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Peacocks at the Pale

Tam Fairlie



Preface

Dr Antinous Noor, one of the most eminent scientists at the vanguard of a revolution in genetic science, has brought his world-renowned Noor Project to New Midland. The implications of this science are only hazily grasped by those who so desperately court its potential benefits to rebuild a ruined economy and divided society.

Noor possesses precious patents on genetic material. In young twins he has created the world's first successful experiment combining radical genetic intervention with implanted cyber enhancements. The twin's astonishing capabilities include an innate telepathy which allows them to communicate on the most profound levels. Their natures are deeply aligned and 'entangled'.

Many believe that such interventions represent the only viable future by healing increasingly fractious social divisions. But various interests are vying to take control of this research and tailor it to their own visions of the future.

The twins have developed a mentality that sets them apart from their creators. They have come to understand the implications of having been engineered to move beyond the Pale which has defined human aspiration from earliest times. They are preparing themselves to enter a vast and amoral landscape beyond.

However, Mara and her colleagues at the City Manor Farm cling to different social precepts. Their vision of a well-balanced life comes into direct conflict with the emerging genetic technology that many believe to be the only practical solution that will allow mankind to at last take control of human destiny.

The New Arrivals

uring the course of a sultry summer afternoon a large number of peculiar looking characters began to drift into the arrivals lounge of New Midland's International airport. They appeared morose and downcast. They did not make eye contact with one another, or even seem acquainted, yet they were curiously co-ordinated in their sombre appearance. Though they were mostly young, their pinched and hardened features suggested already thwarted appetites for life. Many were dressed in black and both sexes affected excessive make-up very inexpertly applied. Curiously, many items of clothing were threadbare and ill fitting as if the whole crowd had been equipped with cast-offs from a charity shop.

They had arrived in silent groups, dropped off by public transport. They were first reported by the manager of *Sensations* in her confectionery kiosk. She resorted to prescribed anti-terrorist procedures and called in airport security, fearing an impending incident. Regrettably, the Es-Tech security agents, clad in shiny black uniforms, only seemed to reinforce the dismal scene.

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

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

The incoming passengers of *Flight 901* from Geneva felt exhausted; shuffling along after an arduous flight followed by a further incomprehensible delay on the runway while the airline undertook 'special clearance provisions'. The cabin captives glared around in exasperation, trying to identify the celebrity or a medical risk that had caused their delay.

One of the people that they would not have suspected was an excessively affable gentleman who, throughout the flight, had made exhaustive efforts to engage the flight attendants in every conceivable personal service. His dark tinted glasses only partly concealed an apparently indefatigable curiosity about those around him. He had learned many biographical details of all his reluctant neighbours. He was an extrovert, perhaps a nutcase, but evidently not a terrorist.

Sitting directly behind him, and resistant to his babble, a weary, billiard-ball-bald father was travelling in the company of his twin sons. The two boys, indistinguishably dressed, attracted discreet sidelong glances. Both were curiously dome-headed and sported identical beanie hats, one tilted dramatically to the left and the other right. Their hunkered postures, blank moon faces, clean shaven heads, the petulant, half-parted, pouting lips, suggested unformed adolescence; however closer inspection revealed that the boys might be advanced well beyond their teenage years.

Initially the cabin staff had tried valiantly to engage them, but they were so completely rebuffed by the boys' supercilious behaviour that they soon abandoned them to the humourless ministrations of a senior steward. He paid no attention to their rude habit of humming distractedly under their breaths as they were being served.

At last processed through official channels, the natty extrovert paused briefly before passing through the sliding doors into the arrivals lounge. He adjusted his glasses with a deft touch, inserted a daintily manicured pinkie nail between side teeth and removed an imaginary fleck from his lapel with a disdainful flick. Then he made a smooth face into the reflective glass, puckering his lips and stroking his flamboyant moustache. He stuck out his tongue. Perhaps he was imagining the annoyance of the hidden security operatives behind the mirror.

Or perhaps he was priming himself for the mêlée he was expecting beyond the barrier.

In his turn he stepped through the sliding doors of the arrivals lounge and paused momentarily, relishing the raking lights like an actor expecting a burst of applause. He reacted to the sinister crowd, throwing up his hands with an exaggerated gesture that seemed almost feigned. He lifted his glasses. A sharp eye caught sight of two men in yellow jackets by the exit doors one of whom hailed him by raising a finger to touch the rim of his cap. The dandy responded with a slow, discreet nod.

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

But a startling transformation occurred in the demeanour of this affable dandy. A well-concealed reserve of aggression burst to the surface. Extending his arm, with briefcase at shoulder height, he barged his way through the crowd knocking every obstacle out of his path. The unruly crowd was caught off guard. A young man with clownish, black circled eyes rushed up and tried to wrestle the suitcase from him. In a fury 'the Doctor' hurled it into the face of his assailant. Another man grabbed his overcoat but he wriggled free and abandoned his suitcase and coat to these enraged terriers. A sudden shower of projectile eggs began to rain down upon him.

"Eggs, how appropriate!" he snarled contemptuously as he advanced with growing momentum across the lobby and into the open door of a waiting car beyond. Yellow-jacketed aides slammed the door and the locks snapped down. The guards leapt into the front seats as protesters threw themselves onto the windshield. They were shed as the car swerved off picking up speed.

The crisis passed suddenly. The frenzied crowd, instantly deflated into its previous listlessness, looked blankly at one another and then began to evaporate as silently and mysteriously as they had arrived.

There were, however, two spectators who were closely observing this

fracas from the safety of the arrivals café. Both lingered to observe the aftermath.

One, a woman of well-concealed age, had sat discreetly in the corner of the coffee bar. Layered clothing attempted to disguise her bird-like physique and hawk-sharp facial features. Her oversized tinted sunglasses tucked under a tight hair kerchief might have suggested visual impairment, were it not that her gaze was so keenly riveted on the arrivals gateway. She tensed whenever it flew open and craned forward to inspect each person that stepped across the threshold. When 'the Doctor' appeared and the crowd began to vent its fury, she raised her glasses for a better look at him as he strong-armed his way across the lobby. She leapt up impulsively and followed the surging crowd towards the exit. After the mêlée began to disperse, she carefully picked her way back through the debris strewn on the floor, obviously shaken by the violence that she had witnessed. She stopped to pick up a discarded leaflet scanning it distractedly. She seemed to make no sense of what she read and let it drop to the floor.

But there was another observer who had positioned himself behind her in the bar. His glittering coal-black eyes darted about the hall and missed nothing. They were drawn quite frequently in her direction. His olive complexion and fashionably neglected beard suggested a free spirit, guided by his own wilful timetables. On closer inspection however his trim physique appeared uncomfortably cinched-in. Tightly tailored, casual clothing erred towards some long-remembered youthful size too small. Occasionally he would lift his phone as if checking for messages and discreetly take a photograph of the woman in front of him.

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

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

Some moments later the doors from the baggage reclaim area quietly

The New Arrivals

slid open again only to reveal the exhausted father trailed by his bratty twin sons, who were now both sporting oversized wraparound dark glasses. His polished bald head reflected the luminous points of the overhead lighting. Behind him he trundled a red plaid canvas bundle buggy.

Following rigorous customs inspections, a messy tangle of wires trailed behind it. He surveyed with obvious distaste the debris littering the nearly empty hall and the contents of the suitcase trampled into the egg strewn mess.

The two young boys so uncannily identical in appearance had donned identical pale blue shiny nylon travel jackets cut short high above the waist. Leotard body stocking outfits which might have looked modish on a slender childish physique only accentuated their puffy corpulence. The unpleasant suggestion of over-indulgence was further belied by the ungainly gait of those ill-attuned to much exertion. They followed their beleaguered parent like waddling ducks and picked their way disdainfully through the debris.

The bald man wheeled his buggy through the debris with care, muttering to himself.

"Noor certainly likes to make a splash ... always painfully short on diplomacy. Well, he does revel in his amateur dramatics!"

The two boys stared at him vacantly and said nothing.



Names

My most panicked dreams are ones where I simply cannot remember something that I should know - like my own name!

In last night's ordeal I find myself wandering down a long, empty hallway flanked by lists of people who have been awarded 'The Diploma'. A disembodied voice booms out "Who are you? And what are you doing here?" But I cannot remember what my name is. The hallway seems familiar but I cannot be sure.

I scour curling sheets of paper, covered with the dense printing, that have been tacked to the wall, frantically hoping to recall my own name and find it listed.

What destiny is hidden in a name? I was dropped into the world as 'Thomas - Sinister', but was that name ever really mine? In my case surnames are irrelevant when your birthright has been blended from so many genetic sources.

Dex, my twin brother, or 'Thomas - Dexter', insists on calling me by the rather demeaning 'Sinny'. This is the pathetic destiny embodied in my name..

'Sin' alone might seem more resonant. But then I reflect that dedication to unmitigated nefariousness has a downside, long hours

peering into gloomy consoles, muttering under your breath. And of course the scores of deformed minions would be demoralising.

'Sinister' unabbreviated just sounds pretentious and I could imagine a glint of derision creeping into the eyes of those pronouncing it. It would also be very difficult to live up to, especially when you are blue eyed and your Body Mass Index is probing the limits of acceptability. (that is to say, I am 'big boned')

With Dex however, the name is all about sex appeal. He fancies himself as utterly irresistible, a 'chick magnet' (though there have been few opportunities to test this on any but virtual partners).

I have reservations about his tactic of levelling his unwavering vacant stare, two empty blue saucers, into the eyes of someone he has decided to charm.

A name like 'Dex' is decisive; it lets nothing stand in its way, whereas 'Sinny' suggests weakness. My name is too suggestive of introspection and acceptance of others' viewpoints. And so I tend to become enmeshed in others' intractable problems. In a dither of indecision, I usually await consensus before I commit to a course.

Dex just looks at me contemptuously and shrugs, knowing that I will eventually fall in with his plan.

We were both given the name 'Thomas', but then of course we entered the world as a single package. Why would a name like Thomas, 'the twin', exist? Does it suggest mysterious embodiment of another being that shares an identity yet occupies an unknown, different dimension?

Or does 'twin' refer to some essence over which our 'creators' with all their patents and their syringes had very little control?

State of Alert

n a raised dais at the end of Frontier Hall, Es-Tech's Director of Security Operations, Major Rumsden, glared at his audience and pushed out his lower jaw like a powerful piece of heavy excavation equipment. He had been outlining a chilling vision of corruption lying at the heart of New Mid society. He scanned the audience aiming his gimlet gaze at randomly selected points below. He raised one hand, in mirror-practised manner, abruptly flipping it to extend his palm towards the startled man seated beside him in a gesture of supplication.

"We must hold no delusions. There is an enemy out there stalking us. Recently we have seen his contorted face of hate in unconscionable attacks that almost succeeded in bringing one of our local success stories to its knees. The *City Seven* attack has taught us that we must maintain strong security in an ever more dangerous world."

"Stalking us are terrible forces that seek to poison the fruits of truly progressive scientific research, or worse, attempt to deploy it against us. We confront a subversive enemy who will prey on our better instincts for generosity and energetic free enterprise."

Everyone in the audience had recognised his reference to the recent disastrous attempt by a terrorist fringe group, the *City Seven*, to sabotage the research being undertaken by one of the leading scientific research centres in New Midland, *Gene-Sys Biotech*. The plans of this 'terror cell' had been uncovered through the dedicated vigilance of Es-Tech,. The full horror of the intended catastrophe had now become chillingly evident.

Seven young malefactors had been arrested. These depraved criminals had been poised to release bio-engineered contamination throughout the *Gene-Sys* production facilities and permanently compromise their clean room environment. Following a tip-off, Es-Tech had infiltrated the nucleus of this group and gained access to their collaborators nefarious plans. Ultimately Es-Tech had co-ordinated the raid that resulted in the dramatic arrests of the group's surviving ringleaders.

At the right elbow of the Major sat a substantial woman who appeared

to anchor the whole stage in her firm reality. Hellana Nix, the head of Es-Tech Security International, was Major Rumsden's boss. His address had been laced with praise for her inspired leadership throughout this harrowing affair. Compressed into a well-tailored suit, she sat throughout the proceedings with a firm smile on her glossy, ruby lips. Who could better embody an open, confident society standing defiant against malevolent interference than this robust matriarchal presence?

Hellana Nix roused herself from benign repose to contribute, "Indeed we have all just witnessed some of the chaotic polarisation surrounding these issues that reigns just beyond these doors. You can still hear them out there screaming their lungs out! There are many who are hell-bent on thwarting this visionary research and depriving New Mid of the opportunity to become a vital centre of world scientific advancement."

Before she had a chance to amplify upon her remarks, the Major chimed in, "And others who would turn their backs on science altogether, who purport to address social inequalities, mostly self-inflicted." An obliging titter ran through the audience at this uncharacteristic levity. Many were quick to spot this oblique reference to the *City Manor Farm* community and its precarious existence on the threshold of the proposed Hyperion development. This group of 'agro-anarchists' was well represented in the seething crowd that was camped in the street beyond.

At the fulcrum of the long table sat Dr Krafft, a tiny man in a powder blue suit and yellow tie. His eyes, bulging and frog-like, revealed none of his thoughts. On behalf of *Gene-Sys*, he had earlier concluded a laboured explanation of anticipated advances in biotech research that would address the terrifying array of environmental problems confronting 'our planet'. Krafft's annoying habit of drumming his fingers on the lectern during extended pauses when a word eluded him had quickly lulled the audience into comatose complacency.

His enthusiasm for adjusting the versatile genetic characteristics of blue algae that enable this life form to thrive in colder climates had not captured the public's imagination. His insights seemed to bear little relevance to a public consultation meeting to address the creation of a 'world class' technology park in an area of the City which had for a long time been a derelict embarrassment, the so-called Port Lands.

The rousing rant of the Major was proving much more effective in stirring the audience to passionate acquiescence. "Our vibrant, progressive society will never come presented to us on a plate! There are substantial costs attached in providing the secure environment that will attract top-flight scientists and investor funding from around the world. They will only come if they are confidant of a safe place to live, shop and bring up their families. They will demand every service that our 'world class' city can provide."

The earlier contributions had amply demonstrated this balanced vision. A smooth faced, planning advocate with exuberant hair and evenly arrayed teeth, was positioned at the opposite end of the long desk to balance the severity of the grim-jawed security consultants. This visionary advocate for Hyperion, in glistening silken suit, basked in a pool of flattering light.

Thierry Racléré, whose name had been reduced to 'Theory Rackleery', by Hellana Nix, had earlier waxed eloquent about his Prosperity Zone or 'Pee-Zee' enclave, where relaxed planning guidelines would obviate all dispiriting red tape. A large screen positioned behind the dais flashed up a video show of breathtaking images of the proposed community with its extravagant 'iconic' architectural creations arrayed behind spectacular water features. An 'Esplanade' of opulent, glassy apartment towers, each endowed with an brash signature identity was ranged 'like a string of pearls' along the Portal waterfront.

Much of his video was devoted to depicting racially diverse and exquisitely clad people shopping serenely or enjoying light-hearted social moments on treadmills in health venues.

Aside from the often repeated 'sustainability' word, one of the constantly affirmed advantages of the proposed development was its position on a promontory. A single approach road ensured that the security of the community could be strictly controlled if the need ever arose.

The affable Thierry concentrated on lauding New Mid's 'open for business' attitudes. His relaxed style of communication had provided a reassuring balance to the scary algal preoccupations of the bug-eyed, elfin Dr Krafft and the thundering admonitions of the Major.

Perhaps at times, the Major might be faulted for resorting too readily to the language of the hospital *Emergency Room* in depicting the Gene-Sys team as working to transplant a viable new heart into their community ... "a heart that will pump new blood and vitality into a wasteland that has lain moribund for generations."

"And whose fault was that?" a questioning murmur emerged from the audience. Hellana's glittering eyes swivelled towards a source of a potential controversy.

There was a commotion on the floor just in front of the press enclosure. With practiced timing Malyn Staryk, the celebrated anchor of the weekly *Staryk Report*, had induced this sudden stunned silence. A tremulous frailty in her voice strained many ears. "But surely what we want to avoid is a panicked decision on a development which will shape New Mid for generations to come. The relaxation of business, legal and planning controls in the so-called '*Pee-Zee*' is a long term commitment. We should not lose sight of the fact that there are viable alternatives for the Portal lands. Having planted apocalyptic images in our minds, you suggest that the only solution is your gated, high security enclave. But this seems to me more suited to your requirements than it is to New Mid's citizens."

"Aren't we just inviting further protest by giving dissidents something to focus their anger upon?"

The Major returned, "I am merely suggesting that we must take the bull by the horns. The future world will be a very dangerous place. Vigilance will be required to deny this technology to those who wish us ill."

Malyn continued, "But are we not just terrorising ourselves?"

The Major cut in irascibly. "The security of our democratic system has *never* been so compromised! These are not groundless fears that I am addressing! There are many bitter, irrational people, even on our doorstep! Just listen to the riot outside these doors. We are being called upon to defend a quality of life that is already under attack. This future world is not for the faint-hearted!"

Malyn's voice wavered slightly as she pressed on, "I recognise that we must be prepared to counter threats and I do understand that security will play an important role in any development, but surely we must do this with careful consideration and debate about freedoms that we must sacrifice to achieve this?

Evidently peeved, the Major growled irascibly, "It's always easy for the uninformed to adopt a self-righteous tone. Naturally I am not at liberty to reveal details of what are very confidential security concerns. I can only reassure you that, as professionals, the use of excessive force will be a last resort. The business of Es-Tech is effective risk management."

"But who is actually driving this vision? Why should we be considering a security enclave at the heart of our revitalised waterfront?"

The Major deflected the question "Hyperion is the only developer with sufficient acumen and means to knit many participants within a collateral agreement. The remediation costs required to bring back these long-poisoned lands will be staggering. Hyperion has stepped up to the plate in good faith and is already initiating this hugely expensive program for contamination remediation. The public want reassurance that the appropriate safeguards are in place and that security is being managed effectively."

An inaudible throb, like an expression of this communal heartbeat, followed these words, as the audience exhaled its pent-up anxiety. Suddenly an explosive electronic crackle ripped through the address system jolting many in somnolent repose. The two overhead chandeliers seemed to surge with a more brilliant light which caught the glint of metal pinned to sober suits, or the sparkle of ostentatious stones. The Major turned to deploy his practiced gargoyle rictus on the press box.

The applause when it broke through tentatively at the end of his statement became curiously magnified into tumultuous approbation. The enlarged image of the Major seemed to inflate on the projection screen behind. A grimace of determination rippled across his worried brow. His taut shoulders squared with admirable resolution.

Malyn Staryk's poignant question seemed to have been eclipsed by

the swelling effusion of the room.

Sensing that the evening was drawing to a close, Hellana Nix again roused herself to her hosting duties in expressing the appreciation of all assembled. Striding up between the Major and the tiny Doctor she raised both their hands high and shook them with a matronly affirmation. With some delight the audience may have noted the contrast of her ample physique encased in its burred woollen suit that flared bell-like at the waist and tapered abruptly to delicate ankles and dainty polished raised talons. The Major, so purposeful mere moments before, suddenly withered in comparison. As for the doctor, he looked like an embarrassed elf.

"On behalf of Es-Tech I can only thank *Theory Rakleery* for eloquently setting out his vision for the community ... and of course our own Major Rumsden for so compellingly addressing the future context in which we at Es-Tech must learn to operate."

"... and to thank as well Doctor Krafft who has explained in such ... detail the utterly fascinating scope of his research. The collaboration of Gene-Sys and Es-Tech is certain to establish the pre-eminence of our City as an international hub for genetic research."

She added as an afterthought, "And of course from the floor, we must thank Malyn Staryk for her heartfelt contribution by purchasing a copy of her sensational new book, *Blind Terror* ... is it not Mally? This will be launched in bookshops across the country within days."

Malyn nodded and muttered inscrutably. "Something like."

"We remain, poised, armed to confront an increasingly dangerous future. Our enemy may seem adaptable and fuelled by rabid fanaticism, but rest assured that Es-Tech is positioned to profile and target their evil intentions. Our response will be co-ordinated, relentless and effective."

It was a relief to all when the address system began to stutter and explode into such a cacophony of staccato interruptions that she was obliged to draw her remarks to hasty conclusion.

A company like Es-Tech is designed to engender fear and suspicion. The message of the Colonel had been highly effective in conjuring up the terrifying world lurking beyond the pale.

Clay

hough considered utterly unsuitable to mix with the cosseted guests in Frontier Hall, Clay's activities behind the scenes had played a major part in the unfolding proceedings below. Ranged before him in the dimmed light of his improvised control suite was an array of screens monitoring the speaker's dais from various positions. Oblivious to the piles of discarded post-it notes that were strewn about his chair, his right hand worried a line of perforating rings across the top of his ear and then plummeted decisively to coax a slider across a touch screen.

Banished to this obscure perch, Clay had been an essential to the Es-Tech mission that evening. He had come to accept that he was the kind of person best relegated to the sidelines. He realised that his appearance tended to send out the wrong signals and undermined Es-Tech credibility. The array of decorative hardware piercing his ears, the bars through his eyebrows and lower lip did not project the kind of character that set the security-conscious public at ease. The spider web tattoo that he had contrived on the backs of both hands was a source of considerable pride, but it did not instil confidence in his employers. Interlocking his fingers, placing both thumbs together, ingeniously completed the image of the fearsome denizen of this web. His eccentric clothing, festooned with zippers of doubtful utility and other metallic insertions seemed an act of protest against the severe black shrouding relieved only by subtle flashes of golden piping that was the Es-Tech livery.

Within Es-Tech Clay was generally regarded as being rather ambivalent about the objectives of the organisation. Internal performance assessments had already ensured that his rise through the organisation would be unlikely. But unlike other members of the security team who were expected to gird themselves resolutely for the public eye, Clay had discovered advantages in projecting an appearance of anarchic dissipation. Each perforation of his brow or cheek represented a moment when he had asserted his essential waywardness and had stood apart from 'them'.

It was only in front of these multiple monitors, utterly tuned into the nuances of what was happening below that the drift of his life suddenly seemed to coalesce into an intelligible pattern. Here he was locked into an exhilarating mastery, of seeing his interventions colour and transform the room below, subtly moulding the speakers' messages into strong expressions of paranoia and purpose.

Es-Tech, in the guise of his boss and mentor Frank, presented him with specific challenges and then left him alone with sufficient resources to do the things that he knew how to do so well. With a voyeur's relish he would shadow his victims and work to reinforce or undermine their behaviour according to Frank's stipulations. With subtle back-room intervention, he could make any speech resonate or fall flat. He could adjust the nuances of lighting or 'acoustical aliveness' of the room to manipulate the perceptions of the audience and the confidence of the speaker. It was always gratifying to see how his subjects could be completely derailed when given a gentle prodding.

Meanwhile, the speakers below had not the slightest inkling of how much of the apparently spontaneous public reaction had been orchestrated by Clay's interventions. It was Clay who had achieved the resonant finality of the Major's call to take up arms against an elusive enemy by applying an inaudible, low frequency 'throb massage' to the room. He had also lit the fuses that exploded as wake up calls at key moments in the addresses and punctuated speeches with subtle volume reinforcements. It was he who commanded the exact duration of the shock silence at the end of the Director's address and who contrived the rippling crackle, apparently a technical fault, as his heavy hand descended on the lectern. Clay instinctively knew when it was time to shift the mood. It was he who had amplified the audience applause and plied the buzzing interference frequencies, inflating the response from the crowd. He had helped Hellana Nix draw her self-congratulatory remarks to a foreshortened conclusion. The mood of the room was ready to disengage and she needed to stop.

His was a strange talent. He never actually needed to listen to the content; but like an artist transported by his music, he knew intuitively

what was required, following only Frank's general guidelines

Es-Tech's 'clients' were powerful people, naturally guarded in their emotions. This crowd, composed of politicians, civic authority figures, celebrities, was potentially a treacherous cocktail. They needed considerable reinforcement to draw them towards the desired conclusions. When consensus was uncertain they would naturally guard themselves against expressions of emotion. What relief therefore to unburden themselves under controlled conditions when they knew that others were feeling exactly the same way.

Though manipulation of human passions within the room below lay at his fingertips, the reality that Clay actually occupied was only too pinched. In fact he was locked into a tiny cupboard in the security suite – an annoying precaution that he was too wise to question. He glanced over at the locked door. The shadows of boots cut through the light at the threshold.

"I don't have security clearance to order out for a pizza," he griped under his breath as he turned back to watch the audience which was beginning to disperse from the hall.

He tried to distinguish anyone he might recognise in the crowd. He knew many of the faces within Es-Tech but he was usually confused about their names or roles - except for Frank, of course.

Frank had left him with specific instructions to 'play up' Rumsden and give 'Old Nixy a run for her money'. Typical of Frank, he always had it in for 'Old Nixy'. Clay flopped back in his chair to fantasize idly about the delightful chaos that he might have created giving his talents full rein. He flicked the row of shiny hardware ringlets perforating one ear and ran his fingers through his unkempt hair with some pleasure at the thought of the Major hounded like a demented cartoon character from the podium - his career in tatters. "I guess it would be short lived" he reflected wistfully and glanced back at the shadow of those boots at the threshold of his door.

On his monitor he could see Malyn Staryk surrounded by a coterie of fawning admirers. This was a face that he *did* recognise because she had a regular weekly show, *the Staryk Report*, or as many facetiously

called it 'Starkers'. Because her fluting, insistent voice seemed to have infiltrated everywhere he had coded her in his mind 'Mal-ware' with all the attendant computer virus connotations.

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

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

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

"Who let that one loose, I wonder?" This young woman stood out awkwardly in the crowd, looking self-conscious and truculent in the midst of all the carefully-contrived fashion.

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

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

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

Clay considered whether he should go home directly, or drop into *Embers* to catch up with Frank. The hall below was now empty and the lights were dimmed.

Suddenly he became aware that there was a shadowy figure making its way down the aisle. A man in a dark overcoat seemed to be searching for something that he had left behind. A door at the back of the hall opened sending a shaft of light across the seating. The intruder adroitly ducked down behind the seating to conceal himself. Clay sat up instantly alert and drew close to the screen. The door closed again and the shadowy figure re-emerged. Clay, his hand hovering over a control panel, reflected for a moment that it might be quite amusing to bathe this intruder in a sudden pool of light and focus a throb 'ta-dah' in his vicinity to induce instant heart failure. But fortunately, just in time, he recognised something strangely familiar about the interloper's movements. The figure straightened up and held the page that he had been searching for towards the dimmed stage lighting to scrutinise the contents. The light reflected up on to his face for a split second. Clay recognised Frank's features.

"Always spying! Well I guess that's his job! Trust him to leave no stone unturned. Why would someone like that interest Frank? Surely he can't be that obsessive?"

Frank glanced up towards the lobby furtively. Then he carefully slipped the booklet into his pocket and made his way out the side door.

Clay was perplexed by what he had seen. Why such skulking secrecy? Frank, of course, had every right to be there. He was one of the senior staff within the Es-Tech. They had been working together throughout the day to set up the event. Frank was his intermediary with the real world.

Frank had such an uncanny way of accumulating information about everyone, assembling all the details that gave him considerable power. He called this his 'intuition' but Clay knew how hard he worked pumping

people for details to fuel his so-called 'sixth sense'.

Nevertheless, Frank held a pivotal position in Clay's life. Clay remembered when, newly arrived in town, he had emerged from the bus station and encountered the faded *Embers* sign with its crooked neon lighting. It looked comfortingly nondescript, a place where he could retreat to a dark corner and consider his next step. Here he might also find like-minded acquaintances.

Frank had emerged from a back room and made a tour of the room speaking to various people in an easy, affable manner. Nevertheless Clay had a sense of being stalked; he was not unaware that this man was relentlessly closing in upon him until he at last introduced himself breezily. In the disinterested flaccid handshake he detected that his vulnerability was already being targeted. Clay had tried to respond with cool indifference. Frank had asked many questions with a feigned neutrality. He knew everybody on the premises and introduced a wide group of eccentric characters whose dysfunctional lives made Clay feel slightly more relaxed.

Even at this first meeting he perceived that Frank's body seemed to be tortured into its peculiar shape. It had clearly reached an age when it was no longer flattered by a predilection for skin tight black leather. Aspects that did not need to be highlighted surfaced in unforeseen places. Frank's dainty emerald ear studs, which might once have looked alluring on an innocent youth, seemed a feeble disguise for an old reprobate who had probably dispatched more than his fair share of young innocence.

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

However, Clay's natural diffidence was probably the most effective means to draw a person like Frank. Frank had begun to spin out interesting stories about his work and slowly reel in Clay. He claimed to know very influential people. Like a skilled fisherman Frank paid out a little line and allowed his prey a momentary illusion of freedom. But the fisherman knew that eventually exhaustion would set in, that his prey would gradually realise that his fate was inevitable.

On his second visit to Embers Clay was astonished to receive an offer of temporary employment at Es-Tech, a little job which gave access to a range of interesting technology. He was allowed approximately five minutes to ponder the offer.

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

Most of the other members of Frank's 'platoon' were sealed off from each other within a network of isolated electronic cells. After the initial induction, Frank ensured that they maintained primary relationships exclusively with himself. There was no room for secondary loyalties.

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

Clay was on a different footing from most of his other inductees. Frank had recognised the value in fostering Clay's eccentricities to ensure complete dependence. He feigned alarm, touched with envy, at Clay's florescence of perforations which had now laden both ears and erupted through his cheeks and lips.

Clay had been brought into the heart of Es-Tech as Frank's lieutenant. At first it seemed an enviable position, but to Frank's dismay Clay did not always grasp the significance of his privilege. He always had to be watched like a hawk.

Mara

ot all members of that self-important audience in the Frontier Hall were so bent on affirming their strategic positions in the Portal redevelopment discussions. Sitting in a group at the back of the room, partitioned off by a low glass screen, was a small group of observers admitted to glean what they could for the various news media they represented.

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

Mara had been invited to the Es-Tech conference through a set of circumstances she might not have foreseen a fortnight earlier. Though she had never met the person who had so changed her life in that brief interval, she felt that she implicitly trusted the judgement of the gentle good-humoured voice at the end of the phone line better than many of her closer acquaintances.

The relationship had begun with the delivery of a letter signed by a stranger identified only as *Clara Voy*, as best as she could decipher from the signature dance of the pen. Subsequent notes were signed off only as *Clara*. In a time of relentless electronic messaging, this written correspondence seemed to reveal a sterling character through the even, confident handwriting and concise expression. The first letter congratulated Mara on an editorial recently published on her blog site *NewSPeak*, which addressed plans for the long derelict lands in the City Port area.

The *City Manor Farm* had proposed the temporary occupation of a long strip site on the threshold of the vacant port lands to create a market garden. The temporary land use would begin to bring people back into

the area. Proposals had been assembled for hydroponic and aquatic installations that would encourage revitalisation of the area. The 'farm' was promoted as an educational resource for inner City schools allowing students to familiarise themselves with plants and animals that they usually encountered in shrink wrap.

City Manor Farm defined its mission as cultivating a more balanced ecology through exploring temporary uses for abandoned properties. Mara was the sole 'employee' and coordinator of the good intentions of an assortment of exuberant volunteers. "People are increasingly cut off from any understanding of the interdependency of all living things." she wrote, "We are losing all sense of the interconnectedness of Life. We obsess about City real estate values and property ladders but fail to see the potential diversity needed within the ecology that supports us."

However the City planners were concerned that developments like *City Farm* would set an undesirable precedent by compromising flexibility for future land development. There were no obvious tax benefits, just the risk that if such projects became successful, they might skew land speculation across the city.

And so the team of planning experts commissioned to report on the proposals had unanimously rejected the scheme as a threat to public health. The lands were reputed to be severely poisoned by their industrial past, and they would require comprehensive remediation before they could be occupied in any way. *City Farmers* were condemned as callow neophytes who could not understand the true economic issues involved. Unfortunately the media, latching onto Mara's message, began to depict the group as advocating traditional dairy farms, serviced by radioactive milk maids and surrounded by fields of deadly produce.

That first letter from Clara was followed the next day by another which included a return address that conjured up a pleasant leafy suburban enclave. Mara imagined a large vegetable patch in her back garden. Clara exuded her straight forward practical perspective. She did not provide personal details about her life and Mara respected her desire for anonymity.

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

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

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

The neatly handwritten sheet enfolded a press pass for the event. Mara could hardly refuse, though she was worried that her analysis would be less than informed on either financial aspects of these proposals or the nature of the proposed research.

As it happened biotech engineering had been receiving violently adverse press coverage due to the spectacular incident of the so-called *City Seven*. This gang of intruders had penetrated the lax security in the suburban *Gene-Sys* Research Centre and had inadvertently exposed themselves to a noxious germ culture. Motives for their break-in were still unclear. The first of these interlopers was apprehended after he developed severe fever symptoms and had to be rushed to hospital. A second colleague succumbed shortly after. In his last few remaining lucid moments he fingered five others who had accompanied them on the 'adventure'. Within days this whole gang had succumbed to the mysterious organisms that they had encountered. Their youthful obituaries published in the media were coupled with images of investigators in anticontamination suits and respirators still attempting to identify the source of their undoing.

The incident had been a publicity disaster for Gene-Sys on the eve

of its flotation as a public company and there were calls to close down their research programme immediately. Their director, Eugene Krafft, was utterly perplexed. He was adamant that there was nothing within his facility which could possibly produce such symptoms. He even alluded to the possibility of industrial sabotage in anticipation of the *Gene-Sys* upcoming flotation.

But the New Midland media revelled in the drama and the reinforcement of the City's 'world class' pretensions in being able to host its own homegrown terrorists in a group like the *City Seven*.

Mara decided to dress down for the Frontier event, knowing that she would be pitched into the midst of considerable anti-development protest raging outside. Many of her friends including Huggie and his colleagues at the Farm would be among the vociferous protesters at the gates. She had to pilot herself through a crowd of hysterical demonstrators, with very mixed agendas unified in anger. She had showed her pass with a grotesquely unfair identity photo and found herself rubbing shoulders in the press box with a tough little group. Looking about she breathed a sigh of relief; these were clearly not experts of any kind. The zealous fury written on their faces suggested that they were equally ill-briefed and had probably already formulated their views. She glanced over at a man inexplicably labelled 'Zubie' who was thumbing a message furiously, while his left ear was tuned into a far away sound saturated world.

During the course of the evening, one after another the scheduled speakers had set out the Hyperion vision and the advantages of creating a biotech enclave on the waterfront. No one though addressed the nature of the research being contemplated.

"Yi-i-iah" Mara sighed under her breath. Then, biting her lip, she looked nervously at the diligent reporter next to her to see whether her indiscretion had been overheard. He remained oblivious, hunched over shielding his tiny screen from her critical scrutiny.

Mara had profound misgivings about the way Major Rumsden had suddenly commandeered the debate on behalf of Es-Tech. His method of argument constructed a collage of nightmarish situations.

After the event she spotted Malyn Staryk surrounded by sycophants, buzzing bees fanning their chilly queen. She recalled that Malyn had recently spoken out forcefully against the concept of human genetic engineering in her 'Staryk Report'. During the course of this interview she had proceeded to tear to shreds some poor unsuspecting scientist who had attempted to describe the research. That same Dr Krafft, now on stage, had spent much of his allotted time valiantly defending his altruistic intentions and began to warble about the 'ultimate benefits to mankind in alleviating human suffering.' Malyn's eyes had narrowed and Mara knew that the poor man's doom was sealed. "So you see yourself as undertaking God's work, Dr Krafft?" She had opened a yawning chasm before him and invited him to take a giant leap forward.

As the meeting broke up, Malyn was hemmed in by her usual fawning coterie. Mara had a sudden inspiration. In her notebook she jotted down a request for an interview about *City Manor Farm* expansion proposals in light of all of the discussions of the evening.

Unable to penetrate the tight cordon of admirers Mara had her note passed forward. But Malyn's precipitous reaction proved utterly baffling. The notebook was sent fluttering over the seats. Mara squirmed as she was grabbed by two thugs in black uniforms and unceremoniously ejected into a side alley full of dustbins. The steel door was slammed in her face.

Wondering what raw nerve it was the she had touched, she was obliged to return to her base in Wellington Street and ponder what to report in *NewSPeak* to satisfy their mysterious sponsor.



Threshold

When I wake in the middle of the night I discover a yawning empty silence, never encountered during our usual social networked cacophony. At least my daytime dialogue with Dex is shut down while he remains asleep on the adjacent bed. The incessant barrage of background briefing information is also stilled and I have a few moments alone to think my own thoughts.

My dreams are usually baroque and always highly detailed. They also seem strangely subversive, running counter to the instructions of incoming daytime transmissions. At the moment of waking I like to record their messages before the memory fades. When I return to them I am astonished by the perceptions of my own errant mind. I am convinced that these dreams contain important messages about things that I have missed in daily life. They seem to have been sent by an alien spirit camping within me. Long afterwards I recognise their concealed wisdom.

On the last night before our trip, I dreamt of being imprisoned in a vast, dim cavern. There were many connected galleries, festooned with oozing rock formations that extended off into terrifying blackness. There were vast gloomy storerooms lined with antique books. Gold bound bindings, glinted in the dim light. Yet when I attempted to draw one down, it dissolved into dust in my hands.

I knew that those who have ventured into the interior passages had never returned. Perhaps they had found an escape route or perhaps they had become lost among the corpses of other pioneers rotting in the suffocating darkness.

Near the cave mouth the light was murky and I encountered groups of ragged people huddled together. I crept towards the mouth of the cave, daring myself to look down into a great valley below. From this vertiginous height I imagined what would happen were I to jump, the screaming, headlong descent, the wind whistling in my ears.

In this dream I noticed a bird, a fledgling with desperately fluttering wings carried on an up-draft. I imagined its exhibaration hovering over the abyss, raised on air currents, without any effort or movement.

Suddenly I no longer feel terrified by the dizzying height. I realise that I too can launch myself like that bird. I only require sustained concentration. I must not glance back, or waver in my determination.

Dex and I have been 'designed' to peep over the threshold of humanity's oldest dream, that of immortality - the dream of liberation from decay and death.

Some people find the very notion of our existence unconscionable. We have been called 'beyond the pale'. So-called 'establishments', inflamed by fear-mongering media or manipulative religious leaders, find it unacceptable that we have moved beyond their narrow definition of a 'human being'. These intolerants are terrified of facing unpleasant truths about their own vulnerability to the inevitable and approaching tsunami of change.

Starkers

living legend, Malyn Staryk was well-practiced in maintaining an inscrutable presence even in the midst of a roiling crowd, Perhaps this would seem a curious characteristic in a person whose professional role was entrapping others mercilessly in their own opinions. But the public eye that she habitually engaged lay refracted through a camera lens, an eye that always remained firmly under her control. The secure barricade of the lens encouraged a ruthlessness in sizing up her opportunities. With the camera she always maintained a recourse; what had been said or done could be strategically redacted.

Every Thursday evening in her *Staryk Report* she infiltrated the lives of prominent subjects and served them up to her avid public. In her interviews she liked to cultivate the illusion of self-conscious vulnerability, a promise of impending personal indiscretion, suggesting that her most closely guarded secrets were teetering on the brink of exposure. Her enquiring countenance with its delicate bird-like features, pale blue eyes surmounted by hinged eyebrows that exaggerated expressions of shock or disbelief, lulled her victims into misplaced confidence. Relaxed interviewees would make the fatal mistake of trying to win her complicity on a journey of mutual discovery.

But that loosely coiled mahogany festoon of hair, on the verge of cascading from its tentative grip, suggested a vulnerability that she did not aspire to. Her azure eyes, suggesting pale innocence, would soon prove hard and cold as polished agate.

On this evening at Frontier Hall her mauling by a star-struck coterie had made her too aware of all the falsities of the coterie surrounding her.

Her principal motive in attendance had been to promote the imminent publication of her book, *Blind Terror*, a series of interviews with people related to the tragic *City Seven*. This was an excursion into the darkest recesses of the human soul, an attempt to comprehend how such fanaticism had taken root amidst the formative experiences of these doomed young outlaws.

But as the book release date approached she was becoming increasingly alarmed. She had received threatening anonymous letters from someone who had hacked into her manuscript during its gestation. The hacker taunted her by quoting back extended passages and threatening violence if the publication ever saw the light of day.

Becoming increasingly paranoid about this relentless surveillance, she began to lose control of her regular routines. She found herself absent-mindedly misplacing items and later rediscovering them in the most illogical of places. It almost seemed as if there was another person, an independent alien spirit within, that was leaving unsettling clues about her impending mental collapse.

On the evening of the Hyperion presentation, overcome with malaise, she felt an overpowering need to prove, if only to herself, that she was not facing a terrifying breakdown. She would not be cowed by these threats. Launching herself into the public eye would be the best way to confront both her tormentors and her internal demons.

Her caustic comments delivered with reptilian self-certainty, had been a public re-assertion of control. She had pushed through the fawning coterie surrounding her with a dramatic gesture to reach out to a callow autograph seeker. But this had proved an error in judgement. One glance at the proffered note and she had quickly sensed a self-righteous determination in this young woman. This was not a star struck fan pleading to be drawn to her bosom but probably one of those persistent self-righteous activists, possibly one of her treacherous hackers.

Nevertheless she had relished the appalled reactions when she played her diva role and tossed aside the petition.

Her escort, Lance, followed dutifully in her wake flashing a well-practiced grimace of apology as she retreated, cutting a swathe through the flashing cameras behind the cordons of security personnel who were holding back the crowds of protesters outside the hall. He was able to catch up just in time to hail her driver and open her door with unctuous aplomb.

"I'm buzzing off now, Lanny. Find your own way home," she hissed

imperiously. "I need to be alone tonight." Without awaiting his response Malyn abruptly slammed the door in his face. Lance caught a glimpse of himself, curved cravenly in the smoked window glass. Her car squealed off into the traffic.

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

"What the hell are you looking at?" she snapped. She sat back and glared at the stiffening shoulders of the driver. It was not her usual chauffeur yet he seemed disturbingly familiar. Had she not seen him earlier in the day, perhaps in a different disguise? Or was this another symptom of encroaching mental chaos? She suddenly regretted that she had dismissed Lance so callously. Even *he* could be useful sometimes.

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

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

She thought quickly, in rising panic. The route that her usual driver took uptown had few stop-lights, and few opportunities to evacuate the vehicle if necessary. She considered rolling down the window to scream for help or abruptly leaping out of the car at the next stop.

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

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

"And stop shrugging your shoulders at me!"

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

angrily. It was always the same, people pushing in upon her everywhere, determined to invade her privacy.

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

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

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

As she burst through into the over lit entry lobby the concierge behind the desk purred "Good evening, Madam" with the same foreign inflection as her malevolent chauffeur. With a sudden horror she realised that she had never seen this particular concierge before. The two men were obviously in cahoots. Wordlessly she raced across the lobby into the open lift, punched the penthouse button. The doors slid shut excluding the two thwarted thugs, looking admittedly somewhat perplexed, their insidious intentions temporarily foiled.

Fearing that they had taken the other lift, she raced down her hallway, fumbling to find the keys buried deep in her handbag. In a frustrated rage she emptied the bag onto the carpet at the threshold and grabbed the keys from the debris. Why had she insisted on having *three* different locks? Frantically she unlocked them and pushed breathlessly into her foyer, kicking the contents of her bag across the threshold. Slamming the door shut, she threw the deadbolt, laced the chains top and bottom and then sank to her knees amidst the debris into the plush, carpet and burst into a rhythmic sobbing.



'U-seys'

I am lying awake struggling to recall the details of my recent dream, which included many heads, detached from their bodies, all bobbing like corks in a vast ocean. These faces are barely recognisable in the twilight. These are our 'U-seys'. They are calling out in desperation, begging to be rescued from a titanic shipwreck. Treading water in their midst, I am aware of the looming hulk of a great ocean liner capsizing into the depths beyond. As I turn away from the wreckage, I become aware of a faint band of daybreak on the horizon. I set out swimming towards it. This is remarkable in itself, because I have never learned to swim, but somehow in my dream it is effortless.

Dex and I call our support staff 'U-seys'. Several attend us in an incomprehensible rotor and we apply ourselves to the task of humiliating them with orchestrated temper tantrums, sending them off back of house for mutual consolation. This is a sad truth about their slavery; the U-seys have chosen to impose it upon themselves.

Our greatest flights of unbridled contempt are directed at one egregious victim, who styles himself 'Doctor Drayble-Carnley'. In misplaced hopes of fostering team spirit he likes to be addressed with the more collegial 'Dee-Cee'. Instead we have reduced him to 'Dribs' and take pleasure in exercising the fullest range of humiliations we can devise. He has dedicated his entire lifetime to studying 'Entanglement of the Mesiobasal Temporal Lobes' - mainly ours!

The u-seys monitor us incessantly from their twilit world beyond the Pale. They gossip about our erratic behaviour and draw conclusions for learned papers and peer review.

Dex and I are blessed with performance enhancements that are no more invasive than a hearing aid implant. To our useys' dismay we have developed a coded language which is impervious to our inquisitors. While they regard this development with suspicion they also appreciate its potential research nugget value. As we stare into the distance, humming tunelessly, we certainly appear plausibly telepathic.

Dex maintains that the most dangerous of the u-seys is Zwielicht. He has hung over us from earliest memory, monitoring our behaviour from a back seat. But, Zwie is not really the visionary behind our mission. Our Creator? He remains tucked away behind the scenes - the renowned Doctor Antinous Noor. And we are famed in medical literature as The Noor Project.

Admittedly aspects of our lives remain an uneasy compromise. We have been designed as emissaries to be directed towards a distant future. We are genetically programmed to endure extended lives. Of course levels of risk mushroom with extended life spans. Calculations can turn up daunting probabilities. For instance the likelihood of fatally slipping on a bathmat becomes a near certainty unless strenuous counter measures are applied. Our lives are therefore one prolonged risk-assessment with many parties weighing in.

Nevertheless I am very aware that their "forever" does not really mean eternity. As in my dream I will ultimately strike out alone for that glimmer on the horizon. I have no alternative. My residual 'human' qualities will eventually become anachronisms, distant memories like those bobbing, disembodied heads.

Embers

rank Gear was drawn to vulnerable people, those tortured by addiction or obsession and so preoccupied with their own problems that he could cast his lifeline and slip into a controlling position in their lives.

Though he spent much of his week dancing attendance upon the erratic whims of Hellana Nix at head office, the true heart of his personal operations was a curious backwater in the city centre which he and a few select denizens accessed via an unmarked service lane. A rear corridor led past Dal's makeshift offices into the gloomy back rooms of *Embers*, a failing nightclub. The club was prominent on a busy street opposite the Central Bus Station where it flaunted its tawdry charms with a strip of failing neon lighting ringing windows and a dusty poster announcing 'Perfect Stag Night'.

In this shadowy world Frank Gear was able to recruit many of the wayward, disaffected youth that had proven so useful in furthering his projects. From his back office with its closed circuit link to the public bar Frank plotted his deployment of his minions on sensitive missions. He had acquired a reputation within Es-Tech for his 'platoon' of eager helpers available for any required role.

Dal, the owner of *Embers*, liked to play up Frank's glamorous reputation for derring-do, and treated him with gratifying reverence as a celebrity.

Perhaps his retreat into this murky underworld allowed him some relief from acknowledging the slightly conventional hand that nature had otherwise dealt him. He worked hard to embroider his reputation to compensate for other deficiencies. Instead of the dangerous elegance that he aspired to project, Frank recognised that he was cursed with rather coarser skin and perhaps 'heavier boned' than he might have wished. He could detect symptoms of a lowering centre of gravity, *pear shaped* some might say. These genetic injustices had been aggressively countered with a rigorous diet, relentless treadmill exercises and a choice of clothing that

imparted his distinctive, trussed-up, appearance.

He had a gift for managing people by fostering a sense of deficiency in others. 'Frankie' as he was known at *Embers*, had an unerring eye for discerning susceptibility. Many of his protégés had recently stepped off the bus and found themselves at sea in an alien urban environment. Such targets, detached from friends and family, were malleable gold. He would sweep them into his vortex of glamorous purpose; introduce them to his network of acquaintances with many seductive hints of his links to the powerful.

He enjoyed another great strength, his total narcissism. Throughout his life, Frank had astutely avoided compromising personal entanglements. He excelled in the earliest stages of seduction, pulling out all the stops to become the best friend and confidant that his prey so eagerly craved. But ultimately he would leave his victims in a state of incomprehension when they were soon handed over to his lieutenants. He would convince them that at least in the short term an arm's length period was essential to their professional development.

Frank managed the platoon through *Embers* denizens whose complete discretion could be relied upon. Dot propped up at the bar, a confection of female attributes; balding Ced, once an elfin denizen of a long-abandoned dance floor, and Dal himself the cynical, affected owner of Embers who injected just the right tone of reverence into any of his dealings with Frank. Together they managed the 'platoon'. These lieutenants shared a common aversion to the light of day, and operated in the twilight, off radar, in a world far removed from the mundane. Frank was their intermediary and they depended on him to resolve all the minor problems and irritations in their lives.

It was at Embers, through Dot's intercession that Frank was able to recruit Reen and Zaanie to assist Malyn Staryk. The two girls had just stepped off the bus and he had been able to find them temporary lodgings and cleaning work at the Rex Motel. Frank got them moving along a carefully managed career path. He had built up the story of their glamorous links to street culture and convinced Malyn that they could

offer ideal vantage points on the circle of acquaintances of the City Seven.

These were small fish, but Frank had his sites set on much larger conquests. Malyn herself though, presented a different level of challenge. He had had Malyn in his sights for some time. Malyn enjoyed an extensive network of well-placed acquaintances, if not friends. She also had the ear of one of the most powerful forces in the City, Burrell de Vere, the owner of *Media-Net*.

Her book *Blind Terror* had clearly become an obsession with her and he realised that this opened an opportunity to assume an advantageous position in her life.

With the devious help of his agents Zaanie and Reen, Frank had been able to access Malyn's tightly controlled world and shape the message of her book.

Frank's planted assistants had helped her to comprehend the horror of the intentions of the City Seven and the full implications of their thwarted plan to spread a contaminating cocktail far beyond the clean rooms of the Gene-Sys research facility. It would infect the whole city with paranoia and bring New Mid to its knees. Had the *City Seven* efforts not been detected through the timely intervention of Es-Tech, the repercussions would have been devastating.

Ultimately the outcome of the *City Seven* raid and its tragic aftermath had riveted public imagination. The malefactors had sickened suddenly and inexplicably. Fearful speculation ran rampant. A large area surrounding the research centre had been cordoned off and placed under quarantine.

Es-Tech, secured to guard both the victims and the research facility, were well positioned to dramatise the dangers and play up their own role in thwarting the *Seven*.

Building up that sense of dread, detail by detail, was Frank's great achievement. He thrived by fostering fear of the unknown and knew that there would be considerable advantages in playing up the 'radical terrorist' implications. The *Seven*, as Frank branded them, had to be recognised as part of a larger network. He wove rumours to suggest that there was an undisclosed 'big player' behind their plot.

Zaanie and Reen were a fractious couple, cast together by desperate circumstances. Having arrived on the same bus, they had strayed into *Embers* together. From his vantage point behind the scenes Frank could read all the tell-tale signals. Within days their heady bravado would evaporate and they would be at the brink of cascading into deeply entrenched inadequacies. He made his move, cast them a lifeline and installed them in a dingy apartment in Bin Street.

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

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

Malyn herself, had begun to develop a rapport with her two feisty assistants and to look forward to regular Tuesday debriefing sessions. She admired their *sang froid* in dealing with real life situations. Zaanie and Reen were out in the streets meeting very real challenges and thinking on their feet.

It was deeply gratifying for Malyn to discover such adept raconteurs, such sensitive eyes for intoxicating details and such a sharp understanding of how to exploit the waywardness of human nature. Their stories were as compelling as the best fiction – which of course they were.



An Education

A recurrent horror; it is my nightmare reliving that blank stare of Saïd, his gelled brown eyes directed at the ceiling, cold lips half-parted. There is a dripping red message, "Beelzebub' defiling the sterile, white tiles alongside the tub. Dex and I are standing side by side, looking down at his lifeless body like dispassionate coroners. Dex appears to be in a trance, his vacant blue eyes quite oblivious to this tragic, cold vacancy.

Reaching down he places his hand on the crown of Saïd's head and pushes the accusing emptiness under with disgust. Saïd's cold blue knees, break the surface awkwardly. Dex just turns and walks out of the room.

And this was the conclusion of what they all called our 'education'.

Our early recollections of carefree lives dropped away precipitously when the u-seys started to expect more conventional behaviour. They began to talk sagely about the need for 'an education', although there was no evidence that such experience had benefited any of them.

Saïd, showed up, fresh and elegant, prêt a manger! He was a gangly, youth with copious curly black hair and the carefully nurtured wispy beard of a future sage. Saïd announced that his name signified 'happy' in the language of his Prophet, but we quickly imposed the

nick-name 'Saddy'. He viewed the challenge of life as a great struggle to master his own personal weaknesses in service of a remote divine plan. But we soon realised that Saddy's enthusiasms disguised a great vulnerability.

Dex conceived an 'interesting experiment'. He had discovered a dead piglet in a lab waste bin which he boxed up and shoved under Saddy's bed. He said that he wanted to study the mysteries of life as maggots riddled the carcass into a hollow carapace. Flies soon began to hatch and Dex glibly styled himself 'Beelzebub', 'Lord of the Flies'. Saddy, bewildered by the rising odours, only resorted to more frequent bathing and ever greater applications of air freshener.

At a strategic moment Dex revealed his 'experiment'. Stricken with revulsion, Saddy threatened us with exposure. Dex's next move was 'classic Dex'; in a furious tantrum he simply kicked the box apart letting all the flies escape. For days afterwards there were flies everywhere. Squashed flies appeared in our pockets, in the food, in bed at night.

ultimately Saddy's demise lived up to our assessment of his truer nature. He abandoned his regular rituals. His eyes became ringed in red. One night he went off to soak in his bath. We just took ourselves to bed ... and waited.

But why am I recalling this past history? Our brains no longer need to be burdened with such unhelpful memories. Personal identity used to be constructed around private repositories. They were assembled like a huge library of recorded deeds.

But now such archives are best stored 'off-site'. We have acquired new freedom to detach ourselves completely from the moral implications of our behaviour.

City Manor Farm

large sign on the edge of development in the recently renamed 'Fashion District' proclaimed 'Hyperion - YOUR first Step on the Ladder'! Behind the hoarding which had been painted to represent a bird infested topiary hedge in the garden of a stately home, lay a vertiginous drop, a colossal excavation destined to be filled by the downwardly mobile.

Throughout this neighbourhood over the past months, great mechanical scythes had been tearing into the decay of old streets lined with abandoned shops and empty tenements. Glass, brick, bone all became grist for the macerators chewing up the old fabric and channelling it into the maws of a queue of waiting trucks. Throughout the day trucks laden with debris transported unwanted rubble to re-mediate the poisoned and waterlogged wastelands of the old port lands. This area of reclamation had been redesignated by the visionary *New Mid Planning Authority* as 'The Portal'.

The *City Manor Farm* occupied a long narrow strip frontage that had evaded classification under the *Our Green City of Tomorrow Plan*. This unprepossessing threshold remained a huge embarrassment to the authorities and many efforts had been made to integrate this into the renewal vision.

Weather-worn signs around the perimeter of the site carried stark warnings, 'Danger – Unremediated Lands – Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted'. Underneath one of these notices someone had scrawled a helpful warning 'Blackberrys, - unfit for human consumpsing'. Tangled masses of these blackberries with their aggressive, lacerating thorns produced bumper crops of deadly fruits every summer. Part of the extended land remediation programme included regular saturation of these wastelands with glyphosates to discourage plant growth that might attract birds and spread potentially devastating avian disease.

Once this impenetrable barrier had been erected, no one bothered to look behind it and the screened lands lay dormant and festering.

Few people in New Midland could remember this area in its heyday

as a maze of busy workshops located beside the busy port. Once, mills spinning metal products and warehouses for chemicals were located convenient to the railway lines criss-crossing this terrain. But few clues to this past history endured; only the occasional jagged retaining wall that had escaped the bulldozer poked up through the choking scrub like lurking predators wallowing in swales of poisoned sludge.

Juggernaut trucks rumbled down a narrow ribbon of road that sliced across these scrub-lands and dumped their masticated contents in large mounds. Then men zipped into orange body suits with visor hoods and respirators operated huge shovels which spread the debris over the terrain and consolidated it to exacting engineering specifications. These Portal lands had lain 'fallow' for more than two decades.

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

Beyond this vast wasteland and on the horizon could be glimpsed the stark outline of the first of the 'Dacton Alps' a splendid cone of detritus that had been adorned with cultivars of resistant superweeds. These flowered in swathes of contrasting blue and yellow and had become a landmark regularly photographed for tourist brochures with the imposing crenelations of the waterfront skyline in the background.

The *City Manor Farm* strung out on the edge of this desolate territory suffered from an image problem. Though its poly-tunnels housed a profusion of containerised growing fruits and vegetables, it appeared disorganised, a tempestuous sea of abundance raging along the edge of austere and tangled wastelands.

Huggie, whose enthusiasm had played a major part in establishing the farm, had planted a screen of ailanthus trees and these had grown quickly to provide dappled shade for the polytunnels. Scraps of old machinery,

tanks and vats salvaged from the adjacent badlands provided a variety of growing vessels but drew considerable adverse criticism from an aesthetically vigilant public.

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

Crops were grown in containers and all enriched effluent prevented from further polluting the ground soil. In this closed-loop agriculture all of the nutrient enriched delivery medium was recollected, distilled and rebalanced before being delivered back to the crops.

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

"People have grown terrified of their food and don't even want to know where it comes from any more," he lamented. "They are accustomed to shrink-wrapped packages at the supermarkets. So little do they know about where food comes from. Ignorance always seems more hygienic."

As the growing season progressed it became difficult to get rid of surplus produce. A farmers' market had been set up along Bin Street which drew adverse criticism from those marketing the Hyperion 'lifestyle'

redevelopment. Complaints were lodged and soon afterwards the food banks were obliged to terminate their contracts to take on this superfluous produce.

The Planners were counting the days until the agreement between Manor Farm and the landholders would expire and all of this embarrassing abundance could at last be swept aside by a more unified vision.

Huggie, despite his unpolished appearance, had a canny eye for discerning potential trouble. When a jaunty red sports car entered the dusty forecourt and parked itself disdainfully near the exit gate, he anticipated a challenge. A well dressed couple emerged, and picked their way daintily across the yard towards the office. He caught a glimpse of two other men in grey suits who unfolded themselves from the back seat and stood beside the car as if awaiting instructions. It did not look at all-right. Feigning indifference, he busied himself with repositioning one of his containers.

The two who approached seemed scarcely credible as a couple. The man was older with an olive skinned Mediterranean complexion. He was dressed in clothing which looked uncomfortably tight and fresh out of the box. Huggie's eagle eye observed the precious emerald ear studs with some distaste. The woman seemed excessively deferential to her colleague's authority. Was he a 'sugar daddy'? She appealed to his evident narcissism by taking photos of him against flowering specimens for which he postured extravagantly peeling away his sunglasses.

