

Hugo Award–Winning Author of *The Jennifer Morgue*

CHARLES STROSS

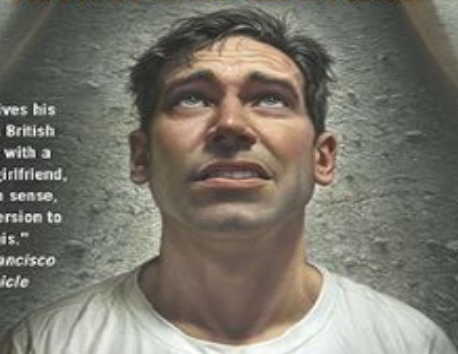


The A LAUNDRY FILES NOVEL FULLER MEMORANDUM

The name of the game is
Bob Howard vs. Evil—and Evil cheats.

"Stross gives his readers a British superspy with a long-term girlfriend, no fashion sense, and an aversion to martinis."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*



THE
FULLER MEMORANDUM



CHARLES STROSS



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THE
FULLER MEMORANDUM



CHARLES STROSS


ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

IN MEMORY OF
CHARLES W. DICKSON AND JOHN M. FORD.
WE MISS YOU BOTH.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Written built on the shoulders of others. In particular, I'd like to single out three other writers, without whose work this book would not be as it is: Fredric Jameson, for his narration of events during the Russian civil war; James Payne, for his portrait of the Bloody White Banner; and Anthony Pica, who gave this book a skeleton.

LOSING MY RELIGION


THESE CAN BE ONLY ONE TRUE RELIGION: ARE YOU FEELING LIKE BELIEVER?

Like the majority of ordinary British citizens, I used to be a good old-fashioned atheist, secure in my conviction that folk who believed in angels and demons, supernatural manifestations and miracles, space-faring and landing in tongues and the world being only a few thousand years covered all supernatural ideas. I was a conviction encouraged by every crazy man from the Middle East, every ludicrous White House prayer broadcast on the TV. But then I was recruited by the Laundry and learned better.

I wish I could go back to the comforting certainties of atheism; it's so much less unpleasant than the One True Religion.

The faith won't make your Baby Jesus cry because, said to my friends and to each other of God. Moses may have been too, babies before breakfast, but there was nobody home to take care of the prayers of the victims of the Shoah. The guardians of the Klu Klux Klan have got the world's best training manual naming the Dalai Lama left anybody's reincarnation. Zion is out to back, and you really don't want me to start on the next pages.

However, there is a God out there—real and ancient and infinitely powerful—and I know the name of His God. I know the path you have to walk down to be one with His God. I know His secret rituals and the correct form of prayer and His parents and signs. These include the ancient writings of His prophets and followers in person, not simply relying on the classified digests in the CODED BLACK SKULLS files and the background training for CASE MATHS/THREAT OFFICERS.

In a believer. And like I said, I wish I was still an atheist. Believing I was born into a faith, inheriting someone's which my existence was a random roll of the dice and I was destined to die and not then be gone forever—was infinitely more comforting than the truth.

Because the truth is that my God is coming back. When he arrives He'll be waiting for lots with a shotgun. And I'm keeping the best shot for myself.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, ANGLETON SUGGESTED I START WRITING my memoirs. It seemed a pretty weird idea at the time—a top-secret-but-casual intelligence officer should take time off on the job to work on his autobiography—but he had a point. "Such" he said, in his usual dignified-but-occasional tone, with a voice like dry sheets of parchment rustling. "Is it or not that trick little deal of yours combines excellent institutional knowledge that has been acquired over years of service for His Government? You don't start too, you may never catch up with the job. And if you don't catch up with the job, part of the Laundry's institutional memory might vanish for good." He gave a curious little chuckle, as if he himself having had to admit that there was any value to my meager contribution. "You might do on your next field assignment, or be turned by the enemy. And that'd be nearly ten years of work down the drain."

Then he pointed me at the rule book that explained how all officers above OGD rank were required to either keep a classified journal or to periodically update their memoirs, which would be stored under lock and key—automatically classified under the various keywords they'd been cleared for during the time period covered—the books to be opened only in event of their author's death, retirement or permanent discharge to the care of His God.

You know something? I hate writing. I keep having to distract myself, hence all the little pages. It's actually not as if the job is all that funny, when you get down to it. Especially as I tend to write everything either in longhand or on a 1962 Triumph when I'm in the car, and burn the ribbons and carbon papers afterwards in the Security Office incinerator in front of two witnesses with high security clearances. I'm not allowed to use rubber bands or paper clips to hold the papers together (although string and jet buttons, traditional and heating wax—use don't get me started on how difficult it is to melt the stuff in a microwave—having with the discretion in every office—is permitted). My fingers are hardened for the Emacs programmer's editor and a laptop. His historic office messengers shall give off me first. But I agree.

This is the story of how I lost my religion, and why I wish I could regain it. This is the story of the people who lost their faith in an alien desert battered by the hideous radiance of a dead sun, and the love that was lost and the horror that wakes me up in a cold sweat about once a week, clanking at the wheels with cramped fingers and aching joints. It's why I like and I aren't lying together right now, why my right arm doesn't hurt properly, and I'm lying side into the right, lying in bed with the smacking wreckage of my life beneath a heap of work.

It's the story of what happened to the Fulmer Memorandum, and the beginning of the end of the world. Are you sure you want to carry on?

GOING TO SEE THE ELEPHANT



Summer in England

THESE WORDS ARE SUPPOSED TO CONJURE UP HALCYON SUNNY afternoons, the smell of new-mown hay, little old ladies on bicycles pedalling past the village green on their way to the church ladies walk, the scorch hot patting the crutching sound of a free-lance cricket ball fracturing the batsmen's staid and so on.

The reality is, of course, utterly different. It's an early summer afternoon in June, and I'm sharing an overcrowded train carriage with an assortment of loud commuters heading back to their dormitory suburbs, and a couple of angry wags, trying to drill their way out through the tattered glass. The trainee-piloted air conditioning is whistling on the edge of a nervous breakdown, its twenty-eight degrees and thirty percent relative humidity out there, and the ambient belated me-including something very bad in a pair of tiny headphones.

To having several thoughts about having paid fifty pounds to sit on this train, expensive or no expense, but I don't see what alternatives there are. I need to get from London to Don't-Careford, just outside Whitehampton, and I don't have a car and the Laundry certainly isn't going to hire me a helicopter for a job that isn't time-critical. They won't even pay for me to take a taxi the whole way. So I'm stuck with a choice: train or coach. At least the way left to avoid the M5 motorway. . . .

And at least I get a seat with a table. I read my instructions as the train shudders and lurches through the parched countryside. It's a low-priority best job: to investigate aspects of noise manifestations of a discharging system from one of the airframes stored in the hangar annex to the Royal Air Force Museum. The museum houses a lot of historic warbirds. Visiting death benches to go with the territory, and a few phony-airframes in the infrastructure substrate of reality—wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. My job is to dispel any annoying manifestations, reassure the locals, close out the case, essence, it's sufficiently routine and predictable that to normally send the office party back for further reasons. Angleton pulled me into his office this morning. "Bob, is like you to deal with this one please!" he said, handing me the brief. "It's got you out of the office for a day."

"Not too busy?" protested, a fat-fingered lack of action was getting to me, and I'm not good at standing up in Angleton at the best of times. "We've got to respond to the RFP on standard coding requirements for the new submersible extension in D Black"—don't call it a cogit the government doesn't do origin, the Spanish translation does origin—"and go over Claire's training budget. Can't Peter-Fred do it?" he's treated Clinton '01, I studied from his head in a hallway. . . .

"Nonononon!" Angleton said crisply. "You can take the paperwork with you, but I specifically want you to go and look at this one."

There's a warning gleam in his eye: he's seen it before. "Oh no you don't," I replied. "Not so fast!" I raised an eyebrow and walked for the reception.

Angleton is not without an old-school that his pretty sure he's seen his face in a department photo taken during the war; back when the Laundry was an obscure department of FIC, the Special Operations Executive, tasked with occult intelligence gathering and counter-demonology. He doesn't look a day older than when he did back then, sixty-five years ago—less than it's longevity and could still be a member of the Murrery. Ice-blue eyes with slightly yellowed sclera, skin like parchment left out for too long in a desert sunbather, dry as bone and twice as oily as oil. And I never want to hear his laugh again. But I digress. The thing about Angleton is that, despite (or in addition to) being the foremost department monitor, he has a series of rumors. It bears about the same relationship to truth that his cadaverous exterior does to Peter-Hilton—but it's there. He has the heart of a young boy, except it's in a hallway under the coffee he sips in a (And) right then, I figured he was sending me up for the fourth time.

But no. He shook his head slowly. "Not this time, Bob." The gleam in his eye gathered out, replaced by dead-still neutrality. "While you're up there to do the business, I want you to take a look at one of the other museum exhibits—well, that's not on public display. It figures it later when you get back. Take your warrant card. When you're through with the job on the workbench, tell Museum Office Hastings that I sent you to take a look at the white elephant in hangar 12B."

Hangar? I blinked a couple of times, then answered. "While sending me up for another working group, aren't you?" "That's better than to ask that, boy," he grunted, and I jumped back. Angleton is nobody you want to stand too close to when he's not smiling broadly. "I'll give you the background when you're ready for it, meanwhile, get moving!"

"Where?" he demanded a sarcastic smile and marched off back to my office, but in thought I was a wing, obviously: Angleton was suffering me up for something new. Probably a new genre of bureaucratic pass-the-parcel, seeing if some poor schmuck—I was already in charge of departmental IT services, for my use—could be judged taking responsibility for executing teamwork or something.

Back to the train-window. The carriage is stalling. A minute later I realize it's putting me in a train the station—Whitehampton, where I got to change trains. I move my reading matter back into my messenger bag (it's now about a private magazine for use in Chicago—your taxpayer pounds at work) and go to stand in the doorway.

The air in the station hits me like a hot furnace, dirt and oily and smelly, ninety of seven fumes. I take a breath, step down onto the concrete, and try to minimize my movements as I go looking for the Coalfield station. (I had the platform it steps at a scurrying concrete step opposite a peeling wooden fence. The site are rusty and overgrown, and a couple of young men are trying to colour the tracks, but the TV screen continued in its tap and predicting a train will be along in ten minutes. I take a shallow breath and sit down, hunching, involuntarily towards the nearest shade. (Which makes sense: the TV screen is still predicting a train will be along in ten minutes, but my mouth isn't, it's me.)

"Bob?" She sounds so cheerful when she says my name: I don't know how she does it, but I chew me up.

"Not?" "Dear. Where are you?" "I'm back in the office! I spent most of the morning in the station, I only just got your text. . . ." The one thing her face does on a day trip to Coalfield. The Laundry's deep archives are in a former underground tunnel, well clear where the sun doesn't shine, and neither do the cellular networks.

"Right. I'm in a railway platform waiting for an onward train. It's about two hundred degrees in the shade, the pigeons are filling out of the sky from headquarters, and nobody will admit a bear" (What, they might if I asked for one, but. . .)

"Oh, good! Where you going to be back?" "Sometimes late the evening," I say doubtfully "I'm due to arrive in Coalfield at—check the time, twelve—two thirty, and I don't think I'll get away before six. I've been told that about five hours."

"Angleton did it? He did, didn't he?" Suddenly Mr. Satchwell from warm and costly to reply as a participant: "Don't you tell him you couldn't? We're supposed to be having dinner with Peter and Sandy tonight!"

I do it, mental calculus. Reorganize my schedule, minutes and realize she's right. Dinner for two, booked at a new Patisserie restaurant in Farnham. Peter was at university with me years ago, and is a pilot or a witch doctor or something. Sandy is blonde and teaches comparative religion to

secondary school kids. My friends who stay in touch with them: hearing hands with ordinary jobs who don't know anything about the Laundry provide a normative dose of sanity for the two of us, to keep us from drifting too far out of the mainstream. "Gee," I'm more excited for hearing handed Ms. O than anything else. "You're right, Lisa, on powder to go on your car, but that'll turn up later--it'll come enough from the train--or do you want to cancel?"

There's silence for a second, then she sighs. "Sandy doesn't have fluoride, Bob, she's got classes to teach. You cancel?"

"She'll don't have her mobile numbers?"

"No kidding, and Mr. Jones it 'll be sure to see you, Bob. Maybe I'll help you remember: routine?"

"Abducts. She's right it's my fault. "Okay," it's my turn to sigh. "I'll be changing some train tracks. Maybe we can use them for something together?" The tracks begin to vibrate and squeal and track up. "It's my first time you know? Bye..."

The train to Conford is about as an Angstrom atom down, wonder-panels, and high-teched earth, powered by a vibrantly named diesel engine stung under its single carriage. Air conditioning is provided by the open lowered windows. I wander in its own-like interior for about forty minutes as it rattles and bounces through the countryside, opening blue smoke and engine oil barrels in. Along the way I barely notice my surroundings on Pines and Sandy's voice mail. Finally the train wheezes automatically to a halt beside a station-combining a Royal Air Force base, with a cluster of hangars outside the gate and some economic address and transport aircraft gently gathering noise on the main outside. Bouncing a sign of metal, I walk up the path to the mainline aware and head for the main building.

It's time to go to work.

3 3 3

FWY ATTENTION NOW: THIS BRINGING WILL SELF-DIRECT

My name is Bob, Bob Howard At least, that's the name I use in these messages. (I've never had your e-mail, it's the only power to attract the supernatural equivalent of a Mike Myers' fast examiner: I'm not just paid in their sights, thank you very much.) And I work for the Laundry.

The Laundry is the British Government's secret agency for dealing with "magic." The use of some-what is forbidden; at St. Arthur C. Caine said, "My infinitely advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," as "magic" is what we deal with. Note that this does not include politics, perhaps, projects, which changing, drawing up in ideas and points, or more (or not) all of the staff associated with the team in the public, most, to, our magic is computational. The work of pure mathematics is very real indeed, and the things... that cast shadows on the walls of Pines can sometimes be made to leave and pay attention if you point a loaded weapon at them. This is, however, a very dangerous process, because most of the shadow-casters are unclear on the distinction between pay attention and they suffer lunch here. My job-applied computational demagogues comes with a very generous pension scheme, because most of us don't have to sleep.

Magic being a branch of pure mathematics, and computers being machines that can be used to perform lots of mathematical tasks very fast, it follows that most real thinking computers start out as computer science graduates. The Laundry's government agency for handling this stuff started out as a byline of the Second World War code-breakers at Bletchley Park, the people who built the first working programmable computers. And the dramatic side of our work-pioneering accidented incursions by non-mathematical forces from beyond operations has been growing rapidly in recent decades. You may have noticed there are more computers around these days, and more computer programs. Guess what? That means more work for the Laundry!

I have a somewhat embarrassing relationship with Hologrammers. Back when I was an intern in Birmingham I nearly introduced it by accident: I was trying to develop a new graphics algorithm. Pioneer Hologrammers' magic transformations in dimensions distorted by glancing horrors tend to attract the Laundry's attention: they go in one eye in five--but before the memories burn, I was about to accidentally summon into this world--and made me a job offer I wasn't allowed to refuse.

(It's history is under-visited, I was included not only in recruiting, but in keeping her alive until she could be recruited. That was some years ago, but I have been together for, oh, about six years, we had the last nearly three years ago, using the original magic to break a hologrammer as an excuse to do something we both wanted to do anyway.) So, I'm here at St. Arthur Caine, on a train to Pines base which is also home to the Royal Air Force Museum annex, where the head of staff that's too big to fit in their North-London site at Duxford. Obviously I'm here to examine an aircraft that has been the focus of some interesting business and to stop those incidents recurring. Ah, thanks to Angleton, I'm supposed to take a look at something in Hanger Six.

One of the things you have likely feel for the Laundry is that most people in the British civil service and armed forces don't know you exist. You--your organization, your job, the fact you work in--are classified as deeply that the mere knowledge that such a classification level exists is itself a state secret. So, to help me do my job, I carry something that we laundry call a "warrant card": it's a form of identification, it comes with certain Powers attached. When you present your warrant card for inspection in the course of official business, the recipients tend to believe you are who and what you say you are, for the duration of the business. Not only that you can't read them to mislead. Of course, trying to use your card outside official business tends to attract the attention of the Austins. And having attracted their attention once or twice, he never been back--even finding out what happens next...

The RAF Museum is fenced by a white-painted-and-steel aircraft hanger of an aerial hall. I march right up to the front door (there's no gate), present my warrant card and say, "Bob Howard. I'm here to see Mr. Hastings."

The newly trained assistant behind the cash register puts down her looking and points up at the over the roof of the building. "Admission is five pounds," she says.

"I'm here to see Mr. Hastings." (Ironic a smile and adjust my grip on the warrant card.)

"Is that a warrant card?" She looks confused.

"What?" I show the card under her nose. "I have an appointment with Mr. Hastings Office. Hastings?" I repeat, using to keep a note of importance out of my voice. "It's from the Department of Administrative Affairs." It's a bit stiff--worn and too short short normal office attire for the civil service, even in the weather--but for causing the fingers of my free hand and holding my card to unspool enough of her neurons to get the message across. "A meeting to discuss the, ah, business in Hanger Six."

She blinks rapidly. "Oh, Hanger Six? That's a bad job, it hasn't been the same since Norman had his head cut off Safety inspection... They used to keep the Whitehead in there, did you know?" I'm seeing Geoffrey, aren't you?

