

Refractions #1

The Fifth Edition

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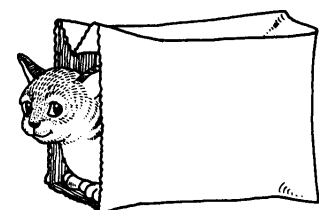
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Cat-Out-Of-The-Bag
Productions

Editorial

Here we are – the first thing to be read, and the last thing to be written. Welcome to the debut of Refractions, the club zine of Alternity, the club for fans with eclectic tastes. Half the blame is Bryan Dart's. It was his idea. I'm starting a club, he said. You've got experience, he said. Would you be interested in editing the club zine? I said no. Then I said maybe. Then I said yes, but don't expect me to contribute to it. Famous last words. Here we have a zine, and I contributed to it. Then again, one zine editor that I know said you can't edit a zine without expecting to contribute 50% of it. Another revised that figure to 90%, so I guess I managed okay! I can't believe it. It's actually finished. It actually happened. The whole thing. Done.

Why Refractions? The name and the idea for the logo came to me at about the same time, back in January. It's supposed to indicate diversity of ideas, alterations, crossovers, and things broken away from the original yet echoing its image; the epitome of a mixed Media SF fanzine. That's why.

My chiefest thanks go to Jean Graham, Judith Proctor and Kev Davis, without whom we wouldn't really have a zine! Thanks to Jean for digging up those gems and making me wonder why I hadn't read more of her stuff before. Thanks to Judith for peppering me with poems in the midst of her own zine editing and family crises. Thanks to Kev for sitting down and writing a durn good (and long) story and polishing away at it – not forgetting the contributions of the Alien Nation Mailing List folks for some of that polish.

Due to the wonders of the Internet, this is truly an international fanzine. Besides Jenny Hayward, Shona McAndrew and I from Australia, we have Jean Graham and Jim McMahon from the U.S. of A., Kev Davis and Judith Proctor from England, and Marina Bailey from South Africa.

I hope you like this zine. There's a mixture of stories and poetry, of Blake's 7 and other universes, mostly serious, but also stuff to bring a smile to your face. Watch out for the end of Aftermath – I originally wasn't going to use Babylon 5 stories, but I couldn't resist this one. If you don't like the zine, why on Earth not? Tell me, constructively. And tell me why you like it too. Do you want a Letters Of Comment column in the next issue? Tell me so.

Speaking of the next issue, its existence and speed of arrival depend on you. If I receive no contributions, there will be no zine. If you're on the 'net, check out my web page for the full submission guidelines, or write or email me (see the front page for the various addresses). To put it briefly, I want good PG-rated stories, poetry and artwork based on any SF Media universe except the Big Two, Doctor Who and Star Trek.

Enjoy!



Note on the Fourth Edition

Yes, that's right, this is the fourth edition of this first issue of Refractions; the fourth time the issue has been laid out. The written content is exactly the same, and the illustrations are mostly the same. Why so many times? You could probably say it was a teething problem, trying to get an issue which would be the same for A4 and Letter paper, then laying it out again for Acrobat PDF format in January 1999, and this time, re-doing it completely with L^AT_EX (and underneath it, T_EX 2_ε) in my quest to be free of the yoke of evil monopolies. February 2003.

Word count: approximately 40,400 words. Warning — boring geekish paragraph follows:

Refractions #1 (The Fourth Edition) was put together using L^AT_EX, T_EX 2_ε and ancillary scripts for conversions to things like PDF. Story headers were done with GIMP 1.2.1. Prose text was done in Utopia and headers in Dauphin.

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Migration

The long slow song
calls me, calls me
Its echo ripples to the shore
Southward they are going, going
And my heart is torn in two.
Southward they are flying, flying
Dancing through the waves
I must be flying with them
Singing with the sea
Yet I'd leave behind me
precious new and strange
dear sweet family.



All my life of drifting, drifting
Day from day from day
Rhythms of the seasons turning
All I ever knew.
Yet they pulled me in their ambit
like a drawing tide
their world of time and metal
wonders
faster rhythms, fleeting ways,
hurts and love, side-by-sideness,
face to face with otherness,
all from one dear act of rescue
brought me to this happiness.

But I must go, I must, I must
Charley calls me, time is sped
Yet time will pass, the season's
turning
Come the spring, I'm Northward
led
Come the spring, I'm homeward
led.

— Kathryn Andersen

BITTER WINE

by JEAN GRAHAM

Why do you imagine I've never gone back? Affection for him?

I am not often so cruel with words. But yours was an anger that provoked my own, festering until I could do nothing else but retaliate. And so I exchanged hurt for thoughtless hurt.

Forgive me, Avon. For my words and for the deception that followed.

I never meant the bonding to last so long. I was wrong, I know, to form it at all. But I simply could not allow you to face the interrogators alone when there was a way...

I only wanted to help. How could I possibly have foreseen the random element of Anna Grant's return from the dead?

Anna was one agony I had not intended to share.

The rumours of my death...

Have been greatly exaggerated.

How lightly Tarrant spoke the words, both blithe and blind to your torment. But your reply was anything but light as you slotted the teleport bracelet into its rack.

Well... slightly exaggerated, anyway.

And when you walked away, your pain was tangible enough to drive me to the cushions at the teleport console, biting back the urge to cry out. Though you'd gone, the horror of your single thought remained with me, bleak and coldly terrifying.

Not Anna too.

I knew the source of the horror then. So many others had already betrayed you. Everyone for whom you'd ever cared... or tried to care. You had come to believe that your "walls" would protect you from ever being hurt again. And now... You had not counted on the intervention of a ghost, any more than I had. The hardest betrayal to bear is the one you would never... ever... have expected.

Please, God... not Anna too.

"Cally?"

I jumped, aware of a hand suddenly touching mine, and a voice – Vila's – concerned and gentle.

"Cally, what is it? What's wrong?"

I should have expected that of all of them, Vila would be the one to notice my distress. But I could not tell him. How would I explain?

"I'll be all right, Vila. Thank you."

"Well you don't look all right. You're white as a ghost. Here, wait a minute. I've got something can help that..."

"No." I stopped his reach for the bottle. "Thank you. But I really am all right. Or I will be, as soon as I've taken care of something."

He glanced nervously at the corridor, the way you had gone, and then back at me as though he might be uncannily aware that some connection did indeed exist. "He'll be all right," he said.

I blinked at him, not understanding.

"Avon," he added with a rueful little smile. "He'll be all right, too. He's always all right. Nothing ever gets to Avon."

Oh, but you are wrong, Vila. So very wrong. I wanted to say the words aloud, but could not. The pain had returned, a frigid, clutching thing from deep within the bonding. Your physical discomfort I had intended to share, through the interrogation, and to lessen it if I could. But this ...

This thing had been born in the darkest hell any Auron may face. It drew its pain from cruel, uncompromised isolation. Your fear, Avon. Alone and silent.

Why did I ever consent to have any part in your revenge? Even so small a part as implanting the transmitter? Perhaps because the thought of forming the bond had occurred to me. And if I could not stop you from going, I might at least help you to face the interrogators.

My people call it *uhrtra*.

The Sharing.

It is done easily – and undone – with nothing more than a touch. A simple mental link. Quite fragile, really. But it can serve a useful purpose, as it did in this case. And you need never be aware of it at all. I knew you would be angry if you knew. Angry that anyone dared enough to care.

I formed the *uhrtra* when we implanted the transmitter, whilst you were still unconscious. I did not think then what a risk I would be taking. If you had died in your quest for this insane revenge, I would have died with you. Uselessly.

The Auronae say that revenge is bitter wine. One always learns, too late, that it is never worth the price you pay.

So I shared, through the bonding, your five day ordeal. For each of us to suffer only half the pain, I reasoned, was better than for one to bear it all. I told the others I was ill – that was true enough – and I retired to my cabin. They assumed that I was only mourning Auron's loss, and that was also true, in part. But I had never realized just what horrors you were ready to endure in order to exact your "justice." I had never been the "guest" of Federation interrogators on a level with these. You had. Yet you were willing to go through it all again, just to get your hands on Shriner.

Was he worth it, Avon?

I think not.

You killed him. You dispassionately orchestrated his death – and yet it turned out he had never known Anna at all. Had not killed her. Had never seen her.

An empty victory.

I began to regret the *uhrtra* then. But I did not break it, even after Shriner's death, because you placed yourself in even greater danger by going after Servalan.

Again, I was foolish. And again, I might have died with you.

It was I who warned you when Anna drew the gun. Did you realize that, I wonder? I tell myself that it was as much for self-preservation as for... well, for any other reason. Yet even that is partly a deception. I know it, but I don't pretend to understand it.

I do not know my own feelings any more, Avon. I do not understand why I care... when it seems that you have never cared.

My brooding at the teleport console was disturbed again by Vila's solicitous voice.

"Are you certain you're all right? Why don't you let me get you that drink, Cally. It'll do you good. Promise."

I forced his hand away, gently but firmly. "No, Vila. There is something I must do."

Over his objections, I departed in the direction you had gone, praying that he would not follow. Fortunately, this time, he did not.

I knew where you had gone. Even without the *uhrtra*, I would have known. I'd seen you on the starboard observation deck before, and assumed you had gone there for the same reason I often did. To lose yourself for a time in the vastness of the stars. To think, to remember... or to forget.

Only now you could do none of those things, and the stars were no longer a comfort. They were nothing now but a billion torments, scattered, hard and shining, as empty and alone as the agony we shared.

I regretted the bond more than ever in that moment, not because I could not withstand the pain, but because this was a personal anguish upon which I had no right to intrude. I felt suddenly cheap and deceitful for not having told you; you would never have forgiven me in any case. And yet, to stop it, I had somehow to touch you...

I came onto the observation deck and stopped just within the door. The room was lightless, but I could see you silhouetted against the rectangular port, standing there, staring out at nothing.

I felt the tears, unshed, burn in my own eyes, and I recoiled at the pain no Auron would have willingly shared – the acrid, bitter twist of the betrayer's knife that left you so horribly alone. It murdered the soul, that knife; made it draw remorselessly in upon itself like a collapsing star. Never to trust again. Never to... love... again. New walls, re-erected, were meant now to imprison you forever. Alone. To an Auron, they would have precursed certain madness. I feared they might well do the same for you. But they were your choice, those walls. I wanted only to be free of them, to break the *uhrtra*, once and for all.

Yet I could not.

I couldn't bring myself to move another step into that room. Somehow, to reveal to you that I was

there at all seemed a betrayal as cruel in its way as Anna's had been.

Something else you would never have forgiven.

So, cowardice defeating me, I fled the room and sought solace once again in the confines of my cabin.

For ten hours, I fought, unsuccessfully, to banish the demons that raged at you. I even tried to drown them in the misery of my own private sorrow: I studied the drawings of Auron, a long and morbid reverie mourning the passing of a world. My world.

It did not help.

Ten hours of grief gone by, and your voice calling softly at my door brings both surprise and, guiltily, relief. Now at last, a chance to dissolve the link. And you still need never know.

I scarcely hear your words – or mine – as you remove the drawing from my grasp and gaze at it, detached, controlled once more. As though your agony had never been. But it is still there, behind the walls. I feel it burning. A cold fire, twisting... consuming.

"Regret is part of living," you say, concealing your own regret once more behind the omnipresent mask. "But keep it a small part."

Now is the time, I know, that I must make the contact. Break the link. So simple and innocent a thing, a touch. Yet this one must be oh so much more.

"As you do?" I ask, and your smile is a thing somehow more frightening than reassuring.

"Demonstrably."

Now. It must be now.

I smile as well, summoning a laugh, and place an almost playful hand upon your chest. A friendly touch, light and fleeting. It is all you are likely to allow. But it is enough.

The *uhrtra* gone at last, I move past you to the door and turn my feet toward the flight deck. A part of me wishes I could tell you... explain to you. But I know you would not understand.

Another part of me wishes I could have done more, somehow, to help you. But that, too, is impossible. You have made it so.

Pain, isolation, emptiness. They are all yours once more. And I cannot – will not – share them again.

I am sorry, Avon. But this is how it must be.

He who drinks the bitter wine must drink alone...

★
★★★
★

(This story first appeared in
Blake's 7 Complex #12 in 1987)

Elegy For The Seven

(with apologies to A.E. Houseman)

These in the day when heaven was
falling,

The hour when honest men had fled,
Followed then the outlaw calling,

Took the risks and now are dead.
Their shoulders held the sky suspended,
They held off evil for a day,
Whom fate abandoned, these defended;
Survival was their only pay.

Time will seek to judge as heroes,
Those who heard no clarion call,
Fear and vengeance gave them foes,
Who else might not have fought at all.
History will ascribe them virtue,
Claim them for a nobler cause,
Every deed with good imbue,

And say they fought to end all wars.
If you recall with strong affection.

Those who lived and laughed and cried,
Do not call them good or evil,
Simply call them those who tried.

— Judith Proctor

Winning is the Only Safety (1) First Death

by KATHRYN ANDERSEN

The sweet sickly smell filled his nose, his mouth, his lungs. He breathed in the stench of death. He tried to move, but there was a heavy something on top of him; to open his eyes but they were caked shut with... something. With blood? Was he buried alive?

He shoved in sudden desperation at the thing above him, and it moved slowly away. He rubbed at his eyes and blinked. Cold and dark. Night and stars. An edge. A pit. A pit full of corpses.

Buried alive. Buried alive. He nearly had been. They had taken him for a corpse and tossed him in an open grave along with the others, and only the lateness of the hour and the incompleteness of the task had stopped them finishing the job - and finishing him.

His hair stood on end. He sat up. His guts heaved and he added vomit to the smells of excrement and blood around him. He stood up on wobbly legs, and clawed his way out of the pit, away from the slaughterhouse smell. The open grave had been dug by the edge of the trees, as far from the base as possible and still be in the open. Not that there was much open. The base was deliberately buried in the middle of one of the vast pine plantations that covered this part of the planet. Two things were uppermost in his mind; first, to get away; second, to get out of these filthy clothes and wash from the skin out. Then, maybe then, he could afford to think about what happened. But for now, he would walk, crawl if need be. But not go back, not for any reason.

★

Miles away, the thief whimpered as the flyer wobbled again. He looked at his face in the dim reflection of the window. His light brown hair was thinning. Look what being on the run for years would do to you. His face was open and friendly, as well as nondescript, suiting his profession to a tee. He'd told Kerril that "a thief isn't what I am, it's who I am". Maybe he should have stayed with her.

"Curse you Avon," he said to himself. "I never thought I'd live to say 'I told you so', but I told you so!"

He had stolen the flyer even though he didn't know how to fly it - not as well as the others would have. The controls were fairly simple, but either he had stolen a defective model, or he had the controls adjusted wrongly.

"Use Blake as a figurehead for the rebellion, eh? Just drop in on an old friend, eh? Zukan's dead, just go to the next one on the list. And we dropped into this hole in the ground, and never came out. Federation agents infiltrated - it was a trap, the whole thing

turned into a trap, and Blake was the bait. And he didn't even know it."

But a wobble in the flight was better than being caught by bounty-hunters in the woods. He gave off as much body-heat as the next man, and he hadn't forgotten what Avon said about the bounty-hunters' heat detectors. Avon. And the others. Not to mention Blake. They were dead.

"Why did you have to kill him, Avon? Oh, I know, you thought he'd betrayed you. But it was that agent! Oh, you stupid idiot!"

He was trying not to cry, running on adrenaline and fear. When it all started going wrong he'd hit the floor and played dead - too much shooting going on for any of those troopers to wonder if any of the bodies *wasn't* a corpse. Cowardice was his defence, as well as one of his faults. He'd made himself scarce before the clean-up squad had come to sort out the bodies. It was getting dark, they might not have finished before nightfall.

"Why does this always happen to me? I was only ever along for the ride. What kind of choice did I have? Open this door, Vila. Crack this lock, Vila. Go and get shot at, Vila. Shut up, Vila."

No point hanging around - just pick up Orac and leave. Avon wasn't going to be needing the computer any longer. He'd apologised to Avon's corpse when he'd taken the activator key from his pocket - Avon always carried Orac's key with him, even when he'd hidden the computer itself. After he'd stolen the flyer, he'd tried to turn the computer on, but it hadn't seemed to be working. Broken. Maybe he could sell the parts for scrap. Or find someone who could fix it. But first he had to get off this planet. He didn't know where he was running to - he was just running.

★

He was concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. He was still filthy. The black leather didn't show the stains, but it was stiffening from the blood. The studs on the jacket gleamed dully in the bright moonlight, as he crossed a small clearing. He had not found even a stream to wash in. The figure upon which the moon shone was tallish, and would have scrubbed up into an elegant, handsome man. Short dark hair, an aristocratic nose, and dark brown eyes that had seen too much. His almost forty years felt like a hundred.

He didn't want to think, but his mind droned a dismal tune to the rhythm of his footsteps. It went: *They're dead. They're dead. They're all dead.* Then it did a little variation on the theme. *It was a trap. You know it was a trap. They're dead. They're dead.*



They're all dead. They're dead. They're dead. They're all dead. You should be dead too. It had been what he was expecting, and his last ironic grimace had been at the thought that he too would be a companion for Blake's death, an atonement to make up for his mistake in shooting the wrong betrayer. That their deaths would be linked after all. He shouldn't have survived. What Fate had laughed and spared him? *They're dead. They're dead. They're all dead.*

It was almost a relief when he heard the aircar. Doubtless a bounty-hunter who tracked him by his body-heat. He leaned against a tree to wait. What was the point in running? They were all dead. He had nothing. No ship, no Orac - not even its key, for someone had taken it from his pocket - no rescue party waiting in the wings.

The last time he'd had nothing was on the London, being transported to Cygnus Alpha, penal colony of no return. He'd been a different man then. His computer fraud failed, Anna dead by torture (or so he thought then) he still meant to fall on his feet whatever the circumstances; and survive. What had he said to Blake? "An intelligent man can adapt." And Blake had set off on his mad scheme which failed, but Blake in his usual bumbling way had stumbled into good fortune and they'd made off with the Liberator, the fastest ship in the galaxy, and Blake fought his crusade - until the Andromedan War. Then Blake vanished, a chimera that had eluded him.

Oh he'd adapted all right. Adapted from a cracker to a leader of the revolution. Kerr Avon, wanted rebel. Ha! All idealists were fools. His reasons were purely practical - the Federation wouldn't leave him alone. His association with Blake had made him a political criminal, and he'd never be safe, and never be free, as long as they ruled. But he couldn't adapt to betrayal. The last time he'd felt like dying... that cold cellar with Servalan's gun caressing his neck, and Anna's body at his feet - Anna who he killed with his own hands, Anna who he would have laid down his life for, Anna who hadn't died under torture, Anna who had betrayed him.

The flyer had landed not too far away. The carpet of pine needles muffled the sound of footsteps but the bounty hunter found him soon enough. His gun was drawn, and he pointed it straight at the computer technician's heart.

"What have we here?"

Avon said nothing.

"Had a fight with the missus, eh?" The man laughed at his own joke. He was dressed in brown leather, armed like a bandit, and a knife was sheathed in one boot. The man came closer, relaxing a little when he saw that Avon wasn't armed, and raising an eyebrow when he saw the state Avon was in. "Quiet one, huh? Did she tear out your tongue too?"

Avon just stared at him. His heart turned over.

"Or maybe she tore out your heart?" the man tut-tutted.

That was too much. Avon straightened, and dived for the bounty hunter's legs, knocking him down. The man's first shot went wild, but he held on to the gun. Avon pulled out the knife from the

boot, and stabbed him in the side, just as the man brought his gun to bear, and shot him, point blank. Apart from the pain, all Avon felt was relief.

★

Vila managed to get the flyer to the spaceport in one piece. He had managed to turn on the autopilot and investigate the interior. His two greatest finds were a map, and a secret compartment containing papers and valuables. It had been no great challenge for his talented thievish fingers. The papers included identification for one Del Green. Well, Del Green wasn't going to miss them - Del Green was probably dead. And so would he be if he didn't get off this armpit of a planet. Dead or worse.

But spaceport bars never close, and money can open many doors. Surely there would be someone here willing to take him off planet, no questions asked.

★

Ricardo Kidd sighed. It wasn't his real name of course. It was more of a joke, really. On account of his looks, too often he was referred to as 'the kid' so he decided to adopt it as his current nom de guerre. Fresh faced, pale brown curly hair with a touch of red; the kind of looks that made teenage girls sigh and older women motherly. But it was no help when he wanted people to take him seriously. All they saw was a rich young man, ripe for ripping off.

He cursed the meteor storm that had forced him to put down on this pest-hole of a planet. What with the inflated prices for the repairs, and the port fees, he was running short of acceptable currency. Oh, his credit balance would have made most people's eyes pop out, but this barbarian planet didn't accept credit balances - just hard valuables, such as metals and gems. And he didn't have quite enough to pay what they euphemistically called 'departure tax', which was really a fee to give safe passage through the blockade. If you didn't pay, they'd shoot you down as soon as you left atmosphere. He didn't fancy that, not at all. He had to get cash for the fee.

So he'd put word about that he was willing to take passengers. Passengers who would find a regular route difficult to obtain. But there'd been no takers in the past few days. Maybe he would have to sell one of the swords. Surely not? In this flea-pit there wouldn't be a collector who would *know* their value, let alone pay a tenth of what one of them was worth. He'd have to wait a little longer.

He sat in a convenient corner making the nearby potted plant quite sozzled on his untouched beer.

A man approached his table. He had thinning light brown hair and walked small, as if he didn't want to be noticed, as if this was a habit.

"You're Ricardo Kidd?"

"I'm cursed with youth and good looks," he said, deadpan. "What do you want?"

"I want passage off this planet."

"And who might you be?"

"Del Green."

Kidd suppressed a quip about green dells. Most people wouldn't get the joke, and the fellow looked nervous enough already. Probably on the run. Del

Green probably wasn't his real name, but then again, a lot of his own friends didn't go by their real names either. The delicate dance of negotiation began. Kidd was going to Bucol-2 'to look up an old friend'. Half the payment in advance - now - and half on delivery. A pouch changed hands.

"Day after tomorrow - Ryan's Pride, bay nine."

They shook hands and "Green" left.

★

The pine needles prickled his face. He ached. Avon rolled over and looked about him. The bounty hunter was lying on the ground, not far away. It looked as though he'd tried to crawl to the flyer, but the knife wound had been too much for him. Just unlucky. Or lucky, depending on how you looked at it.

But how come he himself was alive? The bounty hunter had shot to kill - at least it felt like it. But all he had now was a pounding headache. Did he miss? Impossible. There was something strange going on.

This was no time to be squeamish. Avon cleaned himself up with water from the flyer. He took the dead man's identification, and some spare clothing that wasn't covered with blood. Luckily it wasn't too bad a fit, though it hung loosely in some places. He was now Ren Perera, bounty hunter. He buried the dead man, adding an unmarked grave to a forest that had held such secrets for many years.

He settled down for the rest of the night in the flyer, snatching at sleep.

★

The light was red and lurid, wavering like flames. Tarrant stood in his ripped and dusty flight suit, a streak of blood crusting down the side of his face.

"Is it him?" Tarrant asked.

"It's him," said Vila, looking merely more crumpled than usual. They were both staring at him.

"He killed us, Blake," Tarrant said to the third man in the group, a man with curly hair the echo of Tarrant's, but older, bulkier, with a scar running from one eye down across his cheek. "All of us. Even you."

"Is it true?" Blake asked him.

"Blake, it's me - Avon," he said, moving forward.

"Stand still!" Blake said. He had a gun in his hand.

He stopped still.

"Have you betrayed us?" Blake asked pleadingly. "Have you betrayed me?!"

"Tarrant doesn't understand!" he protested.

"Neither do I, Avon!"

"I set all this up!" he found himself saying.

"Yes!" Blake rumbled.

He started forward again. "Blake, I was looking for YOU."

Blake brought the gun around and fired at him. He felt the projectile go through his chest. The pain. Another shot. He kept going towards Blake, and Blake fired again. He stopped, still standing. Blake swung the gun up to his face. His knees buckled, and he grabbed Blake's arms.

"Blake..."

Avon woke up with a shudder. Another nightmare. Blake's metaphysical revenge, a reversal of roles. The light crept through the flyer windows, giving him an excuse not to brave the shores of sleep again. He started up the flyer and made a beeline for the spaceport.

Avon was hungry so he decided to look for somewhere that was open at this early hour. When he saw the slight figure eating breakfast at the table his numbed mind couldn't comprehend it. He approached the table like a sleepwalker and sat down.

"Vila," he said.

The thief went white and tried to jump out of his skin. "You - you're dead!"

"I expect so," he said. It all made a sudden crazy sense. "Is this Hell, Vila? They won't let me die."

"What are you talking about?" Vila said confusedly.

"I'm talking about this!" Quick as a snakestrike, Avon took the knife from his boot and slashed his left wrist.

"Avon! What d'you think you're doing?" Vila cried, and went to staunch the wound with the nearest thing to hand - the tablecloth. The cloth soaked up the pulsing blood, turning red on white. Vila frantically wondered what to do next, and tried not to feel sick - he'd always felt faint at the sight of blood, but when your only friend in the world has sudden suicidal impulses, your own nausea somehow takes second place.

But Avon calmly took the cloth away, and when Vila tried to put it back, Avon held him back with an iron grip, and merely said "Look."

There was something in his voice which made Vila look. The wound had stopped bleeding. Even as he watched, the gash closed up and then even the scar faded away as if it had never been.

"I wondered what might happen," Avon said hollowly. "They won't let me die. This is Hell."

"No it isn't Hell, Avon, it's Gauda Prime." Vila began, filling up the awful silence with words, babbling on as was often his habit when nervous. "I know it hasn't got much to recommend it, not anything really, but you're not dead Avon, and I'm not dead either, unless they killed me when I wasn't looking which is pretty hard to do - I mean if I was dead I'd know it, wouldn't I? They didn't kill me there Avon, I swear. I just played possum - I mean as soon as she pulled the gun I knew we were for it, so I dropped, see, 'cause how were they to know I wasn't dead already - there were enough bodies on the floor," he faltered, seeing Avon go a little paler. "And if I'm not dead," Vila continued, "then you can't be dead, 'cause you couldn't be talking to me if you were dead and I was alive, could you? Unless you were a ghost I suppose, but then ghosts aren't solid and ghosts don't bleed and you've ruined this cloth do you know that, Avon?"

"*You* ruined the cloth," Avon countered.

Vila perked up slightly at this - at least he was getting a response. "H-how did you do that? You haven't dropped in on any strange basements on the way, have you?"

"No, Vila, I'm not like Dorian," Avon said wearily. Dorian had used an alien room to prolong his life



- an alien room that needed a living occupant to take on Dorian's corruption. He put his head in his hands. "I don't know what's happened to me."