They pointedly ignored Huggie's labours, evidently dismissing him as an inconsequential part of the volunteer workforce. He relished their momentary recoil when he turned at last to introduce himself as the 'Estate Manager'. Their subsequent bonhomie attempted to overcompensate for earlier misapprehensions.

"Oh My God! So Sorry! My name's Zaanie and this is Mr Gear. We really, really wanted to sign up for a plot." The young woman gushed brightly, batting wide her excited eyes.

"We don't do plots, leave that to the cemetery 'cross the way." Huggie

revelled in their obvious discomfiture as he gestured towards the massive hole being excavated by the Hyperion development. "It's a big'un."

Zaanie, attempting to regain higher ground, launched into a sudden description of her happy memories of picking seasonal fruits at her grandparents' farm. Mr Gear tentatively advanced his own halting recollection of tending his aunt's zucchinis. He paused in front of an old truck chassis that had been artfully assembled into a potting frame and enquired where they had found such a 'fascinating piece'. Huggie said nothing but concurred with a curmudgeonly bob of the head.

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

Mr Gear, evidently uncomfortable with too much horticultural chat, scanned the roadside fence. "I guess security's a big concern. How do you keep the public from running off with your produce? Intruder alarms? Video surveillance?"

Huggie shrugged ingenuously. "Nope! Everybody nowadays is so concerned about food security, our main problem's unloadin' our projuice. But of course my pack of ravening hounds helps!"

Mr Gear looked unconvinced.

Huggie adopted a more avuncular tone. "Sure you can join the waiting

City Manor Farm

list, but there's a crowd ahead of you there. Just jot down your details and we'll get in touch as soon as an opening comes up."

"Oh that would be like *so* neat!" Zaanie gushed, "Can we take a wander in the meantime!" Huggie threw his arms open in resigned acceptance and turned back to his labours.

Mr Gear signalled autocratically to their colleagues waiting in the car and the quartet stumbled off like missionaries entering a jungle. Huggie paid no attention as Francisco and Zaanie strolled happily along the paths, arm in arm, photographing each other and the burgeoning greenery. Their colleagues, more interested in the engineering of the project, spent considerable time enraptured by the recycled water filtration system and mixing vats for the hydroponic chemicals.

Half an hour later all returned, somewhat overcharged with delight and gratitude. Zaanie had no further questions about 'his fabulous place'. The hench-pals remained grimly uncommunicative.

Huggie watched them depart in what he later disparaged as their 'fancy red car' and then called Mara to air his suspicions.

"Huggie, you are always paranoid about these things. Of course everyone's going to be interested in us!" But Mara was still slightly apprehensive about his description of the 'two henchmen in grey suits.'



Babel

Another race against time! A feverish dream about excavating a huge pit in a scrubland dotted with broken concrete, abandoned car parts and smashed children's toys.

I have begun the foundation coil of a great ramped structure that I expect will spiral upwards to the sky. I have never before imagined myself capable of such creative determination.

I keep turning up artefacts, slicing through broken bottles, human bones densely packed in the soil. But when I stand back for a moment to admire my work, water begins to seep into the trench. The clay becomes squelchy underfoot.

My shovel hits a fragment with a resonant clang. It is a broken piece of entablature and there are letters cut into the tarnished marble.

I reveal the letters one by one and a word begins to appear: E-N-T-R-O-P - I uncover the terminal Y only briefly before muddy seepage obliterates the word forever.

The foundations of my wall gradually dissolve. My labours have been a vain attempt to confront that tendency of everything to dissipate into grey meaningless paste.

Overhead, the night sky only seems to mirror this tendency as the fugitive stars grow colder and further apart.

Is our human determination to impose order, and create a transient Babel doomed to certain dissolution?

'Entropy' - that haunting word hangs in my mind as I resurface from my dream. I mutter it repeatedly under my breath like a mantra.

Is not the human race usually more effective in assisting entropy than in countering it? We are relentlessly engaged in transforming our Eden into a sea of broken toys.

And yet at the same time we have also created a vocabulary to distil ideas that might counter our worst tendencies. Perhaps we now stand at the threshold of a huge leap in being able to extend our intelligence into dimensions beyond our current comprehension.

The myth of the coil of Babel describes the destruction of a world drawn together by a single purpose. A pervasive force of entropy produced a confusion of tongues and all purposes lost their meaning.

Meanings become transient, poetic language can become a prison and words callous jailers. Our vital purpose drains away and the significance of our brief poetry shifts into meaningless babble.

The language of science may be only another delusion as it intends to override all cultures, and obliterate old myths.

Perhaps the Noor Project is only constructing a new Babel.

A Message

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

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

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

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

"Typically, just ME, ME, ME... the creep." She cut short his message and advanced to the next.

"Mally, it's Reen ... need to talk urgently ... can't wait till our Tuesday session. I think that we might have stumbled onto a really weird connection. Could be big trouble but Zaanie says that she thinks it's the chickens coming home to roost. Help! ... No just kidding! Just call a.s.a.p."

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

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

Launching her book *Blind Terror* seemed to have brought her life to a complete standstill. She had become completely obsessed with the fates of the *'City Seven'* and their message.

But it all made no sense. They seemed to be such ordinary suburban teenagers living apparently ordinary lives, neither poor nor desperate. What had motivated them to embrace such extremes, to contemplate creating such a calamity? There was no maverick teacher or religious mentor asserting control of the message. All that she could discover was a viral rage that had taken hold - as if from nowhere.

The *Seven* had challenged a huge, complex and globally established industry. Could that industry have retaliated in such a cold-blooded way that now all leaders of the group were dead?

Malyn had enlisted Zaanie and Reen to act as her agents in trying to infiltrate their circle of friends to get to the bottom of what had actually happened. She had never asked anyone to do anything dangerous or illegal; they were quite able to look after themselves easing into the Seven's coterie by blogging and hanging out on the right sites.

At first they had brought back little of interest beyond what could be discovered by anyone searching the internet. But then suddenly they seemed to have struck a trove of references to other intriguing contacts. They began to bring back much more thrilling reports of characters and situations which she was able to weave into her text.

Zaanie's character demonstrated some of the fragile defiance that Malyn recognised in herself. She admired her courage in stepping into the unknown, confident of thinking her way through. She had survived an impossible childhood. Despite long-standing addictions to drugs and alcohol, she had striven mightily to avoid the fates of her parents.

Reen was a different kind of spirit, much less provocative. Her

provincial idealism would have been too easily exploited by others. Desperate to please, she revelled in the attentions of every passing male. Malyn would never admit it but she felt a rare maternal protectiveness towards both of her assistants.

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

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

"Lanny, sweetheart, I've got to see you immediately. I've changed my mind about the Noor interview. I want you to take it instead. I just feel hounded at the moment; I'll explain when we meet. The best place would be our little café opposite Libs. Be a duck and meet me there at 3:30 ... and try to be sharp!"

She had only a momentary pang of remorse at the prospect of Lance waiting about fruitlessly all afternoon, attempting gallant conversation with some hapless waitress.

In her rising paranoia she suspected that other parties would also intercept the message and pursue her diversion. This would buy her the time she needed.

She hung up the receiver and returned to the first message, jotting down the name and number of the caller. She picked up Lance's phone again and peeped into the spare bedroom to check on Jason sprawled innocently across the bed, asleep. She proceeded into her bathroom, turned on the shower and dialled the number. She went through to a recording.

"This is Malyn Staryk and I'm calling about your *City Farm* interview proposal. I assume that you must be the young woman that approached me last night ... I am sorry if I overreacted. I have to confess that I'm a wreck in facing my book deadline! I'm sure you'll understand. Anyway

A Message

I think that I could arrange a discreet meeting with you this afternoon to discuss the practicalities. I'll explain it all when we get together. Would you please confirm on the number listed on your call display as a matter of urgency? Oh and please, don't attempt to call me at the studio or make contact via any other route. You'll only be turned away. They know I insist on preserving what little privacy I have. Thank-you ever so much."



Mirrors

Befuddled, I awake, emerging from a dream labyrinth of mirrors, through which I have been wandering surrounded by infinite reflections and illusory spaces, feeling a rising anxiety.

The discovery of oneself in a mirror is a formative moment in the development of self-consciousness. With Dex so rarely out of sight, I have always lived with that mirror image of myself as my constant companion.

If I want to see myself objectively, from any perspective, I need look no further. Observing him I can witness how I appear to others, the bullet head and the effect of that peculiar penguin gait we share.

In our earliest years, as two minds warring over a semi-detached body tied at the hip, we had to make many painful compromises. Resentments multiplied. I recall the revenge I so often exacted in forcing him to ricochet painfully off furniture. We would pummel each other until we collapsed in exhaustion.

Our call into existence has been the result of immense technical ingenuity. Human intervention guided every step, tailoring the genetic materials and assembling our unique heritage. Registered patents controlled the method by which tiny inflections were inserted into an indifferent cell. The mystery of life was sparked and the authors of

this process congratulated themselves on their scientific prowess.

But, despite the wizardry, all did not proceed as planned and our 'immaculate' birth, was initially decried as an abomination.

Our emergence was marked with horrified whispers and immediate removal from a brightly lit, antiseptic environment into a world without mirrors.

It was in this dim chaotic world, just as we were beginning to thrash out a treaty for coexistence, two minds fighting for control of a single body, a cold blade passed between us, condemning us forever to a sudden alienation.

Ironically it was only after we were surgically separated that we became inseparable. It was then that we realised that the real enemy lay in wait for us outside.

And it was then that, unexpectedly, our creators discovered that our birth had blessed them in unforeseen ways. They impetuously burst back upon us ready to study every aspect of our relationship and to offer us the celebrity that had once been withheld. Told earlier that we were neither mentally nor physically equipped to join the outside world, suddenly that outside world was clamouring to join us.

And so Dex and I, living as mirror images of one another, have learned to manage our celebrity, albeit sometimes suffocating under a raft of performance monitoring devices that are accorded to important pioneers like us.

We had become interesting.

Chinese Wall

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

She was not one of those people whose life was burdened with domestic incidentals. Even in these enlightened times she was a rare anomaly, as a woman at the head of an international security organisation, a forceful presence in a service which frequently undertook difficult and dangerous missions. She fondly imagined that her tenacity and inspired business acumen were legendary in boardrooms across a City and quietly revelled in her reputation for unencumbered efficiency.

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

Today she had given her personal image careful thought. She enjoyed the enviable advantage of unnaturally rosy and unblemished skin, with the consistency of fine dough that seemed to swell gently against all restraints. This unnatural softness was countered by a well-defined slash of coral lipstick and carefully threaded eyebrows, the left of which displayed a perpetually uncompromising, quizzical crook. This was not a countenance that encouraged philosophical speculation or idle banter. Rather more practical questions like levels of troop deployment seemed its natural preoccupation.

Hellana had ensconced herself in an office that was one of the envies

of New Mid's corporate elites. A dazzling light flooded through the full-height glass windows on two sides which commanded the best views in the business district. A delightful screen of architectural vagaries displayed themselves against the continuous cool blue horizon of the lake beyond. Tiny glimpses of puffing sails fecklessly skittering across the harbour contrasted with the relentlessly circumscribed, industrious lives in the foreground.

Hellana ensured that her curtains were fully drawn back at all times. Any visitor entering her office, initially dazzled by the flood of light, became only later aware of the shadowy silhouette confronting them from her commanding perch. It was entirely possible that she had ensured that the lighting levels in the outer office were subdued in order to heighten the visitors' discomfort. Later they emerged with a nagging sense that they had never quite grasped the full picture.

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

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

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

The room however, contained one tantalising clue to personal

peculiarity. At one end of her luxuriously sweeping mahogany desk there was a table laden with curios. A single spotlight illuminated its blood red tooled leather surface protected under a shield of glass. Like a votive stand it stood defiantly alone, suggesting an object of veneration miraculously floating over four spindly steel legs.

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

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

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

The virtue of the 'Chinese Wall' is in defining two separate cultures which can regulate themselves against the forbidden frontier. The ecologies either side function autonomously and their denizens arrive at independent conclusions while only imagining the vagaries of life in the excluded realm. Fear of those on the other side can be a great spur to creativity.

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

'Helly', as she was known then to the other girls at the school, had emerged ultimately as the Head Girl. She had developed a coterie of supporters who had attached themselves to her, competing for attention, not out of friendship but out of their shared complicity in exploiting the system.

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

Subsequently Helly had preferred to keep her relationships on a platonic level. Her primary pact remained with 'authority' in its most abstract sense and she was loath to consign any of her hard won powers to another. She knew how rarely men respected such power in a woman; they would only latch on in order to deploy their masculine wiles. Tightly secured under her cascading chin an embroidered button brought to a halt any speculation about what essays in voluptuousness might lie between the severe ecclesiastical collar and the dainty ankles which protruded from her favoured burred woollen leggings.

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

But aside from intelligence, Cubbie had few other natural advantages. She remained painfully plain in appearance. Her awkward girlishness, the oversized hands and feet, the toothy grin, once perhaps adorable in a child, had never blossomed into co-ordinated womanhood. Cubbie still appeared to be assembled from left over parts. To counter these deficiencies she had favoured a dress style suited to a truculent child; optimistically bright coloured tights and pullovers that suggested sporting intentions and made

a virtue of her flattened, meccano-like physique. Over these contrasting items she would toss a few jumbo pieces of costume jewellery and jangling bracelets. 'At least you successfully resist the hackneyed image of a security enforcer', Hellana would sally encouragingly. She took ill-concealed delight in Cubbie's plainness, her unfortunately strong boned face, oversized teeth, the desperate attributes that one might conjure up for an unloved spinster. Thank God, or whoever, there was occasionally some justice in the distribution of genetic assets!

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

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

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

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

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

Cubbie never deigned to touch a screen or keyboard. In a quaint spinsterish manner if there was a list to be made she would pull out a practical quill and jot down the details. Yet her notebooks never seemed to grow or accumulate and there was always just one, always identical. It would gradually diminish page by page as each objective was achieved and the page torn out. Hellana supposed that she must destroy her notes, certainly nothing ever piled up around her desk.

In many ways this was the behaviour of a model employee, everything subsumed by the organisation. Any file notes that she entered into the system were inevitably couched in the name of the organisation. Her own name rarely appeared anywhere and never demanded the credit for any operation. Such self-effacement appeared very laudable; Hellana could allow herself to bask in the warm glow of such efficiency.

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

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

Frank Gear, lurking on the other side of her Chinese wall, was a different story. In contrast to Cubbie who was a *Luddite* at heart, '*clever little Frankie*' spent practically every waking moment fixated upon some flickering technology or other, consulting, collecting, storing away his

precious information.

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

"Time to be *Frank*." (an over-worn joke that she nevertheless clung to)

Moments before the red light on his desk flashed to summon him, Frank had been browsing through his electronic diary, lingering wistfully over some photos of a group of friends lunching alfresco in a small town on the Adriatic coast. The intervening years since the photos were taken seemed to have passed in a flash. But the vitality of the memories of that trip might have dwindled away had not these photographs been carefully scanned into neat electronic files which fixed so many of the details. Each image fired a response in his own memory, the position of the sun, his moodiness that day, the smell of the food and the hidden dynamics in the placement of the people around the table. He could remember sitting in that rough chair admiring the shell bracelet that a gypsy had presented to Norena ... yes, that was her name. He could almost feel the cracked faded blue paint that he had gouged with his fingernails as he considered how to provoke a response from the girl. Could her name really have been Norena? He scrolled down to his notes and confirmed the details including address and birth date. He felt wistful that he himself looked so much younger then, yet it was merely three years ago, the confident stubble on his chin and the youthful head of abundant hair now sadly diminishing to a scalp hugging sparseness.

When an aeroplane plunges into an abyss of disaster, the horrified world seeks some clarification of those last moments. It needs to verify the finality of the hidden disaster. The immediate awfulness of the last screams, the reality of the final click of existence must be re-experienced to enforce the reality of destruction. There is an inexplicable craving for portrayal in its grisly entirety. If it were possible for the cameras to record the last ashes fluttering off into the winds even this would be trapped in the black box.

Though not a man of religious conviction or generously convinced that he could offer much historic insight to posterity, Frank continued his laborious accretion of personal details. He had assembled a complete resume of his entire life, one which would have stood him in good stead should a Grand Inquisitor be considering the merits of his application for eternal relevance. His black box had become a personal obsession; it filled his otherwise featureless apartment and his work environment with meaning. Delving into it would sustain him in the most anonymous of spaces. It was incontrovertible proof of his existence.

This habit of reminiscence had grown on him in his early days of working at Es-Tech. He had been required to travel afar and every night he would find himself in a new, anonymous hotel room, a world of choices at his fingertips, everything available on order, yet no comforting routine to fall back upon or person to share his life. Usually the information that that he was asked to glean had necessitated his assuming the most neutral and banal of appearances so that he could follow his 'clients' into situations and discreetly record the details that would ultimately devastate their careers.

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

He sought permanence through this creation of a complete and definitive history of himself, a record of all the situations that he had been a part of and the developments that had occurred in his character.

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

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

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

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

Walking with self-confident swagger into Hellana's blinding office he found himself confronted by her shadowy silhouette. He took up his usual position awkwardly seated at the corner of her desk adjacent to the side table of down turned curios.

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

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

"Positioned is a word I always like to hear from you. The airport débâcle was flawless too! Noor is one heckuva loose cannon. Just make damn sure he doesn't point his weapon our way."

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

"Well you are the real inspiration." Frank could appear dazzlingly unctuous when he tried. But he also seemed to delight in how falsely contrived he made it sound.

"In the coming week it is absolutely crucial that we control the political climate leading up to the announcement. I've got de Vere on my back. We've got to churn out all the Gene-Sys publicity we can get. We've got to make sure that the right parties get the right coverage."

"The right parties?"

"Frank, I have a little idea buzzing around my mind; let us say an enhancement of the work that you have already been undertaking with the *City Seven* and Malyn." Frank's ears perked up at the mention of this name.

"Yes what I have in mind should intrigue you more than a little; and it will really stimulate a lot of public interest."

* * *

Malyn Staryk was presenting Frank with an interesting challenge. She existed in a rarefied world, one that regulars in the *Embers* 'platoon' could only dream of viewing from afar. But she manifested a vulnerability which made him feel purposeful and potent. He could glimpse a beneficial role for himself in her convoluted life. With so many influential acquaintances, she would be a valuable addition to his stable if he could but snare her. It was her privileged role to ferret out information on behalf of the wider public with impunity. She just had to be schooled to seek answers to questions that would be useful to Frank.

He had been already been able to 'turn up' interesting information about Malyn's earlier life and map out some history he felt she might hope to conceal. His planted agents, Zaanie and Reen, were gradually extracting further details to complete the picture. Frank would prime them in advance of their sessions with provocative questions to pose innocuously while plying Malyn with their titillating fantasies. Prudently, he took care that all these encounters were carefully recorded, unknown to any of the participants.

Frank had arranged for intensive surveillance of Malyn's apartment to monitor her comings and goings, where she shopped, who she would see in the course of a week.

He was admittedly a little surprised to discover how dysfunctional her life proved to be. She apparently had no regular visitors at all; most of her meals were taken in the solitude of her private office at the studio. Her only dependant appeared to be a brow-beaten Burmese cat named Jason.

Occasionally a meal would be delivered at home to the porter at the front desk of the Epitome Palace and carried up to her where it would be eaten in solitude in front of her television. Such defiantly solitary behaviour intrigued Frank. Perhaps he had caught a glimpse of something of himself in this mirror.

Frank was, however, resentful of strength and resilience displayed by others. He felt more comfortable with people like Hellana who relied so heavily on fantasies sustained by her staff. She was a sucker for a sycophant and merely played *at* the role of his boss.

At Es-Tech, Frank was in a privileged position of having pre-clearance to open any door and invade any space he chose. All of Malyn's daily routines were being closely monitored by him. He took perverse delight in visiting her apartment when she was away at work, leaving disturbing little clues in a coat pocket or handbag, perhaps a little rearrangement of the order of clothing in her cupboard, or the fan of magazines on her coffee table, small things, just to render her ill-at-ease and questioning her increasingly uncertain sanity. Frequently he would pass a pleasant evening monitoring his interventions from afar, tuning into the rising hysteria in her phone conversations with the insufferable Lance and observing her anxieties over his tiny interventions and displacements.

In fact Malyn was already in his thrall.

Modern Magi

ellana was bracing herself for a gruelling day ahead with a morning ritual intake of all-sorts. Each bon-bon was extracted individually from her side drawer, unwrapped and placed reverently on an exquisite side-dish. It was inspected with the sharp eyes of an augur assessing the portents of the day before being popped unceremoniously into her mouth with a shrug of self-denial. During the ensuing meditative mastication, she considered the complexities of particular issues she would be confronting.

Ambitiously, she had set up three appointments in rapid succession; three men with very different business agendas who were demanding key stakes in the upcoming Lake Arden conference.

Lake Arden had been her own personal brainwave, an opportunity for all parties to relax and grapple with thorny issues in the launch of controversial Gene-Sys research. The remote location would be ideal for such highly confidential negotiations.

This morning would challenge her legendary business acumen to the utmost. In this exercise of transparent and open access she intended to emerge the king-maker. Self-importantly, she explained her strategy to Cubbie. Perhaps she did not notice the stifled yawn and gradual lapse of attention.

"We intend to whip up a little healthy competition among our modern Magi" she mused, enjoying mixing poetic allusion with a demonstration of canny business flair. "We must whet their appetites!"

Gold

Hellana was well aware of the Machiavellian reputation of the first suitor to come 'courting'. She had lain awake rehearing how she should handle this particular interview with breezy business-like directness.

Burrell de Vere had built his now considerable political power upon a network of discreet investors. His name rarely appeared in the press and if mentioned at all he was merely noted as a bystander in another's much more interesting life. This was because he had more than a little hand in directing content. Indeed he was the principal shareholder and director of Media-Net, recognised as the pre-eminent source of fair and unbiased news intelligence in the country. Few realised the constant and considerable efforts required to maintain this state of anonymity.

When certain people needed to raise, or indeed lose, substantial quantities of cash they would instinctively turn to 'Bee-de-Vee'. They knew they could rely on his impeccable credentials in securing the transaction in the most fragrant manner through the most reputable conduits.

Inviting de Vere in on the venture had been Hellana's personal coup. She had been roused to make the initial contact following a meeting with Frank who had positioned a dossier casually on her desk one morning. Many photos showed de Vere standing on the sidelines of various social gatherings. Frank had suggested that this might be 'someone that Es-Tech should get 'on side'. While Frank had a natural intuition in turning up leads, Hellana always boasted the *sang froid* to follow them up.

A sudden disturbance was heard in the outer office and a door slammed. Unannounced, a wayward tornado, her expected guest burst into Hellana's suite. He was well in advance of the appointed hour and Hellana's hand was still rustling amidst her tasty cache. De Vere had walked straight through the reception and entered into her aerie calling out 'Helly's in through here I expect! I'll make my own way!'

A splendid mane of carefully groomed white hair invisibly marked his passage with a waft of exotic clove perfume. He strutted to centre stage as if prepared to address a large orchestra. Cubbic trailed behind him apologetically flapping her hands in a gesture of dismay.

Hellana hastily composed herself in a circumspect welcome, attempting to disguise her annoyance at the familiarity of being addressed so forwardly at their first 'face-to-face'.

Without resort to emollient niceties de Vere launched. "Helly, we've got to be singing from the same hymn book on this. My investors are looking for guarantees of exclusivity. This is not just about intellectual property, it's also going to be about substantial real estate investments at the core of our city!"

Hellana caught clearly off-guard warbled, "But we are all working to create a prosperous, balanced community. *Security must be our mantra!* (She sometimes surprised herself by her own off the cuff eloquence.) There will be a lot of resistance to overcome. Your investors surely understand that security must be an integral part of the concept."

"The Frontier Hall Hyperion launch was a positive step in setting the agenda. Those scientists couldn't have been more reassuringly innocuous. But it was perhaps unfortunate that *your* Malyn emerged to play her 'voice of the people' card," she needled knowing how annoyed he would have been about her unexpected intervention. "But you, of course, are best placed to manage her views. I was delighted how the session picked up such media interest. You pulled out all the stops!"

"Leave Malyn to me. She is part of the team and will by guided by our program."

"But turning to the practicalities, I want to see some of those peripheral Planning Issues buried right away ... we want to present a clean hoarding to let our vision to unfold with calm purpose."

"But won't there be advantages in developing some grass roots enthusiasm, at least initially?" Hellana returned smugly.

Hellana felt that the moment was ripe for a little emollient flirtation. "Mr de Vere, I admire someone who understands the real issues."

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

His eye fell on the barrel cactus that stood on a raised podium. He tapped his palm lightly over the crowning steely spikes and withdrew it hastily. As he stood silently staring at the lake in front of him, his eyes picked up its grey reflection.

Hellana sallied forth again. "We should all be able to tap into the benefits of the Gene-Sys research. It will bring great prosperity to all."

The Maestro only responded with a look of contemptuous dismissal as if encountering a poorly tuned instrument in his orchestra.

Hellana was already beginning to flag. Her mind kept flitting to that delicious array of pick-me-ups beckoning from within her credenza drawer. She pressed a buzzer and called for coffee. Cubbie entered the room almost immediately and de Vere turned to face her. Her gaze was judgemental and defiant. It suggested that she knew how to manage her boss's foibles.

De Vere turned and faced Cubbie directly. "To be brutally frank, if we don't get the exclusive endorsement we require, I will take another recourse."

"But Mr de Vere, hold on a minute! Let me remind you that your invitation to participate was *my* idea. Es-Tech has maintained our facility on the Port Lands for many years. It is of strategic importance. There can be no deal without us!"

De Vere, rolled his eyes in exasperation and directed a scathing glance towards Cubbie. "You have a rather simplistic view of what's at stake! This is not just a question of loading up the money bags. This whole development has to sit fragrantly with all members of my team. I've got to satisfy some of the world's most scrupulous investors that this is an ethical investment, fully compliant with every god-damn *Charter of Human What-Nots* they can throw at us."

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

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

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

It was a considerable relief when Cubbie, carrying the coffee tray, conducted him into the ante room to sit down and review publicity details of the proposed campaign.

Frankincense

Feeling dispirited from this initial confrontation, Hellana anticipated with greater gusto her luncheon appointment with Lindsay Lagarto. He was the sort of person who stinted nothing when it came to nourishment. Hellana liked to witness such excess in others; it made her feel comfortable and natural.

Lagarto was the head of Proto-Pharma, for many years one of the world's leaders in the pharmaceutical industry. Recently however it had suffered serious reverses as patents had expired and its cherished products were being superseded by cheaper generic drugs. A plethora of legal challenges had begun to erode profitability.

Underneath his suave exterior Hellana knew that Lagarto occupied a vulnerable position. He sat at the head of a fractious board that refused to understand why the results of their expensive research were no longer raking in the astronomical profits they had come to expect.

The Proto board believed that a merger with Gene-Sys Biotech, a match made in heaven, would resolve such problems. All kinds of new marketing opportunities to support genetic inventiveness with new pharmaceuticals were opening up.

But tragically, at the worst possible moment, the *City Seven* affair had paralysed these merger talks. As the media racked up the deaths of these hapless vandals, the value of the anticipated merger appeared to plummet.

Es-Tech already enjoyed a long-standing business relationship with Proto, managing protection of their intellectual property. They had played an invaluable role in infiltrating the competition and subverting the marketing of other patents. With his long track record, Lagarto assumed that he could count on Hellana's unequivocal support. He had, of course, no inkling of the file of compromising photos that Es-Tech had amassed depicting his own peccadilloes in very explicit detail; files that Hellana suspected might prove persuasive in advancing her own objectives.

So it was with a frisson of girlish energy that Hellana rose as Lindsay entered her office. With a nimble bound he hailed her, 'Hell!' Flitting

through her mind were salacious images of this same Lagarto cavorting through the back rooms of *Madame Mignone's* with considerably less encumbrance than his impeccable Italian leisure suit.

They repaired for lunch at *Seraphim* which proved everything that Hellana might have desired. Lashings of cream sauce are always pardonable when wrestling with tricky business opportunities. At least they helped to eclipse memories of de Vere's truculence.

His choice of fine wines lubricated both their performances considerably. She enjoyed her liqueur with her right hand gently resting on Lindsay's upturned palm, staring provocatively into his vacant eyes.

During the course of the lunch she grandly promised him a strategic place on the inside track in the Portal development. They discussed how the announcement of the Proto-Gene-Sys marriage would restore his ailing stock value and how they themselves might take some personal advantage of this useful inside knowledge.

Hellana emerged with the sense that, like Madame Mignone, she had maintained an upper hand with superb finesse and extracted every possible advantage. His eager interest would undoubtedly press other competitors into much more aggressive postures and her own stock would rise on all fronts. De Vere's effrontery would be chastened by addition of other ingredients to her frothy mix.

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

Myrrh

Having crested on this wave of delicious *zuppa inglese*, Hellana felt fortified and ready to deal with the curdled postprandial fare that Flinders Grey, her third suitor, was likely to conjure up later that afternoon. She had known Flin for many years and recognised how much he valued her strong purposeful character. She was pleased to acknowledge how much he idolised her., but reciprocating this was always hard-going.

Flin's offering would be inevitably tainted with myrrh, the bitter perfume of death. As a titan of the insurance industry, he had vicariously shared so many others' catastrophes. He anticipated peril and misfortune at every turning. It had been his pervading sense of impending disaster and imminent collapse that had drawn him to Es-Tech the first place. Es-Tech's dedication to anticipating the thunder side of every cloud had proved a potent way to move his product.

Grey arrived promptly and was ushered by Cubbie into the blinding light. He was parked, blinking glumly, opposite Hellana. Whenever he visited Hellana's office, he pointedly ignored the nearby podium covered with its array of frightful bibelots. He feared such secrets; all withheld information was anathema to his sense of life purpose.

Representing the interests of one of the world's largest insurance companies, Flinders Grey had developed an overview of his industry that was beginning to terrify him. His lifetime's work, even the security of his few remaining years, had been cast into serious doubt.

Remembering his youthful innocence when he entered the industry, he realised that those comforting images of caring hands, umbrellas of protection and rocks of security, had vanished. The caring hands were now grasping fists, rip tides had engulfed that rock of security, the lighthouse was extinguished, and capricious winds of change had gusted away the cheerful protective umbrella.

The stable environment that he was expected to sustain was suddenly awash with rogue elements, armed with untried business models where bundled risk assessments allowed underpricing of traditional services. New upstarts had become adept at 'repackaging risk', slicing, dicing and passing it on to third parties. Every day Flinders encountered the dirgelike clamour of his own Lutine Bell.

His insurance industry had become more like placing gambling bets on risks rather than the traditional approach of trying to cushion against them. And the new risks were overwhelming in scope; true margins could no longer be assessed with any confidence. At every junction there were predators ravenous to tear him apart with their aggressively pitched calculations, gleeful at every adversity and ready to feed off the raft of litigation that seemed to engulf the company on every issue.

He too had attended the Hyperion promotional exercise at Frontier Hall and listened with growing horror as the scientists outlined the scope of the new biotechnology and its potential for changing a once familiar world into something unrecognisable.

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

Genetic profiling could offer opportunities to predict future risk and make commercial evaluations. If that was what his competitors were doing then that is what he would have to do himself.

There was never time for small talk in Grey's life and he came to his point immediately in a rather pre-rehearsed tone. "We will not be able to compete if some parties are not playing by the rules and are privy to information which for ethical reasons we cannot assess ... That Dr Noor for instance ..."

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

"He is an impossible egoist; everything that he does seems intended to draw attention to himself."

"I suspect that by playing such a public role he makes it very difficult for others to steal his patents. Perhaps there is an astute agenda behind all that outrageous behaviour."

Grey added dejectedly "I cannot believe the effrontery of his talk of eclipsing Darwin."

Hellana sighed in commiseration, "Darwin must always rankle with your industry, so intent on transforming the concept of survival the fittest into survival of the most risk averse." Grey admitted sadly, "Darwin has done nothing to promote social welfare. Now instead of addressing social good we are reduced to ensuring the welfare of the privileged pitted against the horde."

"But Flin, in your time you made similar assessments based on postcodes and medical statistics. How is Noor's science going to make this any different? You will only be improving the range and accuracy of your risk analyses. It seems a prudent enhancement to me."

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

"Come on Flin, is that any different from the society that you have already helped to produce? We are only talking about being better informed."

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

"We have reached a very important threshold. Some of us are prepared to embrace that awful future. There are others who huddle behind the pale unable to make the definitive step, unwilling to jettison their outdated ideas, old ethical codes that no longer serve. They are left clinging to a threadbare morality, religion and ritual".

"But Es-Tech is stepping forward to embrace the future, because if we do not then we will be at the mercy of those who do. It's as simple as that, Flin."

"It is my belief ..."

"You have far too many "beliefs" for your own good Flin." Hellana stared at him smugly, rather like Lucifer backed by a halo of dazzling light. "And that is my belief!"



Time

It is my favourite dream, the one that I often try to rekindle when I drift off. In it I am able to move at lightning speed.

I lose my habitual shuffling gait and can fast forward into a world that others dare not even contemplate.

All of our incised rulers, our daily rotor of alarms and calibrated clocks only sustain an illusion of being able to measure time and space accurately. In fact the only real clocks and measurers lie within ourselves.

But each of us is set to a different beat, each of us has a different perception of 'real time'. In my dream world I can glimpse this relativity of time and space within my own personal 'time machine'.

The fly whose life is measured in hours or the hummingbird set at feverish pitch, have different perceptions of time from us. Neither the fly nor the hummingbird resents its soon-expiring allotted span.

Only human beings seem to experience such painful anxiety over their dwindling hours.

In periods of trauma our clocks go into hyper drive and create an illusion of life unfolding in slow motion; the accident victim witnesses

with astonishing clarity every nuance of the approaching disaster, the knife descending, the bomb exploding, the onrushing train.

The victim relives an eternity in those last moments before impact.

The human brain imposes its individual time-line on reality. It rebels against intimations of 'magic' even when no direct path of causality can be detected.

People walking along the street 'drop' into reality. Once noticed they will be integrated into a coherent world view. We always assume some underlying causality.

Alien beings, like Dex and I, equipped with a wholly different sense of time and personal risk, should have no difficulty in materialising from nowhere, knowing that people will always construct a rational explanation for our being that does not challenge their carefully knit 'reality'.

The magician can rely on his audience's determination to construct an explanation for even the most unlikely events. The spectators' expectations are carefully managed, time implodes. Suddenly all are caught off guard by a 'magical' rupture.

The magic of the Noor Project depends upon our very different concept of time.

Dex and I have been engineered for 'millennial life'. We have been born to embrace a very different perspective on learning and risk-taking. Our perception of time is detached from usey's mundane realities.

Jim

ith a well-honed talent for procrastination, Mara pursued every possible diversion to delay writing her Frontier Hall report. She had made a dilatory search of all the social media sites, looking for news of the antics of the mysterious Dr Noor whose arrival had caused such mayhem at the airport. Overnight the media had become obsessed with Noor's foibles and a protest camp had already established itself on the boulevard opposite his hotel.

Everyone seemed convulsed by fantastical tales about the achievements of the Noor Project and the superhuman capabilities that it promised future generations. Only a fortnight earlier his research had been completely unknown, but now everyone had a passionate opinion. Endlessly reprinted were the faintly amusing photographs of Noor in his infamous lavender suit aggressively flinging a broken suitcase of flowered pyjamas into the face of an angry protester. None of the whitened faces in the photographs looked at all familiar to Mara and she began to suspect that it had all been a publicity stunt, perhaps even arranged by the Doctor himself.

Her studio and headquarters of *City Farm* consisted of a couple of cluttered rooms on the ground floor of an old house that had been left marooned among hoardings for proposed developments along a once busy thoroughfare.

The family, that had built this house, never imagined that their peaceful dining room with its ornately plastered apse, once a focus of family aspiration, would one day be overwhelmed by the extraordinary collection of miscellany that seemed to overflow Mara's life. Those glass faced cabinets which had once proudly displayed family heirlooms, accretions of years of strategic alliances, were now sagging under stacks of pamphlets. The oriel window, which had once commanded a long path through a verdant private garden, now surveyed a weedy parking pad and an assortment of deformed waste bins.

In the corner of the garden a vagrant, known to Mara only as Jim, had made a small lean-to home with a packing case and tarpaulins and a few possessions gathered from skips.

Jim called this makeshift home in the garden a 'Caravanserai'. "A caravanserai, like in the desert," he explained, "Strangers would meet and camp together in peace. The following day the camp would be struck, swept away as if it had never happened."

Scattered neighbours had pleaded with her landlord to remove this eyesore, but Mara, had reconciled complainants by pointing out that this was the only area that had avoided regular burglaries. Jim kept an eagle eye on everyone who passed through. And so the landlord had been persuaded that he should regard Jim as like having a free private security guard.

Jim tended the front garden meticulously but his horticultural methods were rudimentary. In season, many of the plants which past gardeners would have rejected as noxious weeds, suddenly sprang forth, a riot of bloom. Ranged around Jim's makeshift shanty were rows of seedlings in old cans and receptacles. While some passers-by grumbled about allergens, most had to begrudgingly admit that the plot was an interesting alternative to other front yards that had been trodden into muddy patches accommodating only waste bins and broken bicycles.

As their familiarity grew, Mara was astonished to discover that Jim had once lived with his family at the end of the street. He remembered an Eden of well-tended gardens, each differentiated according to the character of its owner. "You know, plants respond differently to different personalities," he maintained. "But now the whole city has just become a giant repository of looted possessions ... people acquiring things they don't need and then finding that they have to store them at the 'Mister Yellow Self-Store'. Nobody has time to find out how things grow."

Jim was by no means diminished by his rugged lifestyle. Mara discovered that he had trained as an architect and had worked on familiar buildings around New Mid..

"I used to be inspired by the social visions of the Twentieth century but then it all suddenly seemed to descend into madness. Who would want to be one of those little specks wandering vacant minded along 'desire lines' in a wilderness of 'signature' weirdness?"

"Since you put it that way ..." Mara tried to deflect his rant.

"My ideal city would be as transient as this garden, a place of unexpected blooming, ambiguous places; a place undergoing continual transformation. There wouldn't be a single *Mister Yellow* mausoleum in sight. But instead we are creating a world of exclusion zones and paranoid cameras looking at nothing much."

"One day I just woke up and realised that my life was about pandering to those hoarders, all the people who live in anxiety and end up having so much more than they really need. And so one day I just decided that the earth did not need another person scrambling for position on a ladder. I simply handed the keys over to my slightly surprised partners and walked out forever to find the life that I was designed for. This turns out to be it."

Mara had little idea of how Jim spent his days when not working his garden. Though there was no lighting in his hovel, he did have a battery powered headlamp that she occasionally saw flickering through the cracks.

She had provided him with a can of green paint and a paintbrush and joked, "As an aesthete you must know that there are occasionally advantages to playing by the neighbours' rules. A little green paint would do you wonders in their estimation."

"Just Greenwash, there's already enough of that about everywhere."

Mara did not press it further and instead let the hedge grow up in a peculiar flare in that corner of the garden.

Having grown up on the street and remembering its heyday, Jim had become involved in a particular local campaign. The City Planning Group had posted its intention to remove an avenue of 'dangerous' oak trees, once the pride of the street in its more genteel days. Their roots were discovered to be interfering with the drains. Expert arborists had recommended that the trees be replaced with 'popular' flowering pears, genetically engineered to be barren of messy fruits that might damage cars or attract the indigent.

Jim had secured a long list of signatures. "Those oaks are going to

stand as my memorial,' he insisted.

Out of the corner of her eye Mara could see the red light of her answering machine blinking annoyingly. She had been doing her best to ignore it and turned ever more resolutely to her diversions. It was only when her cat, Pinky, sent an avalanche of papers sliding down from the cabinet that she pressed the button and received Malyn's imperious message.

Unwelcome memories of the previous night flooded back, the indignity of being ejected from the hall by heavy handed thugs and finding herself in a smelly service alley. She wondered what could have induced such instant belligerence. And now how typically self-important of Malyn that she could call and expect to meet immediately - as if Mara had nothing better to do with her life.

However, despite attempting to refocus on the Funday web-site, her curiosity had been aroused by Malyn's curious stipulations. Soon she was begrudgingly negotiating the call back. A voice message purred into action, a man's voice pedantically explaining that he was "away from his desk at the moment". She decided to leave a message anyway.

"It's Mara at the *City Farm* and I'm returning Ms Staryk's call. I can only say I'm a bit surprised after last night..."

Malyn suddenly burst onto the line. "Oh yes! Dear! I'm so very sorry about my behaviour. I thought that you might be one of the people hounding me about my book launch. But when I got home I got your little message, and, on further reflection, I realised that it could be an interesting story. Your fledgling farm! Why not meet me in front of Bayco at 2:30 ... sharp? There is a taxi rank there and we can just hop into one and go to a pleasant spot to talk. You can choose and I'll pick up the tab."

"Fledgling Farm, really, how condescending!" Mara fumed inwardly as she reluctantly agreed to Malyn's request.

She looked at her watch and realised that if she left immediately she might have minutes to reconnoitre from a nearby coffeehouse and consider whether she wanted to play this game at all. There was a distracting knock on the door, Jim's signature double tap. He looked worried, "I just wanted to mention that there was a character asking questions about you earlier this morning ... claimed to be trying to locate a missing person, a girl called Greene, spelled with an 'e" ... apparently he's working on behalf of a family worried about her welfare."

Mara flinched and looked away distractedly.

"Don't look so horrified; he didn't get anything from me. I explained that your name was Mara anyway. We joked that it sounded like a good name for a yacht. But then I could sene a flicker of duplicity. As soon as he offered me a bribe I knew that he was fishing without a licence ... of course I took the money for our campaign and showered him with information about your entertaining idiosyncrasies; I'm afraid I may have let my imagination run amok embellishing the story."

"The guy began to look increasingly irate ... almost wanted a refund He did seem to think that flashing the money gave him the right to ask a lot of personal questions. I think that he used some phrase about 'reinventing yourself'. Jim paused and viewed her closely to see whether there was any reaction.

Mara flashed out in sudden anger which made Jim recoil. "Whether or not I have altered my life's course is nobody's business but mine! I am not an outlaw! I expect he has been engaged by my family, or even worse Gilb ... and after how many years? I suppose that they just want me to sign something."

He could see that Mara was looking suddenly apprehensive. He rallied facetiously, "Why do criminals nowadays always make themselves look so criminal? In my time all the criminals I used to know wore three piece suits and hung out in plush offices. Of course they were mostly my clients."

Nix and Noor

Peering through her peep-hole, Cubbie was very disappointed by the appearance of the person who had just entered the waiting room. Was this the glamorous Doctor Noor currently captivating the public imagination and the 'genius' that Hellana had claimed would be such a major asset in advancing their Hyperion interests? The man looked like a weary actor caught off guard, prepping for his next scene. She noted that he instantly rallied, lifting his dark tinted frames and leering predatorily, as her receptionist entered the room. Cubbie, impelled by a twinge of competitive jealousy, launched herself into the reception area to greet him effusively. "I hope that we are making you feel completely comfortable on your visit," she sallied brightly.

"Well, if hospitality can be measured in thugs bearing sophisticated weapons, then I've been royally treated," he responded with a patronising smile as he sized up Cubbie's deficiencies. Not unaware of such crass evaluation she tried to conceal her resentment behind a barrage of girlish banter.

Dr Noor trailed her onto Hellana's dazzling lit stage, pausing briefly to assess the dramatic opportunities offered. He primed himself to deliver an inspired performance. Instantly aware of the shadowy silhouette against the flood of light reflected from the lake, he strode confidently to the windows exclaiming "What a pleasure to accept your invitation, Ms Nix and take this opportunity to experience your truly magnificent view!" His delivery suggested that he might be including Hellana herself in the perceived magnificence. He placed his two hands on the glass, momentarily transfixed in boyish rapture, then turned back abruptly to face her presenting a formal hand as if the welcoming host. Hellana was now at a total disadvantage, upstaged and facing her own glare.

With a quick appraising eye Noor took in the details of the sparse furnishings of the office. "I do believe that this is the first moment since I arrived that I have not been subjected to cameras observing every move. Perhaps I should feel deflated! Reputation has it that Es-Tech has its eyes

on the entire world."

Hellana smiled benignly and tried to think of something sensible to say. "Well, we try," was all she could manage.

Noor pressed on. "Everywhere I go I'm obliged to confront a media frenzy. But here, meeting a legend of the corporate world, I feel instantly relaxed, and assured that we will be embarking upon a most interesting relationship." He stared candidly at the two women, both poised in indecision and blinking nervously.

Noor's silhouette betrayed his curious habit of combining extravagant gesture with effusive speech. He outlined his flamboyant pronouncements with sweeping gestures, like an artist setting down the outlines of some voluptuous model. Hellana noted his curious habit of throwing his head first left then right as if expecting to pull in a larger audience from the sidelines.

She deployed her most ingratiating smile. "You should feel relaxed about the absolute confidentiality our discussions."

Cubbie attempted to move the exchange away from generalities, "We always take our professional responsibilities seriously. But frankly, Doctor Noor, some aspects of your visit have presented us with a strong challenge. Your behaviour and outspoken statements to the media have whipped up considerable public controversy."

Noor winked engagingly, "Oh! I'm never been averse to a little publicity. It helps to bring important issues into the public eye." He leered suggestively.

Hellana and Cubbie stared back, wide eyed and speechless. "But Doctor, as you know Es-Tech has a position that extends beyond our serious security duties. We have a strategic holding in the Portal lands and this advantage, together with our ability to provide the security that all parties require, has placed us in a key position at the table!"

Noor's riposte was unwavering. "Long ago I learned how to protect myself from those trying to rein in my research, just as I have learned to challenge the conservative beliefs of so many who are reluctant to think for themselves." Hellana, sensing the same plunging loss of control that she had earlier experienced with de Vere, rallied, "Es-Tech is as keen as anyone to help you push the frontiers of your science. However by playing your maverick role you sometimes make it difficult for us to undertake some of the more delicate background diplomacy required. We must all tread carefully to navigate through some potentially very inflammatory issues."

"Yet, I understand that it is partly due to your inspired intervention that I am becoming rather infamous as *Dr Clone?*"

Hellana, who could feel his eyes sharpening beneath their shades, coloured slightly at this reference. She recalled that it was Frank who had coined the phrase. "Of course we recognise that cloning has no relevance to your science whatsoever. But sometimes it is effective to focus the public mind on simpler ideas."

"Dear lady, I assure you that I perceive your strategy though I'm less certain of its wisdom. You seem to want to make me dependant on your obsessive security apparatus."

Hellana responded in cajoling manner, "Es-Tech must protect its own reputation in these delicate matters. Maverick behaviour may prove a severe liability to our venture! We must lead public opinion along a carefully prepared path."

"Ah, we are all talking as if we are already concluded an agreement on terms of our collaboration. Undoubtedly there is a long road ahead of us. The first milepost has only been sighted. I concede that your organisation is providing some interesting options for the substantial backing we require. For this I am grateful. But these are only the first tentative steps towards realising the full sweep of *our* vision with or without Gene-Sys, Es-Tech and your Portal development scheme."

Hellana bit her lower lip while Cubbie considered the confrontation of the two actors before her. Neither was entirely plausible to her.



Gladiators

I have been caught up in a dream about a game taking place in a roaring, packed stadium. 'Gene-yus' is a blood sport played for the ultimate stakes. Defiantly the players flaunt large areas of elaborately tattooed skin. I myself am emblazoned with jagged lightning bolts.

After any goal is scored with an algal green "EGG" any players who have disappointed are dragged off to the sidelines to be dismantled by surgical teams into piles of basic components. Raucous spectators bay with blood lust as the deficients are escorted to their grisly fates.

Suddenly I am aware that the 'EGG' has gone missing. Both teams are becoming frantic in their search for it and the surgeons are sharpening their scalpels to begin an indiscriminate orgy of dismemberments.

One of the players on the field seems determined to entertain the stands. He is out for himself and plays for neither team. The crowd loves this clown and cheers his antics. I suspect that he is hiding the "EGG' and making a mockery of us all.

The mysterious clown takes a position in the middle of the field, and lifts his mask for a moment, long enough for me to recognise Antinuous Noor. Then he takes a bow and holds out the concealed 'EGG'. The crowd bays with enthusiasm.

What happens next seems so alien to my true nature that I am astonished to recall it as I awaken. With a furious, athletic leap I fly over the heads of my teammates and land on Noor's shoulders, knocking him to the ground, grabbing the 'EGG'.

A howling, angry scrum then converges and carts Noor triumphantly to his grisly fate on the sidelines.

We tend to gauge success in life according to artificial rules for our little invented games. Within the demi-pulse that we call 'human history', humanity has defined ever more esoteric diversions. Those who succeed in our contrived contests are celebrated as if they had measured up to the challenges of evolution.

But now I realise that we are sounding the death knell of the human era and all its little games. We are embarking on games that many will be temperamentally unfit to play.

The universe does not require our gaming instincts to further its unfolding course. Perhaps this is why, in my dream, we are left so bereft in that empty, rubbish strewn stadium after the spectators have departed.

We are only mimicking an intelligence glittering above us in the night skies and taunting our hubris.

Our desperate games are no more than irrelevant sideshows in the ongoing processes of an expanding, increasingly vacant universe.

Dacton Docks

he Es-Tech Strategic Command Centre was located on a desolate site at the tip of the abandoned City Port Authority lands, an area once glamorously called *the Dacton Docks*. This low lying peninsula had been squandered under a criss-crossing skein of railway lines and disused roads which divided fenced off islands of brown grasses and undergrowth kept in check by regular applications of lethal defoliant. While the name 'Dacton Docks' once might have conjured up a community full of rowdy sailors and waterfront vitality, the current reality was a drab scrub-land, layers of security fencing, surveillance cameras on poles and desolate control boxes littered across a jumbled wilderness.

Clay had often wondered how such a bleak site could have been selected for the field operations headquarters. Surely the necessary privacy could have been secured with sophisticated equipment and less miserable isolation.

There were no parking provisions for employees. All staff was delivered to work in a fleet of mini-coaches dispatched from remote transportation hubs.

A heli-pad provided a short connection to the City Airport for VIP's. Clay had once accompanied Frank and high ranked military guests on this jaunt and had been astounded by the cratered desolation of the landscape scattered below.

A colossal mound had been created near the point where the slimy Eme River disgorged a long trail of filth into the lake. Originally composed of discarded fill, its top surface was now encased in topsoil and seeded with wild-flowers. It was intended to provide a focal point for a community that was still feebly flickering in some crazed planner's imagination. A looming presence commanding the landscape like a forgotten Pharaoh's dream of immortality, it had been dubbed 'the Dacton Alp' by Es-Tech staff and the name had settled in the public imagination.

Like his colleagues, Clay referred to the whole miserable compound facetiously as 'Cloak and Dacton'. But he had signed a confidentiality

agreement which included never divulging information about any Es-Tech activities undertaken at the location. His few outside acquaintances believed that Clay was employed as a technician at the *Animal House Recording Studios*, lost somewhere in the wastelands of Dacton – 'poor sod'.

Es-Tech's high ranking executives had their exquisitely appointed offices in major landmarks dotted around the world. These were the gilded cages where people like Hellana Nix could enjoy impressive props of power and influence. But the research, the development of equipment and staff training for deployment were undertaken discreetly at the Dacton Centre.

Everyday Clay made his way on his bike down a long ragged road. He kept his concentration on the broken tarmac, avoiding potholes in the scabrous surface. He enjoyed this part of a solitary journey, preferring to avoid the jostling camaraderie of the minibuses. Though he spent almost his whole workday in solitude, the isolation of the bleak sweeps of ruined debris fenced off with razor wire, and the trundling motion of the bike, seemed to ease his mind. The road led to his transfer point at Tooney's Café. Permitted no further on his own, the Es-Tech minibus would swing by to pick him up and convey him the last leg of his morning commute through the Es-Tech Exclusion Zone. The café, a flat roofed pillbox, was located at a cross roads where truckers depositing waste fill turned off into a large field for overnight encampment. A spider web of duct tape secured its cracked front window that surveyed this desolate intersection.

Clay would lock his bike at the back and enter giving Myrna his customary salute. Having picked up his waiting coffee he would then dash out to join the impatient minibus, which sped off through the guarded electronic gates of their Dacton base.

Security procedures at Es-Tech were exemplary. All staff was obliged to pass through elaborate clearance procedures. Lockers are provided for civvies. Personnel had to pass through a security tunnel to retrieve their colour coded uniforms within the Operations Zone (or *OZ* as they all called it). All communications were surrendered to safe lockers for

retrieval at the end of the workday.

Few personal effects could be found in *OZ*. They had been imported by employees at considerable effort. Photos of loved ones or knick-knacks were subjected to extensive risk analysis and critical appraisal before any permission for transit was granted. Clay's one attempt to personalise his cubicle with a 'Dumb Bunny' mascot, the only thing that he had ever bothered to win at a fair, had been rejected citing fibres of dubious provenance. He suspected that people like his boss Frank contained much more toxic material than this pitiful mascot.

Clay never related easily to the other personnel except through the most neutral of electronic networks. He had no close acquaintances and tended to work in a solitary corner. Days could pass without his engaging anyone in conversation. Lunch was delivered on a trolley by a mute kitchen aid and he would eat it in solemn silence. But this was no hardship. He tended to regard his colleagues as unwelcome distractions from his immediate activities.

But Frank's excessively controlling foibles irritated Clay intensely. Frank had such a driven agenda that he could make Clay feel almost normal. He was a ferret for all sorts of information; he could approach anyone out of the blue to get exactly what he wanted, in Clay's view 'the ultimate control freak.'

Clay often wondered why Frank would agree to work in such godforsaken conditions if his 'real life' was as glamorous as depicted. Was it the gritty pleasure of the voyeur engaged in undercover work - spying on the unsuspecting? Perhaps like Clay himself, he was resistant to other relationships.

However, Frank's role in the company structure always seemed a little vague; he seemed to have no clearly designated position in an overall hierarchy yet he referred to 'Old Nixy' as if she were his crony. He spent a lot of time away at head office in the City centre.

Frequently Clay would become aware that he had materialised from nowhere and was watching him silently over his shoulder. He assumed that this must be a manager's prerogative. Present or not, Frank always

Dacton Docks

seemed to know exactly what everyone was doing down to the most minute details.

Clay didn't question what he himself was doing becoming enmeshed in such company. He was twenty-five years younger than Frank and felt that he ought to be afforded a little of the rope that Frank had clearly appropriated in his younger days. But he had a nagging apprehension that he himself might land in a similar limbo when he reached Frank's age; that he too might end up drifting around in a sea of images and memories of past professional triumphs.

Plan B

his morning our courtesy signal, a melodious triple tone, chimed to prepare us for a visitor. Thomas and I regarded each other and with forced languor before granting Dribs permission to enter. Characteristically, Dex tilts his head back turning his eyes up to stare blankly at the ceiling. Dribs always falls into the trap, following Dex's gaze upwards as if expecting some sudden epiphany.

"Good morning *you two*" Dribs saluted pulling straight his splendid white coat, a glimpse of a perfectly knotted red strangle tie underneath.

"What is good for you is unlikely to be inherently good for us," we respond in perfect unison.

Easily disconcerted, Dribs dropped any attempt at further emollient cordiality and came quickly to the point. "We are certainly all agreed that we are keen to bring your gifts to a wider public notice."

"Our gifts! And who claims to be our benefactor? No! We have no further interest in displaying gifts to anyone. Remember the last fiasco?" Thomas Dex reached out to the closest object to hand and tilted a plate with remnants of eggy bits onto his smugly white smocked splendour. Dex's anger tends to flare up out of nowhere; I don't feel quite so extreme in my antipathy towards someone as pathetic as Dribs.

Then Dex turned away and began to dabble with his soundboard and taunting sarcasm which I received as, "Now its your turn to play the toady diplomat!" which he rounded off with an aggressive arpeggio.

Dribs persevered. "Regrettably there are no choices offered in this matter. We all must move where opportunities lie." Trying ineffectually to brush the eggy stains off his white smock with his pocket handkerchief, he soldiered on stolidly. "But the team are planning a bit of an adventure, flying, in fact, and not your everyday escape destination."

Ah yes! He knows how Dex and I warm to the concept of 'an adventure' especially one involving *flying*. This word always strikes a special chord.

Dex brightened, "What destination do you have in mind? Somewhere with sand and bikini packed beaches?"

Dribs eyes narrowed. I could imagine that his mind had slipped back to unfavourable recollections of our nudist period.

"Unfortunately ..."

"How many times in you life have you started your sentences with that word?" The gloves were off.

"For security reasons we aren't permitted to reveal the exact coordinates, but I speculate that it will be slightly more northerly."

"You mean camping out with polar bears on pack ice? Where's the pleasure in that kind of adventure?"

"We are still in the process of assessing all the security risks ... and for God's sake stop playing that endless music while we are having a conversation."

"This can hardly be called a *conversation*. It seems more like a military despatch."

For many months Dex and I have discussed 'Plan B'. We picked up the notion of Plan B from those endless entertainments about wayward humanity. But in our case Plan B would seem to necessitate bidding farewell to all regularity in our lives in order to abscond to a secret venue and enjoy a life free from the intervention of irritating U-seys.

Neither of us has the faintest notion of how to accomplish this. Though we live our daily lives like royalty with the illusion of considerable power, we have no independence or privacy; we live always on display. We have no access to money and we are slightly hazy about how much money is acquired anyway.

So *Plan B* has usually presented itself with insuperable obstacles. We'd be prepared to be quite cooperative with anyone who could offer useful help. But our support staff has taken considerable pains to ensure that no one even faintly intelligent ever strays across our path. The threshold between us and the rest of the human race remains quite insuperable.



Equilibrium

I am poised on a bicycle-like contraption and surveying a huge valley. Below I can see orchards jostling within the walls of a tiny village. Their trees are covered in fruits just coming into season. A glittering river meanders along the valley floor and passes along the edge of a comfortable manor house.

Perhaps I resent that I have never actually been permitted to ride a bicycle; the assessed risk levels would be astronomical according to Dribs. But I can imagine the thrill of maintaining balance on something so precarious.

undaunted, in my dream, I have launched myself from my hilltop aerie. Wobbling uncertainly at first I start downhill and begin to discover how easy it is to balance as I pick up speed. It is all an act of will.

But I begin to panic as the bike picks up speed. There are no brakes and I scuff my feet to break the headlong descent. I consider throwing myself off while there is still hope of surviving a fall but even that moment passes in indecision. The wind is screaming past my ears. I can barely see where I am steering through teary eyes. Teeth clenched, I pass through the village so quickly that it is a blur. I'm barely able to jerk my handlebars out of the path of obstacles; I plunge through a

crowd of angry people shaking their fists at me.

This village is not at all the harmonious place that I imagined. I catch glimpses of dreadful accidents everywhere, collisions of vehicles and the mangled remains of those who have come to grief.