"What's that Mr. Hastings Office Hastings?" I ask, helplessly.

"Oh, yes." She catches her looking aside with one hand-ignited hand and picks up the telephone with another. "Geoffrey?" There's a man been to see you? Who did you say you were? A.M.: Howard? Yes, to see you now. He's not here! She puts the phone down. "Geoffrey will be here in a couple of minutes," she confides. "He needs to scrub up first."

I tap my toes and while waiting as I look around the entrance hall. There's something coming a weird shadow overhead. I look up, and find myself staring at the bright-wire fuel tank of an English Electric Lightning engine, dangling from the ceiling like a decorated Pilsener-brewer's prize and jay it enough to stop the foot tapping for a

moment-of-the-falls, it'll be squashed like a bug-but a moment's consolation, one that I highly value. So I stare wistfully at the Lightning for a couple of minutes. The missiles, already aimed razor-thin wings, a huge, pregnant body full of fuel, and the two screaming-powered engines that once roared from a cold start at a thousand miles per hour in order a minute. Life would be so much simpler if our adventures could be dealt with by superionic death on the wing-fall-time. Human/Robots aren't so easily fooled.

"M. Hastings?"
"I'm here." There's a stuffy-looking middle-aged man in blue overalls standing by the front desk, easily recalling that, a grumpy negative reaction, and a hair combed with questions. I hold up my warrant card. "Mr. Howard? I say 'Captain' Laurey Germaine. I believe you asked for a visit?"
"He does a middle double take. 'Oh, yes, I do.' He's nodding the plane, we start, and could have picked, and I can see the gears whirring in his head as he wonders if he's some kind of reporter. Then his eyes reach my warrant card and something clicks behind them and he's rightly sure human beings was a moment before-'ah'."
"I was told your problem is in charge. So, why don't you take me there?" I can't explain along the way.

"I put the warrant card back in my pocket. His point is being lost."
"If you'll follow me, please, sir." He has a pronounced lisp. "He takes and opens a door marked 'AUTOMATIC ESCAPE ONLY, ONE' sorry about them on the front desk." "Does a little side, but she means well. Oh, yes you, she's been helping out here since Howard, and he's not a customer." He shrugs. "I suppose it's better for her than sitting around an old-age home waiting to die." He lets the door close behind us before he says anything more. "Steady on business, Hanger Six."

"She's about 30 your own words." "Hah!"
"It's another of the Lightning-hal number XR272." He glances over his shoulder. "It's been fitted in Hanger Six for years while we were waiting for funding for some through-plan was to insure a fair rate. Steady in Hall Four when it's ready as an F. Mark 3, opposed from F-2A like the one over the front desk." It takes his wait for it to tell us he had with the model names. "What had a few odd features."

"Odd incidents?" "Define odd."
"Crazy patches on the hangar floor, mysterious oil leaks under hydraulic pipes that were drained more than twenty years ago when it was taken out of service-nothing really unusual, seeing where it came from, if you follow my drift. But then there was the business with Marica and the treatment panel, and I thought it might be a good idea to call you in person, directly."

"Click. A domino slips into place in my mental map. This enquiry didn't come through the SAC, it came direct from Hastings. "You've worked with us before."

"Not exactly. . . I've passed beside an anonymous door, and watched a few others. But I was with the Squadron, on ground crew. Once you're in, you never really leave." "Click. "They're in my reach."

"What squadron?" I wonder, annoyed but afraid to display my ignorance. "I'd be about Marica." I protest, as he opens the door to reveal another public tunnel between buildings, this one unobscured and safe.

"Submarine airframe commander Marica Moran. Age twenty-nine, completed her first service assignment, then signed up with BMC Systems maintenance division when the software system came down-when sold. "Map sold."

"He took a deep breath. "She should never have been allowed to work on XR272, cockpit instruments. We had them round the back, under padlock and washed by a clean two regulation gas. She shouldn't even have been able to see them. She'd have triggered straight off that if wasn't a normal F-3 integrated flight system and weapons control board. She wasn't qualified to work on it."

"He falls silent as he treads along the passage.
"What happened to her?" I asked.
Hastings shrugs his head. "You'd have to ask the doctor. He'd not say they knew, they say she might be safe to release next month, but they said that last month."

"Another domino. "XR272 was one of the, uh, Squadron's planes, was it?"

"They didn't start yet?" He doesn't sound surprised. "In here, Mr. Hastings." I don't bother to correct him as he shows open a side door and steps into an echoing, gloomy cavern of a room. "See for yourself."

"The room walls resemble an aircraft hangar the way a maintenance department resembles a bedroom. It's dimly lit, daylight filtering through high windows, and the light reveals the muffled elevators of half a dozen feet jags stirring the oil-covered concrete floor. Their nearest kin are checked in jags and frames, their visors reinforced in the centering of parts like low-priority awaiting reassembly, or at least massed into the sanctuaries of life. There's junk everywhere, toolboxes, clutter control bins, and disassembled piled high with parts. Closest to the door hangs the wreckage of a Lightning, its tail in missing, as are its outboard wing segments and the central spike of its nose radars, but it's substantially intact. Close up, the tail of the thing appears to sit on the chassis of an old Russian MiG-equivalent, truck. But for the speed of its tail, the wing and high engine nacelle to walk under without stopping.

"Something about it makes me feel profoundly uneasy, as if a black cat has walked half the length of my grave, chased ferociously, taken a nap, and been about its business before being noticed."

"This is Airframe XR272. According to the official records it was scrapped in 1980. Unofficially, . . . it ended up here, because of its history. It's a single F was on the books with 23 regulations and 11 regulations, but they never flew it. I was working for you people, in the Squadron." I shrug. "The Lightning's mostly unscrupulous, but given the bright summer afternoon outside, I'd logged 280 hours on the other side, recording the white airplane."

"Anger mentioned a white airplane, didn't he? I glance at the shadows under XR272's belly. The concrete is stained and greasy with fuel, exhaust and knee and disassembled notes that swim before my eyes. Click. The first domino slides into place.

"I see, Angerton." I nod and pull out my PDA. Tap-clicking and I pull up the photograph gallery listing on the other compartment card in its second expansion slot. I point it at the existing, dimmed group that the phantom hydraulic tank has obtained across the concrete apron and the display beam-stair.

"I take a slow step back from the airframe, and motion Hastings over. "I don't want to alarm you," I murmur. "But do you know your airframe is hot?"

Hastings shrinks his head ready "Figures." He shrugs. "Do you want to look at the cockpit instrument panel?"

"I nod. "Just point me at it, it's still where Marica had her house?"

"I haven't moved it." He gestures towards a camera screen, surrounded by a circle of traffic cones with hazard-type blue beacons between them. "Do you need any help?"

"No, thank you, I'm pretty good, help. . . I advance on the traffic cones, PDA held in front of me. I begin to blink and within immediately I begin to blink, look round the camera screen. There's a workbench bearing a stack of black metal boxes, wire cabling, needles and drain gaudy wires. "Shut-off? Change?" I check my PDA and answer under my breath. "This was a medium tank for backing away and meeting for the scheduled maintenance light nose, but it's not, it's just a basic maintenance about at least you don't usually see outside of a maintenance grid-what the ground jockey is calling a particle. "Scratch that. Do you have any conductive tape? A soldering iron? Some blue cloth?"

"You're going to examine it," states Hastings. "Right?"

"Right."
"Oh? I feel excited to be in the mess, but Squadron issue, we're here, and keep everything inside. Worth me to look?"

"I think that would be a very good idea." I say with feeling, thinking Field Excursion MP Squadron issue? "By the way,

what's the Squadrons unit number?"
Headings smiles at me. "Tip-toe. Don't they tell you anything?"

HERE IS HOW YOU GO ABOUT DORINGING A MOUNTED JET ENGINE, taken copyright by the most-often-somewhat-secret-666 Squadron, RAF:

- * You can explosively deassemble the airframe. It's in the middle of a cloud and from one no-neighbor within a couple of miles.
- * You can violate any number of IEGC directives and damage public opinion by dumping it at sea-whether meant only, or don't need to annoy the courts by violating the Bechtic Treaties-and wait for time (and electrolysis) to wash the memories away.
- * You can track it to a special hazardous waste certified recycling site in Wales, where they have a very special degassing cell for exactly this purpose.
- * Or if you believe in living temporarily, you can do it with a recycling line, a spaceship, a grounding strap, and a good pair of running shoes in case you know up.

Guess what Maggie has done?
Look, it's a museum piece. They don't exactly grow on trees, blowing it up and drossing it apart on the memo; stripping it to brass would cost... Well, it isn't 666 or my discretionary expense worksheet too many zeros (more than two). But leaving the grounding strap and the running shoes.

So if you want to try this, what would you do?
I approach the air-static point beneath the reservoir very very cautiously, holding one end of a grounding strap at arm's length in front of me, the other end clamping the grounding behind my back, right behind, ready to hit. The grounding strap is basically a long conductive wire; the other end is attached to a universal track signal-generator headings pulled from the field exerciser to all terminals and following needles on dial, like something out of a 1950s Hammer Horror film. There's a small but bizarre diorama occupying the middle of the head's transfer worksheet; it sits on a metal support from the exerciser strap, a rabbit's foot, a monkey's fist skull pendant, and a diagram carefully etched in conductive ink.
Look, don't quit on me spontaneously without an in-sound. I don't go anywhere these days without a defibrillator wired on a chain round my neck that shut out a class three offensive invocation, and Headings is safely tucked away inside a grounded partition with Thales-Lescaerme-geometry-but safe as houses, at least houses that aren't sitting on top of a fault line about up to 100 up with a Richter 5.0 earthquake. As it happens, I do this kind of thing regularly every week or so. It's about as safe as well-equipped humans going into an unclassified infernal machine to spray cooling water across the overheating propane tank in the corner next to the main power distribution block. Piece of cake, really-as long as somebody's in the room.

"Are you connected?" I call out very thoughtfully to Headings. "Is the safety zone?"

"Yes," the search board. "How about you?"
"It'll be okay." I keep my eyes peeled as I throw the plug on the end of the strap into the air-static point, and wait for the jolted my PDA down on the floor a couple of meters away and set to auto, keeping line a danger counter on the board. It ticks away low seconds, like a cooling tank. The airframe itself is primarily safe, under the sea-grounding instrument panel on the worksheet, but it's a bigger physical hazard, which is why its locking is first.
I take a couple of steps back, then straighten up and walk over to the signal generator. When was I? Ah, yes. A flip a couple of switches and there's a loud clunk, around like a ball being, except slightly off-k. I take my stand. Continuing the checklist from memory "Calculation field engaged." I pick up my PDA, flip on the shock meter, and shuffle round the airframe away, reading aloud as I go: words in an alien tongue but suited for human lips. The signal generator chirps periodically. There's your exerciser in a nut-shell ball book, and careful-although the candle is steady unless if you're reading from a blank screen, and the ball's a sophisticated bit.

Finally, after squawking between the Lightning and a temporarily set angle on a trolley (back up when I reacted from, back by the workbench. Last words.) I pick up the microphone that's plugged into the signal generator, flip the switch, and say "PDA off."

There's a bang and a blue flash from the grounding point on the airframe, and my PDA makes an ominous crackling noise. Then the thumb dial dies. "You called it," says Headings.
"Looks that way," I grin, turning to face him.
He looks past me. "What about the-hey what are you-?"
New here's where things go wrong.
Maggie here didn't bother to set up a word around the worksheet with the compromised cockpit console before he sorted out the airframe, because he thought that he could do the job separately. But he's not separate, are they? The law of conservation applies; the cockpit instruments had been physically bolted to the airframe for a number of years, and things that form an entity identify for a long time tend to respond as one.

More importantly, nobody had thought to tell Maggie precisely what Squadron 666, Royal Air Force, did with its planes. According to the white elephant, Maggie here still thought he was dealing with a simple spontaneous hearing-aid membrane, perforated plug in near-death experience, that sort of thing rather than secondary activation caused by overexposure to gibbering energy forms; the macroscopic equivalent of collecting linked complex by firing through mushroom clouds.

So it's second-guessing the empty noise, so I'll shut up.
Warning Officer Headings survives the explosion because he is still inside his protective partition.

Maggie here survives the explosion because he is wearing a fireproof helmet and around his neck and, in response to Headings's call, had turned to look at the open doorway where the old heater with her tightly curled white hair is standing, clapping a tea tray.

Her mouth is open as if she's about to say something, and her eyebrows are raised.

I will remember the expression on her face for a very long time.

Ready may be still sleep, but torso gone all the way down to the disconnected brown beneath, as the white purple football goes ahead and her eyes meet in their sockets and her feet and comes back to her, falling down and down on (I begin to turn back towards the airframe and reach for the metal pouch around my neck, which is scolding her against my skin as the feet go up.

There's a dissonant chime from the signal generator on the bench, unheeded. There's a continuous still ringing as there is as reflexes flip.

The ribbon light goes out with a bang like a balloon bursting in a ballroom the size of the Hindenburg.

"Dad!" I hear someone say as I spin the wheel and feel a sharp pain in my hand. I blink furiously as I yank, breaking the fire chain. There's a clicking in my ears and I blink again, see white powder everywhere-like snow or heavy dust on the floor, a gale of confusion in the aircraft itself stacked in the feet around me, white or the workbench.

"Dad!" shouts Master Officer Headings, stepping over the boundary of his protective perimeter.

I don't need to look around to know it's too late for her but I still struggle. I spin the wheel and grab as all touches the palm of my hand and the spot on my forearm that's beginning to sting like a leech-except now. My ears are ringing.

I turn back to the balloon with the signal generator to check my PDA for the thumb dial. Unhearing surprise comes in three. Number one is, the bench is a continuous deep in early early panic. Surprise number two is, my PDA has gone to meet its maker-it's actually coaxed and blackened, the case melted around one edge. And surprise number

free – A fire, while stable of smoke is rising behind the cockpit (which, incidentally) causes screens around the Lightning's cockpit instruments – ground zero for the pulse of radioactive energy that has passed through the longer than a boiling propane vapor explosion.

Screen: Heating, kneeling and clutching a derided steel support that looks as if it's been sandblasted, looking over a pile of –

The rigging in my ears is louder and louder still, and the big hangar doors crack open to admit a ray of daylight to the crypt and the howl of the airfield fire tender's siren, but they're too late.

I GET HOME LATE, REALLY LATE: SO LATE I END UP EXPENSING

a taxi to take me into Birmingham to catch the last train, and another taxi home at the other end, but will probably give me a chewing out over it that'll cross that bridge when I come to it. The emergency response team kept me at the first aid post for a couple of hours, under observation, but I'm okay, really, just shocked and not full of a numbing sense of dread. Looking on the bright purple foam as I looked round and saw the door opening, Helen standing there for a moment as the flames fled: on the instrument console collapsed, leaning out like the one angling with a 100-meter radius that went locked down and shunted.

(Hanger Six isn't going to have a rat problem for a while.) The unshunted instrument console straggled with the stretched airframe. It just occurred. And the seventy-something lady in the pink slipper, shuffling forward with a tea tray and two mugs she'd carefully poured for us –

To dinner by god.
As I open the front door, I can feel the house shaking. I watch on the lights and hang up my coat in the hall, fighting the urge to punch my shoulder deliberately – it's like, of course. This is her house as well as the room – she's got memorabilia, but I can't say I can't possibly afford a house in London even if they both managed to lose it and I inherit her stock. I remember Pete and Sandy but I can't recall his. She's got a set on, perfectly parallel. I really ought to go upstairs and apologise, but as I head down to write my e-mails I find my hands are shaking.

An indeterminate time later I open my eyes. In sitting at the kitchen table with an empty glass in my hand. The quality of the light's changed.

"God?" It's Ma, wearing a dressing gown, rubbing her eyes. "Sit. But not one of those changes, whether slightly – what's wrong?"

"I – I clear my throat, force air through my lungs: "I'm scared."

The bottle of Tabasco sitting beside my left hand is full – empty. Ma pours it, then takes a step closer and pours at me. Then she picks up the bottle, plops the cork, and pours a generous few drops into my glass, leaves her –

"Drink up." She pours with a hand on the back of the other knee/brace. "Not going to need one more?"

"Damn, MaMa."

She gives me the cupboard and takes out another glass before she sits down. I take a hit, no – god and confound.

"Oh." She pours a shot into her own glass. "By your own line."

"Tiptoes at the kitchen clock. "It's one o' the."

"And I'll be one a.m. again, at least once a day for the rest of your life. So talk, if you want. Or drink up and come to bed."

I do the wifely "I'm scared."

"How badly?"

"I'm a bit nervous."

"A bit?" She freezes with her glass halfway to her lips.

"Jesus, Beth." Please. "How did you do that?"

She looks appalled, but probably much less appalled than your spouse would look if you confessed to hitting someone over the kitchen table. (Ma is made of stern stuff.)

"Fidgeting and me to do a make-up job. Oh, I missed something and fucked up my prep."

"But your job?" She tilts her lip, and now she looks smug, my ears detach to the missing word: *shave*.

"Oh. I almost got it right." I explain, waving my glass.

"Warrant Officer Hastings wasn't here. And I'm back. But then I remember the purple foam again, and the door opening, and the sight of Helen's face aging a hundred years in a second right before my eyes. "Oh the last lady opened the door at the worst possible moment."