"We could ask Orac," Vila suggested.

Avon's head jerked up. "You have Orac? What about the key?"

"Er, I took the key from your pocket," Vila admitted. "I didn't think you would be wanting it any more..." He looked at Avon. "But I tried and it doesn't work."

"Of course it doesn't work," Avon snapped. "I had to have some sort of contingency..." he drifted off, realizing he had damaged Orac because he was expecting to be betrayed; he had gone into that base too ready to shoot. "Let's go."

★

They went back to Vila's flyer, and Avon started working on Orac, while Vila went and negotiated another passage to Bucol-2 on Kidd's ship.

"He's already seen you, so the risk is already there," Avon said when Vila complained. "If I were to go, that would be another face he might link up with the Federation's Most Wanted notices. Go."

Avon was still working on Orac when Vila returned, unscathed. Vila's lock-picking tools had proven somewhat inadequate for computer repair, and Avon had done more damage than he'd thought. Finally Orac was working. Avon described to him what had happened.

"Am I hallucinating, Orac? Am I - " dead? His outburst of that morning seemed quite ridiculous now. The work on Orac had served to steady his nerves, and Vila had brought some food, which settled his stomach. He wouldn't admit it to anyone, not even himself, but it was good to have Vila there, good that Vila had survived, good that he wasn't alone.

As for Vila, he kept on staring at Avon, as if to make sure he wouldn't vanish while the thief wasn't looking.

"You are clearly not hallucinating, and neither is Vila," Orac replied. "Therefore we must conclude that these events *did* occur. Most fascinating."

"But why, Orac?" Avon asked impatiently. "Why can't I die?"

"To say you cannot die is jumping to a hasty and premature conclusion," the computer said fussily. "The only facts of the case are that you have sustained wounds which would normally be considered fatal, and have healed amazingly quickly and completely. There is no evidence that you cannot be poisoned, beheaded, vapourised, or die of disease."

"Well don't start experimenting now!" squeaked Vila.

"I was not intending to," Avon said dryly. "Keep working on the problem, Orac."

The computer prevaricated, "I require more data - a full physical examination -"

"Is not something we have the time nor facilities for," Avon interrupted. "If you want an examination, you will have to find us somewhere safe to do it in, as well as the wherewithal to do it. At the moment you will have to make do with finding other similar cases in the records." He paused. "Speaking of safety, find out everything you can about this Ricardo Kidd. I don't want to find out Vila's booked passage with a Federation agent."

"I'm a very good judge of character!" Vila protested.

"You're a very good judge of locks," Avon returned, "at least that's what you keep telling us."

There was a brief uncomfortable silence, as they both remembered yet again that the others were dead, cut down by Federation troopers guns in that underground base that had, too briefly, been Blake's

rebel headquarters.

"Ricardo Kidd is the owner of Ryan's Pride, a modified Mark 12 scoutship registered out of Ar-rakesh," Orac informed them.

"What's he doing on Gauda Prime?"

"His ship was damaged in a meteor storm. He set down here for repairs."

"Why would he be taking passengers? If he could afford to buy a scoutship, he wouldn't need passengers - if the ship is really his."

"The ship is indeed his. He bought it five years ago."

"With what?"

"I am checking..." Orac said. "He inherited a great deal from one Tan Gordon."

"A great deal? You can say that again," Vila said. "Gordon's old money - I mean old old money."

"But if he's that rich, why would he want passengers?"

"Most reputable banking establishments do not have branches on Gauda Prime," Orac pointed out. "I would surmise that he is short of viable currency."

"What else do you have, Orac?"

"Further information will require more time to gather," Orac said. "It will proceed faster if I am not interrupted."

★

The next morning Avon asked Orac again.

"Regarding your condition, the closest references would be in the records of a secret society whose name translates as 'those who watch'."

"Those who watch what?" Vila asked. "What's this got to do with Avon?"

"They watch those they believe to be immortals, who cannot die, and do not age. The only way they can be killed is by beheading."

"I'm sure this is a fascinating source of sociological research," Avon drawled, "but your description doesn't really match my condition."

"If you will allow me to finish," the computer said testily, "these immortals are supposed to live normal lives until they 'die' by violent means, after which they stop aging, and exhibit other peculiarities."

"So how many are they watching, Orac?" Vila asked.

"I have been as yet unable to ascertain more than a few," Orac answered. "They do not appear to keep their records continually available. Even though I can tap into any computer with a Tarriel Cell, I cannot read records if they are not accessible by such a computer," it said with the testiness of one belabouring the obvious. "Their beliefs are quite interesting, however. The similarity in some respects to the vampire legend -"

"Skip the legends Orac," Avon said impatiently. "Do you have anything more recent?"

"A Dr. Grace Wilder was working on tissue regeneration before she was seconded to the group which later became the Clone Masters. Their records were destroyed at the time of the Andromedan War. The only chance of recovering that knowledge would be if Wilder escaped the destruction."

"If Wilder escaped? Surely she'd be dead by now?"

"The original Wilder, doubtless. But the Clone Masters customarily cloned themselves and taught everything they knew to their own clones, so as to perpetuate the original group. If Wilder's clone survived, she may have the expertise required."

"Rather a long shot," Avon remarked. "What about Kidd?"

"Ricardo Kidd does not appear to be a Federation agent," Orac said. "However there is a possibility that this is an alias. The data on Kidd becomes scarce before ten years ago. His university records are full, but before that there is very little."

"He went to university ten years ago?" Vila queried. "How old is he?"

"His birth record indicates he is twenty-eight," Orac replied.

"He doesn't look it," Vila muttered.

"It is probable that his birth record was faked," Orac re-iterated. "Further research... interesting." Orac remarked.

"What is it Orac?"

"Ricardo Kidd bears an exact resemblance to his benefactor, Tan Gordon."

"You mean he may be a clone of Gordon?" Avon surmised.

"Well, that's one way of keeping the wealth in the family," Vila remarked wryly.

"Should we go with him, Orac, or should we try to find another way off Gauda Prime?" Avon asked.

"Going with Kidd is the optimum course of action at this time," the computer said evasively.

"Then let's go."

★

Vila grumbled at the weather - grey skies and drizzle. "I'm a human being, not a plant!" he complained as they made their way to bay nine, where Ryan's Pride was docked.

Avon felt uneasy as they approached the ship; a shiver as if he were too cold even with all his leather on, a queasiness in the stomach. If I were Vila, he thought, I'd think I was coming down with something, and tell the world.

But as they arrived near the bottom of the entry ramp, the sensation became worse. He could feel his hair standing on end. He told his stomach to be quiet. Thunder rolled. Avon put down what he was carrying. A figure appeared at the top of the ramp, stripped to the waist, as if he had been working out. In his hand he held a naked sword, with the ease of one who knows how to use it.

"I am Richard Ryan," he said. "Do you want to keep your head, or are you looking for trouble?"

"There is enough trouble without *fools* looking for it," Avon growled, hand on his blaster. There was no doubt which of them he thought the fool. "I was hoping to find Ricardo Kidd."

"What did you want him for?" the man said cautiously, coming closer. The rain started pelting down in earnest.

"Ren Perera and Del Green are going with him to Bucol-2," Avon said, indicating himself and Vila.

"So you're Ren Perera. No wonder you sent your associate. If I'd known you were one of us, I might not have agreed to take you," Ryan said.

"But you did," Avon countered.

Ryan glanced cautiously at the miserable figure of Vila, who was hoping not to be noticed. "I was not aware that I might have to consider my head when I made that agreement," he said elliptically.

"Well now," Avon drawled, not willing to be evasive, "I'm not in the habit of killing those I do business with - unless they double-cross me."

They stared at each other. Lightening flashed, taking an instant snapshot of the two men, rendering them as statues in marble and bronze. Upon the ramp stood Youth, impetuous, muscled like a Greek god, bearing a sword, his pale curls not yet flattened by the rain. Facing him, impassive, dark of hair and pale of face, handsome as Lucifer, was Death in the modern mode, bearing a blaster instead of a scythe.

Ryan finally lowered his sword and nodded. "Neither am I," he said, turning to go. "Don't just stand there getting soaked," he said over his shoulder, "come on up," and bounded back up the ramp.

Avon and Vila followed.

★

Richie Ryan piloted the ship off Gauda Prime as soon as he could get clearance. His passengers were settled in their cabins, his sword was in its rack, and he'd changed his wet clothes. No fear of being attacked in space - it was against the Rules. Oh, not the old Rules, but then, there hadn't been space travel in the old days. And as for Holy Ground, you'd have to be a diviner to find Holy Ground in Federation-held space. The New Calendar...

... said Sunday 15th July, 2660.

"Nothing you can do will make me untrue to my God (my God, my God) Nothing you can say can tear me away from my God..."

Richie smiled. Christian neo-rock. Lovely Wynn had taken his suggestion and run with it, teaching the choir these new-old songs as soon as he'd unearthed the recording and translated it. Whoopie Goldberg wouldn't mind; she'd been centuries dead. Amazing what a beautiful woman does for one's taste in music, he grinned to himself, looking at Wynn as she directed the singers. At least one thing was going right in these politically unsettled times. The new government was too revolutionary for his taste.

The great double doors at the back opened with a crash. The singers kept on going, but some of the more distractible of the congregation craned their heads to see what caused the disturbance. They didn't have to wait long to know.

"You are all under arrest!" an amplified voice declared. "Remain seated or you will be charged with resisting arrest."

The singers faltered in confusion as black-clad troopers trotted up the aisles and stood in readiness.

The leader came up the front and continued, "All those present are guilty of illegal assembly, incitement to superstition, possession of seditious materials, and failing to adhere to the New Calendar. Therefore, in accordance with the powers vested in me by the government of the Federated Worlds, I impound this property and its contents, to be used by the Administration as it sees fit."



A whisper of song greeted this pronouncement. "There's not a man today who can take me away from my God."

"Be silent!" The captain slapped Wynn so hard she staggered.

Ritchie surged forward. "Don't you know that hurts!" he said, and slapped the captain across the face.

"Ritchie, don't!" she cried at the same moment.

The captain glowered at him, lip bleeding. "I shall have to make an example of you," he said, took out his blaster and shot Richie in the chest.

The last thing he heard before darkness claimed him was Wynn's scream.

When he awoke, the church was on fire. He sat up coughing, eyes streaming with the smoke. He looked around wildly and wobbled to his feet, clutching at the lectern at the front. No one was there. They had all gone, except, perhaps, those who had set the blaze, waiting for their handiwork to be done. But maybe they had no reason to be particularly thorough.

He looked around again, and his eyes set on the book open on the lectern, leather bound, gilt-edged. He was never sure afterwards what guided his impulse - an antique dealer's eye for what might gain in value, an idealistic impulse to save what some considered sacred, or merely because he imagined Wynn would want him to do it - but he picked up the book, cradled it in his jacket, broke a window, and jumped...

... up to Time-Distort 12. Not a bad ship, his Ryan's Pride.

★

"Next stop - Bucol-2," Vila announced, holding a bottle of some alcoholic beverage native to Gauda Prime. He had carefully refrained from asking what was in it when he bought it. Just so long as it had a kick, he was happy.

"Unless Ryan plans on some detours," Avon frowned. His encounter on the ramp had left him feeling uneasy. He would have to corner Orac and get more information about their mysterious host.

"Detours aren't the kind of thing you *plan*," Vila said, determined to be cheerful.

"This whole fiasco wasn't *planned*," Avon frowned.

"Oh, stop being so gloomy. At least they think we're dead," Vila declared. "No more Servalan to worry about."

"Ah, but she'll soon have some *ghosts* to worry about," Avon said with a feral smile.

"I knew I should have run a mile as soon as I saw you," the thief grumbled.

★

Commissioner Sleer, once known as Servalan, regarded the report with a frown. She ought to have been feeling triumphant, but something was nagging at her. She looked at the pictures again. Blake's base wiped out, and an unexpected bonus - Avon's crew as well. Of course she would have liked them taken alive, but she remembered her own maxim: while there's life there's threat. Avon had proven that time and again - with the Liberator destroyed (she blanked off the memory of it disintegrating around her, her winning hand crumbling into dust) with the Liberator destroyed, he had evaded her booby-trap on Terminal and merely acquired another ship, Scorpio, to harass with. With the Liberator he had been aimless - Blake had been the driving force then. When she had destroyed Avon's dreams on Terminal, a twist of the knife with a little lie, she had given him a goal to work for; the Federation's destruction, and her own.

And now he was dead. She felt a little pang, quickly suppressed. What she had felt for Avon was no more than lust - that and respect for a worthy opponent with a mind as devious and intelligent as her own. A pity they had been on opposite sides. Avon was dead, black leather sprawled beside the bloody but blasted Blake. She surveyed the pictures taken by the clean-up squad, mentally ticking off names. Dayna Mellanby, the black girl who thought she was an amazon. No more chances for vengeance over her father's death. Del Tarrant, all curly hair and flashing teeth. Soolin, the ice-queen assassin. Vila Restal, the cowardly thief.

She stopped. Where was Vila? She paged through the report, looking at the descriptions of the bodies. No-one matching Vila Restal. So the thief had gotten away. But maybe he had never been on the base - maybe he had stayed on the Scorpio. The report had indicated that a planet-hopper had been shot down by the blockade, but maybe it had not been the Scorpio. Maybe it was whole and hiding, with Vila - and Orac. If they had not abandoned ship, then Avon would have had no reason to take the computer with him. But leaving Vila behind on the ship would be an uncharacteristic move on Avon's part - he would prefer someone a little more reliable as backup.

There was a mystery here. What did she know? Vila was missing, Orac was missing, and Scorpio might be missing. If Scorpio had been shot down, it might be that both Vila and Orac were scattered very thinly across Gauda Prime - or it might not. She had not risen to the Presidency, lost it and started her rise again as Sleer, by underestimating the odds, and this was a risk she could not take. Vila by himself was no threat - except to people's valuables - but Vila might have Orac, and it was Orac she wanted.

With Orac, she could rule the Federation. Its ability to tap into other computers would be invaluable. Find Vila, and she might find Orac.

Very well. Cancel the bounties on the others - they were dead and she didn't want any false claims - and double the price for Vila alive. He couldn't tell her anything if he was dead. But his life-expectancy, well, that would be short. Very short. He knew too much altogether.

Vila Restal's days were numbered.

★★★

(To Be Continued... in Refractions #5)

(Revised from the original version which appeared on the HLFIC-L mailing list. This version first appeared in Southern Seven #10, and in Refractions #1)

★★★

Deliverance

"She seems to be on our side."

"Yes, but the poor woman's insane."

"Not necessarily."

Innocent, or mad?

Ignorant, naive, trusting

Latching on to the first bright sight you see -
him.

Ironical,

that you - dedicated waiter,
should choose yourself a god
so hard, cold, cynical.

"Counting yourself,

that makes two people who think you're won-
derful."

Flattery may get one nowhere

but to you it was true

you believed it

imperturbably expecting altruism

and miracles.

How many years

did it take to turn your head?

Or were you already lost,

burning candles

in a shrine of forgotten dreams

watching the dust collect

on ancient machineries

those meaningless, magical legends?

He practiced condescension

humouring your mad simplicity

with his Alpha lordliness

but you deserved more than we could give.

"I'm sorry you waited so long."

"Our waiting brought you."

"That seems like a poor reward, somehow."

— Kathryn Andersen

SUSPICION

by JENNY HAYWARD

The rain had stopped, but the trees were still dripping. Two figures, a man in black and a woman in grey, stood over a third person on the muddy ground. The one on the ground was obviously dead.

"Why? He wasn't a threat," said the man dressed in black.

"Squeamishness from you?" the other returned. "I'm surprised." But her voice was edged with irony, not surprise.

"No, you're not," Avon said, threateningly low. "Why did you kill him?"

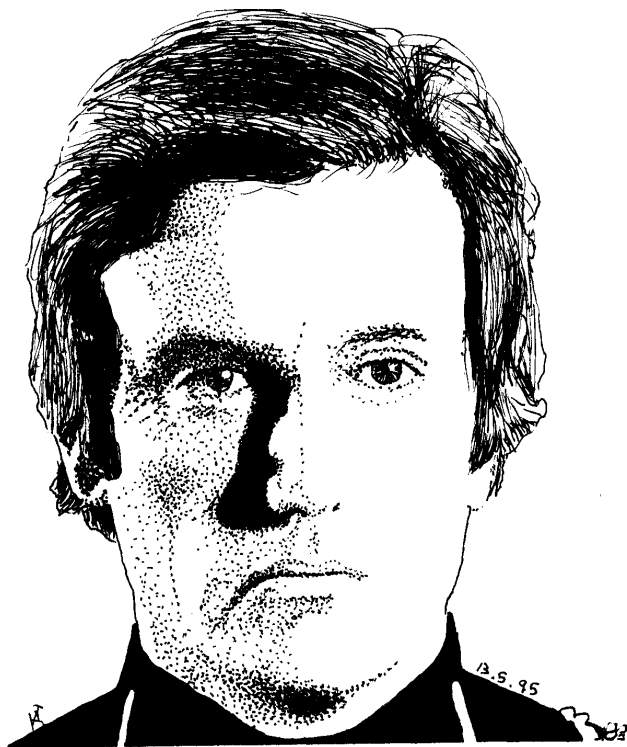
"He was dangerous," she stated flatly. The wind tossed a few wisps of her long blonde hair into her face.

"An unarmed man with a broken leg isn't dangerous," Avon countered. He had heard the bones snap when the man had fallen over, slipping on the slick ground. Avon had wanted to question him, find out why he was following them, but Soolin's fast draw had made that impossible.

"That depends on the man," Soolin said.

"It wasn't just prudence that made you shoot," Avon surmised. It hadn't been necessary to kill him. Unless one was desperate to keep him from talking.

"Try some logic. He was a Bounty Hunter," Soolin snapped.



"Surprisingly altruistic of you to think of the rest of us," Avon said dryly. And how did she know he was a Bounty Hunter anyway? They hadn't found the permit until after the fellow was dead.

"Altruistic?" Soolin queried.

"There's no price on your head," Avon pointed out. "Of course, Bounty Hunters aren't the only people who kill for credits."

"Is that supposed to be an accusation?" Soolin's eyes narrowed.

"I hadn't noticed you drawing wages," said Avon.

"I hadn't noticed you giving them," Soolin returned.

"Maybe I don't like industrial disputes," Avon said lightly, but with a bitter edge.

"Maybe you're about to have one," Soolin said.

"And where would you spend your wages?" Avon retorted. "In a Federation cell?"

"I'm not wanted," Soolin stated, putting her hands on her hips.

"Well, maybe I lied," Avon said with a curl of his lip. "It seems unlikely, does it not? For someone with your skill and history not to have a very expensive head?" Wiping out the men who had killed her family would be bound to get *someone* upset enough to post a bounty on her. "Why else did you come to Xenon?"

"Perhaps I just liked Dorian," Soolin answered.

"Not enough to avenge him," Avon pointed out.

"I would have killed him if you hadn't done it first," Soolin declared. She had been more betrayed by Dorian's nefarious schemes than the crew of the Liberator. She thought she had known him. She had trusted him. They had never met the man before he planned to use and destroy them.

"If you had had a gun," Avon amended.

"I have one now." Soolin placed her hand lightly on the butt of the clip-gun in its holster by her side.

"Nervous, are you?" Avon said with a dark smile.

"Prudent," Soolin said.

"Guilty conscience?" he needled her. It didn't occur to him that provoking a guilty Soolin could be a very dangerous thing to do; perhaps the last thing he would ever do. He just wanted to find out what she was guilty of. If anything.

"Your confidence is inspiring," Soolin returned with heavy irony.

"People who can be bought have a bad habit of putting the price up," Avon frowned.

"It's my services I sell, not myself," Soolin said.

"Until a higher bidder comes along?" Avon jibed.

"I don't break my contracts," Soolin retorted.

"Unless someone else breaks them first," she added

pointedly.

"Your reputation for integrity is known all over the galaxy." Avon said sarcastically.

"Yours too," she returned, equally sarcastically.

It was Avon's turn to bristle. "I keep my word."

"When convenient," Soolin said.

"I would prefer not to discover convenience at the wrong end of a gun." Avon poked his foot at the corpse on the ground, making a silent point.

"Wouldn't we all?" Soolin said dryly, refusing to be baited. "Nothing is certain."

"Not if you betrayed me," Avon said softly, but oh, so coldly. "You would certainly die."

"The reverse is true also."

"Of course," Avon agreed. "You would be justified."

"You would worry about why someone wants to kill you?" Soolin said incredulously. A gust of wind blew a spattering of drips from the wet branches onto both of them. They ignored it.

"There are worse reasons than revenge," Avon declared.

"Really?"

"Consider our late friend with the broken leg." Avon gestured at the dead man in the mud. "Why did he kill people?"

"So it's *mercenaries* that bother you?" Soolin said, raising her eyebrows. "What about Tarrant?"

"Tarrant is not the problem," Avon said smoothly. "You are."

"Because I killed a Bounty Hunter?"

Avon inclined his head towards the body at their feet. "Because you killed *this* Bounty Hunter," he said. "If he was a Bounty Hunter."

"You needn't make it so obvious that you don't trust me," Soolin glared.

Avon gave her a level stare. "I don't trust anybody," he said evenly.

Soolin showed her teeth in a half-smile. "That's *your* problem, isn't it?"

Bartolomew

A year ago beneath the dome,
My love and I walked here alone,
The endless pipes and corridors,
The painted rows of sterile doors,
Asked of me: Who walks this way?
I said: The man I love today,
A man who holds me dear as life,
A man who thinks to call me wife.
But I knew in some future plan,
I'd walk beside another man.
And sure enough, a later day,
Another lover now holds sway,
And all along, the serried doors,
Are silent if I chance to pause,
And I hear nothing in the dome,
Except the voiceless monotone,
Of power pumps and air recyce,
That make an endless day of night;
But maybe now, to him they say,
That he's the one I'll next betray.

— Judith Proctor

ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED FROM WATCHING HIGHLANDER

By Marina Bailey

- Even the most unlikely people have some good in them.
- The occasional flashback helps relieve tension.
- Money is useful, but it isn't everything.
- Always pay your parking tickets.
- Don't fence merchandise - you meet the wrong kind of people.
- Take a minute to tell children fairy tales.
- Tell your Significant Other you love them.
- Beware sultry black-haired women with swords.
- There are no points for placing second.
- Listen to your suspicions - ten to one they're right.
- Don't be too-proud to accept help.
- Always have your sword handy.
- Keep your eye on what you're looking at.
- All people need to know where they come from.
- The more the world changes, the more it stays the same.
- All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.
- Don't interrupt someone who is delivering a baby.
- A new identity can be a way to start over, but only in an emergency.
- Do not apologise for your life.
- It's never too late to do something else.
- Before ordering, make sure you know what the menu says.
- Don't play with swords unless you know what you're doing.
- There's no such thing as bail in France.
- Relieve tension by exercising. Beating people up is generally not good.
- Live for something, don't drift through life emotionlessly.
- Try to cheat Fate. It doesn't matter if you can't. Keep trying.
- If someone kidnaps you, be resourceful. You might escape.
- Darkness is only the absence of light. You have four other senses.
- Let go of the past; nothing lasts forever.
- You can't bring them back. Nothing you do brings anybody back.
- Trying to counterfeit dollar bills will just give you more problems.
- Trying to fry someone at a crematorium is a really stupid idea.
- Know how to look after a baby - you'll have to eventually.
- There is more to life than the letter of the law.
- Tell the truth. Lies are always discovered.
- Play by the rules whenever possible.
- Vampires don't exist, but some things are just as scary.
- Holding grudges only prolongs the pain.
- When someone confronts you, make sure you're who they're looking for.
- Don't brandish your sword in public. Especially not in broad daylight.

- Being older often means that you know more, but not always.
- Know who you are and stay true to it.
- Respect other people's philosophies, but choose your own path.
- Wanting a normal life is understandable, if not always possible.
- Protect those you love as well as you can.
- Question what you don't understand.
- Go to the park on occasion. It'll do you good.
- No matter your size, you can learn to defend yourself.
- Every day you fish adds a year to your life.
- When someone says it's over repeatedly, they usually mean it.
- Not all night-

mares come from within.

- If you see two people fighting with swords, don't interrupt.

- Too much glass in a house is just asking for trouble.

- One tall story is fine. Too many will bore your audience.

- Great music will outlive us all.

- If you want something, go for it. Refuse to be refused.

- Don't let others run your life, no matter how well they do it.

- Make your own decisions about who your friends are.

- And remember, there can be only one.





Ending

Soon
all my moments lost
as tears in rain
anonymously mine.
Unsurpassed
unshared, alone, unique
no other eyes have seen
my wonders
or ever will.
Life's spark
bright, brilliant, short
burning, burning —
drowning.
Too hard to accept
no more chances
to try what could have been
what never will be.
Unredeemable, incurable quenching
predetermined from inception
Such a tiny inferno, my life.
It is time to die.
— Kathryn Andersen

Though This Be Madness

by JEAN GRAHAM

A prequel to the OUTER LIMITS episode "The Forms of Things Unknown"

Based upon characters and situations created by Joseph Stefano.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE:

"The strangest of the strange" accurately describes this OUTER LIMITS episode, the pilot for an unsold series entitled "The Unknown." Its pivotal character, Tone Hobart, was both insane and brilliant: a classic mad genius who succeeded in tilting the cycles of time and bringing the dead back to life. Only two vague hints are given as to just how Tone came to be in Kolas' dark, mysterious house. To Casha and Leona (two women who have taken refuge in his home after committing a murder), the blind man says that Tone "stumbled upon my house in the dead of night, just as you did. He was in flight, just as you were." And some time later, he speaks of the device Tone has constructed upstairs: "He screamed in his delirium... His lifeless form had been hanging there for almost a week, bound to his time-tilting device by rare magnetic wires. He'd had no food, and no water. It was a cold time. But he had died for want of more than bodily sustenance. I unfastened him, and carried him to his bed..."

*The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from
earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's
pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy
nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy
Or in the night, imagining some fear
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!
— Wm. Shakespeare, A Midsummer
Night's Dream V:I.*

A haven for the dead are these trees, these woods. I sense Death's presence in the shadows and the dark. Perhaps a war was waged here once, and the souls of victims linger. But I've no time to stop and wonder. It is the living souls behind me I must fear. I must elude them.

Voices. A dog's sharp yap, and the bone-snapping sound of a twig under booted feet. Shadows, stretched beneath a waxing moon, are bisected by long spears of light, sweeping, searching. For me.

