she looked me over very suspiciously but said nothing ... people like that should stick to growing their potatoes.

... she too was evidently mystified by the VEE3 proposals. Obviously the model doesn't jibe with her Trencher vision. It must have suddenly dawned that they are dupes of de Vere's secretive agenda ... she obviously doesn't know how de Vere operates.

The Pally Rally

Following her visit to the show suite Mara began to encounter more frequent snippets of information about the ValleyView development drifting into the social media. She now realised that Justin had set her up as part of his secretive campaign to expose the developer's intentions. She wondered apprehensively about his next move. She could imagine de Vere's annoyance at these untimely leaks of information that he had evidently intended to suppress.

Suddenly rumours began to emerge about Rev El's determination to lead a rally to fan public outrage at the 'golden armadildo' intended to transform 'Grey Nuns' into a 'glitzy gambling ghetto'. Clay's phrase seemed to have caught on like wildfire.

But Rev El's efforts were actively suppressed by Media-Net which took every opportunity to undermine his reputation. One of the benisons of this age of inundative information was that any party with sufficient resources digging deep enough into the data trove could devise a strong slant to any message. Media-Net's aligned subsidiaries followed suit and dwelt with relish on rumours of the passionate excesses of the *Go-To's* with prostrate souls sprawled around the comely ankles of Angèle. The ***Staryk Report*** aired an entertaining exposé highlighting Rev El's complete lack of academic credentials. Like so many modern students who had conducted autonomous courses of self study all of his degrees were self-awarded including his elevation to a Doctor of Divinity '*digne cum laude*'.

Interviewing past acquaintances, Malyn gleefully extracted details of his patchy early career, 'before he found his road to the divine'. These included a stint as bar room bouncer, an aquarium tour guide and his haplessly lugubrious failure at fiction writing, choice portions of which

she read out with great relish. Her audience was left to draw its own conclusions.

Although the data-mongers were having a field day mining a lode of compromising images of his interactions with acolytes and winking baffling quotations from his homilies, Rev El's supporters remained obtusely supportive of their flawed saint.

* * *

In her eyrie anxiously peeping out through the curtain folds, Colonel McCubbins had most pressing concerns. She was agonising over the lack of preparation time to lay on proper policing prior to the *Pally Rally* as it was beginning to be called. Despite De Vere's relentless insistence she could find no convenient excuse for cancelling the event. She well knew that if the rally grew out of hand the damage to the city's reputation for law and order could be considerable. She was alarmed at the prospect of mixed antipathetic crowds usually kept isolated within controlled boundaries. How she regretted that she had not made a greater case for public safety and closed down the Palisade before it had grown into this hysteria inducing Hydra.

On her desk was a neatly bound report that had just been presented by Agent Brattoné. She always insisted on paper, the only way to retain confidentiality of information in an electronic world. She was astonished at his inspired initiative in assembling such devastating, information about Rev El into a 'diary format'. This material traced the chequered pasts of many of his associates, including some of the rabble-rousers who could be expected to cause trouble at the rally. Justin's analysts had been working overtime to intercept web chatter and pick up all likely dissidents. He was an indisputable maestro at drawing the right timbre from his gleanings. He had produced a veritable symphony, a crescendo

of innuendo, to play on the public ear.

But the Colonel had so many other worries. In this torrid summer weather tempers would be frayed. It almost seemed that the Pally Rally had been timed to antagonise her security personnel with cancellation of summer leave. The Rally was planned to depart from the sweltering Palisade parking lot and continue on foot across the Stits to arrive at Grey Nuns in the heat of the afternoon, when tempers would be most frayed. With undoubtedly inflammatory intentions, the circuitous route passed by many of the boarded-up places of bygone religious assembly.

Meanwhile in his Study at the rear of the Epitome Palace Hotel, Burrell De Vere had his feet up on his desk, enjoying a momentary respite from his insufferable assistant.

He had been reviewing Justin's latest offering, a skilfully edited homily delivered by Elron the previous week. Entitled *Vale of Tears*, he railed against all forms of hedonism. "Is this the city we want to create, awash in opulence and meaningless wealth?"

"Yup!" de Vere chirped.

Elron railed against ceding responsibility for regeneration into the hands of private enterprise. Given the absence of scenery, sunlight, cultural interests or sporting challenges, the proposals to create a major tourist destination to entice affluent visitors from abroad, would soon descend to squalid amusements, frivolous entertainment and conspicuous consumption. Did citizens want a city where 'freedom from conscience' was considered the draw for roving tourists?

De Vere teased his hair in delighted concentration. The hysterical rant bordered on the comic. “It all sounds pretty splendid to me,” he crowed.

Though he prided himself in his arms length, low profile, he had no intention of letting this compelling confabulation pass unnoticed. He would ensure that Malyn’s talents made a hearty meal of Rev El’s foibles.

Distractedly, he opened a desk drawer and pulled out a manila file, riffling through the contents, random scrappy notes, numbers and email access addresses. However distasteful he found Justin Brattoné, he had to admit that some people were intuitive data hounds, able to sniff out the most damning of details.

He sighed contentedly as he stretched back in his chair. He liked to make a point of withholding praise for his agent’s tireless efforts, knowing how much someone so self-righteous and unconfident craved it.

Alas! Justin would only receive his coveted reward once his services were no longer required and he could be dispatched to well-earned oblivion.



trencher.com/prometheus

zebr@ Prometheus of legend stole the fire of the gods and delivered it to mankind. But modern Prometheus is delivering Mankind to the fire.

Argot > They claim that their science will transform our lives. But refuse to reveal their research. In this era of misinformation overload they have avoided the real issues and achieved total blackout on their activities

zebr@ meanwhile we all are all getting worked up about casinos.

mara > What did those ancients do with Prometheus' gift? They only used it to concoct ever more devastating ways of raining death upon each other.

zebr@ > Don't delude yourself trying to find a moral vision behind Prometheus. They are only following the money, what their investors believe will sell. But let's imagine who might be leading those investors ... and what his objectives really might be.

Life Below Decks

As he passed through the mirrored chicane leading into Shazzam's security suite, Clay was startled by his unfamiliar reflection. Justin had insisted that he 'spruce up' his image as a prerequisite for this posting. But stripped of his protective armour, the perforating pins, bars and studs, he felt vulnerable and somehow unformed. His metallic carapace, built up piece by piece, shielded him from confronting the mass of contradictions crowding in upon his life. The 'armoured warrior' fantasy distanced him from those who might draw close, perhaps attracted by the vacuousness of his blue eyes or his undernourished physique. But revealed in the mirror was seemingly a pale, misshapen colourless putty. His pallor and the dark smears under his eyes suggested too much time interred in this working grave. It now seemed ridiculous to have been obliged to 'tidy up' for clients that he never encountered. The only occasions he was even allowed above decks were under heavy escort when the 'royals' were elsewhere.

He grimaced defiantly at the surveillance camera and stuck out his tongue. These cyber-surveillance points gathered information on staff performance. He half hoped to make some point of defiance; but he knew the sad reality of such reconnaissance. The data was stored away for future access if a problem was flagged up, but in the present nobody really cared.

The Shazzam had been lavishly appointed to offer hospitality and 'gold standard' security to some of the world's most precious people. All guests enjoyed automatic encryption of their communications 'for their own protection' preventing compromising details from slipping out into the public realm. All incoming data were jammed except those passing through official channels. Clay's unit worked tirelessly to manage these

local filters.

But he was also an adjunct to another aspect of the data management. Located at the centre of many politically sensitive negotiations, his Excellency prudently liked to ascertain the true positions of his many guests, political luminaries, media stars or arms dealers, insisting that he was only pro-actively enhancing their onboard comfort. All communications were carefully monitored through ES-Tech filters and minutely scrutinised.

At Clay's induction session, the animatrix had set out exacting rules for his deportment below decks. She was sleek, like a cat nourished on a diet of rich cream. She had emphasised the importance of non-judgemental compliance with all requests by 'the royal family' and their guests. "Avoid eye-contact but never show hesitation that might indicate censure. Proper subservience always requires a delicate diplomatic balance," she added regarding Clay doubtfully. "Remember, there is specialist staff aboard whose sole purpose is to accommodate the indiscretions of your clients. Always refer back to your superiors!"

But he was completely shielded from any direct encounter with the royal family or their cosseted guests. Liaison with them was the prerogative of a pompous geek, 'Dee-Gee'. He lurked in a suite adjacent to the communications hub and never addressed a coherent word to anyone as he shuffled to and from his work station.

All personal communications from below decks were blocked. Clay was faintly aware that Mara might have appreciated some little signal from him. He imagined the dreary convent kitchen and recalled his efforts to tease her with his silliness. Perhaps he did miss their morning encounters. On board no one seemed to speak to each other at all, most of the serving staff were mutes. A whole day could pass before his screens without any

human contact.

On his mimic screen indicating the communication hubs aboard, there was a mysterious section aforeships which received total blackout. All communications from this zone were automatically diverted through Dee-Gee. Furtively conjuring up a bevy of dark-eyed houris, this dark zone drove Clay's imagination into overdrive. 'Houri' was a word that had popped unexpectedly into his limited vocabulary and rattled around in his head as he was engaged in furtive sallies into *Doom Dudgeon*. Released from distractions and Justin's prying eyes, he had been able to train up to several new challenges and achieve quite breathtaking scores.

Despite the mania for secure data controls there were evident lapses that he had difficulty resolving. Whenever he logged on at the beginning of his shift he would find that his user name had been unexpectedly altered to '*Ratty*'. This was apparently someone's idea of humour but it was wearing thin under constant repetition. Clay supposed that someone was attempting to access his gaming challenges afterhours and sabotage his stellar scores. Looking around at Dee-Gee and his taciturn colleagues it seemed unlikely that any of them would have the slightest interest in challenges of that sort.

He had been aboard just a week when he arrived on his morning shift to discover the suite unnaturally abuzz, all communications jammed and Walter, the Steward, rushing around in a panic. Dee-Gee had been summoned for a de-briefing with 'his Excellency'. In his absence Clay was obliged to resolve a networking problem above decks. He objected to being ordered to don an orange body suit with pale blue, plush slippers in order to venture out of the security compound.

Feeling rather like a parachuted pumpkin, he was escorted directly towards the mysterious isolation zone. The 'houri' word bounced about

his mind obsessively and his pulse quickened at the prospect of witnessing the opulent delights that he his imagination had hazily conjured up.

But what an utter disappointment! Instead of a seraglio, he was ushered through a squalid anteroom into a Spartan stateroom with soiled black leather furniture and desks strewn with discarded electronic devices. Old dishes of food, plastic cutlery and crumpled magazines had been abandoned on every surface. A cleanup crew followed in his wake, navigating trolleys and disdainfully picking up debris with marigold gloves. Clay was instructed to sort out a festoon of wiring that had been torn in evident rage from behind a ceiling panel and bundled into a tangled nest. Carpet tiles had been lifted and hurled around the space. Upholstery had been slashed and the stuffing strewn about as if someone had been trying to locate an insect infestation. “Just cap what isn’t needed and bin the rest”, were the rather inadequate instructions of the Steward.

The stateroom was windowless; all portholes had been covered over with plywood plates bolted to food splattered bulkheads. There was a curved console supporting numerous screens ranged around a soiled roller chair. The few screens that were still operational were fixed on reports and news analysis. Several of the monitors displayed provocatively pornographic screen-saver images. This barrage of random information, advancing relentlessly from all directions, seemed a recipe for madness. What was the state of mind of the occupant of that soiled chair charting a life through all this chaos? Clay realised that he must have been brought to the suite occupied by the Emir’s introverted son, the young man that was the subject of so many rumours and who Justin had suggested he should try to befriend.

The steward’s cleansing staff having departed wheeling off trolleys of debris, Clay momentarily found himself alone in the room. His eye fell on a stack of discarded gaming disks. As he riffled through them, he became

aware of a purring growl emanating from the adjacent room. There was a sudden snort. He was listening to someone snoring loudly. This whole incursion was obviously undertaking maintenance while the Emir's son was conveniently asleep – or drugged.

He sat down at a gaming console and opened up *Dungeons Nest*, in which he held some of the highest recorded scores. Within moments he had eclipsed the resident records and proudly entered his own achievement under the name 'Ratty'.

The snoring in the next room continued unabated. With rising curiosity he got up and tiptoed to the side chamber door listening to a steady, sonorous rhythm within. He tentatively touched the door handle. A visible spark leapt from the knob and seized him by the hand. Instant stars flashed across his eyes. The violence of the shock hurled him to the floor part way across the room.

Collapsed on his knees, he was grovelling and still dazed when Walter, the steward, returned with an emptied trolley. Clay pretended to be combing the floor for last bits of debris. Walter though smiled complicitly as if he knew exactly what had occurred during his absence.

Without a word, the Steward pointed to the exit. Clay dumped the tangled heap of wires into the trolley. On shaky legs he did his best to slouch nonchalantly out of the room.

But the moment he had left the suite and watched Walter officiously engage the bolts behind him, he thought of his coy little screen message and realised, "I guess that I shouldn't of done that."

But it was too late to backtrack.

An Audience

Meanwhile a water taxi had crossed the choppy bay and delivered an unwelcomed visitor to Shazzam. Burrell De Vere had been priming himself for a confrontation, not an audience with the Emir. As he waited for the long delayed arrival of his host in the ostentatiously gilded saloon, certain that he was being watched discreetly from behind the scenes, he made a point of displaying brazen condescension in inspecting the ornate gilt throne raised on a dais at the end of the room. In a society so deeply divided between the watchers and the watched, Burrell De Vere, a consummate actor, understood the importance of turning in an insouciant performance when required.

He had yet to meet the man, having dealt in the past with a host of shifty flunkeys who had conveyed messages from their master. Absent-mindedly he picked up a hawking trophy, a gilded raptor with outstretched wings, and inspected it with sneering disparagement.

A nearby picture caught his eye. He proceeded with trophy in hand to inspect the icon in gilded frame which had been hung in pride of place over a carved chest. He raised his glasses and levelled an ostentatious, connoisseur's eye. Suddenly his hand seemed to slip and he almost dropped the trophy in his distraction. Were it not for fine honed reflexes it could so easily have fallen through the priceless chest below. His performance appeared flawlessly spontaneous. He could imagine the horror of the silent observers, jolted into anxiety by his near accident.

As expected a few moments later a waiter entered brusquely and deposited a tray of water on the table. The flunkey enquired if he needed anything, then officiously picked up the trophy from the table and restored it to its appointed place without a word. He retreated to de

Vere's laconic 'evidently not' response.

Inspecting his watch impatiently, he slapped his side petulantly and strode over to a port window. Forcing it open he stood admiring the New Mid skyline, its jaunty chain of fantastical architectural exuberance barring the waterfront.

A pale young page entered and announced in fluting voice, "His Excellency Maksuur bin Kalb al Qabeeh" and then stood aside as an immense man in a pale blue suit entered, and ponderously mounted the dais. He was followed by two assistants who positioned themselves either side of the table and awaited his composure before receiving a nod to take their seats.

Remaining a picture of insouciance, De Vere continued to stare out the port hole apparently riveted by some detail on the skyline. Then he turned with a relaxed smile to address his host with a pleasant provocation, "Charmed to meet at last, Mak. You've got quite the boat here! Please feel free to call me de Vere if you like." He bestowed an off-hand wave and turned back to glance out the window.

One of the pages stood and piped up rather ineffectually, "Protocols recommend that you address the Emir as *Your Excellency*". He resumed his seat while the potentate grimaced in mild encouragement.

"That works for me! I'm looking for just that, an *excellent* mutual understanding, so I guess I've come to the right place", De Vere added blithely.

The Emir had the florid, vacant face of one who was habitually protected from the results of decisions made in his name. He looked around vaguely, not knowing how to respond to the evident effrontery. But his advisors

kept their heads down, pretending not to notice. He hove himself forward on his seat, "We are men with different styles of presentation, I perceive ... you are a man with strong equalitarian instincts?"

De Vere smiled and shook his head, "As a man of the media, I am accustomed to cutting through barriers to get to the nub of the matter. It's the way I like to run my business."

The Emir looked perplexed by this elliptical answer. He rose grandly from his throne, stepped down awkwardly and approached the end of the table with the waddling gait of one who generally lets others do the footwork on his behalf. "I've never been obliged to pay much attention to your so-called Fourth Estate. I prefer to believe that a desirable democratic consensus can usually be purchased more effectively than persuaded." He rendered a knowing leer. "But we are not here to expound the merits of democracy, which personally I have never found a very practical employment of power."

He paused for some time and neither man said anything. "One feels that one has entered a very confusing scenario, so many messy, contrary interests attracted to our little project that I'm inclined to suspect your Trojan bank of playing a very doubtful game."

"Our little project?" De Vere burst into an explosive snort of condescension, "There is no need to question my programme or my capacity to undertake it. In the interim the contrary forces you may be alluding to are playing a vital role by galvanising debate about the future of a prime site for '*our little project*'. But you need not trouble yourself about such politics. One might consider that one has come in from outside without any idea of the local politics or of the finesse with which they must be managed. You will undoubtedly discover that we like to do things differently here in New Mid."

Usually the Emir cast himself in the role of sage listener allowing himself rehearsal time before responding with his decisions. He expected others to attend on the vicissitudes of his erratic timetable. At strategic moments, he was known to withdraw in order to perform religious observances and leave a room in suspense while he determined policy off stage. This usually allowed the consequential carnage to be swept aside before he needed to inspect the results. But today more direct engagement was required.

“You, Mister Veer, are in the unfortunate position of having to please a multiplicity of conflicting interests. I perceive that your funding comes from so many contrarian sources. And its provenance is of necessity very secretive. I understand all this.”

He shook his wobbly chin. “I, on the other hand, need let no tiresome compromises restrict my interventions. The resources I command are under my direct personal control. I am not obliged to make concessions when I am determined to have something.”

“Potash? Hah! Is that the power of a jumped up potash potentate?” De Vere pealed contemptuously. He turned with a sudden snap of aggression and planted his two fists on the table top. The two interpreters leapt from their seats in startled alarm. In a voice quivering with rage he lashed into the Emir, “And I believe that our ‘little project’ as you describe it is one for which my Trojan Group originally solicited your participation – and for very specific reasons. I should remind you that we have no intention of vacating our driver’s seat.”

The Emir sighed, “Your so-called *ValleyViewVision*, is a relatively minor part of a much more comprehensive vision that I am evolving, one which will extend considerably beyond the murky objectives of your eager band of Trojans.” He sighed, “But I feel that I can generously offer you and your

Trojans a role in my considerably larger vision.”

De Vere rose to full height and in withering voice stated, “I don’t need to remind you, I trust, that it is I who invited you to participate in our larger vision. We have built this opportunity with painstaking care. You have been invited as a participant with a minority stake. Nothing else has ever been on offer.”

The Emir shook his head sharply, “We are of course grateful that you have identified this opportunity and I know that we can all rise to a fuller grasp of it potential. I will personally guarantee your investors’ stake in this with a generous profit margin.” The Emir paused and sighed, “But we must point out that we will assume the helm, and build out ValleyView. I am in the enviable position of being able to outbid other interests - including those of your Trojan Bank.”

De Vere laughed, a hollow peal dripping with condescension. “Perhaps you underestimate the powers wielded by Media-Net in shaping public acceptance of this project. A democratic society, like ours, will not respond favourably to blatant displays of oligarchic power. You might come here with an impressive boat and all the dandy trappings but you cannot tell us how to reshape our city. This will not be acceptable under due democratic process which we enjoy here in New Midland and over which I exercise substantial influence.” De Vere paused to gulp a fresh breath in his growing rage, “You have not the faintest idea of how subtle this process can be, or the great pains that the Trojan Group has already undertaken to manage it efficiently.”

“I truly believe that enlightened oligarchy is the natural command structure of a nascent society, one that can overcome ill-willed dissent in order to achieve far-reaching social visions. If we cannot count on your assistance, we will need to explore other ways to win the hearts and

minds of your citizens in the democracy that you so quaintly depict.”

“You clearly don’t appreciate the ethos of New Midland! Anything you attempt without my assistance will be viewed with consummate suspicion and rejected flat out.”

“I’m sure that Media-Net will see to that. But do not underestimate the powers of a *jumped up potash potentate*, as you so memorably call me.”

De Vere paused, “Regrettably I think that Trojan House will be obliged to proceed without any further assistance from you.”

“You know, Mister Veer, there is an essential difference between you and me which I’m afraid sets you at some disadvantage. Though we both seek to achieve the same benefits for all, I suspect that you are ill-equipped to rise to the full requirements of a gamble. But gambling is second nature to me, and my pockets run very deep. Ultimately I will prevail. Others inevitably come around to my way of thinking. So perhaps it will be my turn to play the populist card. Perhaps we should let the people to decide whether they choose to gamble on their future or merely place their faith in your quaint ideas of ‘democratic process’. I take it that you refuse my offer to include you in my project?”

De Vere said nothing but turned again to stare out the porthole.

With that abruptly, the Emir turned to the door and mumbled to his page. “Have the boat brought around to conduct Mr Veer back to wherever he might have come from.” Without further word he lumbered out of the room followed by his lackeys.

Tamim

Later that afternoon, Walter floated into the communications suite self-importantly beaming at Clay. "It seems that our little protégé has taken a sudden shine to you." There was a note of withering condescension in his voice, not entirely lost on Clay. "He has been doing his research and now evidently he wants to check out the details. He's just requested that you attend his royal pleasure as soon as you can pull yourself together - for instance - now." Walter added somewhat glibly, "I suspect that you may be in for an even bigger shock."

Clay stared back at him absolutely at sea. Was this move authorised by Justin or Dee-Gee? Dee-Gee had not returned from his de-briefing with the Emir. His colleagues were subdued and whispering among themselves. Evidently something had upset the status quo. He began to suspect that he would not be encountering Dee-Gee's morose presence again in the near future.

Walter continued, through pursed lips, "Any abatement of hostilities that you can encourage will undoubtedly be attractive to his parents. His Excellency has personally approved your intervention. I attempted to disabuse him of any notion that you were likely to be kindred spirits, but he seems convinced that you will find common ground sharing some of the latest gaming software, *'whatever it is those guys like to play at'*, I think were his exact words. I have taken the liberty of transferring some of the diversions gleaned from your workstation onto a hard disk for the young prince's delectation. Perhaps you can sit down together and talk shop."