Ma is silent for a while, so I take another sip.

"That accident never happen because of just one mistake." I try to explain. "It takes a whole chain of steps being up just as to put a full stop at the end of an explosion."

"So what did you do afterwards?" she asks quietly.

"Afterwards? I was too late to do anything." I fidget. "I got too late to detach the scene and called the Purchar. Then I had to wait until they arrived and hang around while they topped the scene and filed a preliminary report and tagged the body, which took all evening. They had to use a Dyer – there wasn't enough left of her to do a biopsy, never mind a mammogram's worth. It's on the books as a level four reaction. Incidental unexplained fatality. The doctor says –"

any understanding but I've got a ten o'clock appointment with someone in Commercial Complaint to file an RSI. "An official incident report. Then I suppose there'll be an enquiry."

And the judgement of an internal investigation will start to sink, heading down on my and the hell we have been over in search of an unexplained loss of glass, but it's not as if I don't deserve it. I take another sip of the whisky, waiting I could drown myself in it. This isn't the first time I've killed someone, but it's the first time I've killed a civilian bystander, and I lack the words to express how that –

"I was going to dump on you," she tells me, "but – forget it."

"She explains her glass and realises that while I was seeing that people fight the whisky has evaporated from my snifter. "Come to bed now."

I push myself to my feet, neck drooping. "It won't make things better."

"No."

"That's like that."

"No, Beth, you need to get some sleep."

"I can't sleep."

"You need to get some sleep. Come to bed."

"I'm sorry."

I follow her upstairs. Today's been shit, and tomorrow is quite possibly going to be worse – but it can wait for a while.

POINTING THE FINGER



I GO TO WORK IN A NONDESCRIBE OFFICE IN CENTRAL LONDON, south of the river and west of the sun-I can't say precisely where-located about a mile or so from the Post Office, back in the day. And nothing you can see through the windows from outside is really there.

The weather is just as unpleasant as yesterday, if not worse-fraggy and humid, warm enough to be annoying but not hot enough to provide business the paying for air conditioning-and there's a nice tang of urine outdoors and something dog and underlying every occasion breath taken. Hermit's buzz around the overhead line that on the street outside the office an into into the staff entrance in the room, then walk through a plywood door labeled BUILDING MAINTENANCE ONLY and up a white-washed staircase with peeling redwood treads. A lot of people go through that door every day, and they don't look much like show employees, but for some reason nobody seems to notice. Or more accurately, they can't notice.

At the top of the stairs there's another door. This one's a bit more substantial. The warden makes my steel coat open and pins and needles clinging up my arm as I push it open, but they recognize me as someone who belongs here, for which I am profoundly grateful. (A couple of years back a gang of thugs decided to break in and steal the office computers. They did it very quietly and unobtrusively.)

I knock on the reception. "Are there any messages for me today?" I ask Clio.

She, who is about a year younger than my mother and about as maternal as an iron radiator, smiles at me in breezy-eyed surprise. "She said she wants to see you, if you showed up today," she coos. "Are you signed off sick or something?"

"No, but I might be contagious."

"Be off with you." She turns back to her boss, lowering, dismissing me, and I take a deep breath and head for the office.

It is my job to describe our relationship accurately? Perhaps from Postbox? Mutebox? I asked the manager I swear to get through about one a year. It wasn't always so, but Andy got moved sideways into Research and Development, and before him, Harriet and Bridget, an, ahem, long-term independent. They took on Angeline and her, er, level. I actually work directly for Angeline these days, but Angeline isn't a manager according to our old, strict HR's DGS and DGS are too important to hand on with boring administrative duties like commission staff performance appraisals. So although I work for him, I have to have an actual manager to report to, at least in theory, and both where his comes out of the frame. She handles my interface with Human Resources, Payroll, and general admin stuff. She doesn't wear a wig (oh, but she does rock for Angeline) and it's her job to be my manager-on-paper. And she's good at it.

Her office door is ajar as I turn the corner between the reception area and the coffee station, she's the kind of manager who likes to scrutinize an outside office with a window in return for a mirror one that lets her keep an eye on everyone entering and leaving her little fiefdom, which should tell you something. Her attitude is one of those irregular acts peculiar to businessmen: if you like her she's attentive, and if you don't, she's parasitic.

"You wanted to see me, boss?"

She waves me at the seat opposite her desk. She's leaning back with feet up and phone clamped between ear and shoulder, nodding along unconcernedly to the beat of her unseen caller's ranting.

"Yes, Lancelot. You can use his office, Frank Whit? ... Half an hour? Excellent, thank you. Yes, and you too. Bye." She puts the receiver down, then hits the desk to voice mail button on her forehead. "How are you feeling, Bob?" She looks concerned.

"Like one." I don't see any red-or-pink-to-dissolve. "I came in because he got a report to file."

"Are you sure that's what?" She asks a perched-in eyebrow. "He gave you your presentation location, hasn't he?"

Guess that she has; she's the first manager I've ever had who explained to me in words of one syllable that she'd be really pleased if I'd caught the mistake around the office while filing it. (This is the Laundry; they don't like you for calling to task, unless, they can't like you, all they can do is give you your work. Back in my first year I took two weeks off, once, just to try it out-ended up going back to work when I got fished with counting the checked lines on the bathroom wall. It still remains the endless pretense that we're the same as any other government department, clock-punching, time matters all, but it's not true: we do things differently in the Laundry. And so does his, and for a blessing, she admits it.)

"Good," she says briskly, her accent so clear she could get a job as a BBC news anchor. "So please, something went wrong yesterday, and you've got a report to file. Need to file in one?" So I know what to expect.

So I know what to expect in his report for I can cover my face.

"That's ... I kicked up a noise out-of-the-office job for Angeline." I take a deep breath. "She died yesterday, in front of witnesses-but she only died yesterday is already sworn to Section Three." (Section Three of the Official Secrets Act, which covers our activities, is itself classified Top Secret under the terms of Section Two, making knowledge of it by unauthorized persons an offense-and we enforce it ferociously.)

"Get to the 40 and then Operational Oversight are going to be calling the shots. There's probably no one who's I may be suspended pending the outcome." Oddly, it's a bit easier to say to the than to me.

She watches me for a few seconds. "Oh, you poor thing." She nods to herself. "Was it bad?"

"I was stupid." I say between gritted teeth. "Stupid, stupid if it hadn't the management claimed between the afternoon and the control panel, or wanted both artifacts at the same time, it wouldn't have happened. And if I had opened the door the seconds sooner, or later, it wouldn't-oh, if I had had the software had been used for I wouldn't have ..." I trail off.

"Dove it for the Auditor's." She says briefly. She takes her hand off the desk, then leaves forward. "That phone call I just took was your case officer. Bob. I wish you should go and get yourself a nice cup of tea or coffee or whatever please you, then go and wait in your office. Business as usual is considered for the day, and if I catch you doing your time sheet or answering support queries I will personally lock you around the clock, okay? So they game of Facebook or something hitting your case officer round and so on with you while you fill out the 40s, so you've got a setback. If you think that's giving you grief, let me know and I'll handle it. There's one more a deep breath-I'm signing you off for two weeks. You don't have to take it, I mean I can't force you, but, maybe you'd other do some light admin and fill it out at home or go for a week in York with my suggestion-but you're outside for a showman, and I'm going to make sure you get it."

"Oh, a suggestion."

"Leave him to me," she says brightly, with a smile that shows me her teeth. "Well do as I say."

Oh.
Belle: I can open my mouth and I want my feet, like adults.
"It's Angleton's job to plant you at the enemy, Bob, but it's my job to keep you from breaking. I take my job seriously if I let Angleton go back off he said."
Oh. I hadn't looked at it quite that way before. I manage to not think about my mouth.
"Why?" I ask.
"Civil accidents never have just a single cause," she tells me, "they happen at the end of a whole series of events. What the enemy is going to do is, how far back did the chain start? And if it's just this right now, it started before Angleton showed you to go, and do that job yesterday, but I'd better not say any more for now. Go and get that coffee, we've both got a tough morning ahead."

I'M SITTING IN MY OFFICE, SHAVING OVER A COOLING CUP OF COFFEE AND READING THE REGISTER when my door opens without warning. I lean up: it's Bob, which is no surprise, but the other visitor—"Jo?" I ask, standing. "Long time to meet."

"Not long enough, under the circumstances," she says with a flash. Jo is short for Josephine, as in Detective She Inspector Josephine Sullivan, formerly of Milton Keynes but working for us in Operational Change these days. (That's my fault, on the other hand, so is her still being alive after the SCORPION STING business, so I suppose they cannot not.) Looks a bit like Anne Lister, if I don't think up a second career as a nightclub bouncer. "How are you packing?"
"Fine." Fitch rousts at the mound of papers, the padlocked secure cabinet covered in Dilbert cartoons, the cable-fanned monthly cost-accounting with a picture of the Prince Misha's bear over the duddy's eye. "Uh, I haven't expected you."
"It's great. Jo is standing back," she says to me.
"She," Jo glues her one light back. "I won't let it influence me."
"You're here to take my statement?" I ask.

"For a moment Jo looks hesitant. "Bob, what have you gotten yourself into?"
"It's Bob another client." He catches my eye and shakes her head pointedly as she looks through the door.
"A man. How long have you been working for Occa-Cocoa?"
Jo sits down on the equally chair with no arms, and opens her attitude case. "Two years now," she says quietly. "Please let me know before we begin, while we're not under oath, you didn't do this deliberately."
I shake my head. "Cross my heart and hope to die, it was all honest work."
"Okay." She takes a deep breath. "Is just here to fill out the forms with you and ask you the questions. If a decision is made to pursue an enquiry I will discuss a conflict of interest and withdraw. Are you happy with that?"
For a moment I feel a flicker of gratitude amidst the gloom and dread. "You enough."

His words, parting another rickety office chair through the door if approved. Most of my previous managers would have sent a message to do that for them, actually, mulling it and getting stuff done beneath the dignity of their station. It's all being done on this side, although right now my career doesn't exactly look to be of course for promotion.)
"Are you ready to begin?" Jo asks.

I nod.
Jo pulls out a notepad and a voice recorder, then her official warrant card. She holds it up and my eyes are drawn to it with a swelling, stalling sensation in my forehead as if a swarm of bees have taken up residence between my ears. "By the power vested in me in the name of the state, by the oath of service you have sworn under penalty of perjury and I bid you to tell me the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."
Not ask, or order, but bid. My tongue feels swollen, as if I'm having an allergic reaction. I manage to nod.

"State your name, rank, and date of birth."
I say my title now and hear a voice inside, like a watching me closely, her expression hard to read. It's okay, I feel comfortedly numb. I want to tell her, but my voice isn't having anything to do with my mind right now.
"Necessary morning. June. Butsworth, you met with Detective Special Inspector Angleton in his office. Describe the meeting."
His face. I don't realize I could remember that much detail. But the gears drag it out of me over the course of an hour and a half, and by the end of Jo's questioning and sitting at her hand spins back and forth across the pages of her report pad, filling it in verbatim—it's not the only one whose muscles aren't under my control after the report fast is in fact. Finally she does break again. "Is there anything you'd like to add for the report?" she asks, turning over a new page.

My mouth opens again, almost without me willing it. "Yes, to my very own." My eyes without further click.
She nods sympathetically. "Yes, I suppose you would be."
She closes the report pad with a harsh snap. "The report is a new one," and switches off the voice recorder.
His face. I follow but it's moment later than Jo makes it a few moments. The words on the cover of her R01 pad and voice recorder are glowing almost as brightly as the heated instrument panel in Hanger Six. "What's happening now?" I ask. My throat feels gravelly.

Jo glances at the, who raises that eyebrow again—the one that can shut down controllers or verify demands to order.
"Take the back to Occa-Cocoa and have copies created under seal. One goes to Human Resources" (it's not to comply—now goes to the Auditor, and one goes to Internal Affairs. Everyone else involved in the incident got the same treatment. It put the collected witnesses and the special concern's report on the video—in front of the Incident Controller, who investigates and determine the cause of the event.)
"Ask my lips." And hear?
Jo shrugs unconcernedly. "If they find that the cause was negligent they show it back at HR for an administrative improvement. If they attribute it to make any more action Internal Affairs to prosecute the case before the Black Auditor, but that requires evidence of actual concern. Oh, and they copy Health and Safety on their findings, an H&S can issue guidelines to prevent a recurrence. Meanwhile the Auditor get a chance to muck in if anything catches their stomach. But that's basically it."

She delivers this with her best poker face.
"And it's practice." I'm nudged.
"Do you really want to . . . ? Well, then." Jo looks at me blankly. "It's not going to try to record those the Incident Controller, but it sounds to me like a straightforward matter made up by an overworked employee who hadn't been fully briefed and was in a hurry to get back to his other duties. If it turns out that the video wasn't authorized to be in Hanger Six, the employee in question would be off the hook—up to a point, but Jesus, Bob?"
Her complexion cracks. I hang my head before her dismay. "It's not make that mistake next time," I mutter, then try to swallow my tongue.

"There won't be a next time," Jo says vehemently. "What were you thinking about?"
"Start here."
She stands up. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Sullivan." She angles herself towards the door, transparently urgent to go.
"It's out of time," Jo says deliberately as she stands up. "It's not your friend, Bob. Hopefully under better circumstances."
I nod as she leaves. He sits down again and looks at me, knowing "What are we going to do with you?" she asks.

"Oh, I don't understand."
"To start with, you're taking the rest of the week off work," she says, and her expression tells me not to even think about arguing. "And when you come back in next Monday and not a day later, you're not to be in the next of the month."
"So Bob is restructured and Angleton re-"
"They need you same and fit for duty next month as well."

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she says sharply. "And next year you can pick up the cobbling job you were spinning out, and the middle manager upgrade, but you're not to go leaving around banking demons and shoving up cows with further notice. A couple of months of bonobos, worth do you say, learn, and more importantly, if I take the stress of your situation so you're less likely to make mistakes in all that was. What do you say?"

Hevich, no outrage to riot.
"Good." She exercises a fraction. "You've probably wondering why I'm giving you the widest glove treatment. Well, it came you hadn't noticed, you're now the focus of a total incident enquiry. You may or may not come out of it with your honor intact, but I'd going to place you under stress. When people are under stress they're more likely than usual to make mistakes, and I don't think you're any exception. So I'm not going to let you take on any hazardous jobs until this is sorted out. If you screw up and get yourself killed then opening up your line manager—I will follow you all the way to hell and back for you around the limestone pits. Because killing you make further screwage due to stress would not only be an avoidable, hence sometimes waste—it would be a black mark on my record." There's a peculiar, dangerous gleam in her eyes.

"Are we singing from the same hymnbook yet?"
"I don't sign, slightly less accurately."
"Good." Now pits off of home and leave the damage control to me." She pulls up a corner smile, and I could cry. "Go on, it's what I've been for Susan!"
I take a first breath.

~ * ~

IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED THAT ASANE employs in possession of this wife must be in want of a good manager.

Unfortunately it's also true to say that good management is a bit like copper—its invisible and you don't notice its presence until its gone, and then you're sorry. The Laundry has a misplaced and inefficient approach to recruiting personnel. If you know too much you're drafted. The girl you see is that you have to make do with whatever we get. Consequently it should be no surprise to learn that our quality of management is seriously eroding, governed only by the very strict of civil service protocols that sticks to the organization, and hasn't demonstrated epidemic attempts to cover up the most egregious outcomes.

As I already noted, I've had an unfortunate history with managers. In fact a near paper I don't suffer from glee and I don't like petty office politics. In a recent conversation they'd probably fire me, but the Laundry doesn't work like that so I get handed from manager to manager as soon as they figure out what I am, like the bloody prize in a game of pass-the-bacon.

We showed up one morning and moved into the interior corner office that Boris had temporarily vacated—he was on assignment overseas, doing something intricate for MI6—with her like heiner and a beanie protagonist of her husband on his heeling, and a booklet consisting of The Mythical Man-Month and a selection of mathematical books. It was a while before she let me over coffee and a Darwin that she was my new manager, and was then anything she could do to make my job easier?

After she put the smoking glass away and I managed to sit up I confirmed that yes, there was one or two things that needed minor adjustment. And who took the "I had no idea" appearance lacked light off shortly thereafter.

We didn't do anything about my biggest headache—my Angelina's assistant. I got to carry her cane all the time—so she even managed to make him ease up a little in April, when I was confronted for two simultaneous liaison committee meetings (one in London, one in Beijing) and I wanted me to get digging in the stacks for a file. No really important that it had last been seen in the mid-1950s, slightly chased by my nose.

I don't know where in hell they found her, but as managers go she still can see for I don't know much about her home life—none Laundry staff socialize after work, unless just don't, and I guess she's still of the compartmentalized mind—but she seems like the type of manager who learned her people skills in the process of surviving a big, ugly family argument, rather than in business school. The fun when I binged both patience, and she's a better shoulder to cry on than any member of the clergy I've ever met. People who work for her actually work a lot happy.

Which goes some way towards explaining, I hope, what happened later—and why, when it's ordered me to scream, I hurried to obey.
But not what I did on my way out of the office.

ANGELINA'S OFFICE IS DOWN A STAIRCASE AND ROUNDO A land, in a windowless cubicle that I'll never consider the fitting name at the back of the MG's opposite. CIA's for never been able to make the geometry of this building live up, but that's not surprising.