I flee into the blackness, mindless of the splintered fingers that have reached out to tear at my clothing. One of them snatches at my feet and trips me, but I stumble on and past it, the odor of lichen and damp earth still clinging to me from the fall.

The dog bays. Shouts echo between the dead tree trunks. More light swords pierce the gloom.

My feet strike damp clay and fly out from beneath me; I am sliding, rolling, until the shock of

cold water envelops me. Stagnation assailing my mouth and nostrils, I struggle up again and run, splashing, until the far bank meets my feet and I climb, a primordial creature emerging from the slime.

The sounds of pursuit have diminished now. I hear only my own labored breathing and the squashing of my mud-filled shoes.

Unexpectedly, a shape looms out of the darkness ahead. A silhouette of gables framed against the moonlight. An isolated house; no lights in its bleak windows. In spirit, it looks rather like the place from which I've come: as drearily repressive as that cold steel fortress the euphemistic call a "hospital."

I move nearer. The trees cast jagged patterns on angular storm cellar doors. The lock is broken. I anticipate the squeal of rusted hinges when I lift the right-hand side, but there is only the ashen hiss of leaves displaced by my action. The door is damp and clammy to the touch. Inside, aged wooden steps sigh wearily beneath my weight, like lost souls.

They are here, too, the dead. Here in this cloying earthen place. I close the door above me, and blind, grope my way to a juncture in the chill, rock-hewn wall. There I gratefully collapse, and savor the chance to breathe once more.

A warmth has mingled with the damp beneath my clinging sleeve. A touch evinces stinging pain. The dead and splintered trees have taken their revenge upon the living, though in my haste I have not noticed the wounds until now. It hardly matters. The cold, wet, pain and hunger are all superceded by my need for sleep...

★

A shout, and the pounding of a fist on a door jar me awake. Disoriented in the total darkness, I start up, clutching at the rocky soil of the cellar floor. Some insect writhes beneath the weight of my fingers, and skitters away when I lift my hand. The pounding echoes above me again, louder now.

With an effort, I can just discern the outline of a stair travelling upward to a door. Something flickers in the small, barred space that is a window in that door: the faint light, perhaps, of a candle. I hear another door, bolted, being opened, and at once the stern policemen's voices demand to know if a stranger has been seen in the vicinity.

I wait, not breathing, as an old man's voice replies that he has seen no one. He can see no one.

The policeman mumbles an apology. Has he heard anyone then?

Whom do they seek, the old man wonders. A smuggler? A thief? A murderer, perhaps?

No, I think. Tone Hobart has been none of those things. He is only a young man touched by the insanity of desiring to resurrect the dead. For this the laws of God and man decree he must be locked away.

These things, in coarser terms, the callers above have outlined. But their erstwhile host has said they will not find their quarry here. The thump of the huge door closing reverberates down the dark stair.

My relief at this is short-lived. The candle has come to the cellar door, and with the hollow clank of metal, light spills through the opening and down the littered steps. The man on the landing stares, but does not look at me. His eyes are empty, unseeing. I wonder briefly why he needs the candle, and then realize that he must have brought it solely for the benefit of the men at his door. Has he brought it now for me?

"You may come out now," he says to the cellar. "They have gone." And when I do not answer, he calls, "Mr. Hobart?"

I rise, apprehensive, back pressed to the wall. They have told him my name, of course. That is how he knows it. Yet it is disconcerting, to have your name spoken so by a stranger. Like the ancients who believed that to know a man's true name was to possess his soul.

"I shall leave the door open," the old man says. "There is a fire in the grate, and food and drink, to which you are welcome. When you feel assured that you are safe, you have only to come up the stairs."

Bending, he leaves the candle in the doorway. His dark shape retreats. It is several moments before I garner the courage to accept his invitation. Ascending the stairs, I grasp the candle holder by its base, still warm from his touch, and its halo of light moves with me past another stair, through double doors into a great room, nearly barren save a few sparse chairs and the fireplace. He is there, tending flames that cast demon distortions in the black of his eyes.

"Are you the master of this house?" I ask him without preamble.

"My name is Kolas," he says to the fire. "You need not worry about others. There is no one."

I take a chair beside the fire, and find the promised food and drink already at my side. But when I reach to take the steaming cup of tea, the injured arm reminds me harshly of its presence.

My sharp intake of breath turns his eyes toward me. "You are hurt."

"No. Not very much." In the firelight, I examine the gash beneath my tattered sleeve. "'Tis not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church door.' I lift the tea cup to my lips and savor the flood of warmth it brings. Life flowing into life.

Partaking of his bread and meat, I fail to notice that my host has gone until he has returned with medicines and bandages, and clothes that will be ill-fitting, but clean and dry.

"Why do you live in such a house, alone?" I ask when we have treated and bound my hurts. It is, I know, part of the reason he has welcomed me. His loneliness is a tangible thing; it walks before and after him.

"A blind man," he answers, "is always alone."

"But there were others here, once."

"Yes. Long ago. They have gone now."

"Do you mean they went away? Or...did they die?"

He returns to tending the fire, as though my question has suddenly disconcerted him. "All men must die," he says, resigned.

"Yes. But some die more timely deaths than others. Would you not like to see them again? The ones who've gone before?" I can see his puzzlement at that, even though his back is to me. No doubt he wonders now what manner of lunatic he has welcomed into his home. I leave the chair to stand beside him at the hearth. "Think of it. For all those souls who died before their time to live again. For all the love they left behind to breathe again, and be fulfilled again. Is it so heinous a thing to want to right the wrongs of time? Is it?"

He faces me now, but all fear and doubt have fled from him. The walking loneliness has vanquished them both. "Come," he says. "There is a room upstairs, where you may rest."

I know, as I retrieve the candle to follow him, that he does not sense the dead who remain here. I lightly touch the polished banister as we ascend the stairs, and feel the presence of a child who once played upon the railing. On the landing, there are memories of a man, his wife, and the enmity they shared. Did one come to kill the other, I wonder?

What other pasts still linger here? How many people died untimely deaths within these walls?

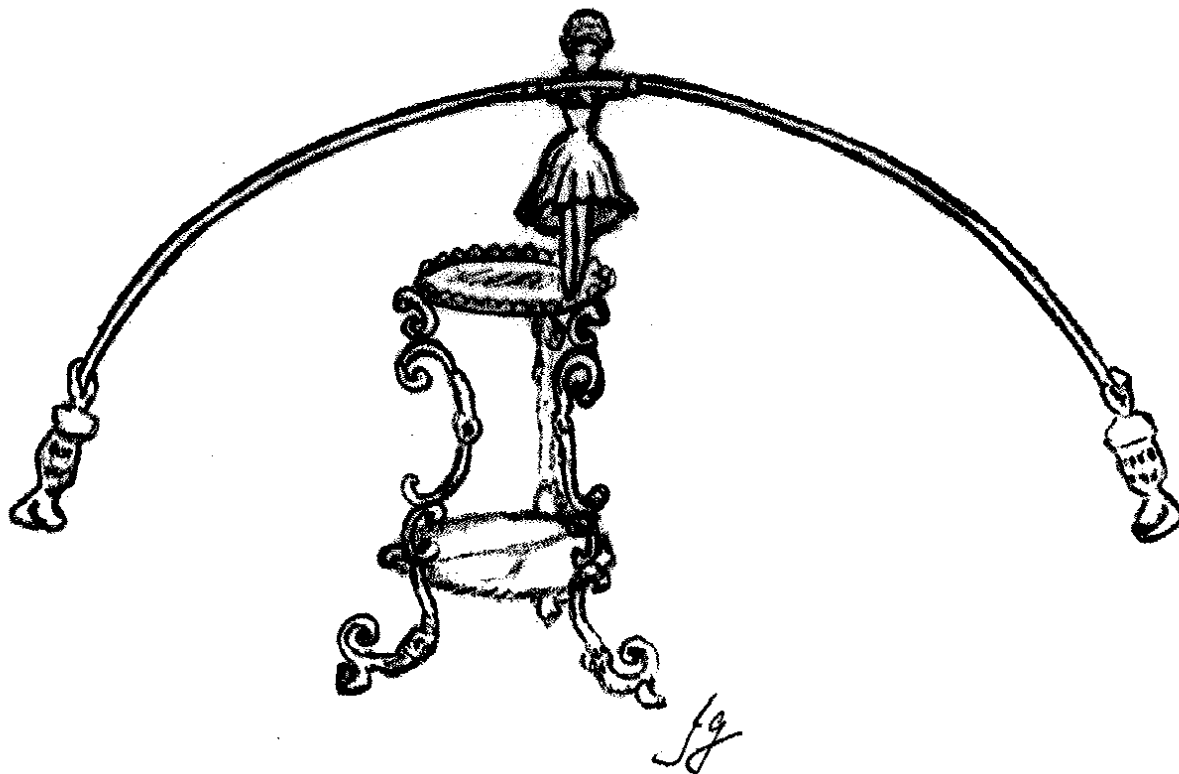
An uncompromising taskmaster, Death.

"Do you not hear them, Kolas?" I ask as we traverse the shadowed hall. "The sighs of all those who lived and died here?"

"No," he says. "They do not speak to me."

I smile. "'Of the myriads who before us passed the door of Darkness through, no one returns to tell us of the road which to discover, we must travel too.' Yet they are here, Kolas. They are here."

He opens the door to a room with a bed, a bureau and a single kerosene lamp. "It is seldom I am able to speak with the living," he says. "I do not know about the dead."



I place the guttering candle on the bureau, and stare into its flame. "We begin to die as soon as we are born. And the end is linked to the beginning." He nods. "Good night, Mr. Hobart," he says simply, and closes the door.

★

The dancer arrived today. She is a touching surprise—one I had not expected. But Kolas' messengers are more efficient than I'd thought.

Three weeks have passed since I took refuge in his cellar. Three weeks through which I have found the Special Room at the hall's end, where I shall build the device. In another room, I have found that Kolas secrets a multitude of clocks: all the clocks, he says, that ever served the house when there were people in it. He no longer has need of them, he says, for time has no meaning to him now. But I tell him he is wrong. It has every meaning. Time holds all the universe in bondage. And I wish to break those bonds.

I will move the clocks into the Special Room.

All that I need to construct the device, Kolas has, through his messengers, been able to provide. Magnetic wires, tools, and the generator to power the single strand of lights for the hall.

I do not ask him how his messengers obtain some of these items, nor do I care. But I am pleased at their latest acquisitions. They have brought the only two things that I regretted leaving at my former place of residence.

One is the dancer.

She is the keeper, though she makes no sound, of a tune my mother loved. She sat upon our grand piano once, and waltzed all the while my mother played. And thus that best-loved piece became indelibly the dancer's theme in my young mind. I hear it sing each time I touch the gentle balance or watch

light refract and play about the spinning, silver toy.

The other item is a letter; a memory of my father as the dancer is that of my mother. It is written in a childish hand, and says, "Dearest Father; Do not be angry with me for leaving school. I am interested only in experimenting with ways to bring dead people back to life. I want to bring Mother back. Your loving son, Tone."

Dancer and letter are the only fragile bridges to my past remaining. When I told Kolas about them, I never dreamed he could retrieve them from that place. He asked me to sketch out the floor plan, and said the messengers would deal with the rest.

He asked little more about the hospital, except once, if it had been at all like a prison. I told him briefly of the needles and platitudes and suffocating tedium. To imprison the body, I said, is merely punishment. But to imprison the mind... That is the vilest of cruelties.

Hospital is a place best left in the dead quiet past.

★

The device is ready now to be tested.

Two months of work have honed it, sculptured it into the image of my mind's conception: a platform through which immutable time's cycles may be tilted. If I can make it work, the coiling planes of time will tumble into one another for just that fraction of a fraction of a moment that can bring the dead back to the living.

It can be done. I know it.

The dancer is spinning on top of my bureau; the letter to Father beside her. The one approves my efforts; the other remains disdainful. And so I set her figure whirling once again, to let the music fill my mind and banish long ago phantoms of harsh, angry voices.



Kolas' rap at my door dissolves the melody. The dancer slows, stops. Soft light from her balance prisms patterns on the letter's page. They quiver as she totters on her perch.

"I have brought the items you requested, Mr. Hobart," Kolas says when I open the door. "The food and provisions I have placed in the Special Room. As to the plant..." He proffers the withered remains of a potted geranium, and I accept it gratefully.

"It is perfect, Kolas. Thank you." I carry the moribund gift out into the hall, and pass with it beneath the harshly glowing strand of bulbs that marches toward the Room. Kolas follows, silent, in my wake, but pauses short of trailing me inside, where the provisions he has promised reside on a table near the door. There is enough for five days, the length of time I anticipate the experimentation to last.

"When I have closed the door, Kolas, please do not open it again, for any reason. My work must not be interrupted."

"It will not be." He extends a hand into the doorway. "To your success, Mr. Hobart."

Wordlessly, I shake his broad, thick hand. I watch then as he turns to go, and I wonder what he privately thinks of these affairs. Whatever his opinion, I muse as I swing shut the door, Kolas has proved in our three months of acquaintance to be a man of his word.

My testing will not be disturbed.

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Success has come even sooner than I'd hoped. Not a full day has passed, yet the device has proved its worth! The geranium, near dead when Kolas brought it, lives again, a healthy, thriving plant once more. As I had hoped, the cycles tipped, and it slid into a living present from the all-confining silence of the past.

It is alive! And it has proven that the tyranny of time is not inviolate after all.

Now to test the theory further.

I have run an electrical line from the generator to the central post of the device. It is the same hub from which the time wires radiate. My left hand I have secured to those wires, and with my right, I reach with confidence to touch the electrically charged pole...

The numbing fire of the current races through me. I feel my body stiffen, and the wires at my left wrist cut deeply into flesh as the spasming hand, independent of mind, attempts to free itself. The generator hums a tuneless ballad, then obeys the command of its timer and closes off power to the extra line. My right hand at once flies from the post backward, entangling itself in more magnetic wire. Muscles spasm, going rigid and then limp so that I must resemble some insect twitching in a silver web.

The ticking of the clocks is a roar in my ears. The odor of burnt flesh is strong. Yet I feel nothing. I can neither move nor cry out. Shadows obscure my vision.

Is this the preamble to death?

Suspended, I wait. But instinctively, I know that I have failed. The current has been insufficient. The creator of Time's-undoing has blundered at the executioner's art.

Already the voices of the dead are here, derisive at my folly. I hear them whisper in the rhythm of the clocks.

This fool.

This mockery.

This would-be conqueror of time.

He cannot even die correctly.

Something drips onto the wooden floor; a tiny spot of crimson that is soon joined by another. I cannot lift my head to look. But I am certain all the same that the time wires have dutifully severed a vein in my wrist. It is not the swift mode of death that I had chosen. But it will suffice.

★

I do not know how many hours – or days – have stolen past me now. Is it not an irony that the dying should lose track of the very Thing which is about to swallow them?

Kolas' provisions still wait patiently upon the table. The clocks, uncaring, measure on.

Abruptly, the sensation of falling engulfs me. I see the floor, pooled with blood, rushing up as though to strike me – and then drawing away. It tilts, recedes, and finally rights itself beneath my feet. The dizziness subsiding, I touch my right hand to my head – and jerk it away to stare in wonder at a wrist unscathed, unfettered...

I whirl, and behind me on the wires hangs the figure of my lifeless twin. He is pale and hollow-eyed, the straw-blond hair askew across a sweat-damp forehead. I touch, but cannot feel, his cheek. I cannot move him.

We are partitioned. He my substance, I his soul. Time would conspire now to separate us further, but I will rob it of that opportunity. I have but to touch the wires, to spin the dancer's balance out of time and place.

But I cannot touch them.

I can do nothing to affect them at all. The designated time for its automatic function long past, my creation merely gapes at me, a smug reminder of my inefficacy.

I must find Kolas. Somehow I must show him what has to be done.

My steps to the door are halted by the snap and whine of breaking wire. The body lurches for a gruesome moment in its radius of metal light, then droops once more, still caught within the filaments. Yet its movement has triggered by chance the wires that are needed to–

Clawed fingers clutch my heart and, yanking savagely, wrench me toward the lifeless thing upon the wires. It stiffens, jerks, and it ... we ... draw in a tortured breath of stagnant air. Pain washes over me, a torrent of ills from bleeding wrists to thirst-swollen tongue. I am alive. But I am still imprisoned.

The clocks tick madly from their unresponsive walls.

The door remains impassive.

My head tilts backward in the bright confining strands, and from somewhere as yet untouched by the body's deprivation, I find the strength of a primal voice.

I scream.

It is hours, days, before Kolas' heavy tread can be heard outside the door. I can see (without seeing) that he is hesitant to disobey my long-ago request that he not enter the room. He calls my name, but strength spent, I cannot answer.

Another eternity passes before he has finally overcome caution and forced open the door. Then at once, his firm, gentle hands are on my own, working to free me from the wires.

He lifts me as easily as a parent takes up a child, and with blindness no hindrance to this long familiar path, carries me back to the room where the dancer is waiting.

She moves in the brisk wake of our passing, turning slowly in her arc as Kolas places me upon the bed. He is speaking, but I do not hear his words. My mind is reeling like the dancer on her silver tray.

Time cycles tipped and broken.

Death tumbling into life.

All the love left over can be found again at last. Mothers, children, husbands, wives. Untimely endings finally made to right.

I have defeated Death, and somewhere, out there, there is another with whom I shall prove it was no accident.

The dead can live again. I am the proof.
It can be done.

All that tread

*The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom. Take the
wings*

*of morning, and the Barcan desert pierce,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no
sound*

*Save his own dashings, – yet the dead are
there;*

*And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, have laid them
down*

*in their last sleep; the dead reign there
alone.*

–Bryant

(This story first appeared in *HERE LIES ILLYA*
KURYAKIN in 1985)

Soldier

The troopers march along the street,
Devils dressed in black,
A single soldier turns his head,
And sees me looking back.

I stand there frozen to the spot,
None so scared as I,
And then he doffs his helmet,
Smiles and winks an eye.

Soldier, are you human then?
Did you burn my land?
Soldier, will you tell me?
For I don't understand.

— Judith Proctor

NOT DEAD BUT SLEEPING

AN INSPECTOR CROWLEY TALE

by KEV DAVIS

"DI Crowley, Vyse Street CID," said the Newcomer in the trenchcoat, ducking expertly under the fluttering police cordon and flipping his ID wallet open. A couple of disinterested uniformed officers grumbled affirmatively at him as he passed.

Sprawled awkwardly on a pile of rubbish bags half way down the dark alleyway was a young Tenc-tonese male, staring blankly at the hastily-erected plastic canopy above him. Heavy rain blattered determinedly against it, and two forensic scientists huddled beneath, muttering doubtfully and shaking their heads at each other. The flashing lights of the police cars in the street cast a grim two-hertz blueness over the proceedings.

As Crowley approached from the pavement, Detective Sergeant Darkwood looked up, brushed aside his rain-soaked shoulder-length hair and nodded in the DI's general direction.. "Evening, sir."

"Evening, Keith," said the detective absently, his attention given almost completely to the corpse. From this angle, the brutal wounds were clearly visible. Both hearts had been cleanly shot out, and a horrific hole ran right through the stomach. "What's the verdict, then?"

"I think we can safely cancel the ambulance," said Darkwood grimly.

"Random shooting, is it?"

Darkwood raised an enigmatic eyebrow, and half-nodded at the corpse. "Probably not, actually. Take a closer look."

The DI crouched on the rain-slicked tarmac and peered critically at the cadaver. The skin seemed to be pulled back slightly over the bulbous skull, and the eyes bulged unpleasantly from their sockets. The usual healthy Tenc-tonese flesh tone had been replaced by something grey and uninspiring. Even the untrained eye of the detective could see that the Newcomer had shuffled off his mortal coil some while ago.

"Three weeks dead?" he guessed.

The first forensic officer turned to Crowley and nodded. "Eighteen days," he sighed. "Looks as if the body was dumped earlier today, though - it wasn't here this morning."

"Hmm. Who found it?"

"James Milton, apparently," said Darkwood, inclining his head at the grimy wall. Milton's chip shop lurked on the other side of the brickwork.

"Jim Milton, eh?" said David, rising to his full height and smiling faintly to himself. "Anyone interviewed him yet?"

"DI Morgan's in there with him now."

"Right you are. I'll leave this with you, then." Darkwood scowled vaguely at the weather, and cast a despairing glance at the corpse. "Yeah. Cheers."

David Crowley nodded, turned on his heel and strode back out into the thundering rain and murmuring traffic.

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"Haddock and chips please, Jim," smiled Crowley, pushing his way through the door of the chip shop and approaching the counter. DI Morgan, seated at one of the place's grimy tables, looked up from her laptop computer and raised an eyebrow at Crowley.

Jennifer Morgan was some thirty years of age, fairly tall, darkly-haired, and had been transferred to Birmingham CID yesterday morning from a similar position elsewhere. She was dimly aware of DI Crowley's existence within her department - when the Tenc-tonese began moving to Europe seven years ago, many companies were keen to employ token Newcomers in fairly minor positions.

Crowley had risen from the streets and up through the ranks with disturbing swiftness, DS Darkwood had been telling her over breakfast. He was now grudgingly regarded as one of the city's finest detectives, even if he tended to stray outside the norms rather frequently. There were rumours circulating among the station about his killing of an Overseer back in '95, although after a twomonth suspension and a detailed investigation, he returned to his post. And never, ever talked about it.

"David Crowley," said Milton, surprised. "Good grief. How the hell are you?"

"Could be better, could be worse," said Crowley with a shrug, shaking the rain from his coat in the process. "And yourself?"

"Can't grumble."

"Glad to hear it."

"Salt and vinegar?" queried Jim, as he wandered over to the freezer behind the counter. He tugged it open and pulled an icy haddock from the swirling cube of frozen air within.

Crowley gave a false laugh.

"Still the old sense of humour, then," he said flatly, running a hand over his jaggedly-striped head and flicking the rainwater on the floor. He joined Milton at the counter, and waggled a salt cellar thoughtfully. "Did you ever catch that bloke who was switching the sugar and salt, by the way?"

"I thought that was your job," said Jim.

Crowley grinned. "Top brass CID staking out chip shops?" he said. "No, not quite. I'll send a couple of plainclothes plods over, if you want."

"No, it's all right - our poisoner seems to have given up of late," said Jim. He fiddled with his microwave. "How's life in the police force, then?"

"Could be worse," said Crowley, giving a non-committal Newcomer shrug. "Underpaid and over-worked, but at least I'm DI, now."

"Detective Inspector, eh?" said Jim, impressed. Crowley nodded modestly, and DI Morgan cleared her throat.

"Ah," added Crowley, "duty calls. Speak to you later." Jim nodded and returned to his work.

David dragged an unpleasantly orange plastic chair across the linoleum floor and sat himself next to Jenny. "Evening, Morgan," he said. "Got Jim's statement, have you?"

"Just finished it, sir, yes," nodded Jenny, spinning her laptop around so that David could see it. Crowley peered at the neat rows of green text, and chewed his lip thoughtfully.

James Milton wandered over to the table carrying a large plate of chips. A lukewarm raw haddock rested on top of the golden heap, wearing a slightly worried open-mouthed frown. Crowley fished some change from his pocket and dropped into Milton's waiting hand. Jennifer just stared at the meal and shuddered.

"Want some?" murmured David, pushing the plate over to Jenny. Wincing, DI Morgan plucked a chip from beneath the fish and nervously shoved the plate back. Crowley grinned wolfishly, and popped a chip into his mouth.

"Mmph," he said, waving a hand at Jim and swallowing awkwardly. He gestured to a sentence on the laptop's glowing screen. "What's this bit here?"

Jim squinted at the text of statement he'd given a few minutes ago. "Oh," he said, "yes. There was a NecroTech Cryogenics van parked out the front all afternoon; someone came to pick it up about half-past four."

"And you discovered the body at...?"

"Five o'clock. I was taking the rubbish out."

"Hmm," Crowley cut himself a slice of haddock and chewed thoughtfully on it.

"It can't be relevant, can it?" said Morgan, doing her best to ignore the unpleasant crunching. "If you're going to dump a body, you don't sit outside a public place all afternoon in a marked van. And you don't dump it where it's going to be found straight away. Unless you want it to be, of course."

"Indeed," mused Crowley. He looked over at Jim, who was idly drumming his fingers on the counter. "I take it this NecroTech place has a branch in town somewhere?"

Jim nodded. "Smith Street," he said.

"Away to Smith Street, then," said Crowley, rising from his table and dabbing his mouth with a napkin. He looked down forlornly at his half-eaten fish and chips. "I'll finish this later. Got any newspaper, Jim?"

James Milton nodded once more, and took an old copy of the local weekly from a box beneath the counter. Whilst his human customers tended to opt for a more hygienic form of wrapping, the Newcomers saw the newspaper as a delicious addition to the meal. Jim tugged free a couple of sheets and laid them flat on the counter. David piled his meal into the centre of the paper, and expertly folded it into a neat parcel, before hiding it all in a pocket of his trenchcoat.

"Can I open up again now, then?" said Jim with a trace of irritation. He'd already lost a good half-hour of potential takings.

"Yes, yes, of course," replied Crowley, making for the door. He patted his bulky pockets thoroughly, in search of the car keys which, even now, sat on a shelf at home awaiting the return of his car from the garage. With a helpless frown he turned to Jenny.

"Er, you couldn't give me a lift to Smith Street could you, Morgan?" he said.

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Crowley tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the dashboard and stared out through the rain-streaked windscreen, thoughtlessly watching the blurred neon lights of downtown Birmingham as they rushed past to either side. The wipers swept determinedly back and forth across the glass, worse than useless against the sheer force of the downpour.

Well, at least the weather was nice.

Whereas the majority of the Tenctonese slaves were more than happy to spend the rest of their days in sunny Los Angeles, a good few thousand Newcomers absolutely hated it. The species as a whole had been bred to survive in various climates - most were best suited to high levels of heat, but those sharing a gene pool with Crowley had been adapted to work in sub-zero temperatures. After a month or so of staying indoors and filling their hot-water bottles with ice, the latter strain emigrated northwards from Los Angeles. Crowley had moved to Britain along with thousands of others, choosing the fair city of Birmingham for reasons which they never explained in any depth.

The clouds rumbled. Crowley smiled to himself. "So," he said, righting his train of thought, "what do you make of all this, Morgan?"

"Jenny," said Jenny, turning off down a gloomy side street. "Call me Jenny."

Crowley grunted his affirmation. "All right," he said, in a businesslike manner. "So long as you don't call me Dave."

"Why not?" frowned Morgan.

Crowley gave a hollow laugh. "Have you any idea what 'Dave' translates to in Tenctonese?"

"Er, I should do," said Jenny, narrowing her eyes slightly. "I bought one of those Linguaphone tapes for Tenctonese a while back," she explained.