Clay looked sheepishly at the sheet Walter slipped onto the desk before him and realised that his list of the latest gaming challenges was

reasonably complete.

“But can’t he just download all this stuff himself?”

“As you might surmise, the dear boy suffers from a trust deficit. He suspects backdoor spy software in anything he receives – not entirely without justification. He is irrationally paranoid that his life is being secretly monitored. Admittedly his parents are so distraught that they will resort to anything. Perhaps if you could introduce him to some of your personal highlights, he might feel reassured that your programmes are reasonably clean. I suggest that you just keep your performance wide-eyed and innocent ... Go with the flow ... Should be easy enough for someone like you,” he added disparagingly.

Walter presented a neatly boxed and labelled hard drive in pristine shrink wrap. Clay could well imagine why Tamim might not trust this slippery steward to have his best interests at heart. He began to suspect reasons for the destructive rampage that had evidently taken place before his previous visit.

“Don’t overheat your grey cells, just play it cool,” was Walter’s pompous advice, “Sit back and let our princelet make up his own mind. The surveillance he complains about is really only intended for his own good. But at times he refuses to acknowledge his parents’ heartfelt intentions.” Clay had no time to ponder the proposal. A tone sounded on Walters’ pager and he announced. “Your escort is awaiting outside.”

Again sandwiched between two guards, Clay proceeded through the labyrinthine corridors. As he approached the security lock this second time his minders peeled away. He was buzzed through immediately and found himself in an empty stateroom. The space seemed no less shambolic and he wandered about jogging various screen contents to life and

feeling quite overwhelmed by the vast range of incoming information to titillate the magpie mind of his host. There were stations relaying African cropping techniques, screens displaying statistics about ship hull design, a twitter feed from the Guardian Post mixed with incomprehensible live news feeds from the Al Jazz and some place where the glamorous reader was wearing a sequinned muffin on her head. Pornography featuring couplings of bulbous physiques seemed a recurrent leitmotif on some split screens. All these parallel worlds had been brought into a convergent cacophony within this single nest.

He flopped down on the soiled control chair considering whether to break the seal on the new games box and get started. Soon he became uncomfortably aware of someone staring at him from behind. He swivelled around to confront a tiny, rotund young man, little more than a boy, ill-kempt and unshaven. Tamim was dressed in a slovenly, grey sweat suit. Clay's shy glance fell to the bulbous feet wedged into pink flip-flops, and huge puffy ankles.

Tamim stared back at Clay suspiciously. "I don't know what I was expecting, but you certainly are not it! So you're the guy they're setting up as a whistleblower? I'll say it's a pretty effective disguise – like you're a total hayseed! That's my chair by the way." Clay leapt up to surrender the position. Tamim lowered his wide frame, wedging it between the armrests with the awkwardness of a settling penguin.

Clay felt his usual deficiency in keeping up with the pace of communications. He usually coped by smiling vacuously, attempting to look as if pursuing some other agenda. He had no clue what Tamim was talking about but he registered the obvious ridicule. "Well like I heard lots about you too, and I'd say y'er not zactly a prince waiting for a rescue team ..." his attempted sarcasm, while glancing down at Tamim's puffy waistline broke off midsentence.

Tamim pushed back in his chair and swivelled round to display a huge globular stomach. "Okay, so I'm a little overweight for your common or garden prince – Just get over it. You would be too if you spent all you life in this chair."

"So what's yer problem? You lazy ... or just too stuck up to get involved?"

"It suits my parents to embroider my case history – making out that I am their great disappointment, like one of those spoiled shut-ins who sleeps all day and plays computer games all night." He belched, then sighed, "Well there may be some truth to it I guess."

"So what is it that you want, hitting me with crazy Ratty messages? I assume it's you."

Tamim looked about and dropped his voice a little. "Well that's rather the point, isn't it? ... Let's say I need a helper and I guess that I may be stuck with you." He began to scribble down a note on the page in front of him and shielding it he turned it towards Clay. It read, "INTERCEPTED MISSION – U R SCAPEGOAT – IN DANGER – HELP ME?"

Clay laughed nervously as he read it out like a piece of literature in slow tones, "My mission? Like I'm just here for fixin' things - Like it's you that trashed the place ... and wants to grab the controls like some spoilt kid. It's not my mission."

Tamim winced visibly at Clay's response and started tugging at his ear gesticulating madly towards various points around the room. Evidently exasperated he spluttered, "I'm looking for a different kind of help, less voluble perhaps, a kind of ..." Tamim paused and wrote out the words 'VIRTUAL FRIEND' followed by an exclamation mark.

Clay again rose to the challenge and slowly read the words out loud, 'virtu-al fri-end' to Tamim's startled annoyance.

"Are you some kind of idiot? I expected that you could read but not necessarily out loud."

Clay suddenly realised that these hastily scribbled words were intended to leave gaps in a conversation that was being discreetly transmitted. He looked around uneasily to identify a bugging device. "Sorry, I geddit. Bit thick, I'll see if'in I kin fix your little problemos. So show the destructions again."

Tamim ripped out a sheet from his notebook angrily, folded it in half and handed it to Clay. "You've put your big foot in exactly the problem I wanted you to address. I may email you later with the specifics of repairs I want you to make. In the meantime it's bye-bye for now., buddy!"

Resenting this sudden dismissal Clay tried a more conciliatory tack. "Well like I'm sorry you're more of a prisoner than I was thinking. I brought you some games that I thought you might enjoy. You can play 'em on my own stand alone machine." Clay shyly placed the shrink wrapped package in front of Tamim.

"When I came up yesterday to fix the cameras, you were asleep. I admit, I tried to peek into your room, and discovered your boobied handle. Like it blew me halfways crost the room. No wonders I was feeling a bit prehensive."

Tamim snickered revealing gappy brown teeth, "Serves you right. I prefer to discourage tourists when I'm asleep."

"Here I thought I was sposed ter be doin' you a favour, and pow."

“Well let’s just say it was a little test.”

“Out there yer sposed to be a danger to yerself. They want me to stablsh contact, become a friend like.”

“It’s more the danger I present to them.” Tamim glanced down at his hands, “Well, not exactly a prisoner in handcuffs. Of course a lot of people are afraid that I will set to blabbing about life from behind the scenes – they’re terrified of what I know. You see I’m good at gathering information. Very good. But that is the great problem with our modern world. Everyone has a truckload of information about almost everything but no one knows what to do with it. The great challenge for those in authority is how to keep a lid on it and select just what they want to release.” He snickered, “I imagine I keep your little screwies down there riveted to everything that I fetch up on my screen.”

Clay was beginning to realise that what Tamim was now spouting was intended to provoke the invisible listeners. But he answered blandly, “It’s all sposed to be classified, to tell the truth I don’t think that anyone’s much interested. They’re all kind ova sub-normal.”

“Effective though I’ll have to say. People are determined to prevent me from doing anything with my riveting insights. Of course they pretend that they’re only keeping track of my state of my mind in order to pass on details to the psycho squad kept at my parents’ beck and call.”

Clay was beginning to lose the drift again, “The porno?”

Tamim yawned, “Well I’m not above most things. But I tend to have bigger fish to fry.”

“Stuff on your screens looked like pretty big fish to me.”

Tamim sighed impatiently and lifted his right arm ponderously as if intending to embark on another tack. "I don't suppose that you have the faintest idea of why you were drafted into the firewall team? I suppose that you think that this was a career advancement? It suddenly strikes me that you are kind of innocent. Have you no inkling of how you are being set up."

"Justin's my boss. It's not a set up, he's just very professional, covering all the bases!"

"But I'm can see why you're an expendable party, the little body that gets carted off in a box."

Clay now had no idea of what he was saying. "How do you know anything about me?"

"Let's say I am a consummate voyeur. I like to make connections – do my detective work and your so-called boss is one of those cases worth a second glance. He fancies himself as a crusader. It's the old scarlet pimpernel syndrome. Just as long as he doesn't ever have to step into the line of fire himself," he snickered. "But I imagine that quite soon it's your name that will be the big news item, another awkward 'whistleblower' trundled into the spotlight and then hastily dispatched. I hope that you've got lots of riveting little peccadillos to keep us amused while it unravels. And the joke is that being our on board prisoner, oh sorry, *guest!* you can disappear without trace. Hey Presto! They'll probably claim you jumped overboard."

"But I can't swim! I've gotta job, so it's not very likely I'm gonna believe your convoluted side of the story."

But Tamim rambled on in a cynical wheedling voice, "Of course your

timely exit will only be a flash in the pan. No one will take the time to figure you out. But you won't be very popular around here ... and my Abu is so good at eliminating negative influences. Of course you won't be very welcome back on shore either. But it'll be your boss you can thank for your allotted fifteen minutes of fame. Hero of the moment."

"But why would Justin set me up? He knows I hardly have any opinions. I am only doing the job he axed me to."

"Perhaps it might occur to a brighter spark that your Justin could have a different agenda? I'd say that your boss has a very high opinion of himself. He's out to save the world in his own peculiar way. But he is also adept at covering his tracks ... by borrowing other people's shoes."

"Like you're telling me that he is goin' to frame me up?"

"Or somfing!" Tamim made a cross-eyed loony face and stuck his thumb in his mouth. Doubts were suddenly surfacing in Clay's mind. It had seemed rather odd that he was so suddenly drafted for this service. He knew that he wasn't particularly qualified. He had no gift for any of the languages bubbling across his screens, or any language at all. He had accepted all the constraints as a part of the job, but Tamim's word 'prisoner' seemed to rankle unpleasantly. He had never thought of testing any boundaries after completing his orientation training.

Tamim, so circumspect only minutes before, suddenly became much more voluble as if addressing the whole room. "Not that Justin is an entirely evil person. It's natural he might want to live to fight another day. You, on the other hand are utterly expendable. Perhaps you've tread on his toes once too often."

"You mean like finding out about *Zebra*? I figured that there was some

reason he wasn't thrilled with that."

"Like I said - I get interested in all this stuff. Justin wants answers to a lot of questions that nobody wants to be caught asking. He's out to save the world. But he doesn't know what he is up against. He underestimates Daddy Abu for one."

"But what's so bad about your Pa? People are falling over themselves telling each other how great it is that an Emir has come to help out New Mid. Everyone's getting the message he's gonna be fixin' the economy. It's what everyone's gambling on, isn't it?"

"So you fancy a go at the gaming tables? Hey? Better than your usual shoot 'em up?" Tamim pointed disparagingly at Clay's gift on the table.

"Well I gotta be realistic, there's about zero chance of me getting in there."

"Yeah, you'd be wasting your time, 'cause Daddy Abu likes to pre-select the winners. I doubt that you're on his list."

Clay again noticed Tamim's disconcerting habit of talking to the room in an increasingly belligerent tone.

"I thought you wanted my help somehow, but seems I only gets insults."

"Well, I wanted your pest control services to clear out some of the bugs that have taken up residence here. But I see that I've misjudged the situation and I'll just have to reassess my plans. I won't be needing your services for the time being – but thanks for dropping by."

Tamim swivelled his chair away and fixed his attention defiantly on the nearest screen.

Clay stood for a few moments perplexed.

“Well?” Tamim enquired querulously, without turning his head. Clay drifted uncertainly over to the exit and closed the door quietly behind him. He started at the electronic Quadra-lock engaging with a sharp snap. Shortly after the door at the other end of the security lock slid open and he was ushered back to the communications suite by a humourless chaperone.

“Who is the real prisoner?” he wondered.

Exchanges

Zebr@ was making increasingly frequent incursions onto the Trencher site, commandeering the conversation and steering it onto topics far from the practical concerns of Mara's blog group.

But as soon as Zebr@ appeared he was soon followed by the appearance of the enigmatic A>Z>. The two would spend hours goading one another and scoring points that bore little relevance to any of the Trenchers immediate practical concerns.

Their dialogue often reached hysterical stand offs and Mara noticed how many others were tuning in to witness the pyrotechnics. Yet there seemed no way to effectively rein them in.

Tentatively she reopened her recent blog on 'Food for free', intended to suggest dietary supplements growing wild in the Stits.

Immediately zebr@ leapt out of the woodwork:



www.trencher.com/food4free

zebr@ > Promethean scientists are redesigning the species while you are focussed on harvesting vegetables. Where are your priorities?

mara > Well at least it's something that we can actually address.

A > Z > But you should be looking at a bigger picture! Zebra insists on seeing everything in black and white, but the story is much more complex than that. We can't turn our backs on what is happening. We must transform ourselves into a sustainable species.

zebr@ > But who directs the nature of these genetic enhancements? I don't for a moment delude myself in thinking that I will be consulted.

A > Z > We can't turn our backs on knowledge that will bring so many benefits. This science promises an end to disease and suffering, an end to deformity and all forms of affliction, an end to the unfair hand that Fortune metes out to so many.

zebr@ > LOL! Remember the fate of Prometheus? Having stolen fire from the gods he was condemned to everlasting torment with an eagle picking at his entrails. Look no further than de Vere for your eagle.

mara > But is humanity capable of regulating Promethean science? Are we perpetuating a myth that we can manipulate the ingredients of life to become stewards of the planet.

A > Z > Our planet is in ecological crisis! We have reached a threshold of desperation. At least Prometheus can envision some way forward!

zebr@ > For a self-appointed elite.

A > Z > Remember that the human species has indulged in genetic morphing since time began. Every animal is out to achieve a superior mate. What is so very different about adopting some new tools?

mara > But why must we pursue such radical solutions. Consider the achievements of Sister Agnes. She freed herself from the constraints of her mother house to serve others. The crutches that line the chapel crypt are a testimony to her success.

A > Z > In a future world there will be no further need for those crutches. Genetic engineering lays it in our powers to eradicate infirmity before it happens.

mara > Are we really in a position to redesign ourselves? We only faintly comprehend the interactive complexity of the ecology that supports us. These Prometheans are working in a cartoon world of 'big ideas' in thought bubbles.

zebr@ > It will be a free for all.

mara > Or a pitched battle between ideologies with very different ideas of the social order.

A > Z > But even now, with cash in hand, you can have your own genes grafted into Triple A genetic stock. You can have the offspring you desire, endowed with the intelligence, the unblemished looks, the physical prowess, the personal qualities that will set new benchmarks for the rest of the race. We are already spoilt for choice!

mara > With a start on life like that, what regard would such monsters hold for their unenhanced inferiors?

zebr@ > About as much as we hold for the other species that we are casually sending to oblivion in order to keep our own viable.

mara > When we started to imagine ourselves as custodians of a fragile planet and solving our problems holistically, without really having a clue or purpose beyond extending human survival, we went radically wrong.

zebr@ > At least you can say that the Trenchers remain grounded – digging their own graves! LOL

Proposal

Mara's heart missed a beat when an unexpected message from Clay dropped into her inbox. He so rarely deigned to communicate anything personal, resorting instead to group mailings with clever emoticons attached. Self-consciousness about his atrocious spelling was a convenient excuse for inaction. She pounced on the incoming message, keen to glean anything about his rarefied life aboard Shazzam. How she would welcome any suggestion of nostalgia for their morning chats in the bleak refectory. "Like, how pathetic is that?" she murmured.

But to her disappointment it was instantly apparent that this was just another of Justin's glib ploys. "Needter meat in the lour orchid at 16 hundered ours", could only have come from this lovelorn smarty-pants. She felt irritated by such annoying condescension. Clay usually managed his messages much more plausibly, even quite poetically, combining intuition and spell-check.

Purposely arriving late, breathless, in manure sullied gear, Mara discovered Justin already ensconced on a rustic bench that Huggie had improvised from entwined stumps. He had adopted a philosopher's pose with his head cradled in both hands, mournfully surveying the trampled ground at his feet.

He looked up at her arrival and assumed a brittle smile. "Sadly, I've got to admit that Clay is completely blowing it," he announced with weary satisfaction. "They won't tolerate him aboard much longer. I need your help!"

Shunning his invitation to sit alongside, Mara folded herself into the long grass opposite. "Does he even know what you're expecting from him?"

Avoiding the question, Justin mourned, “The Emir’s son, Tamim, has rejected him as confidant. To salvage something we’ve promoted the idea that Clay is part of a bigger support network ... that there are others available ... more intelligent ... and ...”

Justin paused a moment for dramatic effect. “... *you!* for instance!”

“Well dream on! That’s not going to happen.” Mara replied hotly. “What could I do for your puppy protégé? I’ve got my hands full trying to pull this dreary place together.”

With Mara thrown into defensive mode, Justin felt more comfortable; his pinched smile relaxed a little. “Well we all know that you are a dab hand in dealing with the upper strata! Besides, to my surprise, Tamim’s already picked up your Trenchers on his radar. You’ll probably even encounter him accessing your Trencher blog. Candidly, I think you’ll find him a kindred spirit. He too is a bit of an anarchist.”

Mara suspected that ‘candidly’ was a word that Justin should expunge from his vocabulary. “Well *candidly*, I’ve long lost any appetite for dealing with *your* problems. I’ve cast aside my golf clubs forever. My hands are more than full helping Huggie with the orchard restoration.”

She winced at the sound of his sanctimonious, fluting voice, all the more tiresome that it was delivered at subdued pitch that obliged her to lean forward to glean exactly what he was saying.

Justin, deep in his own agenda, paid no attention to Mara’s rejection. He forged on, “I’ve had to re-tailor your profile slightly, sexed up the dossier so to speak, to whet his appetite. He’s rising to the bait! Anything that flies in the face of his father’s interests clearly appeals to him. Truth be told, he’s a bit of a handful; the scourge of his desperate parents. But

he'll be a valuable conquest on our side. I'm convinced that you'll warm to him when you see the whole situation."

"On our side?" Mara marvelled at Justin's audacity in piloting his single-minded course amidst those so evidently repelled by his egotism. He remained impervious, cut off by an overwhelming sense of self-righteousness. Justin subtly applied a further inducement by alluding to a chance to drop in on Clay 'living the life of Riley'.

Admittedly, the more Justin explained the details, a mysterious recluse locked away in his parents' pleasure palace, the more intriguing it began to sound. According to Justin, Tamim's mother, the Sheikha, was determined to jolt him out of his isolation. The fact that he had suddenly expressed interest in a visit from anyone, let alone a woman, was a major milestone in her campaign. "She's probably already getting you hitched up!" he added smugly.

"More likely it's you who've got me stitched up! But I don't see how this fits into your big campaign, you know the one that is supposed to bring the whole rotten system to its knees. Remember that one?"

Justin pursed his lips smugly and soldiered on undeflected, "Admittedly, we'd hoped to set up Clay with a more proactive role ... as whistleblower ... I thought he would relish his cameo moment of celebrity. His revelations would expose a lot of skulduggery. He could still emerge as a pin up hero with a bit of your help. You'll see!"

"Are we talking about the same Clay?" Mara was incredulous. "And I presume that you will be operating your puppet from a position of safe anonymity behind the scenes?"

Justin blinked disingenuously at Mara's disparagement. "Declaring my

cards at this point would only derail the express; remember - we are after the big fish. And I can tell you there are some real monsters lurking in these depths.”

“But how come you always delegate the sacrifices to others?”

“I need to hold onto a larger vision,” he added rubbing his hand together with an air of self-congratulation; “I would like to think that you could trust me and remain on side.”

“On side! ... are we playing some kind of team sport? I don’t see you drawing action your way. What on earth is Clay expected to uncover?”

Heedless, Justin persevered, “The Emir’s son, Tamim, is an interesting kid. Perhaps he truly has the soul of a prince. I can understand why his parents need to protect him from a dangerous world. But he remains tragically isolated. I know; maintaining his firewall I follow every move. He’s into everything, politics, social causes, even porno ... the whole shebang.”

“You must find keeping up with *the whole shebang* quite exhausting! So I’m supposed to lend a sympathetic ear?” Mara rose to inspect a canker on one of the fruit trees as she spoke.

“You may feel sceptical, but I can assure you that my interventions are fully sanctioned under the *Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2018*; you can look it up in our ES-Tech Policy Statement and Guidance Notes.” Justin gestured casually towards the briefcase tucked under his bench.

“But how can you ask people to trust your judgement when they don’t know what you are hatching?”

Like a sage parent Justin shook his head smugly, “We’d give the game away if we revealed our sources. But I can promise you from the bottom of my heart that those on side have nothing to fear. Your valuable contribution will become clear in due course.”

“And Clay has failed to gain Tamim’s trust? Why am I not surprised?”

Justin licked his lips with relish, “Admittedly Tamim found him a bit of a dolt. We require a revised strategy to penetrate a shadowy world.”

“Well count me out of your revised strategy.”

“I’m only asking you to step back a moment for a clearer perspective,” he paused for emphasis and added slowly “and it’s going to be one that’s very aligned with Trenchers’ objectives. Let’s only say that I’ve taken you under my wing!”

“I feel that I’d only be stepping in to protect Clay from your clever backroom boffins.”

Justin gave her a furtive sideways glance as he pushed his glasses back up his nose. “You should relax for a moment and consider that perhaps we share the same altruistic objectives. But we must attract others to our cause ... just like you convinced me ... that you were the partner I needed the very first time we met ... even if it occurred under unfortunate circumstances.”

“Unfortunate circumstances! You burned down my home!”

“... it might seem a flawed plan but it was quite necessary. Taking an overview you should be grateful that we were in fact doing you a colossal favour. The area was ripe for clearance and you were all living on borrowed

time, waiting for the axe to fall. You yourself saw how the hoardings went up within days of your exit. Thanks to my intervention the Trenchers have achieved more political prominence than they would have by remaining hunkered down in a backwater growing wormy cabbages.”

“Well you certainly pushed us onto centre stage. But I can’t say that I’m grateful.”

Justin just smiled enigmatically. “Oh but you will be when you grasp the whole story!” Mara had the uneasy feeling that he was deluding himself that she was in his power. His motives made little sense to her. He seemed to be questing for some elusive will-o-the-wisp enemy. “You rail against some enemy as if he were a co-ordinated conspiracy, determined to work the system for its own benefit, dividing the opposition over clever non-issues, setting party against party, running amok in the ensuing chaos.”

Justin stroked his chin with that knowing scepticism that she found so irritating. “I think you have just described de Vere and his Trojans to a ‘T’. He is certainly leading the charge. His secretive investors are well-organised and have a very clear plan.’