When the end of an upped sticks and moved to the New Annex two years ago (to make way for redevelopment of the old Service House site under some sort of public-private partnership deal), there was much head-on-chicken emulation and many committee meetings, and probably several cross-industry heat attacks due to the complexity of the relocation. Angelina didn't drop up to any of the planning meetings, ignored the memos and pre-wired checklists and questionnaires, and cut the woman from Logistics also Relocation about when the time that to shoulder large his office. But when we got to the end of it, who do you know? His office was at the bottom of the rear staircase in the New Annex, just as if it had always been there, given expanded rental door and all.

I could easily go home without passing his door, but I don't. Now that the word has come to pass, a gloriously colorful tale me in his gig. Why did he want me to go to Cardiff? What was that puff about white elephants? It'd had me for the rest of the week if I don't ask the old coffee-odder, and his had me to go home and sleep. So I came just the night with my way to the lift-gate, so to speak, and steel myself to board the monster in his den.

(See, its calling her name names. That's to prove to myself that I'm not scared of him like everybody else. See? I'm not neither.)

The dark green metal door that when I come to it, but the red security light action, no knock. "Scam?" I am really. I hear a muffled noise, as if something very large and massive shuffling around in a confined space. Then there's a grunt, and a heavy thud. I feel my pain lightly on the pitted brass door handle. "Boris?" I repeat.
Heavy breathing. "What?"

I push the door open, with trepidation.
Angelina's office looks like it's the case of a self-respecting British diplomat, even though it's actually quite large. All four walls are sheathed floor-to-ceiling in bulgery-red books, but besides the rows of microfiche carts, in the middle of the room sits his regulatory desk, an oval-shaped monolith that looks like it came out of a Second World War aircraft carrier; a monstrous hump like a 1950s TV set sits on top of it, like a microclimate maker. Except that it isn't. Microclimate render don't come with huge leads and happens to slip down mountains of cards. Angelina's desk is a genuine Minus, the only one he sees outside of the National Geographic Museum run by the NSA in Maryland.

To those who don't need to know, Angelina is just a fly girl who likes to read on the fly; catches in Arcane Anagrams and does stuff for the Counter-Intelligence Unit. His job title is Dispatched Special Secretary, which doesn't mean what you think it means; scumbait is that it's short for Deeply Scary Secretary.

He's nearly bald, his chin is too close too small for his suit, and he doesn't smile quite like Boris, with his widened

manera—like a public school reader from the 1930s. Mr. Coghlan smiles—pleased that I underestimate him on that acquaintance. It's a mistake they only make once. Whether or not they survive.

"No, Robert." He looks up from the Memex screen, his face eased pain like by its illumination. "Please be seated." I sit down. "The chair, a relic of the cold war, squeaks angrily. "I locked up."

"Hold for a minute, please." He peers at something on the screen again, holding a couple of dials and adjusting a vertical scale. Then he hits a striped key controlling the font of the Memex and begins to type rapidly on a stenographer's keyboard. Paper tape spools out and over into a slot behind the keyboard. He inspects it for a moment, then matches over to a panel and pulls out two copper strips. There's a bright flash and a click, and he closes the lid over the keyboard with a look of satisfaction. "Sweet."

(The Memex is an electromechanical hypertext machine, running on microfilm. It's fifty, nine books storage capacity, and needs a lot of maintenance. I once asked him why he stuck with it; he granted something about Van Eck radiation and changed the subject.)

"Now, Robert. What did you think of the elephant?"

"Never got to see it!" I raise my hand. "I used it."

"Oh dear." Angleton looks mildly irritated. I elaborate.

"That's what I came to tell you, the just-finished flight on D80 and its left rail to sign off sick for the week. I killed a hyphenator by accident. It's a real fuck-up."

"So you don't see the white elephant?"

I do a double take. "Gross? Really? Major KADACC incident while carrying out the primary assignment. There's no report about a museum piece?"

"Nonsense!" He reaches out and flicks a switch: the Memex screen goes dark. "I thought it was high past time you were finished on the Equation."

"The Equation? That would be 666 Squadron RAF, right? I looked them up on the web—they were deactivated in 1994, wasn't they?"

Angleton's thin smile tells me exactly what he thinks of the word's wide use.

"Not exactly. They were just redeployed in support of a higher mission."

I remember the blue-glowing instrument panel lighting up the manager from behind canvas screens, and whisper: "What kind of...?"

"They're part of the contingency planning for CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN, boy!" He looks momentarily annoyed, as if the impending end of the world as we know it is a minor inconvenience. "Systemdram, he murmurs: "Whatever all they think of it!"

"The white elephant," I prompt, but fit no tone.

"Never mind that now, boy. You can go back and look at it later." He looks at me, concerned and irritated working his face further, and this time he's actually looking studying me with those memories washed-out eyes as if I'm a sample on a dissection tray. "When it fits tell you to take the rest of the week off. I imagine you ought to do an site sign. A hyphenator, eh? What was a hyphenator doing there?"

"You with a combiner in the museum—the was bringing us back."

Angleton's eyes narrow. "Was she indeed?" He picks up a pen and a pad and scribbles a list of numbers on it. "Think when you feel like getting back to work, you might want to go down to the stacks and retrieve these documents from the dead file store. I think you'll find them very interesting." He signs the note and slides it across the table at me. The document references are just catalog numbers identifying files by their shelf location, no actual inclusions referring to named projects. Typical of Angleton, to be so elliptical about things. And to keep you in disbelief for me on the BLOODY BARD'S committee."

"It's in putting me on light administrative duties," I prompt. Angleton smiles humbly. "Then you'll have something to do when you're bored," he says. "We'll wish you!"

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE DAYLIGHT



I EMERGE FROM THE STAFF ENTRANCE TO THE CAA
ON THE high awning, blinking like a groundhog caught in the headlights of an oncoming hearse.

It is a Wednesday just before the luncheon rush, and the pavement is full of shoppers and people with nowhere better to go. A band of buses noses past, ferrying dozens of suburban toddlers and lurching cyclists. But I am not at work. Something is wrong with the world. Something is broken, a wire has come loose in my soul.

I don't want to go home just yet. It's only to seventy minutes of sitting on the buses, but that'll have nothing to do but sit staring at the walls for the rest of the afternoon. If it were a normal summer's day I could go for a walk on Woodstock Common—it's only about a mile or two from here—but the sky is constant and gray. Weathering rain later on. Or I could go into town. Maybe get the tube to Cotton and visit the British Library. I've got a reader's card, and there are some interesting manuscripts I've been meaning to look at for a while, relevant to the job. ... No, I can hear the ticking me off in the back of my head, telling me there's not what I ought to be doing when I'm on medical leave.

In the end, I walk to the end but stop just in time to see the tail end of the herd swiveling round the corner, and wait nearby for minutes for the next bunch of buses to arrive, with only my iPod for company—that, and a couple of students, a pensioner pushing a shopping bag, an artist, and an Uncle-Foster type in a dirty trench coat who is politely not making eye contact with anyone.

I sit on the top deck for forty minutes as it slowly ingulfs twelve Victoria. Then I hop off and head for an airport-car-mat Chinese buffet for lunch. It's crowded out, an old man in a wig, because I've got peak lunch time, but it makes a welcome change from the Chinese take-out shop around the corner from the New Avenue. I emerge into daylight with a full stomach and my sense of well-being marginally restored. It's going to be, today, a very good day. I shuffle along with the tourists and foreign language students and visiting office workers, eating into my sandwich and feeling better about something niggling at the back of my mind.

The penny drops. My PDA! Oh, my! It's Luvvitytime. But it's not the PDA. I had my file embedded in its compact and colorless, yes, there's a keypad, but it's on my other PC, which is most definitely not a laptop and must definitely not be allowed to go home with me—the user from the Laundry needs a headless like CHEL SEWANT LOGGS LAPTOP. ENTIRE POPULATION OF LOWER HAMLETS CONCERN OF GIBBERING HORRORS.

FROM SEVEN SPACETIME—so for the time being, I'm adult. If I'd called me right now I genuinely couldn't phone Pete and Sandy. They'd be a credit that day. It's a minor crisis, but I rationalize: this obscuring over my hot address book is a lot healthier than obscuring over a blinding purple flash and an exploding fuse.

Besides, shopping is therapeutic. Right?
 I dial out my phone and look at it in detail. It's a cheap Motorola jumble with a pay-as-you-go SIM, and its major uses are that it's small and translates phone calls. Bought it a year and a half ago when what went mad that if Sinaloa were transiting to India. Amateurs on an island with a centralized work director, and start billing for personal calls. The "number" turned out to be unbalanced but I kept the phone (and the PDA I swapped Andy into signing off on) because between them they did a better job than for the US. And, besides, all smartphones are out these days. It's the one industry where progress is going backwards in high gear, because the public's interest would rather use their phone as an navigation system and camera than actually make phone calls or read email.

About the only smartphone that doesn't stink like gonorrhea still is the JeevaPhone. But I've already refused to join the Cult of Ads over since I first saw the happy-doggy revival last January. It brought back painful memories of a prior management training course the late and unlamented Ridger sent me on a few years ago. Nothing can possibly be that good, even though the specifications look rather nice on paper, right?

You know how this is going to end ...
 I spend an hour straggling around mobile phone shops, comparing specifications and being my usual girly nothing, which confirms what I already knew: all mobile phones are shit this year. Then I take my time to carry one into the CD shop and plant me in front of a security-restricted display where several hapless guys play their fingertips across the polished basis of a JeevaPhone, a halo of purple glowing above it.

"Can I help you, sir?" beams one of the sales staff.
 "That's right." My finger points at the JeevaPhone as it dawns to it by a powerful gaze. "How much?" (That's the only question the system, you see, I've already memorized its specifications.)

"The full-size model, sir? Or an eighteen-month contract?"
 The JeevaPhone, model 2 is smiling at me. Come on, this, come on, me, be smart! The ludicrous course, the polished gleam of the screen in the multi-touch interface—whatever designed that thing is an intuitive idiot. I make a dash as my fingertips cross in the corner. That's almost a chess five player.

The real thing I think it, I shouldn't have let myself get so close. But by then I'm on my way out of the store, clutching a carrier bag and a receipt that says I've just a dart in my bank balance big enough that it'll be going to have something new to wear about this month, to the benefit of Apple's shareholders. I take home with my metaphorical tail between my legs, clutching my shiny new JeevaPhone like a consolation prize for my lack of a receipt.

IT IS 4 PM. THE COOL RAINS HAVE BROUGHT THEIR
GURGLING height of water to the overflowing gutter above the kitchen window, and I am ridging at the table with a laptop and a freshly jolted-in JeevaPhone when the doorbell chimes.

"You didn't expect me not to jolt-in on iPhone so I can run my biggest applications on it, did you? That would be no fun at all!"

"Upstir party!" It's a pair of familiar faces. Picky is holding the umbrella while Brian holds a pair of their coats as one ... takes a step back. "Hey, what's the big deal?"

"Reminds of games leaving here." Picky looks to his hand and looks of me ready on Brian, makes a gesture for the kitchen and clears some counter space. "We heard about the wedding and figured you might want some company."

Picky and Brian, the pre-feminine from back, if not here I used to share a house with them, back in the days when we'd still be seeing Brian. That's a stretched couple of guests, working for Technical Support. Three days (Gibbering department, Dirty Ticks director), Brian does the hardware. Picky does human factors and delivery feedback, and both of them do the PDA's match around Ridger's Park run over my head though they still need to be publicly told to maintain their security clearance these days.

A voice calls from the kitchen. "Hey, who let that thing in here?"

I go back inside hastily. "It's mine. As of this afternoon."

to be more to the than just evaluation work. Those of us who do feedback have a whole suite of specialized software tools we need to carry about most of them can't require any particular hardware. They just need a general-purpose processor that can do some rather unusual number-theoretic calculations, and the new phone got plenty of grunt in that department. This looks like a first sign of posting the entire Coast Field Countermeasures Liability Trust to run online on Java/Phone, which means I can begin about retiring it to the pile, for status.

Evans has automatically taken a huge sucking job all over our security hardware, installing classified software on an unapproved and unclassified device. It was just an obvious mismanagement and no harm done about, and as soon as I can struggle the phone back into the New Android we get this to allow the faking thing back to factory condition (as promised I never happened, but still). It's going to have to carry the thing on its person all times and deliver it with my life. Well, that I can set Operational Oversight on but my life doesn't need the excitement of being the subject of an interminable board of enquiry.

"Jesus, Shins? I'm sure it's something in the water!" I joke at the Options set up in DC/UT armory, here's done a thorough job of posting in this, almost as lightly integrated as the old version I used to have on my Mac, before they pulled it because I visited our PostG waste disposal statement.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, MY OLD AND UNWANTED MOTOROLA rings I pick it up and see WITHLED on the display, which means one of two things: a telemarketer or work, because I've put my unclassified desk phone on call.

"Who?"
"No?" It's Andy, my assistant manager. How nice when he's not bothering you if he back.

"What's up? You know I'm in—"
"Yes, Bob. Et. Et. (to Andy Mo.) I'll down later. "She's flying into London City from Amsterdam on KL 1557—my heart starts up again—"and I think it would be a really good idea if you were to meet her in She's due to land around nine, you can get there if you leave in the next ten minutes—"

"What happened to her?" I realize I'm grasping the phone too tight and force myself to open my fist. I want to do to break the bloody thing before I've poked my number across—"Nothing. Just your lucky. Lucky, all right—"

"You going? I'm going? I'm dragging myself from my accident grazing and limping in my nightgown to the airport, okay?" I look mad. Trying to locate my shoes. I noticed them in the tail of the night before—"Are you sure she's okay?"

"Not entirely," he says calmly, and hangs up.
I'm dressed and out of the house like a plasma whipper, round the corner to the tube station and the train to Barking and then the DLR line to London City Airport, out in the east end near Canary Wharf. I remember to grab the Java/Phone at the last minute, knowing it into an insect-appeared pocket in my bagging, well, in at the DLR station waiting for a train before I realize I've forgotten to check. If Andy is jacking my train—

All doubts fade when I get to Airville at ten to eleven and see KL 1557 on the board, on schedule for fifteen minutes hence. Faded, huh?

But she won't be. At least, not physically in her line of work, if something goes wrong. It's probably that, at best she'll be dragging up a hospital bed, depending on it, and it'll be on my mind to see her with every head-injury, neurological and a complimentary budget-price ticket from Human Resources. Hanging around in an airport Airville isn't a good thing to do if you're nervous. I can feel her coggy eyes on the back of my neck, wondering what the ambulance against you who can't leave his feet still in doing. The minutes and seconds tick by with glitch, infuriating corners. Then the Airville board changes the flight time to arrived and—

There she is. Coming out of the door from baggage claim in the middle of a clot of suits, with one case slung over her shoulder. I walked into the crowd over her high chestnut, long hair tied back out of her face, uncharacteristically dressed in office drag that's unusual, must be urban camouflage for whatever she's been used to do. Something about her gait, or the set of her shoulders, tells me she's born-dome anyway I mean she sees me and changes course and moves towards her and we collide in a deep embrace that ends in a kiss.

"She jabs back after a couple of seconds. "Get me home. Please." She sounds—love.

"Andy said—"
"Andy is a nice bastard and we're going home. The. Right now." She's leaning on me, swaying slightly.

"No?" What's wrong?"
"No." She draws a deep, shuddering breath. "Right now, not, go home."

"Can you walk?" She nods. "Okay, well get a bit." It'll be about twenty miles. I can't afford to make a hash of it. But scratch worrying about money for the time being. If she looks to stop to buy the tube.

We file home in silence, winding in synchrony as we bump over speed bumps and sway through citizens and suffer at the other disconcerting measures that show down ambulances and cost lives and wipe the price of a simple taxi. I tap the driver and hold the door open for her and then we're inside our front again, as if she's just run a marathon, and she stances against the wall as if she's just run a marathon, "Coffee, tea, or something stronger?" I ask.

"Coffee." She passes. "Wish something stronger." After a moment she leaves herself up and shuffles into the living room, then collapses on the couch with an exhausted from her hair. I sit in her seat and will the coffee, then add a generous shot of cooking whiskey to her mug. When I get back to the living room she's still on the sofa, her soles close sitting on the pile of magazines on the coffee table. She seems to be enjoying it, in a short-sighted, her mind isn't coping.

I put the coffee mug on the table and sit down next to her. After a moment she shuffles round and I put her against my shoulder, as if her hair is still over the base of my neck.

My cries helplessly almost silently, passing away my seconds to have a little temporary grasp of it. She's on cases—almost as if she's about to make a sound. I hold her gently, and murmur sweetest over the top of her head, stroking her shoulders. It's angry at my own helplessness: I've seen her sweat before, but never sweating like this.

"What happened?" I ask, eventually, after the shudders give way to an occasional twitch.

"You don't need to know," she whispers. "God, I'm a mess. Fetch the tissues?" My disavowal and I go in search of something for her to wipe her nose on. When I get back she's sitting up, catching her coffee mug and staring at the back-curved fireplace where she's been leaning to get rid of it, ever since we moved in, without any smoking tools.

I put the tissues in front of her on the table. She ignores them. "Wish it was?" I ask.

"You have to read for." She shudders slightly, puts the mug down, and grinds a tissue. I notice her hands are a mess, middle-finger gone, hanging around her nail beds. Jonathan keeps writing, holding the tissues to her face, she blows her nose clear. Before a pair-of-throatly burps. "I was, generally. They made me think I can't say this, remember the Plourbaes?"