Not that there was much point in learning the language, of course - it was really only the die-hard traditionalist Newcomers who hadn't bothered learning any Earth dialects. Crowley had picked up English in a couple of weeks. He'd once learnt Welsh just to kill a weekend.

Jenny had decided to learn a second language as a worthwhile way of killing a few evenings, and as something to impress potential employers with. Since Tenctonese was more or less grammatically identical to English, that was what she'd opted for. It was really just a matter of remembering what the words meant.

"Lick," she ventured, eventually.

"Yes," said Crowley, with audible contempt. "Or, as a noun, saliva. So I'd appreciate it if you just called me David, all right?"



"Fair enough," said Jenny. "Still," she added, trying to sound sympathetic but teetering dangerously into the realms of the patronising, "that's what you get when the immigration people choose your name, I suppose."

Crowley gave another hollow laugh, and smiled grimly out into the night. "No," he said. "The immigration people initially named me..." His voice dropped to a low, ominous whisper, and his irises darkened momentarily. "Aleister."

"Did they?" said Jenny. Darkwood had mentioned that Crowley was quick to change his name after he'd got through quarantine. "Did they really?"

"Yes," scowled the Newcomer. "And I strongly doubt that they covered that sort of thing on your Linguaphone tape." Crowley fell into a grim silence.

With a screech of inefficient brakes and a shower of brackish water from the overflowing gutter, Morgan's car drew to a halt outside the gloomy facade of NecroTech Cryogenics. Pale yellow light spilled out through the windows of the front doors, casting a sickly glow over the sharp pavement railings.

Crowley muttered some words of thanks and clambered out of the car. After slamming the door, he turned around and rapped his knuckles on the rain-streaked passenger window. Leaning awkwardly across the passenger seat, Jenny wound it down.

"Come and pick me up after you've been back to Jim Milton's," said David, raising his voice to make himself heard above the rain. "I shouldn't be too long here."

"But I'm not going back to Milton's," complained Jenny warily.

"Where's your computer, then?" beamed Crowley. He waved foolishly and climbed the rain-soaked steps to NecroTech Cryogenics.

"Can I help you, sir?" said the girl at the desk, looking up from her magazine. David Crowley was standing in the centre of the lobby, shaking the rain from his coat and not doing a great deal to improve the state of the carpet.

In contrast to the grimness of the building's exterior, the NecroTech offices were rather expensively decorated within. Plush blue carpet, now bearing a dozen of Crowley's damp footprints, stretched between the grey-papered walls, and numerous triangular lights cast a clean, efficient white glow over everything.

"Er, yes," he said, shaking his head to clear his thoughts. He smiled bleakly. "Yes. Is the manager available?"

"Do you have an appointment?"

"I've got a small plastic card, if that's any good," said Crowley, taking out his police identification. He tilted it to and fro, and a tiny holographic image of David's grinning visage swam in and out of the visible spectrum.

The girl nodded, and pressed a button. "Mr. McGeddon, there's a..." She hesitated and lifted her finger.

"Crowley. DI Crowley," said David absently.

"Detective Inspector Crowley to see you."

"Send him up," said a crackly voice on the intercom. The girl nodded. "Up the stairs and on the left, sir," she said, indicating a wide carpeted staircase behind her.

"Much thanks," nodded David, striding energetically up the half-dozen steps and passing through the open doorway to his left. McGeddon's office was every bit as opulent and expensive-looking as Crowley had expected - an antique-looking desk sat in the middle of the thick red wall-to-wall carpet, its ornate brass lamp casting a pleasing glow over the polished wood. Whispers of classical music drifted from a neat black sound system in the corner.

Another doorway was set in the right-hand wall, leading off to, from the little Crowley could see through it, another office. "Take a seat, I'll be right with you," called a muffled voice from that direction.

David nodded to himself and settled into the comfortable leather chair. He glanced down at the faltering LCD display of his wristwatch. Twenty to ten. Seeing as he'd been out on a dawn raid early this morning, Crowley was feeling increasingly tired as the night drew on. His eyelids drooped, and he let the faint strains of Bach wash over him.

There was some frantic whispering from the adjoining office, and Crowley jerked back to full consciousness, just in time to miss the last of whatever was being said. He straightened up from the lazy sprawl that he'd sunken into, and glanced over at the door.

"Ah, Mister Crowley," smiled a thirtyish human, idly brushing back his thick grey-streaked black hair as he entered the room, "what can I do for you?"

"Richard McGeddon?" queried Crowley, as the gent lowered himself into the seat on the other side of the desk.

The man smiled warily for the briefest of seconds. "Yes," he nodded, and shook David firmly by the hand. "Nice to meet you. So, what seems to be the problem?"

"It's about one of your vans," explained Crowley.

"Ah, the one that was dumped outside the chip shop?" said McGeddon, raising his thin eyebrows quizzically.

"Dumped?" frowned David.

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry if we didn't go through the proper channels. I meant to call, but..." explained McGeddon, his voice trailing away as he clicked open the drinks cabinet. He waggled a crystal decanter at Crowley; sour milk slurped about inside it, leaving an opaque film in its wake. "Milk?"

Crowley battled with his conscience for the best part of ten seconds. He'd given up drinking sour milk a couple of years ago. Back in 1995, Crowley had been quite a heavy drinker - home-brewed sour milk was dangerously inexpensive to manufacture, and his two month suspension from the force had seen him maturing crates of the stuff for personal consumption. For all the Newcomers' biological perfection, though, too much sour milk had an adverse effect on them; Crowley had twice been in hospital for drink-induced illnesses, and his doctor sternly advised him to stop drinking sour milk. But for the occasional glass at Christmas parties and the like, Crowley never touched a drop these days. His willpower audibly collapsed. As days went, this one had been particularly long.

"Go on, then. Just a small one."

McGeddon returned to his desk and placed a glass of noxious milk on the green-leather surface. He held a tumbler of whisky for himself. "Cheers," said he, lifting his glass to his lips. He sipped appreciatively at the golden liquid.

"Likewise," said Crowley, taking a sip of his milk. He sloshed it about the inside of his mouth and nodded appreciatively. Expensive stuff indeed; while you could get a pleasing enough taste by leaving a carton of milk in your cupboard for a week, the

properly-manufactured stuff was far kinder to your taste-buds and - the next morning - your head.

"Superb," he said, after swallowing it. He tilted the glass and gazed admirably at viscous, lumpy liquid within. "Very subtle. Something I can't place, though." McGeddon's smile flickered.

"It's from a little place down in Cornwall - goat's milk, matured in oak casks for month. You can really taste the wood, I'm told."

Crowley took another mouthful and nodded thoughtfully. "Wood. That's it. To business, anyway. Hold on," he said, laying aside his drink. He clicked the locks on his portable computer, opened it like a book and placed it on the desk in front of him. It beeped cheerily into life, and blinked a few lights at the world. "Recorded interview between DI David Crowley and Richard McGeddon, commencing..." said Crowley, his words magically appearing on the screen of the computer as they left his mouth. He frowned into middle distance and consulted his watch. "9:42pm, eighth of September 1998. No other officers present." "Right then..."

★

Some fifteen minutes later, David Crowley emerged from the NecroTech Cryogenics building. He stood on the top step and took several large lungfuls of the vaguely polluted Birmingham air, and let the faltering rain wash over his bald head.

A somewhat muted car horn blared at him from the side of the road. Jenny Morgan gave a cheery wave from the driver's seat, and David danced unsteadily down the stone steps. He wrenched open the passenger door and climbed in.

"Anything?" said Jennifer, with a vague trace of optimism. She started up the engine and the car juddered into life. Crowley stared blankly ahead for a few seconds.

"Er, no, no," he said suddenly, returning to his senses. "No, nothing. Not a jot."

"You took a statement?"

"Well, for what it was worth, yes," said Crowley, tapping a finger on his portable computer. "The van was reported stolen this morning, and one of the NecroTech employees noticed it abandoned outside Milton's this afternoon. He picked it up and brought it back." "Reported stolen?" said Jenny, frowning slightly.

"Oh, yes - I checked with the main police computer," said David wearily. "The manager called in at about ten this morning. It's all logged and everything. No great mystery, there."

The two police officers drove on in silence for a couple of blocks. Crowley yawned, and scratched absently at the side of his head.

"You examined the van, did you?" said Jenny.

"What?" said David distractedly. "Oh, yes, yes. Dusted it and all that. Matched the prints to four of the human NecroTech drivers, none of whom have got previous; it's all on the computer. There's a couple of Tenctonese drivers I'll have to check out tomorrow."

Crowley yawned again and peered groggily out into the night. In the distance, the Town Hall clock determinedly struck ten, its chimes barely audible above the ceaseless crashing of the rain.

"Sorry, sorry," David murmured, clutching vaguely at the makings of a headache and frowning deeply. "I'm not at my best, at the moment. Think we should call it a day."

It was the milk. He knew it was the milk. Such a stupid mistake. Crowley drummed his fingers angrily on the dashboard. An unpleasantly pink pub sign was just visible through the rain as the car drew up at some traffic lights. Crowley cursed under his breath in Tenc-tonese.

"Drop me off here," he heard himself say. The cheery neon sign of The Cooper's Arms blinked on and off invitingly. He could still taste the sour lactic acid on his tongue.

"Sure?" said Jenny. The lights turned green.

"Yeah, I'll get a bus home," said Crowley, climbing from the car. He offered a vague wave to Morgan. "No problem. See you in the morning. Thanks for the lift."

★

The low murmur dropped to nothing as David Crowley entered The Cooper's Arms. A dozen scowling human faces eyed him with contempt, and the barman looked up with a barely-concealed sneer. Someone in the far corner of the room muttered something, and a round of guttural laughter broke out.

"What was that?" called Crowley, with an exaggeratedly polite smile. Deep in his trenchcoat pocket, four printless fingers slipped deftly around the handle of a recently-remembered gun. Even in the current age, few of the British police were actually armed. When such trouble was expected from the criminal fraternity, guns were brought into play accordingly, but for the majority of the time they managed without. Crowley had been issued with a pistol for this morning's dawn raids - a busy day and a poor memory meant that he still had it in his pocket. He'd be invoiced for Hell when he returned to the station, no doubt.

"Diddums want his milk?" called a crop-haired youth, nudging his drinking partners in their collective ribs. Unable to come up with anything funnier, the comedian said it again, in a notably more foolish manner. He wagged his cigarette and leered hopelessly.

Crowley sighed deeply. He was used to this although the Newcomers had been in Britain some seven years now, the Purist movement was still unnervingly strong, and the Newcomers were still a long way from being fully welcomed by society.

Normally Crowley would shrug such mindless racist insults off, but the lactic acid fizzing through his bloodstream added a twist of anger to the apathy. He flipped off the safety.

"And what might you be drinking, sir?" replied Crowley with mock interest.

The yob lifted a half-empty bottle from the pile of debris on his table and waved it proudly in the air. His companions gave a few drunken cheers, although they were rather silenced by the gunshot. Twisted plastic and sticky cider rained down upon the nearby clientele of the Cooper's Arms, bringing with it an uneasy silence that was broken only by a gimmicky eighties pop song from the jukebox.

"Oh, did baby spill his apple juice?" sneered Crowley, his words cutting through the murmuring pop music to reach everybody in the pub. The crew-cutted youngster wisely decided not to make an issue of it, and the detective turned to the bar, clicking his gun's safety catch to its more acceptable position as he did so. Wearing his finest grim smile, Crowley's fingers danced along the bar top and he turns his attention to its pumps. Four lagers, three bitters, two obscure real ales and one sour milk. Crowley sighed. It was a generic, synthetic and rather unpleasant brand - most breweries had started stocking milk in their pubs so as not to appear hostile to the Newcomers, but they invariably went for the cheapest possible label. Any half-decent sour milk had to be consumed at its optimum age - leave it for a few weeks more and you might as well be drinking cupboard-brewed gold top. Since demand for the drink was fairly low in most places, it made economic sense to stock a chemical-laden brand that would happily sit in the cellars for up to a year.

"A pint of milk, please," smiled Crowley, when the barman returned from making a call to the local police. There was a strangled burst of static from David's police radio.

"Shooting reported in the pub on Nightingale Road, male Newcomer armed with a revolver," said a crackly voice from its speaker. "Nobody injured, perpetrator still on the premises. Can anyone deal?"

"Marvellous response time, isn't it?" smiled the detective, nodding to the surprised barman. "Your taxes at work."

Crowley reached up to his collar and gently tapped a button on his radio. "Affirmative, control," he said. "DI Crowley here. I'm at the Cooper's Arms. I think I've got the situation under control. A mere false alarm, is all." The radio muttered acknowledgement and returned to the realms of silence.

"Thank you, thank you," said David to the barman, lifting his pint from the bar top. He fished a handful of change from his pocket and swiftly sorted out the appropriate coinage, sliding it across the bar in a neat pile.

Clutching his drink in one hand and his gun in the other, David sought a table to sit at. The locals eyed Crowley with an uneasy blend of racism and fear, and shifted nervously in their mock-leather seats. The prospect of having a Newcomer at the table was more or less as inviting to them as having an armed trigger-happy maniac drinking with them. A combination of the two was easily at absolute zero on the scale of drinking partners.

In a dark corner of the room, a young Tenc-tonese male sat alone at a table, staring morosely into an empty glass. Clad in a dark coat and looking rather pale and miserable, a palpable air of depression hung over the polished-brass table. David Crowley strode into the shadows, doing his best to dispel the gloom with an understanding smile and the nearest he could get to a friendly face.

"Evening. Is this seat taken?" said Crowley, extending a finger and indicating the empty chair at the side of the table. The Newcomer looked up for a brief second.

"No, no - go ahead," he murmured, shrugging non-committally. Crowley nodded in thanks, and placed his computer on the tabletop, his drink beside it.

"Can I get you a top-up?" beamed David, pointing to his companion's empty glass. The young Newcomer nodded wearily. "Cheers," he said vaguely, pushing it across the table to Crowley.

"Be right back," said Crowley, making a return to the bar with the glass in his hand. The barman, summoning up what courage he had, cleared his throat noisily.

"Er," he began. He looked at Crowley's revolver hopelessly. The Newcomer detective frowned at the barman, and slowly followed his terrified gaze.

"Oh, sorry," said David with genuine surprise. "Forgot I had it." He waggled the gun foolishly, and a few alert patrons to his right ducked instinctively. "Don't worry, it's not—"

A gunshot. An agonised groan. A couple of screams. The jukebox triumphantly finished whatever blandness it had been assaulting the customers with and horrified silence claimed the bar as its own.

"Andarko," cursed a somewhat surprised DI Crowley, turning to face the direction his pistol had been pointing. The dart-board. Still intact, and probably not groaning or screaming. David frowned, and glanced down at his gun. The safety was still on.

There was a low gurgle from the far corner of the bar. The lone Newcomer was lying flat out on the grimy tiled floor, clutching with trembling hands at his chest. He croaked and coughed helplessly.

"Police!" barked David, pulling out his identity card and holding it aloft. He ran across the saloon bar, and fell to his knees beside the wounded Tenc-tonese. "Nobody move!"

There was a whine and a dull clunk as the door to the gents' closed itself. "Monk," swore David. He looked down at the victim of the shooting. Both hearts shot right through, and a horrific bullet-wound to the stomach. "Monk, monk, monk, monk, monk," muttered Crowley. He angrily slapped a button on his radio.

"Newcomer ambulance to the Cooper's Arms, Nightingale Road. Priority," he said. Casting a nervous glance at the dying Newcomer, he darted over to the toilets and kicked open the door. Twin cubicles to the side of him lay empty, and a large open window in the far wall clanked to and fro in the wind.

"On its way," said the static-choked voice of his radio. Crowley sprinted back to the saloon bar, his brain pounding. He clutched madly at his head, and muttered to himself.

"Okay," he said, looking over to a nearby customer. "Get some... get some, er..." Crowley's vision suddenly swam and blurred, and he fell to his knees in the dying Newcomer's blood. No - not blood. He tried to concentrate. White. Spilt milk. Shattered glass. "Get me some..."

"Are you all right?" said the drinker. Her voice was twisted, slurred, somehow far away. Crowley peered madly at her, but found himself unable to focus. With no warning, his legs gave out on him, and

he fell forward onto the tiled floor. Spilt milk and shattered glass.

"I'm, er..." he complained. He rubbed a bloodied hand over his face, and attempted to organise his thoughts. "I'll be..."

Crowley passed out.

★

"Lethaka!" called an authoritative voice. Lethaka, still a good month and a half away from the name David Crowley, was standing in a tired Gas-induced slouch beside a steadily moving conveyor belt. The hellish light of Recycling Point Seasti burned from a low archway in the far wall, throwing an evil glow over the unpleasantness being slowly carried towards it. Rotting meatgrowth, uneaten vegrowth, various discarded debris and - without the numbing blandness of the Holy Gas, Lethaka would probably have contributed his breakfast to the contents of the conveyor belt Tenc-tonese corpses. Every so often, a twisted, sometimes limbless or dismembered Tenc-tonese body would pass Lethaka on its way to the recycler.

It was his job to check it for jewellery or any other non-organic contaminants. With a dull absence of thought, Lethaka reached out to the body that had drawn level with him. A young Tenc-tonese male, clad only in the torn remnants of a ceremonial gown. A horrific saltwater wound had taken both his hearts clean out. Neither noticing nor caring, the future-David gave the cadaver a firm push. It lolled awkwardly onto its front, and David let out a mindless grunt, satisfied that the thing was ready for processing. His eyes swung slowly back to the entrance archway, dimly alert for the next body.

There was a dull clunk, and the background hum that filled the room fell slowly into silence. "Lethaka!" said the voice again, for the fifth time.

Crowley straightened up, dimly aware of someone talking behind him, but more concerned with the fact that the conveyor had stopped. He stared hopelessly at it, and ran his hands over its gore-stained rubber surface in a foolish bid to get it moving again.

"Lethaka!" barked the speaker, grabbing Crowley by the shoulder and wrenching him around. It was an Overseer. Ytris.

"Out of my way," he said, pushing Crowley aside. David nodded dumbly. This was an order. He knew where he was with orders. People shouting his name didn't mean a great deal to his near-dead brain, but orders were orders. Crowley performed a half-stumbled sidestep and resumed a blank, thoughtless pose.

The arrogant Kleezantsun' examined the corpse David had been picking over, and gave a grunt of irritation when he found the hearts to be missing. Reaching to his belt, the Overseer clicked a button on an enigmatic silver box. Motors whined back to life, and David looked on impassively as the conveyor belt rumbled back into life.

For five minutes, Ytris glanced uncaringly over the occasional cadavers that rolled past him. When an uninjured Elder arrived on a mattress of rotting vegrowth, the control box came back into play and the conveyor stopped once more.

"Pick up the body, cargo," ordered the Overseer, turning back to Crowley. Without hesitation or revulsion, David strode over to the corpse and slipped his gloved arms under the Elder's neck and knees. He lifted the body from its rancid, bloody resting place. Rancid chunks of meatgrowth slithered from the torn robes of the corpse, spattering over the gleaming floor-plates.

"Follow me," said the Overseer, turning and striding boldly out of the recycling chamber. Pallbearer Crowley staggered groggily along in his wake.

★

"How long has he been like this?" asked the Tenctonese doctor, casting a wary and slightly unsettled eye over the unconscious inhabitant of the bed. David Crowley mumbled faintly in his sleep. After passing out in the Cooper's Arms, both he and the victim of the shooting had been taken to Birmingham General. Crowley was now lying in a rather uncomfortable NHS bed of the Tenctonese ward, with a bandaged arm and a slightly unnerved frown. His momentary drinking partner had been wheeled off to the morgue shortly after leaving the ambulance.

"Just over an hour," replied Jenny Morgan, raising her head. She looked half asleep, having also been on a dawn raid, albeit a different one, during the early hours of the day. "They've treated him for his minor cuts and bruises to the hands and face, but he's been sleeping like a corpse since they picked him up."

"I see," nodded the doctor. He scratched distractedly at the jagged brown stripes of his angular cranium, and gave an awkward frown. "Well, there's really not much point in your staying here any longer - doubtless your friend will awaken in the morning."

Jenny nodded understandingly and took her bag from under her chair. "I'll be off, then," she said, rising to her feet and slipping into her raincoat. She gave a final, momentary glance to the sleeping detective, who responded by mumbling incoherently into his pillow.

"Oh, did Crowley have his computer with him when he was picked up?" asked Jenny. The grubby white table beside the bed housed only a scratched-plastic water jug and a bowl of small purplish things that Jenny hoped were grapes - Crowley's few personal possessions rested on a shelf beneath, but there was no sign of his police computer.

"If it's not there, he can't have had it," shrugged the doctor. "I can check, if you like."

"No, it's all right," said Jenny. A half-stifled yawn told the world how tired she was. "It can wait until the morning."

The doctor nodded to himself, and walked over to another patient. "Indeed. Good night, officer."

"Good night," smiled Morgan weakly, striding along the ward to the double-doors. Her shoes clicked against the recently-cleaned tiles, and the noise echoed ominously about the near empty ward. The moment she passed through the double-doors into the corridor, the doctor returned to Crowley's bed.

An evil smile playing about his lips, he looked down at the snoring, muttering figure of David

Crowley. He reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a slim hypodermic. With a deft flick of the thumb, he removed its plastic cap. A thin arc of greenish liquid glinted in the moonlight as it squirted from the barrel.

"Good night, Crowley."

★

"Put it here," snarled Overseer Ytris, gesturing to a blank silver workbench set in the far wall. Crowley nodded dumbly. If he'd have been any nearer his full awareness, he would have recognised his current surroundings as that of an abandoned infirmary. Corpses rested on some of the beds, each and every one with two grim holes punched through the chest.

The effects of the gas were slowly wearing off. David staggered slightly as the realisation of what he was doing began to trickle into his brain. Signifying this with a doubtful frown, he placed the dead Elder onto the slab.

"Now leave. Return to your duties," ordered Ytris, indicating the door to Crowley. The Overseer turned to face another corpse, a young Tenctonese male this time, lying flat on a bed in the centre of the room. Tapping briskly at a hand-held wire-trailing keypad, a sinister medical probe was activated; it descended gently from the ceiling like some hideous mechanical spider, hellish red lights blinking on and off randomly along its eight jagged limbs.

Crowley watched with a dull but mounting horror as the contraption settled over the chest of the cadaver. It clicked and whined as three of its legs clamped around each side of the body, and lifted the remaining two into the air. Where the other arms had ended blankly, these tapered into thin blades. They swung carefully to and fro above the body, and with a grim realisation their purpose became apparent. The Overseer took a hypodermic from a shelf and fiddled with it purposefully.

"Lethaka!" barked Ytris, realising that Crowley was still here. "Return to your duties!"

The Holy Gas was thinning, taking with it the fog that blurred David's thoughts. His gaze rose from the corpse and stared into Ytris's uncaring eyes. The Tenctonese slaves had become accustomed to the heartsless destruction of their dead in the ship's recyclers, slowly learning to accept it. A clean and inevitable fate; there was some twisted sense of decency in it. True enough, most of the victims had died at the hands of the Kleezantsun', but all were assured a sort of worthwhile funeral. "Returning to the mother," some said. It was an absolute. An unavoidable, levelling fate.

But here was Ytris, desecrating and abusing corpses that were meant for recycling. Wrenching the innocent dead from their resting place and subjecting them to... to...

Crowley's gaze fell to the corpse, to its sightless eyes, and the glinting blades that swept above its hearts.

"Lethaka!"

★

And Crowley was awake. His bleary eyes tried to focus. For the briefest of moments, the dream superimposed itself on reality - Ytris seemed to be standing over him clutching a hypodermic needle, poised to stab him with it. David squinted a bit more, but his eyes remained largely uncooperative. The Overseer's robe faded gently to become a doctor's coat, the needle inclined itself at a less murderous angle, and the face dissolved into a vague but unmistakably Tenc-tonese silhouette. The backdrop blurred from the brutish decor of the infirmary to the rather less inspiring grey walls of Birmingham General.

"What's going on?" slurred the detective.

"You're in hospital. I'm just going to give you an injection," said the Newcomer doctor.

"Ah. Vitamins, is it?" hazarded Crowley.

"Something like that," smiled the doctor. "Roll up your sleeve."

Crowley deflated a bit, and fumbled back the loose sleeve of his pyjama top to expose a pale unbandaged arm. With businesslike precision, the doctor slid the needle beneath Crowley's pale skin, and the greenish liquid bubbled into his bloodstream.

"There. That should improve matters," said the doctor.

It took three oblivious heartbeats before the pain hit him. Crowley's entire body tensed as if he'd been electrified, and a fearful paralysis suddenly gripped him. As he slid painfully into unconsciousness and beyond, his fading gaze fell upon the Tenc-tonese doctor's right forearm as it neatly returned the needle to a pocket.

If he'd have had enough neurons firing, he probably wouldn't have been surprised to see the tattoo. With a dull groan, Detective Inspector David Crowley fell into a deeper and altogether darker unconsciousness.

★

There was a scratching of keys at the front door, and a few slightly annoyed seconds later the handle turned. Jenny Morgan pushed open the door and strode into her flat, the light from the hallway rushing in ahead of her. It darted enthusiastically around the cramped but organised room, chasing away the darkness and making a hopeless bid to brighten things up.

Yawning somewhat, Jenny placed her police computer onto a spare patch of table and sought out the bathroom. The cheerless neon light flickered erratically into life above the mirror and Jenny frowned vaguely at her weary-looking face for a moment, before reaching for her toothbrush.

There was a tinny electronic fanfare from the living room, and Jenny froze. The mirror caught her distracted look and idly threw it back at her for a few seconds.

The fanfare sounded again, with a trifle more urgency.

Feeling more bafflement than fear, Morgan crept back into her darkened living room. The television was switched off, the radio sat on a shelf lacking a plug, and the video - unless it had been learning

some new skills while she'd been out - wasn't even a possibility. She cocked her head on one side and listened carefully.

There it was again. As the jingle of notes sounded, a tiny green LED flashed merrily away on the side of her computer. Her puzzlement deepened. It had never done that before.

Intrigued, she clicked open the locks and opened out the device. Sensing this, the screen flickered into life. A large window was open in the very centre of it, bearing a twee picture of a cartoonish alarm clock and a large, flashing message beneath. Two words.



FEED MAELSTROM

This didn't make a great deal of sense to Jenny. It would have made perfect sense to Detective Inspector David Crowley, however. Taught to read and given a few English lessons, it's probable that Maelstrom, Crowley's goldfish, would have had a passing interest in the matter as well.