“But they’re just a lot of random individuals acting out of self-interest in the absence of any greater social vision. This is not a conspiracy. It’s a vacuum. They’re only attempting to exploit the selfish lethargy of our whole society.”

Justin grandly swept out his hand to encompass the valley below. “You call the *VEE 3* a vacuum? I think it’s a very coherent picture, and it holds absolutely no benefit for most of the population of New Mid.”

“But there are other visions. RevEI wants to address the moral vacuum in his own way. Though he claims to have freed himself from organised

religion, he is still trying to find some spiritual dimension, something which will draw out human aspiration.”

“Spiritual! Like laughing out loud! You should have a gander at his lovely Angie’s wardrobe, if you want to see spiritual.”

Mara flared “Talk about a moral vacuum! So your snooper’s charter gives you access to her closets?”

Justin snickered, evidently recalling some squalid detail of Angie’s complex life. “Elron only wants to grab the moral high ground by railing against a society that is rebuilding itself around cyber-intelligence to supply the social justice that we have never managed to achieve.”

His fluttering fingers formed an ‘X’ before her eyes. “And don’t forget the Promethean scientists. They pretend to have a completely co-ordinated programme for occupying your moral vacuum! Deluded by their much-vaunted scientific method, supposedly dispassionate and rigorous, they, like Elron, are making their own hopeless leap of faith – into an abyss!”

“But that is not a co-ordinated vision either. They are just exploring the unknown at random, like miners following some seam in the dark, never sure when it will suddenly peter out. At least the Trenchers are founded on something that is known, our own humanity and its dependence on the interlinked ecology of the natural world.”

Mara was beginning to see how Justin’s conception of the world worked. He conceived the enemy as a co-ordinated force of evil, determined to derail at that was true and just. In some ways he seemed courageous in challenging evil from his lonely aerie. She admitted, “Just like you, they are all out on their own limb! But human beings are so limited in what we can perceive empirically. Some kind of leap is always necessary. Perhaps

that leap of faith is the essential story of humanity.”

“But what lies on the other side of the abyss? Can we even look back to where we came from? All the past blood spilt over religion suggests that having made the leap, there is zero tolerance for those left behind.”

Justin sniffed, affecting maddening superiority, “I agree that there is no soft landing on the other side for the Prometheans; they have simply hurled themselves into the abyss! As for your Trenchers, we’ll just see who ultimately invited to the table, and who is on the menu.” Grabbing her knee in what was intended to be an unguarded moment of sincerity he assumed a pleading puppy voice. “Mara, you’ve got to look at the full picture. It’s a crazy world; zealots like Elron, trying to commandeer a desperate multitude in his self-righteous crusade, de Vere and his cronies with their tourist attractions. Meanwhile Prometheus, in secretive purdah, is planning to redesign the human genome. How does that add up to any future you or your Trenchers would want to be a part of?”

Mara snorted sarcastically, “In fact, I’d say that they’re all pretty irrelevant. You too!” She pushed his cajoling hand from her knee in exasperation.

“And what about Clay? You still have a soft spot for him, don’t you?” Justin reluctantly played this trump card.

Mara paused and thought of Clay out on Shazzam, being manipulated by this self-righteous puppeteer. Against all her better judgement she grudgingly consented to meet Tamim, if only as an opportunity to see Clay aboard and help him keep Justin’s overweening ambitions in perspective. Justin clapped his hands delightedly, “I knew that you’d realise how important this will be to all of our futures.” He added with a smug twitch, “In fact I’ve already tentatively booked your water taxi for tomorrow, ten o’clock sharp! Of course, just in case.”

Lottery

Buffeted by choppy waters, de Vere was conveyed back to the shore terminal fuming over the arrogance of *'the potash potentate'*. He fancied each wave administering a slap to this despicable charlatan's florid face, and took delight in imagining a torrent of calumnies that he would soon 'release' to engulf this obstreperous opportunist. Chuckling he imagined ES-Tech's troll factory blitzing the social media with lurid tales of life aboard *Shazzam*. The trolls would soon reveal the corruption which underlay this so-called 'sovereign' wealth. Perhaps he could be parachuted into one of the fundamentalist Tainers and marched to his own spectacular Calvary. All that purported 'philanthropy' would soon drop out of his vocabulary when he witnessed the true nature of the community he was proposing to nurture. Or better still, he imagined him enduring one of Zwielicht's little 'genetic enhancements' and witnessing that sleek little self-satisfied body transformed into a grotesque ravening blimp. One thing was sure, the Emir's reputation would soon be dripping with filth once *INFILT* was enlisted to churn out a litany of aspersions. He rubbed his hands in glee!

He stormed back into his control suite where Justin had comfortably recomposed himself and was browsing the breaking news feeds. Suddenly Justin sat up excitedly and pointed to the screen before him. "Breaking news! the Emir's press office had just announced his programme to spearhead substantial philanthropic reinvestment in New Midland by funding a lottery extravaganza seeded generously from his own resources - a substantial prize in hard currency."

De Vere recoiled aghast. This guy certainly knew how to work the fast lane. Anticipating de Vere's machinations, the Emir had taken nimble evasive action.

“That little jerk doesn’t hang back a minute,” he fumed to Justin as he paced around the control suite. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the rat hadn’t already planned this before we met! Talk about establishing trust!”

In a pre-emptive effort at damage control, he commanded the full powers of Media-Net to suppress any news of the Emir’s project with a general blackout on all aligned media. Nevertheless there were so many social networks beyond his direct control which would need to be coerced to suppress the story. He would have to manufacture his own counter rumours to cast doubt on the veracity of the Emir’s motives.

Thirty million dirham! And all in hard currency! The citizens of New Mid were already so well attuned to lottery fantasies. Their desperate, circumscribed lives revolved around these regular rituals and the stakes, awarded in Goldies, were invariably mouth-watering. Twice a month names of the miraculously fortunate were released, those who had received an astonishing stroke of luck that would transform their lives forever. Such was the public fervour that winners emerging from the Tainers inevitably had to be rescued from the jealousies of their neighbours and taken into protective custody where they were granted identity reassignment and spirited off to enjoy lives of luxurious indolence in undisclosed exotic destinations. There they were imagined hobnobbing with the rich and famous. At least they were never heard from again.

It should be no surprise then that the vacuum left by the sudden disappearance of a winner fuelled further insatiable public appetite and ensured that every spare Goldie mustered would be placed in the next draw.

Thirty million dirham! The prize would be further topped up by ticket sales. Few locals were certain of the value of a dirham, but everyone appreciated that this was a hard currency recognised on international

money markets. The news soon bubbled around the city, leaving de Vere fuming in frustration. Even Clay broke his protracted silence by sending Mara an urgent note asking her to buy as many tickets as possible with 100 Goldies. He would certainly pay her back when next ashore. He crowed about having a 'rink side seat on the axe shun'. Mara felt the poignancy of his ebullience about 'pickkin only 6 little numbars!' She scanned his lists of promising combinations, carefully set out in order of likelihood. Generously he had recommended a sequence for her own consideration. She began to respond, "As usual you hope you problems will be solved by a bolt from the blue. But isn't this all just another distraction from our real problems." But then picturing Clay's dismay at such shrewish practicality, she relented and messaged back that she would pick up as many as she could manage.

The prospects of such a win galvanised Clay into becoming a much better correspondent. In subsequent communications he upped his spend to 200 G.D.'s and waxed euphoric about anything to do with the Emir's charmed life. "Not everyone hasta get excited about real problems. Who's gonna getin toxicrated about a new trunk drain or a load of abused women. I like the gambling concept anyways, those fancy dressed dudes looking over each other's shoulders. Especially if it all just pays for itself - it's totally win-win ... and gonnabe the world's biggest!"

The lottery announcement also came as a severe blow to the planners of the *Pally Rally*. Elron could appreciate that the very people protesting the casino en masse would also be the same ones queuing for their lottery tickets with every spare coin they could muster. He would be treading on thin ice in heaping too much invective on the gambling scene. Hope-filled dreams were too deeply embedded in hearts of his flock. Even Angèle seemed starry eyed about her prospects and her moods were appreciably lighter as she engaged in endless rounds of social consciousness-raising.



trencher.com/lottoluck

- zebr@ > So now we're all out to place our bets. But only one winner ...
- mara > But at least we all share the dream that some unpredictable force, luck, will arrive from nowhere and solve our muddled problems?
- zebr@ > Yeah! like an asteroid! That should do it.
- A > Z > When we are ignorant of the underlying order, we tend to call it luck. But a scientist has to believe that no outcome is ever random. Everything is connected. Ultimately there are explanations behind every phenomenon – even luck.
- Argot > Even evolution can be seen as a kind of lottery, the luck of the draw.
- A > Z > There is no possibility of a random event. Our universe is finite, an amazing fact. We call it infinity beyond the human ken
- Argot > Within a finite system it's possible to be omniscient, to know the outcome of everything, including a lottery. Some might call that ordering principle 'the will of god'.
- zebr@ > But isn't that exactly what we are doing with Prometheus, allowing them to pick their own winning numbers?

Parallel Elron –Turning Point

The following excerpts from de-classified handwritten records of Elron McBride, self-styled 'Rev El' of the People's Palisade, have been seized under the Public Security and Anti-Terrorism Act, redacted by ES-agent Zebr@ and placed in the public domain as being germane to cases currently pending the New Midland Security Review Board.

... how do we not recognise that we are at a turning point in human history? The religious certainties of the past are no longer accessible. Beliefs that we once forced upon each other have evaporated before the scientific mind. We perceive that they were no more than a mirage.

...that scientific mind has replaced our desperately held belief in a special relationship with a benign, ever-watchful god. Now, instead, we confront a terrifying, morally vacant universe. Is it any wonder that so many of us now bolt the doors of our Tainers and hunker down to trivial diversions?

...we have discovered to our horror that conscious human intelligence is not at all god-given. In fact it may no longer be particularly useful in ensuring the survival of our species. Our intelligence has enabled us to occupy such a precarious niche.

... Our self-consciousness is no gift, and there is no divine invitation to husband the natural world. It seems to be just another survival strategy by which we become pale mimics of an incomprehensible formative power. It is this delusion that will prove our undoing. But like the fire of Prometheus we seem unable to renounce it.

... the Palisade has been planted in a wilderness of doubt, on grounds that had been vacated in the retreat of past religious beliefs. Human intelligence has been shaped by very parochial concerns, but now we see that our survival must depend upon framing a wider vision. We must find new tenets of a morality that embrace all sentient creatures in a

new kind of spiritual ecology.

... the scientific mind has abolished the fundamental concept of Evil. We once explained adversity as divine punishment, or as the result of diabolical mischief makers that had lead us astray. Such battles with Evil now seem a quaint conceit, the tales that we devised to reconcile ourselves with forces beyond our control.

...over millennia of telling our stories, of recorded history, we have developed a habit of anthropocentric thought, a perspective that has promoted our voracious materialism and blind certainty that the earth is ours to make over 'in our own image' and husbanded for our own ends. I am sure that the cave man hunting his mastodon did not think this way, with such hubris.

... But our selfish materialism proves to be a debilitating hysteria, blocking access to a more unfettered scope of intelligence.

... we have created a mathematical concept of 'infinity' to grapple with ideas so large or small that they cannot be comprehended by the human mind. But the universe had a point of beginning and maintains an accelerating expansion rate over a measurable time. So ultimately it remains quantifiable on some level. The delusion of infinity therefore rests in human mind. While it remains beyond anything that we can hope to comprehend, all of this is nonetheless finite; it too is like a Palisade, enclosed and defiant.

...we are not mounted on the shoulders of gods but merely peeping over those of feckless scientists! I feel that I am merely a part of this mêlée, the one who taps someone ahead of me on the shoulder to ask what is happening.

Aboard Shazzam

Mara was beginning to realise that underneath Justin's veneer of winsome diffidence lurked a strong and jealously hidden agenda. He was following his own star but she could not imagine where it would lead. Arson could certainly be laid at his doorstep, but then the invitation to the Planning Review Group meeting, the Trojan's offer, Malyn's interview and even Clay's sudden reappearance, all seemed to have developed mysteriously from his first fateful intervention. Yet his objectives remained utterly inscrutable aside from his occasional hints about an altruistic agenda which he expected her to share in 'bringing down the house of cards'.

He also appeared to be taking extreme risks in playing a double sided game. His agenda clearly lay outside of de Vere's careful manoeuvrings or even the interests of ES-Tech. But he seemed to thrive in a solitary subversive limbo, an isolation that suited his undeclared purposes. He demonstrated such unassailable self-certainty.

Early the next morning she was startled by an officious rap on the refectory door and a different, rather self-important and spectacularly uniformed flunkey presented her with a formal invitation in a gilded envelope. To her astonishment the 'Royal Household' was extending a warm invitation to visit the Sheikha aboard *Shazzam* on the following morning for 'an informal chat over morning coffee'. The handwritten note was signed in a distinguished flowing hand. Apparently 'royalty' guarded its privacy by avoiding normal electronic communication. In a childish scrawl, the Sheikha expressed her fond desire that Mara have an opportunity to meet her son. "I fancy that dear Tamim is truly a Trencher at heart" was her enigmatic postscript.

Mara felt ambivalent about another bolt from the blue, which seemed more of a command than an invitation. She felt almost certain that this was yet another of Justin's orchestrations.

To her astonishment the invitation provided an effortless passport through all security cordons as she made her way to the appointment. Enjoying expedited clearance traversing the Cadena, she soon found herself boarding a 'state launch' at Grand Epitome Pier. She was rapidly conveyed across the choppy expanse to *Shazzam* anchored in solitary splendour. The only minor annoyance was in forfeiting her phone-cam to security as she boarded. Even a Luddite like her felt misgivings about losing all means of contact with the outside world.

In all honesty she had to admit to herself that she was looking forward to encountering Clay. Three days had elapsed since her lottery purchases and he had resumed his incommunicado state. Had he been told of her visit? When she enquired about him of the security guards, she received condescending assurances that he would be notified 'in due course'.

But 'in due course' became a constant refrain throughout the ensuing day. She was first shown to a pleasant private stateroom 'to freshen up' and equipped with an on-board pager. The Sheikha had been delayed by one of her guests and was obliged to reschedule their meeting until after lunch. Mara was shown into a luxurious spa to relax in the meantime.

Hours ticked by and no summons arrived. Timetables aboard *Shazzam* seemed to unfold with dreamtime logic. The ship's steward, Walter, witnessing her evident boredom led her to a gaming room, a plush, windowless gallery lined with slot machines. There were two other women dripping with maquillage, languorously pulling levers and evidently bored to distraction. They assessed her critically when she entered, but ignored her greeting. Walter doled out some tokens for an experiment as

the others watched resentfully. Mara felt obliged to play these until they were consumed. Then she threw herself into a chair and wallowed in the vast array of diversions available over the onboard network.

It was late in the afternoon when a flunkey tapped on the door and beckoned with an imperious growl. Conversation seemed pointless. She got up resentfully and followed him in silence along a torturous back route. He rapped lightly on a door, opened it upon a faintly audible instruction within and stood aside signalling Mara to enter. She found herself in a cosy overly-pink salon with a spectacular window wall addressing the city skyline. In the foreground, with her back turned to the view, a woman reclined on a chair surrounded by scattered fashion magazines.

Mara stood staring at her for some moments. Nothing was said. Feeling that she should make the initial sally she coughed and enquired tentatively, "I gathered that your son is interested in the Trenchers?"

The response was sharp and had a flat mid-western twang. "Yeah, he expressed interest in your work. Seems keen meet you. We're all somewhat surprised; it came out of the blue." She turned a pinched deeply tanned face towards Mara, "I must say that you are hardly what I had imagined ... or might have hoped. Is that some kind of work uniform you have on?"

The Sheikha was elegantly gowned, with sharp facial features, cosmetically dramatised and set under a regal golden canopy, notionally a hijab, which flowing dramatically from an improbably high mound of blue black hair. Voluminous traditional garments spread out around her as if a golden silk parachute had settled loosely from above.

Following her curt welcome, the Sheikha turned towards Mara launched herself into a well-practiced dramatic performance. Warming to the role

of distraught parent, she wrung her hands in dismay over the plight of her son. "I'll confide in you, his behaviour is like so self-defeating, such a tragic waste of his potential. We've given him every advantage, but he just retreats into his revolting nest all day long. I'm the only one he will consent to see. We have a cute little ritual where I phone through five minutes before my visit to alert him. At least he still craves his mother's love. He refuses point blank to talk to his father ... and otherwise he just plays his games all day long. Sometimes I think it's intended as provocation that he is trying to get back at his father."

Evidently transported on a torrent of self pity she paused to collect a tissue. "... and he probably dips into a lot worse, I guess that's only natural with a young man's chromosomes, but as his mother I feel that I must cling loyally to the image of him as he once was. I prefer not to know the rest. An unhealthy interest in porno would at least be comprehensible, and we could bring in the right counsellors to address such an addiction." She looked over Mara's nautical anorak with a critical eye. "But I can hardly say that you're dressed to ... encourage a young man." Mara tried to imagine what she imagined as 'encouraging'. As the woman spoke her well-orchestrated doll-like features contorted into successive displays of hurt, apprehension, punctuated by angry flashes of frustration.

"But maybe he doesn't think it an affliction. Perhaps this solitude is a part of his identity?" Mara suggested tentatively.

"Don't be absurd!" the Sheikha snapped. "His world is a complete delusion. He is paranoid, makes his own food; won't accept anything prepared by the world's master chefs. He is convinced that we are trying to make him swallow a concealed transmitter. It's absolutely amazing that he has requested your visit; I was living in hope of that you might be the breakthrough we have all been longing for."

Mara wondered how Tamim had discovered anything about her and the Trenchers movement. “But does he never emerge from his room?”

“Never! We provide for every request; food, clothes, computer stuff. But we’re usually obliged to leave deliveries in his security lock for pick up.”

“But why do you let him get away with it? Why not just forego the deliveries and flush him out?”

The Sheikha sniffed condescendingly. “Parents don’t think that way about their loved ones. I suppose you wouldn’t know. But I guarantee that you will come to no harm in this visit. Tamim wouldn’t hurt a fly. We will arrange that you are fitted out so that everything you say is properly monitored. You’ll be equipped with a panic button. There will be security forces on standby to extract you if you feel any threat at all.”

She paused and her tiny eyes drilled into Mara, assessing how much personal control she could exercise. “I’d like you to take him a small present, one of his little childhood toys, just a memento of happier times.” Mara recalled some of Clay’s remarks about Tamim’s paranoia about surveillance. “Am I being set up to spy on him? Perhaps he has asked for me hoping that I will resist your plans?”

The Sheikha’s eyes again welled with tears. “You wouldn’t comprehend the desperation of a mother! We want to help him in any way we can, to restore him to the happy, little boy that I remember. We’ve got top-notch psychological expertise on 24/7 stand-by and have stinted nothing to resolve his problems. But there is nothing to go on, nothing to construct a diagnosis upon, except random acts of anger and destruction.”

A jarring pulse was heard and the Sheikha plunged her hand into in the deep folds of her tangle of gilded silk brocade. Retrieving her phone

she peered into its little pink screen with glinting, ferret-like eyes. How quickly the appearance of calm elegance could reveal sharper edges when caught off guard.

“Tamim is prepared for your visit ... and my little offering, just a fond foible, is ready for you to take along. Let’s hope it helps you break the ice.” The Sheikha crooked a regal pinkie pointing to the door of the stateroom in a languid gesture of dismissal. “They’ll be waiting for you outside.”

* * *

As she emerged and closed the door behind her, Mara was confronted by two heavysset security officers liveried in glossy purple padded silk vests. One was carrying a stylish leather handbag, which he held away from his body, as if disavowing the contents. He opened it quickly to display a small toy, an astronaut doll, in original plastic wrappings and then snapped it shut officiously. Mara could hardly imagine this to be the prized childhood relic that the Sheikha had mentioned. The guard handed over the bag without a word, and walked off abruptly, evidently expecting her to follow. She had already come to resent this pervasive code of silence observed by everyone aboard.

Her escort ushered her into a small antechamber and withdrew without a word. She could hear the security lock snap into position. The lobby had a single chair with a video tablet listing scores of publications on a little table alongside. She tested the steel faced door at the other end of the room and found it locked. A sudden wave of panic overwhelmed her; she had so foolishly surrendered her lifeline to the outside world and placed herself in a helpless position. If she were to be held prisoner, no one would ever imagine where to look.

She sat down apprehensively and began to plough through a depressing

article exploring the mindset of a psychopath who had successfully destroyed tourism in Western Europe. She became aware of faint music in the distance, a continually repeated motif that seemed almost calculated to drive her to madness. There was the same faint odour of perfume that she had detected in her audience with the Sheikha.

Still labouring over the first paragraph some quarter hour later, she heard a scraping as the door security locks were disengaged. The opening filled with the outline of a tiny, rotund, ogre of a young man. His girth seemed much too large to squeeze through. He beckoned and announced himself as 'It's just Tamim'.

Tamim's following words were rather perplexing. "No doubt you've brought some new little offering from Uma." Mara dutifully opened her bag to display the plastic figurine. Tamim held it up to the light and guffawed. "Is that where they think I'm at?" He wrenched the bag from her grasp, waddled over to the entry door and tossed it negligently into the lobby slamming the door after him. "She'll never learn!"

He pointed to a chair that seemed to have been just cleared of the debris scattered on the floor around it. Mara sat down awkwardly and pulled it in line with the couch on which Tamim ensconced himself. "You see I'm trying to cut back on my daily dietary intake of surveillance, hope you don't mind."

Mara nodded, "Everyone aboard seems rather uncommunicative. The servants with their silent hand signals certainly smack of paranoia."

"They're specially chosen for their lack of communication skills; most of them conveniently mute." Tamim smiled revealing a row of gappy, brown teeth. "But who am I to talk? Long ago I realised the importance of finding my own mute space, where I'm not required to measure up to

everyone else's expectations."

Mara glanced around at the squalor of a room heaped with discarded debris. "It looks a bit lonely."

"I have no desire to play some meaningful social role prescribed by my parents," he added snippily.

"Perhaps it's only natural, if you've grown up in the public eye."

"Well, the privacy that I enjoyed as a child is no longer possible for most people."