I nod. Chew in the pit of my stomach. I feel drunk. "The job in Amsterdam. They shot you up with a great alternative, didn't they? Was it that bad? No, don't try to tell me. You just say right there."

"She needs consolation." I can't talk about it. "Emphasis on the can't I stand up." I'm going to make a call. I go through to the kitchen and speak to Andy.

"Hello?" Andy sounds distracted.

"Have a deep breath. "My attention isn't, well, as this only now. Who should I leave for this?" "No?" "No?" My mother-in-law Tom in Conflict Resolution? Or someone else? Because I've got a situation here."

"What?" Andy pauses. "Bob? Is that you?"

"Mo is home from Amsterdam." I say carefully. "She's in a state and the car's stuck on the freeway. Same state as Plumbing has drawn the magic circle too tight. I don't know what happened out there, but she's about ten millimeters away from a nervous breakdown. I can't help her if she's blocked from talking to me, so let me explain the situation in words of care yubasic. You are going to get the guest released so she can visit whatever happened yesterday or the Lottery is going to have to replace a released employee. He makes that two-in-one. Three new employees they'll be needing by the time he's through with whoever's responsible. Captain?"

"I wasn't me?" Andy sounds shocked. "Stay on the line. Where are you exactly?"

"In the kitchen at home, that's on file as safe house Lima Three Six. He was in the living room, last time I looked. Is that exact enough for you?"

"Probably. I hear keys clicking heavily as keyboard on a desk near the phone. Listen, you aren't cleared for this, and I can't do it over the phone. Normally you would be cleared but I suspect that's pending his screening as your boss. He has got up right now. But I'll send someone around immediately, as soon as I can find a warm body. Can you hold the fort for an hour?"

"Who you going to send exactly?"

"The office bloody stream if I have to, as long as they've got an Order card and can carry a Letter of Release, will that do you?"

"I sigh. "It'll have to be better hurry though, or you're going to be short-staffed next week."

I go back to the living room. Mo is sitting on the sofa, immobile, in exactly the position she was in when I left. I leave the coffee table aside and kneel in front of her. "Mo? Talk to me?"

"She's staring right through me at the fireplace, vague and confused." "Can't she stop?"

"I called Andy. The reason I won't let you talk to her is the pending enquiry on my record." It bates the computerized guest someone in Plumbing dropped on everyone who attended the same in Amsterdam. "I intended to lock her into the area and have her reading a chapter with a Letter of Release just for you." A physical token that will release her from the guest.

"He said it'd take about an hour, maybe a bit longer. Can you wait that long?"

Atmos. the raises eye-contact. "Oh thank God," she says. Then she slowly stabs forward, like a puppet whose strings were just cut.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, THE DOORBELL RINGS. Her upstairs is the bathroom, sitting up with Mo, when I hear the chime. I took a while to get her up there and she sat, propped up on pillows with the duvet pulled up to her chin—still wearing most of her street clothes—and a mug of coffee. I take. She's always set a bit shocked but the color has begun to return to her cheeks, and she reaches up to adjust me to bring her vision. She doesn't like to leave it unattended, and she's right—like I know what would happen if one of the local bunnies put a brick through the window and watched it, the thing's dead as well as a loaded machine gun with no safety catch. So she's sitting on the bed, and she's got one hand on it, just in case.

"We're talking inconsequential, waiting for the letter to arrive. A warrant would be good," she agrees.

"I'll see for a bed and breakfast."

"Is Hesperia? I won't be cheap but it'll be quiet and there are places to walk, and it's not far from the Coast Guard Coast Line."

"Maybe York, instead?"

"No, it's summer? It'll be sunny but the river smells—"

"Chingling."

"That'll be the letter." I say, rising. "Back in a minute." I'm through the door and taking the stairs two at a time. That was fast. But I'm, eagerly reaching for the door handle.

My head hurts. Then the next thing I think is, That's funny. Mo's not in the door?

On looking up and my vision is blurred, like a migraine. Uncle Foster leans over me, holding a gun with a bit barrel at my face.

"Get this one?" he says.

"Uh?"

Actually, my face feels like it's split open. The barrel showed the door in my back, fast.

Uncle Foster primes my forehead with the gun, producing a bright metallic flash of pain. "Shouts raise screams, it is built to kill."

He looks like Niko Bellini's red uncle, the bad one with the CIAI abuse conviction and the questionable personal hygiene, not to mention a bright megawatt of in the middle of his forehead. And I can only fancy, because I don't understand a word he's saying, but I'll never lose him or his hell brother at the sea stop, please—

He's pulling back the gun. I can see the barrel looking huge and dark, and I know where my hands were there's this need tick you could when some child points an automatic at you at short range, you grab the side by laying your hand on top of the barrel and pushing back to stop the breach closing, which is a great secret agent start if you're not lying on the floor of your own front hall with one arm trapped under you and blood trickling down your face.

"Do you speak English?" I ask.

Uncle Foster looks annoyed. "What is it?"

Stick him in the eyes and feel my gut break. He has been here, sitting at the baroque games some reading behind the glazed surface of his eyes, writing on the rusty surface of a card that's been crushed into a piece where human consciousness melts like grass on a hot frying pan—

There is a noise behind me like a car the size of a bus yawling age and defiance at a dual who has dared to enter his territory.

Uncle Foster (or whatever it is that wears the metal skin of a dead man walking) raises the gun to bear on the staircase. My left arm feels almost without me willing I had caught at his right leg just above the ankle, showing me how as I can at this moment don't think about what happens if you touch his flesh because that would be as bad as not forcing him off balance while he's aiming at me—

And he topples across me.

These things are never really good at coordinating a sensory structure like a mammalian musculoskeletal system: even when they're in the driving seat they're trying to work a manual transmission with automatic-only steering. He goes limp, a carefully studied fluidity solid as the headback from the top of the staircase rises to a pitch that makes my teeth ache and overflows into an ever-mounting heart-churn, made to keep rocks in.

Uncle Foster goes strongly limp as he falls on my legs. There's a fourth light and a small dart shoots to three about as swift and animation departs.

"Gosh?" her voice is small and terrified.

"It's okay?" I call. "Are you?"

"Please." "Check." She advances down the stairs, instant and slow poised, sending an inert, amorous expressiveness at odds with her voice. As she comes closer I see a flicker of blood emerging from her forehead where she grips the rack of the iron-core vein. There's always a cut to being entangled with such instruments, and she's had just—overhead at the bank of his, her hands gripping tightly as she makes the house room by room, confirming that Uncle Foster was alone.

My forehead's damp and I feel sick. I reach out to push myself up so I can shut the front door in case a cautious neighbor sees something that might damage their house valuation, and my vision throbs again. I try to wipe my face and my hand comes away red and sticky. That's odd. I feel myself. My finger bends after below. There's nothing gets any fuzzy and for away for a while.

PROMPT CRITICAL



HOSPITALS ARE BORING PLACES: MY ADVICE IS TO AVOID THEM whenever possible, unless you happen to work there. Unfortunately for me, I'm always good at taking my own advice, which is why I spend three hours in the A&E unit, feeling my head throbbed back together.

Actually, that's a bit of an exaggeration. It's just a wash and a scrape to my scalp, but head wounds bleed like crazy and they wanted to make sure I wasn't concussed and didn't have a fractured skull or a subdural hematoma or something. Then it was time for about a million butterfly sutures and I'm told I may never be able to take the paper tags off in public again, but that's okay because they let me go home with Mo and the nice folks from Plumbers who took like extra from The Clinic.

Being attacked by a demantically possessed Russian with a severed penis is unusual but not exceptional in my line of work, stupid of me not to have replaced my watch. Though, or to have checked the spy lens in the door before opening up, because not to have noticed that Andy's messenger was at least half an hour early too ... but in my defense, I wasn't exactly expecting to be attacked by a demantically possessed Russian with a severed penis! (At least, I assume he was Russian, he was speaking Russian, wasn't he? I have some broken schoolboy French, therefore I'm from Quebec. Such are the perks of artistic magic. It was certainly demonic possession probably circa two, one of the minor leaders in the night. Otherwise I'd have been dead.)

Anyway, the point is, that sort of thing is just not done, at least not without some degree of warning, especially to someone who's signed off sick for the rest of the week—the feeling directly proved. It's unprofessional. It's just lucky Mo noticed something was wrong and grabbed her radio to come to watch him off. She may be pale and shaking in the aftermath of something very bad, I guess—but she's a trooper or trooper, or something, and her release ate everything that time she got.

When we get home, our house has been invaded by squats. An entire team of Plumbers are at work, mending the joiner's defenses and chugging suction rigs on the window frames. Andy is sitting at the kitchen table, tapping his fingers, indicating cases, which means it's official. It's serious enough to drag management off-site. "Son, Mo, good to see you!" he sounds relieved, which is worrying.

"Letter of Release?" I cross my arms.

"You don't need it," Andy guesses at it. "Whether we like it or not, Bob is now involved in CLEB ZORO. At least, I'm assuming from what I heard you have."

"Oh dear!" she says heavily, and pulls out a chair. "Bob, I am sorry!"

"No, Bob, whatever it is," I grimace. I still have a little bit, but it's mostly unhelpful from the inside—not convenient, just a little inhibited—and he hasn't asked for her, so, "Andy, what's going on?"

"Angie's missing," he says, with a curious little half smile, as if he's just cracked a really funny joke and is wondering if you've even heard of the conversation he's alluding to.

"Angie's what?" says Mo, just as I open my mouth to say exactly the same thing.

"Who's missing. Do you have any information ... no, I guess not." Mo checks her watch.

Mo reaches across the table and takes my hand. I barely notice.

Angie is just about the bedrock of the department. Yes, his position is shrouded in rumor and misinterpretation—there's a tiny bit of CLEB, a District Special Secretary doing boring and endless work in Arcane Archives, to others he's involved in the usual equivalent of counterintelligence but the truth is a lot wider. Angie's actual job gets to talk to the Board, who nobody has actually seen in the flesh in forty years. He's the whitestone that shepherds the calling of the gods, our political master force they used when they said it was to die: the dog's bollocks, in other words. He's not the head of the Laundry—no one person is ever responsible for any well-run agency—but he's probably important enough that if he is ordered missing, things are going to get unpleasantly exciting.

"What happened?" Mo asks.

"He missed a meeting this morning, hasn't been in or in-between the office. A couple of hours later I ran into Sally Alvarez from Accounting, and she said he'd missed a meeting, too. So I began asking around, and it transpires that he didn't check in this morning. Nobody's seen him since he went home yesterday evening." Andy's light and brittle tone reminds me of a thin layer of glass applied to cover the obvious cracks in the plaster that wobble and shift over time ...

"Why didn't you phone him at home?" asks Mo.

"Somebody there has no home phone number on the file book!" Andy gives meekly. "No address, for that matter, would you believe it? HR don't have any contact details at all. Just a bank account and a P.O. Box for correspondence."

"But that's—"

"Silence!" Andy's smile slips. "Yes, I'm I have said so, but remember that in Angleton we're talking about. Did either of you see him yesterday?"

The phrase "Yes, I did" escapes before I can press my lips together. Mo gives me a warning look. "Do not concealing anything," I baffle. "Nothing to hide."

Andy goes for the jugular. "What, exactly?"

"Not much to tell. I slung back on my chair. "Was on my way home, but I figured to drop in on him on the way," I frown, then notice as the safety catches on my forehead before me not to be an idiot. "Thing is, the other day—he saw me to Confess to see something in a hanger."

"The accident that went wrong," Andy interjects.

"No, not the execution-something else, something in the museum. It's the usual show-up-not-telling thing: he wanted me to see it before he reported. So I dropped in to talk to him because I didn't manage to get to Hanger 12D in the end. He spun me some kind of the usual old 'I'd squashed that was decommissioned in 1964, some photographs and other, and it gave me some file references to follow to read some. Squashed still, he said. Yes, it was temporarily connected, but there's no bloody way of knowing what he's got in mind and you follow the trail of bread crumbs he lay out for you—you know how he is, mind as handy as a devil's own trader. There he said something about wanting me to contribute for fun on a substandard combies, something like SLODDY BLOODY."

"Damn. What time was that?"

"About twelve, twelve fifteen, I think. It was right after my session with the and Jo Sullivan, why?"

"Because he was in the Wray and Means meeting that was on that day, according to at least six eyewitnesses," Andy looks guilty. "Whatever happened, it wasn't you." He guesses at Mo. "What time did Bob call you?"

"She gets up and puts her hand away from me. "Around noon, why?"

"Then, doesn't he? The jail hanging over him is threatening to throw a miniature thunderstorm. He didn't get into—he puts his chin sleepily over his shoulder in the back one of the Plumbers is maintaining a Dho-RNA curve on the wall with a projector and it's flaring green but colorful when he's just off, so it's not that ..."

"What's not that?" I ask.

Andy takes a deep breath.

"Angie's missing, work is following people home, and

the Russians are trying to put the dead back into 'dead' sleep. Stop. You know the old saying, 'back is conventional but three times is enemy action?' Well, right now that's applicable. . .

"Miss our visitor Russian?" Mo wants to know.

"Don't know," Andy looks vague. "Did you give any indication of what he wanted?"

"He kept asking something," J voluteer. "At least two different languages, neither of which I speak."

"Oh, gosh!" he mutters. Shuddering, he shakes his head. "Seen a bad day go by, going to be a long one as well. Don't suppose there's any chance of a trap of any kind?"

"Certainly, for you. I can recommend the special hot-dog line, moor's hand and orange juice, although if you insist I can make a pot of beefy. . ."

"That'd be fine," J's stomach flutters right past him, which is the first warning I had that Andy is about ready to drop. Time to ease up on him a little, maybe. Or he grows for . . .

"To get it? I'm standing up. So do sit me use. . . .

Rate is turning some kind of operation code named SLODDY BASHON which includes something going down in Amsterdam which required black officers, and . . .

They're both staring their heads at me. "No, no," says Andy and . . .

"Mentioned some CLUB ZERO?" says Mo. "It's a situation, and . . . did you bring that letter?" Andy produces an envelope. She pockets it. "Thanks."

"Actually, it all boils down to CAGE NIGHTMARE GREENE," Andy says loudly. "The other operations are side projects; CAGE NIGHTMARE GREENE is where it all starts."

"Oh, yes?" I ask casually, although those words send a chill up my spine.

"Yes," He laughs halfheartedly. "I suppose, you may have been looking after some false operating assumptions," he adds. "The situation seems to be deteriorating. . ."

CAGE NIGHTMARE GREENE IS THE CODE NAME FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

You might have noticed that Mo and I have no children. We don't even have a pet cat. The consolation prize for the overworked urban middle class. There is a reason for this. Would you want to have children, if you knew for a fact that in a couple of years you might have to cut their throats for their own good?

"We human beings live at the bottom of a thin puddle of megadeposited vapor adhering to the surface of a medium-sized rocky planet that orbits a hot, scorching, orange star in a corner office in orbit of many. We are not alone. There are other beings in other universes, other continents, other times, and times, and epochs. And there are alien life in the adjacent depths of the oceans, and dwellers in the red-hot blackness and pressure of the upper mantle, that are stronger than your most exotic lubrications. They're working towards the extinction of millions of technological civilization. They're using building materials and covering megacities back when your ancestors and mine were clabbing each other over the head with rocks to create the eternal primitive disagreement over who had the bigger dick.

But the Deity Dees and the Chronos are dual beneath the feet of the ether stone, just as much so as are the temporal, tombo, cougars. The ether stone are ancient. Supposedly they colonized our planet back in the pre-Cambrian age. Don't bother looking for their tracks, though continents have risen and sunk since then, the very atmosphere has changed density and composition, the moon orbits three times further out, and I could go long, but you're not very keen.

But the ether stone are an dual beneath the many-weight advantages of the dead gods who-

You escaped reading about a paragraph back, didn't you? Admit it you're bored. So I'll just dip to the point we have a major problem. The dimensions of the problem are defined by computational density and geometry. Magic is a branch of applied mathematics, after all, and when you process information, you set up waves in the plastic infrastructure of reality that can amplify and reduce:-

To put it bluntly, there are too many humans on the planet. Six-hundred-petabytes. And we think too loudly. Our brains are neurocomputers, incredibly complex. The more channels there are, the more quantum wireless is observed, and the more interconnectedness creep into our world. The wireless is already going macroscopic, has been for decades; no any discipline of Fontaine could tell you. Somewhere really soon, we're going to cross a critical threshold, which in combination with our later speech, ongoing still through a stable neighborhood where space itself is stretched thin, is going to make it likely that certain sleeping organisms will stir in their ancient-long slumber, and notice us.

No, we can't make CAGE NIGHTMARE GREENE go away by erasing all our computers and going back to parchment paper-I am not that, our amazingly efficient just-in-time food delivery logistics would go down the pan and we'd all starve. No, we can't make CAGE NIGHTMARE GREENE go away by holding a brick machine we and flying the gods with the biggest dick-related megadeaths have consequences that can be explained for much the same ends, as the Aetherite-SG discovered to their cost.

CAGE NIGHTMARE GREENE is the dimensional equivalent of an atomic chain reaction. Human minds equal platinum nuclei. Put too many of them together in too small a place, and they begin to get a wee bit hot. Once the threshold suddenly and eruptively and they get just too hot. And the ether gods wake up, smelt the buffer, and prepare to look it.