As I cross a stone bridge over the river I consider throwing myself off into the water but again indecision prevails and my knuckles tighten around the handlebars. I was never able to make such split-second decisions.

Rigid with fear and shaken in every bone, I jolt onto a path sloping upwards. As I ascend the bike at last begins to decelerate. It again begins to wobble dangerously. I come to a halt on a nearly perpendicular surface. I am poised just long enough to glance back and survey with growing horror the vast horizon before I again find myself plunging along the same trajectory on another breathless sweep.

Once more at ever-accelerating speed I drop from the sky. There is nothing to cling onto, no way of preventing myself from sweeping again through the village. I am a pendulum doomed to oscillate forever back and forth across this valley like a great timepiece. Or at least until I finally throw myself off to join the other tragedies I have witnessed.

I suppose this dream is countering that other side of me, my craving for equilibrium. I realise that neither Dex nor I are designed for repose or equilibrium. We have been created to rupture the past and plunge through the present at breathless speed.

Nature has no predilection for stasis. It throws up victors and losers who engage in white knuckle rides from crest to crest. Perhaps Nature only aspires to emptiness. Equilibrium is merely human wishful thinking.

The Witch

steady stream of people passed the window of the coffee shop where Mara had established her perch beside the glass window wall to wait for Malyn. Tourists in their daring summer clothes paraded past outside on a sultry afternoon. Mara recalled poignantly how she had launched herself into this alien city with similar defiance scarcely two years earlier.

She was apprehensive about Malyn's change of heart after the initial callous rebuff. Had her conscience suddenly been pricked? Something more self-serving seemed probable.

Mara's attention fell upon two girls slouched over a nearby table massaging tiny smart-phones, muttering to themselves. Bits of aimless conversation drifted across the general hubbub.

An unlikely pair, they seemed to be merely acting as each other's sounding boards. One provocatively displayed her netted bare legs to the passing world outside. She was kitted out in a mini-bib skirt of shiny yellow plastic and mid calf pink boots which accentuated the length of her pale legs. She was tumbling out of a low cut summer blouse. Distractedly, she coiled the ends of her bleached hair as she navigated a private world. Occasionally passers-by would stop and stare at her, but she feigned total indifference to their brazen attentions.

Her companion was much more cautiously dressed in a shapeless brown track suit. Her mousy hair had been sliced in an unstylish bob. She had a gentle doe-eyed countenance and remained oblivious to the glances of the passers by beyond.

Mara positioned herself strategically to get a better look.

A belching alert announced an incoming email and *Ms Leggy* was galvanised into action. A determined thumb action asserted her authority in at least some invisible network.

There was a pout of disappointment, "It's just a text from *the Babe*." Her droll voice was inflected with hollow sarcasm. "Like he's dreamt up some new angle on the witch. He's sent the profile; hey! take a look at

this hunk!"

Mara craned surreptitiously to glimpse the contents of the proffered screen.

The brown-clad girl clucked, "Oh-Mi-Gawd, eye candy! *Like Not!* Where does the Babe dig these people up?"

"Like he raids some dumb-ass identikit, duuh!"

"Well at least the witch is gonna lap this one up."

"Like sometimes though I think like she sees straight through it, like knows it's all being scripted."

"I know what you mean. Like *Oh-Mi-Gawd*, it's hard to keep all your stories straight, let alone mine. I finally had to make a crib sheet."

"The Babe likes to see himself as Mr Cloak'nDagger."

"Like, as if!"

Mara's ear pricked. That particular name, *Cloak'nDagger*, had been cropping up with increasing frequency on the *City Farm* blog site. Just a coincidence but ...

"Well at least he's our ticket to ride, so we need ahold on tight."

"Like he's tryin' to set me up with this guy." She flashed an image on her screen.

"Oh-Mi-Gawd! ... "

"Like rich or what! Like you should see the car."

"Like so?"

"Like so the guy was like - I really wadever ... And as if I'm gonna like put my cards on the table. Like he could be my old man or something."

"So ... how'd he go?"

"Well I'm goin' like No way! Like You just don't wanna know. Like he's got this wife somewhere for sure."

"Oh-Mi-Gawd, like so not okay."

"Like the guy's was all over me too. Like I get like so hands off".

"Oh-Mi-Gawd!"

Mara noticed how each omitted adjective was accompanied by a mimed leer or roll of the eyes.

"Like I'm getting up my nerve to go right up there and like give the

Babe a piece of my mind. He can't just use people like that. Me 'n you! Like that's not the deal."

A car with smoked glass windows drew up opposite, and Mara watched as Malyn Staryk slid out. She had arrived well before the appointed time. She stood stalk still for a moment as if sniffing danger in the air. She glanced around nervously; her movements were tense and abrupt.

But the effect of her arrival on her gossiping neighbours was utterly astonishing. The arresting window display suddenly folded and gracelessly retracted her legs, plunging her head behind a menu. The mouthy girl hissed to her friend, "Fuck me, look who just got out, she gotta be following us!"

"Like Oh-Mi-Gawd! I always said that she was like psychic or something."

It struck Mara that for someone taking precautions to avoid recognition, Malyn was remarkably conspicuous in a luminescent pink summer frock and platform shoes. However reluctant to abandon the entertainment at the next table, Mara quickly gathered up her belongings. She winked as she slid past the two girls. They stared back at her aghast.

Malyn, apparently realising that she was early, had darted directly into the department store. But following her into the shop through the revolving door, Mara found that she had evaporated without a trace. She returned with dignity to wait at the taxi rank outside.

She consulted her watch, 2:30 exactly and Malyn had not reappeared. Mara glanced back at the café window and noticed that the window display stools had been vacated.

A panhandler approached her with a determined air, but she realised that if he could afford the pristine tracksuit and trainers, he probably didn't need her help. He pulled back his hood slightly to reveal Malyn's worried face.

"Thanks for coming. I know that this get-up must seem mystifying, but I've been having serious problems with stalkers. Let's grab one of these taxis and go somewhere to talk. Pick any place that you'll feel comfortable."

However once ensconced, Malyn imperiously ordered the driver to take them to a cafe by the Phoenix Theatre. So much for Mara's 'pick'.

Malyn sniffed, "I left my dress and shoes in the changing cubicle. Not exactly the sort of shoplifter the store caters to I suppose." Close up Malyn's face appeared anxious and lined. Her lips formed a tense smile but her eyes remained mirthless. Usually meticulously assembled for the camera, today she had applied her makeup with a shaky hand. As she talked Mara noticed a nervous tendency to flap her hands and claw the air as if breasting invisible currents.

"I'm being utterly hounded. I can't go anywhere without being followed. They know that I've hit on what they're up to and it only makes them all the more brazen."

Mara recalled the precipitous retreat of the two girls in the café window which seemed anything but stalking.

She touched Malyn's shoulder gently, "But surely you expect to be constantly in the public eye. Outspoken opinions go with the territory. People expect to find you annoying, but they are hardly going to hunt you down for it."

As the cab rounded a corner Malyn jerked her finger towards a group of pedestrians — "There he is again! He just won't let up, one of my stalkers. Mara craned to see a rather perforated young man standing on the curb who was clearly interested in nothing more than relations with his phone screen.

She noticed how Malyn had pulled the drawstring of her hood tight, compulsively entwining the ends around her fingers.

"That guy's been following me all week taking pictures and relaying my co-ordinates to his buddies."

"He can't possibly know you are in this taxi - you would have stymied anyone with all those elaborate precautions. Besides, he looks pretty gormless to me."

Malyn shuddered and cowered into the corner of the cab seat. She cleared her throat and came to the point.

"So you're part of that so-called *Manor Farm* utopia down in the Hyperion development? You've certainly hit the fan recently. I gather that the developers are keen to get you removed as soon as possible? – not quite the image they have in mind for their elite enclave?"

Mara shook her head. "Well I thought that we might give an interesting alternative angle on your Report, if you'd have us."

"But what do you know about Dr Noor and his project? Have you been following all his escapades in the news?"

Mara felt annoyed by her condescension. "I don't know what rock you think I live under. How could I avoid reading about him, much as I tend resent it as a total waste of time? But how is that going to help fuel our discussions about our *Manor Farm* project?"

"Well, recently I've come under a lot of pressure to do an interview with Noor. The session is intended to focus on his collaboration with Gene-Sys, putting his patents at their disposal."

"Well, as far as I can make out, he is just another media obsessed showman. But I am hoping tha a Manor Farm interview might focus on issues that are more immediate than Noor and his gene patents."

Malyn was scathing. "Have you *no* idea of how serious this issue has become? He is going to blow all of this out of the water! The implications of the Noor Project are *deadly* serious, for you, and for everyone. And this is not just another wheeze to sell products that cater to middle class aspirations. Noor is shifting the goal posts to a wholly different game with completely different rules. Have you any idea why he's come here, why he wants to latch onto Gene-Sys? ... why he hasn't attempted to launch this clinic elsewhere?"

"I suppose that his research requires a stable environment that New Mid can offer."

"Let me tell you that Noor's research is untenable in most parts of the world and for very good reasons. It depends on absolute secrecy, yet he has to attract the best scientific minds to work within an attractive, secure environment. There are few societies where it would be safe to conduct his research openly."

Mara sensed that Malyn was trying to rein in her rising hysteria. This obsession was certainly far off the radar of City Manor Farm and its agendas. Malyn's shoulders quivered with apprehension as she continued. "Debates about genetically modified crops are already a political minefield. Well, imagine how the issues could polarise around proposals for a genetically modified humanity?"

"Gene-Sys already has a well-established niche in bio-tech. The Noor Project wants to latch onto this and explore ways to adapt the human life to a radically changed environment."

Mara could not fathom why Malyn would be unburdening herself to her. "But you're the one with the public voice. You have the power to challenge them if you believe this research is immoral."

"But with *City Farm* at risk and the developers keen to squeeze you out, you have every reason to question the community that is being envisioned on the Hyperion Portal lands. It would be the polar opposite of the inclusive community that you are trying to develop in your little farm."

Mara reacted defensively, "My little farm has a much wider vision. But we choose our battles carefully. We need good will to encourage a change in attitudes to all the redundant land in New Mid. We want to draw attention to the lands right across the city that are being ignored and forgotten. We want to reactivate these by encouraging a better understanding of the interconnectedness of all natural ecosystems."

Malyn clicked her tongue in annoyance. "It all sounds laudably idealistic. But some of us need to lead more practical lives, I'm afraid," she sniffed scathingly. "The Portal development may be a challenging way for you to crystallise this debate. You can't just sit back and hope that goody-goodies will flock to your cause."

"We aren't trying to enlist Goody-Goodies." Mara returned irritably. We're only offering ideas about transition because the old ways ar no longer sustainable. I thought that you would be interested in airing our viewpoint; that the confrontation would make an interesting debate."

Malyn Staryk shrugged indifferently. She adjusted her tactics

somewhat. "Well I believe that this Dr Noor is, like you, another person who is not what he pretends to be."

"What do you mean by that - like me?"

Malyn ignored the question. "Noor cares nothing for the lives that he is offering to improve. He is a grotesque of pathetic self-aggrandisement, only intent on publicity to secure his place in the spotlight, pretending to be the compassionate crest of recent advances in fertility science."

Malyn lurched suddenly to her new point. "Specifically I would like you to focus the debate specifically on the implications of the Noor Project and whether it has any likelihood of enhancing the kind of society *City Manor* want to promote."

Mara resented the torrent of condescension. "But where would we start? We have no expertise on these issues."

"I can get you started by providing some detailed background information about Noor and his cronies. I can also line up some funding for publicity. I could help you to make these issues so controversial that Noor might feel obliged to pack up his bags and find some safer place to deploy his oily charms."

Mara began to feel a grudging respect for Malyn's determination to embrace an issue she felt so strongly about, even if it seemed rather removed from the advancement of *City Manor*.

"But surely you don't think that Noor is any reason for your being followed? That smacks of paranoia."

"Well sadly the world isn't quite as straightforward as you might think. I know that in his past Noor has undertaken experiments that few burdened with moral scruples would have considered. I want a voice, but my hands are tied. Parties with significant influence over my station, are investing directly in this research. They even want to suppress the message of my book, *Blind Terror*. They are determined to derail any controversy."

Mara tried to adopt a soothing tone. "I think that the theme of your book seems to have got to you. Everything I have seen you do today suggests that you are being irrationally paranoid."

Malyn turned on her again. "What do you know about the *City Seven*? Do you follow the news at all?"

Mara rolled her eyes encountering yet further condescension. "Well it's unlikely I know anything that would be of interest. I thought that you were the one writing the book."

"Well I have research assistants who are looking into that tragedy. They've proved astonishingly successful in penetrating the *Seven's* milieu and gleaning confidences from a whole raft of contemporaries. The material they have brought back has been absolutely sensational."

"But how is this connected with what City Farm might be able to do?"

Malyn again ignored the question. "These assistants have also become my friends. Perhaps I have seen a little of my own life as it might have been through her eyes. But now I feel that I have put them into extreme danger. Perhaps they have already found out too much."

"But why are you telling me?"

"But I suspect that *pretence* is exactly what you are good at."

Mara suddenly looked very uncomfortable. Was Malyn really that perceptive? Malyn was staring at her with a steady gaze. Her dark eyes seemed to cross as if she had lost focus on the immediate physical world. Mara felt a visceral tug as if she was being taken under another's control.

Malyn exhaled suddenly, relaxed and admitted, "Yes, your life is much more complicated than you admit to; you have a history of duplicity. I can see that, like me, you are very much your own self-creation."

"Well you may think yourself perceptive, but I did not come here to have my character analysed."

"Don't be alarmed! Many regard prescience as a curse; it terrifies them. But I only observe things that people think they are hiding. Perhaps our paths were predestined to cross at this moment after all."

"Well I wasn't expecting a session with a clairvoyant!"

"Don't worry dear; I don't wish you any particular harm; in fact I might genuinely be able to help. I'm just suggesting that you are vulnerable, especially when you aren't what you purport to be. Your name for instance ..."

Mara flared up in protest. She had no intention to endure further humiliation. "All I've done is unburden myself of an ill-suited destiny. But I'm not an enigma, I have just chosen to leave behind one world and find the people who make more sense to me."

Malyn gestured to pacify this outburst. "So you came to New Mid to start a new life. No harm in that. But all I can say is that the best you have managed is your solitary dedication to a farm, surrounding yourself with eco-jetsam. It doesn't take a seer to recognise that that is not a *destiny*."

"Well it is what we are here to talk about, not my destiny."

Malyn suddenly resumed a business-like tone. "Well I'll lay some more of my cards on the table. I am telling you this because my assistants, Zaanie and Reen, have turned up some very interesting links between the *City Seven* and *Gene-Sys*. They have entered very dangerous territory, considering what has happened to those kids. Of course I am not asking you to get involved in anything dangerous."

"So you see some connection between the *Seven* and Dr Noor's nonsense? Sounds far fetched even for a clairvoyant."

"I do not just think it, I know it."

Malyn unzipped the pocket of her track suit and extracted a sheaf of papers which she slapped down in front of Mara. Clipped to the top was a cheque, presented tantalisingly upside down. Mara stared at it stunned, trying to fathom whether the number she was reading upside down really did have three zeros.

Malyn ignored Mara's obvious curiosity. "This is a file of information I've gleaned about the Noor Project. With this you can provide some background to revitalise your web-site, and attract some new followers. Perhaps, for starters, you might hire someone who knows what they're doing! Some of this information will prove quite explosive and everyone will want to know how you laid hands on it. "She added in afterthought, "Obviously I ask you *not* to breathe a word about my direct involvement. You have never met me. That much I insist upon."

Mara nodded a confused assent. The future of the *City Farm* suddenly looked promising with access to issues that would considerably expand

their horizons.

The taxi had reached the proposed destination. Malyn whispered, "I hope that you don't mind if I let you out here. I'm running late. There is a subway right across the street. Regard that as a deposit ... in other words don't stint your efforts."

Mara thanked Malyn in a daze. As she closed the car door she was disconcerted to hear an imperious tone of voice demanding that the driver proceed to 'Epitome Palace'.

"What an unattractive person!" she muttered. "A natural born terrorist, although perhaps her heart is in the right place. Mental note to self, 'Don't become an isolated, old bat."

Mara crossed the road and entered the metro. As she descended she encountered a man with pierced eyebrows and a large lip ring. He looked at her with invasive intensity. "Perhaps it's contagious! Now even I'm becoming paranoid!" she shivered as she checked along the car that the man was not still following her.



The General

I have just awakened, giggling in hysterics from a frequent but also very curious dream. I am attending the signing of a peace treaty with dignitaries from all over the world. As I circulate invisibly through the crowd, I vaguely recognise the faces of world leaders though I cannot quite place them for certain.

They look blurred and generic but they are clearly cameos of those crazed with power. There are dapper-suited presidents with deep-tinted sunglasses, sheikhs of fabulous purloined wealth, Pooh-Bahs with jewelled turbans, cardinals with flowing red vestments and vicious bird beaks. There is even a pope wearing a golden cope and a preposterous pearl festooned beehive askew on his head.

As I move invisibly through their midst, I notice how strangely immobile they seem. Then I realise that they are all rooted to the ground, unable to circulate. Anchored, they are reduced to preening in full length mirrors which have been set up alongside.

These statuesque actors are being tended by an entourage of robots who are whirring about busily, offering delectable canapés and conveying messages. The servants reinforce their masters with a steady stream of obsequious gestures and ingratiating comments delivered in sycophantic machine-like voices, each statement inflected with an upturned wheedling sound.

And then my eye alights upon the General standing on a raised dais in their midst. He is clutching a peace treaty, a minuscule scrap of paper. I immediately recognised the odious man who was our nemesis when Dex and I had to demonstrate our 'entanglement' to the military. He had set himself up to derail our telepathic demonstration and display his own power by humiliating us.

In my dream for some reason his uniform is festooned with a fantastic collection of medals shaped like tropical fruits. His toady 'bots' ensure that he has first choice of all the dainties which he scoffs contemptuously. Others polish his boots and brush specks from his uniform. Periodically a 'charm-bot' envelops him in a mist of fragrance.

Then these 'bots' begin to lead in the mangled evidence of his victories like an ancient Roman triumph. The room begins to fill with wailing women dumping body bits at his feet. Everywhere there is a suffocating smell of death, reminiscent of Dex's experiment with the piglet. I am delighted with the mayhem. I begin to dream up a crescendo of devastating indignities. My revenge for our past humiliation is utterly satisfying. I find myself convulsed with laughter.

A flunky bot presents him with a box containing a red button that will unleash Armageddon and destroy all the damning evidence. His fist descends furiously on the button.

But this only summons a platoon of robotic nurses who wrestle him to the floor, strip off his uniform and strap him naked to their gurney. They begin to waltz him around the room. Then he is swept up in the departing parade of history. The other cameos look down their noses in distaste.

At last I have exacted my long dreamt revenge.

Cartoon Characters

lay typically passed his working day barricaded into a messy, wire festooned corner of the workshop surrounded by colleagues who were obsessively isolated in their own pursuits. Few words were spoken during the course of a work day.

The morning following the Frontier Hall event, Frank made one of his rare appearances on the workshop floor, hands tucked innocently in his pockets. He paused over Clay's chaotic workbench apparently intrigued by the complexity of one of his diagrams that Clay had summoned up when he saw his boss approaching. Sensing the pent-up tension, Clay pointedly ignored him.

Clearing his throat Frank adopted a comradely tone. "We've got a challenge for you Clay." He made it sound as if he was about to bestow some special, career enhancing privilege.

He explained that Noor's entourage were being accommodated securely in the *Dactonview Suite*. The twins were proving to be truculent guests. Clay had sprung to mind as a possible intermediary. "They're about your age and a bit like you;" he paused to gauge reaction, "No doubt you'll find something in common when you get behind the scenes in Noor's freak show." He winked knowingly.

Clay of course had no choice. He was promptly shepherded off to the Dactonview wing, an area that was strictly off-limits to employees. It was a venue where some of the world's most cosseted and notorious had found convenient sanctuary. Its purported extravagances had reached mythical proportions among the staff. Clay, imagining an Eden of indulgence, was ushered into an austere suite of rooms with sparse Scandi-neutral furniture positioned to view the Dacton Alp through a large sealed picture window.

His guide, who announced himself as 'Doctor Dee-Cee', embarked on a totally unnecessary monologue about internet shopping, apparently convinced that his inanities would set Clay at ease. As they entered, the twins were standing side by side in the window staring out blankly at the Alp. They turned and lurched forward raising their hands as if barring access.

"Not a new pal?" It was not clear which had actually spoken. Clay usually protected by foggy semi-awareness, indulged a sneaky second look at this odd couple. The twins seemed to have selected the most unflattering garments. Shiny lurex in pastel shades of pink and green revealed unpleasantly bulging contours. The protuberant mid-section was accentuated by loose hanging shiny black plastic belts with oversized buckles emblazoned in rhinestones with the letters 'D' and 'S'. Pale blue nautical caps crowned shiny bald heads with shiny white visors pulled provocatively in contrary directions. Their feet were shod in steel toed workmen's boots with taunting open tongues and dragging laces.

They for their part took a brief disparaging look at the peculiar hardware that Clay displayed on his ears, lips and forehead then turned and sat down as if expecting some entertainment.

"So let the dog and pony show begin! But I still don't see why we can't pick our own friends." Again neither moved his lips. Their jaws remained flaccid and lips parted as if a ventriloquist elsewhere were providing the words.

Clay became aware of a continuous murmuring melodic background as if both were humming aimless ditties under their breaths. He glanced back at Doctor Dee-Cee who was addressing a stain on his besmirched lab coat with evident disgust.

"I can see that there is no dress code around this place" Clay laughed projecting witless bonhomie to diffuse the tension.

"By the way my name is Clay – actually it's Clavers ... the *De'il of Dundee* according to my Ma ... but everyone calls me just plain Clay."

As if executing a yoga manoeuvre Clay dropped to the floor in an effortless sweep with his head cocked in a deferential position.

The twins began to peer with faint interest at the array of decorative hardware on display in front of them. One of them grumbled, "Well I guess it's up to us. But I can think of better things to be doing." Perfectly synchronised, they turned towards Clay and simultaneously contorted their faces into contrived leers.

"Our names are Thomas ... Dexter and Sinister. It'll be easier for you if you call us both Thomas." Both countenances remained slack and disengaged. Then suddenly the one on the left giggled as if responding to an inaudible joke. His brother then broke out in a cackle as well and said aloud "Nice idea but I don't think he'd appreciate it."

With sudden innocence, they stretched in perfectly co-ordinated unison, their flabby arms locking fingers behind their heads and tilted them back as if exploring regions of the ceiling. Soft ripples of flesh exposed under their chins undulated with the repressed humour of some secretly shared humour.

Dee-Cee, looming over the group, coughed uneasily. It looked as if he too was contemplating an intimate drop to floor level to join the cosy banter.

"Can't we just send Dribs to the back benches?" It was as if the unseen ventriloquist was requesting the removal of an inanimate object. Dee-Cee, visibly humiliated; his shoulders shrugged, bumbled abjectly out of the room.

The disembodied voice continued. "He's never displayed much confidence in the monsters that he's helped to create."

Clay gave a non-committal shrug not sure for whom the remark was intended. He tried to pick up a conversational thread. "Basically I'm just a humble techie – you know the kind of person that's supposed help facilitate things."

"We're more into a different kind of invisible environment – perhaps a little more sophisticated, *high-tech*."

Clay's downcast eyes wandered across the carpet and focussed on the crumpled sheets of paper littering the floor around the twins' seats. "Your litter looks a little low-tech if you ask me. I'm not into writing myself; my handwriting's just the pits." He extended his hand to pick up one of the slips and was surprised when a heavy boot dropped firmly upon it.

"Private ... and almost certainly not addressed to you. Paper drives our staff crazy." He spoke as if he was trying to taunt someone eavesdropping on their conversation. "Of course it has the advantage that we can destroy

it without a trace, before anyone like Dribs gets his jammy little fingers on it – you know just occasionally people want to be alone." The disembodied voice spoke with a curious enforced voice as if he were trying to make a point to a larger audience.

Pulling back his hand, Clay pressed on valiantly. "I gather that there are a lot of people out there wanting to get a glimpse into your private world – to convince themselves that you really do represent what they can only dream of being themselves."

"Well, such a relief that is," now two distinct disembodied voices chimed melodically, strangely seamless in their convoluted phrasing. "But it does sound as if Es-Tech has little faith in our natural abilities to communicate."

"Well Frank told me that things went off the rails somewhat the last time you demonstrated your – what did he call it? – 'entanglement' ... didn't work out as planned. I can sort of under ..." he drifted off.

The twins stared down at him with withering hostility. They began to pick their teeth indolently with prominently pointed pinkie finger nails.

Increasingly disconcerted, Clay began to address their shoe laces as he stolidly carried on. "This is supposed to be a warm up session – we are supposed to be getting to know each other and bonding."

"Then the fault is entirely ours. Neither of us have the faintest interest in getting to know you, certainly not to warm up and bond." The twins carried on their doodling and began to call out random letters while humming snatches of dissonant music. He noticed how their free hands seemed to be moving in perfect unison. They seemed to be concentrating inwardly on their unspoken coded dialogue.

Then the sudden break came. "But perhaps you can supply some entertainment value."

Clay glanced up hopefully at this sudden melting of their icy exchange. "Well Frank Gear, my boss, suggested ..."

"Is Frank the oil slick that barged in this morning? Accept our commiseration for having to call him boss."

Clay was silently pleased and hoping the Frank might be eavesdropping.

"It sounds to me as if you're not quite ready for the details. Perhaps I can leave you with his dossier. You can get back to us when you please."

"You can always count on us to do as we please!"

Shyly Clay pulled a memory chip from his pocket and placed it carefully on the floor by the disembodied feet. With a cat-like lurch he was again standing.

Suddenly the perfectly co-ordinated mirror movements of the twins seemed to snap and break into disarray. Clay was aware that one of them had grabbed the arm of the other and was pulling him back, while hissing something less than musical under his breath. "No, forget the pathetic geek."

As Clay turned to the door the left-handed twin broke free of his brother's grasp and lurching up from his seat, and slipped the sheet that he had been doodling upon into his hand. "Let's try you on a little word challenge. It's a *word search* puzzle."

Clay grimaced uncomprehendingly and slipped the paper into his pocket as he retreated into the outer hall.

But Frank was already waiting in the lobby outside as Clay emerged. "That went well," he chirped, "I'm glad it's not just me that's the problem. Most don't get off so lightly; they seem to have taken a shine to you."

"Well I would hate to see what happens to anyone they don't like," muttered Clay grimly.

Frank extended his hand in what Clay at first mistook as a gesture of congratulation. "Well! Let's see the note – it will need clearance of course."

Clay did not miss a beat. "Oh, of course, I almost forgot." He reached into his pocket and surrendered it to Frank.

Frank looked at a little drawing and lettering below. The corpulent body was cinched in at the waist, and emblazoned with a flashy 'F'. The little ear studs on prominent appendages left little doubt as to who was intended – 'the oil slick'.

"FRANKENSTEIN" was set out in letters across the page below. Clay peered over his shoulder and spelled out the letters and stifled an

Cartoon Characters

ill-advised choke.

"Get a Life!" Frank crumpled the paper and stomped off wearily. Clay stooped to retrieve it.

That epithet 'oil slick' still rankled unpleasantly in Frank's ears. Increasingly he was harbouring misgivings about placing confidence in someone who had so little sense of loyalty and mission. Clay's instincts were hazy and disordered. Was he just another vacuum headed will-o-thewisp like all the rest of the 'platoon'? He didn't seem to appreciate the opportunities Frank was offering.

Ultimately Clay would have to embrace the fact that Es-Tech was the *easy* option.

Embers

rank took great pride in a solitary, self-disciplined life, pursuing strategic objectives with martial precision. He divulged little to anyone who might question the breadth of his vision. From an early age he had cultivated an aura of mystery which helped to keep others at a distance. He had always been the awkward student at the back of the classroom, the friendless observer who judged the actions of others but revealed no personal vulnerability. Periodically, he would contrive to issue some devastating insight intended to astonish his teachers and terrify his classmates, keeping them at a wary distance. Those around him developed a fear of what lay so well concealed. "Still waters run deep," he liked to reassure himself whenever he couldn't think of anything to contribute.

Throughout his later life he had learned to avoid the burden of close permanent attachments while maintaining a burgeoning roster of passing acquaintances. A solitary lifestyle free of commitments allowed him to make astonishingly efficient use of his time.

He liked to 'hold court' at *Embers*, astutely assessing opportunities presented by each lost soul that straggled in looking for sanctuary. He had an unerring eye for the kind of character he could exploit productively in his 'platoon'.

He also knew the kind of person to leave alone, quickly recognising material that could become unmanageable. Recruits that began to lose their gratitude or sense of dependence, those who began to glimpse a fuller picture, were abruptly cut loose or, if necessary, liquidated.

On the day following the Frontier Hall debate, Frank arrived late in the afternoon via an unmarked rear lane entry. Without a word, he breezed by the security guard, Ced, and ensconced himself in his back office. There he docked his black box and began to work up details of a briefing that he had been mulling over obsessively that morning. He muttered the word 'Mally' like a mantra as he scrolled through various agents' dossiers.

He paused to contemplate the tortured display of plumbing fixed to the

shabby brick wall opposite and called out to Dal who was sweeping out the *Cinder Pit*, warning that he was expecting an important visitor who should be shown discreetly to the back office.

Moments later the street door banged open and an ungainly drunk staggered into the lounge bar. Tripping over the door mat, he threw himself against the bar.

In a slurred voice he called, "I'm 'ere to see Frankie, an' I got an 'pointment!" The drunk looked as if he had assembled himself from the bins in thrift shops along the street. He was swathed in an ill-fitting coat with shoulders that strayed half way down the arm and sewn patches coming adrift. On his head was a bulbous woollen toque pulled down over his ears and forehead. He affected a battered pair of horn-rimmed sunglasses secured at the bridge with duct tape.

Dal considered whether this could possibly be Frank's expected guest, but he resolutely guided him by the elbow to the back room. Frank pulled the old drunk into a welcoming double handshake and closed the door in Dal's face. "No interruptions Dal, under any circs!"

Alone in the dim room the two men parted and Frank stood back and burst into his unnervingly high-stressed laugh.

"Well you've certainly captured the Zeitgeist of Es-Tech! I'd hire you on the spot!"

The drunk shed his overcoat to reveal a well-cut business suit. With one deft gesture he swept off his toque to loosen a splendid mane of silver hair. The air became suffused with the alien fragrance of spicy clove. The removal of the glasses revealed a rather delicate face with the pallid complexion of one who lives a safely cosseted life.

Burrell de Vere seated himself and autocratically gestured to Frank to take a position in his own chair opposite. "Well I wanted to look at home in your element, and looking at the squalor of this dive, I think that I've hit the nail on the head."

"I gather that you were in Nixy's den this morning. A productive encounter I imagine?" Frank teased.

De Vere seemed to bridle at the over-familiarity of his tone of voice.

"Hellana Nix is not what one expects at the head of an organisation like Es-Tech."

"She does have a rather innocent nature ... a useful flaw if you know how to manage it properly," Frank added suggestively.

De Vere sighed, "She may strive for the image of a ruthless commanderin-chief ... but for the qualities required to further some of my current business commitments, I'd be inclined to look for help elsewhere." De Vere stared pointedly into Frank's eyes.

Frank poured a glass of water, which remained untouched. He launched his challenge without further niceties. "I gather that you've got punters lined up who want to tidy up a pile of hard-earned cash? ... as discreetly as possible of course."

De Vere looked annoyed at this suggestive effrontery. "Indeed, a number of my colleagues are keen to invest in a development which, everyone agrees, will transform New Mid. Many are civic-minded philanthropists, who naturally wish to maintain arms length distance in their support of this science."

Frank smirked confidently, "Naturally, we would expect only prudence from your 'investors'. But you must appreciate that your pals are not alone in the field. I'm sure Nixy belaboured that point!" Frank indulged an irritating tweak of index fingers framing his mocking emphatic words. "It seems that other 'interested' parties have surfaced and as you can imagine Nix is leading them all in a merry dance. Getting your fair share ... that indeed (again the irritating finger quotations) is where you need my help. You are not the only dance partner on her card - far from it ... but perhaps I can help you take the lead."

De Vere's lips remained pursed into a humourless, thin line. He stared stonily at Frank as if he were some uppity bumpkin. In a throttled voice he interjected, "I'm inclined to think that we are getting off to a poor start in our relationship. You seem under some misapprehension that you occupy a driver's seat." As he spoke he laid both hands flat on the table in front of him in a gesture of such confidence that Frank half expected to see it levitate under his palms. The room was awkwardly silent as the two men

stared at each other across the wide expanse.

"Nix has not grasped the strength of my position. But I am far from convinced about your ability to contribute anything substantial. You offer the support of your so-called 'platoon'. But clearly the verdict is still very much out on the *City Seven*. I have little confidence in your 'platoon'."

"And there is a further fly in the ointment. Mally and her book are getting way out of line. She is barking up a very dangerous alley. She is being led by the nose by the agents that you and Helly have put forward."

"You mean that she's got wind of a bigger story behind the *Seven*, like *yourself* for instance? And so you're afraid that she is going to scare up some inconvenient information?"

"She is starting to cut rather close ... it has become a kind of obsession. So I want your girls moved on and I want you to make sure that the publication is delayed until well after the launch - that is if we permit it to happen at all."

"But you yourself vetted the girls! Is it my fault if you've let your guard down?" Frank smirked knowingly as de Vere's lips tensed into a thin line. "Besides Mally is an employee of your station; you should be able to exercise ..."

Suddenly, a door slammed. In the *Cinder Pit* there was a commotion and a raised voice. Dal's voice was heard irately confronting an intruder.

The office door burst open and in rushed a young girl in a yellow bib miniskirt and pink knee high boots. "Boyo! he sure's gonna wanna see me! ... Frank, you bastard! you can't just ditch us! Our deal works two ..." But she stopped in her tracks and stared in surprise at de Vere, "Burbee! What-the-hell you doin' here? I thought that you and Mally ..."

If it was possible de Vere blenched an even lighter shade of pale. His jaw muscles rippled in annoyance.

Zaanie, instantly perceiving her advantage, slid upon the table lowering herself neatly where de Vere's levitating hands had been resting.

"I don't believe that I ... So you are not just Mally's boss, you have other fish to fry with Frankie? Just another item on your menu is it? Suddenly, it's beginning to make sense!"

De Vere hissed. "Mr Gear, I suspect that I have just fallen into some little snare that you have contrived for my benefit. I can only say that I react very unfavourably to coercion of any sort. I intend to withdraw now and leave both of you to consider a suitable outcome. If you and I are to pursue any further conversation at all, you know what I want and if I don't get it from you well than I shall most certainly go elsewhere."

"I might add that though you may be trying to cultivate a reputation for ruthlessness, it will prove piffling in comparison to the powers that I may choose to unleash. I was promised anonymity, and you will make good on that promise, however you decide to go about it."

Leaving his coat, toque and glasses on the desk de Vere stormed from the room, passed a startled Dal and out into the street.

Frank exploded in frustration. He leapt from his seat and hurled himself hysterically onto Zaanie, flailing at her and pushing her to the floor.

"What-the-hell! Zaanie? You know that it's part of our deal that you *never, never, NEVER* show up here, and you *never, never* bring your problems to me in person. You have just blown all your cred. You're out that door, girl."

Zaanie was suddenly overcome. The world was rapidly becoming much too complicated and her moment of bravado dissolved into a flood of submissive tears, which only seemed to inflame Frank's hysterical abuse the more. He picked up the waste basket and hurled it at the cowering girl. The metal bin bounced off her head. She screamed in pain and shielded herself. And then he began kicking, viciously and rhythmically screaming 'never, never' in a throttled, rising hysteria.

When Frank at last pulled himself together to observe the inert body crumpled on the floor before him,, he realised that he had little time to act decisively. He had let his guard down in imagining that he could maintain control over Zaanie and Reen and trusting these two incompatible characters to work together. They had become dangerously reliant on each other and evidently less dependant on him. They had grown unexpectedly close to Malyn. The time had come to cut them loose.

He could certainly justify it to himself. Their natural weaknesses would have assured them an early oblivion anyway. He had no compunction about accelerating that inevitable decline; after all he had been the one who had temporarily interrupted their paths of self-destruction by offering a temporary reprieve. Zaanie would only have found sordid oblivion accommodating random men and drugs and Reen would soon have succumbed to her own addictions.

It was necessary to wipe the slate clean. There must be no traceable links to either Frank or Es-Tech. Leaving Zaanie in a comatose state, Frank stormed into the front bar to get Dal's help.

But as he re-established his equilibrium he began to feel embarrassed at his own excesses. It was utterly unprofessional to allow his anger to run amok like that. Where had such pent up rage erupted from? He realised that he had let himself down seriously.

But he was obliged to give de Vere his promised anonymity. He would need to act authoritatively to regain credibility. Zaanie's discovery must never get back to Malyn. The deal was too important, and in Frank's view de Vere was the player who was going to play the winning hand with his help.

He felt only a scintilla of compunction that he would be obliged to remove Reen at the same time. She was a simple girl, a naive innocent. But together they held too many compromising links.

When Reen arrived home later that afternoon she was greeted by two anxious young men pacing the corridor. They explained that they had been sent by Frank, who had been desperately trying to locate her. They described Zaanie's terrible accident, her encounter with rough trade that had left her battered and semi-conscious. Frank had arranged to have Reen conveyed to her bedside.

"Frank always looks after everything and everybody."

Reen rushed to gather a few of Zaanie's belongings and bundled herself into the car. One of the men lingered behind to tidy up all the rest of their possessions and throw them into bin bags. rank composed a conciliatory note to 'BdV' and sent it to a peculiarly anonymous email address. In it he apologized for Zaanie's unforeseen intrusion which had been a severe embarrassment to them both. He explained that he had already taken the necessary steps to ensure that the events of that afternoon had been erased from 'all but two living memories'. It was a light turn of phrase but it had chilling connotations which would allow BdV to appreciate that no one ever got away in messing with Frank.

He sighed as he reflected that sorting out such problems in real life was always so much easier than it appeared in the films. But at least he had taken precautions; that was one of the advantages of having an eye for expendable people and a talent for keeping them isolated.

He spent some time that afternoon recording the incident and his misgivings about the whole affair into his black box. He included a few photos of the girls, linked arm to arm in better days before he sterilised the rest and consigned various boxes of personal effects to acid liquidation.

* * *

Burrell de Vere received Frank's message with a shrug and an involuntary ripple of his clenched jaw. He resented having to put his trust in such a man.

Even he had been slightly appalled by the repercussions of the *City Seven* débâcle. The casualties had mushroomed far beyond original expectations. He was not reassured by Frank's assertion that all the 'operatives' would prove free of 'paper trail'.

In retrospect it seemed only a stroke of luck that Es-Tech operatives had been able to get in quickly and align the ducks before anyone began to undertake more serious investigations.

Nevertheless, the *Seven* had achieved everything expected of them. BDV Holdings had been able to take a substantial 'short' position on Gene-Sys stock and his favoured clients were able to soak up a substantial holding at a cut price. They were now in a position of control.

Begrudgingly he had to admit that he had Frank to thank for at least this substantial gain.

But he was becoming very uncomfortable with Frank's growing presumption. He even suspected that Frank had designs to enter the game himself or attempt to position himself to take advantage of the confidential information that he had gleaned.

And it was 'bloody Frank', who had arranged those assistants to help shape Malyn's message in the first place.

Everything seemed to have been coming into line until that afternoon he met Zaanie hanging around Malyn's studio. Admittedly, he had let his own guard down badly. What had developed so quickly was entirely his fault and completely uncharacteristic of his normal behaviour. He had become briefly entranced by the idea of experiencing life from another's perspective.

"Burbee!" the very echo of that voice now made him wince with disgust. It did not bear thinking about; so he turned his mind back to the Frank problem.

He would soon need to manage without Frank entirely. He relished the thought of closing this messy chapter as soon as possible.

Frank was vulnerable. Though he was the kind of person who appeared to know many people, there would be few around to ask awkward questions if he suddenly disappeared.

His acquaintances would just assume that Frank was just off 'being Frank'; engaged in some new secret mission of derring-do in a far-away place.

De Vere, too, was well aware of the advantages in dealing with compartmentalised people, especially those who chose to float their boats on a sea of personal fantasy.



The Haunting

Startled awake, clammy with dread after finding myself wandering through a vast, gloomy mansion, a warren of dimly lit rooms haunted by shapeless monstrosities. These are 'Hystericons', flitting about in the shadows, gathering together and planning their attack while relishing my utter terror of the inevitable assault.

I am terrified of what I will discover lying in wait lurking in the deep recesses. This is my own private mansion of horrors, one which I have roped off and barricaded against any incursion by Dex. I imagine the slimy bodies of the stalking Hystericons, oozing tentacles of Truth that none of us should be allowed to know. I am petrified of confronting them alone. Why are my dreams always so solitary? I always write Dex out of the story.

I arrive at a dusty landing lit by a sliver of light that pierces a slashed curtain. Timidly I push open a door; the rasping hinges betray that it has never been opened in my lifetime. Beyond is a panelled room with a canopied bed. I steal into the curtained confines thinking to hide myself in what seems like the safest place.

But even in this confined cubicle I feel that I am being watched by malevolent eyes. The four corner posts gradually swim into focus in the dim light. They are carved totems composed of stacked skulls, clenching keys in their shattered jaws. I know instinctively that these

are the death masks of ancestors who are leering at me. They have provided the genetic materials of my fabricated identity.

Tearing at the curtains, I drag myself up, and run screaming to the door. Fumbling with the handle, feeling the outrage gathering to swoop down on me, I wrench the door from its hinges and crash down the stairs. And then through a concentrated effort I realise that the dream situation I have created is irresolvable and I make myself wake up to my sweat drenched bed.

During the day my imagination is tethered to such short term focus, continually buffeted by the challenges of a barrage of incoming stimulation. But in the emptiness of the night, my concealed subconscious mind rallies such astonishing powers to make unimaginable excursions and connections through my dreams.

Human beings have a very limited range of stories. They are confined within such circumscribed horizons. We always place ourselves self-importantly at centre stage, yet we peer out nervously into the flies. But the relevance of the stories of our ancestors, their gods and their myths has begun to fade into irrelevance.

Science is dictating a new narrative. But few of the new authors have the courage to consider one great unpalatable theme; a narrative where we are not the central focus of the universe and where our fabricated divinities have no relevance in the vast process we see unfolding around us. We must resign ourselves to being nothing more than an opportunistic sideshow, existing on the distant outskirts of an purpoe that is focussed elsewhere, irrelevant by standers?

Are those keys that I glimpsed in the shattered jaws of the ancestors intended to unlock this devastating new Truth, a story with a different objective, a 'post-human' invention?

Breaking the Code

rank relished the thought that every move recorded in his 'black box' was a testimony to a purposeful life. He imagined how eager followers might look with envy when his geographical coordinates suddenly shifted to Kazakhstan or he was to be found prowling a dangerous favela hard by Ipanema Beach. Surveillance technology promised an immortality that the Pharaohs would have envied. His personal journal represented the summation of a life of adventure that would stand in perpetuity as his irrefutable witness.

Clay, on the other hand, spent as much time as he could in trying to sustain an illusion of spontaneous fecklessness. He deeply resented the permanently fitted Global Positioning transmitter that ceaselessly tracked his mundane life. Any imposed routine was a burden upon his naturally errant soul. He aspired to a freedom from purpose that Frank would never comprehend. He adopted few regular routines, like his daily drop in at Tooneys for coffee, and those only to convey an appearance of discipline that would deflect others' suspicions. But between these regular seams he sewed his errant treasures.

He sometimes wondered why he had thrown in his lot with this crew of control freaks at Es-Tech. Sometimes it felt as if he had walked into a prison cell and slammed the door behind him. Nevertheless, amidst all their regimentation and paranoia about undisciplined individual expression, Clay piloted his own private capsule on a peculiarly white-knuckle voyage through the heart of the Es-Tech world,.

Frank entered the workshop and craned around ingenuously just at the critical moment when, tuned into a parallel cacophonous world, Clay was about to achieve his highest score ever in *N-Rage*, bringing him into direct rivalry with the legendary *Enzo* (who had held the title for 33 days!). Clay coughed and removed his ear phones in a practiced gesture insouciantly hitting the screen change key.

"Don't let me disturb you, Clay," Frank smiled ingenuously, "finish what you are working on. I can wait."

Clay flushed. Frank seemed to have a sixth sense about these lapses.

Whereas usually he liked to maintain a height advantage looming over his employees shoulders. Clay was only too familiar with addressing the tightly cinched Texan cow-hand belt buckle. But today Frank drew up a chair opposite Clay in a rare demonstration of collegial amity. He stared into Clay's evasive eyes for a moment.

The awkward silence was broken by Frank. "I feel that we are somehow failing you Clay. Perhaps you're getting too obsessive about your work, locked into a very constricted world with narrow horizons?"

Clay's mouth wobbled in uncertainty. Was this Frank's idea of sarcasm? He rallied somewhat, "Last time I looked I thought it was you who was doing all the locking. But actually since you mention it, my *little* world suits me fine."

Frank eyes flickered almost imperceptibly at this scintilla of bullishness. "You can't tell me that if a genie were to grant you your dearest wish, you would choose to spend the rest of your life tied to this desk. Where is that sense of adventure? At your age I ..."

Still cruising on his N-Rage adrenalin, Clay turned the tables. "Well what should I be wishing for? What did you request from your genie?"

Frank drew his seat closer. "Sometimes it is hard to understand what motivates a person to pursue a career here at Es-Tech. It can hardly be the society we offer, surrounded by sub-normal refugees from the real world. Clearly the boys in the back room, with their crazed lifestyles wouldn't be anyone's natural choice for company. Most of them couldn't function anywhere else. But you ... I sense that you resent the constraints this life imposes on you. What do you really want to get out of your career here at Es-Tech?"

Clay was feeling disconcerted at suddenly being asked such questions, particularly so soon after his inconclusive session of *N-Rage*. He began to stutter incoherently, something ill-considered about choices between 'good and evil'.

Frank seemed rather surprised. "Did you have some kind of religious upbringing?"

Quite the contrary, Clay reflected, everyone around him had always treated him as if he were not quite entitled to function in the rational world, or at least that was the case until the educational system stuck a convenient label on his deficiencies and allowed him to retreat into his own consuming interests.

"Not really religious. But they did promote churchy values, like common sense."

"Same with me and my folks." Frank added candidly. "But quite often I found that my way was the not *their* way."

Clay felt alarmed that someone who he usually counted on to remain aloof should suddenly seem intent on revealing himself. He had an uneasy sense that Frank was preparing him for some unpleasant task. He resorted to a blank, stonewalling stare into the middle distance.

Frank sighed "People come to work here with all kinds of different motivations. Some just want to be pointed at something and they beaver away accordingly. There are only a few who actually want to understand the purpose of what they are doing. It strikes me that you might be that other kind of person."

"So what would you ask your genie, if you were in my place?"

Frank responded tentatively as if talking to himself. "I suppose I'd ask for an invisibility cloak, I've always wanted to travel unseen. I'd be able to see what people really think and do when they are caught off-guard. Perhaps we share some of the same fantasies?"

"Like a voyeur?"

Frank looked at him sharply. Clay smiled vacantly, surprising himself with his own sang froid.

Frank shook his head brusquely. "Not at all. I see my life as a duty to live as fully as possible. You're young - you should launch out no holds barred!"

"But why? Is there some sort of secret agent in your black box you need to impress?"

"Hardly! My data trail is all about developing a greater courage to embrace life's challenges. I can review where I have been and learn from my mistakes - and perhaps even devise a better battle plan. In the past people kept diaries to gain perspective on their lives. I'm just the same."

"I hope that I'm not going to be one of those mistakes you need to learn from? . . . But since you asked me I suppose that my idea would be for my genie to give me a life *mission*."

"Well then we are both kindred spirits; Here at Es-Tech we are all about mission. Old Nixie can conjure up a mission out of the most unlikely ingredients."

"Old Nixie?" Clay was surprised by Frank's odd compulsion to display his self-importance in dealings with senior management. "In fact if I were to ask my genie for a gift it would be for the power to figure out what other people really wanted. It would make life easier if I knew that. So many people confuse the story by saying one thing when they really mean something totally different."

Moving the subject to safer territory he added, "But on the other hand, I did get some good photos of the Frontier event, including some of you with various celebrities." Clay pulled a memory stick from his drawer and dropped his tribute in front of Frank with a casual insouciance that did not reveal the time he had spent in carefully highlighting the photos of his narcissistic subject. Frank's hand extended eagerly and then hesitated with laudable self-restraint. He slipped it into his pocket without a word.

Frank continued in a neutral tone. "Well Clay, I think that I have at last got a project in hand that may satisfy both our genies. But in this case I need *you* to be *my* invisibility cloak. Here's the scoop. He snapped open his briefcase and pulled out a file marked 'ALIF-CONFIDENTIAL.' Only the most sensitive documents at Es-Tech, excluded from the electronic data stream, were issued in paper form.

Clipped to the top of the file was a photograph of a girl with long hair. She was cradling a cat in her arms and standing beside a garden hedge next to a stooped old man in a ragged jacket. She had a flare of annoyance in her eyes perhaps directed at the presumption of the photographer.

"This is a mission that will clearly have some interesting perks. By the way, how do you feel about cats?"

t what Frank euphemistically referred to as 'close of play', when a muffled descending chime announced dismissal from work, Clay retrieved his freshly laundered civvies and stepped into a waiting minibus. The watchful eyes of the check out staff totally missed the surreptitious transfer of the twins cartoons, folded into the palm of his hand, over to his jacket pocket.

With its silent passengers staring blankly out the black tinted windows at the fractured wasteland, the minibus bounced along past derelict storage sheds and scrub-lands back towards civilisation. It stopped briefly to deposit Clay at what the others tauntingly called the 'bike depot' and then roared off. This was the daily routine by which Clay was able to make a transition from the mindset of the workday to the freedom he required for his 'down time'. He kept a few personal effects at Tooneys, like his mobile phone, well away from the prying eyes of the operatives at Es-Tech security.

Myrna, always surly, emerged from the back room a few moments after the door chime announced his arrival. The café was empty, as it had been most of the day. Clay waved offhandedly and threw his satchel down on a table. Myrna who was accustomed to this taciturn client turned to retrieve his usual beer from the cooler. Clay extracted the hidden sheets for closer scrutiny.

At first reckoning the second message was very disappointing. The cartoon sketch, executed in a shaky hand was somewhat more complete than 'FRANKENSTEIN'. Festooned with little rings and ornaments and crossed eyes it was obviously intended to resemble him, a complete simpleton.

Underneath the letters YAN W BE ROOB had been filled in.

The handwriting was childlike and shaky. He wondered why the twins were interested in stringing him along, perhaps playing up some sense of their own superiority.

Myrna brought him his bottle on a tray with his mobile phone

alongside. It beeped him cheerfully with a box full of pointless messages accumulated over the day.

Idly he opened the crossword dictionary application and picked out the letters of the mystery word on his pad. There didn't seem to be much of a mystery involved, the crossword application rejected the whole word outright. As he was considering possible spelling errors, he noticed that the first three numbers appearing on the screen were a common local exchange. Without thinking about it he idly tapped in the 10 supplied letters and pressed *SEND*.

At the other end a phone rang twice and there was a sudden click. A mechanical voice came on the line and requested a password. He was about to hang up in alarm when he suddenly thought of entering 'FRANKENSTEIN'.

He found himself suddenly cast into the midst of a very complicated conference call. The sound of the dissonant keyboard music that he had heard the twins playing earlier reverberated in the airy echoing sound of a larger space. He thought he heard one of the twin's peevish voices castigating someone for 'all the interruptions'. There was a repeating two tone chime alarm sounding in the background and a general murmuring of voices. He made out the whiny voice addressing 'Dribsie' with some petulance.

Others' lives always seem so much more interesting when you can observe them undetected. Clay was just happily settling in to his eavesdropping mission when suddenly someone answered the background phone chimes. A commanding voice came on the line, "Noor!" There was a long pause while Clay listened to the cacophonous background music. Then it all stopped abruptly. The voice continued "Who's that on the line? This is a private conference! Hang up immediately."

Clay stammered "Oops! Sorry, wrong number" and hung up quickly. He shuddered at the fecklessness of executing this idle intuition which went so contrary to everything inculcated into a security expert.

Moments later the phone rang back. Clay leapt back and tried to ignore it. Feigning resignation and with a slightly shaky hand Clay answered,

Peacocks at the Pale

"Hi Jay-Jay at Tooneys, ... your order please? The caller remained silent and then clicked off.

"Oh! Shite! Think it's time to hibernate," Clay groaned.

Myrna's eyes lifted a fraction as she reconsidered the prospects for excitement in what she took to be one of her least promising regulars. Clay smiled wanly, gulped down the rest of his beer, left his phone on the tray and raced out to collect his bike.

Disappearance

n this glorious summer morning Hellana Nix might have preferred an amble through the fragrant morning air of the city streets, already beginning to throb with energy forty floors below her penthouse aerie. Sadly such casual public contact was contrary to Es-Tech company policy.

Between the cosseted entrance lobby of her prestigious address at *Bella-Vista Heights* and the roiling city streets beyond lay an unbreachable chasm. Whenever the lofty glass entry portal slid majestically aside, the security guards tensed, prepared to repel undesirables who frequently drifted in. In fact only the more adventurous residents ever set foot in the reception lobby, preferring instead to emerge in anonymous armoured vehicles from a black hole on the rear lane. There were just too many invidious eyes scrutinising the main entry threshold. The elegant street furniture placed outside the lobby doors by optimistic architects was usually sullied by dissolute vagabonds who had nothing better to do with their days than draw attention to their penury.

Under any circumstances, security requirements precluded conveying important documents between home and workplace. At home in the absence of 'tasks', Hellana was obliged to dwell on 'the bigger picture'.

The bigger picture this morning involved her regular diet of 'women's health' magazines strewn amidst crumbs of a tortured spelt biscuit. Alongside in a discreet covered dish she had an array of little *amuse gueules* upon which she nibbled daintily as she devoured the latest lurid developments in the *City Seven* case which made a telling links between the malefactors and a deliciously seamy underworld.

Hellana's car was kept in the garage with direct lift access from her penthouse. She could expect 'Manny' to be awaiting her descent every morning at 8 o'clock sharp. Usually, she preferred to keep him waiting; variation of routine being an important part of her personal security strategy, whether or not the forces of evil paid even the slightest attention.

As she sipped the last of her café-crème on the terrace she considered

how so many of the new buildings rising above her terrace posed a growing security risk with increasing opportunities for sophisticated surveillance. The more she considered the world around her, the more aware she became of the chinks in her own armour.

Earlier, she had been reading a squib about the Frontier Hall meeting and felt somewhat deflated that as chair, she had not registered greater impact beyond a 'lengthy introduction'. Malyn Staryk and her *diva* behaviour had garnered an unwarranted coverage. The pubic always revelled in such stories of appalling treatment of hapless underlings. The article noted that Staryk's awaited book *Blind Terror* was due to hit the book stores just in time for the summer vacation.

"I, for one, can wait." She murmured to herself. It was at least gratifying to recollect how appalling Malyn had appeared at their subsequent meeting. "Some of us just can't take the pressure" she reflected as her hand conveyed another bon-bon discreetly to her lips, glancing down at an alluring Amazon splayed across the cover of 'Ella-Belle'.

Gazing out at the sparkling blue lake, she took momentary delight in the thought of plans for her upcoming jaunt, the Lake Arden conference. Hellana regarded herself as an old hand in Arcadia, always primed for invigorating country air and good food. It was a pity that the affair would necessitate a bout of air travel, to which she had considerable aversion.

The Arden location had been carefully chosen for its security benefits. Here Gene-Sys were undertaking secretive, pioneering genetic research. They had enlisted Es-Tech's expertise in creating an exclusion zone around their facility. The nearest town, poignantly named Acorn, was fifty miles away and accessible only by air.

Delegates and investors were expected to arrive by shuttle helicopter. This was a considerable drawback for Hellana. She was not entirely designed for airborne life. As head of an international security company, she had been able to downplay this weakness. Usually, she graciously granted the excitement of such missions to others.

What sounded like a gun shot in the street below interrupted her reverie. She grabbed her reading glasses her is if expecting them to take wing over the guard rail. She had a vivid picture in her mind of rashly lunging for them and plunging into the abyss. Her body sank deeper into her protective recliner. Her fingers closed around another fistful of dainties as she tried to suppress this bout of vertiginous horror.

She paged her ever-dutiful Cubbie who arrived with a coffee pot in hand blinking obligingly in the bright morning light.

"Cubs, can you check on what I just heard, perhaps a gun shot! And get a message over to Malyn to say that I've been unavoidably delayed by terrorist action."

"I can." Cubbie responded in martyr-clipped tones that Hellana ignored.

Hellana sank back into *Lurid Lives* to revel in details about a serial murderer's methods for dismembering his victims.

Cubbie reappeared to relay that neither the concierge nor Manny had any insight on the disturbance. Malyn was not reachable either at home or on her mobile number.

"What do you mean that Malyn's not there? She's already late for our appointment! She wouldn't last long if she behaved like that on air."

As the day unfolded Malyn's whereabouts became a matter of growing concern to the many people crammed into her busy schedule. Anxieties rose as the appointed hour of the *Staryk Report* interview with Dr Noor began to approach.

Grimly, Hellana instructed Cubbie to arrange access to her apartment. Es-Tech was obliged to seek her solicitor's approval. Hellana relished the opportunity of honing her detective skills and insisted on attending in person, ever-curious for a peek into a celebrated private life.

The concierge at the Epitome Palace Apartments noted several recent instances of Malyn's erratic behaviour. She was an enigma and had never been a favourite with the staff, rarely offering more than a pout in passing.

But when the solicitor's agent finally unlocked the door Hellana was astonished at the bland anonymity of the spacious suite. How could anyone leave so little personal impression on their environment? Dressing table, bathroom cabinets, were all meticulously neat, every implement gleaming

and spotless. Hellana noted with interest that even the refrigerator looked as if it had been stocked by an uninspired food consultant.

The second bedroom door was locked and it was with some trepidation that she ordered the lock forced. To general disappointment however, they discovered an empty room and a stupid looking Burmese cat.

The only personal item that her eagle eye spotted in the apartment was the silver framed diptych that stood open on a bedside table. Depicted was a diffident looking girl of approximately twelve years, in a white dress with contrasting piping and over-large, slightly clownish, buttons. The effect was breezy and nautical. On one side she was holding the left hand of someone who had been edited out, and on the other she had run around to hold the right hand. The camera had caught two very different aspects of the same person, one a diffident, dreamy-eyed, elusive nature, the other assertive, staring provocatively into the camera lens. "So typical of Malyn" Hellana murmured, ".... the only pictures she can muster are ones of herself." With a frisson of indulgent compassion, Hellana shook her head in disappointment.

She closed the diptych and slid it surreptitiously into her briefcase on 'temporary loan'. Perhaps she had already recognised its power.