Realisation dawned before very long. Morgan had picked up Crowley's police computer by mistake. Or rather, no - Crowley had accidentally taken hers with him to the pub. Making a mental note to swap computers tomorrow morning, she tapped at the screen and the alarm box vanished to whence it had came. Yawning once more, Jenny reached to close the computer down. But didn't.

A file was still open beneath.

Recorded interview between DI David Crowley and Richard McGeddon, commencing 9:42pm, eighth of September 1998. No other officers present. read the title box. There was a nice neat straight line under this, followed by...

Crowley : Right then. So, let's start at the beginning.

McGeddon : Sure.

Crowley : You say that--

Unknown : Okay, thanks Dave.

Jenny bit her lip. If the computer picked up a voice that didn't match any in its memory, it registered as unknown. Crowley's was stored permanently in the computer so that he wouldn't have to keep muttering at it every time he wanted to use the thing - the interviewee's voice print was stored by simply typing in the name and pressing a certain button the first time that person spoke; the vocal

pattern went on the hard-disk, and any further occurrences of that voice were tagged with the relevant name.

The fact that a voice remained unknown meant that Crowley hadn't been expecting it.

McGeddon : Heh. No problem.

Half of the remaining text was printed in the jagged script of the Tenctonese alphabet; Crowley spoke in English, the unknown voice in Tenctonese. Jenny tapped irritably at a button to translate it - she could understand spoken Tenctonese, but couldn't for the life of her make out the written words. The screen shimmered briefly, and the spiky lines of transcription were replaced by their English equivalents.

Crowley : Er, hold on Richard - where are you going?

Unknown : Turn that thing off.

Crowley : I beg your pardon?

*Unknown : **Turn that thing off!*** This line was in a bold typeface, indicating that it had been shouted.

Crowley : Sorry?

*Unknown : **Turn the damn thing off, cargo!*** Again, in bold.

Crowley : Er. Yeah, sure.

And that was it. Jenny tapped hesitantly at the "page down" button, but there was no more text to be had. No mention of the NecroTech drivers being quizzed, no plausible explanation of how the van came to be found outside Milton's - none of the facts Crowley claimed to have recorded.

Jenny bit her lip, and reached for the phone. Her fingers danced erratically over the keypad, and the mechanisms of British Telecom whirled and clunked beyond the earpiece. Jenny stared nervously out through the window, pondering the situation. Was Crowley covering something up? Was he in the pay of NecroTech? A police-issue pistol, now resting in Morgan's handbag, had been turned up in Crowley's trenchcoat pocket - it was missing a bullet. What the hell was he playing at?

"Hello, how can I help you?" said the cheery voice on the other end of the line.

"Er, good evening," said Jenny, her train of thought arriving back from its detour. She tried manically to recall who she'd been phoning. Memory returned. "Hello. I was, er, wondering if I could speak to a patient of yours."

"The patient's name, please?"

"Crowley. David Crowley. Brought in just over an hour ago. He's in the Newcomer ward."

The voice's owner tapped efficiently away at a keyboard, producing a few cheery bleeps and a page of information.

"Ah yes, he's just gone in for surgery, I'm afraid."

"Surgery?" said Jenny, a mite taken aback.

"Yes, he went into..." The voice faltered as its owner peered at her computer screen. "Er. Terry-ack? Twenty minutes ago."

Jenny nearly dropped the phone. "Tehriak?" she whispered, barely sounding the click at the end of the word. Tehriak' was a Tenctonese condition where one heart stopped completely and the other faltered, throwing the victim into a coma. Without an immediate operation, the blood would start clot-

ting, blocking up the other heart with unsurprisingly fatal consequences.

"Yes. Can I take..."

The receptionist's phone took to burring at her as Jenny hung up. With a shrug, she replaced the receiver and went back to filing her nails.

Down the corridor and on the left, in the emergency room of the Tenctonese ward, a hearts monitor ceased its faltering bleeps and opted for a grim, terminal monotone.

★

Crowley awoke to the sound of birdsong, which was a bit unexpected. Birmingham's feathered populace of the modern age was really limited to a few thousand feral pigeons, more suited to guttural cooing than a cheery dawn chorus. Perhaps he'd been moved to a different hospital. That'd be it. Somewhere out in the country.

And the grass. That was odd. Crowley supposed that he could have been lying on his back in the grounds of this country hospital. It suggested a certain lack of care and attention on the part of the hospital staff, but Crowley wasn't overly concerned. The grass was warm and comfortable, and scored several points above the average NHS bed in many respects.

Then there was the sunlight, warming Crowley's slightly puzzled face with a pleasant indifference. Something was different. David lay there thoughtfully for a few seconds, soaking up the brilliant ultraviolet and organising his thoughts.

"Lethaka, te masa vot?" called a familiar voice.

Crowley deftly exchanged his contented smile for a startled frown and sat bolt upright. His mind shattered into several baffled pieces, all leaping unswervingly to the same conclusion. Rasmi. It couldn't be. Crowley brought up a dew-covered hand and clamped it atop his racing brain.

"It's me, Rasmi," said the voice, clearing the matter up rather neatly.

"Rasmi?" replied Crowley, as incredulous as anyone could be expected to be upon meeting their dead wife. His head swung around to face the source of the mystery, and standing only a few feet away from him was none other than Rasmi, Family: Circles of Ionia, Family: Grey River. She smiled crookedly at her husband's expression.

Something clicked. Crowley deflated a bit.

"I'm dreaming, right?" he sighed. It's a fairly long haul from the grimy wards Birmingham General to Crowley took in the scenery for the first time; the impossibly blue sky, the bizarre yet beautiful plant life scattered through the turquoise fields, the chattering bird-life swooping overhead - this mysterious alien paradise, wherever it was. It certainly wasn't Earth. He was either dreaming or...

Memories of the undoubtedly lethal injection returned, bringing with them an uneasy, dismal groan from the pit of Crowley's stomach.

"Oh, don't tell me I'm dead," he said. "Anything but that."

"Don't you know where you are?" smiled Rasmi, helping the grumbling ex-detective up from the delicate grass. Crowley winced vaguely as he caught his

wife's gaze. The dreams of Ytris had raked over long-forgotten parts of his mind, and the face of his loved one brought back the gruesome details of her death.

Crowley shook his head to derail that particular train of thought. He poured all his attention into examining his environs. Shimmering blue grass swept out in all directions, interrupted only by occasional clumps of low silvery trees and sparkling lakes of fresh water. Tenctonese of all ages populated the area, some gathered in large groups, others wandering hand-in-hand through the fields. A dozen or so giggling youngsters ran past as Crowley gazed about in silent bafflement, and sharp, clean sunlight shone down from directly above.

"This would, I suppose, be the afterlife you kept telling me about," grumbled David, barely convinced. Years of work on the recycling conveyors of the slave ship had made Crowley something of a doubter when it came to the subject of religion. Celinism seemed overly idealistic for him, the teachings of Ionia were laughably vague to his cynical ears, and none of the minor Tenctonese religions seemed to work for him. He'd settled comfortably into the role of atheist before very long.

"You never change, neemu," said Rasmi, gently stroking the near side of Crowley's furrowed brow. She pulled lightly at his arm, motioning for him to follow her. "Come on."

Crowley irritably tugged himself free and collapsed with a mutter onto the grass. This was too much. He was clearly experiencing some insane dream as his brain went through its final motions, and the more idealistic corners of his subconscious were winding him up.

Not dead but dreaming.

"I'll be away to oblivion in a moment, don't mind me," grumbled Crowley, idly wrenching a handful of grass and flowers from the slightly damp soil. He picked off the petals with no small amount of irritation, flicking them wretchedly into the gentle breeze.

Rasmi gave a familiar smile and sat down opposite Crowley. This was certainly the Lethaka she knew.

"Do you want to talk about this?" she asked. Crowley surveyed the scenery wretchedly, reluctant to accept any of it. The concept of every dead Tenctonese in history living with him in a vast field was more than a trifle unnerving, if that's really all it was. And did the shambling Tenctonese species of pre-history get invites as well? He scanned the fields warily.

After seventy-odd years on a spacecraft, the outdoors just didn't really appeal all that much to Crowley. Bred as he was for sub-zero labour, excessive UV just gave him a headache. And if the weather got any hotter, he might as well be in - to compare it with one of the Human afterlives that Darkwood often sniggered about - Hell.

He muttered a silent curse at the elder gods. It probably wasn't a very good idea, considering his current state, but he did it anyway. The local star hung with a sinister determination in the "noon" position, and Crowley had a very strong suspicion that it would stay there for eternity. Whilst the majority

of his race would happily soak up the heat and ultraviolet, Crowley and the rest of the sub-zero crowd would be in constant torment.

"We'll discuss this later," he decided, and shrugged off his doubts, for the time being. He leaned against his wife with a confused but contented sigh. Crowley closed his tired eyes, grudgingly soaked up the ultraviolet and breathed in a lungful of clean, fresh air. He sneered vaguely, missing the Birmingham tinge of carbon monoxide.

"Fifty milligrams of nu-tetraprozone."

"What was that?" said Crowley, sitting upright and staring accusingly at something that might have been a rabbit. The creature gave him a blank look and bounded away oblivious into the long grass.

"A metlata. It not just us that make it to the afterlife, you know. All living things do," said Rasmi. "According to some of the Elders here, it's an animal native to Tencton."

"All right, all right," he shushed. "Does it talk?" "Does it what?"

"Talk," said Crowley, in all seriousness. Rasmi gave her husband a concerned look and rested the backs of her hands against his temples. "Are you feeling all right, Lethaka?" she asked.

"Okay, we'll try it again," said a low purplish shrub to Crowley's right. His head span again, and he subjected the plant to a suspicious and critical gaze.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" said Rasmi.

"That, er..." replied Crowley, his voice faltering as common sense put the brakes on. His ground-state worried frown reasserted itself. "You didn't hear anything?"

"Switch it on, Phil," called an authoritative voice a few feet above both of them, and Crowley tilted his head back. A few birds twittered lazily through the clear blue sky high above. Vague and unpleasant ideas began to form in David's mind, and he was rapidly beginning to see the way this was heading.

"Monk," he cursed, and scrambled awkwardly to his feet. The air around him began to hum gently, although his wife didn't hear anything.

"Lethaka, what's wrong?" said a concerned Rasmi. "What is it?"

"I'll explain later," he called, breaking into a panicked sprint. He wasn't sure if he could logically outrun this, but he'd give it a damn good try. Crowley thundered determinedly across the soft grass, his bare feet stomping the blades flat in a precise and terrified path. Rasmi watched in bemusement as her husband ran from invisible demons.

The humming continued, rising in pitch and Crowley increased his speed accordingly. Any minute now, he knew with a horrible certainty, somebody was going to say...

"Stand clear!" advised a loud voice from nowhere.

And Crowley fell. For a moment his back arched and a pained expression took hold of his face, then he staggered and stumbled hopelessly into the long grass. There was a faint shimmer in the fabric of reality, and his now motionless body vanished, leaving only an enigmatic Crowley-shaped dent in the grass.

★



In the darkness of a Birmingham flat, atop a scratched and mug-ringed wooden table and inside a cheap plastic bowl, Maelstrom the goldfish ceased his mindless swimming. For the second time in as many minutes, he turned cautiously to face the glittering crystal that formed the centrepiece of his otherwise uninspiring home. It was half-buried at a careless angle in a few inches of garishly-coloured artificial gravel, dropped lazily into place by David Crowley last time he changed the water.

Maelstrom stared curiously at the crystal as if he'd never seen it before, in exactly the same manner that he had some two minutes ago.

His memory quota ran out. Maelstrom idly resumed his pointless swimming, all things forgotten.

★

"Don't worry, you're all right," said a vaguely familiar voice. Half-sedated and half-confused, Crowley couldn't place it. He was conscious enough to realise that the damp grass had gone and a rather scratchy linen had replaced it, but that was about the limit of his thoughts.

"I am?" he slurred doubtfully.

"Yes."

"Ah." He took the voice's word for it. "Good." David Crowley opened his eyes warily, expecting anything and nothing. Jenny Morgan smiled weakly at him, backdropped by the grim decor of Birmingham General Hospital. As Crowley's senses clicked back into position, his surroundings became more and more apparent. The low murmur of conversation from other wards assailed his sensitive eardrums, the bland scent of hospital food clogged his nostrils and his mouth felt as unpleasant as it usually did first thing in the morning. A few scruffy pigeons croaked at him through the open window.

"I survived the operation, then?" he queried, half rhetorically.

"No. Welcome to Hell."

"Urgh," complained Crowley. He stiffly moved himself into a sitting position and straightened his ill-fitting pyjamas. "Nice day for it, anyway," he added, yawning animatedly.

Jenny lifted a chipped blue dish from the bedside table and offered it at arms' length to Crowley. Several chunks of rubber mauve unpleasantness were sitting in a thick reddish goo, and a fork was jabbed into the centre of it. "Your breakfast," she explained with a scowl. "And don't tell me what it is, just eat it."

"How goes the case?" queried David, between mouthfuls of raw meat. He grimaced vaguely at the food.

"Any word from McGeddon?"

"Very little, apparently," said Morgan, drawing Crowley's computer from under her chair and irritably clicking it open. The transcript of last night's rather brief interview with Richard McGeddon sat with a determined greenness in the centre of the screen. She'd been thinking it through during last night's bout of worried insomnia.

"I was going to take this straight to Chesterton, but I thought I'd give you a chance," Jenny hissed, wagging the computer threateningly. "What the hell are you playing at, for God's sake?"

David wiped a dribble of blood from his frown and laid aside the gory dish. He peered doubtfully at the computer screen.

"Er, this is mine, is it?" he queried.

"Yes," scowled Jenny. "You left it in my car."

"Ah," he nodded, and glanced briefly over the transcript. "What is this, a joke or something?"

"I'd say it was a rather pathetic attempt to cover up some bribery, wouldn't you?" said Jenny. "For God's sake Crowley, you don't leave stuff like this on your computer. And you certainly don't carry a bloody pistol about off-duty."

"A pistol?" slurred the DI.

"The ambulance crew found a pistol in your coat pocket," hissed Jenny. "A bloody police-issue pistol, Crowley. That'll be in the books. You'd better have a bloody good excuse."

Crowley shook his head hopelessly. "No," he sighed. "No, I haven't. I just forgot I had the bastard thing."

"Oh," said Jenny, mocking a smile. "Well, that's all right then. I'll remember that next time I'm stopped by Customs."

"I just," said Crowley, spitting the words out slowly and deliberately, "forgot I had it. All right?"

Morgan said nothing and stared out of the window pointedly. Crowley turned his attention to the screen.

"This..." he said, clutching at his head and narrowing his eyes, "this isn't what happened." His voice took on a level conviction. "I interviewed McGeddon. It was all on disk, along with the data of the stolen van. This," he concluded valiantly, tapping at the scratched plastic screen, "is a forgery."

"Rubbish," spat Jenny. "That computer's been with me since I picked you up from NecroTech. Nobody's had access to it."

"How did you get into it, anyway?" queried David, getting vaguely suspicious. "It's DNA passworded - I'm the only one who can start it up."

This was true; the computer had a tiny scanning device attached to it, which took a rough snapshot of the user's DNA and checked it against the owner's.

It was a completely foolproof way to stop unauthorised people accessing police computers.

"You forgot to switch it off."

Almost completely foolproof.

"Ah."

Crowley's embarrassed iris-shade faded in a single terrifying instant, however, when he finally glanced at the last recorded word of the unknown speaker.

Cargo.

Realisation hit him like a gunshot, and a few shocked words of alien invective drifted from under his shallow breath. "Andarko. A Kleezantsun'. Of course."

Jenny had heard stories of the Overseers, of course. Although the immigration records showed that none had been on the planes that brought the Newcomers to Britain, at least a dozen had been sighted in the country over the past few years.

"What are you saying?" wondered Morgan, a trace of suspicion in her voice.

"You've heard of the Holy Gas, I take it?" said Crowley, looking up from his computer. Jenny, who'd watched the odd Tenctonese documentary or two, nodded.

"It's possible that the unknown speaker used it to persuade me that everything was all right. I mean," he continued, gesturing hopelessly at the final sentence on the screen, "I'd never stop the interview just like that, not without closing the file and turning off the computer. Not unless I was completely out of my head."

"What? So this guy hypnotised you?" Easily at the half-way mark on the scale of incredulity.

"Sort of. If an Overseer tells you to do something whilst you're under the effects of the Gas, you'd do it. If he tells you to forget everything and remember something else, you'd probably do that as well." Crowley shrugged helplessly.

"Is it possible to check for the presence of Gas in your bloodstream?" queried Jenny.

"It should be, although it would have appeared to have worn off since last..." David's voice trailed away into silence, and he stared blankly, thoughtfully into middle-distance.

"Last night. Andarko," he said, the memories suddenly returning to him with a nearly audible thump. "What happened to me last night?"

"You passed out in the Cooper's Arms."

"No, after that."

"Oh. Well, they pumped a load of drugs into you and left you to sleep it off. You went into tehriak' at about eleven o'clock - after a bit of surgery they managed to get your hearts going again, and here you are this morning."

"Did they find out why I went into tehriak'?" said Crowley urgently.

"Er," replied Jenny. "No. Not really. They guessed it was an allergic reaction to the drugs they'd given you, but weren't altogether convinced." Crowley shook his head grimly, and swore under his breath.

"It was a Kleezantsun'. It was—" said Crowley. His voice faltered momentarily. No. It couldn't have been Ytris. Ytris had died, years ago. The poor lighting of the hospital ward coupled with his fogged

brain meant that it could feasibly have been anyone that tried to kill him. The tattoo? Doubtful.

"One of the Overseers from the ship, possibly. He came here last night and injected me with something... lethal?"

Jenny narrowed her eyes, and nodded slightly. "Yes. You were clinically dead for about a minute, in the theatre. But somebody nipping in to murder you?" She shook her head, unconvinced. "Nobody can get in here, the security's airtight."

"What if it was an Overseer, and they used Holy Gas to overpower a guard and gain access?" hissed Crowley desperately.

Jenny bit her lip. She called to a human doctor who was attending a patient further along the ward. A shiny plastic badge on his spotless white coat gave his name as Pike. "Good morning," she smiled, flashing her police ID card at the doctor. "I wonder if I could have a word with you about your security guards?"

The junior doctor nodded warily. "Yes, we've got half a dozen of them from, er, Sorquekla Security," he said, with a shrug and a Birmingham accent. A lot of the local human security agencies were losing business to the might of their Newcomer rivals. The Tenctonese could easily outrun and outgun their human equivalents, and they were slowly cornering the market.

"We think one of them might have been overpowered last night, with Holy Gas," said Jenny. "Is that possible?"

"Well, it's unlikely," replied Doctor Pike, after considering things. "Nothing was reported, and all six guards clocked off okay this morning. We could check the security camera tapes, if you like."

"Is it all right if I get up, incidentally?" said Crowley irritably, preparing to leave his bed. Whatever poison he'd been given last night, the operation had apparently cleared it from his bloodstream. His cuts and bruises had healed to faint blemishes during the course of the night, and Crowley was more or less and fit and healthy as he ever was.

"Where do you think you're going?" quizzed the doctor, moving to restrain his patient.

"Er, with you."

"This is Detective Inspector Crowley," explained Morgan.

"Ah."

★

Crowley, Morgan and Pike sat in the flickering glow of a tiny black-and-white television screen, gazing critically at it. The image panned swiftly to and fro, switching to a different viewpoint every couple of seconds. Tenctonese security guards skittered around the perimeter of the hospital, the fast-forward of the video tape turning their bold strides into the totterings of foolish clockwork automatons.

"Whoa there, wind it back," said Crowley, waving a hand. "What was that?"

Pike thumbed a button on the remote control, and the stream of images ground to a halt. With a clunk from the video, they began to run backwards for a couple of seconds, before replaying at a respectable speed.

"There," stated Crowley, pointing at the screen. In the background of the current shot, a silvery Ford Sierra had pulled up at the main gate and the guard stationed there looked up from his side of the booth glass. The security gannum and the driver talked for a moment, their words lost to the non-audio recording, and the barrier was raised.

"Gas doesn't travel through glass, this is well known," reasoned Morgan.

"Hmmp," muttered Crowley. "Do we know whose the car was?"

Pike peered at the flickering monochrome screen. "Er..." he muttered. He watched as the car drove in the direction of the camera, and turned into an empty parking space. A tall Newcomer dressed in a doctor's uniform clambered from the driving seat and deftly locked the door. He turned and glanced up at the security camera.

"Oh, it's just Doctor McGeddon," said Pike, idly pausing the tape and relaxing a bit.

"Doctor Richard McGeddon, would that be?" said Jenny doubtfully. Pike nodded.

"Yes, that's right. He's our Newcomer specialist; he'd been called in to take a look at the body brought in along with Detective Crowley last night," he explained. "I believe McGeddon also advises a few other medical institutions over Tenctonese physiology."

"Would that include NecroTech?"

"Ah, the cryogenics place? Yes. Actually I think he runs it, or something," said Pike.

Jenny turned to Crowley, who had been contributing surprisingly little to the conversation since his suggestion to stop the tape. He was staring at the screen, his mouth half-open in horror, which seemed a fair enough reason. His face was a blend of hatred and terror - something dark and frightening seemed to be hiding behind his eyes, struggling against Crowley's self control.

"What's wrong?" said Morgan.

The jaggedly-striped head of the Newcomer doctor was turned towards the camera, and his eyes seemed to be staring freeze-framed into the nebulous depths of Crowley's soul.

He hadn't been mistaken last night.

It was Ytris.

★

Crowley straightened his tie in the reflection from the window, and his translucent mirror image smiled brightly at Jenny Morgan as she returned from the corridor. In the dark and swirling depths of Crowley's mind, much contemplation was being given to the presence of Kleezantsun' Ytris on the streets of Birmingham.

Ytris was dead. Or at least, Crowley was very much under the impression that he was dead. The last time he'd seen the Overseer, he'd had a decidedly fatal saltwater chest wound and a noticeable lack of vital signs. That had been enough to convince him, at the time. Crowley shook his head hopelessly.

"Did you get through to the office?" he said, gathering up his few possessions from the bedside table.

Jenny nodded. "Eventually. Darkwood and Black are arresting McGeddon as we speak," she said, and

Crowley's irises blanched momentarily. "Excuse me a moment," he said, gesturing for Morgan to leave.

Narrowing her eyes slightly, Jenny strode out through the sturdy plastic doors onto the corridor. Crowley tinkered with his radio, and spoke into it at length for a half a minute. He left the ward looking rather relieved, joined Jenny outside and took to pacing the bright corridors of Birmingham General.

"Right. Sorry about that," he smiled casually. "So, what do we know about Richard's partner?"

"A certain David Morrison, it would appear," said Morgan, reading from a computer printout. "A London GP up until three years ago - he resigned over some unpleasant drug business; six months community service. He's been in Malton for just over two years, starting NecroTech with McGeddon and a couple of other Tenctonese last year."

"Tall, thirtyish, greying black hair?" hazarded Crowley.

"Nothing less. He's being brought in for questioning."

Crowley nodded, his suspicions confirmed. "That wasn't McGeddon I interviewed, then - it was Morrison. McGeddon must have recognised me when I entered his office, so he sent his partner in in his place, pretending to be him."

"Clever. And the Holy Gas?"

"Bubbled through the milk, probably - I certainly didn't smell any in the office," shrugged Crowley. "It probably contributed to me passing out in the Cooper's Arms, as well. Hmm." A thought struck him. "Is the victim of the pub shooting fit to be interviewed yet, by the way?"

"Well, if you've got a Ouija board with you..."

Crowley ceased his determined stride and slowed warily to a frowning halt outside Pathology. "Hmm?"

"He was dead on arrival."

"Oh," said Crowley, and deflated slightly. "Well, is his corpse still on the premises?"

"Should be," nodded Jenny, and peered up at the bewildering array of direction signs on the nearby wall. It took her a fair while to realise that a pointer to the morgue didn't feature among the brightly-coloured array. "To the front desk, then," she suggested, with a shrug.

Crowley cheerfully binged the desk bell with the palm of his hand, and a dozen pairs of eyes rose wretchedly to peer at him. Eleven rather bored-looking patients waiting patiently on uncomfortable orange plastic chairs, all in varying states of illness and bandaging, and one extremely bored-looking receptionist painting her nails behind her desk.

"Can I help you?" she said wearily. David responded with what would have been a disarming smile, but for the blood on his unwashed teeth. He dismissed the receptionist's vaguely horrified glance.

"Yes, we're looking for-" he said, then frowned and turned to face Jenny. "Who are we looking for?"

"Oh, hold on," said Morgan, fumbling in her pockets for her notebook. She eventually found it, and flicked through its pages of scribbled text. "Yes, we found a wallet on the corpse. Eric Praline, his

name was," she said, missing the reference. Crowley tittered silently under his breath.

"Is he still in the morgue?" queried Jenny.

The receptionist's fingers danced expertly over her keyboard, and the screen swiftly blinked up a page of text.

"Er, no," she explained, and gestured hopelessly at the information on the monitor. A recently-painted fingernail tapped at the line which gave the current location of the patient in question. Crowley read it.

He read it again.

"Praline discharged himself at two o'clock this morning?"

★

DS Stephen Black sucked thoughtfully on half-finished cigarette and blew the smoke idly into the airspace above his desk. His partner, Keith Darkwood, coughed foolishly from the other side of it and waved his free hand theatrically through the invading smoke. He looked up from his paperwork and waggled his biro admonishingly at Stephen.

"I'd rather just the one of us died from lung cancer, thanks all the same," he commented.

"Ah, fate's fate. It chooses you, I'm afraid," coughed Black. He stubbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray, all the same. Crowley would be in in a minute, anyway, and Newcomers were rather touchy about passive smoking. Tobacco often had a notably violent effect on them, and Black was in no mood to watch Crowley retching helplessly into the waste-bin again.

"Take Phil Evans, for example."

Darkwood laid aside his pen and scratched thoughtfully at the pathetic stubble of his chin. Yesterday morning's dawn raids had rather thrown his biological clock out of joint, and he'd overslept this morning. "Oh, what, the health freak in B division? What ever happened to him?"

"Never smoked, never drank, never did drugs," said Stephen, gazing out at the cloudy sky over the city. It hadn't quite started raining yet, but the rumbling grey mass carried a certain gloomy promise with it. "Hit by a bus whilst jogging, he was. The number thirty-seven, if memory serves. Fate chooses you."

"That's as maybe," commented Keith, and returned his attention to the paperwork that lay beneath him, in more than one sense. No computer setup ever being entirely secure, paperwork still featured heavily in the more sensitive areas of police life.

Darkwood ticked some boxes with a deft flourish and applied to a dotted line the illegible scrawl that passed as his signature. Sighing a bit, he turned to the next page.