Our organization was formed as the British Empire's cost countermeasures, organization during the struggle against Nazism, but it has continued to this day, serving a similar purpose: to protect the nation from an entire line of lethal industrial threats, culminating in the goal of surviving CAGE NIGHTMARE GREENE. The UK is in a good position, a developed country, consistently open, (meaning its residents are located in compact, defensible cities) with nearly neutral population size (no hot spots), and the world's most sophisticated surveillance systems. If you think the UK has been sliding into an Orwellian nightmare for the past decade, please go compare on every doozying, you're right-but there is a reason for it: the MAGNETIC SHIELD COMMS defense network and the SCORPION STARS satellite comms are fully deployed, every to track and zap the first submarines. There are other, less obvious defensive measures. Our budget's been rising lately, even wondered why there are no more police vans with cameras on the street?

CAGE NIGHTMARE GREENE is coming, and it's going to be painful in the suburbs. It's a bigger threat than global warming, peak oil, and the cold war ended this one. We may not live to see the light at the other end of the tunnel, as we likely sit out from the last superconductor and the lasted state close their eyes and finally return to normal. Survival is far from assured-I may not even be alive, but one thing is for sure: we're going to give it our best shot.

THE EVENING AFTER THE PLUMBERS HAVE UPGRADED OUR

Andrew and Andy had finished packing our brains and left. I order in a carry-paging unit attention to the telephone this time after answering the disarrayed then neural contacts with Mo, a bottle of single malt, and a box of my favorite chocolate. I've been "having" against an evening live this. On dead end, my face twitches around the battery subunit, and I feel unexpectedly old. . . . Is better than the new model, for what it's worth.

"Here," I pass her the Bloop-Bloop box as I sit on the edge of the bed and carefully smoke.

"Oh, you should've-did you see the alarm?"

"Yeah."

"You're sure?"

"The rest of my clothes are piling up atop the socker." "That me, any target who that that luck tonight is going to get the biggest shock of their lives." Biggest, because afterwards they're going to run out of life in which to cap it. "Remember you need to deactivate it before you set foot on the stairs. Or

I point out, "Not bringing anything recent home, just activate stuff from the inside. It's illegal 'tampering' but it's not illegal if it's merely meant to claim its pension. Strictly historical interest only."

"She raises an eyebrow, "Why?"

"Angelic?" I swallow-"When he sent me to Confess he begged to give me the background file. But he gave me a reading list."

"Oh looking bad!" She looks annoyed, which is a good sign. But then her eyes track sideways and I realize I'm not off the hook yet. "What good?"

"That?" I ask brightly, suppressing the impulse to squeak out still. "It appears to be a cardboard box."

"A cardboard box with a picture of an iPhone on it," she says slowly.

"I'm ending," I hurry to reassure her.

"Right?" She picks up her coffee and takes a mouthful. "Would I get into thinking it's empty because I used to contain an iPhone? Which is now, of course, in your pocket?"

"Yes, yes."

"Oh, Bob. Don't you know any better?"

"I was at least a class four genius!" I say defensively, meaning the sign to hand my credentials and live precariously.

"And I needed a neighborhood lawyer."

She sighs. "Why did? Has your old phone started to smell or something?"

"I left my PCA in Hanger Six at Condit's," I point out. "It's slightly activated around the edges and I don't have room for my contacts on my mobile."

"So you brought an iPhone, rather than begging me to sign off on a replacement PCA."

"I'm motivated by fear, yes."

Ms. rolls her eyes. "Bob's been saying this vs. allyship with a pretty old (75) but I mean, still damage to the credit card—just how much did it cost? How you take it back if I get it? You had enough? Do you go?"

"I was considering it," I admit. "But then Elaine came round and installed something."

"Elaine installed?"

"She's working on a port of CFCUT to the iPhone platform at work. I think she thought now an official phone, she got to shove it into the office and get it installed before I even think about trading it in, or the hackers will strip or hack up the glass." I shudder briefly but Ms. is visibly distracted.

"Hang on. They've ported CFCUT to the iPhone? What does it look like?"

"It shows you..."

Elaine releases later I am on my way to the office, sans ally. Ms. is still sitting at the kitchen table with a coil of rag of padding in front of the new iPhone's newly distorted face, prodding at the jelly-bean core with an expression of vague frustration on her face. We get a horrible feeling that the only way I'm going to earn forgiveness is to buy her one for her birthday. So this is, in a good way, over.

ACTUALLY I HAVE A MOTIVE FOR GOING IN TO WORK THAT ISN'T BEING HELD UP AGAIN.

So as soon as he's stepped in my office and filed out a requisition for the number Angeline attached on that scrap of paper for me—we can't get it at the usual check-out now, Betty's key remains down under the building side that is Service House, but there's a hair-only collector and delivery van I head down the corridor and across the walkway and to the stairs to the Security Office.

"Ms. Henry?" I ask the guy in the blue suit behind the counter, half reading the almost-blank outworking board.

"Henry? Who wants to know?" He lifts up.

I don't want to say "Hi, Henry, it's nice to see you," I want to talk to Henry or failing that, whoever the issuing officer is—about personal defense options."

"Personal options?" He peers at my warrant card; then his eyes cross and he unbuttons a button-athletic adjustment. "Oh, you're one of them. Right, too well here, or we'll get you sorted out."

Context is popular fiction; there is no such thing as a "scam to hit." Nor do secret agents routinely carry firearms for self-defense. Ms. I don't even like gun+meat, though great fun if all you want to do is make holes in paper targets at a firing range, but for their real design purpose, using your aim as a fire-or-death emergency, no. That's not on my list of fun things. I've been trained not to shoot my own foot off (and I've been practicing regularly, ever since the business on Saint Martin's, but I've a safe when I'm not carrying a gun. However, no shot after my primary defense was got smacked in a civilian FATAC, yesterday I got disappointed by a silver cordless from Condustry Square, and I now have a full set in the life insurance policy selling me that it's time to top up. Which in my own terms, basically, dropping in on Henry, which means:

"Hi, my stuff just hours it going with you? Different gender your head up?"

Henry the Horse in our departmental annex: He looks like an extra from The Long Good Friday; backstraining stomach thins, comically trying to escape, throwing white air, and a pointed black eye-patch. Last time I saw him he was explaining the finer details of the care and feeding of a Glock 17 (which we're mandated on duty if because of an 18-month requirement for ammunition and parts commensally with the Sweeney); I responded by showing him how to take down a mediate something which I have unfortunately too much experience in)

I recover from the back-sapping and straighten up: "It's alright, Henry. Mind, Henry. He was just smacked a couple of days ago and I'm not frightened about that's been an accident."

"No. I can see from your head, my son, or you're thinking you need to armor up. Come right this way, let's see what we can do for you with," he points the door door open and pulls me into the life strip-off.

"You know that scene in The Matrix? When Neo says: 'His real name,' and the white rabbit turns into a cross between a helicopter and the back door of a life target? Henry's temporary office in the New Annex Third Floor Customer Security Area is a bit like that, only covered and lit by a bare study-well-inward-accident bulb supervised by a small and very sleepy staff."

Henry pulls something that looks like an M16 on steroids off the wall and picks up a damn magazine the size of a small car tire. "Can I interest you in an AR15/AK-12 assault shotgun? Euro-reliable for single shot or auto? There's a complete drum full of bird-usage magazine rounds, and I've got a special load-out just for taking down mammalian mammalian-obsessed. F5A2-12. Customized, gasless, white phosphorus rounds, and solid fiber 300-grain back, each full micro-embedded with the Library of Alex-Neon right up your street, my son." He takes the slide on the AK-12 with a convincing look like the rest on the game floor.

"Oh, I was thinking of something a little smaller, perhaps? Something I could carry concealed without looking like I was engaging, unless you on the bar?"

"Wings? Henry puts the AK-12 back on the rack and carefully moves the drum magazine in a drawer I can feel the proud of the way by which from the sound of a well certainly (and any unexpected, solid light off my doorway—and the front path, and the perimeter, and the magazine opposite at number 17, and the back garden too. "So tell me, what is it you really want?"

That's the deal for business: "I'm looking to invest for a near class four certified defense-well, personal, with a year 2014." I pause. "I also want to show a H&M, call them with observed issue and a suitable certificate. Act-1, read myself." "I like your advice on the rack, but I was thinking about drawing a personal protection firearm—its certification on the Glock—and a box of ammunition I won't be routinely carrying it, but it's best kept at home to keep loaded."

"You don't need a Glock to get rid of judges, my son." He spots my expression: "Not a problem?"

"Yeah, attempted physical intrusion."

"Haha. Who else will have access to the computer?"

I choose my next words carefully. "The house is a level two secure site. The only other resident is my wife. Dr. O'Brien is certified for firearms, but she has other commitments and knows not to play with other kid toys."

Henry considers his next words carefully. "I don't want to lean on you, Baby, but I need more than your wife for that. Coming as close to it for you and the detective-Contingency-give her my regard-If she can hand the keys for enough to fit, but still need to get a warrant on the trigger-paint."

"A-ha-ha!" That's new to me.

"It's a new technique the aggressor in O-Projects have come up with. They take a drop of your blood and they use the trigger paint so that the only trigger left through is a print. Of course," his voice drops cordially, "that doesn't stop the bad guy from chopping your finger off and using it to work the trigger, but they've got to lean the gun and the trigger off you before you can shoot you with it. Let's say you say it's more about stopping people from going weapons in public than about stopping your lady wife from offering you in a fit of jealous passion."

I nod my eyes. "Okay, can I see with that?"

His laughter. "Haha, we can make it suitable, and silent."

"Who-hey! You mean you've got real concealed carry?"

"He walks in."

"Okay, would like that, too, Um. As long as it's not invisible to me, also. And, uh, the holster or invisible gun in a visible holster would be best of convenience..."

"It'd be invisible to anyone who doesn't have a warrant card, my car, or your money back."

"Will you match my life insurance, if I start and some bright spark tells an SCORH news on me?" One of the reasons I am reluctant to carry a handgun in public is that the London Metropolitan Police have a zero-tolerance approach to anyone else carrying guns, and while their specialist firearms teams don't actually have a shoot-to-kill policy, you try finding a Britishian plumber who does call-out during a bomb scare these days.

"I think we can talk that, yes," Henry sounds amused. "Is that your offer?"

"It is. As a new start for myself, a Head of Ops if I need to make a quick strategic withdrawal and a gun to bring home that I can carry in public if I absolutely have to. What more could an extremely worried spouse ask for? Ah, I know. "Do you have any alarm?" I ask.

"Thought you was dead-out on home defense the DIY way," Henry looks humorously horrified, then thoughtful. "Things aren't that bad yet, are they?"

"Good. In," I shove my hands deep in my pockets and do my best to look gloomy. "Could be."

"Whoa," Henry's forehead wrinkles further. "Listen. There could be a problem you drawing a HCO and a gun, and your good lady wife's wife, her mother, you a regular arrest, current? How, if I was signing out warrants, oh, the nice Mrs. Thompson in Harrow Insurance? I should-There'd be no problem, on account of how she and her hubby and their two good sons of theirs aren't certified for control and wouldn't trace a weapon from a slide if they happen their fingers between them. Right? But let me just put it to you, suppose I sign your name and you put your name on the watch list, and I had go come calling at your front door. You and Dr. O'Brien go to the interview, and you activate the alarm, and being you and the messes you give us good as you get. They search the place. Then see on your case and you're in their custody, head of bottle. How do the Watch Team know the people showing from inside your house are you and your wife? What if you're gotten out through the back window? That's how shit-out-of happens, my son. I figure you might like this one through some more."

"Okay," I look around the compact armory. "Guess you're right."

"We've got a panic button, it's part of the kit the Plumbers fitted us and we'll be on-site of the least bit looking about in potential. Potential, you carry it on your body and there's a linked set of bells who carry them-that kind of cover is conventionally expensive-and if you're on the watch list and you trigger the alarm, SCORPH STAGE wakes up and starts looking for you. And for everyone who might be threatening you. You don't want to press that button by accident, believe me."

"One want one HCO, and a 2 mag3 pistol of invisible energy, anything else I need to know?"

"Yeah. Come back in an hour and I'll have all the paperwork sorted for you to sign. The HCO and the watch I can get you once I get your chip, the pistol will take a little longer. Henry shrugs. "Best can do, alright?"

"You're a champ," I make my good-bye, then head off. He got other things to do before I go home.

ME ON MY WAY TO ANDY'S OFFICE WHEN HIS RING

MEOW

"What's that you are doing here? I thought I told you to take the week off." She sounds mildly irritated, and a little out of breath, as if she's been running around looking for me. "Yes, what happened to your hair?"

"Haha. "That came up."

She looks concerned. "My ring?"

I demur. "In office, in her territory. "Look, I'm come back from... a job... in pieces, really rather. Then the job followed her home, and that's a full-on panic-?"

Her eyes narrow. "How bad?"

"The bad," I point to the row of butterfly closures on my hand and the necklace. "Have you seen anything about about openings in non-affiliated agency activity in London this week?"

"My office," she says, very firmly, and this time she means it.

"Okay."

Once inside her office, she locks the door switches on the old CND lever, then turns the tables on the glass window that lets her view the corridor. Then she turns to me. "What comments do you have?"

"I've been approved for CLUB ZERO-one gives a sharp sense of level-and CASE MONTAGNE GREEN, her to mention MARGOT BILLIE STARS, but Henry the Home Minister give me an alarm button without your stamp on the order form. And Argyle just had me to deposit for him on the CLUB (BARON, although I haven't been told on the yet."

"Wow. That's a bundle." She eyes me wearily. "Angelen dumps a ton on your shoulders." For someone so junior, she seems stressed.

"Haha," I focus on her more closely, why chestnut hair that is currently unbraided and beginning to show silver roots, crown-to-foot wavy lines at the edges of her eyes, a sweetness to her choice that suggests she's far busier than she wants me to see. "No fun."

"What-but-what happened yesterday?"

"Andy was with the Plumbers on cleanup; it should be on today's overnight events briefing sheet."

"That was-her eyes widen-?" Active incursion and instead by a class time, repeated by agents? Those details, it was fun?"

"Yeah," I flip down on her visitor's chair without a by-your-leave.

"They tried to rearrange my features-it was a close call. I came in today to draw a personal defense item, but also to ask what the hell is going on? And the business about Argylene."

"You show'm the day before yesterday?"

"She," I pause. "Her's still missing. Right?"

She nods.

"Do you want me to look over his office? In case he left anything?" His words. "No," "No," I think she's a poor fat. "But if you know anything..."

"I don't like being kept in the dark." Coming over all sleep on the person who is my nominal manager isn't okay, I know, but at this point for sanity for on self-welfare. "It seems to me that a whole bunch of other bad things are happening

light now, and that seems to me like angry action." I'm kidding Andy. Whether the money is, in the context. Right, fine, you keep on playing games, that's all right by me—except that it isn't, really, because one of the games in question just released my wife home and that is all for me. So I joined to the row of fatherly subverses on my forehead, and to her credit, she wince. "Remember, it costs."

"You've made your point" she says quietly sitting down behind her desk. "Gosh, if I was just up to me, I'd tell you-but I can't. There's a committee meeting tomorrow, though, and I'll miss your concerns. Ask me again on Monday and I should be able to pull you in on the BLOODY BARCHON committee, and at least add you to the mailing list for CLLB 2020. In the meantime, if you don't mind the mailing—what items did Harry sign up to you?"

"We're processing them now" I announce. "We've also had our household security upgraded, in case there's a repeat visit, although I think that's silly. We've started now, so I expect any follow-ups to happen out in public. It's safer for them than it was, but right now the house is a kill zone so if they want to badly enough they'll have to do it in the street."

"Check." She leans back in her chair and sets one hand on her computer keyboard. "Listen, if you're really sure you want an alarm, I'll sign for one. But ... what Harry said? Listen to him. It's not necessarily what you need. The girl—well, you're confused. Confused." She gives a noise of assent as the mangled language we have to use. "Whatever. Just keep it out of sight of the public and don't lose track of E As for the rest—"

She exhales. "There has been an article in meetings in public places conducted by three junior attaches at the Russian embassy who our ministerial colleagues in the Quartet—the means the Security Service, popular but increasingly known as MI6—have been keeping track of for some time. It's hard to be sure just which organization any given opinion will connect connections in working for, but they initially thought these guys were FSB cutthroats. However, we've had recent indications that they're actually working for someone else—the Thirteenth Directorate, probably. We don't know exactly what's going on, but they seem to be looking for something, or someone."

"And then there was the Amsterdam business," I prod.

Another shrug back. "No secret cleared for that."

"Andy procured a Letter of Release for Mo." I state right back at her snafu. "It will give my secrets if you had one year's leg dance in a tedious occupational hazard in this line of work."

"Well, yes, then." The bluff works—but and her word told her the telling the truth about the Letter of Release. "Remember, CLLB 2020 was indirectly connected."

"So we've got an opening of activity in the Netherlands and the UK—wherever in Europe, too?" I speculate. "Remember I've sat in on my share of post-faction meetings?"

"I can't comment further until after the meeting group meeting tomorrow." And my bluff falls apart. "We told you everything I can tell you without official sanction. But, get your kit sorted out, clear down your chores, and go home for the weekend. There's an order. It talk to you on Monday. Hopefully the news will be better by then ..."