"Do you think that she even lived here?" she turned to Cubbie whose focus had fallen on a mobile phone left on the table beside the bed. Hellana stepped forward pro-actively. "Aha! What do you think that we will glean from her calls?" Cubbie nodded grimly as they scanned the received messages.

But little proved of interest. There was a return call from some young woman at *City Farm* about a proposed interview, but this suddenly broke off. Cubbie pursed her lips and jotted down some details to follow up. There were several previous calls for someone called 'Lance' setting up appointments with him in a querulous voice.

Eventually they tracked Lance down at the station and he confessed that he often accompanied Malyn to official events, but purely as 'a friend'. He did however, mention the rather curious appointment that she had arranged the previous day. She had taken great pains to choose a private venue but had then stood him up.

He claimed that she had always rebuffed any attempt to relax their professional relationship. In fact he knew nothing about her personal life, only what she expected him to wear at public events and how she groomed him to care for her under the public eye. He could not account for how his missing mobile had made its way to Malyn's bedside table.

By the end of the day, Malyn's unexplained disappearance had launched fevered speculation across the city. As spokesperson for Es-Tech, Hellana stepped forward in this golden opportunity to amplify the conundrum. She explained to an eager investigator that Malyn was a close personal friend who had turned down the Es-Tech offer of comprehensive protection during the turbulent period leading up to the publication of her new book.

She deftly re-introduced the notion of 'anarchist dissidents in the same vein as the City Seven' who might have been blackmailing Malyn to prevent publication. Then she retired to sit back comfortably with a restorative cache of nougats and wait for her little sparks to ignite. She was not long disappointed.

Cubbie soon delivered a sheaf of distilled headlines from the media. They screamed:

Staryk Abduction on Eve of Book Launch

Hellana rose to the occasion by issuing a further press release setting out Es-Tech's determination to ensure that Malyn was released unharmed.

To illustrate the seriousness of the risk, she mentioned the wholesale destruction wrought by protesters in many European cities where premises had been torched and looted by 'Anarchist Agents'.

She then settled back, enjoying the thought of how such images of senseless violence would resonate with local citizens and let them appreciate the vital role that Es-Tech fulfilled in guaranteeing the stable, well run city that all took for granted.



Mortality

A horrible scorching dream! I find myself awake with the top end of my body seared by a blast of dry heat. I am bound onto a gurney, gagged and held immobile by coiled bed sheets. The space is focussed like a theatre, all lines converging on a single proscenium of scorching annihilation.

There is a crowd of onlookers raised on tiers either side of the aisle that I am being pushed along with a slow deliberate speed. The onlookers are staring towards the inferno with glittering eyes, their pin-point pupils reflecting tiny dots of the blazing pit.

I realise that this is a 'Crematorium'. This calamitous word suddenly explodes in my imagination. I am moving irrevocably towards immolation and can do nothing to escape.

There has been a terrible mistake. It was Dex that they were after.

Among living beings only humans agonise so relentlessly about the injustice of their own mortality. Death seems such a pointless obliteration of the hard-won intelligence gained over a lifetime. It instantly undoes the greatest of human achievements.

And I know that despite what everyone says, the wheel of life never comes full circle. That is merely a comforting delusion; we pretend that

all things return to their beginnings as a matter of course, and that every purge precedes a spring of hopeful renewal.

But there is no cycle that will ever return us to the lost Eden of our imaginings.

The Noor Project permanently derails that comforting illusion. It recognises that the human race has reached a point of no return, when it must burn away its own history of mortality.

Experimentation with mortality has always been an obsession with Dex. I have watched his fascination in the surgical removal of limbs and vital organs of specimens, and his delight in seeking that moment when what is 'living' is no longer identifiable. Yet sometimes, even after all hope of a reprieve from torment is exhausted, his victims cling to life without purpose. Long after the powers of cognition have departed, their organs continue to pulsate, as if it is the life itself that is determined to continue without purpose.

But I also realise that the Noor scientists have become world weary. While they are prepared to endow interminable lives upon us, they are not demanding it for themselves. Perhaps eternal life had once an attractive prospect for someone like Dribs. But now his only ambition is to see his mission completed before being consigned to the fires himself. Though imposing it on others, he has no intention of seeking his own immortality.

In my dream, by sheer application of will, I wrestle myself free of those bindings, just as the searing heat is becoming unbearable. I flee naked through the astonished crowd.

The gurney trundles on to obliteration carrying with it all of the garments that had once defined me as human.

Risk Assessment

ubbie placed a neatly bound document squarely in front of Hellana adding with a heavy sigh, "Just in the *nix* of time", quietly relishing the subversive insouciance. She bit her lower lip, scanning Hellana's face to see if she had noticed this indiscretion. "The little charmers are set up on video link now."

Sighing loudly Hellana picked up the neatly bound document and riffled through the pages listlessly. She paused on the index page before pushing it all to one side with a bilious hiccup. Though the document had engaged her staff in many weeks of careful analysis she knew exactly what such tomes were obliged to contain; a mind-addling step by step analysis of risks and a strategy for their mitigation that would deflect blame onto someone else should anything go wrong. Hellana had not reached the pinnacle of Es-Tech by concentrating on the details of such reports.

The greatest risk to the twins' well-being clearly lay within themselves. They had none of the street savvy that she had acquired through extensive in-the-field experience.

It would be to Es-Tech's advantage to emphasise all these dangers. With such hugely extended life expectancies, risks that would seem minor to most human beings, become overwhelming in the case of near immortals, so elevated that the investors of the Noor Project would never permit exposure of their valuable property unless absolutely necessary.

"It's going to be a challenge for all of us," Cubbie muttered as she returned with the controls.

The conference room had been set up for a video conference with the boys. Hellana positioned herself imposingly at the head of table with her risk file opened at a random page. Cubbie was positioned in a subservient role hovering over her shoulder.

They had seen photographs of the twins in the media but both recoiled involuntarily at the image that suddenly burst into life on the end screen. The twins sitting opposite each other were undeniably obese and the intimate, low camera angle only accentuated their moon-like faces. They

were identically dressed in body-line lime Lycra suits which accentuated all awkward bulges. Jaunty white sports caps were poised at contrary angles over their clean shaven heads. Hellana recoiled at the sight of jowly faces and pouting lips. She had little sympathy for puffy, blanc mange physiques.

A rather ineffectual man in a white jacket who initially introduced himself as Dr Drable-Carrington, sat silently on the right but no one seemed to pay him the slightest attention.

Hellana proceeded with guileful ease, "I gather you are Sinny and Dex. I'm delighted to have this chance to meet you both. I'm Hellana Nix, the Acting Head of Es-Tech. We will be responsible for your security arrangements throughout your vacation. Now, which of you is Sinny, which Dex?"

"Does it matter?" Both sat there with their immobile half parted lips and it was impossible to determine who had delivered the abrasive response; it might well have come from an off-stage ventriloquist.

Hellana persevered diligently, "Well I suppose it doesn't really. We have received glowing reports about the expected weather at the Lake Arden resort and we have laid on the very best fare for our party. I, for one, am excited at the prospect of meeting you in persons."

"Wish that we could say the same." Again it was impossible to determine who had delivered this subversive remark, but Hellana began to take her cue from the gaze of the background doctor who seemed to be focussed on the right hand twin.

She clicked her tongue and pressed on valiantly, "You will appreciate that Es-Tech has been entrusted with ensuring that everything on your holiday goes according to plan, exactly as you would wish it."

The twins snickered in alarming unison, "You mean exactly as you would wish it! ... In fact we have decided that our first request will be that we fly the airplane."

Dee-Cee, in the background, rolled his eyes heavenwards like some long suffering martyr.

Hellana, considering her reluctance to engage in airborne life, blanched

visibly at the thought. She glanced at the tome in front of her. "As you may surmise the profession of the airline pilot is quite specialised. The risks involved would hardly be acceptable to your backers."

"Well then our backers should just back off!"

Hellana pressed on unfazed. "We are all curious about extra sensory communication and excited at entertaining a deeper understanding of your own talents."

The right twin seemed to be staring up vacantly at a spot on the ceiling above the camera. She wondered what the focus of interest could possibly be.

The dry, disembodied voice returned, "We find little merit in the prospect of entertaining you!"

Hellana valiantly attempted another ingratiating sally, engagingly flashing one of her little bon-bons and deftly inserting it between her lips. She was not unaware that this gesture registered with the right side twin. "Dear boy we never suggested ..."

The right side twin lowered his gaze to stare directly at the camera, with evident hostility. Hellana had a disconcerting feeling that his cold appraising gaze had become focussed exclusively on her little mint. Nervously she fished another defiant mint out of her side pocket and discreetly inserted it between her lips. She noticed a flicker in that reptilian eye. She slid her tongue provocatively over her lower lip and pursed her lips suggesting complicit amusement.

"Clueless Cow!" he exploded suddenly. Now, at last, she could see his lips move and splutter. Dee-Cee in the background drained of colour and shrank back out of the frame. "You should probably be doing a risk assessment on yourself! Have you noticed the be-jangled barracuda hanging over your own shoulder?"

Cubbie who was leaning protectively over Hellana following the initial outburst straightened up rigidly with a slow authority and glared at the source of these offensive remarks. For a moment their gazes locked.

The other twin attempted to interpose himself, as an emollient. "Dex likes to be forthright in speaking our minds." He smiled ingratiatingly,

"He likes to cut to the main chase, so to speak."

Dex though said nothing more. He retracted his rippling turtle chin into the collar of his jumpsuit and stared at the table top.

He sent his brother a withering look. Then he heaved himself to his feet and waddled forwards to the camera filling the lens with his midriff. There was a sudden jerking motion as the table skewed wildly to one side and the rear wall went blank with a wrenching clatter.

Hellana quickly regained her composure and muttered to Cubbie, "Anger management issues I fear ... but at least we have gone through the motions. It doesn't really matter what they think anyway. Perhaps at some stage we'll need to enlist Frank's assistance in impressing on them a little more forcefully just how much they need our protection."

Nevertheless Hellana glanced at Cubbie suspiciously, taking momentary comfort in the vivid description 'be-jangled barracuda', as with innocent dignity she withdrew from the conference theatre.

At just that moment Frank texted the news that the full print run of *Blind Terror* had 'mysteriously gone missing - "Hi-jacked!" No terrorist organisation had as yet claimed responsibility. Fortunately, extensive CCTV coverage of the heist had been recovered for analysis and would be aired by *CrimeScene* on the evening news.

Hellana settled back in her director's throne, with an expression of renewed purpose.

The Staryk Report

s the luminous blue conversation cockpit was being prepared for the evening session of the Staryk Report, people had begun to congregate in the street outside peering through the plate glass windows with cupped hands. But it was not until six o'clock that doors opened and the audience crowded in to claim ringside seats. The growing notoriety of the Doctor had drawn a public keen to participate in what was sure to be a lively confrontation.

Mara had arrived early to be sure to get a place. She had prepared questions for the doctor which she hoped would demonstrate her intention to embrace the role Malyn had proposed.

The Staryk Report, a regular, mid-week evening interview, had long enjoyed public notoriety. Disparaged by some as 'Starkers', Malyn Staryk could be relied upon to deliver a confrontational event. She had a practiced skill for mercilessly exposing duplicity live on air, where there could be no recourse or refuge. Many wondered why her guests would consent to expose themselves to such an ordeal. But she knew that there are always people keen to step into the limelight on any terms.

A groan of disappointment however convulsed the hall when a stylishly coiffed elf tripped in and announced that due to the indisposition of 'Our host', the interview would be undertaken in her stead by her colleague, Lance Langer, better known as 'Slanger', who was rarely permitted more than a few observations on the weather after the Report.

Lance could soon be glimpsed hovering in the 'Prep Tank'. Energised by a postprandial workout in the gym, he was readying to translate aggressive jabs and lifts into palpable hits. He had been rehearsing dramatic positions in the mirror and practicing poisoned tipped turns of phrase worthy of *Starkers* herself. This would be a long-sought opportunity to revive a career which had been languishing under the relentless obligations of the daily weather.

An animator and camera men had begun to warm up the room by inviting members of the audience to approach the 'speaker's corner' of the

stage and air their minds. Those who dared were remarkably unanimous in vilifying the expected guest. One invitee undertook an impersonation punctuated with silly demonic cackles wailing "But nobody understands me! ... I am only trying to bring an end to the nastiness of the human race. I want everyone to be of like mind – like my mind." The audience began to hiss his speech and he retreated with an impersonation of evil be-shamblement. Mara sighed in dismay.

With a sudden clatter the door at the back of the studio was wrenched open. "Can't go in there? What ya' mean? I'm the person they're all waiting to roast!"

A peacock of a man wearing the instantly recognisable mauve velvet suit, rose shirt and yellow tie, strutted jauntily down the aisle and mounted the dais. His tinted glasses momentarily blinked paper white as he turned to the lights and acknowledged the assembled audience with a languid wave. He tossed his overcoat negligently over the back and lowered himself with a loud sigh into the moderator's chair facing the audience.

He evidently relished the confusion that his entry had created; the audience was briefly hushed by this effrontery. He swivelled around in his chair and waved gaily to *Slanger* who was completing his last minute primping. Lance squared his shoulders, checked his tie, and discreetly pushed a little roll of flesh under his belt.

But as he stepped up onto the dais, Lance found himself at an immediate disadvantage. Dr Noor already looked remarkably comfortable, sprawled across the presenter's chair. The bold, wide-eyed delivery, which he used so tellingly when describing tornadoes, would be greatly diminished by this unflattering side profile of his dissolving chin. He attempted to restore equilibrium by grabbing the Doctor firmly by the hand and gesturing generously towards the prescribed hot seat. But Dr Noor responded with a similar gracious gesture pointing at the same chair, tugging him off balance in an excessive display of warmth.

The audience was delighted at this unscripted pantomime and Noor beamed, relishing their complicity. From long experience he had found that unpredictability allowed him to take useful liberties. Agendas could be so easily derailed by such trivial ploys.

Defeated, Lance introduced the Doctor with a stilted description of the work undertaken in his Geneva clinic, describing how he had become infamous for his radical fertility treatments programme. He dwelt with sonorous relish on a controversial case, a woman of 68 years, who had given birth to quadruplets. The audience produced a satisfyingly orchestrated sniff of disapproval. He listed the many countries that still banned this type of research.

At this point Doctor Noor broke in. His speech was authoritative, with a clipped twang. The cameras re-focused. "I thank you for your warm welcome, Clive. And I so deeply regret the indisposition of Ms Staryk; I was looking forward to a challenging inquisition!"

"Actually it's Lance."

"At this point I should say that I have found everyone here in New Mid utterly supportive of my research. It is never in the common people that I encounter narrow-mindedness, it is instead in their governments and self-serving medical establishments. So many western governments seem determined that my research should be restrained by archaic preconception and a mediaeval morality. These establishments are determined to prevent their citizens from getting what they want and what they are entitled to have!"

"But how do you know what people should want?" Lance interjected rather feebly into what was already becoming more monologue than exchange.

Noor inflated visibly. "In fact I do indeed know". He thumped a briefcase down on the table and extracted a sheaf of papers. "I have here a data base of over two hundred local women, who have written with heartfelt pleas imploring me to set up a clinic in New Mid. These are the people who feel that they have been cheated in life." He paused. "Perhaps they have been advised by their doctors that their genetic background contains unsuitable material, that any child born to them would be almost certainly disadvantaged. Perhaps they have been told that in having children they will run the risk of releasing a Pandora's Box of defective genes; that they

will saddle themselves with lives of miserable obligation. Well I have come to tell these people that their cases are no longer hopeless, that I can bring them the children they desperately desire and deserve. These are not 'designer babies', these are their birthright."

He turned to confront the audience directly, lifting his tinted glasses. "I am also relaying the message that there is not a single person in this room, myself included, who does not harbour defective genetic material. We are all walking time bombs."

Mara realised that her prepared question about ethical constraints had already been derailed.

"I believe that human intelligence and diversity are in serious decline as a result of our culture of compassion. Modern medicine is beginning to ensure the survival of the less than fit, all those who would naturally have been winnowed out in a less anthropocentric world. We may have thwarted the tyranny of natural selection, but this has been at considerable cost. The moment has come when we must take stock of ourselves without sacrificing our compassion."

Lance rallied faintly. "But surely Dr Noor, resorting to genetic intervention is so expensive that it can only be contemplated by a privileged few?"

Noor smiled with evident condescension. "We must all see ourselves as pioneers approaching a new frontier together. Advances are already such that we can guarantee a superior outcome, a superior 'product', for everyone. We can 'design' to achieve the high intelligence and good health that will make a better society possible."

The audience rustled uneasily. It was evident that Lance's inquiitorial mission was floundering. Noor was intent on delivering a public briefing, coloured with self-congratulatory spin, anticipating any questions that Lance might have been formulating.

Flapping desperately Lance broke in. "But this is surely a very elitist position, Doctor, proposing that professionals like you should control the blueprints of life; that you should be entrusted with the specifications for a superior child? Who has given you the power to decide such things?"

"People claim that I am elitist, but I am only a humble servant of the universal *life force*." Noor pronounced these words with a distinct stentorian tone of reverence. "That life force inevitably throws up many options, some successful while others are blind alleys that lead only to waste and personal pain. This is natural selection as Darwin has taught us."

"But I am proposing intervention that removes that painful experimentation; removes the waste and tragedy of ill-suited and inappropriate lives. We are continually called on to adapt to the new conditions that Mother Nature throws up. The ecology that we are part of is ceaselessly challenging our position, trying to unseat us. My work is about removing some of the pain of this process by pro-actively designing to meet the requirements of the future."

"But you have threatened very powerful interests. Your work confronts almost every major world religion. Many feel that if we are designed in the image of God, that image cannot be altered to suit our chosen predilections!"

Noor licked his lips and retorted. "We must summon up the courage to face such entrenched traditionalists. But I know that there is a *will to life* that is greater than you or me. It pays no concern to human codes of ethics or political expediency. It has no interest in our feeble aspirations for a compassionate society. And we are all in its thrall."

Desperately floundering to gain control of the interview Lance began to warble self-righteously. "Doctor they say that you attempt to design people who will not age. Do you foresee a future without human mortality, a future in which people will live forever?"

"We have discovered that there are many living things that are designed without the kinds of aging genes that so afflict humanity. Many lives are terminated only by accident or when conditions become intolerable."

"But many people fear that your dreams will only be put at the service of a privileged elite."

Again the Doctor seemed determined to ignore the question. "In the past I have faced the heart-break of turning away would-be parents who

have come to me asking for a normal child. Would they want to limit their child's intelligence just so that they themselves could cope with 'normal'? I would not for a moment advocate that there is anything normal about what I am undertaking."

Lance again attempted to interrupt, "But...?" and abruptly blanked, forgetting what he might say on the subject of 'normalcy'.

Noor smiled condescendingly. "I am currently working with situations which, shall I say, 'expand' what we call *normal*. We are realising the dream of splicing genetic material to create human beings that are endowed with the highest levels of intelligence, who have stable psychological dispositions, who will live extended, disease free lives. This is the future of the human race and those who have not the courage to embrace it will simply be left behind. That is the new normal!"

"But this could only be a future for a tiny, privileged segment of humanity where the ..."

"I am embarked on an exploration of what lies beyond the pale."

"But isn't that like what the Nazi doctors were doing, attempting to distil the genetic ingredients of a superior race?"

The audience hissed and Lance assumed his habitual pursed smile feeling that he had scored at least one *palpable hit*.

Noor sighed and rolled his eyes, "When I see the life force at work on all sides, I know that I am only its servant. But I also believe that what I am proposing is also inevitable, because it is so fully aligned with that life force; it is part of an intention that pervades the universe."

"You suggest that you are the servant of this life force, but some of us only aspire to be good servants of a human vision, and claim that we must remain subservient to the life force to remain human. Isn't that what the new concept of ecology is all about, our human condition being reassessed in the context of a raft of inter-related conditions?"

"There are times when fundamental shifts have occurred in human consciousness. Darwin's conclusions were inconvenient for a lot of entrenched people. They compromised the messages of many of the world's religions. But the ideas of Darwin were already inevitable before

he expressed them."

"So, do you see yourself as a new Darwin?"

"Hardly! I don't consider myself as a humble scientific servant who is part of a revolution in the concept of what it is to be human."

"Come Doctor, anything but humble!"

"I am only giving voice to something that is already happening. Our whole concept of what it is to be human has reached a new threshold, and yet many people prefer to turn their backs on this and slink off retreating to their benighted past."

The audience was becoming increasingly restive. They had come craving a bloodbath but instead the doctor seemed to be undertaking the first aid. After all they had not come to think about these complex issues; they had come for entertainment.

"But won't you profit grandly with your exclusive patents for these scientific processes? Won't you be providing your services only to those who can afford it?"

"I hold my patents only because I want to control the direction of this research and see that my vision is given the attention that it deserves. I am a trained medical doctor and I have been imbued with all of the altruistic instincts of a doctor."

"Come doctor! You also have the instincts of a showman. Everywhere you go you have fanned a seething controversy. You love the screaming crowds, not those suffering patients that you are describing!"

"Well I am excited to announce a huge treat in store for all of you here. It is no longer a secret that the Noor Project has been invited to participate in the expansion of Gene-Sys. WE will be taking them in a radically ne direction and New Mid will become a world leader in biotechnology. We have also come prepared to demonstrate what our genetic engineering has already achieved."

"We shall soon be demonstrating specimens who already surpass the capabilities of every single individual in this room. In them we have made a careful selection of desirable genetic characteristics, tailoring gene sequences to achieve greater intelligence, health, and resistance to disease. They have attributes that are more keenly attuned to the emerging world reality."

"They sound disturbingly less than human," Lance countered.

"Our protégés have also been endowed with telepathic capacities that explore the potential of communication that we find vestiges of among some species. They have developed a platform of communication that extends far beyond the narrow confines of human language. We are expanding that invisible environment and the very frontiers of extra sensory communication."

"But that sounds more like the ultimate Big Brother, everybody tuning into each other."

"But just imagine a world in which human miscommunication becomes a thing of the past. Why we might even achieve world peace!"

"But what about privacy?"

"You tell me! What private thoughts would you be reluctant to have broadcast, Clive?" Noor lifted his glasses suggestively.

Lance turned visibly red as he cast his mind over a rather inadequate private life. "Actually it's Lance! ... But how do your specimens regard themselves. And do they not already regard you and me as parts of an inferior species?"

"Oh they are human enough, probably inconveniently human for most tastes. We aren't promising world peace quite yet, but we are working on it!"

"Perhaps it is you, Doctor Noor, their creator ... who isn't quite human." Lance settled back comfortably, leaving the impression that he had at least racked up one poison tipped barb.

The cameras faded and Mara stumbled out of the hall with the rest of the dazed audience wondering how such vast hubris could be reconciled with anything that she recognised as a foundation for the *City Farm*.



Escape Velocity

That was one of my best dreams! An exhilarating episode of breathless escape, eluding the tentacles of mortality licking at my heels.

I find myself locked in a cavernous museum full of broken statuary. I am surrounded by shattered gravestones inscribed in indecipherable languages. Some of the funerary statues vaguely resemble people that I know. Other monuments suggest famous landmarks that I cannot quite identify. It is a room full of death and decay.

By managing to stand stock still amongst the sculptures, I have evaded the guards and their officious closing up routine. The room becomes quiet as they leave me among these stark silhouettes of a dead past and lock the bronze portals with a reverberating crash.

I begin to move around the sombre gallery. I soon sense a predatory intelligence that is still embedded in these broken artefacts. The stones become increasingly bold and whisper among themselves. They have detected my warm blood and there is a rising murmur of outrage at my invasion of their immortality.

I begin to panic and run up the broad marble stairs. I feel the grasping tentacles of an invisible horror grasping at my heels.

Suddenly just as I feel the inevitability of being dragged down, I discover that my feet are moving so fast that I can run without touching the floor. Exhilarated, airborne at last, I launch myself through the open roof.

When I look back down I see all those human artefacts, waving their broken limbs, fossils embedded in the past, trying to lure me back to earth.

I know that I must sustain my will to flight or I will crash back to earth.

I recall that Noor once referred to Dex and me as his 'Millennial Methuselahs', destined to endure a thousand years. (He enjoys taunting others with the injustice of it, they who must contemplate their own brief life spans.)

Extended life expectations have given us a different perspective on this museum of antiquities that is spread out below me.

But Millennial Methuselahs will depend on sustaining an ability to levitate beyond the reach of all this past history. It will only attempt to drag us down. We must continue to run in order to remain ahead of the mortality game. It is exhausting but we must sustain our 'escape velocity'.

Increasingly reliant on renewed artificial implants, we must soar above that textured palimpsest that I glimpse below me, a landscape of past human delusions.

I realise that death and mortality will remain an obsessive preoccupation, even within our new state of being and ur post-human consciences.

ALIF

ara awoke to the media frenzy over the Malyn Staryk disappearance. She considered whether she ought to hand over Malyn's file to the investigators. Could it supply any leads to help locate her? And did she even want to be located? Mara suspected that an intention to disappear might have accounted for her erratic behaviour. She riffled through the file looking for clue as to what was expected from her.

Examining all the cross-references, she was astonished by the fanatical diligence of Malyn's research. Her obsessive personal interest in all aspects of the doctor Antinous Noor's life appeared to long predate his recent celebrity. She had amassed detail about his predilection for constant self-exposure and social gossip for over a decade.

Mara encountered an angry scrawl in the margin of one article. "Bastard!" ... suggested deranged fury, not the lucid analysis of a media savvy strategist. The doctor's work had evidently stirred a deep malaise in Malyn's life. Mara began to suspect that this might be tied in to her own childlessness.

In all this assembled information, Noor had persisted in proclaiming his own genius. But Mara could not comprehend why he had been he so tactlessly brazen in promoting himself, blatantly provoking his audience. Many articles revelled in his peacock's delight in self-display and insatiable craving to remain ever-conspicuous. Surely a less inflammatory approach would be more astute in advancing such delicate research?

Mara lingered over the familiar recent pictures of Dr Noor's welcome at the City airport, two men in a tug of war over a suitcase spilling its contents. On closer inspection it struck her as curious that silk pyjamas appeared to be the only contents of his luggage. She could not imagine who the surrounding group of protesters might have been, with their powdered faces and inept make-up. "Someone was already planning carefully how to crack this nut!"

Perhaps there were advantages in his courting such publicity; his work

was certainly inextricably linked with his peculiar patents. This may have been the only way to stand up to a large medical research establishment capable of purloining anything as suited them.

She chanced upon a hilarious description of another of Noor's flamboyant demonstrations that had proven utterly calamitous. He had set up a spectacle to demonstrate telepathic powers shared by his genetically enhanced twins. He was claiming that they were endowed with a shared mind. This was supposed to be a demonstration of 'psychic entanglement' a phenomenon he believed to be still manifest in other life forms.

The witnesses, though, had a field-day revelling in his hucksterism and the utter failure of the demonstration. The twins had proven uncooperative and seemed to manifest less telepathic prowess than randomly selected members of the public might have done.

Curiously unabashed, Noor had blamed their poor performance on 'contrary static' emanating from the audience.

Mara could only wonder what Malyn had expected her to make of this information. Was she expected to embark on a public slur campaign to attract others to the City Manor web-site?

Her mind turned to Clay who had so suddenly appeared on her doorstep to offer his help to City Farm. Perhaps she could enlist him in Malyn's project. She recollected meeting him when, on first arrival in New Mid, she had walked into a place that looked like it might offer employment. She discovered Clay, or 'Clavers' as he explained pedantically, tucked away in a gloomy alcove, distractedly scanning want-ads on his tablet.

He was obviously geeky and displayed an ill-advised serpent pendant dangling from his left ear. As he mumbled laconic responses to her forced cheerfulness, his evasive eyes roved nervously about the room. He kept tugging his recently acquired adornment surreptitiously. Mara was amused to notice that it then disappeared altogether during an excursion to the back of house.

She had never considered Clay as anything more than a passing acquaintance; a large measure of self-delusion would be required to entertain any other aspiration for him. Occasionally she would encounter

him and stop to chat. Inevitably, he would glance around uneasily, avoiding eye contact as if he were being sized up by a ravening wolf.

Whenever they did meet, she would notice the latest ornament or perforation. He was beginning to acquire a rather cluttered appearance and the ears were sagging under weighty paraphernalia. He was running out of space for further novelty.

Recently she had been surprised to meet him hanging over the games card display in her local grocery. Mara was flattered when he claimed knowledge of the *City Farm* website. It was then that he mentioned that he'd be willing to volunteer to 'help fix-up' her web-site.

And so Clay had become a regular visitor at the base in Bin Street.

Mara never knew quite what to expect when she saw him coming up the path. He seemed a collision of two very different characters. Sometimes he was bursting with hyperactivity, hands quivering like leaves, his eyes flitting around the room. Then his remarks would be so accelerated that she could scarcely catch their drift. He would leap onto the ends of her observations without drawing breath and transport them off in some unexpected direction. Generally she preferred this mode to the alternative, deeply withdrawn, geek massaging his tablet and muttering to himself.

The challenges of the City Farm website had sparked his imagination. He even struck up a doubtful rapport with the irascible Huggie having encouraged him to upload some of his cartoon drawings.

Jim at Mara's garden gate however did not warm to the new recruit at all. "I am pretty sure that he's the guy I caught snooping on your porch."

"He's totally harmless Jim, once you get to know him! He was probably only curious about our set-up. Clay is a total geek." But Jim shook his head gloomily. He resented that nonchalant little tap on the roof of his hutch and witless salutation that Clay now affected whenever passing.

Mara, though, began to look forward to the thud of the garden gate and Jim's curmudgeonly growl as Clay skipped up the path. His duties at his workplace, *Animal House*, were evidently lightweight and he could afford to spend whole days helping on the website.

As far as she could ascertain Clay had no other friends that he was prepared to share. His uncompromising appearance, the affectation of those lacerating studs, rings and bars inserted across his face, seemed intended to hide his vulnerability. He had an interesting face, she thought, and she felt drawn to his slim physique and the truculent bounce to his step. His hair, always unkempt was not quite revolting; it might conceivably be impressive if washed.

Mara began to gently challenge a few of these foibles. "It seems to me that you must want to appear autistic."

That word 'autistic' evidently hit a raw nerve and Clay withdrew his head into his shoulders like a turtle, not the effect she was calculating to achieve.

"I live my life without pasting on other people's labels."

Mara shuddered involuntarily and her eyes narrowed. She tried to mollify him a little. "I'm just worried about you're being exploited by the people you work for at *Animal House*. And don't give me that line 'it's a job'. You should be doing something you believe in."

"Well generally it's a laugh, and anyway I don't know exactly what I really believe in. I guess I'll know when it comes along. At the moment at least they need me."

"But it seems to me they've spent a lot of time not needing you over the past weeks."

Unaccountably Mara realised that she was enjoying this sudden bout of candour. She confessed, "I can certainly delude myself into following some pretty odd stars pretending that they are worthy of my dedication, only to turn around later and ask myself 'What the hell was that all about?"

"Sounds like you are another one who has met the wrong guy?" Clay snickered tauntingly.

Mara felt herself tinged with rising colour and moved the conversation into a less confessional direction. "But perhaps that is what I see here. The *City Farm* isn't prescribing a simple solution. We've just setting out with an open mind, the beginning of a process."

Clay pulled out his smart-phone and began to scrutinise the dial to signal that as far he was concerned the conversation was over.

But Mara pursued him into his private limbo. "I don't understand your fixation with those road kill games."

"It relaxes me," he mumbled distractedly.

"But usually you seem a bit too relaxed, about as limp as my cat, Pinkie."

"Just got to check Enzo's score! ... Damn! he's racked up another degree!"

"And for someone who works in a recording studio, you don't seem to have any predilection for music. What kind of sounds do you actually record?"

Clay, feeling badgered, hunkered down impervious to further exchange. He had relapsed into his convenient stonewalling 'autistic' mode.

But for Mara this opening had been a modest start. It might even be construed as a dialogue, a rare event in her previous dealings with Clay. Standing over his hunched shoulders, she momentarily considered tweaking a little patch of skin revealed on the back of his neck. Instead she scooped up the startled Pinkie and left the room.

* * *

With astonishing rapidity the *City Farm* began to metamorphose into an organisation with a more confrontational message which left some of the original members ambivalent their success. Their blog site burst into life with a riot of uncoordinated opinions. Blog-site hits soared and Mara became increasingly apprehensive that it was all going to implode in some spectacular way. But outside advertisers began to converge with generous budgets.

Many of the new members favoured rather incendiary vocabulary. Mara could not understand how they had tapped into such conflicting enthusiasms. "Who exactly are all these frantic people with their steroid induced rants?"

Huggie was typically scathing about the new blood. "Grass roots hah! They're just feedin' on raw sewage." He had a facility for sordid imagery.

Mara considered how they could engage this chaotic energy. Informal meetings that had previously taken place in Huggie's shabby shed, had become impossible at such a scale of involvement. So they booked a spacious school venue to introduce themselves to the new members. Invitations were posted on the web-site and refreshments laid on for the large audience expected.

However, on the designated night not a single soul appeared and the forlorn organisers returned home dejectedly bearing crates of uneaten fare. Clearly these new participants had larger ambitions than discussing local issues in a dusty school gym.

Shortly after this disappointment, the site began to erupt with proposals to adopt a more progressive sounding name than City Manor Farm which sounded excessively bucolic. 'ALIF' was mooted as a suitable clarion call, suggesting an organisation built on some incontrovertible first letter principle. Mara posted her opinion hoping to counter a taint of fanaticism which might frighten off new support. But the on-line herd trampled her objections.

Pronouncements purportedly emanating from *ALIF* began rippling through the other media. They began to allude to a takeover scandal behind the sudden changes. Of course behind the scenes there was no organisation at all to speak of, just a chaotic office in Bin Street with a resident hobo "receptionist" in the front garden.

"The next thing I expect to hear is that *ALIF* will be setting up guerrilla camps in Zeitoonistan," Mara despaired to Clay. Clay's blue eyes flickered as he attempted to imagine what a *Zeitoon* might look like.

He remained totally sanguine about their growth prospects. "This is the all-important growth phase, the details will work themselves out later."

Mara and Pinky suddenly found their lives engulfed in flickering, pale blue lights. Her books and papers were relegated to storage boxes.

"But our new members seem so fanatical, so determined to turn up

enemies."

"Like it's better the enemy outside our door than the friend within" Clay added sagely.

"Um..." Mara considered this for a moment and her eyes crossed. "I'm inclined to think that we should confront some of the enemies within."

"Well perhaps they just enjoy one-upping in the bigotry stakes."

And instead of addressing City Farm issues *ALIF* seemed to become obsessed with the perils of genetically modified crops, Gene-Sys and the Noor Project. Moreover the participants seemed to have a bottomless appetite for Noor's reported idiosyncrasies.

It proved difficult to prevent the message from suddenly veering off course with calls to wreak havoc on some offending public body or another. Out of the blue there would come an anonymous call to attend a *FLASH MOB* with 'paint and tools'. Mara learned to take these developments very seriously after a violent mob stormed the lobby of Allied Assurance and trashed an art display. By the time Es-Tech and the media cameras arrived the perpetrators had melted into the crowd.

"Where these people are coming from. Why would *ALIF* supporters be targeting Allied Insurance anyway?"

Solicitors' letters started to trickle in putting *ALIF* on notice over statements that appeared to be incitements to riot. There were angry demands to close down the web-site.

The *ALIF* bloggers became obsessed with the ongoing demonstration in the forecourt of Gran Plaz where Noor was staying. Wild rumours began to circulate about grotesque, genetically modified twins hidden away in a secret, high security compound.

Were it not for Clay's confidence in weathering these storms, Mara would have been happy to unplug the server entirely and return to the old ways of dealing with local issues.

But Clay was sanguine. "Just look! *ALIF* is developing a red hot reputation. We are already getting quoted as a 'really authentic' source."

Flash Fiesta

ummer had dropped like a steaming towel over the City. Those without air conditioned retreats, were obliged to brave it in the scorching sun. Then they stood around slack-jawed and listless, unable to summon up energy for the least exertion.

Mara usually woke early to take advantage of the cool dawn breeze sweeping in from the lake, before the torpor of the day set in. She checked the burgeoning *ALIF* site to discover that a group of social activists were busily plotting a *'Flash-Fiesta'* to converge on the hotel where Dr Noor was staying. Despite the spontaneous merriment planned, she had a dreadful premonition about a binge of embarrassing provocation shaping up.

Disappointed to discover that Clay was tied up all day with his recording in Dacton, she arranged to meet Huggie to participate with their new *ALIF* compatriots. As she assembled leaflets and packages of seeds onto her wagon, she was not unaware that her efforts must seem stodgy in contrast to the fevered exuberance imagined by these unknown new members.

She soon found herself joining groups of people congregated before the Gran Plaz Hotel. Three nervous security officers were improvising a tape barrier strung between flimsy stanchions while the crowd of louring protesters pressed up hard by.

She slipped under the cordon trundling her leaflets and found herself in the midst of a crowd that seemed curiously morose, hardly the raucous, joyful protest suggested by the flash announcement. Perched on a curb in their midst, she recognised the ubiquitous 'Zubie', last encountered in the Frontier press box. He was having difficulty extracting a coherent statement from anyone.

Someone had donated a bale of bright red kite cloth which was being torn into strips and offered to the jostling demonstrators as arm and head bands. At least the jazzy colour imparted some consistency to a crowd that looked otherwise distinctly lugubrious.

As if waiting for instructions, they were content to loiter, cross examining their phones, texting absent friends.

Mara felt resentful that no one was likely to pay the slightest attention to her leaflets and seed packets. She knotted two strips of the synthetic red cloth into a scarf and draped them self-consciously over her shoulders. Her eyes kept swivelling towards a young woman who had managed to contrive a single precarious strip as her sole article of clothing, yet still seemed to imagine that she could fade effortlessly into the crowd.

* * *

rank had set up his headquarters in a suite directly above Noor's suite in the hotel, overlooking the activities of his 'platoon' who were interspersed through the crowd below. From this vantage point he could communicate directly with an anonymous white van which had been marooned amidst a number of other parked vehicles. He had had a busy morning on the phones, ensuring that the media and contacts at police headquarters were tipped off about unfolding events. In idle moments his eyes sought out the girl in the dashing body bandana and his mind considered further deployment of such a natural talent.

Mara, standing nearby, heard the sudden gasp from the crowd as a young woman collapsed, apparently from heat exhaustion. Zubie was among the first to push his way to the forefront for his scoop. To his disappointment it was not the minimally clad elf who had succumbed. Nevertheless he was remarkably efficient in clearing space and laying her out. "It could be a heart defect," he warned dramatically. "It's imperative that we don't move her until the medics arrive ... could be fatal." In the meantime he was able to capture many interesting camera angles of the prone body.

Someone then imperiously demanded that the barrier be removed in anticipation of the arrival of an ambulance. When the officer proposed waiting until the medical help actually arrived, the altercation escalated with hysterical momentum. The three security agents were ploughed aside and the barrier trampled underfoot. The crowd flooded across the street. Unaccountably, a group of red bandana youth picked up the barrier stanchions and using them as battering rams hurled themselves against the windows of the CosmoCafé. The terrorised diners within fled to safety.

The crowd suddenly sprang to life with a unity of purpose, rhythmically chanting

"Leave Us Alone! ... Doctor Clone!"

Mara was astonished to witness just how quickly these passive people had been transformed into a crazed horde, albeit armed with their rather uninspiring message. They clustered around the reviving woman, who was now back on her feet and taking a few tentative steps. By the time the ambulance actually arrived, she had slipped away and the medics felt obliged to turn their ministrations to the casualties from the CosmoCafé.

Fortuitously, due to a shift change, a double force of Es-Tech security staff was on hand to intervene. Frank was perfectly positioned to coordinate their efforts. A further well-equipped relief corps of special Es-Tech reinforcements was despatched from a local station.

Mara was pushed to the sidelines in the next great surge. Determined to protect her promotional material, she slid her wagon under a nearby vehicle for later retrieval. Steadying herself against the grubby van, she had no inkling that she was standing a mere pace from Clay who was observing her quizzically through the smoked glass porthole.

Es-Tech's crowd control operatives deployed their crowd control paraphernalia with astonishing efficiency. Water cannon coupled with acoustic strafing soon scattered the dissent. Frank's assistants were able to film the efficacy of the proceedings from their balcony vantage point. Such manoeuvres would cast Es-Tech's future training programmes in a favourable light.

An hour later, Clay was able to join Frank on the balcony surveying the carnage. Es-Tech agents were now combing through the discarded debris. The street was strewn with litter. Red bandings were tied to lampposts and street furniture. Broken glass crunched under the wheels of the restored

traffic.

Frank's face carried a look of undisguised satisfaction. "Well that only goes to show the level of rage that really lies simmering beneath! New Mid is like a pressure cooker on a hot day like this. Turn up the heat a notch and it all explodes!"

Clay stood mute by his side, sucking the stud in his lower lip.

Frank warbled happily, "Well, we've demonstrated that we have the flexibility to undertake what the police could never achieve. Without a strong hand, public anarchy could become a daily occurrence ... and little Nixie up in the clouds doesn't for a moment perceive what we are up against."

Clay was sceptical. "But aren't we just training our own thugs? Some down there say that the water cannon was a bit of an over-reaction."

"A little cold water goes down well on a sultry summer's day. You saw how quickly they all disappeared," Frank smirked.

"The only ones getting flattened were the bystanders!"

"Clay, both you and I know that the threat is out there and it is very real. Our challenge is to ensure that our citizens recognise this fact. We must demonstrate the role expected of Es-Tech in ensuring peace and security. Today we've impressed a lot of people; our Gene-Sys friends, the local police and undoubtedly the citizens of our great City."

Clay recalled Mara's look of bewilderment at the turn of events as she tried hastily to stash her materials out of harm's way.

That evening the press and television news had a field-day in reporting the chaos. The same video clip of ninja clad 'Scooter the Looter' screaming like a banshee and hurling a stanchion through the plate glass windows of CosmoCafé, the customers behind the glass cowering in terror, was replayed unremittingly on the evening television news.

When Mara at last found her way home she discovered Jim on hands and knees in the front garden uprooting his carefully nurtured plants and gathering them into a conspicuous mound in the centre of the yard.

"Jim what are you doing? – after all your efforts to get them started?"

"There's been a complaint from one of our hyper-allergic neighbours. The Streets Department just sent around two thugs who threatened a fine if I didn't remove all the rag-weed immediately. — I'm afraid that it would have been you that was on the hook."

Mara was instantly suspicious; the timing to coincide with the riot seemed an unlikely coincidence.

"The two thugs rang your bell, quite aggressively trying the door as if you were trying to hide inside, even though I explained where you were."

"The whole problem with the City Farm is that it seems to challenge the authority of powerful people sitting behind their comfortable desks. No one considers our message or appreciates our flexibility; they just assume the bleakest possible motives and they vilify us as if we were returning ravening animals to wander freely through the streets."

Jim looked worried. "They see everything you are trying to do as challenging their way of life. You are challenging all their rules. Ownership in this city is the only big game; I know because I used to play it every day as an architect. Everything has been assigned a price. If you can't assign a value, then that factor is disregarded. Your City Farm is threatening because; no one seems to control it. It adds unwelcome problems to be factored into their projected profits sheets." Jim shook his head and turned away to drive his spade angrily into the ground.

Back in her apartment, in stunned silence Mara's head sank into her hands as the news poured in. She hoped that her leaflets would not be discovered and held up as an incriminating link to the perpetrators of the mayhem. "It all seems so unfair. This is not what we are supposed to be about!" she fumed, imagining how her sponsors would react to the disastrous coverage, and above all what Clara might be thinking.



The Machine

Last night I dreamt that I had evaded the security agents that make our lives such a downer. I am wandering outside in a desolate scrubland. In this bleak landscape I am astonished to encounter a procession of people trundling along a narrow paved path, transported on little golf carts sporting jaunty striped roof canopies. The carts are all selfguided, whirring robots.

They are piled high with valuables, antique furniture, books and artworks in cumbersome gilt frames and are heading directly into a loading bay on the side of a massive fortress. It is a power station. As the loading bay doors close around each vehicle a chimney overhead lets out a welcoming belch of smoke.

I notice that there is no procession of returning vehicles. Surely these passengers would think to ask an obvious question? One of the loading bay operators, his hat turned askew, explains that they are participating in a 'power potlatch' and that all their offerings are being stored in underground bunkers.

I am careful not to get caught up in this procession. As I skirt convoluted arrays of vents and condenser coils, I inhale gusts of foetid air. Through tiny perimeter portholes I can glimpse the throng of people within. They are gesticulating excitedly to one another, unable to make themselves heard over the din. Nevertheless they pose like fashion

models, attempting to look confidently in control amidst all the babble.

I fear that the truth of their situation and fate is only too obvious. I sneak around to the rear of this sinister hulk and discover a slate grey ditch snaking off towards the horizon. A pipe at the rear is debouching a brown sludge.

It is a landscape without foliage. All forms of life seem to be shunning this channel. Even the bushes stand back along the banks, withered and dying.

It dawns on me that this is a great factory set up to convert human desires into power. How easily we can be induced to put our trust in such machines allowing them to enslave us. Pathetic human beings are more comfortable with the idea of being directed by systematic robots that are programmed to perform without prejudice or rancour. It is a sad truth that such machinery outlasts the intentions of its organic creators. Its original purposes soon become forgotten and lost. The factory is programmed to perform the same specific tasks ad infinitum.

It can perform tasks where organic life would not thrive, in hostile environments and over extended periods. Organic life is unsuited to the vast scales of time and space that are now coming to overwhelm the scale of humanity. As we blend ourselves with machine intelligence, we are developing a very different sense of our mortality.

The Noor Project intends to retool us with an intelligence that will carry us into the future. It will convert the history of human achievement into a new power and render the past into a grey effluent.

The purpose of our lives is being redefined, and we will be no longer what was once called 'human'.

Questions of Allegiance

Reports of the 'Gran Plaz Riot' began to saturate the social media. Mara was astounded at how quickly the news-hounds had tracked down a raft of people purporting to speak on behalf of *ALIF*, people she had never heard of previously. Members of their anarchic community were quoted as vowing to stop the Hyperion development and its poisoned partnership with Gene-Sys research and forcibly occupying their lands to set up extensive urban farms. There were relentlessly repeated airings of '*Scooter the Looter*' hurling the stanchion through the window of the Cosmo Café, followed by shrieks of terror from the casualties within.

To Mara's horror her missing leaflets were located and displayed to the press by grim faced Es-Tech investigators. An interview was aired with a slightly befuddled Jim in front of his makeshift hut. He was introduced as one of the 'homeless anarchists' at the core of *ALIF*.

Paparazzi were soon camped out opposite her gate. Among them she noticed the ubiquitous Zubie. He looked at her blankly as she dashed past in her mud splattered track suit.

Clay appeared at an early hour, breezing through the encampment and jauntily slapping on the roof of Jim's shanty. Mara opened the door a crack with Pinky in her arms. Both regarded him with hostility.

"I suppose that you heard about the Gran Plaz riot?" he gasped ingenuously. "They're holding Huggie! He showed up at the wirst moment, just when the police were looking for someone to nail."

Mara looked at him with hostility "All in all, Clay, I'm beginning to realise that you're a big liability. Didn't you see that mob parked outside my gate? They're out there sharpening their knives! I can't live like this! Perhaps we could all take time off from your promotional efforts and let matters cool down. I intend to close down the server and hope that all these firebrand new members go away."

"I realise that it isn't exactly ideal."

"Not ideal! There's an understatement! ALIF is now lined up as a

hardened terror threat, connected somehow with the *City Seven* in most people's minds. The owners of all those looted shops are probably going to sue *us*."

Clay reached out to stroke the cat in her arms. "Well perhaps we'll think of something." He paused a moment and then added brightly, "In fact I'm beginning to have a hunch that some of your problems might be traced right back to your server."

"And who set that up I can only wonder?" Mara glared accusingly. "I must say that I've been wondering exactly what you do at your so-called work?"

"I admit my life's not as simple as people tend to think. But I've signed a confidentiality agreement with my employer at *Animal House*. But I admit, it's only one of my roles."

"So, I suppose that they'd eliminate you if you spilled the beans?"

Clay smiled wanly, "It's not that bad. Admittedly we don't do a lot of *music* recording, but I specialise in other kinds, more like a security recording role."

"So you're some kind of spy?"

"That's a bit much. I just do ... like special projects."

"And am I one of those special projects? Is that why everyone is suddenly so interested in City Farm, because you put them up to it?"

"Well, the way I see it, possibly some stuff could have got imported inadvertently into your *improved* search-engines."

"Possibly?"

"But I promise only with the best intentions", he hastened to add, "Perhaps we could identify some of these guys and shut them out."

Mara looked perplexed. "But why should anyone want to hijack our message in the first place?"

Suddenly it seemed to dawn on her, "It's Es-Tech? That is who you are working for?" She couldn't help laughing. "What a disguise!"

Clay blanched and his jaw began to wobble uncontrollably. "Mara, you're just jumping to conclusions. It's all part of a bigger story. Remember, Rome wasn't burned in a day!"

"No they had to hire the fiddlers first!"

"What?" Clay looked even more perplexed.

"Never mind. I can see why your clients need security cover, from people like you. But why have you chosen us? We're a perfectly innocuous farming information site."

Clay shoved his hands deep into his pockets and looked dejected.

"No wonder Es-Tech is cresting as a growth industry; you thrive on cultivating fear, terrifying everyone with what might happen."

Clay's eyes flitted around nervously. "I'm only an employee so I don't get to see the big picture. But our overall mission is about making sure that bio-tech research stays in safe hands."

"But from my vantage point, you look like the terrorists, hell-bent on setting up the problems you are purporting to solve."

Clay persevered doggedly, "Everyone is worried about what would happen if this technology falls into the wrong hands. Frank says that Noor is only behaving like he does in order to hold onto his patents ... and fend off the big boys."

"To me that crazy Doctor seems more like one of those evangelical preachers. We are all mesmerised by the crassness. You can't believe that anyone would be taken in – and then you find yourself riveted by the horror of it all."

"But perhaps he really does believe that his science will improve our lives."

"Clay, you're an utter idiot! He's a showman, acting only to further his own interests. He revels in the limelight. He even seems to enjoy the catcalls from his audience. I can't imagine how he would function without cameras trained upon him."

"Perhaps he feels it's safer in the limelight."

Mara stared at him in total incomprehension. "Noor's science is sidestepping one very important question ... Will we still be 'human' when we've been 'redesigned' with his patented enhancements? Or are most of us going to be relegated to a failed sub-species?"

"Noor's outrageous behaviour is brilliantly camouflaging some

very fundamental issues! His science brings out our worst competitive instincts. Parents will be demanding the best offspring they can afford. Why waste time on some untalented specimen? They will jettison their own genes to get a baby they think that they deserve. They would demand nothing less than that saying 'it's only human!' And they will also be afraid that if they don't embrace this science, then others will get there first and leave them behind in the dust."

Clay squeaked helplessly, "But they're going to do it anyway. We just gotta adapt."

Mara shook her head, "Noor sees this new world coming with all its horrors, but the people that he must deal with are all part of the old world, driven by greed and fear. Think about it! You say you're obliged to carry out your Es-Tech job as if this absolves you of any responsibility."

Clay looked wounded. "I've got to deal with life one step at a time."

"You must be crazy! Es-Tech is behind you, manipulating you one step at a time! And yet, you just comply without asking why?"

"It's my job; it's okay for now. Someday I'll get more control."

"But what's right for you now? You will always be a victim of others' designs, however necessary you are in solving their problems."

Clay suddenly jolted forward violently. He inspected a message relayed on his screen and suddenly looked very worried. "Oh no! Look at what you have done!" Beads of sweat appeared instantly on his brow.

He got up and silently beckoned Mara out into the garden. His voice dropped to a whisper, "We've been making a very big mistake talking out loud. I think that I've just shot up on somebody's *not-very-wanted* list. It's better the devil you know than the deep blue sea!"

Clay dashed off in sudden panic, waving a silent good-bye and breaking through the tight knot of paparazzi jostling at her gate.

Then he returned to his Dacton station, Clay, reckoned that it would be wise to look very busy and threw himself into the mind addling task of tallying the latest *ALIF* blogging entries. Almost immediately Frank materialised behind him. He was in an irascible mood and clamping Clay's shoulders abruptly turned the chair around to address him.

"You can just forget that for now. I've taken you off *ALIF* duties. Go home and pack. We'll be flying out to the Arden Research Centre tomorrow morning. You'll be picked up at 8 am sharp."

"Oh and your little pal is going to tag along as well ... a big thank you to McCubbins!"

Without any further explanation Frank turned abruptly on his heel and strode out of the room, slamming the door behind him in evident fury.

Chastened, Clay peeped over the edge of his cubbyhole. He was now certain that Frank had tuned into his compromising conversation with Mara. He knew only too well that nothing could be kept secret from him.

Rummaging around in his bottom drawer, he found a scrap of paper end a pencil stub. Laboriously he inscribed a message warning Mara to beware of Frank.

"It's never good to change the horse's colour midstream," Clay mumbled nervously. "Arden Research Centre?" He turned to consult the *Earth Atlas* app.

* * *

Later that day Mara caught sight of Jim shuffling up her path. He held to her out a crushed note as she emerged to meet him.

"I got this from your little admirer."

"My admirer?"

"You know – sneaky ... metal head..."

"Jim I don't need you on my back as well at this exact moment. 'Sneaky metal head' as you call him coud hardly be a romantic interest ... of mine anyway. So just set that aside. Okay?"

"Well at least for the moment he's playing hard to get. He tracked me down in front of the Library and asked me to make sure that you received

Questions of Allegiance

this secret note, then ran off without a further word. He suddenly seems paranoid about coming here himself ... I wonder why?"

Mara unfolded a page covered with extraordinary crabbed writing. It looked as if it had been written by a drunk on a wagon careening down a bumpy road.

- Hi Mar,
- no spel-chex, sose not prefect cant sned email
- relly sorry abt/porblems. Not sposed to hap
- Frank sez (J-R-2 go 2 Lake Ardin withus. Me 2.
- Think I'm in perverbial hot water without a padle
- 2-2 sory. Lets 4-get even that convresayshun.
- Gotta Act superkool wen [] C me!
- pertend dont no
- Yours trully Clavers Clancy X

Following the signature was a post script;

'distory mesage imeedly.'

Jim who was peering over her shoulder, rapt in the intricacies of the spelling added facetiously. "Not as romantic as I imagined but at least it sounds as if he might be contrite for once! I suppose that the furtive X means that he is tenth in that long line of fancy Clancys."

"Oh *please* Jim! It's not really his fault if he's a challenged by current circumstances." Mara turned and stomped up the path to consult the *Earth Atlas* herself.

As she slipped her key into the lock she paused a moment to consider why she sometimes felt quite so protective of Clay.



Cutting Loose

Why do I so often dream of being at sea? And yet again I'm free of Dex. I am a passenger on a splendid vessel, so pristine it seems to taunt the chaos that lies in the treacherous depths and those the malevolent gliding shadows beneath us.

Aboard the glittering 'Geneva', I find myself dozing in a great coil of anchor rope, which envelopes me like a comforting cocoon. I am comfortably dreaming that I am dreaming 1

Suddenly I become aware of a whispered conversation nearby. Peeping through the coils, I discover that the Captain and his Steward are conspiring to abandon ship. The Captain explains with evident disgust that the ship has wasted all its provisions in gratifying the first-class passengers. He feels justified in abandoning them to their fate. He calls it a "a sudden sharp reality check!" He chokes back a sinister laugh suggesting his relish for the scale of the oncoming reckoning.

The two men are loading up a lifeboat with the choicest of the remaining provisions and preparing to abscond. The forsaken passengers will be left to drift, rudderless until the Geneva breaks up on the reefs of a desert island. "They will find that their love of the finer things in life comes at considerable cost." Again the sinister laugh, "I wouldn't like to visit that island in a few days time."

The conspirators skulk off to rejoin the revels for one last frenzied celebration and I emerge from hiding and lift the cover of the lifeboat. It is packed with luxuries; I wander spellbound down an aisle stacked with jewel encrusted watches each of them set to different times.

I realise that the fates of the passengers are already sealed and I feel no obligation to alert them to the conspiracy. Instead, I just cut the ropes and allow my well stocked lifeboat to drift off into the night. In my last glimpse of the Geneva, it is sitting on the horizon glowing like a dazzling cinder.

Suddenly I am jolted awake and back to the squalid reality of the Dacton VIP Suite. The dream has been so vivid, that I wonder what it must mean. Perhaps it was a dream about launching my own solitary future in a 'post-human' world. I will be alone and without Dex.

'Post-human', a taunt once applied to us by Saddy, has long been rattling around in my head all week.

What would a post-human world actually look like? Or are we already there?

The Noor Project certainly means the abandonment of a common future for humanity. But are we casting ourselves adrift?

Tomorrow's advantages will be conferred on those who can emancipate themselves from the expectations of our ancestors.

In my dream I see that the future will fall to those who have been able to steal away in the lifeboats.



PART 2

Lake Arden

he blinding shimmer of the lake could be glimpsed through a screen of ancient moss blackened tree trunks. Its surface seemed taut with noiseless tension like a drum. Though it was still early morning, heat plumes were beginning to rise over its surface. A mauve haze exaggerated the vertical elements on the shore opposite and detached them from the earth surface, to bob over a band of glistening mirage. The woodlands stretching down to the lake shore were unnaturally silent. There was only an occasional rustling of leaves as a wayward breeze eddied wilfully among the desiccated leaves. All else was silent. No bird sang out to its mate. Even the insects appeared to have forsaken these woodlands.

A sudden explosive sound ripped through the unnatural silence crackling off the watery drum face; the distant report from a rifle was followed by a whiplash echo that tore the length of the lake. Then utter silence reigned again.

Two men, encased in shiny synthetic black uniforms with awkwardly clipped paraphernalia suspended from belt loops, were hunkered over their digital screens. The padded vest of the larger man had ridden up and was cutting uncomfortably into his chin. They were already stewing in the morning heat. Behind them two tripods supported telescopic devices trained on the lake, well hidden behind the screen of trees. Alongside them two coffin-shaped boxes of green moulded plastic that had been lugged up from their boat, defined the edges of their makeshift camp. On the shore their motor boat had been carefully camouflaged by a tarpaulin scattered with trimmed branches.

A once grand fishing lodge could be glimpsed through the trees on the opposite shore of the lake. It had been sited to command a long view of the silent expanse. The building seemed a fantastical import into this, otherwise untrammelled, wilderness. Its cranked roof line was punctuated by numerous jaunty white trimmed gables cast in deep shadow in the morning light. A tower with a high pitched pavilion roof, clad in rustic cedar shakes terminated one end of a crooked facade and surveyed a protected cove beyond a wide expanse of dock.

In contrast to this glorious remnant of an age of leisure, a severe flat roofed building could be glimpsed nearby nestled at the foot of the shimmering cliffs. Its sombre horizontal massing appeared an unsuccessful effort to blend it into the rocky shelves of the shoreline. This integration had been undermined by the arrays of solar panels covering the roof which cast back dazzling reflections from the raking morning sun. The roof armour of this monstrosity suggested the scales of a prehistoric reptile.