"Perhaps I remember my own childhood solitude with starry-eyed nostalgia." Mara valiantly essayed a positive, speculative tone.

"Well my parents enjoyed theirs in a palm thatched hut beside a featureless sea. They grew up perched on the knife edge between the abundance of the sea and the emptiness of desert dunes, haunted by djinns that could quickly drive the solitary to madness. In those days privacy had no value whatsoever. None would be foolhardy enough to venture into the Empty Quarter in search of solitude."

Mara looked around at the heaped, discarded electronic devices. The space looked like a jumbled recycling depot.

"Admittedly I'm not much of a housekeeper," Tamim's self-deprecating, lop-sided grimace revealed revolting brown-stained teeth.

"But is this why you wanted me to visit? To witness your squalor? Your mother is certainly worried about you; she hoped that I might play some kind of intermediary. She said that you are interested in the Trenchers,

though I'm surprised that you have even heard of us."

"I should start by asserting that I had no intention of falling into another of Justin's little snares by inviting you here. In fact I quite warm to Clay, he's simple-minded, hardly fit for purpose – or my purposes"

"at least Clay is trying to do his job," Mara added defensively, "and he is a better housekeeper, if only marginally." She had been surprised at Tamim's immediate reference to Justin's interventions. Clearly he was in the thick of it here as well.

"Clay has just placed himself in the wrong hands. Perhaps that is why he needs you."

Mara, blushing, responded over-hastily, "You seem to know a lot about me for a recluse."

"Actually, I have access here to everything that I need ... except my own voice ... thanks to busy bee Justin and his team entrusted with the task of making sure that my voice is never heard, and my kitty claws remain permanently gloved."

"And what would raising your voice or baring those *kitty claws* actually achieve?"

But Tamim deflected the question. "Justin fancies himself in a starring cameo role, someone who forces us to confront further evidence of our squalid human nature." Tamim chortled and exhaled a foetid breath. "But I see myself as a cat, a patient watcher; transfixing my prey, tail a-twitch. They delude themselves thinking that I am content to sit here impotently forever, and then ... *Shazzam!*"

“Am I the prey presently in your sights?” Mara mocked. She felt increasingly confident that she could handle this pompous pussycat.

Tamim sighed, “The crazy thing about my self-imposed exile is how much time can pass without seeing another human being. Still I remain resilient because I remain curious. But I confess to an almost insatiable desire to invade others’ privacy, a compulsion to witness their darkest secrets ... if only to prove that others are just as repulsive as I am.”

Mara sighed, “It seems that cultivating your paranoia is really an excuse for collecting more data.”

“From earliest childhood I remember lying awake at night imagining the lurid details of the lives I would infiltrate with my invisibility cloak.” Tamim had an unpleasantly relaxed habit of stroking his stomach as he spoke. “Invisibility is probably the most cherished dream of both the paranoid ruler and the dispossessed servant.”

Mara looked around at the piled debris, beginning to notice the rank smells of half eaten food, abandoned cups and opened tins. “But there seems to be quite a down-side to your version of privileged invisibility.”

“Nowadays most of us are mired in useless knowledge, accumulated debris of all our trivial pursuits. We feel crushed under a massive burden of information but powerless to do anything with it.”

“And does living like this” Mara waved at a stack of discarded keyboards, “give you any better vantage point on the world?”

“I suppose the Sheikha pulled out all the stops in her maternal soap opera cameo, all so well rehearsed. Did she rail on about her darling little Tamsy, refusing to step up to his responsibilities ... number one of course

being paying any attention at all to her?”

“She seems genuinely worried about you.”

“And well she might be, I am in the trenches fighting an army of those hell-bent on thwarting my independence.”

“But how can you delude yourself about being detached from everything? You rely on so many people to maintain this privileged self-exile.”

“Most people can’t bear solitude. So they invent gods to witness and validate everything they do. That’s the point of most religions, keeping you on track and in fear of that final judgement day. Gods are never big on personal privacy. But then of course nor is Daddy-Abu. I guess he thinks of himself as a god too. Omniscience for him is just the cost of doing business ... prudent to know what your competitors are really thinking when you need to outsmart them.”

“But you seem to think that Justin Brattoné is playing some different game?”

Tamim stifled a chortle. “Oh but I know exactly how Justin ticks. He will always leap to his own self-righteous conclusions. He imagines himself capable of manipulating the manipulators, but I reckon that he will end up being the biggest muppet of them all.”

Mara felt inclined to agree with Tamim’s assessment of Justin’s sanctimonious self-regard. “He does come across as holier than thou, I guess, but perhaps he truly does believe in some of the right things.”

“Like in himself as number one.” Tamim rolled his yellowed eyes up to the ceiling and clasped his hands in a mock prayer.

“At least he doesn’t fester in some squalid, self-imposed lock-up.”

Tamim’s lips parted in a condescending algal leer. “Meanwhile, I suppose, your Trenchers are out there crusading for truth and beauty. I have been wondering whether any of you has done any homework to discover the real purposes of the Trojan horse? Has anyone considered why they might be altruistically funding your pathetic band? At least Justin has begun to figure it out; I’ll give him credit for that. But it should be painfully obvious when you think about it.”

Mara looked rather deflated, realising that she had no idea of what he was alluding to. There seemed to be so many vying forces with obscure agendas poised to trample the Trenchers interests.

“But I can tell you that Daddy-Abu is far too prudent not to have his fingers on every pulse, including that Trojan horse. Evidently it has not dawned on busy little ‘Jay-Bee’ who he has pitched himself against. At least he knows he won’t have the chutzpah to stand up to it himself ... that’s why he has enlisted your gormless little Clancy to take the rap, as some kind of glorious whistle-blower.”

The word alarmed Mara as she recalled Justin earlier revealing his plans for Clay. “But Clay is just an employee with a brief; ultimately ES-Tech will protect him.”

“Your little Clay is perfectly named; malleable to a fault, shapeless at the best of times, he can be kneaded into anything that anybody wants and then consigned to the fire ... or firing squad.” Tamim chortled at his own dark humour.

Again Mara rose to Clay’s defence. “At least he lives by his own codes, perhaps incomprehensible to some ...” Mara looked at Tamim with

contempt. She felt curiously pleased to be defending Clay but ambivalent about revealing any unguarded personal sentiments to this stranger.

“Well, at least he is not paralysed by the same high self-regard as the master puppeteer. But regrettably Justin doesn’t really see the whole picture. That is why I chose you.”

“Your mother seems to think that you were intending a romantic tryst!” Mara stared with a sarcastic smile, “And you can see the whole picture? How is that?”

“When Daddy-Abu gets what he wants, I imagine that it will be lights out for the entire *dramatis personae* – and your little Clay will probably disappear so completely that his whole life-story will become a rather distant memory ... a perfect example of old Abu in action.”

Mara was trying to get some perspective on his meanderings. There was no reason to trust anything that this slovenly, twilight figure was spouting. Every word suggested conspiracy fantasy hatched by a lonely, overheated mind. But why did she feel drawn into his confidence? What was Tamim expecting of her?

“So why according to you is Trojan House supporting the Trenchers? We never asked for their support.”

“Have you considered the bigger picture, that a controversy over the ValleyView casino might be just a useful smokescreen?”

Mara was struggling to consider what this bigger picture could be. To her the Casino proposals represented dire exploitation of human weakness, everything that New Midland should reject. “What else could they be playing for? The ValleyView stakes certainly seem high enough.”

“Of course it will go through in the end, one way or another. The casino is intended to serve a very useful function, one that Daddy-Abu would heartily approve. ValleyView as a convenient laundry for a great deal of dosh ... and God knows there is plenty around here that needs fumigation. And it will be a very attractive lure, bringing hard cash to a city that is pathetically reliant on dead-end virtual currencies.”

“But what is the point of money laundering here in New Mid, where is it supposed to go after it’s cleaned?”

“Well you may need to take time to connect those dots! That’s why I am such an unwelcome guest at Daddy-Abu’s parties. I’m an ace dot-connector. Don’t you see? What is really in everyone’s sights is the only real success story New Midland has to offer, the scientific research that is putting you back on the map?”

Mara’s mind flashed back to her walk along the Esplanade on the night after Shazzam fireworks and the extravagantly lit up shoreline of the new Bio-technology research enclave.

“Prometheus?”

Tamim rolled his eyes upwards smugly and stuck out his tongue. “It’s an industry to which many international investors have great difficulties allocating funds, even though they believe that it is the only interesting long-term game around. Some, you see, still have to pay lip-service to quaint moralities or home-grown religious fundamentalism. Of course they don’t encounter the same censure when dropping huge sums in a casino. That is much more forgivable; more like human weakness than blatant evil-doing. Crazy isn’t it?”

“Prometheus?” Mara repeated stunned. She conjured up the loneliness

of the dysfunctional couple on her walk, plugged into their isolated soundscapes. “But Prometheus hasn’t weighed into the ValleyView debate at all. It almost seems to exist in a different dimension, some other time warp. Surely those scientists are rather lukewarm to gambling as a pointless squandering of human energy?”

“Prometheans are above all that. They prefer to occupy a hazy moral high ground to give us confidence that they can be trusted in piloting their science ... safe professional hands reaching out to secure improved quality of life for humanity, you know the sort of thing.”

“But you think that they have some contrary agenda?” Mara began to sniff further fantastical conspiracy being spun by Tamim.

“Of course! Their science sits at the threshold of a radical redefinition of what it is to be human. In fact it is a science that will ultimately leave the vast majority of humanity grovelling in the dust. Redundant.”

“But Zwielicht seems such an innocuous little man; why would he do that to himself? It’s not as if he’s going to evolve before our eyes!”

“He pays lip-service to sharing the benefits of his science. But his world remains a realm of the privileged. It is they that are funding his research. This is a transformative science but it certainly contains no philanthropic intentions. This science is laying the foundation of a new morality, and we will soon jettison all our fading religious, atavistic beliefs to usher in a new chapter in our history, the post-human world.”

“But why come here to invest? Why not some backwater country where they can buy off corrupt politicians? ... or for that matter why not in a desert complex in *your* homeland where the Emir can assume full control?”

“Happily, we have strict moral standards at home. There’ll be no need for a *Pally Rally* there,” he snickered. “But they are not looking for a Wild West either; these investors are looking for the legitimacy bestowed by a society with at least a vestigial reputation for probity and some remnants of consensual politics. Daddy-Abu’s financial reach can command any global location, but he knows that he must also be seen to be performing to his own legendary, high ethical standards. New Midland is quite convenient; a well ordered society, with strong security structures in place to control the message, and scrupulous business practices.”

“But I can’t see how scrupulous business practices result in a casino?”

“Investors will come flocking from all parts of the world laden with their hard currency ... none of your pathetic local virtual currencies. Research that can’t attract controversial government funding will enjoy a huge inflow of investment from alternative, undisclosed sources. That is the kind of money that will draw in the brightest and the best scientists. And hey presto! the vibrant new economy that everyone is dreaming of!” “So you see that ValleyView and Prometheus are really a marriage ... made in heaven!”

Tamim sighed and stared at her with black encircled eyes devoid of passionate spark. “Even your Trenchers must have realised by now that you are mere pawns in a bigger game.”

Mara bridled at the sudden tone of condescension, “Even I can’t imagine that your father will ever be able to control what I think.” But she knew that Tamim was right. There had been so many issues that she had let slip under the carpet and pretended to be unimportant, issues she had been afraid to confront. She was prepared to immerse herself in the practicalities faced by a small community of outcasts. But she was too often able to avoid addressing the real agendas.

And could the Trenchers themselves be dismissed as similar opportunists, exploiting their little temporary perch? What was their fuller vision? Other interests were positioned to make much more radical decisions about the future direction of society, people like those scientists working away within their secretive, gated community.

And what of Justin? Suddenly she began to glimpse the outlines of a more complex agenda: it appeared to be the agenda of someone who was determined to stand up and counter this slide.

Tamim sighed again and threw his hands wide as if about to embrace a like-minded spirit, “Are you just prepared to drift until the inevitable presents itself? ... sitting back waiting to be dealt your hands, playing by rules that no one dares question ... what can the Trenchers offer aside from some nicely pruned fruit trees that might eventually grace the chill out zone of a new gambling Mecca?”

Mara mumbled sadly, “I remember a moment not long ago when we thought that we were standing at the threshold of a new world, one that would give humanity the communication tools to take command of our own education through a burgeoning web. We expected a renaissance of the human spirit to be delivered by the tools themselves. But instead we have suffocated under an ever increasing burden of data. We have watched private integrity being opened up and parcelled out to commercial interests, all the while becoming ever more obsessed with security.”

Tamim nodded, “The human species has an appalling track record; quite evidently the most destructive species on the planet. We agonise about uncontrollable environmental degradation without actually acknowledging that we have been the prime instruments of cataclysmic environmental change ever since we fashioned our first spear. Denuding

landscapes, hunting species to extinction, our intelligence has made us seem invincible. But we have never conquered ourselves. We have established an *Anthropocene Era* that is malignant to all other natural systems. But I think that Nature is sneaking up upon us with some nasty surprises.”

Mara stood up, “But perhaps that is the positive side of Prometheus, setting out to help us do just that – to conquer ourselves – or at least to redefine ourselves.”

Tamim shook his head in disgust at such naive optimism. “Prometheus remains entirely under the control of an exploitative market which dictates all its objectives. They remain a ‘private industry’ because no regulating body dares be seen controlling them. Most world leaders are much too terrified to endorse any programme of eugenics ... they remain at the mercy of conservative populations, paralysed and unable to address population growth and impoverishment. Instead they engage in damage control, without any forward vision.”

“But it all seems a very uncertain gamble.”

“Abu never gambles; he always calculates outcomes. Gambling is merely a means of redesignating owners. For him it’s just one of the costs of doing business. Of course he’ll get it all back one way or another. Abu knows how to cast his die.”

“He can’t control the final outcome though.”

“Oh, ... so you think? Abu’s first objective is to demonstrate that we are all natural gamblers. Everyone of us craves an outrageous stroke of luck; we readily delude ourselves that we are entitled to it. Perhaps that is the greatest human weakness, that wishful thinking that in a flash of good

fortune, all will suddenly turn out in our favour. We are all much too susceptible to that dream of winning.”

“Half the people in New Mid have already bought lottery tickets for this moment, all the same hopefuls that trekked down to see the *Shazzam* fireworks. There isn’t a person in this city that hasn’t stopped for a moment and thought what he might do with 30 million dirhams. Even the street vendors are calling the tickets ‘*Shazzams*’; punters are slapping down their money and demanding a ‘*Shazzam*’.

Tamim rubbed his hands dismissively “Daddy-Abu has great enthusiasm for gulls like that.”

“But most of us have no alternative dreams. Most have already shed everything except our debts.”

Tamim suddenly winked at her and smiled with an unpleasant familiarity. “Well perhaps together we can find a way of decreasing the odds and ‘re-designate’ some happy lottery winners ...”

“Even I know that the probability is millions to one against any such prediction. You’d have to buy a lot of tickets.”

Tamim’s lips compressed smugly in his puffy round face. He swivelled his body to address his screen. “Well I know from experience that I can trust old Abu to predict the winning sequence accurately.”

“So all those kooks and desperate widows who usually end up as the lottery winners are part of his predicted outcome?”

“It’s hardly rocket science, you know. That little widow in the boondocks will have her time honoured horizons wrenched away, and she will

probably be dead within a year anyway. A friend of Abu's will probably take out insurance on her, or sell her some," he added flippantly.

Mara looked at Tamim sceptically. Conspiracy had clearly gone to his head.

"I should tell you that Abu never gambles with his own money – only other people's. It will all end up in his pockets anyway. Undoubtedly he sees this Lottery is an investment. He always balances the final account in his favour." He turned to face Mara; his grey eyes stared at her without blinking.

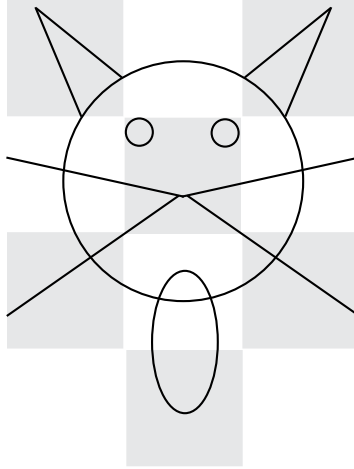
"Well it sounds like he's got everyone, including you, stitched up."

Tamim shrugged. He could see that Mara was becoming restive. He picked up a bottle and applied it to his lips looking away pensively, blowing a hollow note across the brim.

"Before you go I'd like to show you one of my little sketches. I confess that I'm not much of an artist but perhaps you didn't know I've always been a cat lover. Tell me what you think!"

From a pile of debris, Tamim picked up a sketch book and opened it on a page gridded as for tic-tack-toe. Across the nine squares had been drawn the basic cartoon outline of a cat's head. A tenth square at the bottom contained the 'U' of the cat's tongue stuck out in derision. It was a painfully simple diagram without any artistic merit.

"It sort of like doing drawing by numbers, It's quite easy to do", Tamim added cheerfully.



Mara, hoping for some mitigating revelation as an outcome of her visit, was evidently disappointed. “I don’t know what to say. It seems fairly basic.”

“I’m not expecting you to be a Bernard Berenson. Better if you don’t say anything at all; just ponder on that ole Cheshire Cat in Alice. Try doing one yourself when you get home; you’ll soon get the hang of it and see how fun it is to be an artist! “To remind yourself how to start, just think of this. He held up the dial pad on his phone and silently indicated the nine number digits and at the 0 below where the cat’s tongue extended he stuck out his own tongue. Mara realised that she had been given a simple code for ten digits without a word being exchanged.

She suddenly felt very pleased with herself for catching his drift so adroitly.

Tamim slumped back and began to shift in his chair as if awkwardly trying to think of something else to entertain his guest. “At least you’re better on the uptake than some. Clay is a bit of a retard!” was not a promising start.

Mara bridled sharply. "People like Clay just have different perspectives." She surprised herself with her own vehemence adding, "Whatever his faults, Clay has more integrity than most people on this little skiff."

"Well perhaps you are a better judge of character than I. But I only suggest that he should watch out. I don't want to sound like one of those chancy astrologers but I sense that someone very close to him is setting him up for a big fall. Planets are aligning and he may find that he is ready for permanent eclipse. Perhaps with your brains and his beauty, the latter fairly minimal I might add, you can figure a way out ... and live happily ever after," he added with a smug smile.

Tamim lapsed into total silence and began fidgeting with his pencil and staring at her balefully with dark ringed eyes. Clearly the welcome mat had just been swept aside. Mara suggested brightly that she should leave him in privacy and he extended a damp hand and pointed casually to the door back into the transfer space.

Mara closed the door behind her and took a deep breath of relief. The bolts shot across with a sudden crack. She picked up the gift bag and tucked the rejected toy into the folds of the sofa hoping that she might be allowed to keep the handbag as she sat back awaiting the guards. Again she could detect distant, circular, maddening music, a Satie Gymnopedie.

She rehearsed what she might tell the Sheikha to cast a positive light on the visit. She had so obviously failed all expectation. However, a security stooge entered silently from the other door. He brusquely snatched the handbag, confirmed that the contents had been delivered and escorted her silently to the water-taxi. Mara realised that her expected role had been accomplished and she was of no further interest to anyone. She wondered how many secretive voyeurs already knew exactly what had taken place during her encounter with Tamim.

Debriefing

Returned to the gloomy refectory Mara set about peeling roots that Huggie had so enthusiastically unearthed from the walled garden. The specimens were gnarled, squinting eyes and troll-like shapes, a world away from the glistening antiseptic jewel box she had just encountered aboard Shazzam. She laughed to herself imagining a dish of these 'whatevers' being presented to the Sheikha with great fanfare. 'She lifts the lid ...' Yet only a few moments later that rarefied world seemed an improbable memory. All those silent minions despatched on their duties, her time spent waiting in empty rooms, listlessly scrolling through vapid lifestyle publications.

Now she could barely conjure up the face of the Sheikha or flesh out any individual characteristics, just a taut, humourless mask floating over a sea of opulent materials. Even Tamim seemed a shadowy caricature, a rotund mass of irritations, surrounded by heaps of undifferentiated debris.

There was, however, someone chafing to learn more exact details of what had happened at their meeting. A diffident rap on the door disturbed the gloomy silence. She opened it to find Justin, a finger pressed to his lips beckoning her silently out to talk with his other hand.

"Another mute to make my day complete!" she muttered caustically. "Why has everybody suddenly lost the power of speech?" She followed him silently across the orchard to the chapel where they resumed their positions side by side on the plastic chairs in the semi-darkness.

"Hi" seemed a scarcely adequate beginning.

“So I suppose that you have bugged my kitchen too ... in case I run off with the pots?” she needled.

Justin emitted an inane little chortle and composed his body into a characteristic yoga-like contortion, muscles tensed and unbalanced. Perhaps he could only think clearly by assuming a position of tortured disequilibrium.

“Well, so, let’s have it! what’s the scoop? How did your princlet react? I hope he warmed to you more than he did to Clay ... or *me* for that matter!”

“I’m surprised that you don’t already know everything. It seems I was foisted upon him to deliver some childish toy, no doubt bugged to the hilt. He had the good sense to reject it on sight. He just chucked it back into the waiting room, clearly paranoid about surveillance ... and not without cause. You and Clay have been busy I gather.”

“In fact that’s one of the Clay’s ‘duties’”, Justin signalled air quotes and smiled knowingly “... to make our client feel more comfortable by clearing away some of the more obvious intrusions; well perhaps more a discreet upgrade, truth be told.” He sighed coyly and pushed up his glasses, “Sadly, I’ve got to keep them all happy!”

“What a divisive world you inhabit! *INFILT* suits your talents perfectly.”

Justin emitted a nervous peal that collapsed into a condescending twitter. “It’s you, Mara; you’re the dinosaur! Your Trenchers are certainly well named. You’ve dug yourselves into a big black hole and can’t see the world for what it is.”

Mara snapped back, “At least we’re out there digging in! You on the other

hand seem to be locked in a dark closet of wait and see.”

“There are many ways to fight a battle; some are more intelligent than others.” Justin pinched his nose, looked away and sniffed. Mara had become accustomed to these telltale signs of obfuscation. His hand continued to flit about his head as if he were distracted by an invisible fruit fly. Then he blurted candidly, “The truth is that I really need an ally. It’s like I’m a solitary guerrilla; but I could accomplish so much more with someone I could count on, a kindred spirit who wanted to share the mission.”