"Morning all," said Jenny Morgan, striding through the open door of the office and nodding to the two detectives in the otherwise empty room.

"Talk of the devil," said Stephen, demonstrating one of his less irritating habits to the world. He tended to say those four very words whenever anyone entered the room, irrespective of any preceding conversation topics. Jenny grinned wearily at him, and wandered over to her desk.

"Morning Jenny," muttered Keith, momentarily brushing aside his straggly shoulder-length hair and looking up at her. "Crowley still in hospital, is he?"

"No, I couldn't bear to be away from you," said the gannaum himself, entering the office with a computer in one hand and a battered tray in the other. As he passed from desk to desk, his fellow detectives claimed their drinks in turn. White unsugared tea for Darkwood, orange juice for Jenny and - a drink that some suspected he only drank to try and confuse people - a black coffee for Black. Crowley placed the tray on his cluttered desk and plucked the penultimate cup from it; a heavily sugared white tea. A white decaffeinated coffee remained, waiting for DC Jayne Smith to arrive.

Crowley sat in his chair and sipped warily at the ice-cold contents of his beige-plastic cup. The sub-zero Newcomers didn't think highly of hot drinks. "Here," he said suddenly, sitting up straight and casting a doubtful glance at the lounging forms of Black and Darkwood. "Shouldn't you two be over at NecroTech arresting the managers?" He gave Darkwood a particularly critical stare.

The two Detective Sergeants raised their respective eyebrows and smiled exaggeratedly innocent smiles at their superior. "You haven't heard, then?" said Darkwood.

"Heard what?"

"Someone set a match to the place early this morning," explained Black. "The blokes from forensic are sifting through the rubble as we speak."

"Well, why aren't you out looking for McGeddon and Morrison?"

"We sent a couple of PCs round to their respective houses," shrugged Darkwood. "Nobody home, it would seem."

"Ever heard of a search warrant?"

Darkwood lifted a thick bundle of papers from his desk and waggled them disparagingly in the air. "Yes. That's what I'm applying for," he complained, and set to work with his biro.

"Hmm," murmured Crowley, and returned to sipping his tea. He opened up his police computer and thumbed the DNA scanner. The screen flickered into life. After a valiant search through the random clutter of his desk, he located a trailing multicoloured cable that ran to a port in the skirting board. The free end terminated in a spiky plug, which Crowley pushed carefully into the side of his computer.

"What are you up to now?" said Morgan vaguely.

"Just uploading my files and seeing what we've got on Praline and McGeddon," replied David, punching single-fingered at the grimy keyboard of his laptop and wading through the main police computer via the rainbow cable.

"Did you know McGeddon on the ship?" said Jenny warily. Crowley seemed to ignore her question, and stared distantly at his computer screen for a few long seconds.

"We'd met, yes," said David in a low voice.

Morgan nodded imperceptibly, sensing that she'd just nudged a deep and sinister patch of Crowley's personality. From what she'd heard, rather a lot of his psyche was of such a state. Over breakfast

yesterday, Darkwood had reeled out a lengthy list of conversation topics to avoid.

A tiny speaker on David's computer broke the awkward silence by bleeping cheerily. The tense atmosphere lifted in an instant, for the three humans. Crowley's concern deepened.

McGeddon, Richard. displayed one part of Crowley's monitor. Tenctonese name: Vohan. displayed another. Families: Vengeance of the Sky, Flaming Serpent.

Crowley smiled for a fleeting moment. You could lie about your Tenctonese name, you could falsify your human one, but without extensive surgery or complicated permanent makeup you couldn't possibly pretend to belong to any other families. McGeddon was either Ytris, or a close relative.

The "twin brother" theory was given the briefest of thoughts; Ytris only had the one brother, and he certainly wasn't a twin. If Crowley was sure of anything in this whole maelstrom of confusion, he was sure of that.

David bit his lip. Had he been mistaken, all those years ago? He was sure enough at the time that Ytris had died, as was everybody else. Even the finest of actors would be hard-pressed to imitate a corpse with half his torso scythed away by a blast of saltwater. Crowley had watched the Overseer breathe his last, he was sure of it.

But here he was, on the file. And that was certainly him on the hospital security camera. Not dead at all.

Crowley shook his head hopelessly. He looked up at Darkwood, who was sucking foolishly on the end of his now-spent biro in an attempt to coax it back to life. David's unregarded gaze fell back to the computer screen. He tapped a few more times at his computer's grimy keyboard, and it bleeped again, throwing up a page of data.

The detective picked up the receiver of his phone, and noticed the lack of dialling tone before it even got to his ear. He rattled the receiver-detect button up and down foolishly, being under the impression that this might help, and - when it didn't - took to clubbing the top of his desk with the silent receiver. "Phone's dead," was his considered verdict.

"No, no, it's stunned," chorused Black and Darkwood, and sniggered foolishly at each other.

"The system's being rewired," explained Jenny. "The lines'll be down all week, probably. Who are you trying to get through to?"

"Eric Praline's landlady."

"Huh?" said two voices in an out-of-synch chorus. Black would have joined in, but he was busily extricating a careless cigarette from his coffee.

"Karen Henderson," explained Crowley, grinning smugly. "Praline's been down in our morgue since last night."

★

"Hello, miss?" called Crowley, stood by the spotless desk of Vyse Street's rather cramped morgue. He and Morgan peered warily about the whitely-tiled underground chamber. A dozen or so brushed-steel drawers were set grimly in the opposite wall - one was open, and a red-headed policewoman was studying the grim contents.

"Be right with you," said Karen Henderson, not looking up. After purposefully ticking something on her clipboard, she closed the drawer with a squeaking metallic rumble and a heavy clunk of finality. Satisfied, Karen straightened up and strode across the tiled floor to the brace of detectives

"Ah, Morgan. Crowley," she said, nodding a greeting. "What can I do for you?"

"We're here to see one of your customers," explained Crowley, smiling faintly. "Eric Praline, brought in last night. Is he in, or has he popped out for a bit of breakfast?"

"Praline?" frowned Karen, shrugging off Crowley's bizarre sense of humour. "I don't think we've got a Praline." Not entirely trusting her memory, she lifted a clipboard from the desk and peered critically at it. "No," was her eventual conclusion. "There's no Praline here."

"Any Newcomers at all?" said Jenny, with a shade of desperation.

Henderson checked. "None whatsoever, I'm afraid."

"Hmm," said Crowley. "Can we borrow your computer a moment?"

"Feel free," shrugged Karen, and gestured at the empty swivel-chair. David dropped accurately into it, and tapped a few buttons on the clunky desktop computer.

"You think whoever logged the body could have made a mistake?" Jenny remarked, studying Crowley's activities on the machine.

"No," said Crowley distantly. "I was checking to see if anyone had altered the file since." His voice trailed away, and smiled crookedly to himself. A printless finger reached out and poked the power switch. The computer whined dejectedly into silence.

"Well?" said Morgan.

"Well what?"

"Did anyone alter the file?"

Crowley's smile broadened knowingly. "No, I've just remembered who logged the corpse."

★

Darkwood's brain was fitted with a sharply-toothed circular saw of metaphorical design that could cut corners faster than most people could blink. If there was a way to skirt around certain bits of paperwork or effort, Keith Darkwood would have mastered it to Olympic standard. It was, for example, rather pointless hanging around until a corpse reached the morgue before logging it - you might as well do so when it's loaded into the ambulance.

Darkwood explained this warily to DI Crowley.

"You logged the corpse at 9:54 last night?" said the Newcomer.

"Well, not as such," squirmed Darkwood. "9:34. But it takes twenty minutes to drive from Milton's to the morgue, so I wrote in the arrival time there and then." He smiled hopefully. "No harm done, eh?"

"Milton's?" said Crowley, his irises suddenly assuming a pale grey hue. "The corpse came from the Cooper's Arms, didn't it?"

"No, he was lying the alleyway next to Milton's," said Black, who had fetched himself another coffee

and was determined to make it last as long as possible. He took up a grin similar to Darkwood's. "You were there, remember?"

David looked rather bewildered. "The corpse by the chip shop was definitely ID'd as Eric Praline, then?"

"Going by the lad's wallet," shrugged Darkwood.

Crowley narrowed his eyes. The corpse in the alleyway, shot through both hearts and the stomach. The gannaum in the Cooper's Arms, shot through both hearts and the stomach. With a bit of concentration and a modicum of applied thought, Crowley wasn't long in realising that they were one and the same. Eric Praline.

David bashed a fist on the desk, and his three coworkers looked up. "Of course," said Crowley, slapping his expansive forehead with his other hand. "What a fool I've been."

"Really?" queried Darkwood.

"Praline wasn't dead when you picked him up from the alleyway; just injured. He stumbled from the ambulance at, probably, the Nightingale Road traffic lights, nipped into the Cooper's Arms for a swift pint and was then shot dead by friend murderer. Probably McGeddon, or one of his cohorts."

Jenny narrowed her eyes critically. Darkwood chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. Black sipped his coffee and wondered vaguely where he'd put his cigarettes.

"The assassin wasn't after Praline, though, he was after me; McGeddon must have realised that I'd recorded the interview on my computer, and had me followed to the pub to try and dispose of the evidence. Mistaking Praline for my fine self, the murderer kindly put a bullet through him and sprinted away with my - or, rather, Jenny's - police computer."

"But," said Morgan, "surely all that mind-wipe business was McGeddon's wiser alternative to shooting you?"

"And," observed Black, "our friend Praline had a load of bullet-holes straight through him when he was found in the alleyway, did he not? I know you blokes are rather resilient, but that's pushing it a bit."

"And, er, didn't the boys from forensic confirm that he'd been dead for three weeks?" added Darkwood, memories returning with a vague frown.

"And the hospital computer said that Praline actually discharged himself from the hospital morgue how did he do it, and where the hell is he now?" shrugged Jenny.

A rather more sinister mental image soon arrived in David's racing brain, however. The helpless cadavers in Ytris's workshop aboard the slave ship. Stabbed through both hearts by the fearful mechanical spider. Vague and terrifying ideas were forming.

"Ah..." breathed David Crowley, nodding warily. He reached for his coat, and shot a glance at the doorway to the Detective Chief Inspector's office. "Is Chesterton about yet?"

Keith shook his head. "Off on some training course for a few weeks, apparently," he explained, and continued with a note of hesitancy. "He's left you in charge, actually."

"What about Smith?" added Crowley, nodding at an empty desk.

"Probably overslept again," suggested Black.

"Right," said DI Crowley, nodding purposefully. "Morgan and Black, go and visit Praline's widow; let her know of her husband's current state. Darkwood - get those warrants and take a couple of PCs with you for a look round McGeddon's. I'll go and take a look at what's left of NecroTech."

Darkwood applied the final tick to the last sheet of paper, and slipped the bundle into a large manila envelope. Morgan and Black strode from the office.

"I'll catch you up," called Crowley, turning to face Keith and adopting a very serious expression indeed.

★

Jenny Morgan's rain-spotted blue Fiat pulled away from the charred wreckage of the NecroTech building, DS Stephen Black sat awkwardly into the passenger seat with his head resting against the ceiling. Crowley, now standing on the pavement, offered a cheery wave to the departing vehicle.

A thin drizzle fell from the solid grey clouds above the city, gently turning the pavement a darker, grimmer shade. What remained of it, at any rate. The NecroTech offices had collapsed forward after the blaze had claimed some important supporting walls, and the blackened, shattered brickwork had spilled out towards the road, smashing the pavement tiles as it went.

The fire brigade had been on the scene since just before three o'clock that morning. A lone fire engine remained, although it was in the business of packing up and leaving. Everything was in the hands of the police, now - having marked the place off-limits with a few hundred feet of stripy plastic tape, they were now sifting through the building's remains in the hope of finding some evidence.

"How's it going?" said Crowley, approaching a lone PC who stood surveying the scene. A dozen or so forensics and arson experts clambered over the heap of wreckage, pausing to examine various sections of it.

"Er, hello?" said Crowley, tapping the silent police constable on a rain-soaked shoulder.

"What?" said the officer, turning around irritably.

"I said, how's it going?" repeated Crowley.

"Piss off," scowled the police officer, and pointedly returned his attention to the crime scene. The wind changed direction, the rain became a touch heavier.

"I'm sorry," said Crowley, "is this a Purist thing, or are you just a naturally miserable bastard?" He gave a polite smile. "I like to know where I stand, that's all."

"You don't belong in this country," muttered the policeman, not turning around. "You don't even belong on this planet. Stealing our jobs, taking our money. It's not right. Now piss off, or I'll arrest you."

"You're from London, right?" said Crowley. The policeman didn't reply, and stood motionless with his back to David.

"Piss off back to London, then," continued Crowley, mocking the officer's South London accent to a point beyond accuracy. "You don't belong in Birmingham. Stealing our jobs, taking our money. It's not right."

"Right, that does it," spat the policeman, spinning round and grabbing Crowley's arm, twisting it behind his back. The Newcomer didn't resist. "You're bloody nicked, mate," he explained, seeking handcuffs.

David gave a crooked, enigmatic smile. "I see. Might I ask what for?"

"I'll think of something," muttered the cop, and waved to another policeman further along the road. "Here, John," he called. "This bastard slag just assaulted me."

The Purist strode purposefully towards his squad car, dragging an unprotesting DI Crowley along in his wake. John walked over from where he'd been standing, but his scheming smile dropped to a terrified grimace as he caught sight of the alleged assaulter.

"Bloody spongeheads, eh? Always out for a fight," cursed the Purist. He noticed John's expression, and the osmosis of doubt carried some of it to his own face. "What?" he asked.

"Er," said the second policeman weakly, gesturing at the Tenctonese prisoner, "that's, er... it's..."

"Crowley. Detective Inspector David Crowley, Vyse Street CID," beamed the gannaum in question, shaking the officer by a disheartened hand. He peered exaggeratedly at the Purist officer's shoulder badge. "PC 696," nodded Crowley, carefully jotting the number in his notepad. "Nice meeting you."

"Now then," he continued, ignoring the flabbergasted look on the Purist's face and turning instead to the policeman known as John, "perhaps you can tell me how it's going?"

★

"How long have you been working with Crowley, then?" asked Jenny, making a spirited bid to dispel the silence that mingled uneasily with the acrid scent of the cheap pine air-freshener.

Black looked up from his perusal of the car's dashboard-mounted cigarette-lighter. He'd been idly fiddling with it for a couple of minutes.

"I, er, assume this doesn't work?" he said vaguely, wagging the stone-cold widget disparagingly.

"No."

"Thought not," said Stephen, poking the thing back into its housing and shaking his head dismally. He settled back in his seat. "Four years, give or take," he added. "I joined CID in '94, after a few years on the beat. Crowley was a DS, back then. And Darkwood."

"I assume Smith wasn't with you?"

"No, no. Still pounding the streets somewhere, I think."

Morgan nodded, and drew her car to a grumbling halt behind a dozen or so rush hour victims stopped at the traffic lights. Black yawned a bit, and peered unimpressed at his reflection in the drizzle-specked wing mirror.

"Darkwood told you a bit about Crowley yesterday, didn't he?" said Black vaguely, scratching at his beard.

"Er, yes," said Morgan, perhaps exaggerating. Keith, never at his best before lunch, had merely

slurred a few vague warnings and anecdotes at her over his five o'clock cornflakes. "A bit."

"Mention the Overseer killing, did he?"

"Briefly," shrugged Jenny. The traffic lights grudgingly turned from red to green, and the rush hour rolled onward. "You were about during that, I suppose?"

Stephen nodded. "Still a DC, although I was promoted to DS while Crowley and Darkwood were suspended," he said.

Morgan's Fiat rattled to a sullen halt at the next crossroads. Black had a rather foolish theory about organised crime controlling the city's traffic lights for their own nefarious purposes, but spared his assigned partner from it.

"Darkwood was suspended as well?" said Morgan, rather taken aback.

"Oh yes, yes," said Black casually. "He was with Crowley when Andrew Christ was killed. He doesn't tend to talk about it much, though."

Morgan's expression blanked as she tried to work out what the pun was, there. Virtually all of the British Newcomers had been given foolish puns for monikers - the sub-zero lot were more or less the last in line when the names were being given out. Puns or famous names, the lot of them; Darkwood claimed that Crowley and Smith were the only English Newcomers who didn't conform to the rule, although that was only because they'd insisted their names were changed.

A slow look of realisation soon made an appearance.

Andy Christ.

"So what happened?"

Black gave an ignorant and slightly doubtful sort of shrug. "No idea. I can tell you what the police investigation turned up, though."

Morgan nodded a prompt as her car rumbled onward.

"Self-defence, with sufficient warning given. Crowley and Darkwood were picking up Christ for further enquiries - he'd been running some rather evil Newcomer narcotics thing since '94."

"Christ had one of his cohorts in the flat with him, armed with a saltwater pistol. Ford Anglia, I think his name was. As Andrew made his escape, he told Anglia to fend off our boys in blue. He unwisely chose to squirt his ammunition at Darkwood, mind. Keith did a neck-pinch on him, took the water pistol and went after Christ with it."

"Neck-pinch?" said Morgan doubtfully. Seven years ago she'd have just laughed derisively at the overall surrealism of Black's final sentence. A lot had changed.

Stephen tapped himself behind the ear, pointedly. "Jab them just there," he explained. "Knocks them unconscious. Handy thing to know, that."

"I'll remember it."

"Anyway, it turns out that Andrew had a gun as well. A good old-fashioned sharp-bits-of-lead one. He took a couple of shots at Darkwood, putting the lad in hospital for a bit, and proceeded to try and escape. Crowley pursued, grabbing the fallen water pistol. Christ turned and took aim, and Crowley barked your standard armed-police warning whilst

doing similarly. Christ fired. Crowley fired."

Black shrugged expansively. "And they both fell. Darkwood managed to call a couple of ambulances - everybody was all right in the end, except for Christ, who was lacking by about fifty per cent in the vital organs department, and had died almost immediately. Crowley had taken a bullet to the arm, and Darkwood got away with just a minor leg wound."

"They were both suspended for two months while an investigation was carried out," continued Stephen. "As I say, they were both back on duty afterwards. Christ was cremated, Anglia went to trial but got away with just a couple of years."

"I see," said Morgan. The scenery got a bit grimmer as her car entered one of the city's less pleasant areas. The rising sun had yet to catch the dark streets, here, and virtually every street-lamp had been taken out by a well-aimed brick at some point in its life. The night survived, hiding in the alleyways.

"And what's your view of it all?" said Morgan.

Black shrugged again. "I haven't got one. Crowley and Darkwood don't like to talk about it in any detail. Press them and they'll tell you what I've just said. Anglia doesn't remember anything about it. And the attempted hypnotic regressions didn't go terribly well."

"They didn't?"

"Well, Anglia still didn't remember anything, Darkwood couldn't give any clear details because - they guessed - the trauma of being shot had blanked most of it from his mind, and Crowley..." His voice trailed off.

"And Crowley?" prompted Morgan.

"He went berserk when they tried to regress him to the night in question," said Black, darkly. "Smashed the place to pieces and damn near killed the hypnotist bloke before they could snap him out of it."

Morgan registered a blend of surprise and horror.

"Never found out why, either," shrugged Stephen. "Crowley - when he'd recovered - blamed it all on some sort of mind-control experiments from his days aboard the slave ship. He said he had vague memories of Christ performing brain surgery experiments back on the ship - a couple of other Newcomers backed him up on that," Black shrugged. "Seems a bit odd, anyway," he added, his tone of voice vaguely unconvinced.

"Hmm. You don't suspect conspiracy, at all?" said Morgan warily. Her Fiat ran obliviously through a set of long-dead traffic lights. Black grinned.

"I always suspect conspiracy."

★

Kathump. Kathump. The number thirty-seven bus, on its way to the suburbs, juddered its way over something large and solid halfway along Court Lane. It swerved to the left and drew to a noisy and unscheduled halt outside the library.

Darkwood looked up from his magazine - sporting an amusingly-captioned cover picture of Britain's only Newcomer member of parliament - and offered a distracted frown to the person sat next to him.

"Excuse me a moment," he said, pushing his way out to the aisle. Ignoring the baffled mutterings of his fellow passengers, he strode to the front of the vehicle and strode out of the door in pursuit of the driver.

"Police," explained Darkwood, deftly flipping his wallet open to display his identification card, not flicking it out into the gutter by only the merest of chances. "What happened?"

"There was nothing I could have done," said the bus driver distantly, shaking his head slightly. He leaned absently against the side of the bus and tried to pull himself together. "He just ran out in front of me. Straight under the wheels. Didn't stand a chance."

DS Darkwood crouched down urgently and squinted beneath the bus. An unfortunate Tenc-tonese was sprawled under the oily workings of the vehicle, understandably groaning and croaking a lot. No blood, however. And a vaguely familiar face.

"Hmm," commented Keith. He waved an arm at the driver, and folded his magazine into a coat pocket. "Give me a hand, here."

Darkwood lowered himself further onto the damp, unpleasant tarmac and stretched an arm in the victim's direction. "Grab hold," he advised, and followed up with a badly pronounced Tenc-tonese attempt at the sentence. "Er, kat dloh."

The injured gannaum grasped Darkwood's questing hand for the briefest of moments, but apparently changed his mind and swatted it away. To Keith's general incredulity, the jaywalker crawled purposefully in the opposite direction, rising awkwardly to his feet as he emerged from under the bus. There was a screech of brakes and an annoyed blast of car horn as he staggered into the path of the traffic.

Darkwood sprinted around the side of the bus just in time to see the tire-marked Tenc-tonese hobbling away down the road, slowly stumbling into a sprint.

"Blast," said Keith vaguely, and narrowed his eyes at the escaping Newcomer. "Er." If he'd have had a car, he'd have jumped into it and given chase. If he'd have been as fast as a sprinting Newcomer - which no humans were, not even the best of athletes - he might have given chase. He sighed. When in doubt, bluff.

"Armed police, freeze!" shouted Keith. He held his right hand out in a vague gun-shape, for theatrical effect.

The escaping Tenc-tonese ignored him and continued his sprint along the deserted road, before ducking away along a side-street. Darkwood cursed expertly.

"Keith?" queried a familiarly accented voice behind him. The Detective Sergeant span around warily. The car that had stopped beside the bus was being driven by none less than DC Jayne Smith, on her way to the station.

She'd overslept, much as had been expected. Whilst Darkwood often had a lie-in and blamed his lateness on the city's hellish traffic jams, Smith's extra hours in the arms of Morpheus were always betrayed by a noticeable paleness of her cranial spots.

With an uncharacteristic display of energy and determination, Darkwood clambered into the passenger seat of Smith's Metro, muttering greetings to the driver. Smith didn't inspire a lot of confidence in her current state - oversleeping always left Newcomers feeling vaguely disorientated and confused - but lacking the licence, skill and inclination to drive, Darkwood decided against commandeering the vehicle.

"Ashley Street," he suggested, pointing a finger in such a direction. The blood-red Metro swerved lazily around the diagonally-parked bus and drove onward with the nearest it was ever likely to get to valiant purpose.

★

"How can anyone live in a place like this?" said Black, a distasteful look on his face. He nodded variously at the piles of litter and the colourful but depressing graffiti, and stepped onto the next turn of the grimy concrete stairway.

Greenwood House, a council flat-block. A hundred rather squalid and uninspiring apartments, home to some two-hundred Newcomers of similar aspect. Birmingham City Council thought it'd be a good idea to put all the Tenctonese flats in the same building. The local Purists voiced their appreciation of this scheme by cheerfully setting fire to the place every couple of months.

"Gruza House, the locals call it," sighed Jenny, glancing down over her shoulder, from her vantage-point on the stairs above him. Black looked baffled.

"That was the name of the Tenctonese slave ship," explained Morgan, and shrugged hopelessly. "One of the names, anyway. They say the comparisons are numerous, although this is really the height of luxury compared to the conditions aboard the ship. Says a lot, doesn't it?"

Black nodded thoughtfully, saving his breath for the ascent.

Across the plaza, the identical stories of Redforest House cast a cruel shadow over its neighbour. Redforest was an entirely human-populated flat-block, and enjoyed something of an ongoing battle with Greenwood. It had thankfully settled down a bit in recent months - back in '96 there'd been an all-out war between the flats, with heavy casualties to both sides. An increased police presence in recent months had helped quell things a bit, although occasional outbreaks of violence still cropped up every so often.

"Which floor are we after?" gasped Black, clutching at a rusting banister rail and tugging away several strata of brittle nastily-hued paint.

"The ninth."

Black squinted at the sign on the nearby wall. Once bearing a neatly-stencilled number, it had long since been spray-painted into submission by the locals. Atop the varied colours was a black and angular symbol that wouldn't have looked out of place on a video remote-control.

"That had better be a nine," said Stephen. The lift was out of order, and he'd lost count of how many flights of stairs he'd staggered up.

Morgan nodded, and pushed open the battered door that led out to the windswept balcony corridor.

DS Black staggered out of the stairwell in her wake, a few shreds of litter dancing after him as the breeze caught them.

"Flat ninety-eight," explained Morgan, striding purposefully along the concrete walkway, glancing at the door numbers.

"Squiggle-squiggle?" sighed Black.

"Something like," nodded Jenny. "Ah, here we are."

Stephen leaned on the rusted steel balcony fence and fished a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. Far below, a car pulled up in desolate scrub-land of concrete and mud between the flat-blocks. The chill wind idly rolled a few empty carrier bags across the plaza, like tumbleweeds across the main street of a ghost town in any half-respectable Western. A darkly-haired human strode groggily into Redforest house.

There was a click from flat ninety-eight's front door.

"Mrs. Praline?" said Jenny.

"Yes?" came the reply. DS Black turned around, having let his unlit cigarette spiral nine floors earthward, and smiled weakly. He fished an ID card from his pocket and waggled it purposefully.

"Police," said Stephen. "Mind if we come in?"

"No. Not at all, not at all," said Mrs. Praline, gesturing accordingly to Morgan and Black. The police officers nodded their thanks and entered apartment ninety-eight.

Rachel Praline was an attractive but somewhat haggard-looking Newcomer somewhere in her thirties, and Morgan guessed - correctly - that she'd been Eric's partner aboard the ship. She smiled politely as she ushered the detectives through her flat.

The Pralines' living room was a cramped and badly-lit affair; sunlight bounced off of the outside of the boarded-up window facing the walkway, a dead bulb dangled wretchedly from the ceiling as if it had been hanged, and the only illumination was from the dozen or so candles scattered over various flat surfaces.