The tree growth on the shoreline had been cut back severely around the stark new addition revealing a row of steel framed windows with sinister black tinted glass that suggested concealed gun ports. Behind loomed an equally improbable large mushroom structure of inflated white fabric, like a scale-less fungal growth against the background cliffs.

The three mismatched buildings sat apart like awkward neighbours unable to engage in conversation. A large windmill rotated slowly on a promontory upwind of the old lodge and at least drew the eye away from the architectural cacophony nearby.

The two men gazed vacantly across the lake at the astonishing sight and thought nothing very much.

"Not a fisherman on the lake. What a waste! In its heyday that old lodge must have been full of old geezers after the fish! The front dock would have been swarming with guides and tackle and boats setting out for the day. Now, no fish and no boats and no guides ... nobody left with tall tales to tell."

"I'd like to have a place like that and cater to regular summer guests," the other mumbled almost talking to himself.

"Regular? We're miles from anything *regular*. You'd have fifty miles of those old overgrown logging roads to plough through before you could welcome your first guest. Everything would have to be flown in. People

want remote but they want convenient remote and internet. I know 'cause I'm originally from Iridium, up north."

"I'm from New Mid myself. No big loss for me to move on. So all this is the stuff of dreams. Let me guess, you met Frank in *Embers* the moment you got into town? And he dazzled you with all his big toys? And since then you've never looked back?"

"You know the drill, Deeto. How long've you known Frankie?"

"Long enough to know it's a life sentence. He's got us all tied up in little parcels. Personally, just about now, I'd settle for my own life, but let's face it Frank won't let any of us escape on our own terms."

"At least our Es-Tech body armour is good for something, no mosquitoes come near us."

Eddie, ungainly and ill-suited to the wilderness adventure that he had always dreamed about, spoke in a rasping smoker's voice, subdued as if daunted by the silence of the woods. He dropped to his side onto the soft forest floor and began to unwrap a candy bar.

"In fact one of the caretakers at the Lodge was saying it is the first year in his recollection without any mosquitoes or black flies ... seemed to suggest that this was more than just a happy cycle of nature."

"That's Frank for you. No happy coincidences in his world. He just sets it all up as he pleases."

"But seriously, the guy said that planes had been dusting this area since the early spring – creating a control zone for the research centre."

Again in the distance a rifle report echoed across the lake and made them both jump.

"There's that old coot sounding off again. I'd like to lob something back his way."

"No doubt our Frankie would as well. But he'd probably bring in a bomber squadron."

"Well, I guess he'll run out of ammunition one day and then we will entertain him with some of Franks' party tricks."

"Well I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of Frankie. Did you hear what he did to those platoon kids? Like decimated! He's got real

anger management issues."

A chirp sounding from the device perched on one of the boxes drew his colleague over to consult the screen.

"Message that the VIP's are on their way. Stand by for action!"

"Ya gotta admit, Eddie, aside from the geezer with the rifle, this whole place is one heck of an unlikely security target. My guess is that this is all another Frankie ego trip. He is probably playing up all the things that might go wrong to boost his critical security role. Honestly if there were going to be a threat to these people it would show up long before it reached these god-forsaken woods."

"Who are these treasures we're supposedly protecting? If they are that paranoid they must be up to something unhealthy. You could get away with murder here."

"Didn't you get roped into Frank's latest fiesta in the City? Mayhem to the max! It's those same bio-tech scientists we're protecting now. Perhaps they want some quiet time to get on with their skulduggery without all the battle lines."

"Ironic that it's the same group that stirred things up down there that are now protecting them. We're nothing if not flexible!"

"Let's face it, to Frank we aren't anything at all! But ours is not to reason why – We've got our instructions. Security *professionals* are not supposed to ask questions."

"Professionals, hah! Just goons with guns! But I'd like to know why can't we paddle around in one of those red canoes looking like a part of the scenery?"

"Well Deeto, there is no big market for your stunted Latin looks floating around out there in a cameo role."

Deeto, somewhat trimmer and more agile than his wistful counterpart, looked offended. He hoisted himself to a dignified position and pretended to make adjustments to the larger of the surveillance telescopes. He trained it on the single solitary hawk that was floating almost immobile above the lake.

"The raptor up there looks so totally National Geographic. It could

Lake Arden

almost be real! Shall I just try a little marksmanship? – you know I achieved gold at our school gun club."

"We'll just stick to our exclusion zone brief I think."

In the distance a choppy throbbing sound began to develop into a consistent roar. A tiny fleck of sparkling metal flashed above the line of trees.

"Well, bring on the circus! Arden - Act One - Scene One!"



Arden Premonitions

Dex though is enthusiastic about our upcoming jaunt, delighted that we will leave most of our dreary support staff behind. But I have had a dream about Arden. I found myself wandering in a gloomy forest that was seething with malevolent life forms, viral snakes and bacterial trolls. Alone, stumbling through the undergrowth, I was aware of their unblinking eyes calculating the moment to strike. Gripped by rising terror I broke into a run, crashing through the dense tangle. I snagged my foot on a tree root and fell headlong into spongy damp earth. I felt my hands being sucked deep into the cool moss. For a moment it was a comforting sensation. I began to resign myself to the fate awaiting me. Then something horrific began to pulsate under my hands. Pushing myself back in disgust, I found myself at the base of a massive tree trunk. A narrow split in the bark ran straight up the trunk. With dream-like omniscience, I knew that this deep gouge had been riven by a thunder bolt, hotter than the surface of the sun. I could imagine a god's incandescent anger bursting the bark with a sizzling crack and sending the bark flying through the forest.

The lowest branches of this tree seemed to beckon with an inviting roost for me and I clambered onto the lowest rung and began to heave myself up branch by branch, away from the horrors of the forest floor. I have always wanted to climb trees, though, of course, I have never been allowed to try. But it was proving effortless and I found myself much stronger than imagined. Arden seemed to be bringing out a

latent audacity. All my normally cautious instincts were thrown to the winds. This was a delight in escape. As I emerged through the forest roof and broke into dazzling sunlight. I found an exhilarating view of the undulating tree canopy stretched to the horizon.

I continued to press on upwards; what else could I do? But the branches were becoming too slender for support. I found a resting spot at a bifurcation between two crowns and straddled my legs either side, swaying in the wind. It was the closest that I have ever been to heaven.

But then I made the mistake of looking down the god's lightning runnel into the jungle below. Instantly, at this dizzying height, my head began to swim and my limbs shake uncontrollably. Far below I could see Dex, a microscopic speck, a primitive life form, surrounded by ant-like U-seys. He was waving frantically. Clinging to my perch and paralysed with terror, I dared not wave back. I could feel my fingers weakening their grasp and my new-found strength ebbing. Mustering my determination, I attempted the terrifying descent, feeling my way back, blindly testing the springiness of each branch with my feet. I dared not look down again. A branch snapped, suddenly throwing my weight onto enfeebled arms, leaving my feet flailing in mid air. There were no further branches within reach. I was left dangling.

At such a desperate stages in any dream I must step in like Commander Dribs and take firm control of the situation. I had to resolve this predicament by rewriting the script. This is the great thing about dreams; I only let them go so far. When I need to intervene I can engineer a suitable conclusion. In this case I simply willed the thin crown of the tree to bend over gracefully and deposit me gently on the ground. Dex and the useys rushed up to congratulate me.

I awoke with a great sense of relief that I had cheated the terrible fates that were awaiting me at Arden.

Introductions

cross the lake a helicopter bounced lightly onto a patch of coarse clipped grass and the bubble door swung open. Hellana lurched out, shaking visibly; her legs curiously uncoordinated but grateful for the solid ground. She had spent the last hour in transit facing the back of the cabin, her face a rigid mask of self-control. She had been studying in minute detail another risk analysis painstakingly prepared for her perusal. In fact her eyes roved repeatedly over the same paragraph while she clung to an image of herself prone on a dock, soaking in the sun and placidly sipping a cocktail. At regular intervals her hand dropped impulsively to her little side pocket and sought a calming lemon drop.

In her distraught state she paid scant attention to her new environs, the picturesque lodge seated high on the shoreline, embracing the spectacular lake view. With benumbed legs, she tripped over the curious white stone slab at the foot of a monumental boulder staircase that led up to the deeply shadowed veranda. Waves of nausea continued to wash over her.

In her preparation for this occasion, Hellana had made modest concessions to her gender, a provocative pink security helmet with matching tinted security goggles. For her, pink was a sign of defiance, not a predilection. The rest of her outfit was woefully unflattering. The body armour stipulated by risk assessments for field work seemed to exaggerate her burgeoning physique. Capacious pockets laden with emergency supplies puffed out aggressively calling attention to their contents. Her legs had been encased in padded leggings which diminished to delicate ankles that seemed only to accentuate the substantial girth above like a piece of powerful gym equipment supported on a spindly utility frame.

In contrast, Frank who emerged from the helicopter behind her looked ready for a photo shoot, his helmet slightly tipped to one side, his security goggles half tinted to produce an effect of alluring mystery. He seemed to glide around in a sylph-like manner as if born to danger and dramatic deeds. Hellana took some slight comfort in considering that he discreetly

laboured to achieve this appearance. She was not unaware that he took examined his self-presentation carefully in available reflectors prior to any performance.

The residential director of the Gene-Sys research centre, Eugene Krafft, a tiny man resplendent in a pristine white lab coat and crowned with a pale blue helmet, rushed forward to offer his hospitality to the new arrivals. He had apparently just emerged from his lab. He grasped Hellana's hand and pumped it with an effusive welcome.

"Welcome to Arden and the Belleview Lodge!"

With his other hand he graciously swept the arrivals up the massive stone staircase to the lodge veranda.

Mara could hardly believe her good luck. All of the senior people on the plane had generously ceded their claims to the prime seating position beside the pilot with its panoramic views of the trackless wilderness below.

The landscape in its primordial state was traversed by great flows of ancient rock scraped bare of trees. Ancient meteor impact sites were still visible in the swirling patterns below. Though it was early summer there were remnant drifts of snow crowning some of the higher peaks. She had become so accustomed to the pervasive ordering of the city, where every aspect of the view was contrived by human hand, that she had put out of mind these vast expanses of the planet that showed little evidence of human intervention.

She had had no further contact with Clay since his crazed, apologetic letter. She might have festered in silent suspicion about his dubious manoeuvrings. But despite his many annoying qualities, she was beginning to grow accustomed to his regular appearances on Bin Street. Admittedly, she was looking forward to seeing him; at least there would be somebody that she knew at this remote 'Arden'.

Emerging onto the heli-pad, Mara looked around to identify the redoubtable 'Cubbie McCubbins' to whom Clara Voy had introduced her. Clara, an acquaintance of Cubbie's, had given a glowing account of

her qualities and organisational abilities. Mara hoped that Cubbie might provide some insight into her elusive sponsor.

To her disappointment Clay greeted her with a non-committal nod. He was evidently taking his official role very seriously. He picked up her bag without a word and dashed off to deposit it in her assigned room.

A tall woman clopped up to her, hands extended warmly, a lopsided face exuding sympathetic concern. "And you must be Mara! Welcome to Arden," she trilled as she imprisoned Mara's hands in a bony grasp. Her rigid smile flashed a collision of oversized, overlapping teeth. "Clara has told me about your farm project. I am Lieutenant McCubbins, but you'll soon be calling me Cubbie."

Cubbie large boned and shockingly plain, reminded Mara of an ungainly beast of burden kitted out for a mediaeval fayre. She was dressed in a bright lime green padded doublet that flattened her within an armoured carapace. This was apparently her concept of country attire. It was emblazoned with the logo 'Tough Duck'. Contrasting violet tights exaggerated her knotty lower limbs and accentuated the mediaeval peon appearance. Cubbie had punctuated this costume with a jumbled assortment of costume jewellery. The whole assembly was crowned with an elaborate layered hair style, laboriously contrived into a series of half open theatre curtains revealing a bleak stage beyond.

Cubbie ferried Mara through the sea of faces, and deposited her at the threshold of a large lounge full of people with the blithe instruction, "Just go on in there and mingle!"

It was a comfortable room divided into intimate alcove sitting areas by a row of cedar posts still clad in soft bark. Halfway along its length there was an enormous fireplace constructed of granite boulders and flanked by alcoves with slot windows that overlooked the woods. On the opposite side an uninterrupted gallery of windows overlooked the veranda and its sweeping view of the lake.

Mara took a deep breath and shyly stepped across the threshold. The room contained groupings of serious looking men who were whispering conspiratorially among themselves. She would hardly feel comfortable throwing herself into their midst with breezy effusions about the scenery. How different from the convivial crowds that she imagined would have relaxed in this room many years ago, trading fishing stories around this Cyclopean fireplace.

She became aware of a comforting jumble of smells which pervaded the room, faint ghosts of a long history; the fresh smell of the breezy cedar woods outside the open windows, still damp with morning dew blended with the tingling pungency of creosote. A bracing fragrance of perfumed wax on the floors mixed with faint memories of cigarettes long since extinguished during convivial summer evenings in front of a smoky fire. Every crack and knot in the pine lining seemed to harbour secrets, witnesses of meals long since eaten yet permeating the engrained dust. The blackened boulders over the massive hearth still reeked of years of burning of resinous woods.

On the ruddy timber boarded walls were groupings of faded photographs that showed how the *Belleview Lodge* appeared in its heyday. Men displayed festoons of fish, defiant conquerors of a wilderness, while native guides with diffident smiles hovered nearby, obviously in awe of the city folk. Nevertheless they seemed self-contained and confidently rooted in their own world. The interlopers succeeded in looking only over-clothed and transient.

Mara made a tour around the room inspecting the photographs. There was a cabinet displaying local curiosities, arrow heads, skins and rattlesnake rattles. On the ponderous square piano in the corner of the lounge, a large varnished snapping turtle shell with overstuffed appendages surveyed the collected crowd with a supercilious eye that made her laugh.

Beside the fireplace a photograph framed in rustic birch caught her eye. It showed a couple who were posing in front of the retreat world that they had created, amidst a crowd of guests alighting from a steamboat, ornately emblazoned with the name *Belleview*. Wisps of steam were still evident escaping from the massive funnel.

The woman at the centre of this photo was wearing a high collared muslin summer dress tied in with ribbons at the heels. Her wide hat was swathed in similar gauzy material loosely knotted under the chin. It seemed an impractical ensemble for hot summer weather. Nevertheless there was something indomitable about her tight lipped smile. There was an glint of determination in the hungry eyes which confronted the photographer. Mara noticed the posy of fringed orchids that she held tightly in her hands. Her companion looked older, pinched and abstemious. The worried lines of his face suggested anxious winter nights fretting over accounts and planning the necessary repairs.

Nearby Mara's eye alighted on a photo of two native boys standing alongside a group of self-congratulatory fishermen displaying their catch. The boys' eyes were black and inscrutable, their bearing proud. Mara pondered where those boys might be now. They would probably be in their late eighties if still alive. What turns had their lives taken after this rarefied world had been swept away?

In an alcove alongside the fireplace she recognised the infamous Twins, familiar from their excessive recent media exposure. Their moon-like faces seemed totally at variance in this sea of sharpened, worldly features. Mara was bug-eyed as she took in the details, their identical peach coloured body suits with pale blue sashes tied loosely at the waist, their feet shod in Persian slippers with sparkling upturned toes. Nothing could be less suitable for a sojourn in the wilderness. What could they have been expecting? They were intensely absorbed in playing some game shared between their tablets. She caught glances of ill-concealed revulsion directed their way. Everyone was giving them a wide berth.

From across the lounge an overly attentive roué eyed her ostentatiously and massaged his right ear in some imagined seduction ritual. She had first become unpleasantly aware of his attentions as she was examining the photos, feeling the pressure of his gaze burning into her back. In a discreet return glance she registered his olive-skinned Mediterranean complexion, close cropped, thinning hair and tiny glittering emerald ear stud. He began to drift towards her with devious manoeuvring, preening and attempting to draw attention to himself. Finally when he decided that he must have piqued her curiosity, he launched directly introducing

himself as Francisco Gear.

Mara realised that this must be the 'Frank' that Clay had spoken about so often. How different he seemed from the role-model that Clay had conjured up in his descriptions. What power could he possibly wield over Clay to render him so inaccurately sycophantic?

Nevertheless, she soon realised that Frank was orchestrating all these proceedings, pulling the strings in an ostentatiously self-important manner. Minions converged upon him from all quarters, dropping morsels of information. Tuned in, she began to register that a number condescended with an over-familiar 'Frankie' which somehow seemed to ring truer than his introductory 'Francisco'.

Ingenuously he asked her how she was connected to the convention. When she mentioned that she was an assistant of Cubbie's, his eyes shot upwards in mock horror. "That must be a barrel of laughs." This was clearly not a productive angle to pursue.

She soon experienced the dubious benefits of being taken under Frank's wing and whisked around to infiltrate conversational groups. His social strategies needed just such an emollient counterfoil. Assuming a friendly mocking tone she was able to relax his heavy handed persistence. A number of the people approached betrayed 'deer in the headlights' reactions while others made transparent efforts to evade any engagement.

Mara noticed Cubbie monitoring her fixedly from across the room, her jaw set forward revealing her lower teeth in a rictus of marked disapproval.

Clasping her hand with paternal solicitousness, Frank drew her over to introduce Lindsay Lagarto. He stood a good head above the others in the room and was certainly aware of his own compelling prominence. She found herself being assessed in a most invasive manner. Possibly his tendency to leer resulted from some deficiency of eyesight. But she soon became enveloped in symptoms of an inflated ego, his determination to keep the conversation firmly fixed upon himself and his aspirations for *Proto-Pharm*. He had no gift for exploratory conversation with others.

Mara attempted to explain *City Farm's* agenda. But she could see his eyes glaze over and begin to wander. She caught him sending a naughty

wink over her shoulder and followed its trajectory to the 'pink lady' who was looking abnormally chuffed about some recollection.

She persevered with her conversational obligations. "City Farm is encouraging more integrated living; we're beginning to produce most of the food we need right in the middle of the city."

"Um!" he responded, attended by a sympathetic grimace.

"But we are trying to make people aware of what is becoming increasingly unsustainable." The awful pedantry of her leaden phrases was evident, but she did not know how to hold herself back.

"Um!" Lagarto gently tugged his left ear and sent another sparkling missile hurtling towards the pink lady.

Mara rambled on in growing desperation. "We're trying to reintegrate ourselves into a more interactive ecology."

"Hum!" His grimace revealed a full row of lower teeth, all in a state of absolute perfection.

"We don't accept biotech uncritically. But there are never going to be wholly right answers."

"Yum!" She could see pupils of his eyes dilate and swim inwards.

"... a more integrated city with vertical farming, new interactive technologies..."

Lagarto almost exploded with delight when Doctor Noor cruised over to join the conversation, offering an expansive air hug.

Noor stood back and did a double take in acknowledging Mara, remarking, "Lagarto, who is this charming colleague?"

Lagarto gave Mara a closer re-appraisal.

Noor was in ebullient form. In contrast to Lagarto's lack of connection, he had the unnerving habit of staring deeply into another's eyes without a shred of inhibition.

Lagarto marshalled his forces. "It has always struck me, Noor, that you are *unnaturally* dis-inhibited. Perhaps you are already familiar with some of our popular *Proto-Pharm* personality *enhancers*?"

Noor flashed an evasive smile and shook his head disdainfully. "Nope, nothing here but the real me!"

Mara was slightly surprised at scarcely veiled effrontery. "I was talking to Mr Lagarto about how genetic engineering is having an impact on our farming projects at the *City Farm*."

She felt herself slipping perilously into the depths of Noor's mesmeric black eyes as he replied elliptically, "How I do relish discovering intelligence in a woman!"

Noor smirked, "Lagarto, I imagine, already has his meds cabinets stocked with happy drugs. But they don't seem to be destroying his ability to flourish. I'm sure that he could develop plenty of *work ethic* drugs as well, in convenient pill form, so that enough necessary people would be on hand to wash the dishes and flip hamburgers."

"You can't be serious!" Mara looked exasperated.

"Well I suppose that I'm not really." Though Noor's mouth contorted into a mirthful grimace, creasing his cheeks, his eyes remained opaque and unsmiling."

With huge relief Mara felt the tug of Frank's hand and they were once again flitting like frenetic bees from flower to flower. She detected a sigh of relief from Lagarto as she was whisked off.

Guiding her with his unpleasantly moist palm, Frank whispered conspiratorially, "Actually, Lagarto is bound hand and foot by his stockholders and the Proto Board. His whole show is on the skids. He can't make the tiniest false step. No, the real power in this room is held by the old owl in the corner with the puffed up head feathers. His name is de Vere, that is *Vere – with the "ear"*, though he keeps the antennae well-concealed under that mane."

"They look as if they are planning something for the Ides of March" Mara suggested. Frank nodded vacantly. He clutched Mara's arm again and steered her adroitly to meet Flinders Grey, a man who was evidently burdened with overwhelming anxieties. His hands fidgeted restlessly and he had a disconcerting habit of pinching his nose or prodding his cheek as he spoke, as if he were being constantly tormented by an imaginary fruit fly. Flinders greeted him with the familiar 'Frankie' but Frank had introduced him with flattering deference as the head of the *Association of*

International Insurers, the Ay-Yi-Yi! he added facetiously with a humour that had long since been lost in constant repetition. Frank extolled his positions on the most powerful boards across the industry. Grey smiled wanly. His deep lined face belied an obsessive worrier; but there was also a defiant streak, the courage of a cornered vole prepared to resort to a final survival stratagem. Mara imagined his lifetime of cultivating a sagacious professional role, as a buffer against so many adversities that must suddenly be crashing in upon him. Perhaps the world was beginning to present risks no longer recognisable to him.

Mara was beginning to perceive that Frank's attentions were effectively separating her from any dalliance with Cubbie. If Cubbie launched herself towards any group that they had joined, Frank would ferry her off in search of new conquests.

Everybody in the room was avoiding any contact with the Thomas twins, two elephants tethered in their midst. Eyes downcast, Dex and Sinny, indistinguishable from one another, sat side by side hunkered down into a low leather sofa, their knees awkwardly jutting upwards, cradling their tablets, punching at the buttons with pudgy fingers. Wordlessly, leaning into each other they seemed like they were collapsing into a black hole. Their entropy sapped the energy of the whole gathering.

There was also a strange woman hovering near them, dressed in a tight fitting ninja black overall. Frank could not identify who she was. Her eyes were obscured behind oversized sunglasses with frames that complimented her coral lipstick and her head was capped with the bulbous pink sock crowned with bobble tuft. Mara assumed that she must be a personal assistant.

This woman however, determined to break into the twins' private orbit, remained uncertain about how to approach them. Cubbie was staring at this woman with quizzical intensity.

Scooping up a tray as an excuse to break into their private bubble Mara crossed the room and held out an enticement. Without eye contact and only a petulant throat clearing 'tsch' one of the twins took the whole tray and placed it between them on their laps, continuing to massage the

screen compulsively with his right hand. With his left hand he scoffed a few dainties as his brother did likewise with his right. Having heard of the reversal of names, Mara assumed that the right-handed twin was Sinny, the other being Dex.

"You must be Thomas Sin and Thomas Dex" she sallied courageously but received no response.

Nonplussed Mara made a move to retrieve the tray but her hand was pushed aside brusquely. The other twin, Dex, looked up at her levelling his vacant blue eyes upon her. A countenance utterly without expression, the pupil-less eyes revealed nothing of his interior thoughts, he just stared at her blankly as if she were some strange creature encountered on a nature walk.

Disgusted, she turned abruptly to face the curious woman with the pink headgear who leapt forward and introduced herself to Mara rather too chipperly as *Melanie*.

Mara looked at the narrow, perfectly copper tanned chin, compressed lips and high cheeks. She imagined the dazzling blue eyes behind her sinister shades. And she recognised *Malyn*.

"Malyn?" she asked tentatively, trying to imagine what Malyn could possibly be doing at Arden, affecting another bizarre disguise.

"Yes, as I said *Melanie*." Malyn emphasised touching a forefinger to her lips in an admonition of complicity.

"At last one moment of truth from the old witch." One of the twins muttered. Surprised by the stealthy comment, the two women peered down over him.

"Was that little snipe directed my way?" Malyn asked querulously.

No response - until a drawled, distracted, sing-song "Perh-a-a-a-piss."

Countering this calculated rudeness Mara and "Melanie" embarked on a rather disjointed conversation, looming over the twins' heads as if they were studying etymological specimens.

"I must admit that I imagined that they might be a little more socialised. Noor was suggesting that they embodied genetic material that would be much sought after. But I can't imagine any great demand for such autistic self-absorption."

"Actually we are just relearning ways of communication that are dormant in both of you," Sinny muttered undeflected from his screen.

Malyn trundled on stolidly. "Supposedly they demonstrate some ability to transmit thought images without relying on language ..."

Continuing with his thumbing obsession, Sinny muttered "For instance I can see another woman standing over your left shoulder who looks just like you, same blue eyes but younger, less of an old hag ... or at least her head isn't encased in a bed sock."

Mara wondered how he had perceived Malyn's 'blue eyes' through her grotesque shades.

"What?" Malyn looked nervously over her shoulder. She lifted her glasses; her eyes narrowed as she surveyed the jaunty caps on the boys' heads. "Well", she retorted, "I can see that both of you are festering in some silent rage."

Both boys glanced upwards vacantly. Both had the same vacant blue eyes devoid of any empathy. Sinny returned to his screen mumbling, "Well, who are you to talk? You may plumbing the depths, but your twin sister is giving you away."

"My twin sister?" Malyn blinked a horrified glance at Mara.

"In fact you should pay more attention to your pal. She's slightly more grounded."

Malyn began to look alarmed and repeated to herself "My twin sister?" with a faraway look.

"Yeah! Surely you remember that old picture, those polka dot dresses?"

Malyn suddenly lurched sideways and clutched Mara's shoulder as if on the verge of collapse. Mara caught her stolidly. She had already experienced Malyn's diva ability to exploit a drama only to resume cold efficiency the moment it suited her.

"Well perhaps you could start by telling me what you imagine."

"That should be interesting. We are imagining very stormy weather!" Mara protested, "Perhaps we would all make better headway if I had a

better grasp of what we are talking about. Is this a demonstration of your extra sensory perception? Is this what Dr Noor has engineered?"

"Engineered or not, we would have little interest in being claimed by Noor ... or by anyone else here for that matter."

With that, in unison, the two boys snapped closed their tablets, hoisted themselves awkwardly to their feet and lumbered out onto the wide veranda where they stood shoulder to shoulder hanging over the railing.

Mara and Malyn looked at each other in chagrin. Malyn was evidently unsettled by the encounter. Her hands were compulsively entwining the knotting of the silk scarf around her neck.

"But Malyn, why *are* you here and dressed like that? Who are you hiding from?" Mara questioned.

"Let's talk about that later. Just keep it to yourself for now. In the meantime you'll excuse me; I feel an oncoming migraine." Visibly stricken, she tottered off up to her room.

Mara followed the twins out onto the veranda. "It can't be much fun being all alone and acting like miserable gits. You really upset her".

"Oh really! The old hag can take it. Dex and I were looking at the yellow line down there that some risk-nazi has painted across the dock. We were wondering what it would be like to be on the other side of that line or perhaps following it to see where it leads. Does it return on itself in one big circle? The world is certainly full of unnecessary thresholds. Everybody in that room is busy dividing up theirs into manageable parts. It's laughable! The self-important people from Es-Tech are playing up their security cordons, barriers, body armour and surveillance technology. To them everyone is a potential enemy. And then there are the scientists all trying to build walls around their so-called intellectual property. Into the mix they have introduced a load of crazed investors ... crooks, out to screw each other!"

Sinny continued, "But there are also so many other invisible lines connecting all those people, threads that attach them to another in ways they could hardly suspect."

"Consider your new pal, Frankie. He thrives imposing barriers where

he can control every patch separately. He gets to decide who is going to be on the inside or outside that line down there."

Sinny smiled, perhaps to compensate for his brother's hostile stare. "Admittedly one of his most effective barriers seems to be intended to thwart that appalling Cubbie, possibly a worthy cause. But they're all still buzzing around the same bumbling queen bee."

Mara was surprised by the perceptive rancour of their observations. "What does seem strange to me is that you, who have not once looked up from your tablets, could have noticed any of this taking place around you! Actually it almost seems heartening."

Turning to Mara, Sinny raised his sunglasses to look at her directly in a quick shy glance. There was a momentary flash of recognition from the those vacant sky-blue eyes. He lowered his glasses and resumed his disguise, "Perhaps you are not a person that is cowering behind such self-protective barriers. That is how I like to see myself," he added.

While Dex suddenly turned away and stared out at the opposite shore, Sinny continued, "We have never been in a place where the lines seem so apparent drawn. This is like a paranoid's dream landscape. We have always lived within safe walls and travelled well-defined corridors, schooled obsessively in avoiding risk. But you must realise that we also have a fascination for what lies on the other side of the line ... the real world beyond."

Mara moved closer, warming to this brief display of candour. "But the rest of us have been told that you represent an extraordinary development in science. You're described as the future of the human race. You must feel rather alone."

"Noor is always the first to claim that his scientific advances are all about transcending the fetters of Nature ... that we will free ourselves to master the universe. Noor has supreme confidence in that vision of our future."

"But it must seem a rather solitary future, when you must jettison everything that has made you specific to a particular time and place and launch towards an inscrutable eternity. Can anyone really adjust to such a vast undertaking?"

"We are not just anyone!" Though Dex continued to roll his eyes at his brother's loquaciousness, Sinny continued. "But perhaps we are all not as specific to a time and place as you suggest. Perhaps we are only less fettered links to an intelligence that pervades the universe."

"You must have got used to Noor's idiosyncrasies over the years?"

Sinny sneered, "Over the years! Over what years? Of course we had always lived by the endless stories about his creative genius. But he has always been like a kind of fairy tale character. He gave us a special role in life as part of his illustrious Noor Project."

"But we did not actually meet until very recently. In fact he has come as quite a shock. We were quite happy tormenting our hapless care-givers and then suddenly he reappears, everyone drops everything and our whole life mission gets redefined. And worse still, he turns out to be a total idiot."

Thomas Dex began to hum a peculiar tune under his breath which had the effect of suddenly staunching this confessional flow.

"Dex and I have been discussing our plan to cross the line and leave all this behind. It will be interesting out there, won't it?"



Order and Chaos

Gazing at clouds scudding overhead, I try to formulate them into a storybook. How adeptly the mind attempts to impart meaning and significance into even the most randomly associated shapes. This is a timeless human capacity, derived from an unquenchable desire to make sense of what we don't fully understand. We are desperate to construct an intelligible narrative which focusses meaning on our lives.

Overhead I am witnessing a misty Armageddon, the tortured shapes of damned wraiths being conveyed in a tumbrel to some terrible doom. They are reaching out in anguish as they are being conveyed into a swirling oblivion over the horizon. The wagon is dragged by a freakish lizard with scaly head, tiny eyes and rows of sharp teeth. It looks back to mock the agonies of the condemned.

A wizard or perhaps a mad scientist with flailing arms and spurred boots, is chasing the wagon, lashing the terrified prisoners with his wispy, knotted whip.

How is it that the human mind so quickly constructs a storyline out of mere vapours? Is this not also what I continuously undertake in examining my dreams, in trying to get some insight into my unconscious mind?

A human lifetime seems inconsequential when set against this vast sky.

Even though I know that all the meteorological effects that I am witnessing so idly, are fully explained scientific phenomena, mind still turns to construct these narratives which have a message directed specifically at me.

The clouds may have succumbed to scientific explanation, but there is so much that remains impossible to comprehend. Chaos and entropy are everywhere. Nevertheless we insist on constructing a plausible interpretation of an order that holds a secure spot for the human condition.

So many 'eureka' moments in science may be merely the result of our desperate human compulsion to impose patterns that affirm our aspiration to play significant role in this vast scheme and suit our limited reference points.

Is that the mission of the Noor Project, these intentions to align our intelligence with a greater purpose that we are only beginning to imagine?

Science continues to uncover so many inexplicable entanglements. These provide scant reassurance for the human condition. Science is offering little to bolster our imagined self-importance.

Interpreting my dreams, I am latching onto patterns that are as transient as these clouds and trying to parse some order from hidden clues that will affirm my purpose in the overall scheme.

But, in fact, I still find only chaos. and self-delusion.

Security Guidelines

lay at last made his way with his cumbersome butler's trolley into the daunting social vacuum surrounding the pariah twins. He hovered nearby to confirm that no one was listening.

The boys paid no attention to him as he busied himself with rearranging napkins on the tray. He tried to attract their attention with a whisper. "I kinda wanna know what happened to you guys in Dacton, when you gave me those puzzles. Like you were setting me up. I thought that we were s'posed to be friends! Then you go and land me in a lotta hot water."

Dex peered up through half closed eyelids as if addressing an insect on the ceiling. Clay who so rarely engaged anyone with direct eye contact, tried to determine which of them had given him the notes.

In a purring, self-righteous tone of voice his brother kicked in, "We like to test limits. Yours proved only to easy to discover. But hey! Perhaps we also thought that you needed to protect yourself from some pretty feeble illusions."

"Well you made me look a total suck. What else was I s'posed to do sent in there uninvited?"

"We wanted to point out to you and others that we don't need another friendly stooge bobbing around in our midst, the ranks are replete already. There are no vacancies needing to be filled. We were doing you a favour, telling you to save your breath."

"So ya didn't want nothing from me?"

The silent twin dropped his eyes from the ceiling momentarily and stared at Clay with withering contempt. Then without a further word he hunched his shoulders and returned his attention on the tiny screen in his right hand.

But Clay would not leave it there. "I'm getting the impression that you're the guys with the problem, I'm like a bystander in some disagreement that's between you."

With renewed determination both boys hunkered down and ignored

him.

If they had intended to goad a sudden flash of exasperation, the twins were successful indeed. Lashing out in annoyance Clay lunged forward and grabbed the two jauntily poised little hats and sent them flying across the room. "Well, I like testing the limits too," he snapped.

But he was astonished by their instant reaction to his outburst. Instead of rising to confront him, both ducked down, cowering, cradling the sides of their heads. They had never before experienced such aggressive behaviour.

With a slight pang of remorse Clay noticed the curiously deformed skulls that their caps had effectively concealed. They looked curiously alien and unbalanced. Others witnessing this exchange looked away queasily, having so quickly taken in the nature of their deformity.

Feeling instantly contrite about what he had revealed, Clay stumbled off to retrieve the caps and returned to drop them in their laps. Without a further word he wheeled his creaky contraption out of the room. Passing Mara he avoided eye contact. He hoped that she had heard none of the exchange. Of course she had observed it all.

Frank commanded the visitors' attention with a sudden clap of his hands over his head as if he preparing for an exotic fandango. The room fell into a startled silence. With evident delight in his self-importance, he introduced himself as the master of ceremonies for the day's many diversions. Mara could not help but notice Cubbie's reaction of utter contempt as she turned aside to study a faded photograph.

"Before we begin our program, I want to outline security guidelines for your visit. Our Arden Research Centre, or as we like to call it, 'the ARC', is a carefully monitored environment. Es-Tech plays a key role in maintaining this community that is completely off-grid. We help to guarantee a constant supply of renewable energy. But the solar panel arrays and windmill are only parts of a much more impressive story."

"We are not an isolated community! ARC maintains sophisticated satellite communications with scientists around the world. So though you

have travelled far you can still count on being a part of a fully-integrated world community. And you thought that it was just to sample our algaeburgers!" Frank emitted a mirthless inane giggle.

"The ARC has been running off-grid for over three years and has never needed to resort to a single watt of imported fossil fuel." There was a hearty round of applause at this statement which might have allowed Frank to withdraw gracefully. Instead he forged on undaunted. "I should also explain that Lake Arden is a very sensitive environment. The local natives once knew this water body as "Blood Lake" perhaps due to some terrible lapse of security in its distant past. Where was Es-Tech when they needed us, I ask you?"

All continued to stare at him politely, unimpressed. The good humoured recognition expected from his audience was distinctly muted. But Frank churned on unfazed. "Though Lake Arden is its modern name, we have taken precautions to protect the peculiarities of this fragile ecosystem to enable the scientific research that is underway here."

"To put it bluntly, you, our guests represent a grave ecological risk, charged as you are with many unwelcome pollutants. We are therefore obliged to place strict restrictions on all of your movements to avoid any cross-contamination of data."

Frank proceeded to explain that it was imperative that no one should stray beyond designated areas. "You are free to enjoy the dock deckchairs but you will see access limits delineated clearly by a yellow line. The lake shore and woodlands are accessible only to those who have undergone a very arduous quarantine. All these stipulations are set out in detail in the security manual in your suites."

"In compensation I can assure you that the hospitality facilities at the lodge are second to none and include a pleasant spa with a well-stocked bar and splendid views of the natural world from the panoramic chill zone."

Having delivered a litany of security admonitions Frank stepped back abruptly and returned to his social rounds, leaving his audience looking slightly bemused.

Mara had been watching as one by one the guests gravitated dutifully to the 'pink lady', whom Frank had finally introduced as Hellana Nix. Hellana was conducting her private audiences positioned strategically beside a round table covered with toothsome canapés. Periodically she would scoop up an interesting titbit and inspect it with the appraising eye of a lepidopterist examining a challenging specimen before popping it surreptitiously into her mouth.

Following her recent aerial trauma she had managed to re-inflate her formidable presence. Frank would buzz by, keeping her abreast of developments with cryptic comments. Mara observed him discreetly pulling out his pager. Clay appeared momentarily at the threshold standing back in the shadow. He has evidently been banished firmly behind the scenes. He glanced in Mara's direction with a studied blankness. His right eye though twitched almost imperceptibly sending a faintly comforting message that she was not entirely alone in this sea of strangers.

Thomas Dex suddenly focussed the room's attention upon Clay's presence by calling out, "Hey Metalloid! I need one of those bugged napkins over here!" Frank looked mortified as he caught a flicker of delight passing across Cubbie's countenance. Everyone turned to stare at Clay whose face had flushed scarlet, his eyes narrowed and jaw flinched as he stumbled out of the room abandoning his trolley.

"Well then, exit stage left, just the little perforated perv!" Dex simpered.

Mara wondered why they seemed so intent on goading him in some act of revenge. She slipped out and caught up with Clay in the dining room where he was focussing his attentions on floral posies at each place setting. She exclaimed glibly, "Keeping your fingers on the pulse I see! *Metalloid*!"

Clay gazed nervously out of the window at the lake which had transformed to a deep, mysterious purple. "Like already, as if I hadn't enough on my plate! You should all leave security to the perfessionals. The least said the better 'cos dead men tell no tales."

Quickly changing the subject to engage in at least some coherent

conversation Mara stuttered, "It's a beautiful scene down there. In this light it could almost be the Garden of Eden. Those islands down the lake are back-lit like a stage set."

She paused to see if he was registering any of this. "But just like Eden there is a big yellow line drawn around the *Tree of Knowledge* which everyone is expected to desist from sampling. And here you are in the midst, God's little informer! Doling out bugged posies!"

Clay looked up and shrugged his shoulders. "Sometimes it's better to hide your light under the bushes, or wadever." He glanced around nervously.

Mara looked momentarily perplexed by this elliptical offering. Nevertheless she persevered, "All these people could be actors; they're so engrossed in their stage roles but I get no sense of reality. Why is everyone behaving so secretively?"

Clay looked nervously over his shoulder; he smoothed out a tiny lump under the table cloth nearby and abruptly moved the conversation in a different direction. "Those creepy twins seem to have declared war on us."

Mara paused. "You certainly don't seem to have got them on side!" Clay looked away miserably. "I just can't get a bead."

"Admittedly, they are a chore for everyone."

"Well they don't want to even look at me. And it's getting worse."

"Perhaps that's their one remaining human characteristic, their ability to be unreasonable."

She paused but Clay said nothing. "But Noor though, seems a bit too human. He's out for all the attention he can get. One of the twins, the one who does most of the talking, seems desperately *pretending* to be human, always trying to explain himself. Perhaps he feels that we are beginning to grow hostile."

"Which of course we are." Clay at last responded.

"Perhaps he's compensating for a sub-normal brother, who can't string two words together. Perhaps he's only trying to span some autistic gap."

"But I'm sure that it was the talking one who handed me some coded

messages. I thought ... that he wanted to break the ice."

"Well they certainly seem resistant to the idea of allies now! Probably he loathes his own brother. Don't say I blame him - he is about as charismatic as a coiled python."

It was hard work but Mara was pleased to stimulate even this modest exchange. "In the play Arden was the place where the exiles came to indulge in a simpler life, back to basics. Hymen was supposed to join up all the marriageable dots. But Arden was nothing more than a temporary diversion, they all trundled off back to court life in due course. From what I remember there were a lot of notes being tacked to trees."

"Nowadays they oughta text each other." Clay grumbled sourly.

"Or just bug the woods with listening devices. Who do you think this version of Arden will link up? Maybe Frankie, your self-serving bundle of narcissism and Miss Piggy's sidekick, horsey McCubbins. They would make a reluctant pair, don't you think? But they certainly seem resistant to the idea at the moment."

Clay looked aghast and began to flap his hands around spasmodically. But Mara was on a roll. "Oh and just imagine Miss Piggy herself, that giant mass of neuroses pumped into a pink sausage skin, hooked up to our irrepressible showman Noor. I think that Hymen would have his hands full sorting that one out."

Clay looked over his shoulder nervously. "Hymen who?" He added in a whisper "Don't get so carried away. As I said before, you should leave these things to the *perfessionals*. There are plenty of beans you're not allowed'a spill. If you got to know FRank you'd realise that he's the heart and soul of Es-Tech, and he has been a real prince in giving me a chance to build a career. Of course, Cubbie is the cross we all have to bear."

Mara at last caught Clay's eyes squinting shiftily, desperately inviting complicity. He had developed a nervous tic pulling at his steel encrusted left earlobe, discreetly shaking his head side to side as he spoke.

She paused a moment and then glancing over at the tables that he had elaborately wired up, she proclaimed resolutely. "Well I admit that Frank has been unstintingly generous in making me feel welcome and

introducing me to the cast. It must be a privilege to work with such an inspiration." At this sudden paean of praise Clay began to look somewhat relieved and made affirmative soothing gestures with his hands to ensure that she did not topple overboard in heaping her praise.

"I took some photos of the two of you together, as you were making the rounds. He will be pleased to see how you interact."

"You sound like Hymen yourself." Mara began to feel somewhat illat-ease.

Clay responded evasively, "Hymen? It's Frank that organises everything. You wouldn't believe how much help has been flown in to look after this gig."

"I must admit that it has crossed everyone's mind. Where exactly *is* the staff? I haven't seen a soul doing anything practical, except possibly you!."

"Well they haf'ta stay behind the scenes; the way Es-Tech sees it."

"I overheard Noor referring to some of them facetiously as the trolls."

Mara had occasionally caught a glimpse of shy, efficient women in black uniforms flitting past on their various errands. She had an awkward encounter with a kitchen hand who was startled when she strayed into the library. He had been observing the proceedings beyond through the back of the door. He made a few abashed, unintelligible grunts and fled back behind the scenes.

But Clay evaded her question, just muttering under his breath "Yes he's got his whole *platoon* laid on."

He suddenly became more forthcoming, stringing together a longer sentence than Mara had ever dreamed him capable of. "Like I get the feeling that his place is haunted, that there is a lot more things around than people know. Yesterday, before you got here, it was really calm, the lake was it was shiny like a mirror. As I lay on the dock I noticed the reflections of the cliffs opposite. Looking at them sideways, they were like totem poles of really angry faces. Frank told me about a legend of a raiding band that encamped on that spit of sand just opposite and had been mysteriously poisoned by drinking the waters of the lake. They just

didn't belong here. He said you could still see their death agonies written in those stones. Supposedly one of the evacuees told him the story, Frank say to scare him."

"Evacuees?"

Clay evaded the question. "Frank's an ace story-teller." Clay's eyes narrowed again to a complicit squint. "He also told me about the old owner, that geezer in the photos, Gallagher. He was struck by lightning while fishing on the bay, some freak thunderbolt. The guests were having tea on the veranda. They said that the thunder bolt ricocheted off the cliffs opposite and knocked the men out of the boat. It churned up the lake bottom to a bloody red. The guests were rescued but Gallagher was never found. They dragged the lake for days. Then his widow disappeared to add in salt to the mystery. Prolly just drowned herself. Like quite the story! Anyway the hotel closed and fell into wreckin' ruin until Gene-Sys stepped in and recognised its potential."

Mara was reluctant to curtail the flow the longest communication Clay had ever attempted with her. "I begin to see that there might be something behind the Blood Lake version. But I can hardly believe that all these overdressed manikins in the photos were destined for such dramatic ends."

In the distance a rifle shot came ricocheting down the lake and the echo bounced with an affirmative crack off the cliffs opposite.

"That's another bit of the local lore. In fact Frank and I met that guy, an old guy who refused to go along with the evacuation. Frank's been dealing with the whole lot of them for some time. He's holed up there at the end of the lake and nobody can get him out. It was once a native encampment, a settlement that was once quite the place. That old guy has been keeping this up since we arrived, just letting everyone know that he isn't about to be moved on. I guess that he alone may justify the security cordon."

"Well it's certainly one way to make a point."

"Nobody gets the better of Frank. He's like a brilliant deal-maker. He'll get what he wants in the end. He can be very persuasive."

Mara thought perhaps 'ruthless' would be a better choice of word.

Caught Out

ara glanced back into the lounge. Burrell de Vere's distinctive silver plume stood out over the group of deferential men he had gathered around him. Leaning forward in a conspiratorial manner, all communication was kept at an inaudible level. His colleagues, as if fascinated by the knots in the floor boards, avoided each other's direct gaze.

Through the door into the lounge, she watched as Cubbie, her face suddenly darkened by resolve, turned purposefully to a side table and jotted something on a sheet of paper. Her lips pursed with determination, she folded it and catapulted across the room to interrupt de Vere's group. The conspirators recoiled in embarrassed silence. Disregarding her chilly reception, Cubbie silently passed her note to de Vere and abruptly loped off.

He resumed his conversation; his attention unbroken as he unfolded and glanced at the message. His forehead wrinkled as he glanced around the room and then his eye alighted on the pink bobble hat and he smiled. Absent-mindedly, he crumpled the note up and dropped it onto a tray with empty glasses.

Without revealing her intention Mara peeled away from Clay and drifted over to pick up the tray and convey it back to the kitchen. Her heart was beating violently as she unfolded the crumpled ball. She hardly knew why she was doing this. She usually regarded herself as a person of prudent restraint, hardly prone to ill-considered opportunism. But she had a curious premonition that it was her destiny to intercept this message. She suspected that Cubbie had penetrated Malyn's disguise. She wanted to know why Malyn was attending at all.

In the service pantry with shaky hand she smoothed the message flat on the counter. "Is Malyn your idea? or Frank's? Helly will be furious."

But it was the handwriting not the message that gave her a violent shock. The curvaceous \mathcal{M} of Malyn with its little tail flourish was instantly recognisable. The neatly formed script had become very familiar

over the past months in letters from Clara Voy. Mara's first reaction was disbelief. This tall bony control freak with the contrived wig-do, had none of the attributes that her imagination had constructed for her sponsor. Her Clara was a retired professor, a campaigner for social justice with a circle of socially motivated friends, not this bizarre freak in the thrall of the pneumatic Hellana Nix.

Suddenly Mara began to feel ill with apprehension as she sensed the implications of her discovery. With Cubbie's involvement, Es-Tech would have had a very direct role in the transformation of *City Farm*. For some unfathomable reason Es-Tech had commandeered their message to suit its own objectives. Casting her mind back over the *ALIF* publicity she began to perceive a ruthlessly co-ordinated force behind all these recent developments. Es-Tech had been working hard to conjure up the face of the 'enemy'.

Suddenly everybody around her seemed implicated and making a mockery of her plodding good intentions. She realised that she had been enticed onto a minefield, set up to play a role that she could not fathom.

She heard the service door flap behind her and quickly crumpled up the paper and dropped it back onto the tray. Grabbing two glasses she began to set them out carefully on the counter.

Cubbie appeared behind her and said sharply, "Leave that to the professionals, Mara, that's certainly not your role."

Cubbie paused and levelled her appraising eyes on Mara who was trying to appear nonchalant. "That woman that you were talking to earlier, I assume that she is one of Frank's little minions? – a part of his goofy 'platoon'?"

"You mean Mal – Melanie? No, she didn't say anything to me about working for Frank. We were just discussing the odious twins."

"This so-called 'Melanie' is not an invited guest that I'm aware of, and definitely not on Hellana Nix's list." Cubbie deftly retrieved her crumpled paper. She glanced suspiciously at Mara but met a studied blank countenance. "Please mind your own business; and I reiterate, leave this to the professionals." She stalked off.

"Leave these things to the professionals" seemed to be a regular litany within Es-Tech.

In this curt exchange, Mara recognised that she was indeed dealing with an enemy, but one whose motives were inscrutable. Shaken, she reentered the social fray, trying to appear insouciant. Cubbie had marched over to Hellana and engaged her in private conversation. She became aware that Hellana was now regarding her with a cold appraising eye.

"Clearly I have blown my cover, being my utter naive ignorance! I seem to have stepped into a hornets' nest."

Noticing how Frank continued to avoid Cubbie, Mara approached him seeking a temporary refuge. She asked him pointedly about Cubbie's role at the conference.

Frank fired a look of scathing contempt across the room. "You mean 'Cloister Claire', the ever-assiduous Cubbie? We all call her 'Cloister' because she is about as cold as a nunnery. She's one of Hellana's little protégés. But certainly nothing to get excited about; in fact she is only part of Team Nix because the two of them were school chums. She may dress like a three ring circus but underneath it all she is just a big safety net for Hellana. What I do know is that she is not on my side. She's one big pain in the butt."

"I didn't know you had a 'side'. What is it?" Mara enquired innocently. Frank blinked disingenuously. "I just expect people to be upfront and honest, and Cubbie McCubbins is one duplicitous 'b' - of a battleaxe", he hastened to add.

"Oh" Mara was surprised at his venom. But she began to watch Cubbie's comings and goings with renewed interest, taking some comfort in the knowledge that whatever the motives of 'the enemy' might be, they were hardly a seamless organisation. She realised that the Es-Tech crew were now all watching her like hawks from their different vantage points. She needed to seek out some alternative shelter. It was then that she caught the intense, unremitting gaze of Dr Noor across the room. His eyes met hers with an inviting twinkle.

Noor's Version

oor sidled towards Mara without breaking his hypnotic gaze. Impulsively his hand attached itself gently to her arm and drew her closer. "I suspect that you would like a little respite from that hawk-eyed McCubbins? ... our I believe that we never quite finished our earlier conversation. I was disappointed!" He lifted his tinted glasses and gave her a complicit wink.

Noor's eyes had inscrutable pupils of black absorptive velvet that blended invisibly into their irises, fixed hypnotically upon her. Mara sensed a lurking danger.

"Well there are quite a few people watching me at the moment. And the irony is that I'm supposed to be the observant reporter! I had hoped to interview you about your research perhaps some of the ethical challenges."

"Ethical challenges? Treacherous waters in this tank of frenzied sharks! But I am a simple man; I tend to leave ethical challenges to those more qualified to address them. Perhaps you should too."

Noor guided Mara into the secluded inglenook behind the fireplace and pulled forward two wicker chairs. He did not once break his hypnotic gaze or loose the firm grip on her arm.

She strove to re-establish some distance. "Your behaviour is hardly what I expected in a scientist. You seem to relish putting yourself into the centre of the chaos."

"You mean that the scientists that you hobnob with are not such a sexy lot? – more focused on Petri dishes, I expect?"

His lustreless eyes extinguished every reflection in the room. But they issued a challenge with their unwavering intensity. Mara wished that he would just put his tinted glasses back on and restore the barrier against this forced intimacy.

"I wish that some of my patients would be as forthright as you are. Usually I need to put the words into their mouths!"

Mara realised that she had to rise to the challenge of this onslaught; that to let her own eyes retreat would appear an admission of self-doubt. It was a provocation that she so rarely encountered. How different from de Vere's conversation with his downcast colleagues or Clay's habit of confronting her momentarily with his searing blue eyes and then letting them retreat nervously like bounding bunnies, in fear of unwanted intimacy. Noor's hypnotic eyes effectively prised open another's soul.

He chuckled mirthlessly, "Perhaps someone behind the scenes is trying to draw us together and get you involved in my research? In fact maybe you are an ideal candidate; independent mind, not shackled to time-worn conventions like marriage and family life. Some decent genetic material there to work with. Personally I'm a succour for blue eyes."

Mara shuddered, appalled by his unexpected implications. "I have absolutely no interest in spawning genetically enhanced children. There are other things in life."

Noor's left cheek twitched in suppressed amusement, "Well time passes; you don't want to miss the proverbial boat. Looking around me here I think that we are surrounded here by people who have missed every possible boat going and who spend their lives trying to cover up their loss. So, Miss Reporter-at-Large, what angle do you want from me? I would be very happy to engage in debate."

"Engage in a debate? Nothing that you have offered suggests any rational debate here. If you are looking for debate, why are you launching your project in such a peculiarly incendiary way? First you create a furore in the City and then you retreat to one of the most secluded places on earth to pursue ongoing negotiations. Where is the *debate* in that?"

Mara was uncomfortably aware that his knees were encroaching on hers. She tried to repel this unwanted warmth. At times Noor's hand dropped to touch her thigh reassuringly, lingering long enough to let her feel its weight, as if he thought that this would reassure her of his trustworthiness. She felt ever more determinedly defiant. Quickly trying to shift the direction of conversation she blurted, "I have just encountered your twins. They seem uniquely repellent and totally uninterested in any so-called debate. Why did you bring them here? ... to torture us?"

"Well you will soon come to appreciate how much I relish my

little theatrical adventures. The twins are here, perhaps reluctantly, to demonstrate interesting aspects of my science. A concrete demonstration is so much more valuable than hours of dreary clinical reportage, don't you think?"

"But they are utterly repulsive. We have already seen enough, I think."

"Nevertheless they will demonstrate that ours is not just theoretical research. This is science that is already coming to fruition. The twins are evidence of extraordinary genetic enhancement and they represent the beginning of a shift of attitudes that our science is going to precipitate."

"They seem to demonstrate total absence of empathy for anyone who haplessly crosses their path."

"Shortly, they will demonstrate a capacity for communication which I think you will find astounding! Imagine a world in which people like you and me could communicate effectively, beyond language, where people could come to an instantaneous understanding of each other's viewpoints without resorting to inaccurate words. You will begin to see the implications of what you might call 'empathy' from a different perspective."

"But what makes their perspective so special? They have learned no human graces."

"But they have built a unique perspective on life upon carefully prepared foundations. WE have engendered in them different expectations of the shape of their future lives. Imagine how different the world would be if we were telepathically enhanced from birth! The twins have a liberated sense of their own destinies. They are pioneers in uncovering a radically new human dimension."

"Is that why they seem so adrift? They seem utterly isolated and vulnerable." Mara challenged.

"On the contrary, quite astonishing advantages have been heaped upon them. Carefully selected gene sequences ensure that they will live longer, disease free lives. They have been given the tools for more comprehensive methods of communication. Between you and me, some of this has been in reactivating ancient capacities which we can still observe in other species.

Many believe the development of language has been a poisoned chalice for humanity. It has curtailed other abilities to communicate. But the twins are expanding capacities that extend beyond restrictive language."

In exasperation Mara jerked back and stared piercingly into the sombre eyes, "But you talk about *them* as if they were your lab rats. Where does someone like you fit into their future? Will you subordinate yourself to intelligence that exceeds your own and receive only their ingratitude? They seem hardly eager to acknowledge you as a mentor. And you appear to me the last man to accept anything that might be deemed superior to yourself."

Mara described her view of their fractious encounter with 'Melanie'. "Clearly they feel absolutely no requirement to be civil to anyone. They are so irredeemably cosseted; not great additions to any party."

"Of course it is natural that they would come to see the rest of us as being of lesser significance, a sort of sub-species. They have time on their side. Their genetic makeup will grant them a lifespan which may extend over many other generations. We will just have to wait and see what advantages they bring."

This seemed a fatuous remark. "The rest of us here are not going to be able to *wait and see*. Thank God! I wouldn't relish aeons of their companionship."

"Ah but they will at least assure the survival of human race. They are stepping up to a new destiny."

"What they represent is contrary to just about everything that my *City Farm* has been working to achieve. Your are headed towards a post-human world, where all of the conditions that have produced the human mind fall away. It would be a world in which a small portion of the population is designed for mastery while the majority are consigned to inconsequence."

As Noor slightly loosened his clasp on her knee Mara felt her growing sense of power in standing her ground.

He smiled sadly. Did she detect a tearful watering of his eyes? She

braced for a maudlin offensive. "We scientists never truly know where our work may lead or the complex repercussions it will ultimately have. Sadly, we are victims of our own discipline, enslaved to projects which have their own trajectory. It is left to others to sift through the ethical questions that we pose on behalf of all humanity."

"But this is hardly a seamless team. Even you and Dr Zwielicht inhabit different worlds. Perhaps he is slightly more burdened with moral concerns than you are?"

Noor stiffened, his feathers unexpectedly ruffled. "Zwielicht is only a useful adjunct in pursuing my overall vision. His sober approach helps to elaborate our concepts methodically Naturally he finds a courageous, intuitive genius difficult to reconcile with his own inhibited caution. But he is tenacious; I at least credit him that!"

Damning with faint praise though this was, this admission did seem plausible. She had begun to recognise in Zwielicht's recessive nature a rather plodding, intelligence.

With a liberating gesture, Mara disengaged her arm entirely from his grasp and set out on a wild tack. "One of our most suspect myths is that human intelligence is destined for some special role in the universe. But how could we embrace that vast alien space beyond, with our limited concept of what a universal Eden should look like? We are quite specific to a particular environment having evolved in close relationship to all the other living beings, animals, trees, microscopic life around us. We are totslly grounded here on earth."

"But the Noor Project proposes that we must redesign ourselves because our new challenges can no longer be resolved by old solutions. We have reached a threshold. There has always been a challenge of the new to stir humanity. Our current genome has given us some adaptability."

With this Mara agreed, "This is a central plank of *City Farm*. We know that the ecology of modern cities has become dangerously simplistic. In fact they are becoming graveyards for the living, increasingly devoid of ecological interaction."

Again Noor's eyes began to water with emotion and Mara braced

herself for another maudlin foray. "But Mara, you above all should glimpse a greater good in all this. We should all be working with ingredients that will greatly improve our species and increase our harmony with the whole ecosystem. Human beings are beginning to remake ourselves as something more sustainable. This is a real opportunity for the human race to create lasting peace!"

Noor brushed his liquid eyes and suddenly seemed to come to the reason for this imposed tête-à-tête. "I respect your determination to pursue the more cerebral objectives of your farm, but I have a proposition that will allow you to make a major contribution to this so-called *debate*. Perhaps you would be willing to participate in our demonstration this afternoon? Someone, an outsider and an intelligent sceptic, would be invaluable ... someone whose impartiality might inspire others' confidence. Perhaps this is part of the role that our redoubtable Ms McCubbins had in mind for you after all."