Mara grimaced sceptically, “So that is why you too are courting the Trenchers? To find someone to count on?”

Justin suddenly seemed to implode like a pleading puppy, deflated and self-effacing. His eyes were brimming with tears of self-pity. “But it’s the loneliness! I know in my heart of hearts that what I am doing is 100% right but there is no one to share it with, no one to bounce my ideas off. I feel myself outside a society that has stabilised itself into a false peace. All its norms are suspect. I am setting out as a solitary agent of moral change. I feel that there is no one out there who is sympathetic with my side” he paused and his eyes slyly flicked up to check what impact he was making, “... except perhaps you.”

Mara tried to deflect this maudlin tone of voice with her practical assessment. “But you impose that loneliness on yourself. Clay says that you are always barricaded into your office and hold yourself aloof. No one can get a bead on what you are thinking.”

Justin suddenly bridled, “So Clay says that does he? Thinks that I’m some kind of psychotic does he? Well, I sensibly pay no attention to what Clay thinks.” His voice was dripping in sarcasm. “Talk about a social misfit!”

Mara realised that she had inadvertently invited the venting of this pent up resentment. “No! It’s just that they’re all worried that you seem to put distance between yourself and others.” She adopted a more conciliatory tone, “But you are not alone. Our society divides everyone into separate camps and thrives on isolation in a culture of Tainers and containment. We are not encouraged to harbour any empathy for others. We are not invited to look at situations through others’ eyes. Instead we are schooled to fear the unknown and caricature those we don’t understand and just cut them off.”

Justin continued miserably, “I’m only trying to drag you away from your comfortable world to glimpse the bigger picture.”

Mara exploded. “Do you have to be so incredibly patronising? Trenchers are grounded in very real activities; we *do* share a vision of integrated lives in a society that secures its own means of sustenance.”

Justin shook his head wearily, “We all know that you are never going to take on worldwide agribusiness from your little trenches. They will annihilate you if they think you might pose any threat.”

“But you can’t talk! You’re just a patsy who helps sustain the establishment that we seek to challenge.”

“Challenge? Don’t be pathetic! Do you know who is presenting the real challenge? I can tell you that you have to look a lot further than Trojan House ... of course it is Prometheus!”

“Prometheus? A coterie of self-serving back-room boffins?”

“Don’t you believe it! I am in a privileged position to review de Vere’s correspondence. I can read between the lines. Prometheus intend to

bestow on mankind a fatal new gift that will totally eclipse that fire of ancient myth. They are contemplating a total transcendence, whereby their patents will rewrite the future of the human race. This is no longer about pale skin, blonde hair and blue eyed children. This is about creating a joined up intelligence through a synchronised brain web and redesigning the human genome to suit such specialised roles. They are creating superior genetic stock which will tolerate such a lifestyle. This is about science gone mad! ”

“But what could de Vere get from all this? He too will be left behind.”

“Exactly! De Vere is obsessed with power ... but that means his leaping in to control this science. He is positioned to draw huge profits from this. Beyond that he has no other vision.”

“And you’re positioned to eavesdrop on all his backroom dealings?”

“You are already caught up in their web. Prometheus is not just looking at enhanced intelligence for those who can afford it, and downgraded subservient gene manipulation for those required to sustain the privileged. Zwielight is developing genetic modifications which will assist in the integration of artificial intelligence. He is working to create a seamless fusion of the organic and the cybernetic.”

“ValleyView is only a sideline and the Trenchers a convenient smokescreen to conceal how de Vere and his cronies intend to undertake huge investments in Prometheus and enable it to exploit New Mid as a base for genetic interventions worldwide. ValleyView is only the funding cash cow.”

... “And that is why I need you help to take on the bigger picture.”

“While you remain safely behind the curtains, in Oz, pulling levers while others, like Clay, are dispatched to the front lines. You are contemptible.” Justin rolled his eyes at her mention of Clay. “Clay will be alright, for what that’s worth. You have my word!”

“You’re just setting us all up. I bet that you even set up my meeting with Elron at the show suite.” She made a stab in the dark.

But Justin just smirked, “I confess that I wanted you both to see firsthand that there is nothing in this for you. Elron is of course a big phoney; he will go to the wall in due course.” Justin suddenly snickered at some unpleasant recollection.

“But you and I working together can make a really big difference. We both believe in human goodness that is being trampled by the likes of de Vere and Zweilicht. And I think that we are both smart enough to avoid detection and maintain control of our mission.

Justin’s voice rose in a tone of fluting self righteousness, “Candidly, I have dedicated my life to this battle, even though I’ve infiltrated the heart of the organisation entrusted with ensuring security at any cost ...

“you mean, ensuring that the present status quo remains immutable!”

“No one dares to question Es-Tech’s authority. What a sick joke! We have a dysfunctional paranoid at our helm! All such people hold their positions because they serve the interests of those who put them there.”

“Just walk away if you have any hope of change.”

“No! I will remain ... because I can do much more with access to information that few imagine available. I can see real power being

wielded at the centre of an organisation that sets out to tell us what we must believe.”

“And so you are looking for gulls to back your subterfuge? Like the Trenchers ... ”

Justin again adopted his pleading puppy stance. “I feel that you could try to be a little more sympathetic. We are both crusaders. It is people like de Vere who have warped perspectives, who pursue their own objectives without any reference to the values of others. Zwielicht also has a hidden agenda of such breathtaking arrogance that they must work hard to cover lest it be found out. His marginalises everyone – even de Vere.”

“But how can anyone trust your judgement unless they know what you stand for?”

Justin crooked a delicate finger at her. “But they know what you stand for.”

“So I’m a proxy? Some sort of stand-in? Perhaps you’re so alone because people realise that you are only too willing to sacrifice others. You’re no better than the powers that you are confronting. In my case you undertook arson in your pursuit of your ‘bigger picture’. And now you’re exposing Clay as cannon fodder while you retreat a safe distance.”

Justin “Have you really no inkling of the risks I am taking? De Vere is undoubtedly the most powerful force in the city. Media-Net rigorously controls what people are allowed to think here, despite what he pretends. Our society makes perfect sense to him; it is a society that has traded individual freedom for security.”

Justin pursed his lips and inclined his head slowly in prim disavowal. “But

de Vere can't help himself. He regards himself as especially nurtured for the guiding role. He has deep paranoia about what might happen if freedom was extended to the masses."

"But Trenchers have created our own freedoms."

"De Vere fears people who have found your kind of anarchic freedom. Don't you think that might be why he seems so intent on sponsoring the Trenchers? Truly he intends his Trojan Horse to infiltrate your camp."

Mara cast her mind back to de Vere's dismissive reception at the PRIGS meeting. He had paid no attention yet had spoken so surprisingly eloquently about the Trenchers' purposes. She realised that what she had considered her own failure of courage to speak up had been deviously manipulated.

Mara felt a rising frustration. "You claim that you see some bigger picture. But isn't that true of everyone, de Vere, Rev El and even your paranoid boss, the Colonel? They are all running scared, afraid of being erased from the bigger picture."

Justin clasped his hands together massaging the palms in nervous anxiety, "Some people wonder what de Vere could fear when Media-Net holds such a stranglehold over public consensus."

Mara sniffed in exasperation, "I can't see him afraid of anything. No doubt he'll get his *VEE 3* tourist trap. I can already imagine what he intends for our Trenchers. But we will just bounce back and set ourselves up elsewhere."

Justin snickered unpleasantly, "But I think that de Vere has woken up to a nightmare of his own making! He has begun to realise the full

implications of the Prometheus Project and he is terrified! He realises that it portends the end of the world that he thought he was born to rule. Suddenly his fond illusions are collapsing in a maelstrom of change. Mark my words! Only too soon they will unseat his benevolent dictatorship. The future of humanity is being commandeered by Prometheus and de Vere is powerless to confront the implications. Instead he hopes to commercialise the products of their research. That is the only kind of control that he knows.”

An image of the irascible visitor to the show suite flashed into Mara’s mind “And that would be one good reason for destroying Rev El’s reputation, because Elron can certainly see the implications of Prometheus research and poses a different kind of dissent, one that might erode de Vere’s control.”

Justin laughed smugly, “Well Rev El is just as flawed in his fanaticism. I daresay that I may have no little hand in his changing fortunes ... not to mention the lovely Angèle; now there’s a basket case!”

Justin sighed and cast a fleeting glance over his shoulder. “Nobody can simply opt out of this change. Big data has bathed the planet in comprehensive intelligence, an increasingly sophisticated, interconnected nervous system. People like Zweilicht and his crew at Prometheus believe that we have to step up to the new conditions by redefining ourselves.”

“The tools may have changed, but underlying human morality has not.”

“Who is talking about human morality? You’ve got to laugh! Nowadays everyone you talk to sees the big issue of the day as a lottery with a 30 million dirham prize. That certainly isn’t catering to basic human morality.”

Mara shuddered at Justin's' cool cynicism. "I used to believe that information technology was going to make us more responsive to each other. But instead we're in the thrall of a worse sort of Big Brother! Information mining has brought the classification process that keeps people firmly in their places."

"But you only have to look into the Cadena to see some real winners. They find no benefit in sustaining that old middle class economy. They've dropped lip-service to all those old codes of morality. Their world is all about exclusion."

Mara laughed, "I'm not so sure that they're winners either; I may have already scrolled through too many Celebrity sites today and met too many mute servants."

"Security is one of humanities overriding obsessions. We can put up with a lot of adversity if we are guaranteed security."

Mara shuddered, "I guess that's why we hear so much blather from ES-Tech these days. I feel that we have laid ourselves open to a new generation of bullies, machines which subvert our intuitive morality by giving the impression of impartiality."

Justin bestowed a special fleeting glance of unalloyed sincerity. "Long ago I learned about the necessity of an invisibility cloak to carry out my campaign. I have learned to exploit some of the inherent weaknesses of that mechanical intelligence. But we must both be clever about our subversion. Pattern recognition algorithms have become very sensitive and they can pick up the tiniest nuances to pinpoint identity. These days you can't conceal anything. I have had to learn how to deflect them onto other users' profiles."

“I suppose that is why you find Clay so useful? A pliable scapegoat? And who is Zebr@? Another of your clients, no doubt.”

Justin snickered. “Clay doesn’t realise how significant he is in this campaign.” He rallied suddenly, “But I’m inclined to feel that you are wasting too much time on your Captain Clueless.”

“Once we imagined that gods watched over us. But now those gods have morphed into monstrous cyber-guardians. Now that we have digitized ourselves, we realise that none of us are unique and all are vulnerable to our own data. We are confabulations of data points that can easily explain away our individuality. We find ourselves as disappointingly quantifiable.”

“Whatever you say, I know that I can still make my own decisions ... and some of them will be right.”

Justin added facetiously, “Going with the flow has at least that compensation ... an absence of pain. But someone like Tamim is certainly not attempting to go with any flow; he’s dead set on thwarting his father and the whole system.”

Mara laughed at her mental image of Tamim’s corpulent body bobbing along like a cork, going with the flow. “In fact he suggested that his father has sights set on something much more interesting than the casino, probably Prometheus itself.”

“Yeah! Tamim should know, the Emir could set up a casino in places a lot more conducive to fun than New Mid!” He suddenly flashed one of his unwelcome ‘candidly’ smiles. “I only wish that we could bring him to appreciate that we are really on his side.”

“His side? He’s a paranoid, extremely unhealthy young boy, deeply depressed, and abandoned to his silly obsessions – on nobody’s side.”

Eyes averted, Justin dropped a hand tentatively to linger on Mara’s knee. “He knows more than his parents suspect; part of my job is scrutinising his correspondence minutely.”

Mara bit her lower lip. “That’s what you have Clay doing, isn’t it? Spying?” “Well I hoped that Tamim might open up to you since Clay has failed so abjectly. He could be a valuable asset on our side.”

“Our side?” As Mara glanced up at this wispy cipher of a man she wondered whether anyone would want to be included on his side.

Justin sighed and levelled an empty azure gaze on his dainty red shoes. “You’ll just have to trust me that I have only ever acted towards you with the most altruistic of motives.”

“But you intend to do all this by sacrificing your own team?”

“You’re a political illiterate, uncouched in the ways of the world. What would the Trenchers have achieved through anarchic resistance in your old digs?” Justin shook his head smugly, “Consider how useful your Trenchers are now proving in concealing what is at stake behind the Trojans’ philanthropic facade of good intentions.”

“Even the most manipulative kleptocrats on the planet still live in mortal fear of exposure to the wrong publicity. These people and their armies of financial minions have become increasingly vulnerable in this information age!”

“But the Emir doesn’t have such inhibitions. One look at Shazzam, you can see that he’s not trying to conceal anything.”

“His wealth has been ripped from the ground in some god-forsaken land. But he is still constrained by the religious prejudices of his impoverished nation. While the destitute admire a flashy leader, they take a dim view science that runs contrary to the religion that provides their only solace.”

“But all these forces are way out of my league.”

Justin shook his head sagely like a chiding parent. “But Mara, that is where we have a joint mission. We will unleash their worst nightmare by exposing exactly what everyone stands to gain. But we’ve got to act as a team.”

Smilingly winsomely, he squeezed her knee and then stood up abruptly in an awkward unwinding movement. Mara followed him out of the chapel, unsure what they had concluded.

“Just wait for developments. I’ll get back to you by close of play tomorrow. I think that you will find it a very interesting day.”

He retrieved a little blue scooter with black and white tassels dangling from the handles tucked discreetly in the bushes. She caught only a glimpse of his delicate boyish frame churning off down the lane, evidently delighted with himself, tassels flying.

Suddenly, the memory flashed back of the blooming hydrangea. She realised where she had seen that scooter previously. In that moment of dread she could only think of Clay and how she had to protect him from this self-righteous monster.

Disappearance

“**B**ut he’s simply disappeared! Maybe kidnapped! It’s that scientist, Zwielight!” Justin leapt up breathlessly from his station to relay the breaking news to De Vere as he entered. His surprise, for once seemed totally unfeigned.

“Who? How could he?” De Vere blanched the muscles twitched around his locked jaw, to Justin’s growing satisfaction.

Justin relished filling in pieces of the puzzle with a deliberate attention to detail. He had received the ‘heads up’ from the Colonel. The Emir’s Steward, Walter, had called ES-Tech’s Secure Transfers Division to inquire why the doctor had not made a private lunch appointment with His Excellency.

Justin was delighted to note De Vere’s look of horror at hearing that the doctor had even contemplated a clandestine meeting with the Emir. Instantly aged and deflated, he slumped in his chair and stared out the window pulling a wispy lock of hair. Following their fractious meeting, the Emir had evidently decided to strike with unanticipated force, first his lottery announcement and then this apparent abduction.

Justin began to ladle on further details: the security staff at Hyperion had recorded on CCTV Zwielight’s prompt departure from their gates at the appointed hour, looking dapper and insouciant. But the doctor had never arrived at the water taxi terminal. Somewhere his passage had diverted into the Interstitial areas.

De Vere’s body began to shake, his head bob in frustration, “What the hell does he want? He’ll be taken apart if they figure out who he is!”

Suddenly de Vere rallied with a steely look in his eye to counter Justin's detailed account. He sat up straight and thumped the table. "That little Shazzam doesn't know he is playing with fire if he thinks that he can outsmart me on home ground. Get McCubbins!"

He issued immediate instructions that ES-Tech suppress any references to the disappearance until they could get control of the message. Zwielight was considered such a key ingredient in the emerging picture of future prosperity. The abduction of such a high profile scientist would undermine the image of carefree urban life that New Midland was struggling to project. De Vere well knew that if this affair were mismanaged, the value of his own personal investment in Prometheus would plummet. He needed to buy time to reclaim his lost property and effect a damage control strategy.

He had always ensured that the Doctor was kept on a short leash to minimise any controversy regarding his research. All news streams emerging from Prometheus were closely 'redacted' to ensure that only feel-good stories extolling the advantages of genetic amelioration saw the light of day.

But it was still not clear whether the Doctor had been abducted or had defected to the Emir. Panicked by uncertainties, De Vere began to cast his web of suspicion wide, observing Justin closely to detect if there were other possible subtexts. But Justin was evidently equally astonished by the breaking news.

Nevertheless, he almost appeared to be taking sadistic delight in slowly spoon-feeding De Vere with the perplexing details as they came in. Evidence of some larger plot was becoming overwhelming.

It was Justin who first began to piece together an interesting interpretation

of events and administer provocative speculation to De Vere in measured doses. According to him it was apparently an inside job. The excitement of the mystery brought out many perceptive insights into human frailty.

“There were only a handful of people who knew of the Emir’s invitation.” He surreptitiously inspected De Vere’s anxiety mottled face to assess the damage. “Rumour has it that he disappeared with a lot of key data files relating to his personal patents. He had been assembling these for some weeks. I suspect that the doctor is already enjoying a sabbatical break aboard Shazzam.”

FIASCO

Then suddenly De Vere's troubles began to multiply far beyond a concerted effort to locate an errant Doctor and drag him back to safety. It was clear that even Media-Net could not suppress the story of his defection much longer.

Then a further bombshell exploded far away but its repercussions soon flooded non-aligned media, well beyond the control of Media-Net. Justin appeared regularly at the office door, clearing his throat and extending a toe over the threshold in his exasperatingly diffident manner, bringing updates and spooning out poisonous details of what was evidently becoming a slow motion train wreck. International news feeds had begun to spew confidential details about Trojan House, listing the assets and addresses of its secretive offshore investors. Fascinating details began to emerge about lifestyles of these legendary titans. Initially few recognised the significance of the leaks; but only too quickly they began to conflate into 'A Roster of Infamy'. The names included some of the globe's most revered philanthropists, those who prudently employed an army of accounting lackeys and discreet advisors to keep their affairs safely out of the public eye. Surprisingly many were well-known business leaders based in New Midland. De Vere immediately realised that this disastrous litany of leaks could only be an egregious assault orchestrated by the Emir. ES-Tech had utterly failed in their brief to surreptitiously monitor his activities and maintain the required firewalls. McCubbins should have known the paramount importance of keeping a close eye on the Emir.

He was watching in rising dismay as his personal reputation for discretion was shredded. This raft of named individuals had placed total confidence in De Vere's rectitude and capacity to control the ValleyView message. Such utter failure had embarrassed powerful private interests not only

in the Cadena but around the globe. In a world only too prone to enjoy a feast on prurient data, these were men who, above all, treasured their anonymity and paid dearly to maintain it. But this very specific list of the publicity shy titans together with minute details of their investment 'shenanigans' as the vulgar press so mercilessly dubbed them, was already bouncing around the gleeful global media. Some of the wealthiest 'folks' on the planet, business titans, resource magnates, and powerful politicians had been drawn into an embarrassing entanglement by these compromising allegations. Together they sullied each others' names. The outlines of a monstrous international scandal were heaving into view.

De Vere was faced with massive withdrawals from his syndicate, the collapse of Trojan House and a total derailment of the ValleyViewVision. This was the moment for which his political enemies had been awaiting. And all fingers seemed to point to the Emir as the nefarious source of this disaster.

With slow deliberation Justin uncovered compromising details about the agent that Es-Tech had posted to manage security aboard Shazzam. Seizing Agent Clavers server he had discovered a trail of duplicity hidden within cleverly disguised files. Clancy had evidently been colluding with unidentified moles over an extended period. Playing an elaborate role as idiot savant and deceiving everyone, he had bamboozled everyone and amassed an extensive library of incriminating records. He had traced the Trojan 'investors' aliases via disguised accounts to reveal their true identities and uncovered what might at first seem quite irrelevant details of very sordid lives which were proving riveting in a growing public backlash.

De Vere was almost exploding before his eyes, imagining the Emir's delight in the carnage he had wrought. He was now strongly positioned to assume direct control of ValleyView and, more importantly, take the

reins of funding the Prometheus Project.

There was an appreciable bounce in Justin's step that afternoon as he made his way over to ES-Tech headquarters. He had been summoned by a panicky Colonel McCubbins. He tapped gently on her door and heard her croaking invitation to enter. Quickly assuming an appearance of solicitous dismay he found her seated at her desk in the gloom, surrounded by a mess of papers. The old typewriter sat alongside with an unmarked scrap in its carriage.

Through clenched teeth she railed, "De Vere is certain that the Emir is behind the disappearance and the leaks about investors. So where on earth did you source *your man Clancy*? How could you let this happen?"

Justin adopted his most self-righteous fluting voice. "It was you who arranged to have me embedded in the Media-Net Dragon's den in the first place ... if you recall. You who connived with De Vere to station an ES-Tech agent on Shazzam to manage onboard security. You approved Clancy yourself despite my misgivings. I refuse to take responsibility for any of your backroom dealings."

McCubbins stared at him blankly, surprised by such unwonted indignation. "Well one thing for certain, you'll have to find a way to take him off *Shazzam* and get him back under direct control. The Emir won't surrender him voluntarily."

"Take him? Get him?" Justin shook his head with uncustomary authority and focussed on a potted cactus as he spoke in cool flat tones. "I don't need to remind you that *Shazzam* is a foreign embassy which enjoys complete diplomatic immunity. We can't just stride in and retrieve an

agent, particularly one who is now evidently a feted guest.”

Both jumped nervously at the sound of a door slamming in the outer office followed by an angry snarl. McCubbins braced herself as De Vere burst into the room in apoplectic fury and hurtled towards her desk to plant his two fists firmly before her. De Vere’s great waft of white mane was uncharacteristically askew and his milk white complexion had achieved a blotchy purple tinge of rage. Justin stood up with wide-eyed innocence, one limb daintily extended like a solicitous maitre d’ ready to take an order.

“McCubbins you’re a frigging disaster!” He slapped down Justin’s raised gesture of surprise. “This nutcase, *Clancy*! I’ve got the low-down on his identity now, he’s going to hold us all to ransom with his devious campaign. Who knows what further distorted fabrications he’s going to spin? Where do you pick up these guys? – surely you run your agents through some basic screening? Even I, a mere civilian, have been able to lay hands on enough incriminating background information that would lead me to avoid this guy like the plague! Yet you install him on your most sensitive mission. What could you have been thinking?”