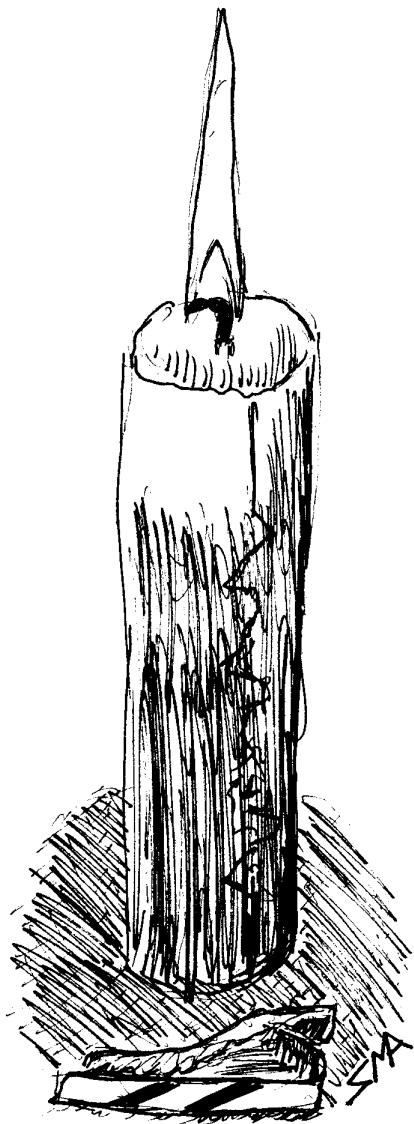
The faint scent of alien incense hung in the still air, and a deep sense of peace and reverence hit Morgan as she and her assigned partner strode into the room. Far beyond words, she could only describe it as the sort of feeling you get when you walk into a cathedral.

Black, ever the pagan, just coughed and winced a bit, flapping his hands foolishly through the pall of thin smoke. Having now realised that he'd left his cigarette lighter back at the office, he had just enough respect not to light up from one of the candles. Very little more, though.

"Mrs. Praline, I think you should sit down," said Jenny softly. Nodding slightly, Rachel Praline lowered herself onto the spotless sofa and looked expectantly up at Morgan.

"It's about your husband. I'm afraid we have some bad news," continued Jenny. "We think he may have been involved in an accident." Her delicate voice faltered momentarily. Inviting Mrs. Praline to identify the corpse down at the morgue wasn't really an option.

"My husband is dead," said Rachel in a level monotone. She was staring intently at a guttering candle over the bricked-up fire place, and for the first time Jenny noticed a photo of Eric propped up next to it, with a dull purple rock on its other side. Glancing briefly about the room, Morgan could see that each candle had some trinket next to it - a watch, a tie pin, a pen. Minor possessions of the late Eric Praline, most likely.



Jenny gave a sharp intake of breath.

The Zelian clayocabta ritual. Literally meaning "beacons of the soul", the candles and the personal possessions were believed to aid the deceased's path to the afterlife. The slow-burning candles were left burning continuously for thirty Earth days, being replaced every morning at sunrise. So long at least one candle burned all the while, the soul would reach the afterlife safely.

Rachel Praline seemed to sense Morgan's discomfort. "It is all right," she said, smiling weakly. "You are not disturbing anything by being here." Jenny gave a reverential nod.

"Eric was shot three weeks ago," continued Rachel, fishing a handkerchief from the pocket of her blouse. She smiled apologetically and dabbed at her eyes. "Sorry."

"Take your time," said Jenny, patting the linnaum's arm.

"He was... shot last month," said Mrs. Praline, in a quiet voice. "He was mugged, and left for dead." Without warning, there was a heavy, dull thump against the haphazard panels of chipboard that covered the window. Jenny glanced up, Black reached warily inside his jacket for a gun that wasn't there. Rachel looked at the blank sheets of wood with horror in her eyes.

The thump came again, with greater force. A rusting nail jerked out from the corner of a board, tumbling through the air and tinkling to a sinister halt on a glass-topped table.

"It's him..." mouthed Rachel silently, rocking back and forth gently on the sofa.

"Armed police, freeze!" called Black, taking aim at the blank chipboard with a couple of empty fingers. He motioned for Jenny to leave via the front door and confront the intruders from there. Purists, no doubt.

Another thump. The corner of one wooden sheet pulled itself free of its fastenings and lolled inward. Thin sunlight and a strong breeze entered the room through the crack, and a pallid grey hand wedged itself awkwardly into the gap. Jenny paused in her departure, and raised a hand to her radio, preparing to call for backup if it was required.

"Police!" barked Stephen again. His gaze wavered nervously to and fro, and he narrowed his eyes. "Hold hard or I fire!" he bluffed.

The hand tugged at the creaking board and snapped it easily in two, sending a cloud of sawdust through the now swirling air. Low muttering could be heard from outside.

"It's him, he's back!" whispered Rachel, her voice carrying far more horror than any voice should.

"I'm serious!" called DS Black. He turned his head to Rachel, and threw her a quizzical glance.

A thin but muscular grey arm tore another hole from the boarded-up window. The jagged piece of chipboard span across the room, scything a flickering candle from atop a table.

"It's him!" sobbed Rachel urgently, gesturing weakly at the window. "It's Eric!"

★

The car park directly opposite the smoking remnants of NecroTech Cryogenics had been filling up for the past twenty minutes or so, and a dozen or so soaked and irritated police constables were explaining the situation to the workers as they emerged warily from their cars.

Crowley stood on the slippery pavement, glancing tensely up and down Smith Street. He strongly doubted that either Ytris or Morrison would turn up for work this morning, but kept a nervous eye out all the same.

There was a sudden flurry of activity at the ruined building. The waiting ambulance workers sprinted purposefully towards the waving forensic officer, but a few brief shouts halted them. The uncovered body was dead.

Crowley precariously tiptoed over the rubble to join the group of police officers clustered around the corpse. It was little more than a blackened skeleton,

smashed into numerous pieces by the brutal rain of masonry.

"Human or Tenctonese?" queried Crowley, not being entirely up to speed on human skeletal structure.

A couple of forensic officers lifted the shattered remnants of a desk from nearby, revealing a bleakly grinning skull. The distended cranium could only belong to a Newcomer. Crowley's hearts froze momentarily, and he stared at the charred, scattered skeleton, surrounded by the shattered remnants of McGeddon's hi-fi and desk. Could it be?

"Can we DNA-scan the remains?" said David anxiously.

The head forensic shrugged. "If there's any bone marrow left, we might be in with a chance. Back to the lab for further tests, it'll have to be."

"No word from the security and cleaning companies, I suppose?"

"NecroTech employ their own janitor and security guards, apparently," said a constable. "We haven't been able to contact either of the managers yet, so we can't get in touch with them."

Crowley sighed and nodded. He dropped to his knees and swirled his fingers in the sodden ash. If there had been a charred mop or a blackened pistol nearby, things would have been made slightly easier.

His questing digits nudged against something hard and metallic buried in the ash. With a faint glimmer of uncharacteristic optimism, he dug it out and wiped the black sludge from it with the sleeve of his trenchcoat.

It was a brooch, of Tenctonese design. A golden circle within a silver triangle. Crowley looked at it thoughtfully, flipping it slowly through his fingers. It gleamed wetly in the dawn light, and stirred nagging thoughts in the depths of David's mind. He gazed back down at the cremated corpse, then back at the brooch.

Ytris had worn it on the ship. With an unconvinced shrug and a pessimistic sigh, Crowley slipped it into his pocket. It proved nothing, of course Ytris could quite feasibly have left it in a desk drawer or planted it on a corpse to confuse matters. Neither would have surprised Crowley.

"Sir!" called a police officer, waving for Crowley to join him. He was standing on the far side of the rubble, against a charred but intact brick wall at the back of the wreckage. The fire department had been on the scene fairly quickly, before the blaze had been able to claim the entire building.

A heavy, fire-scorched steel door was set in the base of the wall, and a couple of officers were struggling to force it open. Crowley, having traversed the debris, wrenched open the door with little difficulty, and peered within. Dark and smoky though it was, he could see every detail.

Crowley gave a sharp intake of breath, and coughed a bit as his lungs voiced their opinions of the smoke.

The room was, but for the badly-plastered walls, a precise copy of Ytris's laboratory aboard the slave ship. A dozen or so Tenctonese corpses ignored the Newcomer detective as he wandered from bed to bed examining them. Some had been stabbed

through the hearts, some hadn't. Crowley bit his lip thoughtfully, and his sweeping gaze fell upon something not entirely unexpected.

Hanging from the ceiling was the evil-looking mechanical device. Its eight legs pointed limply at the floor, and numerous points of hell-red light glowed on and off in the smoky darkness.

Crowley warily approached the thing, half-expecting it to leap into life, and carefully examined its spiked pincers. Both were smeared with pinkish blood. As he leaned closer, he caught a whiff of concentrated Holy Gas. There was a brief ringing sensation in his ears, and he backed away warily.

Aboard the ship, there had been rumours about what Ytris had been doing with the cadavers he took to his lab. Mixed as they were with the contorted remnants of Tenctonese mythology, Crowley hadn't believed a word of them. In light of recent events, though, it seemed almost feasible.

The slaves had spoken of the eveckwa.

The undead.

"Have we found any actual cryogenic equipment amongst the wreckage?" called Crowley, turning back to the dim rectangle of light in the wall behind him.

"None yet," came the reply. "The actual cryogenic engineers don't seem to have turned up for work yet, mind, so we can't be sure."

"Give me a shout when they do," said Crowley, leaving the laboratory and returning to the drizzle. "If they do," he added, darkly.

The on-duty officers shrugged, and left the matter to CID. David glanced at his wristwatch, reached for his police radio. He tinkered carefully with it for a few moments, then tapped at its transmission button.

"Crowley to Darkwood," he said. There was a silent pause of several seconds in length, before Keith's voice crackled from the speaker. "Mmm-hmm?"

"Morning. Have you, er, dealt with McGeddon?" asked Crowley. His voice was probably a bit more of a whisper than it might have been.

"Ah," replied Darkwood. The low engine noises in the background grumbled slowly to silence. "No. Not as such. We've had a development."

"You've let him get away?" hissed Crowley angrily, turning away from the assembled police officers. His irises swirled through dark and frightening corners of the spectrum, and he scowled evilly at his radio.

Always the realist, Crowley was assuming the discarded badge was a red herring. Ytris was probably even now sat at home reading the morning paper over breakfast. "I gave you strict instructions, you bastard. You know what's at stake, here!"

"Yes, yes," replied Darkwood. He laughed dismissively at somebody on the other end of the line. "Smith's with me," he said, pointedly. "I bumped into her, and could hardly continue with it."

Crowley was incredulous. "Bumped into her?" he sneered.

"A bus ran into - over - someone on Court Lane, and I think it might have been our friend Praline. Smith said she'd go after him, and I said I'd back her

up. Standard procedure with potentially dangerous criminals. We're currently chasing our man into..." There was a pause as Darkwood squinted at the graffiti-ruined lettering of a nearby sign. "Greenwood House. He's broken into a ninth-floor apartment."

"And what are you planning to do about Ytris?" He had to still be alive. He wouldn't be stupid enough to die in an office fire. Not Ytris. "Don't you realise how important this is? I can hardly send anyone else, can I? I can't get him arrested."

"Can't you make your way over there, then?" said Keith warily.

"What, get a lift in a squad car?" jeered Crowley absently. "Nice thinking, Keith. I'll have to get back to the station and get a bus, or something. Hell. All your bloody fault, as ever."

With that, David fiddled about with his radio and broke the connection. A few button presses later, he was in contact with Jenny Morgan.

"Crowley to Morgan," he said, striding toward the pavement. The radio beeped to signify that Morgan had pressed her receive button.

"Jenny. Morning," said Crowley vaguely. "Any chance of a lift back to the station?"

"Er, well..."

★

Eric Praline was standing in the centre of his living room, silhouetted dramatically against the sunrise through the glassless, ragged-edged window behind him. The candles supposedly guiding his soul were dying in the cold breeze that swept cruelly in after him.

Eric looked just as cadaverous as he had when Jim Milton discovered him in the alleyway last night. His flesh was bloodless, of a uniformly grim, pale shade, and the skin was stretched a little over his now near-spotless skull.

Detective Sergeant Black was currently crouched behind a dusty armchair, gazing incredulously at Eric Praline. Already he had sustained three gunshot wounds one to each heart, another to the stomach. From his viewpoint, Stephen could see sunlight through the latter wound. He shuddered.

Rachel Praline remained motionless on the sofa, trembling fearfully and staring into the eyes of her husband. Eric was slowly advancing on her, his arms open and a thin, feeble smile on his decaying lips.

Morgan had backed into the hallway, and was whispering urgently into her radio. "Praline's here," she was saying. "We're at his flat."

"Where's this, again?"

"Greenwood House," she said. "Number ninety-eight."

"Ah. That figures. What's he doing?" asked Crowley.

"Katra," said Eric, his voice a dry croak. In the corner of a fading eye, a pure-water tear formed and slalomed down his cadaverous visage. "Katra, I'm sorry."

Overcome by emotion, Rachel rose to her feet and, sobbing, wrapped her arms around Eric's frail torso. With a slow, slightly erratic movement, he patted the back of her neatly-spotted head with a dead hand.

Black lowered his gun cautiously, and relaxed a little. Morgan quietly explained the situation to her radio.

"What's happening, Torrrpa?" said Rachel. "You..." She gestured weakly at the candles, half a dozen of which were bravely surviving the freezing wind. "You died."

Eric closed his eyes and nodded. The memory of his death remained forever at the front of his mind, burned into the very synapses of his brain. The two human muggers. Although "muggers" was probably too flattering a job description for them; murdering corpse looters would have been more accurate. Eric had been taking a shortcut home that fateful Friday night, and the twosome had gunned him down with neither warning nor concern. As he lay there in a widening pool of his own blood, they took the opportunity to empty his wallet, before sprinting away into the anonymity of the night. Eric had lost consciousness some five minutes later, as far as he could remember.

And then, what seemed like the morning after, he'd woken up with a hideous mechanical spider clamped to his chest and two murderous blades piercing his hearts. Fear. Pain. Life.

And a Kleezantsun' standing over him, laughing triumphantly.

★

Darkwood peered groggily at the vandalised sign bolted the wall. "That had better be a nine," he said, under what he could get back of his breath.

"It's a six," said Smith. "Don't tell me your optimism's overcome your ability to count flights of stairs?"

"I passed out two floors back, this is all just reflex action," said Darkwood, with an expansive, hopeless shrug.

"Ah."

"Onwards and upwards, then," he muttered, taking the next turn of the stairs with weary persistence.

★

"For a moment I thought I was back on the ship," said Eric. He sipped at a recently-poured glass of sour milk, and stared grimly at the murky carpet of his living room. "The light, the smell, the Kleezantsun'," he said, spitting out the final word with all the contempt it deserved.

"When was this?" whispered Rachel.

Eric rubbed at his face with a colourless hand. His memories of the past twenty-four hours were blurring closer and closer together as time passed. "Yesterday morning, I think," he said. "But I'm dying, Katra, I'm dying. I had to see you before I died again."

"Damn. Blast. Hellfire," complained Black under his breath, kneeling on something sharp as he tried to get into a more comfortable hiding position. "Bugger," he added.

Eric looked up groggily, peering at the armchair which Stephen was hiding behind.

"It's all right, odrey," explained Rachel. "He's with the police. He's here to help you."

Black's nervous face emerged from behind the chair like a rising sun with a thin beard and an unlit cigarette. Smiling hopefully all the while, carefully sat himself in what was previously serving as his cover.

"My, er, colleague, Jenny Morgan, is also here to help you," he explained, gesturing weakly at the woman in the hallway. With a nervous smile and a display of gunless hands, Jenny entered the living room and took a seat in the other armchair.

"You're here to arrest me?" said Eric, without surprise or concern. "I didn't mean to cause any damage," he said earnestly. "I just wasn't thinking straight."

Black shot Morgan a mystified glance. "It's all right," he hazarded. "It's not a problem. We're just visiting your wife."

"Did they put the fire out, in the end?" asked Eric in a quiet, concerned voice. "I didn't think it'd spread that quickly. I... I don't know what I was thinking. The Gas..."

He buried his head in his hands.

"The Holy Gas?" said Rachel. Eric Praline nodded wretchedly.

"It's like I've been breathing it all day, but I can't smell it," he said, and laughed hollowly. "I don't even need to breathe anymore. I can't. My lungs don't work." He tapped absently at his ribcage, home to two dusty lungs and a brace of silent hearts.

"The Kleezantsun' have been controlling you, Torrrpa?" said Rachel, in a horrified tone of voice. Eric gave another bleak laugh and shook his head.

"One of them tried to. At least that's what I assume his plan was," shrugged Eric. "Whether the dosage was wrong, I can't say. When I awoke on that operating table, though, I felt more alive than ever."

"This was in a building on Smith Street?" queried Jenny Morgan, having heard Crowley's theory of events.

The eveckwa nodded. "An office block, I think. I was being held in some sort of medical laboratory in their basement." The memories caused him to wince momentarily. "A lot of it seemed to be from the ship. The lights, the infirmary beds, the medical equipment..."

Eric Praline rose crookedly from the sofa and took to pacing the floor distractedly. He sloshed the milk about in his glass, and drained half of it in a single swig.

"It wasn't hard for me to escape; as I said, it felt like I'd been given a new lease of life. The Overseer tried vainly to stop me, but I just wrenched open the door and ran out of the building onto the street." Eric laughed at the simplicity of it all. "I stole a van, and just drove aimlessly about town for an hour or so. The Kleezantsun' chased after me to begin with, but I soon lost him in the traffic."

As Eric stepped past the coffee-table, an eddying breeze caught the candle positioned in its centre, and the flame guttered to nothing.

"You drove to the chip shop on the High Street?" guessed Black.

Eric winced as the memory hit him again, and nodded. "It was all I could remember. Everything else about my life was a blank. I thought if I re-

turned to the alleyway I might be able to find my wallet again; find out where I lived, who I was." He shrugged. "I parked the van outside, and went into the alley."

He swallowed the last of his drink.

"And did you find anything?" said Black.

"My wallet, yes," said Eric. "And a sudden headful of memories. It was overwhelming - the emotion hit me like a brick to the back of the head. I stumbled into the litter-bins and passed out."

"And presumably even the finest of forensics wouldn't be able to tell the difference between an unconscious undead and a corpse," said Morgan darkly, turning to her partner.

"Not dead but sleeping," said Black.

"Precisely."

★

"Leesk, leesk, kak ock key zoo?" said a voice. Darkwood didn't even bother trying to translate it. Heavily sarcastic politeness sounded more or less the same in any language.

The two detectives froze momentarily on the stairs between the eighth and ninth floors, then turned around slowly. Leaning arrogantly in the doorless doorway they'd just passed was a burly T-shirt-clad Tenctonese, eyeing the pair of them with obvious distaste. He'd been awarded the name "Brian Damage" whilst in quarantine, for one reason or another.

"E nemas nas Tenctonets byndy?" he sneered, idly stepping out into the stairwell. He adopted an evil, lopsided smile. "Won etwes."

"What's he saying, what's he saying?" hissed Darkwood half-turning to face Smith. He had a very nasty feeling about all this, and glanced fearfully at the surly Newcomer. Brian responded by spitting a slimy nugget of chewing gum onto the step beneath Smith. At least, Keith hoped it was chewing gum.

"He thinks," said Jayne, wondering how to put this. "He thinks we're together. And he doesn't seem to like the idea particularly."

"But we..." began Keith. He grinned mirthlessly. "Ah. I see."

"We're police. Key-ip mileetsya," he explained, using one of the few Tenctonese sentences he'd been taught to pronounce properly. The Newcomer sneered a bit. Keith fumbled around in his pockets for his police ID, pulling it out in an impressive shower of toffee wrappers and loose change. The coins bounced and span their merry way down the grimy staircase, and Darkwood grinned feebly.

"Mileetsya," he repeated, gesturing at the card, the hologram of which sported a similarly anxious smile. "See?"

Brian slipped a muscular hand into the inside of his jacket. Inside Darkwood's brain, the "bad feeling about this" dial span urgently into the red zone. It didn't have far to go; to Keith Darkwood, the difference between a violent armed Newcomer and a violent unarmed Newcomer was - at this sort of range, and with Darkwood lacking any form of defence - largely academic.

"We're just police, called to a burglary on the ninth floor," said Smith urgently, and laughed. Darkwood narrowed his eyes. "Vot tash N'ad kay each

eckwa tew e melsell sash eek tees?" Jayne added, smiling.

"Kwen," said Brian. And pulled out a knife. A nice, big, sharp kitchen number, stained with blood. It glinted terrifyingly in the murky dawn light. Darkwood shuddered, vividly imagining how it would feel to have the blade plunged through him. He knew the blood on the metal was probably only from Brian's breakfast, but that didn't really do a lot for his morale. A sibilant four letter swearword slipped out from under his breath.

"Don't do anything stupid," advised Darkwood, his eyes fixed on the blade's tip like an imminent roadkill staring out a juggernaut. "Stabbing police officers is generally frowned upon in legal circles. Don't make your situation any worse. Drop the knife." He tried to look bold and valiant.

Keith Darkwood then did something very, very stupid. He would shortly find himself sitting in a pool of his own blood, silently cursing and muttering how very, very stupid he'd been.

He pretended he had a gun.

It was a common trick of his, this. Reach purposefully into your inside pocket with a bold and valiant look on your face, and friend criminal, if he or she wasn't entirely up to speed with the British police's firearm regulations, would assume the worst and cross out "violence" from their list of options. It was usually worth a try. It was, however, not a plan to be recommended when dealing with armed felons, and Darkwood was about learn to his disadvantage - not one to be carried out against unstable human-hating Newcomers with sharp knives and good throwing arms.

The blade made a nice gash in the sleeve of his jacket, and clattered onto the staircase behind him. Darkwood stared at Brian with a distant wide-eyed incredulity for several seconds, not fully taking things in. The Newcomer's right arm had merely flipped through ninety degrees with a deceptively lazy movement, and the knife had vanished from his fingers.

Darkwood's nervous system did its work. His right hand suddenly clamped the top his left arm, and he groaned terribly. Darkwood swayed gently for a moment or two, before sitting down heavily on the concrete steps. Blood welled through his fingers.

Jayne, who had been watching all this with increasing horror, suddenly looked back at Brian. Or, as was now the case, a large, empty patch of Brian-shaped air. And some receding, panicked footsteps making their hurried way down the staircase.

"Go on," gasped Darkwood, speaking through gritted teeth. If you'd have told him earlier this morning that he'd be going through a hopelessly dramatic leave-me-here-to-die routine before lunch, he'd have spluttered a laugh into his tea and thrown sarcastic apothegms at you.

"Get the bastard," he advised. Gory redness welled between his clasped fingers, and he fumbled vaguely for his radio with his left hand. The limb failed to respond to his requests. "And an ambulance," he added.

Jayne grimaced bleakly for a second, before giving Darkwood an understanding nod and bounding

away down the staircase in pursuit of Brian Damage.

Her footsteps slowly escaped the realms of Darkwood's hearing. A radio in a nearby flat tinnily sang the closing verse of "Eech Ka Marcus", the latest cover song from Touss la Duga. But for that and the faint murmuring of the gathering wind, the world was silent.

Darkwood bled a bit, and groaned. On the step beside him, the blade of the kitchen knife was wet with his own blood, glistening unpleasantly in the murky sunlight.

"Well, it looks like my horoscope was probably wrong this morning, then," he said to nobody in particular, and tried vaguely to remember if this sort of thing was covered in his first-aid training.

★

Crowley watched with narrowed eyes as a burly figure sprinted purposefully past a sixth-floor window of Greenwood House's nearest stairwell. A few seconds ago he'd passed the seventh floor, looking similarly anxious. Crowley leaned thoughtfully on the side of the squad car, parked at a careless angle in the bleak wasteland between the flat-blocks.

"667 to all units," said his radio. "Am in pursuit of a Newcomer male leaving the Greenwood tower block. Has already attacked an officer. Assistance required."

David registered surprise, and tapped idly at the control switches. "Crowley here. No problem," he said, and launched himself lazily into an upright position.

"I'll check the break-in, shall I?" said PC Geoff Carnadine, jerking a thumb at the looming concrete nightmare of Redforest House. A ninth-floor resident had called in to report a burglary in process, and Crowley, eager to pay Praline a visit, had hitched a lift in the assigned squad car. He span idly on his heel as he strode across the mud, and nodded briskly to Geoff before turning around again.

The bulky silhouette of Brian Damage flitted across the dust-opaques window of the fourth floor. Not far behind him, Crowley could see Smith in determined pursuit.

As he slowly approached the only exit from the stairwell tower, David's eyes took in the scattering of rubble that was heaped untidily against the stained concrete wall. A rusting length of steel pipe took his interest, and with a grunt of effort he tugged it free from the pile of shattered brickwork. It had a large and unpleasant-looking nail through the end of it. Crowley grinned evilly, and made a few experimental swishes with it through the murky dawn air.

The footsteps were louder. Second floor, David guessed. He wandered off of the blank concrete path, and stood by the side of the door, hefting the metal pipe onto his shoulder.

First floor.

Crowley's fingers tightened about his makeshift club, and he tilted his head slightly.

Ground floor. The acoustics of the footsteps altered slightly as they hit the solid concrete.

DI David Crowley counted absently under his breath for a few seconds, idly examining his fingernails, and slammed the fire door.

Nine floors up, two humans and a Newcomer spoke with the dead.

"The next thing I knew I was alive, awake and in an ambulance," said the eveckwa. "In a body bag. Took a while to get out of that one, but I managed it eventually. When the ambulance drew to a halt at some traffic lights, I just opened the rear door and climbed out."

"And went into the Cooper's Arms?" said Black, nervously chewing the filter of an unlit cigarette.

"A pub of some description, yes," continued Eric. "Now that I had my wallet, I knew who I was, where I lived and –" he took Rachel's hand in his own, and squeezed it tightly, "–who my wife was, I had to organise my thoughts, plan my actions. I'd realised that I'd been out for three weeks - did my wife think I was dead? Missing? I just sat there with a pint, working out how I should go about getting back in touch. Another Newcomer came and sat at my table - when he went to the bar, a human emerged from the toilets with a pistol."

"He shot you?" said Rachel, her expression a wavering mix of horror and concern.

A momentary look of blankness passed across Eric's face. "No," he said. "No, he injected me with something, and took the briefcase that the gannaum had left on the table. I lost consciousness almost immediately." Eric gave a lengthy sigh. "Andarko knows what happened after that."

"He could have shot you afterwards," shrugged Stephen, idly glancing over Praline's skull for bullet holes. "Who knows?"

"I think the injection was meant to kill me," said Eric. He gave a deep and unhealthy-sounding sigh. "I've been slowly dying ever since. I can feel my mind slipping gradually away from me." Even for a three-week old corpse, Eric didn't look particularly well. His spots had faded to almost nothing since Milton found him in the alleyway last night, and his face had become more drawn and pallid as the day progressed.