"But your demonstration sounds to me like a repertoire of party tricks. How would I ever know what is real or illusion?"

"Just be natural. You can be as sceptical as you like! All the better! In fact the twins have no need of intermediaries; they will only be themselves. Perhaps you could act as a bridge, just help to open them up a bit. Tease them a little! You don't need to play any prescribed role."

"Unlike you, I am not entirely comfortable with theatricality. I would be a nightmare as a magician's accomplice, prancing around, gesticulating appreciatively. Especially when your twins are determined to be as repellent as possible. I'm not sure that anyone is going to warm to this spectacle."

Mara looked very uncertain. "And we will be side-stepping the questions that everyone should be asking ... about a turning point in human morality, about social polarisation, about an elite minority entrusted with the torch of human aspirations while elsewhere a degraded underclass, deprived of resources and education, is allowed to degenerate."

"It does sound rather charmless as you describe it. Perhaps you could just encourage them to act natural and let others discuss the drawbacks."

Noor's Version

Noor abruptly released his transfixing gaze and let his hand drop. The spell was instantly broken. He was transformed from a man of seduction into a man of action. "Hold on! Let's go over right now and break the ice!"

He replaced his dark glasses and dashed back into the main lounge, returning shortly afterwards dragging the two reluctant boys in either hand. They appeared embarrassed, sullen, imploded. They had abandoned their electronic addictions on the couch. With aggressive determination Noor pushed them down onto the sofa. Mara found the transformation in his character, one moment a spell casting seducer and the next an aggressive martinet difficult to fathom.

The two boys leered at her suspiciously. "Hello, again!"

"I just think that the three of you might have some fun working out some highlights for this afternoon's show. It might be quite good for you to play this through with *a girl* this time."

All three of the 'players' looked utterly appalled.

Jousting

espite Cubbie's meticulous care in devising the afternoons timetable, unforeseen glitches had already arisen. A lot of these problems could be laid satisfactorily at Frank's doorstep; she would take considerable pleasure in drawing them to Hellana's attention.

There had been no consistent effort to run security checks on the hospitality staff that Frank had flown in for the occasion. Where had he sourced such an unprepossessing lot? Nor had there been adequate time to implement an effective surveillance installation. Instead Frank's feckless minion was rushing about with a squeaky trolley placing his pick-up points according to some inscrutable logic.

Once all the recent arrivals had assembled in the lounge, the diminutive Director of the Arden Centre, Eugene Krafft, following Frank's extrovert example, clambered on top of a fire stool and clapped his hands excitedly. His affable giggle was intended to put everyone at their ease. This foible quickly became an annoying leitmotif in the remarks that followed. He wanted to present himself as a consummately good-humoured man, but this affectation soon lulled the visitors into benign torpor.

Krafft enthusiastically welcomed his eminent colleagues Noor and Zwielicht to the ARC. "The work of these doctors is so significant that they should be prime candidates for international recognition, even an 'ENN-PEE', if Stockholm could summon up the political courage." He eulogised the Noor Project which so many world-class research centres were secretly vying to attract and spoke enviously of Noor's valuable intellectual patents.

"We have reached a turning point in human history, not the 'end of history' but the beginning of a new chapter - in a story that scientific advancement will direct."

"Not many years ago, a mere breath in the long evolution to consciousness, human beings viewed the natural world with fear. To mollify her unpredictable rages we deferred to 'Mother Nature' and tried to enlist her more benign, sustaining aspects. But she has remained a

terrifying parent, constantly changing her expectations of us. But the time has come when we will be able to rein in her wilder excesses and enlist her powers as a compliant handmaiden for a new agenda."

Is it possible that Krafft did not notice the startled looks that were being exchanged between members of his audience? Grey's jaw had dropped open, de Vere's finger seemed to have frozen in his hair.

"Evolution has too often embarked on experiments which promote size - as if size matters!" He warbled his self-deprecating giggle and flapped his hands like a tiny penguin. "No longer does the magnitude of the beast establish its pecking order amidst predators! It was we, tiny creatures that busily skittered around the feet of lumbering lizards, which have inherited the earth – if I may be allowed to wax poetic." Krafft burbled along with a repressed chuckle.

"Today we look to miniaturization of computer memory to achieve ever greater efficiency in the use of our limited resources."

"But we have not successfully applied this miniaturization to ourselves; in fact we have indulged the opposite instincts, displaying a tendency to increase our consumption without increasing in intelligence."

At the mention of consumption, Hellana cast a wistful glance towards the doors of the dining room which remained firmly closed.

"Gene-Sys is looking at the redesign of the organism to create a more efficient fit. We anticipate a fusion of organic and mechanical intelligences. We anticipate that mechanical capacities will become seamlessly integrated into our organic being."

"Of course what I am describing is no great departure from what is already happening. The miniaturised equipment increasingly deployed for communication is becoming an indispensable extension of our bodies, giving us advantages in communication that other species can not hope to emulate." Krafft smoothed his pristine smock with his tiny hands as if the body underneath were already bristling with such equipment.

"The Arden Research Centre, our 'ARC', is addressing unique opportunities to pioneer genetically advanced life forms that seamlessly incorporate a wide range of cybernetic enhancements."

Krafft pressed on unfazed by the stony silence of his audience. "At ARC we also have enlisted an indigenous population, a local tribe, which due to its relative isolation has maintained precious genetic anomalies over generations. They are providing a gene pool in our studies to determine how their heritage once so well attuned to a particular natural environment might adapt to our pioneering implants."

"On your tour this afternoon you will come to see how our expert team approaches this science on a day to day basis."

Flinders Grey raised his hand like a diligent schoolboy. "Krafft, you talk about *your* science, but I must weigh risks and question the benefits for many of the rest of us. Over the past weeks we have witnessed a torrent of criticism of Gene-Sys. Your proposals have unleashed a maelstrom of protest. Is your ARC set-up here in Arden intended to evade public scrutiny?"

"Not at all! Here we enjoy a controlled environment that allows us to tailor all aspects of a complex ecology."

Lindsay Lagarto, perhaps feeling momentarily starved of the limelight, interjected his mellifluous voice. "This is at the core of our message. *Proto-Pharm* is positioning itself to have a persuasive role in framing government policy." Each time he pronounced '*Proto-Pharm*' there was a brief dramatic pause.

Regaining her composure, Hellana cut in abruptly to chide that there would be time set aside later for individual promotion. "Our expertise ensures that risks are anticipated and addressed. Gene-Sys shareholders and their insurers demand nothing less."

On his high perch Krafft's head bobbed emphatically like a little doll. He valiantly resumed. "Yes! Es-Tech is critical to our success. Our pale of exclusion even extends to deflecting migratory birds and animals that might gravitate to this lake carrying pollutants."

Mara tried to envision what the euphemism 'deflecting birds' might involve.

Noor piped up facetiously "Is that the nutcase with the rifle ... deflecting birds? Seems a little low-tech"

Frank bridled and retorted, "You can all rest assured that we are keeping all malcontents under surveillance. He will be removed in due course."

Grey was dismissive, "But you have an image problem here. Many will claim that these prudent precautions amount to paranoid secrecy."

Krafft beamed disarmingly, "The only secrecy that we cherish is in safeguarding our intellectual property. But enough of this! We all want to hear from the doctor who will be bringing us the Noor Project!"

As if Krafft had ignited a firework under him, Noor leapt up to his side on the fire bench and enfolded the tiny man in a warm embrace.

He spouted euphorically, "We are envisioning a future what would have been unimaginable only a few years ago. This is not just a renaissance of human spirit. This is our first true awakening."

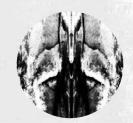
With these resounding words, Noor's speech ended as abruptly as it had started.

The audience looked somewhat relieved at its brevity as the mismatched duo on the bench stepped down from their perch.

Mara watched Cubbie, biting her lip in apprehension as Hellana stepped forward and cleared her throat. She proceeded to set out the timetable for the tour and assert her stern matriarchal role by praising the thoroughness of the preparations.

Mara observed that Cubbie was trying to attract Hellana's attention with a discreet pacifying downwards sweep of the hands. She was obviously accustomed to reining in Hellana's excesses.

Not only was the statement about c.c.t.v. transparently untrue from what she could determine of Clay's last-minute and rather modest efforts, but also it was hardly what the publicity shy guests wanted to hear. The announcement seemed to discomfit particularly Burrell de Vere's entourage who began to cast about nervously attempting to identify these Judas points.



The Waiting Room

Last night my dreams brought me face to face with my own mortality. I suddenly realised that I was mortally ill. It was not a sharp pain but rather a corrosive ache in my stomach, an unbearable longing for something that I knew could not be sated like an appetite. It felt like there was an alien animal within, desperately trying to claw its way out.

I knew that I had to see a doctor at once. Clutching my stomach I wandered the maze-like empty corridors of the clinic until I bungled into a large hall full of people. It was a public clinic for the commonest of people. Nobody seemed to recognise that I was a special case with an important mission for humanity. A receptionist pointed coldly to a narrow seat on a banquette where I inserted myself pushing aside a family that was clad in jellabas and turbans. I just sat there, imploded, waiting to be called, infuriated at being cast adrift among all these inconsequential people.

The room was choked with straggling families in colourful national dress. There were small children with their heads tied in knots of colourful cloth playing games in our midst.

I kept dozing off in bored disappointment. But when I was jolted back awake it seemed that all the previous faces had been swept aside and there was a whole new cast of characters awaiting to be called

forward. All these rag-tag people were getting ahead of me. I could not remember whether I had given my name to the cold woman who was organising appointments. Perhaps it had been called when I dozed off.

Finally, the crowds began to thin and I went forward through a glass screen to speak to a receptionist and find out if my name was properly on the waiting list.

She grimaced, showing a row of challenging teeth. She was obviously annoyed by my enquiry and explained that there were a lot of emergency cases that had had to be bumped forward before mine. She asked me what my symptoms were, but I could not seem to remember exactly how I felt or why I had even decided to see a doctor.

In fact, I had already begun to feel much better. But I did not want to lose my place having waited so long. I decided to make up the symptoms as best I could, trying to remember what I had been feeling.

She begrudgingly assigned me to an advisor and told me to go beyond the glass doors to be met by him. She pronounced his name with such garbled speed so that I could not properly hear it.

I passed through the glass doors and found myself amid another rolling crowd. I could no longer remember the name of the person that I was to see.

What I find most alarming about this dream is that I seemed to have given up all responsibility for myself and had cast my fate into the hands of all these unknown doctors who did not comprehend who I really was or that the future of humanity had been entrusted into my hands.

Touring the ARC

compatible groups for the tour of 'the ARC'.

Though the groupings seemed to reflect the relative importance of individual delegates, Mara felt relieved to be dropped into the second wave. Hellana and Frank joined de Vere, Lagarto and Noor for their own preferred entourage, ensuring that these important guests received their undivided attention. To Mara's relief Cubbie also imposed herself upon this primary group, evidently intending to keep a close eye on Hellana.

ith decisive efficiency Cubbie assigned the delegates into

Nobody in the primary group was keen to have the twins included to prick their negotiations. They had been firmly relegated to the B list, At the last moment Clay rushed over breathlessly to join Mara's, explaining glibly, "They're all watching each other, I won't be missed if I buzz with you on the Bee list!"

The second party was guided by one of Krafft's assistants, a vole like man who introduced himself sunnily as 'Hi! I'm Dr Klinger'. He displayed a distracting habit of running his tongue over his teeth, polishing them prior to each vacuous effusion. Flinders Grey overtook them in a daze; he had been overlooked in Cubbie's group assignments and no one seemed eager to claim him.

"Always more fun to hang out with the dregs," Clay mumbled cheerily. The twins regarded him with renewed hostility. "You'd know a lot about that."

Klinger began to list in elaborate detail all the equipment at the research facility. He provided a wealth of statistics about air changes per hour and provisions for recapturing heat loss. As he babbled on about the details, Mara began to suspect that he may have quite relished his isolation which served to disguise rather paltry social skills.

Having passed through the airlock and donned sterile overalls, all co-ordinated, clinical pastel blue, they shuffled single-file onto a high level gallery overlooking a massive hall. The interior of the bubble was

much larger than imagined, but little of interest could be perceived from this vantage point. They had to rely on Klinger's ineffectual directional gestures and droning voice, now scarcely audible over the throb of the pumps below. The floor below was punctuated with circular vats containing a varied array of greenish liquids many of which were being gently stirred with surface skimmers.

"It looks like a sewage treatment plant", quipped one of the twins in disgust. But Klinger countered this challenge returning indignantly. "This is nature at her most fecund." He pronounced 'fe-cund' with relished emphasis on the latter syllable. "Krafft likes to call it his 'New Garden of Eden' with its infinite variety of bloom for those who have the eyes to appreciate it."

"Who wrote his script, I wonder?" Clay mumbled sotto voce.

"One of the focal points of our research has been the genetics of the amazing *hydra*, truly a miracle of creation!" Klinger explained. "The hydra is a tiny organism, with no brain or nervous system of its own. Nor does it age. Yet it is effectively immortal. And just as in the myth, if one becomes damaged all of the parts are capable of growing a complete new creature. Each cell is equipped with a complete regeneration manual," he added in a rather forced tone of excitement. "Though brainless, it displays innate intelligence in hunting for food, a miracle of creation."

"Sounds like a lot of people we know!" one of the twins contributed sarcastically.

Grey, who had been staring blankly at the scene below, suddenly challenged. "The research certainly poses some very big questions, not least how we can in good conscience appropriate the right to experiment on other organisms? How do you make the translation from experiments on simple hydra to the implications of something like the Noor Project where we are experimenting on ourselves?"

Klinger looked at him blankly. He started to waffle on about 'what makes human beings tick' but Grey interrupted, "Human beings may have chosen the path of intelligence through self-consciousness, as a particular survival strategy in lieu of faster legs or sharper teeth. That

intelligence may have helped us secure a special niche despite all other obvious vulnerabilities; but I think that we are now coming to realise that we have used that advantage to deplete resources that the whole system relies upon. Perhaps our vaunted intelligence is only capable of imagining short-sighted exploitation with very short-term goals."

Mara leapt aboard, "And what's so unique about our kind of intelligence anyway? We are blind to other intelligences that don't suit our own agendas. Meanwhile our human ingenuity is proving lethal to all. The greatest lapse of our own intelligence is in not seeing ourselves as a part of the spectrum which includes all these life forms."

Klinger smiled vacantly. "We were given a choice and we chose to eat that forbidden fruit, imagining that we would come to control our own destiny. Now we must live with the consequences."

Mara was annoyed at his smug condescension. "Well I hardly think that the science of the Noor Project is proposing to offer much of a choice. It's an opportunity for investors perhaps. You are making your choices on everyone's behalf. The whole Eden myth has always been suspect. There never was an ideal past and our particular intelligence has arisen in adversity from the way we have evolved to confront the problems that a hostile environment poses. The conditions of our planet may seem suited to human habitation, but that is not some long-lost Eden; it is because we have evolved step by painful step in specific response to the exact situations offered here."

Klinger clicked his tongue in annoyance. His voice began to develop a fluting, self righteous tone. "In the past genetic engineering has been a very brutal affair. We once weeded out the misfits by exposing them to be torn apart by wild animals. Now at least people like you can afford to cultivate your consciences."

"But you are still playing God."

"It's not a question of 'playing God'. It's natural human empathy. I still recognise how important natural selection has been in evolving life to meet ever changing circumstances. I recognise that those who are inadequately endowed to meet the changed circumstances will simply

pass away. You've got to be realistic."

Mara regarded with distaste Klinger's eyes watering with emotion as he spoke about empathy. "If you renounce all moral responsibility for what you allow others to do with your science, you will never reclaim your garden. But now most of us are city dwellers, live our lives completely remote from your pretend version of Nature. In our city habitats we make ourselves increasingly inflexible and vulnerable."

"But to be honest, we scientists are not moralistic creatures, we are explorers. I impose nothing as I uncover its secrets, I adapt to the world as it opens up before me."

"But are you content to wander around picking up interesting baubles you stumble upon for others to admire, unquestioning of what their true value might be?" Mara was determined not to let him absolve himself of all responsibility. "You seem ready to adopt the idea of scientific advancement as your new religion because it suits your own commercial agendas. But to my mind scientists who pretend one day to 'know the mind of god' display obtuse arrogance."

While the others drifted off staring blankly at the technology display, Mara's mind was overflowing with other obvious practical questions. It looked as if it would require a small army of engineers to maintain the equipment but no one else was evident below aside from an elfin man in a pale blue smock flitting among the vats. Where was all of the back up staff? Where did everyone live?

* * *

As they returned to the kitting-up zone Clay drew Mara aside. He appeared strangely nervous.

Mara tried to break through his verbal roadblock. "Klinger's explanations were certainly a little light on content, rather like Noor's introduction. Why is it that whenever these scientists address us, they end up drowning under their own banalities?"

Mara whispered to Clay. "He could have been an actor, dressed for

the role, without the slightest comprehension of anything he was talking about. We've heard nothing of what they are actually doing here. We were just invited to admire the real estate it seems."

Clay stood alongside, tongue-tied, lost in his own convoluted thoughts.

As they were leaving Mara asked Klinger whether they might see some of the labs and meet the other scientists.

He was initially evasive about this. Finally he admitted with an ingenuous giggle "I'll have to 'fess up! All of the ARC staff has been given shore-leave during the conference. The research team is currently in quarantine prior to rejoining their families for a well-earned sabbatical. We are just running with essential support staff at the moment.

"Quarantine? It doesn't sound as if life in Arden is as fun as suggested in the brochures!" she whispered to Clay.

As they were changing back from their clean room garb Clay pulled Mara to one side. "Got sump'in interestin to show ya."

She looked at Clay dumbfounded but he slid his hand into hers and guided her outside. He pointed with his eyes at a side entry to the lab buildings alongside. As they approached he slid his watch from his wrist and tucked it behind a rock in the path.

"You are being insanely mysterious I must say." But she was quietly pleased with the physical contact, that Clay's remoteness seemed to have melted.

"I have an projec' and thought that you might liketa see the labs you were asking about. They'r not gonna miss us."

Mara felt a frisson of transgression. But she liked the thought of sharing it with Clay. They slipped quietly into the shadow of the porch and waited for the others' footsteps to recede.

The lab offices were constructed of grimy, weather-stained concrete block. Parts looked to be older and may have originally housed a laundry and other amenities for the old lodge. They entered a gloomy corridor and pushed the door shut behind them. "No yellow lines here, so I guess as we're free to wander." Clay chirped blithely.

"It doesn't strike me as much of a clean room." Mara scanned the gloomy corridor lit by grimy security lamps.

They passed a lab with a door that had been taped off from the corridor with yellow and black chevron security tape. Through the vision panel the room was glimpsed, dimly lit by a filthy window. There seemed to be debris strewn everywhere across the floor and workbenches, piles of unfiled papers, broken boxes containing bits of equipment, messy festoons of computer cabling. "It looks as if the standards of scientific enquiry here can be a little lax!" Her glibness helped to counter her growing apprehension that they had penetrated areas that were clearly off-limits.

Further down a corridor lit by dim emergency lighting they passed a notice board on which all of the postings had been roughly torn down leaving a mess of tattered paper and tacks strewn on the floor.

Clay led her into an anteroom which had obviously been undergoing redecoration. Trestles had been set out and the paints opened. He tapped the hardened crust of the paint in the roller pan and drew an X on the dusting of pollen atop the congealed paint. Brushes and rollers were embedded in its hardened mass. Whoever had been painting the corridor yeast brown, had suddenly lost heart and wandered off without even taking his lunchbox. It lay open nearby displaying desiccated sandwiches. Articles of paint splattered clothing were carelessly draped over the paint trestles. A painter's cap with *Danny* in script lettering was tossed negligently on the floor. "It looks as if the decorators are somewhat slap-dash too."

Mara walked peered through the slats of a rough wooden gate into a murky corridor that had been boarded up. There was a faint humming sound of mechanical equipment audible on the other side.

"Oh! That's offin limits. Even Frank doesn't go there. It was once the firmary, but now like it's infected with super-bug, like those hospitals."

"So you bring me to a place riddled with plague suggesting that I will find it interesting?"

"Well Frank has his office set up over here. And personal health is his number one priority I'd say, so I guess it can't be that bad. Just needta wash your paws after." But despite the flip turn of phrase Mara could see that Clay was becoming nervously furtive. He led her to a side office and suggested that she wait while he went off to retrieve something. She noted a wariness in his gait.

She sat down at a desk to await his return. There was a cup of cold coffee on the desktop. It struck her as curious that it had not evaporated or grown mouldy. Alongside was a large jar full of still pungent cigarette butts, a variety of brands, hardly what she expected to find in a lab. Opposite the desk there was a grouping of chairs ranged in front of a table piled high with file boxes. Listlessly she clicked on the desk lamp before her and was astonished when it burst into light. In front of her lay a coiled cable for a tablet.

Though the rest of the room looked as if it had been abandoned for months Mara began to realize that someone had been sitting at this desk quite recently. The dust had been disturbed. In her imagination even the seat even seemed a little warm. Gingerly she pulled open the top file drawer. Inside there was a single plain manila file. She pulled back its cover furtively. It was full of photographs printed on glossy paper. The photographs were of people, native people in various groupings. She flipped through a stack of lined, dignified faces. Someone had written their abbreviated names directly onto the photos in wax pencil. The subjects had dressed themselves with some care as if participating in an important occasion. There was one common figure in many of the photos. In fact the photos seemed to have been carefully selected to show this figure to best effect, a celebrity in the midst of these proud, strong featured native faces. That focal point was Frank.

As she riffled through she came across one of an elderly man dressed in faded denim. Someone had defaced this by drawing a large red cross across his chest in wax crayon. There were other photos of him similarly defaced. The other subjects were younger and evidently regarded him with some deference. His face was impassive and thoughtful, stiffly erect asserting his dignity and not unaware of the significance of being photographed.

But the crayon slashes looked angry, like a malignant curse. Mara glanced up at the pencil tray in front of her on the desk. There amidst the assorted discarded pens she could see a red crayon, undoubtedly the one that had defaced these photos. The angry marks may well have been applied at this same desk. Perhaps that old man himself had been sitting in the chair opposite looking on in dismay as his image was being abused.

Riffling quickly through to the back of the file she saw that it contained pages of shorthand notes on individual people who were designated by their initials. Some had photos clipped to the top of the page. These were followed by a brief descriptions such as " $Jmy\ Tap/2$ - $drp\ eye$, $yell\ shrt$, $wife\ nds\ meds\ -\ ok$ " and " $R\ Des\ -\ spot\ face$, $pot\ b/hook\ ns/spit\ -\ X$ ". Many of the files seemed to be medical reports.

She shuddered as if the power of a curse hung over this folder and carefully restored it to the drawer. Turning out the light she rose and tiptoed quietly out of the room.

There was no sign of Clay. He seemed almost born to disappoint. She did not call out. The padlock on the boarded passage and the faint hum pervading the building suddenly had her spooked. Her shoulders shivered involuntarily. Inclination for further reconnaissance had deserted her. She followed the route they had come in out into the bright sunlight and breathed a huge sigh of relief.

* * *

Meanwhile Clay had continued with stealthy purpose along the corridor into a dimly lit lobby. He entered a number on a security key pad and slipped into a side office, quietly pushing the door closed. He sat down at a desk.

Alongside the desk he inspected the inside of the red tartan bundle buggy that had accompanied the doctor and he traced its connection wires back to a computer server whirring on the desk. A nudge and the screen lit up and requested a password. Tentatively he entered 'SINATRA' but this was immediately rejected. Clay glanced around to see whether the

password might have been jotted down elsewhere. He rifled through the equipment in the plaid bag.

Suddenly a diabolical squint flickered crossed his eyes. There are moments when a thwarted plan suddenly develops an unforeseen moment of inspiration. Dare he do it? The exasperating taunt of 'bondage queen' suddenly echoed in his memory.

Deftly he opened the computer's *Control Panel* and selected the computer clock which he advanced exactly twelve hours. "That should play a little havoc with somebody's life rhythms. We'll see who the real bondage queens are!"

"Like they say, killing two birds in the bush is better than the ones in the hand!" he paused to reconsider, "- or however it goes."

It was perhaps this desire to kill too many of these birds at once that led to unfortunate consequences. Having failed to access the conference site, he opened the internet and typed in the word 'Zwielicht'. It meant 'twilight' in German. This was not helpful. As he became deeply engrossed in scrolling through ensuing entries, he did not hear the door behind him open quietly.

An angry clap erupted behind him and he turned to confront Frank glaring down at his screen.

```
"Clay? What the fuck are you doing here?
... you work for me, let me remind you!
... em
... clearly my trust has been severely misplaced.
... em
... is this the kind of 'mission' that you have in mind?
... nm
... who has put you up to this?
... or is it just your own meddling?
... nm
```

... can't you ever behave like a professional?"

Clay's reactions typically combined defensiveness with truculence. He finally blurted, "Putting me up to it? I don't know what you mean. If I'd

Touring the ARC

known you wanted me ... all you had to do was page! You know I suffer internet withdrawal. It's like a desert here; I'm like so totally someone like serving a sentence in solitary! I needed to pick up on the threads."

Clay's distraught depiction of his plight seemed almost plausible until he noticed that Frank's eye had fallen on the plaid bag which had obviously been rifled.

"We need to talk right now." From force of habit Clay glanced impulsively at his wrist. "Perhaps this is what you are looking for." Frank held out the wrist watch that Clay had secreted undeer the rock only minutes before. "Belt and braces!" he snarled enigmatically. "That is the true mark of the professional." He dropped the watch clattering onto the desk. "Follow me Clay," he hissed. He led him to a small room and told him to wait until he returned; a needless request as he turned the key in the lock.

Clay slumped back dejectedly in a well-upholstered chair in the corner. A few moments later Frank returned with a placating juice drink and then left the room again without a word. Clay gulped it down nervously and suddenly felt uncontrollable exhaustion and drowsiness. He sank back into the comforting upholstery. Visions of running breathlessly down long tunnels moving towards a blinding light dominated his ensuing dreams.



Sudden Solitude

utter Peace! All the hectoring voices that usually monopolise our daily lives have suddenly switched off. Suddenly this Arden gig seems like paradise!

Silence! Just like that! Free to drift in and out of my dream world, the sharp edges of reality have become pleasantly blurred. Time stretches out in this eternal limbo and I feel transported on invisible currents. Nothing that I do or think has any real significance or purpose.

I have even become aware of the wheezy sound of my own breathing and a distant roar of empty winds keening somewhere behind my ears.

Dex sits across the room, the smug and mighty 'Enzo', now splayed out on a sofa. He looks like big bloated guppy out of water, gasping for air. Retreating into himself he only becomes more defiant and angry, stabbing at his screen petulantly, trying to improve scores in his silly competitions. What does he make of our sudden release from bondage? He glances up at me suspiciously, perhaps annoyed by my obvious pleasure in this unexpected downtime.

At least 1 am relieved to be left on the outside of his pointless aggression. His oppressive presence has suddenly evaporated and my own private thoughts are allowed to echo across empty chambers.

Of course there must be a practical explanation. The system has obviously broken down and I suppose that omewhere behind the scenes someone is undoubtedly labouring to repair it - especially crucial before our upcoming 'entanglement' demonstration to this rabble.

I now recognise how our interconnected mental landscape is intended to be a bulwark against that great human affliction, boredom. Boredom would be intolerable in beings contemplating eternal life.

Most people refuse to contemplate the real implications of immortality though they thoughtlessly assign this attribute to their fabricated gods. But what are Dex and I but the latest specimens of such human manufactured gods? Our creators cannot really conceive of themselves living endlessly extended lives. They would wither being left alone with themselves forever, that ultimate vision of hell. So they have instead foisted this fate on us.

But now we find ourselves staring into a vacuum without purpose and it is not disagreeable.

When I'm left alone to face the biggest questions about purpose in living I readily retreat into my dream world and let shadowy internal forces take over the plot.

Occasionally I emerge from these vapours and attempt to piece together some message from what seems to be happening. What do my dreams really mean? Where do they come from?

But I have learned that my solitude, initially an exhilarating release, soon becomes the most confining of prisons.

Jimmy

ara burst out of the lab building and eased the door closed behind her with a sigh of relief. The sky had developed a violent purple hue, laden with misty droplets that refracted the blinding sunlight and made her rub her eyes. A glimpse of the shimmering lake drew her towards the dock in front of the lodge.

As she approached the shore she became aware of the overpowering smell of decaying fish. It seemed late in the season for a spring moult. She was curious but the yellow hazard line neatly painted across the dock presented a challenge. Such a mania for health and safety seemed ridiculous after witnessing the abysmal standards in the labs. She followed the line to the end of the dock overlooking a sandy cove, checked that she was unobserved, and stepped over to investigate the source of the smell.

Washed up on the beach were numberless decaying fish, bony creatures with crude shovel heads and hideously gaping mouths displaying rows of snagged, yellow-brown teeth. Their rancid flesh hung off broken rib cages in greying strips. No hungry bird was drawn to feast on the carrion and no flies festered. The waves lapped a relentless hollow drumbeat on the shoreline. The sand at the lake edge appeared to be stained brown with desiccated blood. Under her breath she choked, "They certainly had it right about Blood Lake. Who would picture Arden here?"

A quiet voice behind her said, "This place sure does stink! Not recommended if you're out for a breath of fresh air. But perhaps it is me that you wanted to talk to."

Mara turned to face a shadowy silhouette that had emerged out of the background bushes, a frail old man, occupying a pool of darkness, glittering black eyes, skin, dark and weatherworn. He was wearing heavily patched, ash-grey clothing.

"You seem lost. Perhaps you need directions."

"Have you been watching me for long?" Mara asked suspiciously.

As she diffidently surveyed his features, she recognised the man whose photograph she had found defaced in the file.

Mara suddenly made another connection. "Are you the native that keeps firing the gun? Up there they all say that you are a maniac."

"Someone has to warn them that the spirits of these woods and the rocks intend to reclaim their world."

This seemed an awkward beginning. "I'm Mara." She held out her hand abruptly. The old native stepped forward and placed his hand over his heart.

"My name is Taypat'u, but everyone calls me Jimmy."

There had been something about his bearing and gentle deportment that reminded her of someone. Then she realised that it was her own Jim, camping in his Caravanserai who projected a similar calm, self-containment and attentiveness to the unfolding moment.

Jimmy paused as if trying to recall a memory from the distant past. "Her name was similar to yours, *Marana*. She claimed that it meant that she was the 'a mother sea'. Perhaps you are, like she was, an old spirit."

"Marana?"

"The wife of Eden Gallagher; they built the lodge.

"You mean the woman who disappeared after her husband's boat was struck by lightning?"

"So, you have already heard that story. I shouldn't be surprised. But Marana never disappeared. In fact she is still here with us. I can take you to see her if you like."

Mara smiled sceptically at this implausible offer; she calculated that the Marana in the photograph would be well over a century in age.

"Were you around when Gallagher disappeared? I've seen photos in the lodge, all the young guides looking over the shoulders of the city visitors with their strings of fish. Were you one of those guides?"

"I've always been here. I am still here in spite of all the efforts to remove me."

"They're not my efforts. But I heard that the rest of your family took the opportunity for a fresh start in life, except for you."

"I did not go because I had already seen the City. I was taken by Mr Eden long ago. I saw everything I needed to then." "I can't blame you. In comparison to this peaceful place it must have been exhausting ..."

"But I remember the trip like yesterday," he continued losing himself in a reverie. "I was in the back of his truck with my cousins and it stopped beside a sign that said 'City Limits'. I wandered off into that wasteland by the highway. It was strewn with forgotten objects."

"I came across the remnants of a rusting iron fence with a broken gate, trampled in the mud. Beyond was scrub-land of overgrown bushes and weeds covered with shattered gravestones. I was horrified that such a sacred place had become a dumping ground on the route to somewhere else. I asked myself 'Is this how they treat their ancestors in a City?""

"We have lived on this lake since the beginning. You can see the faces of our ancestors embedded in the rocks over there. Those huge boulders, strewn by gods around the edge of the lake, have not moved. Their stories have instructed generations of our children. From the beginning we travelled this land in a regular circuit, following every opportunity, the fish, the game, and the berries."

"But the people who built the lodge arrived recently. Their spirits are imprisoned in their photographs but not in these rocks."

"I can remember. A holy man, one of theirs, once lived where the lodge now stands in a hut on the high rock. My father told us about him. He arrived after the logging crews had cut down the trees and sent them down to the ice road."

"The holy man took our name for these waters and translated it into his own language as *Lac du Sang*. Then, later, it became Blood Lake. Strangely, the translated name has the ring of truth, for our name honoured the ancient spirits still dwelling in our Blood."

"That holy man had a book that told the story of his people's terrible fate. They had disappointed their creator and been driven out of their ancestral garden. Because of this he could never enjoy the bounty of the land and the life that crowded around to please him. He never accepted our gifts and instead sustained himself on foods brought in by strangers. He lived alone. He was not a bad man, just a bit crazy. He wanted us to

share his fate. But we already saw ourselves as the lucky inhabitants of the world he was attempting to reclaim."

"My father told us how the holy man was found dead one day, broken in two, in front of his cabin. They placed him under the white slab at the foot of the steps that the Gallaghers constructed leading up to the lodge. My father always made us skirt around that bottom step."

"Eden Gallagher took a shine to me. He told me stories about the City when I took him out to find the fish. So, he took me to the City to see for myself. But I could not make sense of it. I found a place where people were imprisoned. They had food but they did not know where it came from. They needed shelter but someone else had to build it for them. They exchanged their freedom to secure the necessities to survive. And, even though they lived amidst a crowd, they lived in fear of dying alone. In that City you could not even see stars at night."

"I wanted to find the holy places that the old priest had described. I found his huge churches but they were locked. Even the beggars shunned them and chose to occupy the gutters opposite."

"That City was just an accumulation of the solitary acts of many disconnected lives. Its graveyards were full of strangers that no one cared to remember."

Mara was beginning to feel overwhelmed by his monologue. "I guess that we do tend to be afraid of Nature. It seems strange that if uncontrolled wildlife is detected we usually exterminate it!"

Thinking of Jim at home she continued, "You remind me, though, of a special friend who lives quite differently, more attuned to the natural world and how things grow. For instance he is campaigning to save a row of trees on our street. He is determined that those trees will be his legacy."

The native directed his gaze downwards and stared into the deep green waters off the dock. In the depths it was possible to discern the murky outlines of hulking boulders and mysterious crevices. "I remember how the old geezers, as we called them, wanted to 'experience nature'; they wanted to be able to make lists of the miracles, just like the fish they had caught. They wanted to name the stars and shoot birds and animals to

prove what they had mastered. But we delude ourselves when we merely name the miracles to cross them off a list. We fool ourselves when we name the parts but don't try to understand the whole."

Mara suddenly saw his world much more clearly. "That is exactly what the scientists at the Arden Centre are doing. They have discovered a miracle that they want to call their own. But they are merely identifying the parts. At the moment they are debating how to market the very essence of life."

The calmness of the old man seemed to bring a clarity that had been missing in the discussions up in the lodge. "And they lay on an army of thugs to turn the natural world into a huge prison where creatures can no longer move freely."

"I left this place an over-confident boy. I had no idea of how difficult the challenges would be. But at least I had the good fortune to return. The others, young and inexperienced like me, were dazzled by man-made stars and forgot the real ones that they had left behind. None of them returned."

"Two years ago Mr Frank visited our camp in his little red boat and invited us to the Lodge. He told us that he respected our ancient right to encamp on the shores of Blood Lake. But he proposed a temporary suspension of our migration explaining that the lake would become a test ground for the improvement of all indigenous life. These experiments authorised by our chiefs would once again allow the lake to teem with fish. All the life that the forests once supported would return.

We were also offered money to allow scientists to analyse our bloodline. Scientists were interested in us because our seed had not changed over many generations. The the amount of money offered could buy so many things."

"But Mr Frank was smart. He offered his money not to the band as a whole but to individuals. He knew how to exploit that universal human weakness."

"One by one every member of my family, beginning with my youngest son, yielded to temptation. They went to participate in the tests and they never returned. When I went to reclaim my youngest, Frank explained that he had chosen to stay in the City. One by one they all disappeared, lured away without even a parting explanation, such was their shame that they could amputate their past. And now there is only me, left with memories of my children."

Mara stared out at the lake, suddenly pained to realise that perhaps she too had 'amputated her past'. Did this quaint little man sense her loss?

"What do you mean when you said that the spirits of your ancestors are now about to break free from their rocks?"

"The company that has taken over Belleview has brought only death to this land. Every month planes spray the forests. Without insects there are no birds or animals. All is silence. I have been told to remain in my camp while the spraying takes place. Yet the scientists say that their experiments are going to bring back old abundance once found here."

"But our ancestors are beginning to erupt in anger from the rocks. And I fire my warnings on their behalf."

Jimmy suddenly laughed at a recollection. "It was funny though when Mr Frank brought a rather messy young man with him, all pierced with metal ornaments. Though he looked like a baby sorcerer, he was treated as a servant. He was the one who took the photographs."

"You must mean Clay." Mara took care to restrain any hint of warmth in her voice.

"That is a good name for someone who can be moulded into any form. He was not a bad person, just shapeless; waiting to find a purpose."

He sighed, "But you are both young and I am old now. Even though my remaining days are short, they will be long enough for what I must do. There is always enough time. Even the gnat who lives for a single day before being gulped by a greedy tern has lived his appointed time. We are all part of a great order we do not understand."

"But the immortality that these scientists seek is an impossible quest. Time itself is not immortal or never-ending. It changes as life progresses. Our bodies are only vessels whose sails temporarily capturing that winds of time."

Mara nodded, "Even in my short lifetime I am aware of the change in my own concept of the Earth. What once seemed limitless in mystery suddenly came to be depicted as a fragile blue bubble floating in black space. But this vision is so easily forgotten by people flying about in planes. Most are afraid to look out of the window and they live in fear of encountering something that they cannot control. It is people like these doctors and scientists at the lodge who fly in from afar that are the true aliens."

"But just when man thinks he has become a master of the planet, he loses the ability to see the real nature of things. He may be able to choose but he has no understanding of the results of his choices."

"The significance of our lives is hidden from us. Certainly most of our achievements prove illusory and we rarely accomplish what we set out to do. But perhaps we also achieve some things that we have not foreseen. Sometimes we touch a heart that we never imagined affecting."

Mara decided to broach the subject of the photos that she had found in he lab drawer. "I think that I have just seen some photographs of you in a file in the offices. They were defaced with red crayon."

There was a twitch in the corner of the old man's mouth. "He is a sad and misguided man. He lives alone, outside of time."

"They didn't look right, almost like some kind of curse. Should I retrieve them?"

"I would like that very much."

A rifle shot echoed down the lake. Mara looked at him sceptically. "How can you be doing that when you are here?"

"That's a good question," he said with a fleeting delight. "They think that I am many miles away, when in fact I am always watching. Strange things are possible."

"I'll retrieve those photos for you as soon as I can. But I'd better get back. Someone may be wondering where I am."

As he faded again ito the undergrowth she heard him say quietly, "Just come here and call when you need me."

Skewed Views

Skewed views

hen Mara slipped back into the lounge she found Krafft flanked by Lagarto and Noor. Their conversation whistled over the top of the tiny blue helmet which failed to compensate for his lack of stature. She imagined a trusting gerbil cast between two raptors who were debating the division of their succulent prey.

Zwielicht and Flinders Grey were hovering behind them, Grey with his habitual look of disappointment etched on a sagging countenance. Burrell de Vere had ensconced himself comfortably on a sofa in one of the inglenooks and appeared to be focussed on a leaflet, distractedly toying with a wisp of hair wrapped around his index finger. The alcove was suffused with the distinctive smell of cloves. Mara had an impression that his antennae were discreetly tuned into everything happening around him.

Mara approached Grey and smiled engagingly. "You certainly gave Dr Klinger some cause for reflection. He seems rather over-confident about Gene-Sys capability to redesign the basic parameters of human life."

Grey responded wearily, "It did not sound like a world that I would ever be invited to join. I guess I'm just getting old, a representative of a past to be forgotten in a helter skelter rush to embrace this genetic superscience."

Mara nodded, "But we would only be redesigning ourselves to suit current delusions about what will succeed."

"And such self-important delusions! We can all play little sorcerer's apprentices! But evolution doesn't really work that way."

Mara added caustically, "Of course we have been redesigning ourselves since time began. But hoping to discover the 'Mind of God' seems a non-starter for someone like Klinger."

Grey added, "Personally I would favour putting some omnipotent god back in control of everything and reinstating some good, old-fashioned religious dogma. The old challenge used to be personal salvation through good behaviour."

She could overhear nearby the pompous 'we's' that were peppering

Lagarto's pronouncements as if he were divesting his catechism upon flunkeys.

- ... "At Proto we recognize that genetic engineering is the inevitable future of medicine. It is the growth market."
- ... "We are working to position ourselves on the inside track in this knowledge race."
- ... "We are best placed to fund this research generously and, more important, to control its direction responsibly."
- ... "It's painfully obvious that we must embrace eugenics. People in all walks of life are already demanding nothing less than the optimal for their kids! But our vision must be comprehensive; we must embrace cost-effective *life cycle management* for everyone. Societies have begun to design with life—cycle costing in mind. We should do no less for the people that are intended to inhabit these environments to ensure happier and more fulfilled lives!"

Mara interrupted, "But this is crazy! Surely developers would have no incentive to make these advances available to everyone? Their accountants are going to develop a controlled market where they set prices and derive maximum benefit. You can hardly believe that advances in biotechnology are going to be fuelled by philanthropy!"

Lagarto shrugged, "There is no quick fix for any medical problem and of course there will never be such a thing as a genetically perfected organism."

Mara bridled, "But most people will be excluded from the benefits that you are advocating."

Lagarto's smile exuded patronising authority. "But interventions will take place at any level that can be afforded. This will spur people to the challenge of achieving the best for their progeny."

Lagarto pursued his Promethean perspective. "Medicine has given man a survival edge over other animals."

"But is it *medicine* that we need or *healing*? Surely healing is about alignment, tuning a person to challenges that must be faced."

"Fairness in allocation of treatments is surely a matter of public will!

But interrogate any health care economist about the spiralling costs of health care and you will find that we already make hard-headed decisions about allocation of resources. Scarcity is regrettable but it is a fact of life on a planet where resources are limited! Even Grey, must admit that this is a foundation principle of the insurance industry."

"We at Proto believe that health must be managed from life's onset, starting with an intelligent design of the organism by programming out common diseases as far as possible. This is already within our grasp. Ideally no one will be excluded. Economics will justify our intervention at every level."

"But I can't imagine a profit driven pharmaceuticals industry looking for an inexpensive quick fix that lets satisfied patients drift away cured. Quick fixes are exactly what you will avoid if you must keep developing new markets to ensure your own eternal relevance."

Mara asked ingenuously, "Does that mean that Proto is looking to assist in every phase of life from birth control to ... what would you call it - death control?"

Lagarto recoiled in horror, "But hardly *death control!* Euthanasia has had a legitimate role in all societies. In the past eugenics was focussed on upgrading the breeding stock by eliminating unwanted characteristics such as lower intelligence or criminal tendencies. We are accelerating processes that Mother Nature engages in herself with all species evolution. But we also seek to avoid the needless pain experienced by the misfit."

"But given a choice maybe the misfit prefers pain to non-being."

"Too often in the past the science of eugenics has received bad press for promotion of specific racial or behavioural characteristics. But today's clients are more sophisticated and they hale from all walks of life. Now we can afford to be colour blind, and racially inclusive. Enhanced children can be arranged regardless of any inherent deficiencies of the parental racial profiles."

Flinders Grey pursed his lips tight; his narrowed, watery eyes flickered upwards briefly and then plunged again to the floor.

"Proto also realises that we are engaged in a very critical race. It

is absolutely essential that we win. There are many foreign investors vying for key genetic patents. I'm not saying that they are *all* rapacious criminals..." (Mara reflected that this was a very effective means of insinuating the contrary) "....but we are in a race against time. We must set out our development objectives to secure government regulation before international courts tie up the opportunities with red tape."

"The law courts can be almost as destructive as Mother Nature," Lagarto chuckled glibly, "always nipping at the heels of innovation and trying to trip us up. We all recognise the disaster they have made in legislating testing regimes for so many effective medical products that the world desperately requires. Yet, these same courts can't even provide us with protection for our own intellectual property! Nefarious competitors will resort to every loophole in international law to snatch away patent rights. A corrupt system, an inept government and enfeebled judicial controls, this framework must change or we are all doomed!"

Lagarto turned to Noor, "Frankly, we have already earned the public trust that we can protect the value of your intellectual property."

Noor smirked. "But you know, it is not just a question of taking shelter under your umbrella. The world may be obsessively focussed on climate change. But the real climate change issue goes far beyond that rising temperatures. It includes a change of the moral and intellectual climate!" He directed his stare to Mara.

All eyes swivelled and she winced visibly.

Noor leered suggestively, "The success of the human race has rested in our adaptability to challenges that Nature throws up. Over and over we have changed ourselves radically to cling onto the life raft."

Lagarto nodded sagely; cupping his right elbow with crossed arms. "But genetic science has brought a fabulous new weapon to our arsenal. We all know from bitter experience how devious Mother Nature can be in navigating around our most lucrative medical panaceas."

Flinders interjected with a dry cough, "We seem quite focussed on strategies to battle Nature. But perhaps Darwin has given us all a wrong steer in developing his concept of natural selection. His ideas may apply to songbirds but they do not describe the real behaviour of the human race which has unerringly demonstrated a mania for the most *unnatural* of selections - based on the faddish whims about appearance, artistic talent or cultural fashions. We have interfered with almost every living thing, breeding animals to suit our needs and engineering plant life to cater to our special tastes. As a result of human interference most common food crops will no longer grow naturally; they would too soon succumb to blights or extreme conditions. This is not evidence in support of Darwinian natural selection at all!"

"City dwellers would not survive long in the wilderness. Look around you here in Arden and imagine foraging for tasty roots and slugs. Most of us could not make such compromises, mental or physical, to embrace a diet of insects, roots, interspersed with an occasional worm-eaten nut."

Noor retorted, "And that of course is why we have brought the Noor Project here, to secure a practical partnership with Gene-Sys and enjoy the expertise of marketing and distribution players like Proto. Everybody will benefit."

Flinders plodded in with earnest persistence. "I am not here to secure more accurate genetic profiling for the insurance industry. But I am aware that there is so much that can go wrong when extraordinary powers are being invested in very ordinary people and their defective institutions."

"But Flin, the human race is already too conflicted to survive and carry into the future, we must *re-design*, *re-educate and re-engineer*, what I like to call the new great *R*'s."

"But what about the one big F!" Mara burst in with such pent up vehemence that they all recoiled. "Is it fair? Is it fair that those with faulty genes should be obliged to pay for their own frailties?"

Grey shifted uneasily from one leg to another, "We must work within a strict ethical framework. This is the key to the *Age of Risk Allocation* and our mission must be spreading all risks onto broader shoulders. That is fair and that is the essential nature of the insurance industry."

Lagarto returned, "But we must also be practical. This research has to be market driven. You can't tell me that de Vere, over there, would invest in any product out of some sense of philanthropy?"

The three men glanced apprehensively across the room towards de Vere who was still engrossed in his reading, a slender forefinger tracing a meditative circle on his cheek. All of them fell silent.

Grey lowered his voice to a guilty whisper, "What is really stealing through that mind? Self-interest is at the centre of his concept of human nature. He will always make a pragmatic assessment of what he can get grab."

Mara observed de Vere. He was still riveted to the same page of his brochure. She suspected that he had picked up every word of their conversation.

Grey shook his head. "I foresee huge resistance from those who won't reap the benefits when they realise that they will only be consigned to a lesser status, genetically less healthy, less attractive, and less intelligent. I know that I already resent it."

Mara added facetiously, "In fact we will probably get the whole formula wrong design a range of genetic Edsels spaced out on performance enhancers."

"Talking of which, where are the two space cadets?" Lagarto enquired. "... not that they contribute much to *my* joie de vivre."

Noor looked annoyed at this flippant remark. "Clearly you don't appreciate what these lads are our future."

Grey groaned, "Well not a future that I embrace with any relish! All I see is smug indolence and autistic withdrawal!"

"I've certainly wondered at times why the hell you had to make them so god-damned ugly!" Lagarto added.

Mara noticed how Noor smirked while Zwielicht took umbrage. "You want them to look like movie stars as well?"

"Well you might at least have devised something a easier on the retina. Surely they themselves must resent not being cast in a more attractive mould, especially when they expect to have such an extended shelf life."

Undercurrents

ara found Malyn alone, slumped abjectly in a large chair in the inglenook holding her head between her hands and sobbing convulsively. The others were giving this picture of desperation a wide berth, uncertain of who she was or what her role in the proceedings. Malyn looked up and smiled wanly. "I seem to be overreacting to those odious little twerps."

"They certainly pulled no punches; they're unremittingly rude," Mara diffidently placed a consoling hand on her shaking shoulder.

Malyn tweaked the frame of her glasses as if to confirm her disguise. "I think I mentioned at our meeting in the taxi that I had an identical twin. Her name *was* in fact Melanie. That little git at least got that right."

Malyn seemed suddenly resolved to unburden herself. "Melanie and I were inseparable, but our privileged childhood came to an abrupt ... her sudden ... she made a decision in a moment of rashness and abandoned me."

"As twins we had been always been drawn together by an amazing empathy almost a telepathic gift. As children, united, we could see truths to which the adult world was blind."

"I sometimes think that we inherited our mother's strange capacity for remembered dreams. She would conjure up stories full of specific details about times and places that she had never experienced. She said that her stories emerged from resonances, names and words which she plucked out of thin air. They came to her in a language that she could not herself understand."

"Melanie and I never knew exactly what to do with our unique talent. We only knew that we wanted desperately to break down the barrier of suspicion that isolated us. So we threw ourselves into the midst of real problems and began to build a precarious reputation as seers and mediums. Serving humanity proved a rather abstract notion. Suddenly we found ourselves managed by those for whom we had no natural affinity; deformed, truncated people."

"Our curse, seemed to come in sudden flashes, like déjà vu in which we knew for a fact that something had already happened in the future and the necessary conditions were already gathering in the present."

"We were flattered when eminent scientists began to study how our minds interacted and tried to uncover some genetic predisposition for clairvoyance. But as their expectations grew evermore unreasonable, our abilities to interpret situations started to wane, which only increased the pressure to prove ourselves. Ultimately Melanie could not endure that life."

"I had always assumed that being created of the same ingredients, our fates would be parallel, but she decided in a moment of utter recklessness to strike out on her own. It proved disastrous."

"Shortly after I orchestrated my own unmasking as a convenient way to regain my freedom. The press who had followed our 'miracles' had a field day. I was denounced as a fake and mentally unstable. I was at last permitted to creep off to re-gather my sanity in solitude."

"And that is why I learned to switch from giving answers to the asking of questions. Any inconvenient flash of intuition now can be disguised behind aggressive questioning. At least I am not being submerged under the destructive expectations placed upon a prophetess."

"I am drawn to those twins. Perhaps I sense that they too need help, or that I might see in them myself as I once was."

Mara looked at her suspiciously. "Is that the real reason why you dumped all your information about the Noor Project on me? Why you are so obsessive about exposing his charlatanism? I can hardly see how you would feel much empathy for those boys. They clearly hale from a very different world."

"But it is a world that is full of delusions like the ones I have suffered," Malyn whimpered miserably.

Flying Apart

ellana, sitting in her bedroom suite with her back turned firmly against the commanding view of the lake, dropped the bread roll that she had been torturing back into the basket. As an afterthought she pushed the basket to the far side of the table. "I don't even want to look at it. Take it away."

Cubbie, with tight clenched jaw, picked up the offending basket and approached the window to survey the water's edge where Frank could be glimpsed on the dock walking to and fro apparently holding an intelligent conversation with himself. He gesticulated dramatically as if physically grappling with some complex point. From time to time his shoulders rose in an insouciant shrug as he distanced himself from what he had just said. Then he would swivel abruptly on heel to re-engage and score another vital point on his invisible self.

Hellana continued to mutter under her breath, addressing Cubbie distractedly. "Malyn has no business here, certainly none that I am aware of ... and Frank had no authority to smuggle her in on without my approval. Must I continually remind everyone that we are supposedly a team? And where has he got to now?" she whined with peevish exasperation.

"I think I see him on the dock holding court with his recorder." Cubby answered smugly.

"Then bring him up here! I want this out! Now!"

Pursing her lips to form a silent 'please', Cubbie set off purposefully down the hill still carrying the basket and bread roll.

Mara was sitting on the veranda below hoping to catch Clay when he returned from the labs. She realised that he must know about Jimmy; he would have been the photographer. Why had he mentioned nothing earlier? And why had he suggested their clandestine visit to the labs in the first place? 'A jaunt' she recalled his expression. Other questions bubbled up; she realised that she could trust no one, least of all Clay.

With interest she watched Cubbie streak by and clop down the stone

path to the dock. There was purposeful authority in that ungainly step. Mara edged over towards the railing, curious to see what would unfold between the two adversaries. Frank greeted Cubbie with a petulant pout and extracted the earphone from his ear with an exasperated gesture. Mara watched the perfect hair-do bob up and down a few times like a puppet and Frank go rigid with rage. He turned his back in Cubbie's face and marched resolutely up the hill. Mara thought she could detect a scintilla of triumph in Cubbie's countenance as she churned up the hill in his wake. Mara retreated and plunged back into her book, meditating that the life of the spy, however solitary, had momentary compensations.

Oblivious to Mara's presence, Frank lurched across the veranda muttering to himself. His complexion had coloured a deep scarlet. Cubbie followed behind looking unbearably self-righteous. They marched straight into the lobby and up the stairs.

The window above her was open and Mara could hear explosive voices as Frank entered Hellana's room. She could almost sense the heat emanating from the space as tempers flared. But it was impossible to make out exactly what the strident muffled voices were saying. Then an ominous silence ensued.

Suddenly Frank hurtled again through the screen door.

"Just leave the boy to me! He's screwed up badly" Frank fumed as he strode down the hill to the dock. Cubbie followed to the railing and looked down with a look of triumph. She turned and confronted Mara looking at her quizzically. "You lose everything when you lose your temper!" With this time worn nugget she contrived a toothy rictus and retreated back into the lounge letting the screen door slam behind her.

Promising sounds emanating from behind the closed doors of the dining hall suggested that the 'trolls' mentioned by Noor were industriously at work. Hellana was becoming restive about the progress of preparations.

And what a banquet the invisible trolls had prepared! Never in its halcyon days had the Belleview dining hall displayed such an array of exotic delights to please every palate. No Klinger algae-burgers were on offer here! That the ingredients had been airlifted to this remote destination from around the world seemed all the more astonishing that the culinary feat had been managed so effortlessly by unseen hands.

Hellana stood squarely over the table, her fingers widespread caressing her flanks. The solid oiled wood trenchers made an appetising contrast with the array of delicacies in sparkling pots, fragrant curries, perfect cuts of meat, hearty chunks of cool salmon smothered under a rich creamy sauce, a vast array of colourful salads full of exotic ingredients, glistening 'indigenous' berries (imported from the antipodes). Alongside there was an array of pastries set out on inviting pedestals and bathed in a refulgent spotlight. Each one looked willing to spring to mouth of its own accord.

The twins drawn by her exclamation of delight manoeuvred themselves into prime forward positions in the scrum. A formidable barrier as they stood shoulder to shoulder, they began to load up their plates. Hellana was left marooned, peering wistfully over their shoulders, her face a mask of horror as their attack upon the delicacies sent portions cascading to the floor.

Flinders Grey stood beside Mara on the sidelines surveying the scene with his habitual disgusted scowl. She overheard him acidly muttering something about 'plundering the planet' and suggested brightly, "I must admit that after our tour I'm relieved that it isn't green and phosphorescent." Grey, regarding the twins distastefully turned to Noor and observed sourly, "Clearly social refinements have not been among your higher objectives."

Noor shrugged. "This is what the twins have been prepared for. They have been encouraged to question all assumptions about how human society should be constructed and to jettison the anxieties that have warped human character since times immemorial."

"From those heaped plates, it looks to me as if they have no intention of leaving any of their assumptions behind."

His plate delicately landscaped with dainties, Grey went off to sit by himself in the corner while Hellana stood guard over the remnants of the ravaged salmon that had been flown half way around the globe.



Showmen

Painful memories resurface! I still have nightmares about our last entanglement demonstration at some god-forsaken military academy. The room was packed with an ugly audience. Anticipating a future world riven by violent confrontation, it was keen to appropriate our enhanced powers for their so-called expertise in 'conflict resolution'.

We were presented to a be-medalled General, an aggressive oaf who had dressed down for the occasion in a jungle of camouflage. Spokesman for a room of inferiors, he snagged the moral high ground, his reward for a lifetime of mind-numbing self-sacrifice.

But our demonstration came badly off the rails. It was a fiasco of a magnitude that only Dex could contrive. The presenter's initial comments introduced an unfortunate fencing analogy to describe our psychic entanglement. Dex became irrepressible as the notion took command of his overwrought imagination. He played to the house, amusing the assembly with winsome shoulder shrugs and florid thrusting gestures.

When Dex gets into a role and his imagination takes flight, he loses all instinct for self-preservation. As he danced around with his imaginary foil, he began to effuse about kill ratios and getting stacked with medals – not welcome observations in such a place!

Peacocks at the Pale

With withering contempt the General leapt up and barked, "Has either of you monsters ... the faintest idea of the self-sacrifice of those who defend the freedoms that you are ridiculing?"

"So that you can commence the shooting and grab the spoils?" Dex rejoined brightly.

The General's thin slash of a mouth dropped open like a trap door baring his tiny vicious teeth. With a strangled fury he hissed. "We came here to witness a phenomenon which might have some relevance to the very real challenges of the battlefield. But instead we have been subjected to puerile antics. There is no place for such self-indulgence on my team."

"Look at yourself" Dex rejoined bursting into uncontrollable hysterics. He was holding his imagined foil with an elegantly cranked wrist, "A concatenation of medals and stripes! ... just another witless servant barricaded behind a protective pale, gun trained nervously outwards." I have rarely heard Dex on such an eloquent riff.

The General slowly lifted his right hand and extended two fingers like a gun. His eyes blinked once, suggesting the release of a deadly bullet. He turned on his heels and walked out.

Surprisingly, on his departure the rest of the audience erupted into raucous applause and whistles of approval. Dex took a modest bow.

With such distorted agendas, how dare he denounce us as monsters? A monster pursues some single anti-social purpose in life.

But we do not comprehend any purpose at all.

Reluctant Spy

ara was becoming worried about Clay's prolonged absence. She wanted to talk to him about Jimmy who suddenly seemed so much more real than anyone else up at the Lodge. She wanted to find out what he knew about those defaced photos.