The Colonel only looked distraught, while Justin stood firmly behind her facing this abuse with a surprising self-righteous defiance.

“Well you will have to act fast and get him out of there pronto and make it crystal clear to all that he’s a complete fantasist, a poisonous, disaffected maverick. *I mean immediately!*”

The Colonel hunkered down in her chair not daring to exacerbate this face of rage. She harkened back wistfully to that cavalier banter in this same room only hours before, banter which she had treated with such disdain. There could be no more further ‘Cubbie-laced’ flirtation now.

Her reputation was plummeting to the depths.

Assuming his characteristic holier than thou 'S' stance, one wrist raised as if ready to parry the onslaught with an invisible foil, Justin rose valiantly to her defence with the calm voice of reason. He was also keen to steer the contretemps away from any details that might implicate any involvement in these affairs. "The Colonel and I were already discussing the logistics of lifting Clancy out of the hands of the Emir. It won't be easy though."

De Vere rounded on him in a fury, "This is crazy! The f***ing guy is less than zero and he's f***ing part of your f***ing crew. And you tell me that you have no f***ing control over him! I expected more f***ing spine from all of you, McCubbins! As for you - you little nerd!" rounded on Justin who sought solace again in contemplating the cactus.

McCubbins insinuated a brief practical observation, with chilly disapproval for such unbridled language, repeating Justin's earlier admonition, "Of course Shazzam enjoys diplomatic immunity. We cannot just 'go get 'em' as you fondly suppose."

But McCubbin's attempt to interject useful further background was rebuffed with fury. De Vere lashed out, "Somebody's put him up to this. He has wangled access to the private lives of some of the most influential folks in town, if not the whole planet. He has fabricated a tissue of fantasy ... and got everyone jumping to the wrong conclusions."

Justin piped up manfully, "It appears that Clancy may have defected to the Emir's service some time ago. This has been a brilliantly co-ordinate plan which had us all fooled. Copies of very compromising records have been found concealed within his personal database."

De Vere threw out his hands and screamed at the ceiling in his frustration. “Well you don’t have to tell me that the Emir’s behind this fiasco. He’s obviously positioning himself to take over ValleyView, that much should be obvious – even to a f***ing twit-cake like you! The Trojan consortium is ruined; the investors will walk a mile! Your data-terrorist Clavvers will cost this whole city dearly; ruining one of the few remaining opportunities to turn around our economy; he is responsible for sabotaging the prospects of a whole generation! And what the hell for?”

Justin rallied, “On the other hand there may be advantages in it for the very group that your consortium is revealed to be supporting – the Trenchers. Perhaps they could assist us at this stage with damage control.”

De Vere drew back, “What can you possibly be talking about? Even my elementary research has already turned up that Clancy is in league with the Trenchers. He was even registered at the Convent address for friggin sakes! What kind of a double game are you all playing?”

Cubbie cast an oblique glance towards Justin with a tiny mote of suspicion in her eye. But to her relief he again valiantly raised the calming voice of reason. “The Trenchers too are probably surprised to uncover this list of plutocrats behind their Trojan House benefactors. Perhaps there is publicity mileage in reassuring them that the intentions of this group of illustrious citizens remains entirely philanthropic. Don’t you think?”

The Colonel looked haggard with confusion. She had completely lost the plot and slightly resented finding herself under Justin’s stewardship. “Well that is a question that many people are certainly going to be asking themselves. Why were you supporting the Trenchers when your consortium also appears to be a lead advocate for the casino? This may confuse a lot of people, not least our own team.”

De Vere recoiled, chastened by McCubbins perceptive tone. He was reluctant to have her penetrate the murk of a very complex business landscape. He was also beginning to sense some faint merit in Justin's suggestion for turning the tide of adverse publicity. He justified himself haughtily, "People don't understand how business operates these days, and the importance of a smokescreen in deflecting adversity until the key components of a deal are in position."

Justin's face suddenly lit up with a flash of inspiration for negotiating these treacherous seas. Both De Vere and McCubbins turned expectantly to confront his serene and purposeful countenance. "Well, it may still be possible for us to derail this. Perhaps Media-Net could assume the initiative and arrange for an interesting diversion, another issue for all these idle minds to dwell upon, something perhaps not so directly related to ValleyView but easier for common folk to get their teeth into!"

De Vere snatched at a waft of hair in an angry petulance. "Talk about Fantasyland!"

Justin persevered. "I was merely pondering the implications of your word - 'smokescreen'. Perhaps the time has come to launch our supplementary story, something that will engage the chattering classes who may soon want a rest from your unfathomably complex business dealings. News about chicanery in tax sanctuaries generally tends to leave people numb. They don't have an effing clue, if you will excuse my language."

The Colonel glared disapprovingly at De Vere who had so suddenly shown himself no stranger to unfettered expression. "We know that it's happening but there isn't really enough of a human interest angle to sustain the common mind, which is much more adept at comparing yacht sizes. But ... the time might be ripe to launch a deflection issue with ingredients to capture public imagination. I think that Mr De Vere

knows what I am suggesting.” Justin glanced at him tellingly and lowered a left eyelid of complicity. De Vere had no idea of what he was babbling about, so caught up was he in the crisis of the moment, but something in Justin’s unprecedented sustained gaze triggered a realisation that there might indeed be a neglected decoy beacon on the horizon to help set a proactive course.

McCubbins, enjoying momentary relief, unwisely attempted to reassert her dignity and turned to admonish de Vere shrewishly, “If it’s all crazy then it’s up to you to stamp on it before it gains any more traction, diplomatic immunity or not. After all, you have the resources of Media-Net at your command.” This is what she imagined Justin had been alluding to.

De Vere swept the papers from her desk to the floor in impetuous fury. “For starters, let me tell you what YOU are going to do. Dig up whatever you can about Clancy’s connections, a complete data trail, all his despicable habits, where he sources his information. Dig up every drug-crazed, pole dancing floozy in the Stits if you have to. I’m sure it’s all there if you know how to look. You do know I suppose.” He added tauntingly. “I want you to demonstrate what happens when you pit yourself against forces for pro-active change. I want to see real public anger aroused at all these false slurs that are being levelled at me.”

“And you! Brattoné – You’re coming with me!” De Vere grabbed Justin by the shoulder and marched him out of the room.



trencher.com/fiasco

mara > They are calling it a fiasco, but I can't really why everyone's so upset – just a list of board members at Trojan House – all 'great and the good' at least they know what New Mid is about.

zebr@ > but can't you see? – they thought that they'd secured complete anonymity. They had paid dearly for it. They are creatures of stealth. Those secret numbered companies parked offshore, the multitude of gnomes with fake names, sworn to secrecy - They simply don't want you to know what they are up to. But isn't that the way we all have learned to operate these days?

Rock On! Fledermaus

“**Y**ou’re only inviting me because you don’t have anyone else to ask,” Mara shook her head firmly. The last thing she wanted was an invitation to join Justin at a Gala opening of the new Bin Qalb Qabeeh opera house in the Cadena. This was one world which she had so firmly rejected when she walked out on Gilb.

“If anything, it’s de Vere’s suggestion ... or at least he has responded to my prompting.” Justin batted his eyes knowingly without engaging hers. “People are killing to get tickets. The Great and Good are flying back from their far flung hideaways, sparing no expense to make cameo appearances. With all the current news about Trojan House shenanigans they are keen to show themselves as staunch citizens. Hotel space across the Cadena has already been booked out by support staff, hairdressers, dressmakers – not to mention the cast itself, the world’s most famed voices, flown in from the Dubai Opera for this event.”

Mara winced, “And I’m supposed to be cast among them in my gardening gear?”

Justin was not to be deflected from imagining the magnificence of the occasion. “Magnus Forbeson has flown in a fleet of luxury limos. Chow Ca-Ching, that guy who owns half of Africa, is coming in his jade chopper! And you are whimpering that you don’t have a frock?”

“But *Rock On! Fledermaus*? What’s it supposed to mean?”

“It means whatever you want it to mean. Half the audience will be waiting for the controversial nude scene in the batmobile. Everyone will be plugged into the commentary anyway. This is all about star gazing!”

Justin paused and then added in his irritating confidential tone, “It might also mean an opportunity to see what we are all up against. You, me and even your god-forsaken Trenchers!” Then he added in a sneaky undertone, “With any luck I suspect it will also be a chance to see some heads roll off the scaffold.”

“I’ll look completely out of place! Worse than when you set me up with Malyn!”

“Don’t worry, no one’s going to notice you. They couldn’t think of anything to say for starters. Just dress smart casual. The crowd will be riddled with bodyguards anyway, keeping everyone closely corralled.”

“So that’s why *you’re* invited? Yet more security?”

“De Vere specifically wants *you* to be there. Exhibit A! The Emir is supposed to be among the guests. De Vere is keen to give him a taste of who really holds the reins in New Mid. We’ve got a little entre-act planned. The way I see it only some of the theatre will be onstage. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Justin laughed, on reflection. “a good thing because I hear the show’s crazy deadly otherwise. Something about bats that sing in hysterical high pitched voices.”

Boasted as a ‘World Class Venue’ the *Benni P. Tubicz III Memorial Opera House* had already been abbreviated to ‘*the Tubby*’ by practical locals. This jocular name totally suited the architecture. Conceived by van Zilto, a starchitect based in Dubai, the building reputedly took its inspiration from the smashed teapot which he had spied in land fill on a site visit. It was regarded as a triumph of contextualism. The bulbous massing with broken toothed counterpoints had been realised on a spit of remediated rubble fixed in a gelatinous resin that extended defiantly into the lake. Basking in splendid isolation, the massing provided a poetic counterpoint

to the hyperventilating architectural assortments of the Cadena ranged behind.

Those who pay for such culture call the shots. An important cultural shift had occurred with a growing demand for more 'world class' spectacle, shipped in from abroad. Public taste demanded tried and true productions that had proven cost effective. Normally 'high culture' involved bullet riddled bodies followed by 'forensics'. Consequently *Rock On! Fledermaus* was hailed as a challenging avant-garde departure.

This 'iconic' opera project represented the culmination of years of diligent networking and fundraising among the cultural elite of New Mid who still clung to fading memories of halcyon days. It had been achieved entirely through private philanthropy and every brick, doorway, seat or cushion was labelled accordingly.

And so Mara found herself at the '*Tubby Portal*', joining a queue of attendees awaiting security clearance. Nearby, there was an unruly knot of protesters hurling abuse at new arrivals in an unidentifiable language.

"They're just the remnants on the construction crew protesting being deported back home." Justin explained. "Evidently they prefer Tainer life over returning to their families in Wadeverstan," he added with a dismissive snort. Their Tainer, 'Valhalla', had had to be vacated to accommodate an incoming tranche requiring temporary accommodation at the end of their useful lives.

Media-Net agents were present like busy bees, to record and if possible amplify the protest. They were keen to dramatise the standoff between a privileged society and such poor souls resisting deportation to the ghastly vagaries of life back in Asinistan. The widely televised message always made Tainerites realise how truly lucky they were to live in New Mid.

As Mara looked at all this photogenic desperation held in check by a line of taser armed security agents, she was struck by Justin's callousness. He had no room for compassion when his mental energy was so fully engaged in his ever unfolding 'bigger picture'.

At least Justin seemed on familiar terms with the security personnel deployed. A mere nod cleared a path through the resentful melee. Mara already hated every moment of what she had agreed to attend.

The security clearance procedures released them into a long windowless tunnel which traversed the Cadena and disgorged them into the midst of a vast covered hall, a space which had no evident boundaries just a bedizened throng shouting hysterically at one another.

One of the minor drawbacks of such a cutting-edge venue as '*The Tubby*', was that there were no spaces conducive to intimacy. The architectural experience was conceived as a 'celebration of public spectacle'. Tilted, sweeping planes collided violently with one another and ensured that the impressive vastness of overhead volumes was utterly pointless.

Justin seemed to be leading her purposefully through a parting sea of blank faces. One of the first persons Mara recognised was Malyn Staryk. Malyn gazed at her quizzically for several seconds as if trying to place her face. Then she grimaced and turned to talk to a hatchet-faced woman dressed in a purple sheath, trailing lacy bat wings. "That's de Vere's wife, Elvie." Justin confided nonchalantly as he guided her through treacherous shoals with his knowledgeable running commentary.

This was not merely a gala opening but an occasion intended to galvanise public awareness of '*The Need To Do Something About the Grey Nuns*' and would present an opportunity for patronage signatures on many more bricks and floor tiles. Perhaps some may have felt challenged in making

a connection between this defunct religious community and a rock opera about bats, for neither of which they had much natural sympathy.

There was a fanfare and general surge in the crowd. Justin explained that the Emir and his entourage had arrived. “He’s already got security goons laced throughout the crowd.” Mara craned to see if she could identify the Sheikha or her son but the huddle around the royal party obscured her view.

In the melee she caught sight of De Vere, deep in conversation with serious colleagues whose downcast countenances appeared to be addressing a blemish in the carpet. De Vere raised his head suddenly and caught Mara’s eye. He paused, then surprisingly, he raised a hand in half-hearted salute. He murmured something to one of his colleagues who looked up at Mara and offered a knowing wink, then looked away. Mara shuddered with the premonition that someone had just trod upon her grave.

As a result of not being located anywhere in particular, the expectant crowd was enduring the fluidity of unforeseen exchanges, usually described as ‘networking’ while attempting to pursue their habitual devious evasions. In this vast mêlée, there was however a single coveted vantage point of repose on a swelling jetty of gilded steel filigree which had been designated ‘*Juliette’s Prow*’. To general disappointment this plum position had already been plucked by a luminous Angèle McBride and her entourage of fawning acolytes. Elron was standing on the sidelines looking bemused and staring at the canted walls as if he longed to scamper heavenwards.

Everyone below enjoyed a fine view of the preening peacocks on *Juliette’s Prow*. Little did they know that they were all about to partake in an unexpected operatic prelude; far more riveting than anything they were likely to witness on stage.

A sudden intuitive lull occurred in the hysteria of the gabble as if a divine hand had mysteriously hushed the proceedings. All eyes seemed drawn to a curious ripple that tore across the crowd and followed spellbound as a posse of lantern jawed men in cinder grey uniforms trailed by a little bald man with a briefcase traversed the crowd, ascended the steps and pushed its way officiously onto Juliette's Prow. Elron recoiled in surprise as the little man with the briefcase opened it, extracted a sheet of paper and started reading something. All ears strained to capture the gist of what was unfolding. Whatever the content, the statuesque Angèle suddenly fell back dramatically and covered her face in a gesture of melodramatic horror as a battery of cameras flashed.

The transformation of Elron was extraordinary, one moment a bemused bystander, the next transformed into a spineless zombie, crumpled in upon himself, attempting to vanish before the eyes of the multitude. The tight circle of admirers around the couple melted away as one of the security officers proffered handcuffs that sparkled in the footlights and deftly clamped them around Elron's wrists. Two other officers positioned at either elbow escorted him out through a parting sea of stunned onlookers.

The significance of the subsequent musical which featured an over-sized bat gyrating on a dangling disco-ball was lost on most of the audience. The nude scene in the bat-mobile was a total write-off. Many were restlessly counting the moments until they could discover exactly what had happened to one of their more controversial citizens. Some found themselves obliged to answer compelling calls of nature and upturn rows of annoyed, yet complicit patrons in their unassuaged thirst for these details.

Sadly, as the lights dimmed on the final moments of Rock On Fledermaus, they went out forever in the People's Palisade.

By the following morning, speculation had spread like wildfire. Suddenly RevEI's many peccadilloes began to surface as an open secret among a throng of the hitherto mute. Victims began to step forward in droves, an army of furies raising a deafening chorus of denunciation. Rumours about the shenanigans back of house, that impenetrable 'holy of holies', were flashed from one gawping soul to another.

Devastated acolytes stepped into the limelight to describe in faltering voices how their lives had been destroyed by his 'cult'. As tales of duplicity amplified, many seemed incredulous that Rev EI had found the time to indulge a double life quite so replete with depravity. Details of personal bank statements were released revealing Angèle's expenditures on jewels and fine wines. Email accounts under assumed names proved uniquely damning. Such elaborate ruses only titillated the public imagination. All were enthralled by rumours of body doubles installed to exude public virtue while disguising a trail of infamy elsewhere.

And so, to the immense satisfaction of Burrell de Vere, the public crowded to the trough to gorge on this feast of lurid detail.

And so also speculation about the mysterious disappearance of Dr Zwielight received little further attention. Of course, few could muster much continued interest in the murky tax affairs of Trojan House.

Justin was in an unnaturally ebullient mood the following morning. He so rarely toured *INFILT* to engage his staff at random. His assistants invariably found such attentions irritating, resenting this flitting bee that materialised unexpectedly over their shoulders full of feigned enthusiasm. Elron's shaky Palisade had been irreparably breached, its pales wrenched from the ground and hurled in upon their creator. Without tiresome

delays of due process, he was tried and condemned for heinous crimes, perjury, false accounting, and corruption of youth. In a society now founded upon a rich lode of accumulated data, it was quite astonishing what could be dredged up when the right cyber-algorithms were applied.

The treasures that were uncovered by investigators included private diaries which had foolishly been maintained in a too legible hand and without any attempt at encryption. This trail of deviance was obviously intended to remain beyond electronic scrutiny. Here was a seasoned expert in evasion whose clandestine records indicated a life-long habit of recording errant private thoughts. The 'Elron Diaries' replete with salacious addenda were scanned and uploaded for the delectation of a voracious public.

Parallel Elron – The Diary

The following excerpts from de-classified handwritten records of Elron McBride, self-styled 'Rev El' of the People's Palisade, have been seized under the Public Security and Anti-Terrorism Act, redacted by ES-agent Zebr@ and placed in the public domain as being germane to cases currently pending the New Midland Security Review Board.

... how could I have been such a fool? ... to record personal doubts in writing and think that I could get away with it? Long ago I should have destroyed my ramblings. Was I deluding myself in making this monument to my fleeting thoughts.

... in the past people used diaries to spur their internal dialogue. They were used as moments of private confession perhaps to clarify a position or to justify one's actions to the gods.

... perhaps I too have been attempting to fit some consistent storyline to my life aspirations, some consistent narrative framework which affirms my quest for that invisible and insubstantial Aeternum, that intelligence that I intuitively sense bound up in other dimensions.

... but nowadays we have all lost our private landscapes and perhaps with them we have also lost a sense of personal destiny. We have certainly lost the idea of cultivating the soul in the eyes of God.

... a diary used to be about personal battles won and lost, a witness that demonstrated that a struggle had taken place.

... I deluded myself in thinking that my diary might open a tiny gate, an opportunity to clarify in my own mind what cannot be discussed publicly, and explore my own doubts about the purpose of my life.

... keeping any diary always presents great dangers because inevitably the chosen words will fail, the message will eventually be misconstrued

out of context. The diarist will be condemned by unsympathetic judges when his original perspective has become unrecognisable.

... In our society watchful drones monitor every transaction and garner information about every activity undertaken. We are left mourning the loss of that great treasure once called 'the private moment' ... we have lost some essence of being individual and with that a most critical access into the numinous.

... few in our modern world can afford to acquire privacy, as a public figure I am considered fair game for every type of invasion. Like the royalty of old I should have learned to live in the public eye.

... all those sanctimonious certainties that I once incanted buoyed up by the adulation of my congregation now seem utterly fraudulent.

... so many have 'put their faith' in my command of this sinking vessel. But I have never pretended to be a man of faith. I was only a man of intuition. The People's Palisade was focussed on introspection.

... Across our data obsessed society, it has become impossible to achieve redemption through forgiveness. Forgiveness is the foundation of many religions. But I have become so tainted that I cannot practice forgiveness upon myself. All remains forever on public record.

... why am I flouting the void? Do I find within, a hateful wish for disaster, to author my own undoing, if only to prove that there is indeed something greater at work, something far beyond my feeble power to reason

... Oh to be rapped sternly on the knuckles by some chiding parent and told 'Look here! You have missed a very important point'. To find any

such surety would be heaven itself.

...no animal knows Evil in the way human beings do. Animals experience Nature's adversities, but human beings have created crippling adversities born of our own self-consciousness. No other species engages so wholeheartedly in ruthless warfare upon its own species.

... for science has fuelled a new myth. The human race has been consigned to irrelevance by our modern Prometheans.

... Oh! What a fool I've been! How deluded! Now I have nothing to turn to except the emptiness of the Aeternum.



trencher.com/pallyrally

mara > The Palisade has been breached and vandals are now dancing amidst its ruins. Perhaps it was a remarkable achievement - to have fired so many imaginations in a world left destitute by the old religions. Elron was brave, if so obviously flawed.

zebr@ > Flawed? His nemesis is totally deserved, in fact he provoked it. No charlatan's religion can play any valid part in this dawning new age. That old enemy is still on the rampage within ourselves.

mara > The people who are now running amok, tearing apart the Palisade seem to have succumbed to subtle manipulation. At least he inspired others; that was a kind of generosity.

Beggar

Mara emerged from the roadside market stall for the Trencher Food Bank and began to make her way back to the Convent in the fading light. Streets in the Stits were no longer lit at night and Bin Street relied on overspill shed from the towers of the Cadena. The prudent usually carried battery torches to navigate the broken pavements. As she emerged she was aware of a solitary figure lurking in the twilight outside the stall; a grey shadow stirred like a dry cinder and resettled in the dust. She assumed that the hunched figure was just another destitute soul, perhaps too embarrassed to show his face in the queue. As she drew near she could make out a greasy fringe of blond hair protruding from the black tuque pulled down over his ears.

She felt ashamed of being so caught up preoccupations of the moment, a detached worldview that seemed little better than Gilb's. He could remain oblivious to any dislocation around him. Most people though had donned such blinkers to continue to function in their daily roles. She found it exhausting coping constantly with a continuous onslaught of need. Like so many others she dressed down, affecting shapeless ragged clothing to avoid the resentful stares of the destitute.

What if she were to encounter Gilb reduced to such conditions? How might he perform detached from that comfortable context that he had always taken for granted? He had so little resilience. He thrived within a protective cocoon, never needing to cope with anything more than a menu or a golf score. But what if his cocoon were suddenly torn apart as it had obviously been for this destitute man? Would he, a born insider, survive for a moment without that protective wrapping of privilege, without all those filaments that sustained his fragile position at the apex?