"We can help you, Eric," said Morgan's radio. Crowley had tuned himself back into her frequency and was leaning against the wall outside, listening in on the conversation. A bloody-nosed Brian Damage struggled half-heartedly to escape from the drain-pipe he'd been handcuffed to. Crowley waggled his metal pipe threateningly.

"A Newcomer ambulance is on its way for you," continued Crowley. "When we've got Morrison in custody, we should be able to find out if the reanimation..."

Crowley's words and the beginnings of a nagging thought were cut short by a gunshot from the direction of Redforest House. In the still morning air, his aural systems pinpointed the noise, and his eyes swung up to the upper echelons of the building.

In flat ninety-three of Redforest House, PC Geoff Carnadine slumped painfully to the floor, leaving a nasty crimson streak on the wallpaper and adding an exciting splash of colour to a Lowry print. A few feet further down the hallway, the owner of the flat lay in a separate pool of her own blood.

David Morrison pushed shut the front door and walked gingerly to the open rear window of ninety-

three Redforest House. He lifted a rifle from the sofa.

★

"Crowley to Carnadine," said the DI for the third time, still getting nothing but static from his radio. The gunshot meant one of two things, and all the evidence was pointing with increasing urgency to the anti-police conclusion.

Crowley damned and blasted, and turned to face the looming angular bulk of the human-populated flat block. Two-hundred inhabitants, virtually all of them Purists. And, as was often wretchedly observed, all of them armed, from a Tenctonese perspective. A group of precociously yobbish under-tens were sat on the stairs to the building, squirting saline water pistols at nothing in particular. Raised on vastly xenophobic video games and cartoons, the below-average-intelligence under-tens of the modern age contributed alarmingly to the Newcomer assault statistics.

David glanced into the rear seat of the squad car. Carnadine's police cap sat on the grubby fake-leather upholstery, and Crowley contemplated it. A helmet would probably have fitted slightly better, but the cap should hide his species well enough, provided that nobody looked too closely. Perhaps.

Although no great friends of the police, the Red-foresters' hatred of the boys in blue was probably marginally less than their hostility towards Newcomers. Plain-clothes Crowley slipped the headgear over his jaggedly-striped cranium, and, lacking Carnadine's keys, performed a convincing "locking the driver's door" mime for the benefit of any casual car thieves who might have been watching.

The kids looked up as David strode towards the flat-block. Crowley met their gaze and continued to walk forward. This was ridiculous, and a couple of the older youths knew this perfectly well. Although the gun laws were still fairly harsh in England, no real restrictions had been levied in the field of water pistols. The more militant Purist groups often went a-shooting with the latest high-powered kiddies water guns, but the police were powerless until a Newcomer was actually injured by them. If they tried to arrest them before the shootings began, they'd find a hopeless lack of salt in the water - it just took a couple of salt-cubes prior to the assault for the twee, garish kiddies' toy to become a brutal murder weapon.

And, of course, it was near impossible to crack down on every sort of salt-water projectile - Jim Milton had more than once seen Purists emptying salt cellars into their drinks and flinging the concoctions in the faces of Newcomers. A good enough motive to switch the salt and sugar at that fish-and-chip shop.

The children warily dispersed as Crowley began to climb the steps. He strode through the bleak lobby, and thumbed the loosely-fitted lift call button. The Fates being on David's side for once, the lift opened after a couple of seconds, bringing with it the unpleasant odour of all flat-block lifts.

Wincing vaguely, Crowley strode into the filthy steel box and stabbed a digit at the required floor button. The lift groaned into life and began its rumbling ascent to the upper echelons of the flat-block.

★

Black peered cautiously around the side of the window frame. His gaze swept to and fro along the many plaza-facing windows of Redforest House. The rising sun was obligingly bouncing its light off of the glass directly into Stephen's eyes, preventing him from getting a good view of the interiors. Behind the now-closed window of flat ninety-three, David Morrison stood flat against the wall and stared manically at nothing.

"See anything?" said Morgan.

"Nope," replied Black. "Not of any note. We'll leave it to Crowley. He tends to enjoy that sort of thing."

Across the plaza, Morrison glanced out at the Praline residence. He watched the crop-haired police detective collapse into the armchair, and the window of Redforest ninety-three was pushed open again.

The barrel of the rifle rested neatly on the badly-painted windowsill, and David Morrison took careful aim. His target was sat in plain view on the sofa. Morrison's finger hovered over the laser sight button. This had to be precisely carried out if it was going to work at all, McGeddon had said.

The front door of the flat clicked almost silently, and opened a few inches. DI Crowley edged his crablike way into the apartment, and did his level best not to audibly voice his disgust at the scenery. Carnadine and the unfortunate resident were sprawled across the hallway, neither of them dead, but both heading with increasing rapidity in that direction.

A pistol rested on the table, by the phone.

Crowley dithered. Birmingham General probably didn't have any necromancers on the hospital staff, so the mechanical spider looked like it could be Praline's only hope for survival - if Ytris really had died in the fire, Morrison was probably the only person on the planet who knew how to operate the device. And if Ytris had merely fled the area, Crowley supposed, it was a safe bet to assume that Morrison could point a finger in the right direction. Perhaps Darkwood hadn't screwed up entirely, then. Ytris, if alive, could wait.

Silently, cautiously, Crowley lifted the gun from the table.

"Armed police. Drop it, Morrison!" shouted Crowley, striking up a dramatic armed-police sort of pose. Morrison hefted his rifle from the window and span idly to face Crowley. He stopped suddenly.

The two Davids stood motionless, staring at each other across the stained carpet. In sharp contrast to the relaxed, amiable person Crowley had spoken to at NecroTech last night, the Morrison of the current hour was clearly on the brink of madness. The events of the past night had taken a terrible toll on his sanity - the desperation in his eyes was as clear as the doubt in Crowley's.

"Don't do anything stupid, Morrison," said the detective. "I don't want to have to shoot you. You know what our reflexes are like; if you fire, I fire." His fingers tightened about the trigger.

Morrison's blank look faltered, and his aim dropped momentarily. His wild eyes stared critically

at Crowley, and the detective spied a certain familiarity to their dullness.

The Holy Gas?

It was common knowledge that the Gas had an effect on humans, of course; some humans reacted to it just as the Tenctonese did. Giving Morrison a rifle, two lungfuls of Holy Gas and an order to kill Eric Praline would probably have worked. Also tell him to shoot anyone who gets in his way, and to ignore the words of everybody but the voice he's hearing now, and you've got a very easy and non-incriminating way to dispose of your enemies.

But why the hesitation? Realisation half-dawned, hovering doubtfully on the edge of the thought horizon. Was it possible?

Crowley dropped his voice slightly, and assumed a commanding stance. In a poor light, he could probably have passed for Ytris; although Crowley was a mite shorter and wider, the bold, jagged stripes of both his and the Overseer's crania were similar in more than a couple of aspects.

"It's me - Richard. Drop your gun, David," he commanded.

Morrison stood his ground, trembling slightly. A nervous bead of sweat traced a path down his forehead and buried itself in an eyebrow. Any knives applied to the thick pall of tension at this point would have come away a good deal blunter.

"It's over. Drop it," said Crowley, showing only a trace of terror in his voice. In his current state, Morrison was more than likely to put a bullet through Crowley, lightning reactions or otherwise. "Drop the gun."

Morrison gave up, and his shoulders fell into a half-slouch. He grunted monosyllabically under his breath, and the gun dropped from his limp hands.

As it fell to the carpet, the less murderous end clipped the edge of the glass coffee table. The rifle's hair-trigger deemed this a good enough excuse.

★

"Never a dull moment, is there?" said Darkwood, as the second gunshot's echoes died to silence. He and Smith were slowly retracing their way down the grimy stairway, Keith's injured arm being crudely wrapped up with his grim black tie. "This is the reason I became a detective, you know."

He took a couple of pained steps forward, taking him away from the dusty window and putting six inches of brickwork between him and the outside world. "To cower in fear from hidden snipers. Marvellous. We'll probably be caught in a bit of cross-fire now. Petrol bombs and the like. And me one of the only three humans in the building. If the Purist snipers don't get me, the Newcomer assault teams will. Wonderful, wonderful."

"Are you always like this?" said Smith.

"Hmm? No. Only when I'm being shot at and bleeding to death from a knife wound," said Darkwood, and his eyes took up a vaguely distant look. "Sorry," he said, and made a spirited attempt to pull himself together. It nearly worked. "Sorry. Not at my finest this morning. Guns and near-fatal injuries tend to bring out terror in me at the best of times, anyway. Ignore me." Darkwood shrugged. He tinkered one-handedly with his radio, tapping the

same button thrice and conjuring up an electronic link with his superior officer. "Crowley?" he said. There was a pause.

"Yes?" came the reply. Darkwood detected the after-effects of adrenaline in the DI's slightly out-of-breath voice, and could hear somebody muttering and writhing in the background.

"Er," was all Keith could say on the matter. "Not disturbing anything, am I?"

"Thirty seconds earlier and you probably would have been. I've just arrested Morrison." Darkwood and Smith nodded in simultaneous understanding.

"Been a-shooting, has he?"

"A civilian and PC Carnadine, apparently, yes," said Crowley. "He was after our man Praline with a rifle, I think. Hmm. Ambulances are on their way, in any case."

"Mine there yet, is it?"

"Yours?"

"I've been stabbed, you see. I thought an ambulance might be nice."

"Ah. No. Nothing's turned up yet."

"Do you still want Smith to check out Morrison's house, then?" said Darkwood.

"Indeed. Give it a search; something might turn up."

"And, er, McGeddon's?" asked Darkwood, warily.

"I'll sort something out."

"Right you are," said Darkwood. "We'll be on our way." He twiddled the dial on his radio, and its speaker faded into a solemn silence.

"Onwards and downwards, then," he decided wearily.

He tilted his head at the nearby floor sign. The colourful Tenctonese spray-painting looked like something from the washing instructions of Darkwood's shabby-grey and recently bloodstained shirt, and conveyed about as much meaning to him. "Is that a three or a four?"

"No."

"Hmm?"

"It's a six."

★

"I came here after leaving the hospital," said Eric, his voice now faltering in and out of silence. He'd been clutching his head a lot in the past few minutes, and knew he was nearing death again. Halfway along Goodyear Road, a Newcomer ambulance sat amid the rolling fumes and gridlocked cars of Birmingham's rush hour.

"Bashed on the door," continued the eveckwa. His speech became increasingly laconic and weary as his consciousness faded. "To see Katra." His eyelids fell.

"Keep him talking!" said Morgan's radio urgently. Crowley was in on the conversation, despite being stuck in traffic on the outskirts of the city. In the rear of a squad car, he tried desperately to get some sense out of David Morrison. Heavily drugged on the Gas - Crowley had had to open a window to dispel the traces exhaled - and programmed for serial-killing, he was doing very little beyond seething silently and twitching in his handcuffs. Crowley's Ytris-impersonations had little effect on him; he'd

been pushed way over the edge since the Overseer had started on him.

"So, er..." said Black hopelessly.

The swirling autumnal wind changed its angle of attack, and Black looked up. A fine mist of drizzle swept gently through the shattered window, putting a thin sheen of water droplets over the coffee table.

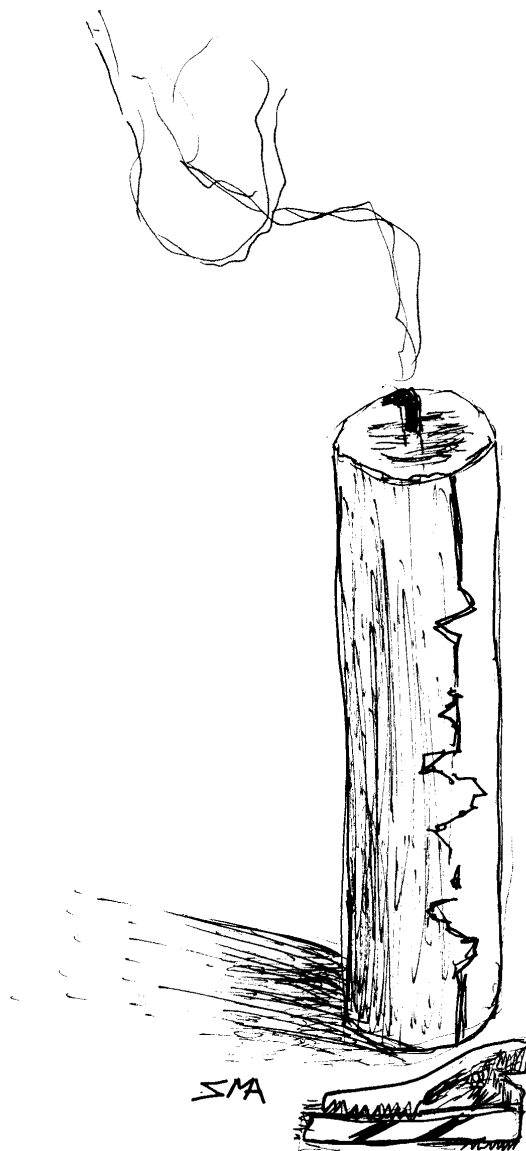
On an otherwise empty shelf stood the last remaining clayocabta candle. Where the others bore charred, dead wicks, its orange flame survived, flickering and guttering against the weather.

Rachel Praline glanced up at the candle, its tiny point of fire reflecting deep within her tear-filled eyes. Her gaze fell to the now still form of her husband. One fading, colourless eye looked weakly back at her, full of terror, regret and disappointment.

"Goodbye, Torrpa," whispered Rachel.

Eric's mouth croaked a half-spoken response. "Goodbye."

The candle died.



★

Three detectives stood at the window of the CID office, gazing across Vyse Street at the churchyard. The clouds rumbled, the rain hissed, and the body of Eric Praline was lowered into the murky soil. Beneath a canopy, a small crowd of mourning Tenc-

tonese stood around the recently-dug grave, and a purple-robed Zelian priest went through the solemn burial ritual.

Every life-signs test in the book had been pointedly negative, which hadn't surprised anyone; Praline would probably have failed most of them when he was jogging home earlier that morning. As they body-bagged him and sped him away in their ambulances, Rachel hadn't objected. From the moment that the final candle had been extinguished, she'd insisted with an unnerving conviction that her husband had died. Crowley had attempted to talk her around to his way of thinking that Praline had just lapsed back into unconsciousness with the stress of recent events - but it was like arguing with a particularly stubborn brick wall.

"Can't we check if he's dead or not? Didn't he have a serdsos?" said Darkwood, having a fairly basic grasp of such things. He now sported a clean shirt and some neat bandage-work from the station's resident doctor, not to mention a rather unwieldy sling around his left arm.

Crowley lifted his gaze from the muddy grave and shook his head grimly. "No, Praline was a Zelian. None of the Zelians have serdsos."

Darkwood looked blank.

"Not all of us were able to take our serdsos with us when we left the ship," explained David. "The sudden panic of the Descent, the sealing-off of ship sections those of us trapped far from our sleeping quarters couldn't go back for their serdsos."

"Couldn't take their souls with them," echoed Jayne solemnly.

"It destroyed the will of a lot of our people," said Crowley, unsympathetically. "They believed their souls to be forever lost. In the quarantine camps, some of the Elders made an attempt to calm them, reassure them. The Zelian religion - apparently originally founded around the time of Celinism - was reformed, and those without serdsos were welcomed into it." Atheist Crowley shrugged to signify his lack of knowledge and interest in such matters.

"Was there a purple rock in Praline's flat?" he added.

Black nodded absently. "On the mantelpiece, yes."

"That'll be your Zelian serdsos, then," said Crowley. "The Elders gave out a load of rocks and said that the souls would see them in the same way that they do serdsos. Even though we've all bought new serdsos since, the Zelian's have stuck with their stones. The candle business is some sort of feeble everlasting-life checkpoint thing, as well you know."

The DI's gaze had returned to the funeral. The mourners and priest had left, leaving an open grave and a darkly shrouding canopy. Six feet beneath the straggly, wet grass, and surrounded by an expensive pine box, the corpse of Eric Praline rested motionless. The only remaining piece of evidence in the whole NecroTech case. The mechanical contraption from the lab basement had been buried under a ton of flettons when a damaged supporting wall finally gave way, and had been crushed to a billion shattered pieces.

Morrison had been dragged gibbering to the local hospital shortly after his arrest, and his mental

and physical prospects looked far from rosy. He was certainly in no fit state for an interview.

Leaving Ytris. He was missing, perhaps dead - the lab report on the charred bones was inconclusive - and there was little else that could be done. Crowley had been quick to visit McGeddon's Birmingham residence soon after dealing with Praline, but the place had been cleared out and abandoned. Crowley hadn't been surprised.

Of the NecroTech staff that came forward, all of them turned out to be office workers, knowing little of the business's running. The actual cryogenic equipment was, to their knowledge, situated somewhere out of town and visited only by McGeddon and Morrison. Crowley hadn't been surprised.

The corpses that remained in the lab at NecroTech were eventually identified as customers. The families claimed to have visited their loved ones several times over the past months, although admittedly they'd only been shown a large, blank, cold steel box with a temperature readout. "A glass window," the smiling NecroTech guide had said every time, "would, of course, affect the temperature stability." Crowley hadn't been surprised.

NecroTech had had several human customers. All of the corpses in the lab had been Tenctonese, presumably because the reanimating device was geared for twin-hearted life-forms. None of the human corpses were ever found on the site, although there was a nice big incinerator in the basement that invited closer inspection. Crowley hadn't been surprised.

And when the DI had asked Rachel Praline if he could take the corpse back to the labs for an in-depth autopsy, she'd said that it would be going against the basic tenets of the Zelian faith. Crowley hadn't been surprised.

Darkwood flipped through some paperwork with his free hand. His wound meant that he probably wasn't too well suited to making arrests; even more so than usual. Which left paperwork, surveillance, and perhaps a bit of trailing along on other cases. He wondered vaguely if his superior officers knew he wasn't left handed. The CID budget needed sorting out now that the new fiscal year had begun, and it was something of a daunting task.

"Death and taxes," said Keith, with a sigh.

The rain drummed ever downward, churning the soil of the churchyard into mud. A couple of gravediggers shovelled the waterlogged earth into the open grave. Crowley knew, even without looking, which one of the standard Zelian epitaphs would be chiselled onto the headstone.

Eve eckwa stew quascha.

Not dead but sleeping.

"No," said David, pensively rolling a silver-and-gold badge between his fingers. He stared absently at the thick grey clouds above the city. In the distance, thunder grumbled ominously to itself. His gaze fell back to Praline's grave, and for the briefest of moments his irises flickered to a cold, swirling darkness.

"Just taxes."



AFTERMATH

by JIM MCMAHON

(a Babylon 5 story set after "Eyes")

Dr. Stephen Franklin examined the medical scanner he had just used on his patient. The readings indicated a broken bone and some bruises, but he had already known that. If that was the extent of the injuries, he would be happy. What he wasn't sure about was the skull and its contents. Damage to a brain still wasn't able to be determined easily. He wouldn't be able to even begin any kind of further testing until his patient woke up.

A small groan shifted his attention back to the body lying on the examination table.

★

Michael Garibaldi sat on his bed holding his head in his hands. Why did I let that happen? he thought. Here I am, Chief of Security for the whole station, and I didn't even think far enough ahead to prevent that. He fell backwards onto the mattress, running his hands back up through his hair. Maybe Jeff was wrong to believe in me. Maybe all those incidents were trying to tell me something. Maybe I should just quit.

★

"How could you let something like that happen?"

Commander Jeffrey Sinclair had known Ambassador Delenn for some time, and he had never heard her yell quite as loud as she just had. In fact, he couldn't recall ever hearing her yell.

"Commander, this is not something that would have gone unnoticed, especially by my government. An incident such as this would have grave effects upon the future of Babylon 5." Delenn's tone returned to her normal, calmer sound. 'Effects which I am sure neither of us would be very happy with.'

Commander Sinclair rose from his chair and placed his hands on his desk. "Ambassador, I'm sure it will turn out all right. I heard about —"

"About a lapse in security? About allowing an innocent Minbari to be nearly killed?"

"Actually, I was going to say that I had heard about the incident, and was going to ask you to accompany me to Medlab, where we can find out exactly what the situation is right now."

"Very well Commander, we shall do that."

★

The sound of the door chime brought Garibaldi back to alertness. He sat up on his bed and tried to straighten out his hair. "Come in," he called.

The door opened and Lt. Cmdr. Susan Ivanova walked in. "Mr. Garibaldi..." She noticed his appearance. "Is this a bad time? I could come back..."

"Oh no, come on in. What's up?"

She walked over to the chair nearest the bed and settled into it. "I know you must be felling badly about what happened."

Garibaldi rolled his head around his shoulders. "What, is it that obvious?" he asked, sarcasm dripping from his words.

"I just wanted you to know. I was with the Commander, and we both saw the... prelude, if you will. Neither of us gave it a second thought."

Jumping to his feet, Garibaldi exclaimed, "Yeah, but I almost killed him. For all I know he could be dead right now. I mean I know that if it was in a less crowded area then things might have turned out differently. That Carrion Eater might not have been walking in the wrong place at the wrong time..."

Ivanova stood up and put her hands on Garibaldi's shoulders reassuringly. "Hey, hey, hey. Aren't you the one always saying that you can't go on wondering what life would have been like if you had only done this instead of that?"

"Yeah, yeah. Except sometimes there are still... some things that I wonder about."

"Well, this shouldn't be one of those times. Come on. Why don't we to to Medlab and see how things are going?"

★

Dr. Franklin studied the readout in front of him. Everything looked to be the way it should. That was a very good sign. If everything else went this well he would almost be out of a job.

"Dr. Franklin?"

He turned to his assistant. "Yes?"

"The Commander and Ambassador Delenn are outside."

Great, he thought. This news is just what they're looking for. He thanked his assistant, made a few notes on the panel, and made his way to the doors. As they opened to reveal Commander Sinclair and Ambassador Delenn, the outer doors opened. Garibaldi and Ivanova walked in.

Delenn moved in front of the security chief. "Mister Garibaldi. I am glad to see that you are well."

This was not what he had expected to hear. "Uh, thank you Ambassador. Once again, I am very sorry for everything."

Dr. Franklin stepped forward. "Well, if I may add a bright note to this, and maybe even make you



all feel better, aside from a broken arm and some bruises, Lennier is just fine. Under orders to rest now, but fine."

A smile formed on Delenn's face as she said, "Really? That is good news."

Sinclair moved forward and put a hand on Delenn and Garibaldi's shoulder. "Why don't we discuss this whole affair in my office?"

★

Delenn and Garibaldi were seated in front of Commander Sinclair's desk. He looked at both of them. "Who would like to start?" he asked, smiling.

Ambassador Delenn stood up. "Commander. Mr. Garibaldi. Perhaps I was a bit more... hostile than I should have been. I was mostly concerned over the return of Shaal Mayan, and then when I heard what happened, I believe I overreacted."

As she sat back down, Garibaldi said, "Yeah, I know what you mean about overreacting. After that

whole Colonel Ben Zayn fiasco, I just had to let off some steam. Lennier had just finished helping me build my motorcycle, so I took him for a ride. It was fantastic. We were riding down through the station when suddenly this Carrion Eater appeared out of nowhere. I braked, and when I was almost stopped, he just fell off."

Sinclair stood up and walked around and stood in between the two of them. "Well, Lennier is doing fine, and I think we've learned our lesson. Haven't we?" He looked at Garibaldi.

"Sure. First thing I do is find Lennier a helmet." If looks could kill, Garibaldi would have been dead from two directions. "What?"

(This story first appeared in the Babylon 5 fiction internet mailing list <b5-creative@best.com>)

Astrogation Log

The point of this little column is to orient yourself if you are lost while reading the pieces in this issue, so I'll tell you a bit about where and when they're set. It is stuck at the end of the zine so that you don't rush off and read about the stories before you read the stories.

Migration is a poem set at the very end of the first season of *Ocean Girl*, aka *Ocean Odyssey* in the UK.

Bitter Wine is set just after the *Blake's 7* episode *Rumours of Death* and partly into the next episode, *Sarcophagus*. But if you haven't seen *Rumours of Death*, you'd better.

Elegy For the Seven is just that; a poem of mourning for the Seven of *Blake's 7*.

Winning is the Only Safety (1): First Death is a *Blake's 7*/*Highlander* crossover, set after the last episode of *Blake's 7*. As for the *Highlander* connection, well, there could still be immortals in the future, couldn't there? As for the (1), yes, it is the proposed first in a series. I still haven't written the next one, though I do have a good idea of what will happen.

Deliverance is a poem set around the *Blake's 7* episode *Deliverance*, in which Avon is taken to be a god by a waiting acolyte on a primitive planet.

Suspicion is a *Blake's 7* story set randomly somewhere in the fourth season.

Bartolomew is a poem about Bartolomew. Rush off and watch the *Blake's 7* episode *Rumours of Death* if you want to know more.

All I Really Need To Know I Learned From

Watching Highlander is, well, a list of epigrams and advice, derived from watching *Highlander*, and you don't need to have seen the series at all to appreciate it, though if you have, you could play spot-the-episode if you like.

Ending is a poem about the death of Roy Batty in *Bladerunner*. And don't tell me you haven't seen *Bladerunner*!

Though This Be Madness is a prequel to the *Outer Limits* episode *The Forms of Things Unknown*, but you don't need to have seen the episode to enjoy the story - I didn't.

Soldier is ostensibly a *Blake's 7* poem, from the point of view of any poor sod who's been conquered by the Federation, but it could be set anywhere.

Not Dead But Sleeping is set in the *Alien Nation* universe, where a group of alien slaves (the Tenc-tonese, colloquially known as Newcomers, insultingly referred to as Slags) crash-landed their spaceship in California "seven years ago", but apart from the situation, there is no overlap with the series. It is set in a completely different country with no characters from the series.

Aftermath is set just after the *Babylon 5* episode *Eyes*, in which Garibaldi is seconded to an internal investigation into the competence of the Babylon 5 command staff, and is so busy that Lennier, who offered to help with the mysteries of rebuilding a 20th-century artifact (a Kawasaki motorbike, complete with Japanese-only manual) actually finishes the bike by the end of the episode.

Bread And Salt

I have eaten your bread and salt,
I have drunk your water and wine.
The deaths you died I have watched beside,
And the lives you led were mine.
Was there aught that I did not share
In vigil or toil or ease, -
One joy or woe that I did not know,
Across the starry seas?
We have written the tales of your lives
For a sheltered people's mirth,
In different guise - but you are wise,
And you know what the tale is worth.

— Judith Proctor (via Rudyard Kipling)