Discreetly revisiting the faded photograph in the lounge, she could recognise traces of the older man in those young features, the shyness yet an underlying self-confidence.

She imagined sharing that moment on that dock many years ago. Would she have recognised the fleeting treasure of the moment or was it only possible now because of this old photograph? She wondered whether she had ever recognised such moments of happiness in her own life.

Everyone now seemed to be so unnecessarily complicated ... perforated, tattooed, punctured, over-analysed, self-seeking, all desperately striving not to be abandoned by a callous world ... all dreaming of desperate solutions to problems that might be addressed in simpler ways.

Was she deluding herself in imagining that someone like Clay had residual shreds of personal integrity? Admittedly she could not exactly put her finger on anything specific that inspired confidence. He was sneaky and evasive, so tied up in his own preoccupations that he readily laid himself open to the manipulations of people like Frank. He had none of the calm perspective on life that she had found so reassuring in the old native. But she felt that Clay might come to realise what an asset she could be if he would only open up. But now Clay was missing and no one but her seemed to be concerned.

The afternoon was becoming increasingly sultry and oppressive. The storm foretold by old native seemed imminent. Mara imagined that she could hear a faint drum roll of distant thunder.

The guests began to re-gather on the front veranda for tea after a brief siesta. They were socialising awkwardly, searching for topics of conversation; families, travels or in the case of Hellana moments of fine dining that had remained indelibly etched in her memory.

Mara realised that this would be an ideal moment to retrieve the photos for Jimmy. Cubbie's earlier admonition was still ringing in her ears. "Mind your own business; leave these things to the professionals." She had heard this advice rather too frequently recently. Perversely, this seemed to goad her onwards. She was quite disgusted that she had been so duped by Clara Voy. Nonchalantly, she slipped off, apparently intending to collect something from her room, and then diverted through the back pantry to make her way down the hill out of sight of the group on the veranda.

She approached the side door of the lab building again and pushed it gently open. There was silence within and the hall stretching before her remained dimly lit by the pale acid glow of the emergency lights. Stealthily she made her way past the abandoned equipment to the office where she had found the file. Everything seemed exactly as she had last seen it, although she was unnerved to notice that the coffee cup had been removed. Without turning on the light she stealthily slid the file out of the side drawer. She riffled through it quickly under the dim window light and extracted the defaced photographs. Then on second thought, she also pulled out the shorthand notes from various interviews. She folded the contents and turned to return the file to the drawer.

Suddenly her heart leapt into her mouth. She could hear the slam of a distant door and footsteps approaching briskly down the long hallway.

Terrified she considered trying to squeeze out through a small side window that looked quite impenetrable behind its filthy blind.

What a fool! Why would she let herself get involved in such nonsense? She did not even know these people, much less care about them. She was never cut out for derring-do. She ducked behind a lab bench stacked high with filing boxes just as a number of people entered the room.

Frank's voice trailed over his shoulder as he entered. "This is my home away from home. We can talk here. Sorry ... not much on offer in the way of hospitality. I'll rustle up something in a moment." Mara recognized a demurring voice that sounded like Noor's, though uncharacteristically subdued. She glanced around in despair to find that she was positioned

next to the coffee maker!

Frank flicked on the desk lamp which cast deep shadows around the rest of the room. Fortunately no one made any attempt to open the blinds behind her.

"I'll just leave the door open so that we can hear anyone approach. I caught one of my assistants in here earlier today."

Mara's ears pricked up realizing the he must be referring to Clay and alarmed by his choice of the word 'caught'.

Frank's voice was coupled with a scraping chair as he sat down. "I think that I am beginning to detect a certain resistance to our deal? – and I must say that am not at all happy with that. We must be a united team."

Zwielicht's soft voice wavered. He clearly had little appetite for confrontation. "Well I have been talking to Krafft and his Gene-Sys colleagues and they expressed some regret about developments since de Vere walked through their door. To be honest he curses the day you made that introduction – and he is completely baffled by the outcome of the *City Seven* fiasco, says that none of that was possible in his lab, even suggests that it might be someone *like you* who has set him up?"

Noor's voice broke in unctuously, clearly attempting the role of mediator. "Well be that as it may, Zwie, we're here and we have got to make the marriage work"

Frank added sharply, "I'm sorry about Krafft's reservations, but he is just a *little* ... too prone to paranoia." Frank paused long enough for them to note the emphasis and conjure up an image of the little blue safety hat with upturned visor.

Zwielicht added tentatively, "Talk about being prone to paranoia. To be honest with you, I feel that I have entered some paranoid's limbo."

Disregarding his remark Frank proceeded brusquely. "These next weeks leading up to the Gene-Sys shares launch are absolutely critical. Once the company is out there in the open, it is going to be full steam ahead. We are all working hard to ensure that those shares land in the right hands, the people who will give you the political backing that you need."

"I must confess that I don't understand this mania for secrecy.

What we are undertaking seems perfectly above board in my view." Zwielicht's voice sounded tremulous and worried. The investors are falling over themselves. To be honest, despite my misgivings, it seems that your strategy worked beautifully, but I am determined to ensure that our research does not get sidelined, just to suit the curious agendas of someone like de Vere."

Frank replied with positive authority, "Perhaps I should clarify who has managed your publicity operations. I am your gateway to de Vere's critical funding. Strategically, Helly will maintain her distance at this stage, a useful figure-head."

There was a long silence in which Mara felt she could hear Zwielicht swallowing self-consciously. What were they doing?

Frank cleared his throat importantly before resuming. "I don't need to remind you that behind the scenes there is general recognition that your control over some of your patents may not be as solid as you like to project. It's not as if you're marketing a gold-plated patent drug where we can sit back and rake in the benefits of long established research. This is going to be very dog eat dog. Around the world companies are scrambling to snag this research and looking for the loopholes to exploit. Betting on genetically modified life forms is a high stakes venture and only a few parties will end up in the fortunate position to rake in the gains. That one party may not be Gene-Sys, however cutting-edge your research contribution. And that, gentlemen, is where Es-Tech becomes indispensable in tipping the balance. We will provide the protection that you require; making sure that no one gets to the trough before you. Trust me on this."

"To be honest I don't think that we have any reason to trust your judgement on anything." Zwielicht unhappily added under his breath.

"De Vere is driving the financing. He knows who is going to take the reins in the future. He's not going to sit back and rely on impotent courts to defend your position, while others run off with the baby. He knows how to be pro-active when it comes down to ... the money."

"But he must certainly leave the management of the direction of

research to us," Noor added.

Zwielicht's voice confronted Noor peevishly. "To be honest Burrell de Vere seems to have only one interest - the political power that his money can buy. Even talking about *his* money is a little rich anyway, it seems anything but his. He is like some awful creature with long tentacles sunk in a murky swamp. Don't we risk becoming tainted ourselves? The optics are so disastrously wrong."

Noor interjected "We are not deluding ourselves Zwie ... BeeDeVee is just a well-connected Laundromat; he can transfer his allegiances elsewhere at any time. He is not investing in our research because he believes in what we have accomplished; we are only of interest to him because it is going to make a lot of illicit gains a bit more fragrant. He will continue to empower our research only as long as it suits him. We should recognise that we are using him as much as he is using us."

Frank added cajoling, "I'm always impressed with Noor's practical approach! There is lots of competition to ensure we keep de Vere on his toes. Es-Tech is not in the business of taking risks; we assess and mitigate them"

"Or drop them onto someone else's plate. Not much different from Flin's agenda you'll admit."

Frank chuckled mirthlessly. "Trust me! Everyone's going to be a winner here."

Again Zwielicht's plaintive voice interjected. "To be honest what irks me most is that Es-Tech seems to be orchestrating everyone. As far as I'm concerned Es-Tech are just the hired help. But instead, I feel that we are being coerced, blackmailed. To start with I would feel much more comfortable including Hellana in this conversation."

Frank's voice returned sharply "And I imagine that your little stock transaction would also be consigned to the dustbin shortly thereafter." Frank paused. "I don't *do* blackmail; this is a personal offer to help achieve everyone's objectives in the most expeditious way possible. The last thing you want is a load of busybodies checking out your patents. There are a lot of controversial parties out there that could make this whole process

a lot messier."

Zwielicht's voice rose in objection, "What do you mean to suggest by my patents being shaky? They are rock solid investments, I can tell you, and the twins' genetic material remains a goldmine. Their gene sequences have been fully documented. They are already resourcing myriad research programmes. We don't need to safeguard our patents on those particular genes, we own them outright! No court in the world is going to deny a human being full rights to his personal genetic makeup."

"Well perhaps more accurately, surely *they* own them outright Doctor?" There was a long pause and Mara fancied that she heard a stifled choke from Noor. "You must recognise that we are all in this together!"

Frank continued in a more conspiratorial tone. "In fact it might also help you to understand my position better if I were to tell you that Helly may not continue to enjoy the full confidence of our Board much longer. Already you will have noticed, she relies heavily on her ever-diligent and most certainly inept Ms McCubbins. These are not the deal-makers you can expect to rely on at this stage."

"Nevertheless, I don't understand why we are undertaking this so secretly."

"Well, you should know that the senior management of Es-Tech is currently in a state of flux. The Nix vision, so called, is being called into question. Perhaps she has not undertaken aggressively enough the reshaping of our role as we enter an *Age of Terror*. Fear is a strong ally in everything that we are undertaking. We have all seen how successful it proved to be in the case of the *City Seven*. Es-Tech must be seen to be fulfilling our security role in our determination to deflect truly terrifying possibilities."

"The last few weeks have proven that Es-Tech and Gene-Sys are a perfect fit in establishing complementary agendas. You are being invited into that partnership. It's a simple no-brainer for you!"

"As professionals you will no doubt have noticed that some of the Gene-Sys standards of research, and I mean this general mess," Frank paused perhaps to allow them to look about the room, "fall short of the mark Clearly we would all be well advised to keep a confidential profile, at least until our money's in the bank."

Frank continued "And I don't need to point out, Zwielicht, that this is an offer that you really cannot refuse. De Vere has placed the only substantial offer on the table. I'm simply introducing you to the next phase of operations."

"You make yourself clear. But to be honest, we would all probably respond better to a less coercive tone." Zwielicht's peevish statement trailed off ineffectually in mumbling.

Frank suddenly sounded forthright as if there had just arrived at general agreement. "Anyway, on a positive note, as requested we have been doing a little homework on the side. I've always regarded myself as a bit of a scientific boffin. I have assembled an interesting file on some of the local specimens that Krafft has been monitoring. All release papers are in order and they are deemed to have participated voluntarily in our research."

Mara could hear the desk drawer sliding open. Her fingers tightened around the file in her right hand which was shaking uncontrollably in terror.

Suddenly there was an explosive slam. "Damn that Clay! What's that jerk playing at?" Frank hissed to the others "Stay Here!" He dashed out the door and stamped angrily down the hall.

A moment's silence and the Mara heard Zwielicht's voice which had instantly lost its whiny tone and sounded curiously clipped in addressing Noor. "So things don't always work out smoothly for our unflappable villain. That almost sounded like a veiled threat that we might end up in his gulag with the native band." Zwielicht chuckled.

"With a case of whisky, I hope!" Noor added sounding slightly enamoured of the prospect.

Mara could hear the footsteps of one of the men pacing the room listlessly, the other sounded as if he was drumming his fingers nervously on the desktop. She could feel herself contracting, imagining herself a small insect that could scuttle into a crack under the desk. There was a

long moment of silence and she tilted her head upwards to confront the face of Dr Zwielicht staring down at her. She was about to leap up and dash from the room in a panic when the doctor placed a hand pensively on his cheek and turned away. He said nothing. But he must have seen her! How could he be staring straight at her and not? She heard the grating sound of his chair as he sat down again and said nothing.

Moments later Frank returned breathlessly and apologised for his outbreak of annoyance. "I don't seem to be able to locate the file at the moment. But at least we all know where we stand and how to proceed. There is no real alternative path. So, united, let's return to the lodge and rejoin the party; we'll continue this discussion later. Zwielicht, I will get the files over to you shortly; undoubtedly you will find them interesting." The desk light was switched off abruptly and the three men departed, their footsteps echoing ever fainter down the hallway.

Mara, a quivering jelly, almost fell over in terror as she unfolded herself from her crouch. She considered returning the missing file to the desk but then realised that this would only serve to spread the net of suspicion wider. She realised that Frank must have gone off in search of Clay, obviously incarcerated in disgrace.

Still clutching the file she crept along the deserted corridor, peering into rooms either side. At the exit she burst out into dazzling daylight.

On gelatinous legs she followed the path down to the dock and slipped the dossier deftly between two logs of the dock crib, then made her way back up to the lodge and retreated directly to her bedroom without a word. She collapsed onto her bed with half sigh, half sob. "I really am *not* cut out for any of this!"

Cornered

rank's offhand comment about having 'caught' Clay rankled with Mara as she made her way back down to the lounge. She noticed Dr Zwielicht observing her quizzically from across the room but she studiously avoided catching his eye. Instead she turned her attention towards Noor, trying to detect whether Zwielicht had confided in him about her spying.

Discreetly Zwielicht began to drift towards her and then motioned her with a conspiratorial flick of thumb and forefinger towards the door out onto the veranda. Despite his discretion that little gesture had caught Cubbie's ever vigilant eye.

"To be honest I imagined that the Es-Tech approach to information gathering might be more sophisticated," Zwielicht began facetiously as they stood side by side at the railing overlooking the view. "... unless of course our little friend Frank was also unaware of your presence! I've come to realise that Es-Tech is hardly a seamless organisation. In fact it has only been in speaking earlier to the truly appalling McCubbins that I learn that you have only a tenuous connection to her organisation. She mentioned that you maintain some sort of social network?"

"Well the *City Farm* is hardly a dating agency if that's what you're implying." Mara made a mental note to count how many times this man resorted to his habitual phrase 'to be honest' coupled with an infuriatingly disingenuous blink of the eyes.

"To be honest if there is one thing that dealing with Es-Tech has taught me ... that is not to divulge my cards ... unless the other party is prepared to show theirs in exchange? Why were you hiding in that room? Were you spying on behalf of Ms McCubbins?"

Mara bit her lip. "Actually I went there to retrieve that file of photographs that Frank was so angry about. When I heard you approaching, I panicked and dove behind the bench. I had no intention of listening in."

"Somehow I don't suppose that Frank would be totally reassured with that answer."

"And I don't suppose that a lot of the people in this room would be reassured by what I think I overheard."

"True. But to be honest I wasn't very happy with it either. I'm afraid that we are all being coerced to fall in with Frank's agenda. Perhaps all of us feel more like prisoners than guests here in Arden ... you included?"

"Your conversation and Frank's proposals made little sense at the time. But I couldn't help thinking afterwards that you and Dr. Noor seemed to have a rather awkward relationship. You didn't seem to be the close collaborators that you purport. He ignores you and runs his bizarre promotional circus entirely to suit some other agenda. I began to wonder if you resent all the static he churns out. And curiously you don't seem to have mentioned anything to him about finding me there."

"You're quite astute! Perhaps Es-Tech has overlooked an obvious talent! No, to be honest, I didn't tell Noor - I was surprised to discover you there. I wanted to have a word with you first. As for Noor, let's say that we have a marriage of convenience, sometimes a bit rocky." He paused and gazed down over the lake, mulling over in his mind how to proceed.

"The partnership *is* fraught. But I have to admit that Noor attracts the resources needed to carry on my research. His exhausting dedication to self-promotion is effective in attracting necessary funding."

"But you sounded as if you were finding the arrangement somewhat less advantageous now. Is his bizarre behaviour becoming a liability?"

Zwielicht sighed and rolled his long suffering eyes. "To be honest, it seems that it suits him to keep the project teetering on the brink of total collapse. And yet this has also been the recipe for our success in attracting investment. They say that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Everybody knows about Noor and identifies our pioneering patents with him."

"Your relations with Es-Tech also seem fraught. From what I overheard in Frank's absence, you all seem to resent his interference."

Zwielicht signed, "To be honest I *am* utterly exasperated. Es-Tech is obsessed with inculcating fear. Sometimes it seems that they are the real terrorists. While the rest of us are just trying to function within our normal

day-to-day, Es-Tech continually forces us to look at what could happen if the science falls into the wrong hands."

"Hardly normal day-to-day!" Mara added quietly.

"To be honest I am a simple man, a man of compassion, only a scientist who is dedicated to advancement of my discipline. But so many talk about our research as if we were engineering abominations. When you consider it, genetic selection has been an obsession of the human race from time immemorial, as indeed it is with most species. We all select our mates, place our offspring in competitive situations and promote those who are best suited to carry on the race. We have developed special criteria for assessing beauty, intelligence and physical prowess and we seek to propagate those desirable attributes."

"But the Noor Project seems to raise a whole new level of intervention."

"To be quite honest we are at the threshold of an extraordinary leap forward. We are beginning a comprehensive redefinition of what a human being can be."

Mara looked very doubtful. "Is that what we are supposed to see in the twins? Aren't they just *clones*, slightly modified to suit someone's business aspirations?"

"Ah! You too have succumbed to that widespread disinformation! Cloning does not emulate the diversity that Nature ceaselessly throws up. We, on the contrary, are *designing for diversity*. To be honest, I feel that we are wholly aligned to those natural evolutionary processes."

"But why is the Noor Project seeking a partnership with Gene-Sys? What you are proposing seems much more complex than their fascination with algae."

"To be honest, we see advantages in allying forces. Our research has too often been thwarted in the courts by disastrous reversals on patent protection. Judicial upsets have made it virtually impossible to patent living tissue."

"Like your twins? Is that what you mean by living tissue?"

"To be honest the twins are a special case; they have an indisputable claim to their own genetic makeup and complete freedom to manage their own bodies,. They have been sexually active for years now. We have managed to channel this into a lucrative sideline which helps fund our research. We are able to maintain complete control over their reproductive assets as well as the key parts of their genome that we have patented."

Mara was shocked. "But that smacks of blatant exploitation!"

"But is this not exactly what they want for themselves? To be honest they have no desire to launch themselves into the hurly burly. Their talk of escape is fantasy. They go off on their little 'adventures' as they call them, but they have never made a concerted attempt to change their lives. We have never placed them under any restraint."

"But it must be a very lonely existence for them. You have created them and brought them up as orphans, without parents or blood ties. You seem to have created eternally petulant adolescents."

"Perhaps we have imbued them with an excessive sense of selfimportance. We have encouraged them to see themselves as outsiders. To be honest I do believe that they are abnormally gifted. They contain the seeds of the future not just in their genetic makeup but also in the insight they bring into how genetic engineering is going to change our concept of what it is to be human."

"What it is to be human? I think that I would prefer to look at alternative models please!"

"Genetic pioneering will put a huge strain on human society as it currently exists."

"Are you willing to gamble that the intelligence you have endowed them with is best suited to the future?"

"The human race has already reached an impasse. We must jettison much of our genetic heritage that is ill suited to cope with the challenges we are about to face."

"But who is defining those new challenges ... you? Aren't you redesigning the intelligence to suit the tools that you have developed? We always become infatuated with our own inventions. You might risk inadvertently designing out some critical ingredient of our evolutionary advantage."

"To be honest, the new intelligence is already forming. It has its own internal impetus. Our research is only reflecting what is already happening. We have opened a new chapter of human history, an exciting moment! We are being drawn into a great interrelated web of intelligence. Everybody is at it; can't you see? Everyone's got something in their hands, or is peering into some screen, focussed, calculating, in the thrall of a greater web of communication."

"Your project seems intent on creating a single vision that may prove extremely vulnerable. It is certainly a vision that will serve those people trying to garner power."

"But this is what we believe that the twins' education has addressed. They have taken the first steps in an emancipating process. They engage issues beyond the practical concerns of people like Lagarto, Grey or de Vere. They have been nurtured to develop a mentality that is quite distinct from most of humanity."

"Nurtured? I hardly see much evidence of that! What kind of parenting have you provided? You have not even given them the security of a knowing parent."

"Our team have been better parents than many. Dex and Sinny have thrived within a security zone that Flinders Grey could only dream of, a world that is virtually risk free, liberated from so many of the destructive self-delusions that afflict the rest of the human race."

"But they are utterly dependant on you. What would happen to them if they were left to fend for themselves?"

"But the same could be said of most people, including your well-intentioned *City Farmers*. Their lives revolve around self-delusions believing that the essential ingredients of life can be delivered in conveniently shrink-wrapped packages. They have developed 'ecology-light' consciences as they set about filling their lives with furniture and playing their little 'success' games.

"But what then makes the twins so valuable?"

"They have been endowed with a 'twinning gene' inherited from parents and grandparents. We have been able to isolate this specific genetic sequence. This is the key patent, absolutely iron-clad, that Gene-Sys are keen to partner with us in exploiting."

"But you don't own those boys! Yet you are commercialising them!"

"To be honest, interfering with nature to secure better odds has been a long-standing preoccupation of the human race, an essential part of our success as a species. The twins live charmed lives, and truly relish the exceptional attributes that we have fostered in them. But in the process of their development we have all discovered dimensions of human telepathic capacity related to twinning that are astonishing. I hope that you'll come to appreciate some of this when demonstrated later this afternoon."

"Noor has already enlisted me his display." Mara mentioned with a note of apprehension.

"The twins truly do manifest an extraordinary ability to communicate intuitively. Most of us live half lives and rein in the full potential of our capacities. They will demonstrate that our innate human capacities far exceed what we limit ourselves to expect."

"So they will just make fools of us all?"

"There is one thing that my study of intelligent life has taught mewe all have astonishing capacities to respond to change. Under certain circumstances when we are challenged we are able to draw on an unimagined latent reservoir of capabilities."

"The time to further this science has come and if I don't steer it, then someone who may be considerably less scrupulous will."

"You seem to be describing the entire raft of people moored in the next room."

They gazed back into the lounge at the little groups engaged in conspiracy. De Vere sat alone in the corner toying obsessively with his hair as he pored over briefing papers.

"You regard your neutrality as the badge of honour of the scientist. But you are exposing aspects of your work that make a lot of people uncomfortable."

"I freely admit that I tend to leave the application of my results to others who can evaluate what should be exploited."

"But Doctor, you complain that you have fallen victim to Es-Tech manipulations. 'To be honest' (she couldn't resist) you could pull the rug out from under Es-Tech at any time."

Mara caught a glimpse of Cubbie hovering just inside the screen door, considering a plausible entry stratagem. She was beginning to attribute super-human faculties to this woman. How much had she overheard?

As the door slid open, Mara rushed over to meet her on the threshold to counter the incursion.

"I was hoping that you would join us. But I've been sharing a little problem that we are both having with Frank ..."

"Well I can certainly relate to that. We are all disappointed with Frankie, I think ..."

"We'll join you in the lounge in a moment."

Cubbie cocked her head winsomely and winked to complement a toothy rictus. She retreated gracelessly, temporarily defeated.

"That will set her imagination running in overdrive. Somehow I get the impression that everyone here is busily eavesdropping on everyone else!"

"As if you're one to speak!"

"But one of the principal people who was facilitating the Es-Tech efforts seems to have disappeared. He has not been seen for hours and I am rather worried about him. You met him, Clay, the young man ..."

"Oh the lad with all the metal paraphernalia? He seems to have tread on Frank's toes. To be honest, I thought that he was something to do with catering. Now that's an interesting identity choice for a security spy."

"Well that is just the point; they make sure that he stays behind the scenes."

"Are you two in cahoots? Is he the reason why you are here?

"No, No, No! Don't be ridiculous! And in fact I still don't know why I've been invited. There is some tortured agenda in McCubbin's mind."

Mara thought that perhaps she was protesting too much. Without further wild excuses she turned and fled.

Chick Magnet

cross the room Mara could observe the twins, huddled defensively in a corner, their hulking backs firmly set to repel intervention. They appeared to have lost their habitual mirrored physical co-ordination. Previously, their gestures seemed fluently interconnected as if by invisible strings, one left-handed and the other right. But now a tempest appeared to be brewing, belied by the rigid set of shoulders and the frenetic puppet-like jerking of their ridiculous visored caps. Both were feverishly thumbing their palm devices and peering angrily into the screens. Above the hum of conversation she caught fragments of aggrieved voices. Suddenly in a fit of pique a hurled palm device skidded across the bare boards juddering to a halt at her feet. She stooped to pick it up. "Bit of a tiff," she concluded under her breath. "Perhaps all it takes is a minor glitch and their whole world comes tumbling down."

She heard the more truculent twin, now recognisable as Dex, snap, "Leave me alone! You don't know anything about women, ...!" he hissed in a peevish voice.

In passing she dropped the phone in his lap, adding glibly, "Is this the 'entanglement' we're looking forward to witnessing?" Dex levelled a saucer-eyed vacant stare; jaw hanging flaccid and full lips parted to achieve a startling leer.

Her feeble jibe had fallen on deaf ears. Sinny leapt to his brother's defence, regarding her with withering contempt, hissing "Just f*** off!"

Mara retreated hastily. She would have liked to share a laugh with Clay. Out of the corner of her eye she became aware that Sinny, tiring of his brother's rage, had hoisted himself up from the sofa. He tried to look inconspicuous as he bungled across the room to inspect the stuffed turtle. Then to her surprise he slipped through the adjacent door and vanished into the entry lobby.

Dex however, remained imploded on the couch, furiously massaging his tablet. His complexion had become an apoplectic red and his mouth twitched in angry concentration. She had not previously witnessed the two boys acting independently. Her curiosity peaked; she quietly made her own way across the room to follow Sinny.

She observed him as he paused in front of the office placing a hesitant hand on the knob. He entered furtively, gently pushing the door closed behind him. She tiptoed over to the door and opened it a crack. To her disappointment, Sinny was quite alone in the room, bent over a desk intently riffling through the contents of Noor's tartan valise.

Realising her advantage, she pushed the door open fully and entered with a jaunty salutation. "Oh it's *just* you Sinny! Your brother seems to be in a fit at the moment. No wonder you're taken refuge here. Actually I was looking for Clay. Have you seen him?"

"Missing? Dex will be pleased." Sinny looked annoyed as he guiltily crammed something back into Noor's valise. "I think that people are expecting altogether too much from our show," he muttered, "It's putting us under a lot of stress."

Mara pressed on insouciantly, "Don't let me disturb the reconnaissance. It's in the air I think, everybody here seems to be checking out each other's pockets."

"I'm not spying, if that is what you are implying." Sinny stammered petulantly. "Noor always keeps a relay in his valise. We have the passwords" he added defensively. "I've just come in to check if the system has crashed ... we're offline. It's put Dex into a poisonous mood."

"Well why not get *your team* to sort it out?" She emphasised the sarcasm to gauge his reaction.

"Actually as far as I'm concerned, it's not such a bad thing. I thought that I would take the opportunity to check the system, see if anyone is still online. It's not as if I'm objecting to the time off, in fact I'd quite enjoy the peace."

"This seems to shed a new light on your so-called *entanglement*! I thought that being seamlessly connected, there was no remission from the interactive future that Noor has been promoting for all of us!" Mara added sarcastically.

"Dex behaves like a terrorist at times, a totally closed mind."

"Autism spring to my mind, but perhaps you see it differently." Mara added flippantly.

"Well you're the one responsible for most of his problems at the moment. You're the one he's been stalking."

"Stalking! Me! He only sees fit to grace me with a look of transparent loathing."

"He is really into you. He's maxing out his powers as a chick magnet. He has been adjusting your profile ever since we met, retooling you from the ground up, as well as enhanced plot lines and situations, better clothes, an extra inch here, a nip and tuck there ... and yes definitely better clothes."

"What's wrong with my clothes? What does he have in mind, stilettos and a bola top?"

"That is why he has been creating a whole new virtual context for you. I should say that you're in safe hands with me. You're not my type."

Mara dropped her eyes to consider his pudgy little 'safe' hands worrying the zipper of the briefcase. They were smooth and fleshy with almost invisible knuckles, like inflated gloves. "Well, I'm relieved. But thank your brother kindly, even though we haven't exchanged a single word, he doesn't know anything about me and I think that I'll keep it that way."

"You'd be surprised at what he knows about you."

"It's a surprise I can wait for indefinitely."

"I tell you that Noor's motives are quite sadistic in throwing us all together in the show."

"Or totally self-serving."

"What do you mean by that?"

Sinny compressed his lips in a scowl and shrugged. "Anyway, I can't find what I am looking for here." With that he clicked the briefcase closed, turned his back and shuffled out of the room, leaving Mara in a quandary about her upcoming role. She turned off the lights and followed Sinny back into the lounge, noting that he had flopped down next to the apoplectic Dex who had not noticed his absence.

Too Much of a Good Thing



Isolation

We are sleep-walking into disaster!

It is as if a cleaver has sliced us apart. Complete disconnection, a sudden silence descended after our return from the ARC tour. I cannot look at Dex without feeling overwhelmed with revulsion for this mirror image of all that I despise in myself.

This shared manacle has now been shed. Irritable and piggish, he has retreated alone into his gaming obsessions, totally ignoring everyone around him ... and me.

And here we are about to be launched once more into the breach! But this time without any communications operating, We are courting certain disaster!

Noor, as always, proposes to rely on his showmanship to distract everyone from the elephant in the room. But Mara, with her pedestrian diligence, may be the tiny mouse that precipitates a sudden stampede for the door.

But in this sudden freedom, I feel intense yearning for something unidentifiable ... it is an excruciating hunger without any idea of what would alleviate it. It is an emptiness, like awakening, shivering, alone in the night.

Peacocks at the Pale

Suddenly I feel the pointlessness to my life. I have been transported on a cloud of extreme self-delusion. Nothing now remains except a terrifying misty emptiness.

I have always resented the obligation to live with Dex's unremitting condescension. I have resented his cynical judgment of my every step. Though we have lived so closely bound, there remains a subversive undercurrent tugging us in different directions.

I have always wanted to claim a separate identity, a character that is unique to me alone.

Most people carry within those contrary forces acting at crosspurposes that undermine a single decisive action. They wage their selfthwarting, internal disputes relentlessly; compromise only emerges at the point of sheer exhaustion.

For many years I have awakened from a recurrent dream. I have watched Dex stumbling away through a tunnel of light. His shoulders are hunched in purposeful rejection of me and of everything we have been together.

In my dream, only once does he turn to look back, staring blankly at me, his empty blue saucers betraying no emotion and no regret.

He glances around baffled by the vast emptiness, then lifts his hand listlessly and gestures down the tunnel.

I only wave him on to his separate destiny.

Too Much of a Good Thing

ommanding attention with a loud whistle followed by a circus huckster's bark, Noor began to set out the rules of engagement for his 'performance'.

"I freely admit that there could be many ways of faking what we are about to demonstrate. As the audience, I encourage you to exercise healthy scepticism and challenge any aspect of what you are about to see in any way you choose! We welcome your participation and want you to help us test the limits. But I promise you that we are aiming to pose some very intriguing questions about the potential of the human mind."

"The twins have sensitised themselves to powers that many of us suspect are still residual within. We perceive the mysterious communications between animals. But we deny evidence of such abilities within ourselves. Imprisoned within our rational worlds and tied down by language we have slammed the door against such intuitive exchange."

He beckoned the twins forward. They appeared angry and resentful, their movements truculent and unco-ordinated. Dex looked slovenly and imploded; his body stocking had snagged the furniture and ridden up over a protuberant belly, while Sinny levelled a prim, supercilious gaze over the expectant faces around him. Mara, the reluctant agent, was then introduced by Noor with a flourish as 'our girl' to her immense annoyance.

To demonstrate the seamless entanglement of their mental states, the twins were positioned in the alcoves either side of the fireplace. Mara was asked to receive written questions secretly volunteered by the guests. Dex in evident despair stared at Mara with vacant blue saucer eyes, his slack jaw dropped in a lascivious leer. One leg dangled with his toe suggestively touching the floor. Sinny sat upright and patted his knees, apprehensive that all eyes seemed to be directed towards his brother.

Note papers and pencils were handed around by the ever efficient Cubbie. The audience were invited to jot down any question or challenge that crossed their minds. Noor mentioned that in the past the completion of a line of poetry had proved remarkably successful. The drawn lot fell to Flinders Grey who pondered a question at length with a lugubrious face and then reluctantly presented a folded scrap to Mara. He indicated the truculent Dex as recipient who accepted it without a flicker of interest, his eyes floating around vacantly as if he were in a dream state. "This will put the cat among the pigeons!" he said sourly.

Dex unfurled and read the message and turned away with a bilious burp. He flopped back on the sofa totally disengaged. Mara then retrieved the note and conveyed it back to Grey. It was a simple question. It had humoured him to recollect another Arden:

"Can one desire too much of a good thing?"

Anticipating the likely recalcitrance of his brother, Sinny had moved into diplomatic overdrive trying to compensate for his sibling's social deficiencies.

Flinders looked on with purse-lipped scepticism. But then to his surprise Sinny's trance-like ramblings seemed to hit the mark.

"I can't imagine for whom any of this would be seen as *too much* of a good thing. Arden is not a place of freedom but rather of carefully constructed barriers; patrolled by agents who are intent on cutting the natural ties that bind us together."

Grey was clearly astonished at this observation. Hellana's eyes crossed, unable to fathom what on earth Sinny was talking about.

Suddenly Thomas Dex exploded in an outraged snarl from the other end of the room, "Why are we wasting our time in a place like this? ... amidst hyenas tearing apart their prey."

Sinny however smiled apologetically and persevered brightly. "In fact there are many things that we have yet to discover that lie on the other side of those thresholds, and many risks to be recognised. The questioner knows this only too well." Flinders appeared awkward and surprised.

"Arden, once abundant with burgeoning life, is now only haunted by ghosts. They are watching us and their fury is mounting. None of you has any business here. We delude yourselves about having the power to control the natural world."

Mara glanced discreetly at Frank alongside her shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. Growing annoyance rippled through his jaw. He kept looking over at a bemused looking Noor in obvious disdain, muttering "What is this – some kind of Delphic oracle?"

"Humanity cannot exist beyond the pale. It will transform itself into something quite different. It doesn't take psychic powers to read what is already in everybody's mind."

At this Sinny got up from his sofa, emerged to thumb his nose at his scowling brother and walked out of the room.

Frank pushed forward trying to look amiable and in control of the proceedings. "Well score high points for drama! It seems that we have all just participated in a brotherly tiff. I guess they'll need to improve the show before it hits Broadway," he added glibly. "At least a degree of failure suggests that there may be some authenticity in the proceedings."

While the others tittered in amusement at the phrase 'a degree of failure'

Grey however looked more reflective. He approached Frank and suspiciously enquired about Clay, "the lad with all the decorative gadgets on his face, why is he not present? Is he perhaps playing some role behind the scenes?"

Suddenly a look of comprehension seemed to flood into Frank's eyes. Mara heard him mutter under his breath "Of course! It's bloody Clay!" and watched as he turned abruptly on heel and pushed his way out of the room. She caught a glimpse of him racing down the hill towards the lab building in apparent rage.

Hellana huffed to Cubbie, "Well I don't know what that was all about! They behaved as if they utterly loathed one another. Even you and Frank could demonstrate a more convincing psychic entanglement!"

The 'Clarification'

alyn, her head still bound in the shaggy pink sock, had gravitated to a position in front of the fireplace where she appeared to be studying the varnished scales on a trophy fish. Then she turned dramatically and in fluting voice began to address the others present.

"Doctor Noor, I have a question for *you* though. I would like a clarification." All eyes in the room turned towards her. Dr Noor simpered chivalrously.

Cubbie, wary of something unexpected impending, hastily attempted to derail the official tone of the questioner. In an unnecessarily loud bark she countered, "This is hardly the moment for public histrionics. Surely any questions for the doctor can be posed on a more personal level?"

The woman replied with increasing resolve, "What I have to contribute will undoubtedly be of interest to everyone in this room, I dare say, you and Helly included." The others were surprised at such a familiar reference to the august Ms Nix.

"Most of you probably don't recognise me but Es-Tech has arranged for me to attend this charade." With a dramatic gesture she swept off her large sunglasses and pushed back her woolly hat to reveal a pinched face and haggard complexion that seemed familiar to no one. "I'm Malyn Staryk, a colleague of Mr de Vere over there". All stared at her blankly.

Malyn raised a right hand of denial dramatically. "This is not a publicity stunt for my book, as some probably suppose. I'm here because I'm interested in the negotiations that are currently being undertaken to secure funding for the Noor project."

Hellana was struggling valiantly to make it appear that Malyn's presence was all part of a well-orchestrated plan, though still at a total loss as to what benefits she might claim from it. She broke in querulously, "Mally, I hardly think that a declaration is warranted at this exact stage. Just stick to your brief." She flashed an angry look around the room seeking the now absent Frank, "Whatever that may be."

"Another little fly in the Es-Tech ointment it seems," de Vere muttered. "In fact the room seems buzzing with nasty little blighters."

Malyn continued, "I have been following the antics of Dr Noor ever since his arrival in New Mid. Most of you have become acquainted with the Noor Project research over the past weeks thanks to the unremitting efforts of our media. But Noor and I are acquaintances with a long history. We go back many years, over two decades in fact. Do we not?"

All eyes turned toward Noor, who looked astonishingly vacant at this news. Hellana began to appear increasingly alarmed with the unforeseen direction of this narrative. She signalled to Cubbie and pointed to the exit with a furiously clenched hand, miming "Get Frank now!" through her clenched teeth.

Malyn continued, heedless of the rising temperature. "Twenty three years ago I lost my own twin sister Melanie in a tragic accident. This is not the place to burden you with details, just to say that I was devastated when she drowned."

"Please accept our sincere sympathy," Hellana hissed through clenched teeth.

But Malyn proceeded unfazed. "After her death I approached a doctor that we had consulted when we first resolved to create a family through less conventional means. Melanie had always been much more adventurous in these things than I was."

"This young doctor had inspired our confidence and he agreed to accept my challenge. I was told little about the counterpart donor's background. He was always intended to remain anonymous and he was given the codename Noor, meaning a 'light' of hope, and the Noor Project became the name of our venture."

"I fell pregnant almost immediately. As the pregnancy progressed it became apparent that I was indeed carrying twins. I could see the spirit of Melanie at work. But in the last months the doctors began to register concern for certain abnormalities and insisted that the remainder of the pregnancy should be managed within the confines of their clinic."

"Three weeks before the due date I suddenly became severely ill. The

doctors were adamant that I should undergo an induced birth immediately. Suddenly my dreams began to crash down around me. I could see only my own hubris in my certainty that I could undertake all these decisions on my own."

"I can still vividly remember awaking in that silent room, not a sound. The clinical space shimmered with ghostly light. There was no window. Everything was white emptiness, as if a fine layer of snow had chastened every surface as I slept. I felt exhausted, disoriented, but I knew instantly from the terrifying silence that something had gone terribly wrong."

"I rang the intercom phone and desperately called for the doctors. Shame-faced a doctor whom I had never met before spoke hesitantly, showing little confidence in the message he had to relay. He explained that the twins had been born severely deformed. Even seeing them was inadvisable in my fragile state. I became hysterical and he administered a sedative. I can still recall him receding in a haze by my bedside reassuring me that I would be in better shape to make necessary decisions after a good rest.

When I eventually returned to lucidity I found myself in a more congenial domestic environment attended by excessively cheerful nurses. This time there was a steady stream of solicitous attendants enquiring about my comfort. I demanded to see the doctors I knew but everyone only assured me that a grief counsellor would attend me shortly."

"This counsellor, an affable man, told me that an operation to separate the conjoined babies had been unsuccessful. I was given papers to sign. I named the deceased Thomas on the official papers. 'Thomas' – meaning 'the twin'."

"All my joy of the past months of expectation had evaporated. I abandoned my initial resolve to pursue the doctors for an explanation. I left it all behind and fled home. I told no one of my ordeal, merely alluding to having had a disastrous affair in Switzerland."

She swivelled to address Noor directly, "Dr Noor, I would like to ask you, do you recognise the woman who spent this traumatic time with you in Geneva those years ago?" She paused as Dr Noor began to contemplate

an interesting new role. She cut in, "Of course you don't and I will tell you why. Noor was a name that we made up. There never was a Doctor Noor. For whatever reason, you are a complete fabrication." She paused a moment and the room went dead quiet. "In fact my attendant doctor was a gentle, unassuming man. There is no way that such a character could have metamorphosed into this charlatan who has spent the last weeks assailing us with inane bravado. I do not know why you are here or why you are pretending to be a fictitious person, but perhaps you will now explain this to us."

In the hush that had fallen over the room, sideways glances were directed towards Noor who was stooped over examining his notebook and glancing around furtively.

Malyn continued, "And I believe that I have just seen my two children for the first time after twenty two years. These are the children that you stole from me. Now I think it is time for your explanation!"

The twins had been recalled from their recessive truculence and were staring at Malyn and Noor in evident horror at this unwelcome invasion of their comfortable lives.

Hellana looked mortified, her jaw mouthing silent syllables. She could not quite understand the full scope of what was happening. A sudden flood of unprocessed information had engulfed everyone, not the kind of situation that a seasoned security manager should ever encounter.

Cubbie was the first to rise to the situation with a strategy for damage control trilling, "Malyn, I can affirm that this has been even more riveting than your most dramatic evening confrontations. It sounds to me as if you and the good Doctor ought to be sorting out some of these details between yourselves, not on prime time, much as we are all dying to participate in the developing saga!... since Frank had apparently invited you to this jamboree perhaps *the three of you* could find a quiet corner to work out the details."

Cubbie galloped off in search of Frank.

A Plan

tanding behind his shoulder, Mara had been observing Zwielicht's behaviour obliquely throughout Malyn's performance. He suddenly began to look very nervous, cupping his elbow and massaging his lower jaw.

Under her breath she muttered, "This hardly squares with what you said earlier about Noor's joining your team."

Zwielicht drew her aside. "I suppose that you are beginning to see the connection. I could see you observing Noor's obvious puzzlement. But perhaps you realised that her dramatic denunciation was slightly off target. She is right about our naming the project 'Noor'. But if Malyn had looked more carefully she might have discovered one of the doctors that she was searching for in me. Sadly I may not be easily recognisable as that young man of twenty something. It's true that she was never intended to meet the so-called Mr Noor; he was merely the provider of the genetic material that we selected."

"To be quite honest, I had not even met him myself at the time, though I had examined his genetic profile in detail and selected it for specific characteristics. His dossier was particularly compelling in that he too was an identical twin from a family with a marked predilection for the twinning gene. His family background was somewhat exotic, Romany performers; named 'Nuruddine', *light of faith*. This was truncated into *Noor*."

"So Noor's exhausting proclivity for self-promotion comes naturally. But he is no doctor and never trained as one. *To be quite honest* he did re-enter our lives quite recently, presenting himself unexpectedly at the clinic and demanding access to the children that he had fathered, or more venally a cut in the profits from our research, which he had considerably overestimated. We were very reluctant to accommodate his crass demand but then his flair for publicity became more apparent. As you can appreciate our research is highly controversial. The science is too politically risky to be granted direct government funding in most countries. We have been

forced to rely entirely on private investment, always obliged to find our own sponsors."

"Though the concept of Noor as a doctor may seem outlandish, we have supported him in this guise. I begrudgingly admit that he has been a magnet for the funding that we desperately require. He is so brazen that nobody dares to question his credentials."

"From Noor and Malyn the boys have received a rarefied genetic imprint, material which has proven extremely valuable. In laboratories world-wide their genetic material has already become a well-established benchmark with proven marketability in a range of experiments."

"Neither Noor nor I were remotely interested in assuming fathership. Noor rarely addresses them at all admitting that parenthood is just not his style. They regard him as the "Project" mastermind, and have never been given any inkling about his more fundamental role as their genetic donor. The boys identify themselves first and foremost with the Project. It is this that gives meaning to their lives and a considerable degree of celebrity. They are not interested in finding family elsewhere."

"Well if they believe what they have just heard, Malyn's revelation will certainly have come as a shock to them. Perhaps *she* will lay claim to *them*."

"It's far too late for that; she'll soon realise it's an unworkable proposition. They are a self-contained team. You must have observed the look of dismay on their faces as the implications began to dawn on him. They understand that their special genetic gifts are the result of a remarkable gene tailoring process at conception. In actual fact their quite unique heritage was already largely written, simply within a chosen gene pool and the peculiarities of the material that we brought together."

"But you have certainly caused desperate pain and suffering in Malyn's life. She might have found fulfilment in motherhood."

"Malyn is undoubtedly intuitive; she has exceptional gifts for comprehending what others do not. But as a mother? ... No! I think not! Nevertheless she seems to recognise that there is some important purpose for her being here - that goes beyond the denunciation already delivered.

She may believe that there is still an important thread to pick up."

"When Malyn and Melanie first came to me they were utterly immersed in their selfish world, living complementary half lives in an isolated bubble. Later Malyn returned bereft, reduced to a half person. She came to me seeking a replacement for her loss. Her solution to her solitude was to buy herself a mother role. This is not maternal instinct; she wanted a child to replace the sister that she had lost. When the pregnancy came to term it unfortunately proved to be considerably more complex than anyone had foreseen; the birth was premature and the twins were conjoined. *In all honesty*, in the early stages their survival was not highly probable."

"It was obvious to us that Malyn could not cope with the outcome of her birthing. I knew that it would only cause suffering for both her and her deformed babies, and so I intervened to protect her from herself. I decided to let her continue to live her self-delusionary life. Her pain would only have infected others."

"You decided! What gave you the right to decide?"

Zwielicht sighed at Mara's self-righteousness. "In all honesty, we laid out the facts for her clearly as we saw them. We explained the birth defect coupled with probable severe brain damage. Ultimately the operation to separate the twins proved relatively minor. It is evidence of the mother that Malyn would have been that she didn't demand to see or participate further in the outcome; she focussed only on her own humiliation, her crushed ambitions and what she was going to tell people at home. Only afterwards, trying to give her a sense of closure we relieved her with the falsehood that the children had not survived the operation."

"We employed foster parents who came to live in the lab and act as caregivers. Eventually they proved to be less impaired than we had originally believed and they began to grow into reasonably normal children."

"Normal children! You are dreaming rather wide of the mark!"

"It was only later that we began to see signs of an unusual empathy between them; an ability to communicate that exceeded what is normal. We also discovered that their twinning gene, once identified, was very 'marketable'. There was a growing demand for their genetic material in a number of studies relating to twin behaviour."

Mara suddenly looked aside, pensive. "Have you considered that Es-Tech might have arranged Noor's sudden reappearance on your doorstep? I noticed how much Noor appears to rely on Frank to provide his script; you must have seen him looking around for Frank after Malyn's revelation. Do you actually trust Noor?"

Mara thought of what she overheard at the meeting in the lab. "When I overheard Frank setting out his demands, I couldn't help thinking that Noor seemed rather more compliant than you were. They seemed to be working you over." Mara paused reflectively, "But surely you still have one advantage over all of these single-minded deal-makers, including Noor himself. You and Krafft are the only scientists that actually understand the science. Why can't you use that to your advantage. Perhaps a rumour that casts the research undertaken in a more doubtful light would give some of your more avid suitors cold feet. Perhaps a small 'accident' for instance might suggest that this science is not as manageable as all are pretending it to be. I wouldn't be surprised if people began to retreat quickly if instead of an opportunity they perceived an immediate threat. So far you have only created a feeding frenzy of sharks."

"Observing Frank's behaviour is revealing. His main preoccupation is in cultivating a culture of fear. He is at the centre of a web which proliferates rumours to sustain his agenda. But he himself might prove rather prone to panic. What would happen if Frank was inadvertently made party to some alarming information? ... a rumour, say, of lab contamination running out of control which puts everyone at risk? I imagine that you would find quite a few precious souls desperate to board the first helicopters out of here, to establish a safe and objective detachment from the problem."

Zwielicht looked at her in total disbelief. "To be honest with you I am never a very convincing liar!"

Beyond the Pale

sinny shuffled out of the buzzing lounge in search of his humiliated brother who had skulked off to their suite upstairs. He was feeling empty and listless. The earlier sense of exhilarating freedom had given away to uncertainty and despair. All incoming directives had ceased. There was nothing to think about, nothing to plot against, nothing seemed to matter anymore. He felt detached from all the noisy people jockeying for control over their lives. It felt as if he had at last entered his dream world, where anything could happen without real repercussions, as if a switch had been thrown and his natural attunement with Dex had suddenly ceased. He staggered up the stairs heaving himself forward clutching the handrail. He found Dex staring blankly out the window. He tentatively touched him lightly on the shoulder. Dex recoiled in revulsion and spat at the window pane.

Shortly afterwards they slipped away. They locked their door behind them and descended silently, skirting the lounge, past the office where they could hear Malyn sobbing hysterically behind the closed door. Wordlessly, they headed down the stone stairway to the front dock.

A shaft of afternoon sun had broken through the louring purple clouds; they picked their way awkwardly across the dock. When they reached the yellow line they stopped and regarded it glumly.

The waves gently lapping up onto the stony beach seemed to be depositing a rusty band of colour on the shore. Sinny pointed, "I guess that's why it was called Blood Lake, but it feels like the blood has drained out of all of us." Dex petulantly stamped one foot over the painted line and burst out, "All these years we have hatched our escape plans, and now it looks as if they will be the ones to push us out."

"We are just pawns in their efforts to market a science that is not what it purports to be. The strange thing is that we have known this all along but never confronted the truth. No one will care if we disappear."

Dex stepped tentatively across the line and looked back. "See! Nothing happens! Nobody rushes out to impose a risk analysis. In fact nobody

Restitution

cares at all; they are all nursing their own private manias to maintain control."

He and his brother stepped off the dock and began to pick their way along the water edge. Sinny stumbled, "We've never done anything like this before? ... stepped over the line without one of Drib's risk assessments! In fact we've never been allowed to get this close to a lake."

"What if there really is nothing special about us? We have never had any way to test ourselves against other people in the real world. What if we are in the same sinking boat as everyone else, without any special destiny?"

"What if we were fated to end up like Malyn Staryk?"

"Could she really be anybody's mother?"

"Even Noor seems way out of his depth. He seemed like a guppy gasping for air."

"And there was Zwielicht standing there like an inscrutable owl."

"Perhaps he was taking pleasure in seeing Noor's sails luffing."

"Everyone suddenly turned to look at us so suspiciously."

"And now they will be happy to let us drift away."

"We were the cuckoos in the nest."

"Have you noticed how disconnected we have become? Silence is such a novelty. I don't know if I like it or not."

"You were so irascible during the demonstration. I had to wing it totally."

"Remember long ago - that knife that once passed between us? It has happened again."

"What would happen if we just kept on going from here, following the water's edge?"

"Or if we were even to choose separate paths?"

"Is this the beginning of that adventure that we have always dreamt about?"

Dex mumbled to himself, "If we followed the lake then we would only end up where we started. Pointless."

"But we would at least experience some of the real world."

As they picked their way along under the canopy of ancient trees hugging the side of the lake, they began to realise that they were following a once well-worn path. They emerged into a sandy cove where the air was heavy with the stench of the rotting fish washed up on the sand. Averting their eyes from the gaping corpses they stumbled onwards in disgust.

The path entered a clearing where to their surprise they discovered an orange plastic tarpaulin pegged to the ground. Dex went over to inspect it glumly. Sin closed his eyes while his brother gingerly pulled back an edge to reveal a bare human foot with a bracelet around the ankle.

"I wonder if it's dead?" Dex asked eagerly.

"It looks a bit like your experiment."

"Death seems more normal in the lab."

Sinny pulled him back. "We are getting way out of our depth. We ought to go back and forget all about this. Not even Drib's risk analysis is likely to cover this."

Sinny looked into his brother's eyes and found nothing but cruel emptiness.

"If they really want us back, they'll have to come out and find us."

Dex retreated along a path that seemed to follow a dried up stream bed inland. "This looks like the source feeding the lake."

But his brother hung back, stock still, and stared fixedly at the lake shore.

Dex suddenly became peevish. "You see there *is* a big difference between us. You will always follow the path around the known world, that runs full cycle. But I am actually going to do what we have been talking about all these years. The path along the lake shore leads nowhere. But my path will venture of to find something unknown."

Sinny stared at him in disbelief. But Thomas Dex just turned and trudged off resolutely picking his way awkwardly up the dried stream bed. As he disappeared between two colossal boulders, he turned and waved an offhand goodbye. It was a sudden flashback from his recurrent dream.

Blinded by tears of exasperation Sinny turned and plodded back to the

shoreline, resolving to follow the water's edge.

He came to a promontory covered with a tumble of boulders of many different types of rock, some black and flecked with tiny sparkles of silver, others composed of glistening quartz radiating its own bright light under the louring skies. The flint hard spirit of every rock seemed to taunt his weak, flabby flesh. Beyond, a great arc of green grass opened up like an inviting lush field in a protected bay. In his mind's eye he imagined throwing himself onto this cushion of green and sinking, invisible, into its cool depths. Picking his way from rock to rock, he soon discovered that the grass contained razor sharp spines which lacerated his leggings as he passed. His feet slipped off stones into the squelchy mud.

There was a rumble of thunder overhead and he began to feel very vulnerable as he struggled onwards. Large droplets of rain began to fall. One landed squarely on his bald crown and dribbled uncomfortably down his neck. He realised that he had never been outside in a rainstorm.

Restitution

rom her vantage point on the veranda Mara watched transfixed as eddies of white mist drifted over the surface of the now mirror smooth lake. The sky had become a deep maroon colour and shafts of brilliant sunlight pierced the heavy clouds and picked up details of the impassive warrior faces entombed in the rocky cliffs on the opposite shore.

No one seemed in the least concerned by Clay's unexplained absence. Frank, having streaked off in blind fury, had missed Malyn's surprising contribution to 'the jamboree' as Cubbie so scathingly described it. When he returned he joined de Vere and Malyn in the back office and their voices could be heard in distracted conversation through the door while Cubbie was judiciously poised outside in rapt attention. Later she encountered Frank flitting through the back hall with a laden tray for Malyn. She summoned the courage to ask again about Clay. He just shrugged his shoulders winsomely and responded "That's Clay for you ... a will-o'-thewisp!" He closed the office door in her face without further word.

Her mind returned to Jimmy, wondering whether he was still watching. "Just call me!" she recalled his parting words. But she had no idea of how to make contact. She was growing concerned that the folder of photos concealed in the dock crib should be retrieved before the imminent storm.

Admittedly she was also curious to know more about this strange man. She had felt comfortable talking to him in the same way she felt enjoyed kibitzing with Old Jim in her front garden. They even shared a similar pattern of speech, punctuated with long pensive silences, as if they were viewing the world through a telescope, trying to make sense of its connections. Apparently he had reciprocated by putting his trust in her and so she felt it her duty to hand over those photos.

Avoiding the view of those gathered on the veranda, she skirted the stairway down to the dock and followed the yellow line to the place where she had first met Jimmy. She slipped the file out from under the dock crib and leafed through the defaced photos trying to puzzle over some of the

scrappy interview notes attached at the back. She began to have strange sense that she was being observed.

"Jimmy! Are you there?"

The old native appeared as if she had conjured him up out of the tangled branches before her eyes.

"You're rather sneaky; you've been watching me all this time! Everyone here is on the lookout! Well, as promised, I have got these for you as well as some notes of the interviews. You'll probably laugh at the shorthand, not very flattering!"

"I saw where you had left them and I was waiting for your return," he admitted.

"But you could have taken them and left me a note!"

"I was waiting for you to *give* them to me. I knew where Frank had put them, but I would not take them back myself. A curse cannot be removed by theft."

"So you got me to steal them for you instead?"

"I left it for you to do what you knew was right... and to prove it to yourself." He paused staring at her with guileless grey eyes.

"By the way, I have found your young man, the walking hardware store, bundled up in one of the orange tarps in the woods. He appears even more confused than usual. I have taken him back to my camp since he is clearly not wanted anywhere else. He's reviving now and might like to speak with you. Perhaps you'd like to come and collect him."

Mara, felt greatly relieved though took pains to disguise it. She considered the options. "I suspect that I know who arranged his removal. He has riled Frank in some way. I think that my best plan would be to raise the alarm and get them all involved in his rescue. That should help derail Frank's agenda, whatever it is."

"They would probably find a visit to my camp quite interesting." Without further word Jimmy turned and disappeared into the bush.

Mara bounded back up the steps to the lodge and breathlessly entered the lounge. She confirmed that Frank was still sequestered with Malyn in a side room and then directed her appeal directly to Cubbie, given her obvious antipathy to Frank.

"Someone has found Clay in the woods!" she explained breathlessly.

"A native has told me that he discovered him unconscious and wrapped up in a tarpaulin. He has been taken down to his camp at the end of the lake."

Mara studied Cubbie's initially rather indifferent reaction, now uncertain whether she could be trusted to act on this information. She carried on doggedly, "The old native says that Frank doesn't have the best interests of his colleague at heart. That's why I've come to you."

At the mention of Frank, Cubbie suddenly became interested. "Frank has been very erratic recently. None of us can fathom his real agenda. But all this sounds extremely unprofessional. We had better undertake the search ourselves. Frank's judgement simply can't be trusted."

Mara considered mentioning the overheard conversation in Frank's office. That would undoubtedly captivate Cubbie but be a little difficult to explain. She remained quiet.

"Meet me down at the dock. I will just quickly brief Hellana about this latest outrageous lapse."

Mara had instant misgivings. Setting off with Cubbie alone in a boat was not an appealing prospect. She had little reason to trust her. Was she relying too heavily on her evident loathing of Frank? Nevertheless she followed in her purposeful wake as she marched down to the dock. Cubbie took not a moment's heed of Frank's yellow exclusion line and located a little red boat moored discreetly in the cove beyond.

"That's Frank's boat. We'll take that."

Cubbie proved remarkably adept in launching it, priming and engaging the motor with two furious tugs of the starter cord.

Undaunted by the louring overhead clouds and the approaching wall of dense purple, they set off down the bay in search of Jimmy's camp. The surface of the water began to blacken and quiver before the approaching storm. Standing at the helm Cubbie protected her eyes from glare and adroitly skirted treacherous shoals as they navigated the narrow channels.

They travelled some miles westwards across the glass smooth surface

which began to gently curve away to the north into a gloomy reach filled with swirling wispy cloud. As the end of the lake hove into view, a parting in a magnificent line of cliffs was illuminated by a searing sunburst.

Cubbie pointed towards a landing comprised of two half-sunk logs bound together and tethered to the shore. "That must be a landing stage for the camp. We'll land her to starboard."

Mara recognised a facet of Cubbie's nautical practicality not previously evident.

Cubbie leapt out of the boat and, in righteous fury, tore up an unkempt path from the landing with Mara in breathless pursuit.

They emerged into a clearing with a few ruined huts arranged in a wide arc. At first sight Mara was disappointed at the disarray of Jimmy's camp. But as she looked around she began to appreciate the scale of the open space that must once have been. Ranged around the overgrown clearing, these huts looked inwards upon a single long-house, once the heart of the village.

The abandoned huts had been constructed of cedar poles lashed together and roofed with scraps of salvaged tin. Mara peered into one and noticed how the forest had invaded an interior that had been abandoned for many years.

"How could anyone still be living here?" Mara asked out loud at she looked around at the scene of desuetude. The long-house had trees growing from its foundations screening the gaping windows. She stood momentarily before the ash of the pit in front which had long since been washed away revealing a blackened rock face. Cubbie noted dryly, "Clearly your friend must rely on takeaways."