As she brushed past, he pulled back into the shadows and faced her warily. His complexion seemed pink and smooth, having acquired a recent, uneven stubble, suggesting that he was not yet a hardened denizen of the Stits. Her torch beam glinted off his thick rimmed glasses with tinted lenses, one cracked and held together with tape. He was dressed in a baggy suit, already soiled by street life that bore witness to the comfortable life he had been obliged to abandon. There were so many like him, dispossessed, scrabbling for existence, without entitlement to social services or rehousing in the Tainers and without any experience of fending for themselves.

She took it all in instantly. But there was something oddly familiar about his presence. She wracked her memory to recall some earlier encounter. Surrounded by broken, boarded up shop fronts, these two figures stood warily confronting each other in the midst of what had once been the bustling marketplace. He murmured something to her in a soft voice that contained the faint resonance of past certainties and a now lost authority. Then she realised that he was looking at her with growing curiosity, a sudden recognition.

“Actually I think I know you, or we met not so long ago ...”

Mentally she stripped away the tuque, the glasses with the shattered lens, and found beneath the furtive man whose visit to the show suite had coincided with hers. But how astonishing was Elron’s transformation! Like everyone else, saturated with sordid details of his recent scandal, she had just accepted the public outrage. When he just dropped from public view, she assumed that he had probably retired ignominiously.

“But what are you doing here – at our food bank?”

“It appears that you and your Trenchers have succeeded where I have not.

I only wanted to see what you are doing with the convent and imagine what I might have done were I to have succeeded.”

“But your congregation at the Palisade? Is there no one you can fall back on?” She already knew the answer; there had been so many disavowals recently, so many harsh jokes at his expense going the rounds.

“No one dares come near me. No one can afford to risk that blot on their record. They wouldn’t want to expose themselves to questions if I were brought to court.”

“Why didn’t they arrange to send you away? I’ve heard so many rumours flying around, as if some dam had broken, all those ... details of your life suddenly released ... and so much coverage of ... your wife’s ... problems.” Mara instantly regretted having chosen such a silly word.

“We have been used as convenient scapegoats to deflect attention from other issues. Perhaps not unlike your Trenchers.”

Mara looked sceptical about yet more smoke and mirrors. “We’re not scapegoats and we’re not helping to cover up anything.”

“Some suggest that your Trojan backers are being used as cover while ValleyView gains control over funding for their gambling Mecca. The real stakes appear to be that uneasy partnership between the Prometheus Project and the casino, a marriage surely made in hell.”

“If that’s the plan it seems that the whole playing field has been suddenly vacated. All the teams have just walked off. Who knows what Trojan House intends now that the director of Prometheus has mysteriously disappeared?”

“Perhaps he realised what was in store for him, how they intended to push him around. But I guess your Trenchers are only being tolerated until the moment suits De Vere.” Mara could hear the bitter edge of paranoia in Elron’s voice.

“It was De Vere who made such concerted efforts to wreck the Palisade and prevent our inclusion in the development. He relied on ES-Tech goons to undertake his hatchet job. Angèle’s disappearance was probably also orchestrated by them. It has certainly signed my doom.”

“By ES-Tech’s goons I suppose that you mean Justin Brattoné?”

Elron shrugged and his voice wavered, “ValleyView was only going to be a milch cow intended to direct freshly laundered international investment towards Prometheus. De Vere realised that the Pally Rally was intended to draw public attention to what was really happening at the heart of our city. I don’t imagine that your Trenchers ever really figured importantly in his deal, you have just provided a convenient smokescreen.”

“But are you expecting to take refuge with the Trenchers?”

Elron shook his head sadly. “That would only put you in greater jeopardy and bring your tenure to an abrupt end. Of course they can find me whenever it suits them. But the truth is I won’t resurface. They will make sure of that. I have alienated too many powerful people with invective aimed at Prometheus and their investors lack of any moral compass. I have created mortal enemies.”

“I can only wish you luck.” Elron turned and retreated into the burnt out shell, leaving Mara with her fading torch wondering what she could do to help the man.

Collateral Damage

Oblivious to all of the developments on shore and arriving late at his workstation deep below decks in *Shazzam*, Clay, somewhat dazed by his latest *Doom Dudgeon* challenges, was relieved to discover that the time clocks were still off line and had not picked up his absence. Such breakdowns offered a welcome respite from the continuous surveillance of daily life. He sat down to review Tamim's recent data trail and applied various auto-checkers to analyse the risk quotient on sites visited. He now took a very competitive interest in the scores achieved by Tamim in his on line gaming.

As Clay was trawling through this data trail he clicked on a file on his desktop titled CC.jpeg only to discover to his astonishment a photograph of himself, unkempt hair, white faced, squinty eyes. A perforated left ear like boiled cabbage hove into view. A selfie taken to check out an array of ear hoops, he had long since dumped it into the trash file. Someone had apparently fished it out and printed across the bottom "WHOO'D FANCY THIS CLANCY?"

A message suddenly popped up on his screen. Evidently someone was waiting for him to take the bait.

> *Clancy– you really are a dark horse ;-)*
> *but perhaps your safer outside the stable*
> *PS take a peek at this ...*
> *Fancy Clancy - an international celebrity! :-o*

Attached was access to leader in the International Post site. His jaw dropped in horror – there was the same photo. He scanned the key phrases helpfully highlighted in yellow.

Clavers Clancy ... hacked ... confidential records ... Trojan House ... Cayman Islands ... Interpol ... banking chaos ... plummeting ... published names ... financial security at risk ... riots in London ... death squads in Caracas ... catastrophic bank failures ... agents of destruction ... international terrorist links ... special task force

His eyes flooded in dread as he looked again at the ghastly photo displayed in the header. It was most certainly his ear.

International police ... converging ... holed up ... pawn of 'the Emir'... Shazzam ...

Clay's eyes began to cross in dread. Someone was making a terrible mistake.

Suddenly his screen flashed to indicate an incoming email. "That ear is hot property worldwide, girls swooning for a nibble. Perhaps you could drop by and tell me your secret. P.S. barriers down. Once in lifetime offer."

Clay crept out of the office discreetly, and made his way along the tortuous gangways to Tamim's stateroom. To his astonishment, all security sensors along the route had been disabled for his passage. None of the guards even looked up as he passed; doors opened automatically without any identity confirmation. He passed directly through the security lobby and found Tamim hunched over a screen, his misshapen body clad in dirty T shirt and pizza stained sweat pants. He turned and smiled encouragingly, revealing the gappy brown teeth and exhaling an appalling odour of salt vinegar staleness.

"Well I'm impressed! Though it looks as if you may have set yourself up for a bit of collateral damage."

Clay flopped down miserably amidst the debris on the sofa, “Justin’ll be down on me like a ton, somebody’s framing me – I’m perverbially without a paddle.”

“But of course you must by now have realised that it’s your busy boss that set you up! Collateral damage as they say. I can hardly think that Jay-Bee will be that furious, chortling to himself behind those dainty pink shades.”

Clay only stared at him in disbelief, not knowing what to think. “Not Justin?”

“Face it! He’s popped you into the frontline - cannon fodder. Not very sporting!”

“Wadavi dunn’a him? Onlie dalways followed his instrucshuns.” Clay presented a picture of despairing dread.

“Oh well! at least in international circles, you’re a celebrity. You’ve been officially named as the heroic whistleblower responsible for shaming a whole posse of villains. You’ve dropped a blazing spotlight on one of the world’s most secretive of tax shelters and you’ve acquired a load of fans through the sheer brazen moxie of your disclosures. Real courage, I’d say! Daddy-Abu must be over the moon at the moment. He can play the righteous saint, at last! You are certainly hot property – all his of course - ultimately he should be able to sell your carcass off at top dollar!”

“But I don’t know nuffing about anyfing,” Clay looked ashen.

“How cool is that?” Tamim relied brightly.

“But it’s like some guy’s framin’ me.”

“Everyone is happily engaged, debating whether you are a dark horse, or just an idiot savant. Personally I suspected the latter – perhaps without the *savant* qualification.”

“And now you’ve got us all revelling in the minutiae of your lurid life, makes my own drab existence look hardly worth the candle. Although I must say I don’t warm to your bedroom decor. Surely *Tawnee* should set higher standards?”

“*Tawnee?*” Clay vaguely recalled a momentary dalliance with ‘Tawnya - ravenous haired Russnya buety’ who had popped up unexpectedly on his side bar.

He cast his mind back to all those curious messages that Justin instructed him to file away methodically. And then he recalled Justin’s evident irritation over their ill-advised visit to confront Zebr@. Why had he not seen the signs?

Tamim threw his hands wide in an air hug. “But one thing for sure, you won’t be welcome on Shazzam for long. Daddy-Abu is undoubtedly cresting at the moment but I imagine that he’ll soon attach you to a large anchor the moment the novelty fades – or at least when he can agree your price. I know what happens when people come to grate on his nerves. He has trained staff for dealing with excessive boredom.”

Lips quivering Clay blanched and gulped like an oxygen deprived guppy. Tamim resumed blithely, “You probably have a few minutes leeway before the mood swings. I would suggest that you use that window of opportunity to make a swim for shore.”

“But it’s like a mile! and I don’t akshully swim!” Clay squeaked. Tamim considered this drawback for a moment then his gappy smile opened up

again. “Well there you have it then, not much future either if you just stick around ... especially when you’ve got my place so well wired.”

Then to Clay’s surprise Tamim abruptly excused himself and retreated into the bedroom shutting the door behind him.

Clay looked around wildly. This was hardly a scene that he wanted witnessed. He knew exactly where the surveillance monitors were hidden. Like a demented cat he rushed around the room dragging devices from positions of clever concealment and crushed them underfoot.

The moment he had completed his wrecking spree and flopped back in his chair to catch his breath, Tamim’s door opened and emerged, with a snagged brown smile. “I hope that you’ve been busy devising Plan B; it’s always best to know where your loyalties lie.”

He waddled over and threw himself down into a director’s chair and picked up two strands of wire that Clay had wrenched from a midden of old equipment moments before and inspected them quizzically.

“Take off your shoes,” he said abruptly, “you’ll need to stage a theatrical exit at least – make it look like a moment of panic! Lob them onto my sun deck but make sure the cameras don’t catch you. And you might as well include your jacket; make it look like a moment of panic.”

“And then what?” Clay was reluctant to hear how the next scene might unfold.

“Well you stay here of course. Be my guest! We’ll soon discover whether your house cleaning has been effective. Of course if you didn’t do the job properly, then we’re both toast!”

Clay flopped down miserably on the sofa and pulled off his shoes.

“Anyway it may not be for long if your pal Mara is sharp enough to figure out what’s expected. I think that we’ll get her to buy a lottery ticket on your behalf. Tonight at midnight, with any luck, but I have to admit the odds are only one in 19 point 2 billion, you may be a very fortunate man, an international celebrity – or else you’ll be scraping the bottom of the lake.”

When he returned from the sun deck Tamim led him into his bedroom. The under-ventilated room was rank with stale food smells. Clay cast himself down onto a bed covered with discarded printouts and stared at the ceiling in a daze.

Tamim prepared an email for Mara to be transmitted via Clay’s account. Mentioning nothing of his immediate plight he blithely asked her to buy him a ticket for tomorrow’s lottery. He scanned a page containing a sequence of numbers in boxes ranged like a phone dial. Each of the twelve boxes was carefully crossed with fragmentary encryption lines.

The message ended with the rather cryptic remark “Tamim says don’t let the cat out of the bag, yours sincerely Clay”

Clay looked very doubtful, “Don’t sound zactly like me, She’s gonna see through it a mile.”

“I certainly hope for your sake that she does.”



trencher.com/end-times

zebr@ > Elron's body turned up in an alley off Bin Street - death ascribed to substance abuse. Hah! The least of his sins!

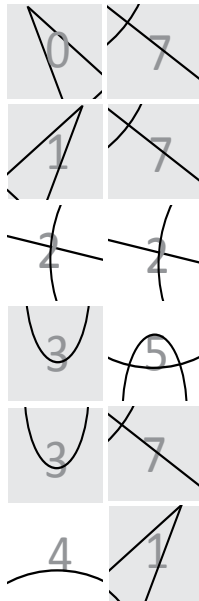
mara Though I was repelled by the showmanship, he had a vision unlike most people. He tried to break people out of their Tainer holding patterns.

zebr@ > Just another self-deluded charlatan. Those old gods never had any validity— it was WE who created THEM in our own image. We are only living through the Twilight of such Gods.

mara > But what framework is put in its place? Man is by not the measure of all things, merely the Measurer ad one with a very defective scale.

Just the Ticket

Mara picked up Clay's message moments later. At first she thought it was another of Justin's lovelorn ploys. But the reference to the *cat* reminded her of Tamim's appalling drawing. Then she realised that each of Clay's suggested numbers printed in a long line on the scanned sheet was apparently encrypted with very odd cancellation lines. They resembled fragments of Tamim's cat.



On a separate sheet she carefully sketched out the cat's head inscribed over the configuration of a phone keyboard as she recollected Tamim's sketch. She paired these up the with numbers from a phone keyboard.

This produced a number sequence of very different numbers:

19
39
44
08
09
23

She felt rather daft as she cycled over a mile of broken pavement to purchase a single ticket in the foyer of the Paradigm Plaza. She registered the ticket in the name of Clavers Clancy.

* * *

The grand draw for the lottery was held in the Crystal Ballroom of the Paradigm Plaza. The prize, a staggering *30 million dirham*, was to be paid in one of the planets most reputable hard currencies!

Only the privileged had been able to secure admission to an evening of rarefied entertainments, culminating in the draw. The proceedings were relayed live around the globe as befits a 'world class' city. Many hopefuls, clutching their tickets, made the journey to encamp near the security gates of the Golden Cadena or congregate amidst the burnt out public buildings in Civic Square. Here they were able to catch glimpses of a privileged world parading along Grand Boulevard in their limousines.

Within the *Celestial Paradigm*, at the centre of the Crystal Ballroom attended by four spectacularly sequinned amazons, reposed *Veritas*, a machine with an unequalled capacity for random number generation. Each winning number was produced from links to six random sources. All awaited the moment when each would be announced in a reassuring

incontrovertible computer voice and projected onto a giant screen overhead. Outside the winning sequence would then be laser projected onto the night sky cloud cover.

The moment came and was accompanied by choruses of enthusiastic gasps or groans of dismay as tickets were consulted.

Nineteen ...
Thirty Nine ...
Forty Four ...
Eight ...
Nine ...
Twenty Three ...

There was a stunned silence as the audience looked at each other in disappointment. There had been no winners within this august assembly of worthies, no one rushing forward shrieking ecstatically clutching the winning ticket.

In fact it took some hours for details of an actual winner or in this case winners to emerge. Searches had been swift to pinpoint global positioning of the lucky candidates purchases.

A glorious sunrise which saw the last of the disheartened stragglers depart from Civic Square belied the day of violent dissention that lay ahead. The rumour had already begun to circulate that despite overwhelming improbability there had actually been *two* local winners. They would be obliged to divide the prize equally. The winning tickets had been bought in two locations, in the *Paradigm Plaza* and at a distribution hub in *Tainer Galax*. The city held its breath awaiting details of these fortunates.

But by mid-morning the news media erupted in dramatic description of an elderly relict in the Tainer Galax, Betty Clinger, who had collapsed on hearing news of her good fortune and been rushed to the Premier Class Infirmary. The ticket had been presented to her by an unknown well-wisher. A large group of needy dependants was pictured clustered around her hospital bed, ministering to her dying moments.

News of the enigmatic purchaser of the second ticket took longer to emerge. But when it did the social networks began to erupt in righteous indignation.

For the second winner to present the correct digits was named as a member of the Emir's own onboard security staff, an agent named Clavers Clancy, reputedly a close confidant of the Emir himself. Hoping to evade detection he had surreptitiously purchased his ticket by proxy in the lobby of the *Paradigm Plaza*.

Clancy was soon identified as the same person named as the source of recent leaks exposing the identities of Trojan Bank depositors. There were howls of foul play and the smoke of destruction already began to rise over some of the more volatile Tainers. The odds against such a result were so astronomical that it was obvious that the whole charade had been contrived to bilk a gullible public. It was impossible to construe anything less than gross corruption.

ES-Tech acted swiftly by impounding Veritas, wrenching it from its plinth and removing it to its headquarters for forensic study.

* * *

And so De Vere awoke that morning to enjoy a broadening smile on his face. His ecstasy grew hourly as news of further riotous outrage rolled in.

He would have to congratulate McCubbins on an unexpected stroke of genius. That crafty old witch! The lottery result had not only completely discredited the Emir but it had also diverted the spotlight from all those murky Trojan House affairs.

But where was this purported winner, this *Fancy Clancy*? It would be rewarding to have him arraigned and paraded before the public eye. Public censure would quickly shift away from embarrassed Trojan depositors to this criminal fraudster in the employ of a rapacious foreign Emir.

Communications with Shazzam had been entirely curtailed. ES-Tech considered undertaking a raid on the ship to seize incriminating documents. But due to its diplomatic status, Shazzam was inviolable; the resulting stand-off became a focus of international interest. New Mid was at last being gloriously restored to its stature as a '*world class*' city with '*world class*' problems.

Meanwhile a tsunami of rage engulfed the Tainers of New Mid. The hard currency required to purchase tickets represented major sacrifice for so many. Desperate souls had paid appallingly over the 'official' exchange rates on their Goldies. That the whole process had been revealed as fraudulent and utterly intolerable.

Fractious crowds burst forth from their Tainers and stormed into the City Centre. New Midland braced itself for a return of the riots that had once left huge tracts of the Interstitials in smouldering ruin. ES-Tech forces were obliged to deploy sopor gas to 'disincline' unruly crowds amassing at the Flora Terminus. Nevertheless, thousands of others converged on the Cadena and smashing through barriers made their way to the waterfront to jeer at Shazzam, moored in isolated splendour. Others rampaged along the Esplanade smashing anything that lay to hand. Though security guards had been given permission to use live ammunition, many refused,

feeling resentful that they too had succumbed to lottery dreams.

The genius of the Tainer concept had been derailed overnight. The fiasco had brought together disparate populations in a common cause of protest, creating a melting pot of seething rage.

The hysteria only began to subside when a harbour patrol drew up in the shadow of the huge yacht. Bystanders with binoculars relayed details of the scene unfolding in slow motion. Evidently the officers were being denied permission to board the vessel.

Suddenly two tiny figures appeared on an upper deck amidships, both kitted out in orange floatation gear. They were seen gesticulating wildly to the patrol boat. Then the two figures were observed tussling with each other. Security staff was converging to separate them when in a sudden ungainly lunge the larger figure catapulted the smaller over the railing. There was a gasp from the shore crowd as the ejected body missed by a hair's breadth being broken on the police launch and landed in the choppy waters alongside. The figure left aboard was dragged away by a knot of converging attendants.

The crowd watched spellbound as a limp, apparently unconscious body was pulled aboard the patrol boat. Then to the collective fury of the observers, the police launch roared off along the shoreline, avoiding the ravaging chaos of those ashore baying for blood.

Sanctuary

Mara had already returned, dejected, to her dreary base at Grey Nuns. Against all better judgement she had followed the crowds through the ruptured cordon of the Cadena wanting to glimpse Shazzam where Clay was so evidently in danger. She was quite certain that Clay had been the tiny figure that she had seen ejected. The other figure who had hurled him overboard appeared to have been Tamim. She could make no sense of what she witnessed.

She then pushed her way into the office of the ES-Tech Harbour Police to try and discover where they had taken him, but had received only a humiliating challenge from a narrow eyed agent, "And who are you? Some kind of close relative?" She backed off quickly. Clay was now a pawn under the control of ES-Tech; she knew that he would be used in whatever expedient story they constructed to explain the chaotic course of the day's events.

The Emir's lottery had been utterly discredited. It suited everyone to imagine Clay as the villain masterminding these machinations. Poor dumb Clay, so malleable in everyone's hands. She deeply regretted falling into Tamim's trap in purchasing his ticket. She could not understand his reasons for setting him up. The disappointed populace of New Midland would be enraged if she revealed any part in the fiasco and would probably converge to wreak havoc on the Trenchers headquarters. It was better to lay low. The light was fading as she stumbled, exhausted, up the broken asphalt path to the refectory door. As she fumbled with the door latch she caught a sideways glimpse of a little black and white knot of tassels caught on a bush by the door; ... or had it been left there on purpose? She picked it up and turned it over in her palm, trying to make sense of the implications. She looked around and pushed her way

into the dense bushes where she found Justin's abandoned scooter lying amidst discarded debris of many decades. Its cheerful racing stripes had been disguised by rotted matting; the other tassel lay nearby trampled in the mud.

She knew where she would find him and made her way down to the end of the garden, pushed the protesting door of the chapel open and peered in dread of what she might encounter. How desperate would Justin be? Of what rash actions of self-harm might he be capable? To her relief, the chapel appeared empty, the orange chairs where they had met for 'off-the-record' chats seemed ominously aglow in the fading light.

She tentatively whispered his name, which rebounded as a disembodied echo. The pale light burning behind the ghastly reliquary filtered up from the crypt. She descended the steep steps on shaky legs. To her relief, the room appeared empty. Had she imagined encountering some terrible scene of self-obliteration perpetrated by a desperate man unhinged by all the mayhem he had caused?

Then her eye alighted on the tiny crumpled bundle of grief, misshapen as a battered insect, huddled against a pier. Justin looked up and mumbled "Hello Mara" in a pathetic voice. "I guess I'm in a fix".

"So you are Zebra, in a world in black and white. I should have known. But if you think that you're in a fix, just think how many others are facing disaster because of your misguided plans?"

Justin's broken voice was punctuated with gulps of self-pity, "I was always trying to do the right thing. How could I know that Tamim could unleash such a campaign of destruction? I only ever wanted to help him!" he sobbed.

“But framing Clay as a scapegoat is totally unforgivable; how could you delude yourself that you were doing the right thing?”

“None of this would have happened if Tamim had trusted me in the first place.”

“But instead Tamim has used Clay as a pawn in some twisted vendetta against his parents.”

“Mara, you’ve got to help me! I’ve got nowhere to hide. De Vere will crucify me; McCubbins, she will see to it!”

She looked at the pitiful crumpled frame. It was difficult to imagine the winsome conceits that he usually affected. Here was only the jagged, collapsed outline of abject misery.