LOST IN COMMITTEE



I GO BACK TO HARRY'S PLACE AND COLLECT MY KIT.
THINK I catch the bus home, shoulders itching every time it passes a police car. We, I'm legally allowed to carry the Glock and its accessories, which are sleeping in my car etc. it a combination-locked case. The gun, and its chambered holster are supposed to be invisible to anyone who doesn't carry a Laundry water can but I believe when I see it. Luckily the bus is not stopped by an armed SOCB and performing a random check for implausible weapons. I arrive home somewhat parched, the gun and pieces of it on the bathroom mantelpiece (which is just to the left of my side of the bed), and go downstairs to collect sugar with Ma.

Foody happens, and then the weekend. I register the smallPhone. I watch a game, and Ma suggests Christmas. It (if that's the right word) the NeocortexPod. Her attitude has much to do with proportional stress. If not tonight last damn I'm going to have to buy for one.

We do not discuss work at all. We are not disappointed by accidents, shot at, blown up, or otherwise disabled, although our mid-dor neighbor's teenage son opens a guilty chair of Security evening playing "Kissed a Girl" on loudly that Ma and I rarely come to know over the pressing question of how best to respond. It's going for "Entertainment Headlines delivered over the Speakers of Ohio"; what a proponent of Schopenhauer believed as the Volk that kills Monks. In the end we agree on the polite voice of reason delivered via the web of the parents. Games are made for growing kids.

On Saturday morning, I turn out that we are running low on groceries. "Why not go online and look a delivery from Amazon?" asks Ma. I spend a little hour struggling with the web server before admitting to myself that my abstract combination of FedEx package, security threat, and freedom just to mention running on an operating system that the big box retailer's programmers wouldn't recognize it's stuck a bit in them) makes this somewhat impractical—by which time we've realized that delivery, so it looks as if we're going to have to go forth and brave the world on foot. So I cautiously look the main block to my job for the first time, just my bagged jacket down to cover it, and Ma and I hit the road.

As before, as we struggle home from the supermarket, laden down with carrier bags. I begin to miss slightly even when my jacket got caught up on the front of a woman's garden's shopping trolley which nudged the hardware and started screaming. (This is twenty-first-century England: home of handcar! handcar! They're not being pulled.) "Go the way!" Ma comments slyly as we wait to cross a main road. "Don't you think you should be keeping your rights to life?"

I scan the surroundings for fresh supermarket alibis: "If I need my things the shopping cart has choices."
 "Then don't you think it'd be better to be carrying the bag with the bread and cheese in that lane, rather than the milk and the jar of pickled cucumbers?"

I swear, quietly, to watch hands, and get the bags head-on-charge just as the green man flicks to red. In any case, we're couple for the entire duration of our partying hurry across the street crossing. "I must have had that for an attack alarm," I grumble.

"Well, not one out on Monday." Ma says absently.

"Watch the vegetation, dear."
 On Friday, we're due to have lunch with my parents, which means catching the tube halfway across London, and then riding way the hell into suburban St. I'm sure the line run by a low company distinguished for their hatred and contempt for all humans. I am the historic, this time bringing my right hand free, and Ma carries her violin case along. Our train is not unattended by citizens, music bombs, or obvious attack machines. Frankly, given the quality of the postprandial conversation, this is not a bad payoff. Ma's face becomes much the same intensive expressions as an intrepid Koranai dragon when Muir makes the usual false and thoughtful comment about walking for the center of the flat. We are not, perhaps, allowed to discuss our work in the presence of children, so we are short of conversational materials with which to realize—they still think I work in computer support, and Ma's some sort of musician. By the time we make our excuses and leave I'm thinking that maybe I'd better leave the children on their parents' side.

"Do you enjoy the vegetable?" Ask the steering voice of silence beside me as we walk back up the street towards the subway station.

"Thought you were going to eat them at one point."

"Sure, by choice."

She sighs. "No, don't need to apologize for your parents, look. They fight over it enough."

"They're not to know." I glance back over my shoulder. "We must, you know. Theirs, unless I'm a parent."

"Time to fit in all the heartbreak and pain of eating see ones to they're just old enough to appreciate the honor of it off. No thank."

We've had this conversation before, a few times: recalled the situation for an update. No, the worst we work in isn't a suitable one to reflect on in a child's eye.

"Besides, we've got to one which leads to go through a fast pregnancy in your life there."

"Certainly not just to please them."

We walk back to the station in morose silence, a thirty-something couple out for a Sunday afternoon stroll, nobody watching us needs to know that we're pissed off, armed, and on the lookout for trouble.

It's probably a very good thing, indeed for the local masses that they're still sleeping off their Saturday night hangover.

MONDAY DAWNS BRIGHT AND HOT AND EARLY, AND I FIND MY SELF

waking to the happy music that I can go back to work, and nobody will order me home. I'd love, had the cooling depression across the mattress—continue my self and all up, indeed, on the wrong side of the bed.

Ma's clearly been up for a while, when I look up with her in the kitchen dress, suddenly opening up a bowl of yogurt and patch food, latched to the coffee. She's wearing what I think of as her go-to dress. "What's up?" she asks.

"Need to look the part for an office." She frowns. "Do you think the looks business?"

"Yes." She looks like she's about to kneel on my

mattress. I pull coffee grounds all over the worktop, then opening the lower end of the jar, and start looking water.

"What kind of meeting?"

"Got to see a man about a violin. Conversation."

"Conversation...?"

"They don't give you lines, you know." The man in front:

"It's not something common like a Stradivarius. We've got

two in inventory, but only twelve were ever made and they're

all unavailable for one reason or another. A couple got

damaged during the war, three are untraceable for practical

lost during extra-dimensional excursions—and the rest belong

to other agencies or collectors we can't touch. Operational

Assess are looking for a supplier who can make more of them,

but it's turning out to be really difficult. History is quite rare of

the order in which Zehn copied his biography, and as for what

it's made of, just covering the necessary magical probability

you in search of the known. Twelve Act of 2004, not to

mention a raft of other legislation."

"Oh." I look at the hollow violin case, propped up in

the corner next to the recycling bin. There's trouble with a

deliberate and/or illegal concealment. The rest of Ma's who

make magic sounds can never be bothered with the BS CTSO

quality certification required by government procurement

Oh Janet I clear my throat. "We only had an hour and a half with the case file, and I may be misreading the staff." I admit. Did you realize someone? I just realize you look like BLOODY BARCH appears to be a monitoring committee based with... The case we were advised about, etc. Of these are too many verbal intensions on all sides who want to keep it continuing. And the quiet is that Russian espionage directed against the West has been going since 2001. The kind of report that you don't need permission to set up an apartment suitable between the Russian Empire and Western Europe--but corruption was a distraction. Hence the current case seems and economic blackmail."

He smiles. (In smiling inside if you had our meeting like last winter, you'd be smiling too.) "Enough of the macro picture if you don't read. What's the micro?"

"FBI activity in London has been rising steadily since 2001." I sigh.

The Lushenko assassination, that embarrassing business with the refurbished sick in Moscow in '05, diplomatic equations. For old corruption is still building under. But BLOODY BARCH is new to me. I'd act as...

I glance at the file on the table in front of me. "Anyways here's an organization. We don't know her real designation because nobody who knows anything about them has ever defected and they don't talk to strangers, but folks call them the Thornwell Directorate--not to be confused with the original Thornwell Directorate, which was misdesignated the FBI Directorate back in the '60s. Heavy talk--they were the ones responsible for our work. Myrtoze Day."

"The current business of the same name was being formed at the KGB back in 1961, when the KGB was restructured as the FBI. They're an independent wing, much like me."

The Laundry was originally part of SOG, back during the Second World War--we're the part that kept on going when SOG was officially shut down at the end of hostilities.

"They're the Russian OCCIDENT agency, handling democracy and social intelligence operations. Mostly they stay at home, and their activities are presumably based on domestic security issues. But there's been a huge upgrade--expansion--in overseas activity lately. Thornwell Directorate staff have been identified visiting public auctions, controlling finances, advising sections of finance, manufacturing, and controlling individuals suspected of having contact with the former parent agency back before the end of the war cold war. They've been focusing on London, but also visible in Geneva, Amsterdam, Paris, Cologne, Ulm, France... the set doesn't mean any crucial sense."

"Insights?" "That's all I've got, but there's more, isn't there?"

Sergey's looking at me, except for Gustafson, who's watching, not listening. "That's the basic picture, Howard?"

Chouhury looks at me curiously. "Is Mr Howard speaking Dr Angleton in this connection?"

I nearly swallow my tongue. His looks disconcerted. "Dr Angleton isn't currently available," she says, causing me a warning glance. "There are Human Resources issues. Mr Howard is deputizing for him."

Oh Janet. Who else within which--committee members who haven't been briefed, Russian secret demagogues, cold war D.D. What have I got myself into?

"Oh dear." Chouhury nods, rattled. "Allow me to express my sympathy." He has a far confidence like in front of him: he taps the corners into line with tiny movements. His suit is black and shiny like an EDS consultant's in the old days.

"Next time, we have been tracking a number of interesting financial aspects of the KGB activity. They appear to be spending money like water--we have requested information on BIAN transactions and credit card activity by the mobile agents we have identified, and while they're not bringing it away on silly luxury items they have certainly been working on their frequent fair rides. One of them, Agent Kucharski managed to fly half a million kilometers in the last two months alone--we believe here a high-ranking courier--as an example. And they've been bidding in estate auctions. The overall pattern of their activity focuses on memorabilia from the Russian Civil War, specifically papers and personal effects from the files of White Russian leaders, but they're also been looking into documents and items relating to the Aggettman Affair, which is on our watch list--SOLING SILVER STAG--along with documents relating to Western occultist groups of the pre-war period. Alvin Karpis comes up like a bad penny, incidentally, but also Professor Mead, who tipped and a number also Norman Macle."

Civil war memorabilia... I'd nearly thought about me, but Victor looks as if he's about to continue. "What's special about Mead?" I ask.

Chouhury looks irritated. "He was a mathematics professor and an occultist," he says, "and he knew F." The legend--F--the Laundry's first Director of intelligence reporting to Sir Charles Heston at 64 Baker Street--housemaster of the Special Operations Executive. Whose? He looks his head to one side. "If you don't mind..."

I shake my head. "Sorry for new to this." "Really, isn't he?" "Please continue."

"Certainly. Looks as if the Thornwell Directorate are taking an unusual interest in the careers of memorabilia associated with the late Baron Roman Von Ungern Sternberg, commander of Mongolia, Buddhist reprobate, and White Russian leader. In particular, they seem to be trying to trace an item or items that Agent D'Ver returned from Russian Estonia on behalf of our old friend F." Chouhury looks uneasy, self-identified, as if this direction, into what is effectively anyone pertinent to me is supposed to be enlightening. "Any questions?" he asks.

For once I keep my glib smile, waiting to see if anyone else is making an out-of-the-top as I am. I don't have to wait long. Steve looks about to speak. "I wish you had the full set of questions. Who is the Baron Roman Von Stauffenberg or whatever? What was he--did he do the coup?"

"Ungern Sternberg died in September '02, executed by a Bolshevik firing squad after Trotsky's soldiers captured him." Chouhury looks his face again, looking serious. "He was a very bad man, you know. He had a habit of starting arguments, and he had a most ridiculous, biased view of himself. I suppose we could all do with that trait."

He doesn't notice--or doesn't care about--his. He's beyond glad. "But still, you've seen one of those Russian occultists. He converted to Buddhism--Mongolian Buddhism, of a rather bloody and not stayed in touch with members of a certain Theosophical order going to had fallen in with who has been pointed to St. Petersburg. Obviously they didn't stay there after the revolution, but Ungern Sternberg would have known of his beliefs in General Denikin's army, and possibly knew of F, due to his social connections. And he, as well, denigrate."

He looks pained. All intelligence agencies have detectors in their circuits: ours is our first Director of intelligence, whose backlist organizations were formed, and only barely outweighed by his patients.

"What can that possibly have to do with current affairs?" Steve's sudden baffled mirror his own. "What are they looking for?"

"That's an interesting question," says Chouhury, looking perplexed. He glances at me, his expression unreadable. "We Howard might be able to tell..."

"Can, when?"

"My confusion must be as obvious as Stone's, because this stops in. "But that's only just comes in on the case--Dr Angleton didn't see fit to brief him earlier."

"Oh my good lord..." Chouhury looks at me. "I've been a busy man."

"But in that case, we really must talk to the doctor..."

"No, can't." He shakes his head, then looks at me again.

"But, we the committee--should Angleton to investigate the link between Ungern Sternberg, F, and the current spike in KGB activity." She looks back at Chouhury. "Unfortunately, he was not seen on Wednesday evening. He's now officially AWOL, and a search is under way. This happened the same night as Agent CANDEID closed out CIA-R 2003. The next morning, CANDEID and Mr. Howard were assaulted by a class three member, and I don't believe 'in any way of

coincidence that Agent Khatib has been seeing reading the Russian primary in Washington Piazza. Given that that morning-wed hit on an early evening flight back to Moscow.

"But we be straightforward: all the signs suggest that the Townsend Directorate are suddenly playing very dangerous games on our turf if the cables you CLIB 26R0 that show you out to be a host for the Townsend Directorate, then we have to assume that CLIB 26R0 is connected with BLOODY BACON-and that sure is from a low-level advance agent injected anyone into a much higher priority for us. They're not usually innocents, and they're not putting the ideological agenda anyone-they wouldn't be acting this openly for our security advantage-so we need to find out what they're doing and just a step to it, before anyone else gets hurt. No, Bob? What is it?"

I put my hand down. "This might sound stupid," I hear myself saying, "but has anyone thought about you, know, asking them?"

IT WAS NOT BIG ON HISTORY:

When I read at school I dropped the topic as soon as I could, right after I took my GCSEs. It seemed like it was all about one damn thing after another or one war after another or a bunch of social-history stuff about what I was like to live as an eighteenth-century weaver whose son had to off with a spinner called Jerry, or a nineteenth-century religious bigot with a weak frame and a witching knife. Indeed, when, in other words, of class relevance to modern life-especially if you were planning on studying and working in a field that was more or less centered out of time, such as 1933.

The trouble is, you can ignore history-but history won't necessarily ignore you. History it turns out, is all around us. See Senate House-where I used to teach my cubicle-in where the Laundry moved in 1953. Before that, it used to belong to the Foreign Office. Before that we worked out of an old attic above a Chinese laundry in Soho, hence the name. Before that...

There was no Laundry officially. The Laundry was a surface work of expediency, masked into existence by a few-line memo headlined ACTION THIS DAY and signed Minister Churchill. It was directed at a variety of people, including a retired major general and sometimes MI6 informer, whose obvious dislike was probably the deciding factor in keeping his ass out of an interview camp along with the rest of the Non-sympathizing Directorate of the British Union of Fascists-that, and his shadowy connections to occultists and mathematicians. An unrelated genius as a tactician and theorist of the arts of war, and the tactical genius of the political office, who figured his particular had a higher capacity precedence than his politics. That man was F. Major-General J. C. C. "Blaney" Fisher, here's been in the game for nearly half a century, and would doubtless be enjoying in a fit way enough to qualify for carbon credits as an environmentally-friendly power source if he could use as today in all of our multi-ethnic anti-discriminatory spirit.

But who cares? That is, indeed, the biggest question. Before the Laundry things were a bit confused. You can do magic by hand, without computers, but magic performed by hand without free state assistance in the long-calculating machine, in other words-meets to be frequent, unreliable, uncalculable, prone to undesirable side effects, and difficult to repeat. It also tends to lack with causality the logical sequence of events, in a most alarming way.

We've unfortunately rewritten our history over the centuries, ourselves increase creating chaos and giving down events with the dead hand of consistency-always leading towards a more stable ground state because chaos is unstable, entropy is magic's great enemy. When the ancient arts of gods and demons, they might well have been including their marble experiments-or they might have drunk too much mushroom tea, we have no way of knowing.

Let's just say that you can't always find the historical record and move easily on.

On the other hand, unobtainable never stopped anyone from using a given technology-just look at Microsoft if you don't believe me.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the sciences of right experimentalism and studies the causal with all the real Victorian businessmen could bring to bear. There was a lot of about writers (because obviously, those hot like carbon rocks, muddled the waters in an immensely useful way, as did Anna Karenina, and Tolstoy, and a host of others).

And then there were those who came too damned close to the truth. H. P. Lovecraft hadn't done it, intellectual career in 1933 something would have had to have been done about it, if you pardon my subjectivity. (And it would have been messy, very messy of old PCs, was around today for the best of things and email junkie which is everybody's RSS feed like some kind of giant mutant gorilla squid.)

Then there were those who were sitting on top of the truth, if they'd had the will to see it-Drews. Whether, for example, worked down the hell in Occupation Planning at SOE and regularly did lunch with a couple of staff officers who worked with Alan Turing-the man himself, not the anonymous code-named genius currently doing whatever it is they do in the secure wing at the Farnham. Luckily (whether they would) have known a real politician, because if it bit him on the ass, in fact, looking back to the early magic files, I'm not entirely sure that Drews' Whelan's publisher went on the Occupation Planning project after war. (If you follow my old.)