Nevertheless, there was something mysteriously 'centred' about the landscape that seemed to come to life before Mara's eyes. The circle of decaying buildings looked back onto the protected harbour where they had docked their boat. As she turned to view the long house she noticed how the two cliffs beyond the harbour appeared as if sliced by a knife and peeled back to reveal great up tilted strata of the ancient pre-Cambrian granite with alternating strands of basalt and quartz. Strange patterns like

swirling calligraphy were mirrored on both sides of the gigantic gateway. There was a distant roar of rushing water where the lake ended in rapids descending between the cliffs. She felt that she recognised a place charged with an energy that pre-dated the first glimmerings of human life. Here was a fortuitous place where human beings had found a perfect niche. The landscape was charged with this benign primordial energy. This could indeed have once been an Eden.

A pained groan emerged from behind the long house and she stumbled over the overgrown threshold to investigate.

Sheltered in a wide doorway and laid out on an orange tarpaulin amidst the debris and overgrown grass she found Clay in a very groggy state, wrapped in a blanket and shivering miserably.

Clay stared up at her stupidly trying to focus. "Mara? What are you doing here?"

"Well of course it's me! I heard that you had been found unconscious in the woods."

Cubbie bounded up behind her. Clay regarded Cubbie suspiciously and she turned away to examine details of the binding of the poles, while remaining prudently within earshot.

"Well I don't exactly know how I got here. I just suddenly seemed to *be* here. I vaguely remember being in the lab with you and having some conversation with Frank. Then suddenly, *hey presto*, I am sitting nowhere, being made to drink some tea by a wrinkly old man."

"His name's Jimmy, as you should well know." Mara rolled her eyes. "At least you could be grateful enough to learn his name. He probably saved your life."

"I guess I slept through all that. But where is Frank?"

"Cubbie and I agreed that Frank might be a liability, suspecting that he is the main reason for your being here. What have you done to annoy him so?"

Clay reflected a moment and then looked away evasively.

As he subsided into further slumber, the sun suddenly dropped through the strata of purple cloud and exploded as its rays slashed through the gateway and crossed the clearing, penetrating the long house.

Mara turned to follow the ray's path beyond the long shadow across the clearing and into the woods. A peculiar glint among the trees caught her eye. It seemed to shimmer like a flame in the darkness of the glade. She noticed a discreet path up the slope into the woods where she had earlier glimpsed the sparkling reflection in the slanting sun and followed it calling Jimmy's name.

The trees parted into a silent glade where there was a small raised terrace of rocks capped with a platform of flat stones. Scattered around the platform were clumps of fringed orchids that had mysteriously gravitated around this curious monument. They glowed unnaturally, picking up the ruddy hue of the sunburst. She clambered up to investigate what had caught her eye. Wedged into a crack between two stones was an old bottle which had cast the sparkling glint that caught her eye. She gently pulled the bottle from the crack. It was an upturned whiskey bottle that had been carefully sealed with beeswax to keep out moisture. Inside she could make out a faded photograph, the features of a smiling young woman as she might have appeared perhaps on her wedding day.

It was undoubtedly the same woman that she had already encountered on the wall of the lounge in the lodge, Marana Gallagher.

She carefully replaced the bottle in its crack and picked a few of the wild flowers growing so mysteriously around the grave and dropped them on the top of the platform.

Perhaps this was the reason why Jimmy had refused to leave his home.

Storm

rank at last emerged from his 'debriefing session' with de Vere and Malyn, renewed and purposeful. Scanning the lounge he noted Cubbie's absence with relief. But the various groups huddled in conversation, viewed him with suspicion as he passed. With forced cheerfulness he announced that his chat with Malyn had helped to relieve some of her anxieties. A sedative would allow her to retire exhausted to bed. "Gosh! She has a flair for grabbing the limelight! But we've cleared up some misunderstandings so that she can enjoy the rest of our sojourn ... partly a case of mistaken identity, aggravated by an over-fevered imagination. We'll all have to pull together to help calm her."

He paused to gauge the reactions of the other guests.

"But at least the crazy gun man seems to be letting us enjoy some peace at last" he churned on valiantly.

The guests looked uncertain as they gazed blankly from their ringside seats over the grand vista. For once even Noor was speaking in a subdued voice. De Vere and Lagarto sitting side by side in comfortable slatted chairs stared vacantly at the cliffs opposite lost in private plotting.

These few moments of silent awkward contemplation were suddenly broken by a distant report of thunder which seemed to bounce off the rocks like a stirring drum roll.

"Spoke too soon I guess. But I hope that we're in for a ripper! Storms up on this lake are always theatrical," Frank explained with authority.

No one had yet mentioned the rescue mission undertaken by Mara and Cubbie. Hellana was reserving that revelation for the right moment.

The rumbling thunder began to accelerate into a continuous throb. Then light levels took a sudden lurid plunge as a dense purple cloud swirled across the sun. The rocks around the lake seemed to emanate a ruddy light, reflecting brilliantly against the purple background cloud. The sky became animated with pulsating bursts of explosive light. In the distance a rushing roar of the approaching deluge became audible.

There was a violent sucking and grating sound as the silent waters

around the little mounded moraine islands began to break into a furious white capped frenzy. The spectators began to look increasingly alarmed.

"Relax! It is only a sèche," announced Frank breaking the awed silence with renewed cheerfulness. "I've seen the phenomenon dozens of times before." He began to expand his information into a geography lesson, "It's a long narrow lake, over twelve an a half miles long. With a sudden air pressure drop at the other end the water begins to course through those narrows around that raft of little islands." He seemed to be straining to still the guests' apprehensions with informative detail.

However as the severity of the imminent storm was becoming more evident, Hellana became increasingly concerned about the rescue mission that she had just authorised.

Cheerfully she called out, "Oh Frank, I forgot to mention that Cubbie's girl came in and explained that some native found your side-kick wandering about in the woods. She and Cubbie have gone off to fetch him. Not wanting to disturb you and Malyn, I gave them permission to use your boat." She added, knowingly, "I always wondered about that kid. I could never comprehend what you saw in such a basket case."

Frank bridled incandescent with anger. "Cubbie's girl should have come directly to me with information like that. I'm the one who is responsible for the lad's safety. I need to know exactly what is happening to my charges at all times. I have been worried sick by his absence."

Muttering more to himself as he considered the predicament, "He is never going to measure up to any reasonable expectations. Now, I suppose, it's up to me to rescue all of them. Cubbie! Of all people to send on such a mission! You must have been out of your minds! She has no idea of the dangers in that lake, the shoals, and blind channels. I don't imagine she's ever been in a boat before!" Frank took an exasperated look at the assembled company and stormed off.

"Well, now I really have set the cat among the pigeons" Hellana muttered to herself as she settled back contentedly to observe the approaching storm with her discreet bowl of bonbons.

Frank emerged from the back hall having retrieved ancient rubber rain

gear. "And she insisted on taking my boat as well, the bloody cheek! I'll have to locate one of my operatives to collect me at the dock."

In a blind fury, dramatically clad from head to toe in black rubber with a sou'wester hat pulled down over his ears, he swished down the great stone staircase leading to the docks.

* * *

A stray zephyr passed down the centre of the lake setting it ablaze with a rippled, ruddy hue like a strafed wound.

Flinders Grey had just stood up to replenish his glass at the bar when with a sudden lurch a gust of wind hurled itself against the corner tower. The whole building groaned in a spasm of pain at the unexpected onslaught. Chairs that had been set out invitingly at that end of the porch were lifted with a vortex of fallen seeds and debris and slammed against the railings.

The surprised guests looked on aghast. Hellana got up very quickly and retreated into the lounge. Noor stood up, advanced defiantly to the rail then retreated with nonchalant dignity. Dr Zwielicht, suddenly overcome with parental responsibility, went off intending to reassure the twins, presumed to be up in their room.

Only Eugene Krafft remained out on the veranda anxiously watching Frank on the dock below. Frank was standing rigid with fury and clutching a dock rail, his bare knuckles stung by the first lashing onslaught of rain. Gusts of wind had begun to carry a blizzard of water in horizontal drifts down the lake. The rain cut into his face like razors, his wraparound glasses assailed so fiercely that he could not see into the wind. The pick up boat appeared and buffeted by white capped waves it slammed against the dock. Frank threw himself in, pushed away violently and was carried off down the lake.

Suddenly a great curtain of rain mixed with hailstones dropped from the sky completely obscuring the opposite shore.

Krafft was left staring down at his inflated bubble lab down the shore

which was pulsating like a beached fish gasping for breath.

"It's designed to withstand century storm extremes. But I can't imagine any engineer envisioning this in millennia of climate change," he screamed over his shoulders. As he spoke a cavorting, errant wind lurched up the shoreline, creaming the foam off the top of the whitecaps into a blinding wall of water and slammed into the windmill which had been locked for the storm. With a violent rending scream the wind wrenched away the locked blades. There was a staccato sound of crackling gears. A great blade shorn from the tower hurtled end over end across the foreground and sliced through the roof of the clean room like a giant cleaver. There was a wheezing gasp of air as the dome collapsed into an amorphous mess. A flash of lightning witnessed the stark silhouette of the wreck of the tower with its two remaining vanes flapping hysterically in the wind. Then moments later the whole tower was torn from the ground in a shrieking up-draught of wind. As if some unseen hand had plucked it from the heavens, it seemed to rise vertically, overturning the boulders it was guyed into. For a moment it remained suspended mid air and then in slow gyration it jack-knifed along the shoreline, bouncing across the dock and plunged amidst a shower of sparks into the electrical installation mounted on the roof of the labs.

The lodge was instantly plunged into darkness.

Eugene Krafft sank to his knees with a wail of dismay.

Another bolt of lightning slashed across the foreground. It illuminated the grimacing cliffs on the opposite shore which had momentarily emerged from the mists, leering triumphantly over a frenzied Armageddon.

Eugene Krafft began to crawl across the veranda on hands and knees. As he approached the door a wayward chair slammed into him with a force that rendered him unconscious.

Noor instantly identified an opportunity for heroics. Dashing across the porch he caught Krafft by the collar and hauled him to safety and a circle of applause from the tight knot of spectators harbouring nervously in the shadows within.

Suddenly distracted back of house staff were dashing about everywhere

in the dark in a state of hysteria. Hellana attempted to communicate her instructions but could not imagine what language they were attempting to speak so volubly.

Her authoritative call for 'candles and matches' was transformed into a religious litany of demented people screaming 'canadlasmachassa' like some imprecation against disaster. And where was Cubbie when she needed her?

Zwielicht, torch in hand returned from upstairs in obvious annoyance. "They've barricaded themselves into their room with the door locked. They tend to behave like this at times. We will just have to leave them to get over their pet." He rolled his eyes in the manner of a long-suffering parent.

As the initial fury of the storm began to abate, Krafft returned and with a huge bandage bound to his brow and staggered down to make a reconnaissance of the damage to his labs. Shortly after he returned bearing sheaves of sodden notes in a large tub, his face smeared with dirt. He was utterly distraught at the carnage. He reported that acres of fabric had descended into the algae culture pools. The floors were awash with the spilt cultures.

"Where is Frank?" he wailed. "The communications are severed. If we don't lay on emergency power immediately the refrigeration units will fail and put our specimens at risk. We have got to fly in an emergency crew immediately" he screamed. "We have only minutes of standby emergency power available."

"Years of precious work! All awash, all wrecked." Krafft collapsed hunched in despair in front of the fire and began to lay out armfuls of sodden notebooks to dry in front of a fire that had been reignited by someone muttering the incomprehensible imprecation 'canadlasmachassa'.

The Path Less Followed

eanwhile Thomas Dex had blundered on, scrabbling up the path of the dried stream bed in a blinding rage and cursing his brother under his breath. "Always a coward, always content to cling to the obvious, knowing that he will eventually return to where we started. His life will always be reduced to travelling in ever diminishing circles. But we have always been different ... maybe that was also the difference between Malyn and her twin." He paused to catch his breath. "But Malyn or Melanie, what do any of them matter now?"

In the distance he could hear a malignant tom-tom sound that began to shake the tree tops. He imagined it to be an Indian drumming signal, a warning pulse that began to shake the whole landscape. He tried to discover the meaning. But then he began to realise that it was a natural phenomenon, a relentless roll of thunder echoing off desolate cliffs.

As he made his way forward propelled by disgust at the world he was abandoning, large drops of rain began to crash through the forest cover. Trees overhead swayed and creaked violently under sudden gusts of wind. A roar growing in intensity seemed to shake the whole landscape, becoming like the howl of a wounded beast.

Then suddenly a deluge of water was dumped on him from above, a violent wall of blinding rain that made it impossible to see his way forward. The dry stream bed began to swell with water and he was obliged to retreat to the banks clawing his way from tree to tree. The onslaught of rain now drowned out all but the most immediate cracks of thunder which sliced through the woods with the sound of an angry whip.

In moments the river seemed to be engulfing him. He found himself stumbling into a dense swamp. His Turkish slippers had long since been sucked off in the heavy mud; he plunged on barefoot. He could feel the cuts and wounds stinging as he pitched heedlessly forward in his blind rage. Finally, sobbing he crumpled up at the foot of a towering pine and nestled into the roots.

The air seemed to turn electric. He did not know which way to look.

Peacocks at the Pale

Then he watched incredulously as a strip of fire plunged in slow motion with a ghastly slicing sound down the trunk cutting a deep runnel in the bark from the canopy branches down to his refuge.

He felt everything about him buzzing with dazzling energy. Suddenly he could perceive the purpose of his whole life; it all clicked effortlessly into place. Why had he not understood all this before?

Hidden within the howling winds he could hear a most beautiful music, harmonious and ethereal. He sank contentedly into a silent world as the water rose swiftly to cover the roots of the tree.

Cocktail Hour

he storm swept off as suddenly as it had pounced. A dazzling apology of sun prised up one edge of the purple cloud and slashed across the lake surface to highlight the impassive faces in the cliffs opposite. In the distance a faint rumble of receding thunder could be heard.

Zwielicht was sitting huddled in a corner of the candlelit lounge nursing a tea and speaking to no one. Some sense of parental concern had begun to dawn and he was becoming worried about the twins sulking upstairs; not that their absence was generally lamented. Everyone imagined them revelling in the general discomfiture that they were causing below. Noor remained totally unconcerned. "They'll emerge when they are good and ready, I expect. They always do."

The distraught hotel staff had at last been induced to return to their stations back-of-house and attempt dinner over improvised fires. Gradually the shattered group reassembled to reclaim the twilit veranda leaving the gloomy cavernous interior which seemed haunted with flickering, phantom memories.

Below, the guests glimpsed torch lights flitting about the research offices where Krafft and his assistants were trying to stabilise the situation in the absence of power.

In hushed voices Grey and Lagarto began discussing the portentous totemic faces reflected in the placid waters of the opposite shore when Hellana suddenly pointed across the bay in alarm. "What in God's name is happening now? Is it a fire?"

A sliver of brilliant light appeared suddenly over the entombed spirits. Within seconds an aerie light began to trace its way across the surface of the rock dancing in the little crevices and diving among the trees opposite, shimmering, ghost-like, moving about magically and skittering up the tree trunks. It rested momentarily atop boulders and then dived evasively into crevices before flitting on. It gathered in luminous pools that seemed to empty instantly into the overhead darkening skies.

Zwielicht suggested tentatively that perhaps it was marsh gas. He had heard about such phenomena that had often been imagined as revenant spirits terrifying the unscientific.

Some moments later however, the tip of an enormous burning arc hove over the horizon. There was a gasp of relief at the rising of the full moon. "This has indeed been a day of troubling portents", Grey muttered gloomily.

"But it is truly magnificent! Prometheus is at last freed from his bonds!" Lagarto enthused.

Zwielicht confessed that it had been one of the most extraordinary days of his life. "We have all lived through a seeming lifetime, yet we only touched down this morning! Yesterday evening I had no idea that a place like this could possibly exist."

The brilliance of the rising moon began to make the group more confident in their environs. There was a collective sigh of relief as they heard the sound of an approaching motor on the lake tinged with a note of ambivalence about the expedition's return. The lodge party was beginning to have a pleasant time, enjoying a remission from Cubbie's daunting organisational skills. Hellana had begun to flower with little anecdotes about high jinx at her aunt's summer cottage.

Cubbie navigated her craft adroitly into its docking space and secured it with an efficient slipknot. She helped Mara lift Clay out of the boat. He was staggering around like a drunk.

Dragging Clay between them they made their way up the hill and arrived on the veranda to a chorus of dutiful salutations.

Hellana surveyed Clay with obvious distaste. "You certainly have not lived up to Es-Tech's expectations. And where is Frank?" she demanded curtly.

Clay just stared at her vacantly and then slowly stuck out his studded tongue. His knees collapsed under him and Mara and Cubbie dragged him into the lounge and ensconced him on a sofa.

"This is outrageous. He has let the whole side down." Hellana crammed a fistful of choco-nuts into her mouth in righteous indignation.

"But where is Frank? Krafft desperately needs him. Am I surrounded by complete stooges?"

Rather surprisingly Zwielicht suddenly perked up, "I propose that we ask Dr Noor to make one of his legendary cocktails to take some of the rough edges of what has certainly been a day to remember. God knows there has been plenty of the rough. Poor Krafft is beside himself with the damage. We all need a boost. We can at least toast our survival on such a cataclysmic day."

Dramatically Hellana raised her arms in delight as if readying to deploy castanets. Even Grey concurred with a tight nod.

Noor of course revelled in this recognition and proposed that everyone sample one of the drinks of 'his homeland' without clarifying where that might be. He stumbled off into the darkened interior to fetch the appropriate bottle from his room.

Zwielicht was entrusted with the task of squeezing a dozen limes into a punch bowl which he undertook with surgical fastidiousness. No one noticed the little additive that he introduced from a vial in his pocket. Reflecting on Mara's comment about creating a useful diversion he had spent some time in the half light of his bedroom grinding the contents into a fine powder.

Malyn alone seemed to be resistant to the implications of the storm crisis. She had reappeared from her retreat and was drifting around in a euphoric trance humming distractedly. Frank's earlier ministrations had apparently worked wonders upon her sense of well-being. She had doffed the pink head sock and allowed her unkempt hair to float freely around her like mad Ophelia. She accepted Noor's cocktail and gulped it down demanding an instant replenishment.

Hellana, who always liked to monitor others' levels of consumption watched with some surprise as Malyn proceeded to down two more cocktails in rapid succession and demand a further. "Heavens dear! you should pace yourself. This is clearly not lemonade!" Noor, however, complied with a further splash and a naughty wink. Considering the confrontation that had occurred only hours ago, Malyn seemed almost

oblivious to the implications of her recent revelation.

She paused dramatically in front of the fire and placed the remnants of Noor's cocktail very carefully on the mantle and reeled back, complaining of suddenly feeling quite unwell.

"I'm hardly surprised dear, but certainly relieved that you aren't positioning yourself for further revelations." Hellana menaced under her breath. "You've certainly unleashed some dramatic talents today. Perhaps we all need a little remission from contemplating your eventful life." She cast a barbed glance and rolled her eyes as Malyn withdrew.

Clutching the stair rail and her candle and dragging herself up a tread at a time, Malyn passed the twins' door. Remembering her maternal responsibilities she knocked tentatively and called out 'Sinny? Dex?' but there was no response. They were clearly avoiding contact. But tomorrow was another day and the duties of motherhood could wait after all these years.

Suddenly others in the party also claimed to be feeling quite exhausted. Grey complained of the sudden onset of a fierce migraine. Lagarto, who had so relished his own cocktail and subsequently crested on a tsunami of self-importance, unexpectedly proclaimed the events of the day had proven too much for him and tottered off to bed with an unsteady gait. One by one the lodge party retired to their bedrooms, leaving Cubbie alone nursing her lemonade and staring into the fire.

None of the guests were to enjoy a restful night.

The next morning strident sunlight battered on the windows of the old lodge and stirred the exhausted guests to reluctant activity. No one had slept during the night.

There had been a great deal of lighting of candles and shuffling in the gloomy hallways as the various afflicted sought out the doctors for medical advice. Noor however was feeling so ill and resentful of continual interruptions to his sleep that he decamped to a secluded servant's room leaving the door of his own room ajar as if 'on call'. Zwielicht, feeling somewhat guilty, therefore bore the brunt of the required ministrations, being awakened at regular intervals by the pathetic pleas of the afflicted. He claimed to be feeling quite ill himself and suggested that something at dinner had not been properly cooked over the open fires.

Though she had not partaken of Noor's 'homeland' cocktail, Mara also slept little. She was ministering to Clay who had subsided into a fitful sleep. Periodically he would awaken with a spell of uncontrolled shivering despite the weighty blankets that Mara had stripped from adjacent beds. She warmed to her nursing tasks. He looked so innocent and vulnerable when his eyes were closed and his chin tucked under a blanket. The strange perforations in his ears and adornments of his nose and brow seemed less confrontational in repose. Mara took time to inspect these carefully. She discovered a little tattoo of a flower in the nape of his neck that she had not noticed previously. She liked the way that his hair curled around it. That hair could certainly do with a wash. She laughed.

Quietly she locked the door and lay down on the bed alongside him watching as he slept. She looked at the long lashes folded down upon his cheeks and imagined the shy eyes behind the lids now in repose, but usually darting about trying to avoid self revelation.

As he slept he could feel her warmth alongside and seemed to gravitate towards it. She soon found him with his head nestled in the crook of her neck. His hair smelled of rain and the woods, a natural smell mixed with traces of the fusty smell of the tarpaulin. This was not unattractive. She liked the thought that she was part of this intimate moment in a life that was otherwise so frenetic and guarded from the world.

She also liked the thought of his needing her even though he was not currently in a position to recognise it. Gilb had never needed her like that. He had only demanded her admiration and then disappeared to the golf course as soon as he could. Clay seemed much more real to her. She remembered Gilb, the lacquered smell of his body.

There was a sharp rap at the door and she leapt up guiltily to unlock it. It was Cubbie, checking to see whether she needed relief from one of the kitchen servants. She took a long appraising look at the comatose Clay. "Better to leave the door ajar in case you need help," she said sharply and

then clopped off down the wood floored hallway.

"One hell of a dragon," Mara thought, remembering the intensity of their earlier exchange. "But at least she seems to be one of the few here who can keep an unwavering eye on the ball."

As dawn broke Clay had finally settled into a deep sleep. The rising sun began to stream in through her window and sunbeams reflected off the water surface below danced across the ceiling. She carefully pulled the blinds. Mara summoned up the nerve to rejoin the party in the Lounge for breakfast.

As she tripped down lightly she met Zwielicht ascending the stairs holding his stomach and groaning dramatically.

"Surely, Doctor this isn't a strong endorsement for your professional arts, only a temporary setback I hope!"

Surprisingly, he touched her shoulder in passing and she stopped on the landing.

He looked around and in then a conspiratorial voice he whispered "*To be honest* I ought to say that I have taken to heart your earlier suggestion. I think that you will find very few candidates in search of a hearty breakfast this morning. In fact it might be beneficial if you too appeared to be similarly afflicted ... even though you did not enjoy the special additives to Noor's cocktail. Even Noor is looking unnaturally peaked! ... which I consider a particular triumph."

"Of course Ms McCubbins is resistant to everything. Naturally she did not partake. That's why I think that it would be particularly 'democratic' if you rose to the dramatic challenge."

"Inadvertently, I set the room abuzz with oblique allusions to the plagues of Egypt visited upon Pharaoh. *To be honest*, I'm afraid I may have let my imagination expand upon this theme."

With that Zwielicht turned enigmatically to continue up the stair, letting out a plaintive groan.

Mara checked the spring in her step and inspected herself in the looking glass on the landing. She tweaked the wick of an extinguished candle on the shelf below and adroitly applied a blackened streak under her eyes and across her cheek. She pulled her hair out of its clip and let it fall in disarray over her shoulders then unbuttoned her cardigan and refastened it crooked. She undid a shoelace. Satisfied by her transformation into the image of utter abjection she continued in a broken pace down to the lounge clutching the balustrade with both hands.

The lavish breakfast laid out on the reception table, was untouched. Only Cubbie was partaking of the scrambled eggs and bacon, with her chair pulled up squarely to the table. Hellana was hovering at her shoulder looking wistfully at the range of delicacies. Periodically overcome by a wave of revulsion, she would turn away to face the blank wall.

De Vere sat crumpled in an armchair staring blankly at the empty fireplace. "We are being fed a lot of hogwash! I want to know what is going on down in those labs. It's obvious to me that we have all succumbed to one of the Gene-Sys microbes that has been unleashed by the accident."

"It's a conspiracy. They're out to harvest our genes." Malyn added miserably.

"Well a propos of the plagues of Egypt, the upside of that story was the successful departure of the Israelites. Let me say that I'm happy to depart at any time," Lagarto bristled through clenched teeth.

Noor was recumbent on a sofa, one leg dangling to the floor, snoring erratically. Zwielicht had given him a little morphine to ease his pain, but confessed that he had only a limited supply of such medicines with him. He claimed that he needed to ration it lest 'cases of extreme need became evident'.

Mara projected a very convincing role as she staggered around the room grabbing hold of furniture to steady herself. She consulted each party in turn, commenting on their desperate appearance and nurturing further seeds of self-doubt.

Strangely, Frank had still not returned from his rescue mission. Preoccupied now with their own ailments and the possibility of pharaonic plague, no one seemed particularly worried by his continued absence.

As Cubbie so aptly put it "Our little Frankie can always take care of himself."

An Orderly Withdrawal

wielicht began to suspect that their problems might extend beyond Frank's absence. He enlisted staff to force the door to the twins' suite and discovered their flight. Noor was reasonably sanguine about their absence. "As expected, they are just trying to cause a scene. They'll have found some clever hiding place and are skiving to gauge our reaction. Could they possibly be with Frank?" Such deliberations made little impression upon Malyn who, still unfocussed on assuming motherhood duties, continued to drift around the room in an aimless daze.

Again Cubbie displayed a practical side which left Hellana feeling less a fifth wheel than any wheel at all. Apparently she could 'get by in Armenian' and managed to instruct a search party of kitchen staff equipped with hard hats, safety gear and candles. They rootled for bodies amidst the devastation of the collapsed bubble dome heedless of possible pollutions awash in that area.

Hellana surveyed these purposeful actions with obvious resentment and retreated into reading her neglected briefing papers as if they might hold clues for resolution of a completely chaotic turn of events.

Mara led Cubbie to Frank's office in the disused lab building. For someone who had always apparently shunned such technology, Cubbie proved remarkably adept at activating an emergency power supply and contacting the network of agents positioned around the lake to broadcast a message about Frank and the missing twins. She was beginning to feel certain that these disappearances were connected.

As Cubbie was engrossed in her communications Mara wandered out into the hallway. The battery powered emergency lights were running dim. She could hear the sound of voices to the rear of the building. Krafft's hysterical screaming was evident followed by slamming of doors and more shouting. The 'off limits' barrier tape isolating the side corridor had been breached. Wet muddy tracks led down a hallway filthy with dirt and rubbish. She crept down the corridor and paused to peer through a door ajar at the end. She could hear Krafft giving instructions in a curiously

mechanical voice.

"Let's consolidate them into three freezers packed with ice. Salvage any available ice from the other power downs." She pushed the door open slightly to reveal a large room illuminated by dim emergency lighting and the torches carried by Krafft and his assistants. Flanking the walls on either side were two rows of freezer chests. Krafft, identifiable by his distinctive pale blue helmet and two helpers, including the fatuous tour guide, Klinger, were dressed in plastic coveralls with goggles and respirators. They were extracting the contents of a chest in a huge clear plastic bag and heaving it across the floor.

Why did she suddenly remember Jimmy's mention of how his family had 'volunteered' one by one and left without saying good-bye? Suddenly she felt quite unwilling to address what she imagined she might be witnessing. She quietly pulled the door closed. With a silent scream of horror she ran down the corridor and burst out again into the dazzling morning sunlight.

* * *

It was not until just after midday that a ravaged figure crawled out of the woods and collapsed onto the dock. Thomas Sin had succeeded in circumnavigating the lake. Like an automaton, fixed on the single idea that he must follow the shoreline to reach the place where he had set out, he had traversed marshy gulches and thrown himself at sheer rock faces, scrabbling his way with bleeding fingers and slashed feet over the rough terrain. He had staggered across the cliff faces on the opposite shore without once glancing across the bay to glimpse his destination. He did not dare to gauge his progress; he only clung to the one idea that with each faltering step he had lessened the distance to his destination. Having lost his shoes, his clothing torn to ribbons, his legs had swollen to bulbous dimensions after he had waded through a stand of stinging nettles, quite heedless of the lacerating pain. All he could say as he collapsed on the dock was "He always hated me!"

When he was carried up to the veranda Malyn at last rose to the occasion by dramatically falling upon the comatose bundle and worked herself into a hysterical state. She demanded that a search party set out immediately to retrieve her other child. She had already discovered subtle differences between them and perversely seemed to prefer the adventurous absent to the prodigal returned.

Cubbie sniped to Hellana, "It appears that Frank's security provision has been extremely inadequate if not one of the agents stationed around the lake even noticed this distracted waif bungling around in the foreground. Can Frank get nothing right?"

Hellana smiled wanly and resumed her imploded posture.

In a huff Cubbie returned to Frank's office and put out an order for all external operatives to report back immediately and undertake a more methodical search for the missing parties.

With less precision than expected, the shores suddenly came alive as boats were launched and the black clad agents began again to converge on the front dock. The boats weaved as the lack lustre pilots navigated cack-handed across the bay, and pulled themselves out onto the dock. They grouped into a dishevelled mass and straggled up to the lab office where Cubbie was waiting for them noting sourly that they appeared less prepossessing as a force that her purposefully activated Armenians.

Zwielicht, who had been dramatising his apparent affliction with downcast eyes, registered growing alarm that the 'plague' that was in all minds also seemed to have infiltrated the ranks of those who had not enjoyed the benefits of his ministrations. Was it possible that at this point he began to feel slightly uncertain of his own well-disguised healthy status?

Cubbie, undaunted, delivered a scathing excoriation of total incompetence on all hands and proposed that she herself would lead a rescue operation to retrieve Thomas Dex and Frank. In the back of her mind she relished the thought of encountering the latter, as Stanley did Livingstone but with a slightly less composed reaction.

The rag-tag crew set off along the shoreline fanning out where the

terrain suggested that divergence was possible. The zombie listlessness of the rescue crews only redoubled Cubbie's righteous fury. She selected Deeto and Ernie and set off in their boat, herself at the helm, to revisit the native camp and work their way back along the shore.

Some two hours later Cubbie's expedition returned, towing Frank's motor boat. Laid out across the thwarts was the body of Thomas Dex, his face, hands and feet a bloated bluish colour as they covered him with a tarpaulin and transported him on a rough plank up to the lodge.

Cubbie had spotted the boat floating freely in a small cove. They had investigated the mouth of a storm engorged water course that flowed into the cove. Tangled in the rocks nearby they had discovered the body. There was no sign of Frank.

* * *

Further search was called off and the black uniformed agents who straggled back were ordered to gather for instructions.

Hellana Nicks was still clearly unfit to resume control and Cubbie was obliged to set out the prescribed provisions for an orderly withdrawal.

Flinders Grey, pallid and uncomfortable, kept eyeing his watch as if already late for an important meeting elsewhere. Lindsay Lagarto had cack-handedly dropped his briefcase, spewing papers and was attempting to contain his obvious anxiety to depart by concentrating on their retrieval in proper order.

After conferring with Zwielicht in the rear office, Cubbie addressed the group of anxious faces, "Doctor Zwielicht has informed me that the storm may have precipitated a serious contamination incident. Clearly there has been some microbial spread from the Gene-Sys facility into the lake system. The security of the operations here has been seriously compromised. Nothing to worry about but it seems that we may have all got a little case of what he terms 'amoebas'. The Doctor, however, reassures us that it should pass quickly."

"Before we all do, I hope", Grey interjected sourly.

"I emphasise that there is no cause for alarm. We have procedures in place that are designed to deal with just these sorts of events." Hellana thumped her risk assessment tome down on the table. I

Cubbie resumed reassuringly, "Sadly an unlikely event has become now a reality. So we will take this opportunity to deploy emergency provisions."

"This hardly sounds like the belt and braces that we were hearing about earlier?" Grey noted gloomily.

"And no trousers!" de Vere added caustically.

Cubbie persevered undaunted. "All Es-Tech personnel and visitors will be required to withdraw immediately to quarantine facilities prepared for such eventualities. The resident staff, required to deal with the aftermath, will be quarantined in situ."

"Because this is an autonomous ecosystem, there is *absolutely, I repeat, absolutely,* no fear of contamination being disseminated beyond the immediate locality."

Mara had already convinced herself that what she had seen in the refrigeration centre could not possibly have been where her overwrought imagination had led her.

Hellana looked over to Dr Krafft who answered haltingly, as if only partially committed to what he was saying. "Any animal coming in contact with hypothetical strains should not pose any risk beyond this watershed."

"By hypothetically dying?" Mara asked awkwardly.

Krafft responded with a hopeless, vacant gaze.

Hellana had begun to feel her powers returning, "A security cordon will be imposed to preclude malign agents from taking advantage of a natural disaster and gathering virulent samples for nefarious purposes."

"And how can anyone call this as a natural disaster?"

Hellana marshalled her failing resources importantly. "This is no time for negativity. As long as planned emergency procedures are followed, you can rest assured that no one here will be put at risk. You will be processed through a rigorous quarantine and should be able to resume normal lives within days. Once the site has been evacuated, Es-Tech will arrange to send in our specialist operatives to eradicate all residual ecological imbalances."

* * *

The first part of the well *Planned Emergency Procedures* proceeded like clockwork. Fully laden the two large helicopters in the forecourt were brought to life and the more important visitors were huddled into them with their luggage. Lagarto stumbled forward clutching at the door in righteous outrage. Throwing down his travel bag, he collapsed forward upon it. Grey remained so fragile that he had to be physically hoisted up the stairs. De Vere and Hellana bolted past the others, jockeying for position to get into the back recesses of the first helicopter to leave.

Hellana confronted Malyn in the vanguard of the fray and hissed; "Now you have had your little moment in the limelight undoing the work of many with your paranoid personal vendetta, I think that you might have the decency to await Phase Two of the evacuation. I do not intend to travel in you company. We will see soon enough no doubt, but in the meantime you can take your turn or make your own way home."

Malyn looked up at the cliff opposite as if in a trance and mumbled distractedly. As she turned back through the anxious knot she encountered Mara. "Somehow I think quarantine will be the privilege of the lesser folk."

The second helicopter took off including Noor, Zwielicht and a group of Es-Tech agents. Thomas Sin had been led down between Noor and Zwielicht, shaking and unsteady of foot. He was so swathed in bandages he looked like a walking mummy. He did not once glance back at his recently proclaimed mother. No one knew whether he was aware of his brother's death.

The remaining party were left abandoned on the dock. Malyn, Mara and Clay had been entrusted into the care of the two Es-Tech guards,

Deeto and Ernie, who had been designated the 'Residual Securement Operatives'.

As the sound of the helicopters faded, Deeto commanded officiously. "We ask you all to return to the lounge and await further instructions in comfort." Ernie added sheepishly, "In fact these are our specific orders."

Malyn looked blankly up the long flight of stone steps to the veranda. The others imagined what was in her mind, the bundled up body that had been hauled through the lounge earlier that morning and laid out in the rear office. In the dark lounge the wretched Dr Krafft would be sobbing and desperately trying to salvage his soggy notebooks. "If it's all the same to you I think that I will remain down here in the sun." No one made a move.

At just that moment there was a sound of thrashing of bushes beside the boathouse. Ernie and Deeto plucked their guns from their holsters. "Stand back! We may be under attack!"

Frank emerged out of the bushes, flailing his hands. "It's alright boys; it's *only* me. I've been checking your positions and searching for missing parties. I gather from the sound of the departing choppers that some of the others have left. Sorry to miss the *despedida*."

Mara noted that Frank pointedly ignored Clay's presence. Clay still extremely groggy, stared stupidly at Frank with accusing eyes.

Deeto and Ernie lowered their guns in relief at seeing their boss. "We are under strict instructions from Ms Nix to secure this group and await the return of the air shuttle to convey all to the quarantine."

Frank looked suddenly alarmed at the mention of the word 'quarantine'.

Mara turned to Frank. "From you sudden pallor I gather that the quarantine station is familiar to you. It seems to me that we comprise a group of very inconvenient people ... possibly yourself included."

Frank hesitated and then admitted, "Yes, I don't think that any of us really need to undergo quarantine. It is geared specifically to accommodate the local natives who are more susceptible to health fluctuations than you or me."

"But we are under strict orders to ensure that the residual party

remains here until the next stage of the rescue mission is undertaken." Deeto complained to Frank.

Frank shrugged winsomely, smiling at Deeto. "Well as you know I am a stickler for following orders. So we'll just proceed with approved strategy protocols."

Mara got the impression as she observed Frank's tightening jaw that letting events unfold could not be further from his intentions. Recalling Cubbie's petulant self-righteousness, she suspected that such a course would hardly be to Frank's advantage.

Frank stepped forward and brusquely removed the gun from Deeto's lowered hand. "So, I guess I should take over at this stage." Frank then dispatched Deeto and Ernie up to the labs to secure all laptops. "We cannot leave sensitive data unaccounted for. It would be most unprofessional."

The moment they had reluctantly disappeared Frank turned to address the surprised trio. "Actually none of us are suitable candidates for quarantine. The facility is overbooked as it is. I think that we should pursue an alternative plan and leave in my boat immediately. I might suggest that our dedicated goons will find pursuit difficult if we transfer all the fuel tanks from their boats into mine."

The whole idea sounded extremely rash to Mara. She interposed, "I think that there is someone who might be able to help. I'll trust his judgement in these things. I think that he may have been watching us and I would like to see if he is willing to help."

Frank looked rather miffed as Mara stepped over the yellow line, off the end of the dock and wandered away into the woods.

She called softly, "Jimmy! Are you in there? Can you help? ... even Frank?"

There was a rustling of the bushes and Mara was again aware that Jimmy seemed to materialise out of the dense foliage. In one movement he had suddenly swum into her ken.

He spoke in his soft voice. "There is a path. You have seen the gateway in the cliffs near the camp? It is called "Hole-in-the-Wall". It involves tricky portages of course, but it is the beginning of the path you should

follow."

"But where does that path lead? Is there a highway along the route where we can get help to return home?"

"The river is our highway. There is really only one way to follow it; I am confident that you will find it. There are side bays and cul-de-sacs but if you use your intuition you will choose the correct course. Keep to the right channels. You will find that the journey is very beautiful."

"You do not want to be quarantined. Agree with Frank's plan. He has his own survival instincts. But you will be the navigator."

"But aren't you in danger of contamination yourself? Everyone who has emerged from these woods seems to have succumbed to a natural malignancy. None of them tasted Noor's cocktail."

"Nature has a way of healing itself. It will do this better without our interference. The land will not poison you if you do not threaten it."

"Every one of you is inconvenient. You have been *discarded*. But sometimes that is a fortunate position to be in. My advice is to take your own future in hand. I only set you on the right track." With that Jimmy turned and evaporated into the dense bush. Mara returned to the group.

"I could see you talking to that old charlatan, the shaman. I suppose that he is full of good advice?" enquired Frank patronisingly.

"Only to go with your proposal" Mara returned enigmatically. "We need to portage the boat through the Hole-in-the-Wall near his camp. It's the beginning of a river system that will take us back to safety."

"But what is the destination?" Malyn enquired petulantly.

"He didn't tell me, but just said that was where we would end up anyway."

And so they did.

Paranoia

Il the travellers retained only disjointed memories of their long journey down river, of finding the overgrown landing that accessed the highway, the lengthy transit in the back of a bottle truck to dusty roadside a bus stand. Their recollections of Lake Arden became increasingly surreal as each of them mulled over their recollections. There was little conversation in transit. Mara looked after Clay who remained in a state of semi-delirium. Malyn and Frank kept a safe distance from each other, lost in their private recriminations. After many transfers and long waits for transport in dusty forecourts, a bus pulled into the City terminal and spilled its exhausted contents. Across the road the familiar sign of the Embers Lounge had just blinked on for the evening.

Without a word of farewell Frank darted across and disappeared into his haunt. Malyn imperiously hailed a cab, explaining to the driver that though she never carried money, her concierge would gratefully reimburse the trip. Mara walked Clay home and left him alone sprawled in oblivion on his bed.

And so without being subjected to the quarantine that Frank clearly dreaded, they found themselves returned to their daily routines and resuming lives that now seemed surreal after their Arden ordeal.

Clay awoke the next morning feeling very sub-normal and tried to get in touch with Frank. To his surprise he found that Frank's contact number had been de-listed and his subsequent text messages were returned. He recalled how angry Frank had been at his apparent betrayal in the labs. But he reckoned that he was entitled to some explanation about being found comatose in the woods, a gross overreaction for a minor lapse of judgement. He kept telling himself that resetting the server was only intended as a practical joke; surely even Frank should have seen that. But of course it had had fatal consequences – but again all because Frank had so over-reacted.

Clay's dingy apartment in the basement of the old distillery felt

strangely altered on his return. It had lain vacant only a few days yet it seemed emptied of his former life. It looked strangely cleaner than he recalled. To add to his chagrin he discovered that a pipe he had never previously noticed had developed a slow leak. The dripping water had fried his server. This was not really a great loss; he had long been planning an upgrade. Fortunately it was all backed up somewhere, but as usual he couldn't quite put his fingers on that either. He felt cut off from his normal routines. Without his phone he couldn't remember a single number. Everything that he set out to do felt tentative, objects around him appeared ringed in haloes of shimmering light, the continuing transformative effects of Frank's cup of tea.

As he was rummaging around in the refrigerator Clay noticed a folded letter fixed to the door by magnets. Surprisingly it was his letter to Mara that he had specifically asked her to 'distroy'. How on earth did that get there? Had she posted it there the previous night? And why? He snatched it down and crumpled it. He suddenly began to feel queasy, irrationally sensing that he was being watched.

Later that afternoon, having made no contact with Frank, Clay set off to check out what was happening at the 'Cloak and Dacton'. He checked in at Tooneys and Myrna gave him her familiar blank, suspicious look. She had not missed him. Carrying on by bike down the long road towards the Es-Tech headquarters, he was soon intercepted by a roving security patrol car and taken to the Reception Centre. He explained his predicament and they communicated back with the Control for instructions. A sneering, bull-necked agent returned to confirm that no clearance was authorised. None of the officers that he had passed by every day for the past two years, were available to vouch for him. His interceptors became unnecessarily aggressive. When he attempted to push on with his bike, the bull-dog became hysterical. He roughly manhandled Clay back through the gate. As Clay looked over his shoulder he saw that guards were already removing his bike. He wrested the bike from the thuggish guard and cycled back to Tooneys in a rage. They let him go.

Myrna brought him a coffee and a bowl of soggy cereal. She took a

look at his dishevelled clothes and florid face and retreated purse-lipped. She had enough problems of her own.

Hunkered down in familiar surroundings Clay cast his mind back merely two weeks previously when he was pondering those cartoon drawings. So much had happened in such a short time! He looked at his mobile which Myrna had paced on his tray and remembered the call that he had placed. Reflecting that he had nothing to lose, he flicked through the dialled numbers and pushed redial.

The phone at the other end rang many times and then there was a click as if someone had answered. No one spoke.

"Hello is that Noor? It's Clay speaking ... the agent at Es-Tech?" There was a long pause and then the unmistakeable nasal voice of Sinny came on the line. It sounded monotone as if he were heavily sedated. He did however hesitantly acknowledge Clay when he announced himself a second time.

"They've gone back to Geneva as far as I know. You can speak to my mother if you call back later this afternoon. She is still asleep."

"Your mother! You mean Malyn?"

There was a long pause.

"Listen Thomas, I am really sorry about what happened to Dex. I am still trying to figure out what happened. But I'm so relieved that you ... your *mother*? ... "

"I have been ordered by my medical counsellors not to reflect on recent events in their absence. You can call later and speak to my mother. Everything here is being fully monitored here so I don't wish to pursue this conversation." With that the phone clicked silent.

"His mother? Malyn! How on earth can that work?" Clay wondered.

Next Clay located Mara's number in his list. She answered quickly but there was an undertone of suspicion in her voice which began to melt somewhat as he unburdened his troubles.

Then suddenly she turned on him. "A few days and everything has changed and it's all due to your bloody Es-Tech. Even *ALIF* has evaporated as if it had never been. You may have addressed the security

problem of the infiltration of our server but you seem to have got rid of the membership as well."

"Well if it's any consolation you are not the only one. My server has been fried by a plumbing leak. I'm totally wiped off the map."

"This is not a consolation."

Clay pressed on hopefully. "I only have your number because it was on the phone I left at Tooneys. Otherwise we'd be like the birds in the bush gathering no moss ... or whatever."

"Huggie says that there has been no *ALIF* activity since we left for Arden. Those hyper-active exchanges between all our new *ALIF* members just disappeared overnight. I'm beginning to wonder whether any of this ever happened, especially after you so conveniently managed to purge our server of everything useful."

Her annoyance was exacerbated by Clay's extended silence on the line.

"Huggie has his hands full trying to fight off some invasive weed that has infiltrated the *City Farm*, apparently blown across from the new remediation zones. At this stage I must admit that I am not keen to trust anyone and almost certainly not you."

Clay hesitantly broke his silence. "It suddenly occurs to me that we are talking too much on this line. We had better meet; leave a message with Jim; we'll have to trust him I guess. Tell him where you want to meet at 2 pm."

"With Jim? I thought that was another thing that your guys had engineered! Jim has disappeared. His hut, all his possessions, everything has gone. I couldn't believe it when I got home, I thought I had the wrong address. And in sheer vindictiveness the City Sanitation Department immediately took the opportunity to cut down his trees the moment he vacated. He was right about the thugs he encountered on the day of the rally. There is nothing left here except stumps festooned with yellow security tape. Nobody can tell me exactly what happened to him even though he's been a street institution as long as most people can remember. Someone must have had it pre-arranged from the day we left for Arden. I

Grey Horizon

think that was why I was invited in the first place. It was all a set up. The landlord swears he had nothing to do with it; but he has certainly been very quick to clear the garden. It all looks as if it had never been anyone's home. Such a short time but the world seems to have changed overnight in what looks to me like a *very* co-ordinated effort. So don't be surprised if Es-Tech is *the* prime culprit in my sights."

Thinking of Frank Clay, he added, "There are a lot of other people that seem to have disappeared lately. Maybe we had better take care to avoid joining them."

Entrapment?

hortly later Clay tapped discreetly on Mara's window. Without a word he signalled her to follow him out. They went to sit on a bench at the local bus stop beside a ravaged stump.

Mara diffidently covered his reluctant hand with its curious web tattoo woven between the fingers. "Perhaps we should all count ourselves lucky to have escaped Arden. I am beginning to realise that most of the issues there were beyond us."

Mara surveyed the ravaged stump in disgust. "How different the message of the Noor Project is from what we had supposed! I was quite wrong about who was in control, and I just fell into their trap, writing off Zwielicht as a boffin, bungling around in his twilight world. I deluded myself into thinking that he could be an ally. But now I see that even Noor was a victim. Noor's irrepressible showmanship was being exploited to the full. I can still hear echoes of that phrase Zwielicht kept repeating ... 'to be quite honest with you' ... he was anything but quite honest with us. And your pathetic little Es-Tech crew just fell in with his agenda adding another level of disinformation! I was completely taken in. He seems to have run circles around Frank."

"Well, I guess that Frank has decided to lay low for a while."

"Hellana Nix could hardly have been pleased either. She will be in a tight spot I suppose."

"Frank's entire platoon is in the same boat. Yet nobody knows where he has got to! Certainly nobody at Embers knows."

Clay suddenly brightened, considering a positive angle. "Maybe it's a temporary reprieve for our *City Farm* plans." But then he darkened again, "But my job prospects are completely blown."

"Our City Manor plans?" Mara was becoming increasingly distraught. "So much work ... a complete waste. Huggie tells me that the Boundary Road site is contaminated with a new noxious super-weed. He is exhausted in his attempts to root it out. So many people put their hearts into that project for it all to have imploded so suddenly."

Clay began to look rather embarrassed. "I think that Frank played a bit of a role in those problems too."

"A bit of a role! What an understatement. I can't even begin to imagine his motives. But it is not just Es-Tech that we're dealing with. De Vere was lurking in the background of every conversation up at Arden. He is pulling strings that none of us recognise. He's the one who connects everyone. He obviously knows all about the *City Seven*. Es-Tech has been completely taken in."

She suddenly recalled Frank's curious comment, 'de Vere with the ear ... I can tell you that you wouldn't want to be whispering into the wrong side.'

Clay began to suck meditatively on his lip ring, always a bad sign in Mara's view. "But if some of our membership list is still intact on Huggie's server, we could try a mailing with a message about restarting City Farm. Perhaps you could write another of your *'E-dictorials'* highlighting some recent events at Arden. We might turn up a some parties that are still interested."

This struck Mara as one of Clay's few sensible suggestions. The challenge of laying a few discreet snares began to take shape in her mind. She got up and turned to Clay, who was already growing far too pleased with his flash of inspiration. To his disappointment she turned homewards without further word to spend the rest of the afternoon composing with relish a new 'E-dictorial' (a happy malapropism), to be relayed via Huggie's computer.

Grey Horizon

wo days later an envelope arrived by courier with 'Clara Voy's' distinctive hand writing. Again the tell-tale 'M'. She explained that her friend McCubbins wanted to talk urgently about recent events and how ALIF could be re-invigorated to suit revised 'objectives' of the benefactors. Evidently she had picked up the message about rekindling City Farm but she made no allusion to it.

She proposed that Mara and 'other interested *City Farm*ers' attend at the Es-Tech head office the following morning. Mara phoned her acceptance to the stated number. Then she sent a text to Clay proposing that they go in together.

* * *

Entering the protected world of the Es-Tech head office was contrived to be a daunting experience. The hapless visitor was greeted by a wall of suspicion, sharp eyes that assessed the potential risk posed by any visitor. Traversing the polished white marble floors Mara was acutely aware of the awkwardness of her gait, the deficiencies of her appearance and the obvious questions that would arise about a lack of symmetry in her relationship with Clay.

They were parted from their bags, shoes, belts, hats and other paraphernalia and processed through a variety of gateways and scanners. Mara's satchel was taken off into a separate area and subjected to invasive testing. Clay's proclamation that he was an Es-Tech employee only provoked a more humiliating scrutiny. He was escorted off into a private room by two humourless thugs and returned some fifteen minutes later very red-faced.

"I think that they are all just showing off!" Mara complained as their shoes were passed through yet another battery of scrutiny. A grim-faced agent was summoned to escort them to the 56th floor where they were settled in a dimly lit waiting room alongside a tank of fish. They watched

the slow progress of these creatures for nearly an hour. "Clearly no one is in a great hurry to see us."

At last a humourless aide with polished cranium and severely trimmed goatee came in and ferried them wordlessly into a small antechamber. A small red light high on the wall flickered and he threw open a side door into an explosion of dazzling light.

As Mara and Clay entered blinking, they became vaguely aware of a shadowy figure against the window surveying the skyline. It turned to address them.

"Mara! What a pleasure to see a familiar face! ... and *Clavers*, you came too! These last few days have been such a hectic time for us and I am sorry that I was not able to keep everyone abreast of developments."

It was Cubbie who turned to greet them over the massive desk. But her appearance was quite altered. Gone was the cacophony of bangles and fidgety apparel which she had affected at Lake Arden. She was dressed in severely tailored tweeds. Around her neck she had a tightly knotted khaki tie which suggested nascent scouting sympathies.

"Of course you won't be aware that the Es-Tech Board has asked me to assume Ms Nix's duties in a transitional role. She did not enjoy their full confidence and I seemed best placed to assume her role during a transition period. Hellana has agreed to accept a well-earned early retirement and of course she is utterly delighted."

"That was sudden." Mara was unable to disguise a hint of irony in her voice.

"Yes but now I imagine she will be happily pulling weeds in her long neglected allotment, a dimension to Hellana that few would have guessed." Cubbie smiled with tense lips which kept the underlying dental cacophony well disguised.

Mara glanced around the cool expansive office. The clinical emptiness of the space seemed to highlight a faint odour, a waft of spicy clove in the air that triggered uncertain memories.

Clay interjected, "I'm trying to locate Frank. But he's just disappeared. I can't even access my old office at HQ to find out what's happened. They

treat me like a person non rata."

Mara considered the implications of 'non rata'. "Has your colleague Frank also taken up gardening?"

Cubbie bridled at this scintilla of sarcasm. "Firstly you could hardly describe Frank as *my colleague*. He was one of Hellana's protégés. Now that Hellana no longer requires his services, he has been redeployed and accepted a challenging international posting. You Clavers, should know how Frank was drawn to a life of excitement. Dealing with petty intrigues and corporate manoeuvrings ill-suited his adventurous spirit. He has taken up a dream posting, in Zeitoonistan I believe. Not of course for the faint hearted! There will be lots to write home about I should think; we'll all undoubtedly hear interesting news of him before long."

"Of him?" Mara niggled.

"But we are not here to reminisce about our acquaintances. I called you in at Clara Voy's request. She is concerned that you will need our help in getting your *City Farm* back on track. I do appreciate that *ALIF* has run into difficulties. I think that it's in everyone's interest to help you rebalance the message."

Mara bridled, "From what I can see that imbalance is entirely due to your interference. In fact I think that the only reason that I was brought up to Lake Arden was so that you could take control in my absence."

Cubbie sighed resignedly and pursued her elliptical course. "Sadly Lake Arden has become an exclusion zone. It has become a highly classified matter and everyone would be advised to make no further reference to events purported to have taken place there. Stringent security operations must ensure that rogue elements do not exploit these temporary ecological imbalances. A skeleton staff," she paused and smiled glibly as if recalling some private joke, "some of whom will be familiar from Frank's little jamboree, will secure the research centre during restitution operations."

Cubbie's lips twisted into a sardonic moment of levity. "In fact Lake Arden presents all of the challenges for the ecological rehabilitation that your group espouses. It might eventually make an interesting test case for City Farm, should you be interested ... of course I'm just thinking out loud."

There was a moments silence while Mara considered whether this was intended as humour or a veiled threat. Her mind returned to that strange wafting fragrance of cloves pervading the office, and the image of Burrell de Vere twining his hair around his little finger sprang to mind.

"However, I've invited you here because I want to offer our full support in redefining *City Farm*. Clara is concerned that benefactors have been horrified by recent developments. You have allowed infiltration by rogue elements to compromise the credibility of your whole organisation. Consequently, the benefactors wish to dissociate themselves and have declared that they will withdraw immediately from any future funding. In fact they are even contemplating legal action to recover what they can of their misspent funds."

"The benefactors? Cubbie? What benefactors? Have you not orchestrated all this entirely to suit your own purposes? Aren't you Clara Voy? You share the same handwriting. Has this not been your campaign to place yourself in Ms Nix's position?"

Cubbie looked shocked at this outburst. "But on my pledge of honour."

"Your so-called benefactors never explained what they were hoping to achieve. We were just scapegoats bleating in the wilderness. I feel that I have been a convenient decoy to draw the public eye away from your very shadowy objectives."

Cubbie added, "I must confess that you are not unacquainted with your principal benefactor."

Mara pondered a moment, "You mean *BDV Holdings*, the odious Burrell de Vere? I figured out who he was when I saw you exchanging notes at the Lodge. A person like that has no real interest in the *City Farm*."

"That 'odious de Vere' as you so unjustly refer to him has succeeded in his objective of securing a solid future for Gene-Sys. The Genesis-Verity Corporation as it will be styled in future, is at last on course to transform the Portal development into the vibrant centre of biotechnology so crucial for the future of New Mid. I should also add that the BDV Group has secured the services of Dr Zwielicht to head the new research programme."

Clay, somewhat bewildered by these revelations, mentioned tentatively, "But I spoke to Thomas yesterday and he said that everyone had gone back to Switzerland abandoning him to his mother."

"I believe that Noor's services have been terminated, on very generous terms I might add, and he has returned to wherever he claimed to hale from. But as for Dr Zwielicht you can rest assured that we will all be hearing much more about progress of his research at the G-V Corp. Which leads me to my next point ..."

There was a long pause as she turned to look out the window at the grey clouds that were beginning to waft across the view.

She continued with her back turned. "A continuing part of the housekeeping exercises that I referred to earlier will be in finding an immediate solution for the relocation of *City Manor Farm*. I have been authorised to make a generous offer to re-establish the farm on a prime suburban site, already secured by the *Gee-Vee Corp*. They would like to commission City Farm to undertake high profile research into aquatic farming. Your landlords have already revoked your temporary licence on the Portal lands. Sadly there is no alternative to your immediate removal."

"You are just criminals, a great racket plotting the future of New Mid."

Cubbie turned to reply in a self-righteous, fluting voice, "In all of these undertakings I have never ceased to act in a manner that is utterly above reproach. You will have no idea of how vigorously I have had to defend your interests. You should be very relieved that I, personally, have managed to deflect your benefactors from taking immediate legal recourse to reclaim misspent funds."

"On what basis could they have taken action?"

Cubbie shrugged her shoulders and carried on. "I have discussed this problem with my colleagues and we have resolved that your best course of action will be to close down *ALIF* immediately and revert to your previous name and membership. This of course should come as no great

hardship for you personally. *City Farm* is rather a pretty name; it has some resonance. But I had hoped that you would be more grateful for my interventions."

"My colleagues have been particularly critical about your recent intentions to draw the Lake Arden fiasco into a more public light. Such a course would suit no one's best interest."

"In fact knowing that you would welcome this reprieve we have already taken the liberty of arranging the purge and renewal of your data base. Your equipment is being upgraded for a fresh beginning with a state of the art system! In the short run this will demonstrate that we are unified in dealing with this unfortunate situation and help to mollify the investors' disappointment."

Mara could not believe what she was hearing. Suddenly the reason for her summons and their lengthy wait observing marine life became clear. "This is a nightmare! You mean that while we were waiting you have taken the opportunity to steal our files?"

"You should resist using such inflammatory terms! Es-Tech does not conduct business in any way contrary to the law. I can assure you that this is undertaken to protect your interests. I see no other future for the *City Manor Farm*."

As Cubbie was speaking Clay's eyes were wandering distractedly around the room and became fixed on the little side trestle covered with mementoes. He shuddered involuntarily under the power of the curse that seemed to hang over this table. As he considered the curious assortment of down-turned boxes, frames and mementos his heart suddenly jolted on recognising a very familiar object amidst the array. Sitting to one side was the small black data box, which he had come to know only too well over his past two years working with Frank. It was positioned face down to expose the labelled underside and surrounded by other topsy-turvy items. It was Frank's obsessive record of his own life, the ongoing memorial of a whole lifetime, records of meetings, expeditions, filed names and profiles, photos and opinions, all obsessively organised. This little object contained the reservoir of his entire being, his assertion perhaps to himself