“They’ll make me disappear. I am way too much of a liability. No one will ever trust me now. I have got to find a place to hide ... I came here ... I knew that in spite of everything you might find it in your heart ...”

“You still have a rather inflated opinion of my heart”, Mara added tersely. “Am I supposed to help because we’re still partners? Still kindred spirits? You’ve put Clay’s life in jeopardy; they’ve taken him off god knows where for interrogation. It seems to me that he is more likely to disappear at this stage.”

“Clay will be alright.” Justin wheedled, “Everyone will quickly realise that he couldn’t possibly have been the mastermind.”

“So that is how you see yourself, a mastermind? ... prepared to sacrifice everyone to prove your own superiority? Your high self-regard has always disgusted me.”

“Mara! Just let me stay here. Just for a while. They’ll never come looking for me among the Trenchers.”

Mara shook her head with rage, “You’d be putting us all in danger ... again.”

But it was her brain, not her heart that was working overtime at that moment considering whether having Justin under her control might achieve some little advantage for Clay, while he remained in the clutches of ES-Tech. A vague strategy was beginning to take shape in her mind.

She tried to justify it. Perhaps Justin had indeed attempted to do some of the right things on principle; he certainly believed in the validity of his objectives. In some ways he was employed in a world that was not unlike the decaying monastic world that the Trenchers had inherited from the old sisters. He believed that the ends would always justify his means. A curious, almost autistic, isolation had given him this strength of purpose. Perhaps that too was what she admired, perhaps even loved, in Clay ... that in his own way he remained imperviously unique and complete in himself despite so many drawbacks.

And so, without consulting her Trencher colleagues, she led him to sanctuary until the lottery furore had died down. There were so many people baying for blood, while others were equally keen to deflect the spotlight from their own roles in this affair.

Two old sisters still occupied adjacent rooms and there was a rookery of empty spaces available. She thought that perhaps they would warm to the concept of offering sanctuary in a case of dire need. Justin was allocated one of the disused cells and all his movements strictly confined to an interior courtyard, while Mara deliberated a strategy for moving him to a more permanent bolt hole.

Damage Control

Hours later Tamim surfaced and issued the first explanations of what had happened in those last chaotic moments aboard Shazzam. His report, carried by Media-Net, included a riveting video clip recorded by his body-cam. As he and Clay made their way up on deck the camera had been ingeniously employed navigating corners to avoid encounters with security staff. There had been shouting and confusion when the harbour police requested permission to board. Shortly afterwards Tamim was heard taunting Clay ‘You clueless wuss! - you don’t get a second chance!’. Clay is heard whimpering pathetically, “But I can’t hardly float.” The action then became kaleidoscopic as Tamim bundled him across the deck and toppled him over the railings. This was followed by a mêlée of onrushing guards and a dizzying plunge into oblivion; faces, hands, shreds of clothing swirled across the screen. This live sequence had immediately gone viral.

Attempting damage control, Walter, the Emir’s director of communications, released a sober statement explaining his master’s intense embarrassment at having been duped by saboteurs who were determined to wreck his vision for a New Midland renaissance and attempting to dissociate himself from any subterfuge in the lottery fiasco. As a gesture of good faith he announced that his Excellency would reimburse every bona fide ticket holder at double their purchase price.

“His Excellency wished only to participate in the renaissance of New Midland by investing resources that are so desperately needed. It was his altruistic intention to see that the widest section of society would reap its benefits of the ValleyView Vision.”

Nevertheless, Media-Net encouraged a resentful public hastening

to reclaim their ticket refunds, to see through such futile gestures of contrition.

To the considerable astonishment of the Colonel who had spent a sleepless night dreading her inevitable confrontation with de Vere, their early morning meeting proved surprisingly amicable. “You are certainly one helluva dark horse” he pronounced as he gazed admiringly at her equine features. “What arcane imagination has brought together all these ingredients that might yet save the VEE 3 and restore New Mid’s world-class position on the map. Even the riots are being construed in a positive light, as the righteous indignation of the demos. Where do you find guys like Clancy? I’m gobsmacked.”

In her aerie overlooking the placid lake Colonel McCubbins had drawn back the curtains a fraction allowing a dazzling ray of sunlight to penetrate her life. She was basking in the warmth of De Vere’s appreciation. “I don’t know how you pulled that one off, but it was a stroke of pure genius” rang encouragingly in her ears.

Astutely she had begun to focus de Vere ire upon Justin Brattoné as the author of his problems, though she could still only vaguely comprehend the subverted motivations of her wayward agent. She chided him that he had seen none of the danger signals in his assistant. Blinded by Justin’s unnaturally compliant nature, he had given Justin access to information that should have remained strictly confidential. De Vere began to wax incandescent about the underhand activities of the ‘duplicitous Brat’ upon whom he had ‘lavished his personal good-will’.

He was nevertheless pleased with Clay’s unexpected victory. The Emir had been so thoroughly discredited by this masterstroke that de Vere

imagined even Zwielight might be induced to return to the Trojan camp.

Colonel McCubbins remained calm in the face of this posturing bluster, for it was not without a certain quality of cluelessness that she had managed to hack her way to the helm of the city's security establishment. "You are well placed to make this fiasco highly profitable for Media-Net," she added with theatrical sarcasm.

Then, inadvertently, she again displayed her true mettle, "What we need now is a hero, someone in the spotlight who represents the spirit of New Mid at its best. We'll undoubtedly pick up Brattoné in due course; a creature so dependent on technology has nowhere to turn. But in the meantime we ought to have on board someone who we can all get behind, someone *fragrant* who will enhance your spotless reputation as well as ours ... "

The hero that emerged obligingly to embrace wildly over-inflated public encomium fanned to life by Media-Net ... was Clay, the mastermind who had so boldly dared to expose the scheming of the Emir and had unmasked a gangster's intention to create an international money laundering Mecca out of the ValleyView casino. The murky links between ValleyView and Prometheus Project investment were downplayed.

In contrast to the Emir's chicanery, the exemplary Trencher Trojan collaboration was revealed in fuller detail through De Vere's determined campaign.

So Clay was suddenly discharged from captivity to a hero's welcome. Colonel McCubbins announced that Clavers Clancy would be awarded the *Superlative Service Ribbon* for services to the community. The City Planning cabal announced shortly afterwards that the entire length of Bin Street would henceforth be renamed *Clancy Boulevard*.

Though Malyn Staryk implored de Vere to approve a ‘face to face’ interview with the hero of the moment. “People like Clancy show that we can still muster some of those ancient Roman virtues.” De Vere however felt it would be prudent to veto the suggestion. The situation still remained too volatile. “At this delicate stage it is best for our Clavers to orchestrate his message through official channels only.”

And so Clay emerged in triumph and returned to his digs at the Convent with his *Superlative Service Ribbon* hanging over his cot on a peg that had once supported an image of the Saviour.

The Escape

As he fastened his seat belt and flopped back into the cossetting recliner, Zwielight glanced from his window at the shabby decay of this once vibrant airport. He sighed, muttering under his breath, "Farewell New Mid, ... I bid this squalor adieu!" A line of redundant planes, decked in greasy dust was tethered alongside the boarded up departure lounge. Those melodramatic, posturing airport buildings with mouldering networks of walkways criss-crossing pointless voids had been once designed to overawe the traveller with a sense of destiny and purpose. They now seemed so very triste, abandoned even by ghosts. He now saw New Mid for what it was, a deeply depressing city. How had he ever been seduced to come there?

He breathed a deep sigh of relief when the great empty behemoth at last stirred. He glanced down protectively at his hand luggage, a battered brief case containing all the access codes for his life's work. The contents would one day change the world and consign all this desperation and decay, everything that he had come to loathe about New Mid, to irrelevance.

These flights were usually near empty, undertaken only to sustain New Mid's self-regard as a *world class* destination. There was only one other occupant in the cabin, a tarty looking woman sitting forwards across the aisle. She had peeled off her sunglasses and released a cascade of unnaturally red curls from her bulbous cloche hat. She too was feeling evident relief at her escape. She summed him up in an appraising glance and quickly turned away to peer out her window. Then apparently riveted by some outside detail, she released her seat belt and hunched over cupping her eyes against the glare.

Piqued with curiosity, Zwielight lifted his blind halfway and peered down at the low undulating roofs of a curious hub radiating tentacles across a sea of desolate asphalt. He could make out gigantic encircling letters proclaiming

* P-E-O-P-L-E-S ** P-A-L-I-S-A-D-E *

Their flight path crossed a hive-like belt of Tainer settlements below. Even from this height he could detect distinctive characteristics of the different agglomerations. Some appeared neatly ordered and rigorously managed. Then divided by an invisible boundary a neighbouring quarter would appear a seething mass speckled with white flecks like maggots feeding on a carcass. Other neighbourhoods betrayed a sinister, cinder black of large tracts now ravaged by fire.

Moments later the plane passed above the luxuriant overgrown wastelands of the Interstitials and then banked sharply to make its obligatory passage along the length of the Cadena. The flight path was contrived to affirm ‘*world-class-city*’ status to many wistful souls below who were clearly not going anywhere.

Zwielight shuddered in disgust at his last sight of the fabled chain of architectural jewels ranged along the vacant waterfront. He pulled down his blind with a decisive snap.

From his briefcase he ostentatiously pulled out a daunting leather bound tome, *Fractal Deformation and Bi-Lateral Genetic Manipulations, Mandelbrot Reassessed* and placed it conspicuously on the seat alongside to deflect unwanted advances from the cabin staff. They would be reaching their destination in Free Geneva some ten hours hence.

Then he opened his tablet and settled in to compose a letter. He spent

some moments choosing a jaunty font style which he imagined de Vere would find most insufferable then flexed his fingers with relish, not unaware that his russet headed companion across the aisle was observing him with growing interest.

* * *

Well Burrie Boy!

Imagine how I now rejoice at having escaped your 'world class' New Midden ... certainly I have no misgivings!

The Wild West sure lives on! It's quite the gambling town! - and so much latitude for bending the rules if you own the game. But I have decided to cash in my chips while I still have a pocket full.

When you originally enticed Prometheus to set up in New Mid under such favourable circumstances I had no idea that you intended to control our research. Of course I appreciated the brilliance of your funding wheeze and appreciated all the research facilities that you were able to lay on. But what I have grown to find intolerable is the stranglehold that your investors expect to exercise over the direction of our research. You never revealed that you fully intended to enchain Prometheus to be feasted upon by your eagles.

It was your little confidant Zebr@ who briefed me on the true intentions of your secretive Trojan Horse.

He revealed how we were all being groomed for your commercial agenda. I suppose that it was Zebr@ who then unmasked that shady Trojan clique and published their financial details. He's quite some operator!

Anyway it was he who revealed my true status, not as your feted guest but as your hostage, obliged to cater to your skewed conceptions of marketable genetic products. So I have much to thank that little guy for as my horizons again open.

The truth is that Promethean research cannot be regulated by what you choose to develop as your profitable market for genetic design. However ingenious your casino, money-laundering scam, Prometheus scientific research cannot be constrained by the opportunistic aspirations of those controlling our funding and directing what will be brought to market.

Genetic enhancement will neve jibe with the brazen profit mitives of your little cabal of investors and I am firtunate to have learned this through the intercession of our little Zebra.

Our vision of the future is one of greatest magnitude. For it is not frail human bodies but the breadth of the aspiration of our minds that will come to conquer the universe. But our minds must grow and come together if we are to align ourselves with the universal creative forces and realise a destiny which

*renders the aspiration of you and your Trojan House
picayune.*

*There is no stasis in nature, no time out for repose
and self-congratulation! The survival of the fittest
has never been about survival of the civilised -
though I reckon that our definitions of 'civilisation'
may be extremely variant.*

*And the beauty of my science is that there is no
stopping it! Research will continue to uncover the
unsettling facts of human existence. It is not a story
that can be reversed. This is an undirected process
and therefore inherently amoral. Yet I am convinced
that scientists will establish the framework of our
future society. We will not be content to stand to
meekly helping to promote an economy with you
positioned at the helm.*

*His Excellency has generously offered to accommodate
Prometheus in his new capital. He has bestowed
upon me a complete freedom to direct my research
and offered a patronage that is untied to any of the
commercial agendas that your investors were intent
on imposing. He truly realised that those who release
the potential of Cyber-Genetics control the future of
our race.*

*We have indeed reached a critical turning point
in human history, a profound change in the way
we conceive of ourselves as a species. We are at the
threshold of taking the greatest leap conceivable,*

not merely to know the mind of god, but to define that god's very nature!

I can only state that these changes will inevitably happen. Neither of us have any choice about this.

This is the nature of scientific discovery, the determination to uncover a pattern and the unflinching courage to contemplate its consequences. My credo is that of a scientist, - I address these frontiers, 'because they are there'.

I should remind you that I depart taking my intellectual property over which I claim full and undisputed rights.

Any attempt to infringe upon any of my patents will unleash a storm of litigation. The Emir, as you know, has deep pockets.

I trust that your Trojans will enjoy your 'World Class Casino', figuring out ever better ways to screw each other over, for which you all seem to have a particular aptitude.

Cheers for now Old Burrie Boy!

Aldebaran Zweilicht

A > Z >

Abduction

The Colonel was doubtful about the viability of sustaining euphoric media focus on Agent Clancy for an extended period. However she perceived advantages in having not just a hero of the moment but also in inflating the nefarious role of the counterbalancing villain, particularly one who was conveniently fugitive. Justin fulfilled all her requirements. Remembering his preachy voice and mock diffidence, she rejoiced in counting him as completely expendable. She encouraged de Vere in his riveting media cat and mouse pursuit of the man. The public were spurred by the promise of a substantial reward for Justin's apprehension. An hour did not pass without Media-Net running some new angle in the hunt for this elusive 'anarcho-terrorist' who was blamed in absentia for attempting to derail one of the few opportunities for local economic renewal open to New Mid.

The Goldie crashed in value overnight. This fuelled public animosity over Justin's role in undermining the fragile monetary system. Daily raids on safe houses were reported. *Tainer Galax* was isolated in a dramatic unit by unit search which turned up some minor accomplices. Overstimulated by Media-Net and galvanised by excitement of the chase the public was fed daily with reports of raids on potential refuges in some of the most dangerous Tainer communities. Security sweeps presented an ideal opportunity for enforcers to review cases of 'people of interest' and negotiate protection pay-outs.

A substantial reward for Justin's apprehension was posted and a string of tattlers, clamouring to reveal 'the real Brat within' emerged with lurid stories about his peculiar excesses. Disaffected colleagues stepped into the limelight with lurid tales of bizarre habits.

“Gosh, what a full life!” Mara suggested to Clay, “Surprising he could cram it all in,” as she scanned the convoluted confessions of a ‘professional nail sculptor’ who had assisted in cosmetic self-enhancement among other things.”

Clay did not look up from his obsessive challenges, “I dunno – spent most of his time in front of his screen, as far as I can see.”

How ironic though that both the hero and the demon of public imaginings were co-existing in the Convent, unknown to each other and separated by a few partition walls.

Mara made discreet daily visits to Justin’s cell to deliver supplies and news updates. His days as undercover web warrior were over. Reconnecting Justin with cyberspace would have precipitated his immediate detection despite his many aliases. Cyber watchmen, closely monitoring all data flows, were waiting for him to make any ‘signature move’. However much he might try to disguise his personal profile, search algorithms would adroitly penetrate his obfuscations and identify patterns that were as individual as a signature.

And so Justin was restricted to playing solitary off-line computer games and diverting himself with reruns of *‘Wheel of Fortune’* imported by Mara. Deprived of all access to a ‘live’ data, the interaction that had been his lifeline, he was beginning to lose all sense of perspective.

Mara tried to bolster his resolve. “But you always were a monk. How is this situation so very different now? Get a grip! You’ve just got to adapt yourself to different obsessions and stay off line. Make the best of it until we can find a long term safe house.” Mara cajoled. “I’m out on a limb as well as you, remember.”

Fortunately, unwelcome romantic tensions had abated in his enveloping misery. She was the only person that he saw in a day apart from an imbecilic old nun who was convinced that they were harbouring the Pope's brother.

But it was evident that Justin was becoming daily more depressed. Dwelling on the injustice of his position, his thoughts veered towards the increasingly maudlin and self-serving. He had been granted the kind of privacy that he had always craved, but it had been achieved by resigning himself to total isolation. One by one he revisited all his past battles and railed about his thwarted altruism. "All my life I have fought against the invasion of privacy in our information obsessed society." His voice began to wobble hysterically as he contemplated the injustice of his fate. "And yet I end up locked away in a godforsaken hell-hole surrounded by old crones ... just for unfurling the flag of freedom!"

Mara tried to keep this sense of self-pity in perspective, "But don't forget that like many bearing their flags of freedom, you were only too prepared to sacrifice others to serve your own ideals. What kind of a model was that?"

She mercifully suppressed some of the details of Clay's recent moment of glory. It would have ill-served Justin to know that only a short distance away sparkling blue and white signs were being installed on *Clancy Boulevard*.

Media-Net had undertaken such a thorough hatchet job on his reputation, exposing myriad heinous details, that she began to doubt that he could ever be rehabilitated. Riveting revelations emerged from those keen to claim their moment in the limelight. He was exposed as conniving to achieve the downfall of a blameless RevEl with material that was entirely fabricated. Papers recovered with Elron's body pointed to Justin's obvious

interference in his role of arch nemesis. Vigils were held at the Prayer Palisade in honour of the dead man, and acolytes emerged screaming for revenge. Colonel McCubbins issued a formal statement distancing ES-Tech from their rogue agent who had conceived his own personal vendetta against a ‘mostly-innocent’ man.

Selectively relaying these contrary snippets of information, Mara tried to mitigate his misery, “There are still plenty who still see you as a crusader for greater probity in an information obsessed world. Many still sympathise with someone who has incurred the wrath of the smug, secretive establishment by exposing it.”

He would only gaze back at her with broken tear-filled eyes of self-pity. “People are always afraid. The whistleblower is hated because he shows up the complicity of others who have not acted on their consciences. No one wants to be reminded of his own moral ambivalence when the whistle blows.”

Most days she found Justin, haggard after a restless night, dabbling distractedly with whatever stand-alone gaming challenge she had been able to source. Often she found him at the point of total despair. “My life’s meaningless without any outside context,” he moaned. She recalled how Clay once described Justin, locked into his latest campaign, back to the wall, oblivious to all round him. “But isn’t this the way you have lived your whole life, like some detached game in which the ‘baddies had to be obliterated to rack up your scores?”

This was only an invitation for Justin to rekindle his myth of the valiant crusader pursuing a daring quest. “My game was always focussed on the triumph of good over evil. I have always exercised my own freedom of choice. There are real issues out there in the blogosphere.”

She wondered whether he was ever the leader he imagined or merely playing an adrenalin fuelled game of cat and mouse? “Perhaps in your case that freedom should have been about turning off the game and stepping outside to take a deep breath.”

Justin just shook his head distractedly.

She realised that far from being a natural to monastic life, he had no inner landscape to fall back upon. His whole sense of well-being depended upon connective engagement, gathering information, secretly observing and assessing. He was a natural voyeur who thrived on what he thought he was getting away with.

Clay on the other hand was a different story. Despite his sudden celebrity, ES-Tech remained keen to protect him from public scrutiny as much as possible. He was assigned lighter tasks.

This sudden lack of focus at work rendered him ever more absent-minded. Mara was hardly surprised when he staggered into the refectory early one morning, looking distractedly for his Virtu-glass. He wandered about the kitchen in a fog and looked in the same drawer at least three times.

Later in the afternoon he returned, keen to show Mara the latest features on the replacement set issued by ES-Tech. They included an upgraded a virtual wand and camera features to see through the tiniest of cracks.

Mara yawned in amazement. It was a beautiful July morning and she admired the dainty new equipment in a perfunctory manner and then thought nothing more of it as she set off with Huggie to witness his latest

arbour labours.

Returning later to the refectory she noticed a bundle of rags discarded in the bushes by the refectory door. Nudging it with her toe she found to her horror that it was the old nun, quivering and in an evident state of terror. "It's the Inquisition!" she shrieked, "They've taken the Pope away for proving." She stammered, "I'll be next. I have to hide." As Mara coaxed the old crone out of the bushes, she suddenly recalled Clay's delight in his showing off the prosthetic Virtu-glass earlier that afternoon and mentioning having misplaced his old set. She had a sudden flash of intuition that something terrible had happened.

"Oh Justin! Oh you fool!" She sprinted back along the corridor to Justin's cell, to throw the door open upon a tumbled chaos. His bunk had been dragged half way across the floor, the sheets lay in a tangled heap and equipment was tossed everywhere, testimony to a violent scuffle. She had already fathomed what must have happened. On the floor in the corner she picked up Clay's shattered prosthetic lenses.

"Surely you should have known that they were just waiting to pounce, waiting for the moment that you went on line," she moaned. No one can disguise identity from the cybernetic guardians that can so quickly profil-analyse any data flow. More than anyone Justin should have known that he couldn't hide his signature profile from such relentless scanning. He supposed himself to be a master of these dark arts! He thought that he could outsmart the system and get away with it, even in the world that he had helped to sustain. He always thought that he was invincible.

Despite all his elaborate ruses, he had sent a fateful signature pattern which had allowed the cyber-wardens to trace his exact co-ordinates. This was ES-Tech at its most efficient. With maximum discretion they had removed this long-sought source of embarrassment. Colonel McCubbins

could at last sleep easily that night with a delighted de Vere off her back.

Mara realised that she would not encounter Justin again; he was a person who knew far too much; too many people were afraid of what he might divulge. He had too often proved that he could not be trusted.

* * *

The torrid weather continued unabated. The splendid Cadena sprawled out glittering in the sunshine, a monument to all those better things in life that can be dreamt up by the human imagination. But there was not a single soul on balcony or terrace to witness the glories of the empty azure sweep of the open harbour below.

The few Cadenites who could not contrive to be elsewhere had sought refuge from this unremitting view in cool conditioned dens of their apartments where in dimmed light the bustling information world beyond could be brought to their threshold.

Only a couple straggling despondently along the Boardwalk and plugged into separate cacophonies, were present to witness the departure of Shazzam as it silently pulled up anchor and glided off over the horizon.