But I digress. It seems to me great advantage during the cold war that the countries were always terrible at dealing with the supernatural. For starters, having an ideology that explicitly denies the existence of an invisible sky-daddy or a bit of a handcap when it comes to assessing the best of signments internal alerts from elsewhere in the multiverse, given that the NSA in question have historically been identified as gods (bridgehead). For example, those Tullin Lyapunov for computing science, health's ability to cope with low findings that contradicted medical political doctrine. For friends, blame the Politburo, which, in the 1950s, looked at the embryonic IT industry through "tools of capitalist profit-maximizing" and denounced computer science as an-Communist.

Practically made: they got into into using hand calculators, but completely dropped the ball on anything that required complex theory, understood "freedom pricing" or technical goals.

But that was then, and this is now, and we're not dealing with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, were dealing with the Russian Federation. (When we're trying to see ourselves from the end of the world, that is.)

The Russians are no longer dragged backwards by the middle hand of Lenin. Their resources have taken with gusto to god-outflying and hacking, their official government ideology is "bad to the chisel" and Moscow is the number one place on the planet to go if you want to rock a torus. There's a pragmatic and pragmatic attitude to their computer operations. These days, their ruling network, the atomic, aren't playing the Great Game for ideological reasons anymore, even though they came up through the KGB just to the years of chaos. They're not to make Kuznetz great again, and grab a tidy bank balance in the process, and they're playing hardball because they're pissed off at the way they were treated off the board during the 1950s, considered in the dustbin of history, assimilated by oligarchs and hounded by foreign bankers.

And so, to the present. The whole of Western Europe-and a bunch of far-flung outposts beyond-are currently creating with KGB, but not so much. No longer the cold gray-mudged battles of Soviet-style egg industry, if they come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but they have two things in common: now on their knees and blood-thirsty eyes. And if they're looking for something connected with our founder, and displaying appropriate respect to our territory-

We need to know why.

RED ORCHESTRA



LET US TEMPORARILY LOOK ASIDE FROM VR. HMBL. CRISPINMETI'S work diary to contemplate a very different matter: a signpost of street life in Central London. I am not myself a witness to this or, to some extent, a work of imaginative reconstruction.

Visualize the scene: a side street not far from Piccadilly Circus in London, an unappetizing busy shopping district crowded on both sides with fashion chains and department stores. Even the alleys are lined with bistros and boutiques, tucked up against the passing tracks. Pedestrians from the pavements and overflow into the street, but vehicle traffic is light thanks to the congestion charge and slow-trucks to the rapid buses.

Here comes a mid-haired woman, smartly dressed in a black skirt, four-button-check jacket, medium heels. She's holding a white case in one hand, her face set in an expression of patient irritation beneath her makeup: a musician heading to a recital, perhaps. She looks slightly uncomfortable, out-of-sorts as she weaves between a pair of braying office workers, patting mutinously, jostling ladybugges the side of their noses, a sleek punk in distress, and a bigger woman in high. She cuts across the pavement on Grosvenor Street, crosses the road between an overhanging B&M X5 and a black cab, and turns into Shaftesbury.

Somewhere in the winging alley behind Cleary's Cross Road there is a narrow-fronted music shop, its window display empty but for a rack of pulsating scores and a collection of lightly varnished brass instruments. The woman pauses in front of the glass, apparently examining the sheet music; in fact, she's using the window as a mirror, checking the street behind her while she places one hand on the counter and pushes. Her close-fitted nails are smoothly sheathed in enamel the color of overripe grapes; there are calluses on the tips of her fingers.

A tall figure, somewhere out of sight as she enters the shop.

"Good afternoon?"
One side of the shop is occupied by a counter glass bound in oak, turning back towards a back-curtained alcove at the rear of the premises. A customer and presumably agent follow with weary eyes, dressed as conservatively as an orchestra chuffles between the hanging string-oboeist and tuba-player disapprovingly.

"Hi, Dawnie? George, Dawnie?" The woman smiles at his lights for his pocket in constant beam.

"I have that tonic, you." He looks at her as if he wishes she'd go away. "Do you have an appointment?"

"As a matter of fact—the woman whose a hand into her back leather handbag and produces a wallet which takes open to display a pass—No. Cassie May, from Sobelby's called yesterday?" The pass glimmers with a strange iridescent sheen in the dim artificial light.

"Oh, yes!" His expression brightens considerably. "This indeed a restoration project, isn't it?"

"Exactly." The woman twinges her chin above the glass counter then gently lowers it. "Our client has asked us to do a preliminary valuation, and she'd like to inquire about the cost of certain necessary restoration work for an instrument of similar manufacture that is currently in storage in a degraded condition—it's too fragile to reuse." She reaches into her handbag again and when she takes her hand out, she's holding an envelope. "Before examining the instrument, I would like you to sign this non-disclosure agreement." She receives a thin document from the envelope.

Mr. Dower is surprised. "Is it just a visit? Even if it's a song?" He thinks a double take. "Yes?"

The woman shakes her head silently, then flashes him the pages.

Mr. Dower scans the first page briefly then glances up at her. "It's all set from Sobelby's?"

"I explicitly state you who I am and why I'm here, you will tell them that Cassie May, from Sobelby's auction house, requiring about a valuation." She doesn't smile. "You will now read the document and sign it."

Almost all of the card tear himself. Mr. Dower's eyes return to the document. He scans it rapidly, mulling under this touch as he turns the three pages. Obviously, he produces a pen from his inside jacket pocket.

"Is it true?" The woman offers him a disposable sterile needle. "First, you must draw blood. Then sign using the pen." She waits patiently while he presses a digit against the needle, winces, and tucks the rib of the pen across the ball of his thumb. He makes no complaint about the unusual request, and Dawnie seems to notice the way she produces a small spare container for the office supplies and carefully takes the document back into its envelope. "Good. By the authority vested in me I find you to be innocent, under pain of the penalties specified in this document. Do you understand?"

Mr. Dower stares at the vain case as if dazed. "Yes," he replies.

The woman who calls herself Cassie May unfolds the lid of the coin-cases and lays it open before him.

Mr. Dower draws into the case for ten long seconds, barely breathing. "The instrument. 'Cassie May'—he says, finally covering his mouth. He turns and stumbles toward the back counter. A few seconds later she finds the sound of fiddling.

The woman waits patiently until Mr. Dower responds, looking pale. "You should that," he tells her.

"I've seen." She shrugs. "Take it and we can see how before."

"He's strutting again, his gaze unfocused. He seems to be staring down lower downers. "What do I have to do to get you to take it away?"

"You give me a written evaluation." She has another piece of paper, this one covering a short list of bullet points. "As I said, a preliminary estimate of the cost of repairing such a piece. A half-grown sample excised from the corpse of another identical instrument. All necessary materials to be provided by the customer. You can assess the status of the instrument that I'd like to together, my employees would like to be able to replicate them."

He stares after her. "Who are you? Who sent you here?"

"You from the government department responsible for keeping instruments like this out of your shop. Unfortunately there is a time for business as usual, and then—well, can you do it?"

Mr. Dower draws at the wall-halter bar. "Of course."

"Good. If you attach your invoice to the report I will see that it is processed promptly."

"When do you need the report?" he asks, shaking himself as if awakening from a dream.

"Right now." She walks out to the door and flips the sign to CLOSED.

She?—He hesitates.

"It's required to stay within seven days of the instrument at all times. And to remove it from your premises when you are not working on it." The woman draws aside; in fact, her expression is barely restrained.

"Why? To prevent me stealing it?"

"No, Mr. Dower to prevent it from killing you."

I'M BACK IN MY OFFICE AFTER THE BLOODY BARON

MEETING. The committee have concluded that I am to try and clear myself from Anger's charges (his blood) but the coffee mug is cooling on the mouse mat beside my empty out-of-the-office as I sit here, head to back, growing weary and waiting for paid more attention in history classes rather than sitting at the back of Don McCullin's head and thinking

about 400-500 to them. (Silkman-year-old male. 58 in the
stains.) Did the Mission staff at confining the level of the
why can't we go back to worrying about Al Qaeda or
pedigree on the internet or whatever is it intelligence
service traditionally obsess about?

There's a pile of dusty rotary folders sitting on my desk.
Agoston said they were interesting, right before he went
missing, and an assistant documenter came to see my parents.
Here a silly old man and I wouldn't put it past him to have
mean something significant, even lie. But as he got to a list
of neatly scanned file reference numbers, pointers into the
shelf positions documents are stored at in the stacks--nothing
at all simple as far as I can tell. That would be giving
valuable information to the enemy. How like Agoston.

I pick up the first folder and open it. I combine it, connect
dog-eared, and most filled better handwritten on paper trails
I would also a piece of faded screen typing to make head or
tail of it. "Janus box, what the hell"? Luckily I have a
viewer with an automatic document reader. I carefully feed
the brittle pages to the computer, one at a time, watching the
software to maximum resolution. On the first page I pick up a
microscopic high-resolution scan--there's some glowing, what
looks like pale scribbles showing through, as if the author tried
to scribble something out and zoom in to justify the date.
First: October 19th, 1921. Then I turn the handwriting
recognizer software back and back. After a while, it's
cooked and nearly read.

CLASSIFIED STATE

Dear John,

First of all, greetings from Hawaii. I sincerely hope this
letter finds you experiencing a more pleasant climate than
the Eastern seaboard, which has cleared down in earnest
the past week. Please give my best regards to Doris.

I presume you have already received word through the
wire about the accusation of the Board of Church last
month. By all accounts he was given as far a trial as the
Reels could manage, and if even a sixth of the allegations
related against him are true then I can't say that they had
any alternative but to shoot him. I have been paying special
attention to the reports floating out of Hawaii about
Gerson's travels, and Unger's Shomberg was by far the
worst of a bad bunch. I was a heavy affix, and I had not
a thoroughly bad fellow, and perhaps we should thank
the Reels for ridng us of this monster.

However, his death leaves certain questions
unanswered. I decided to visit his parents--not his father,
but his mother and her husband, Sophie Charlotte and
Samuel Chlar Von Hognberg-Haase. They live in
Jena, and although the weather is dismal--the snow is
already giving first feet slick on the ground--I was able to
gather a modicum of news.

As you probably know, madrasa stalks the Unger
Sternberg line, the Reels, other Theodor--a keen
emulator geologist, noted for his interest in natural
history, is a naturalist to the day. In my estimate Sophie
Charlotte suffered considerably by marriage, for he
deteriorated while they were still married; it is a difficult
topic to raise in conversation, especially in light of the
unfortunate fate of her son, and so I did not seek to disturb
her, but made my observations indirectly.

The Hognberg-Haase estate is a stately home that
would grace any family of means. In any case, by virtue
I presents a lively table to the world, its deeply pitched
roof and ornate parlor beneath a basket of snow, an
air of tranquility in the middle of the gloomy pine forest.
But it is a fairly late out of the Brothers Grimm, other than
the stolid and conditioned love that our parents'
generation sought to raise us on. This is a castle of the
German aristocracy, descendants of the Teutonic Knights
and warriors of the Russian Empire and the like, upheaval
displaced them of the objects of their loyalty, and it is an
estate that has been cut down to size, thanks to the
doctors of the oligarchy relating to land reform and the
rights of the peasants to the fruits of their labor.

Epigrams and studied with the Hognberg-Haase but
unwieldy, unobscure to write a full-length in the
Quarterly about the equine settlement in Regio Cuvia,
which has not seen so much turbulence and persecution of
the former rulers as other areas. I just about that we would
like to see the countryside, the roads, and talk to
some of the local landlords about the recent changes. The
Quarterly exists as an English newspaper caters to the
political opinions in the backwoods. I had no shortage
of correspondents, mostly of the indignant of Coocheter
variety so familiar to us from the letter columns.

On Sunday afternoon, after the obligatory morning visit to
the chapel--which was very Lutheran in that manner that is
peculiar to the Baltic territories, with gloomy dense
masonry and carved stucco heraldy above the bare wood
panels, and so I need to add, unimpaired when he visited--I
had a chance to chat with the Baron, and by way of two
or three glasses of champagne the subject of the Prodigiosus
to the surface.

"He has always been a disappointment to me, and a
disillusion to his mother," said Oskar Hognberg-Haase.
"This latest affair is but the final straw--lucky the final
one--in the eyes of his dearest." He sat down at this point.
"I tried to beat sense into him when he was young,
you know. But he was always a wild one. That after his
father, and then there was the obsession with Dionysius,
like the heretical garbage Theodor peddled my wife
with before she died." "

"Gadgets?" I asked, digging a little more, indirectly, that I
had been asked to prepare a column about his adolescent
son, but had decided to do so out of respect for the
nearly-bereaved.

Oskar snorted. "He son of mine," he said, with cold
deliberation. "You'd have done what you had done. He
was an idiot, you know, fondling of El Caudillo
prowess by courtship--right that kind to getting
everything, like hangings, hangings, etc., etc." Still he
was going to like the story to blow up with Communism
and Jewry, heaped empty couple of parts--never knew
he got no time for his own, but he pledged to tell them
at to justify Russian and Marxist notions. Can you believe
it? And there was other stuff, dark stuff. Absolutely
dramatic."

asked what he did with the letters.

"Burned them," he said indignantly. "As but a couple that
Sophie refused to let him. I had the heart to dig out
her of... and Memorabilia." He submitted me a wad of paper
for a few minutes, but heathed himself with the assistance
of a third glass. "There was his father's fossils, you know. I
think that's where the rot set in."

"Crazier?" I asked.

"Not Erich, never saw anything like them. I think
Sophie left them in the boy's room. He used to play with
them when he was a kid, you know, to find they coming at the
things. Thought he was going to grow up to be a geologist
like his job, which would have been a bad thing compared
to how he turned out."

"Knowing of your illness, and learning that his mother
had actually preserved the Prodigiosus' bedroom--
circumstances that I do expect her son to return--I asked
myself if an opportunity to look inside, in hope of getting
some insight into his character.

(ENCLOSED) I mailed back and white photographs of
single pieces of wood, connected along fracture planes.
Most of the pieces appear to be oak, although it is hard to
be certain. The fossils resemble certain other samples
retrieved by geologist ANNEKE ELIC, DALL.

I think we've seen the like of these pieces before, haven't
we? Those dark, gleam, looked like Earth.

I shall make modest enquiries to see if it is possible to
acquire Roman Von Unger's Swemmer's topographical fossil
collection for the nation, and (if possible) his mother's
collection of letters. I shall also attempt to arrange a follow-

or visit, although it is now unlikely to be practical until the spring (see *Christmas Hysteria*—there is a somewhat hotheaded, and public society does not trust much in winter, a premature visit would (quite unseasonably) offend) *Incidentally*, I must be warning to travel and visit make use of my free time to investigate further the matter of the bloody White Baron and the mystery he discussed in the Knight's Tavern palace.

Your obedient friend,

John Starnes

THE WOMAN WHO CALLS HERSELF CASSE MAY WANTS PATIENTLY sitting on a backless stool behind the antique cash-register in George Dwyer's shop while keeping an eye on the proprietor, who is busy in the workshop behind the bead curtain (which she has tied back, to afford her a clear view).

The back of the shop is not what she had expected. She's been in instrument-makers' workshops before, among the glue and fresh-bled wood, the saw and varnish. She's familiar with other medical specialties as well, with signal generators and signalboards, amps and filters, the hum and not metallic, crack of cathodes amplified. Dwyer's shop is not like any of these. It has some of the characteristics of a jeweler's workshop, or a watch-maker's—but it is not entirely like either of those. Its name is not the name of its occupant, and it is not from an aristocratic family, and there's a faint chamberlain's coat, as if something has descended the front stairs.

Dwyer has dressed a pair of white cotton compression gloves and hung a stethoscope around his neck. He keeps the lower-white watch at arm's length, as if he doesn't want to hold it too close, rubbing into his microphone. "C-0's thickness varies between 3.2 and 3.5 millimeters, as with the right lower curve, this material appears to be ductile and rigid, although examination at 6X magnification reveals the characteristic spongiform structure of endochondral ossification. . . ." He reaches, as if to measure, and he is right. The instrument is indeed made of bone, preserved and treated to give it a rigid and measureable surface to maintain shape. The treatments, that modify the material in this way are applied while it is still alive, and it is excruciating pain. Pressing into a fine-point probe, the end of which is treated through one of the victim's fingers. "The upper block appears to be carved from the body and lesser cone of hyaline cartilage, the greater cone is analyzed in a manner usually indicative of death-by-intoxication. . . ."

Dwyer may suspect, but the woman knows that the instrument used to construct this instrument were harvested from the bodies of no less than twelve innocents, whose premature deaths were deemed to be an essential part of the process. Before he became a highly specialized instrument maker, Dwyer worked as a surgeon. He's a sensitive, trained to see what lies behind his eyes, most people wouldn't recognize the true horror of the instrument, seeing merely a white vessel, which is why the woman came here after checking the files for a list of suitable specimens.

After almost three hours, Dwyer is finishing, but his work is nearly done. The woman is checking her watch now, with increasing concern. Carefully, finally he removes the flow in its source and holds the lid of the case still, snapping the lattice closed. He steps back and tentatively peers off his gloves, then drops them in a rubbish bin, being careful not to touch their contaminated outer surface with his bare skin. Finally he clicks off the dictaphone. "In done," he says flatly.

The woman stands, smooths the neckline of her skirt, and looks, "Your written report," she says.

"It will be up after five I've had some lunch. You can collect it after that afternoon. . . ."

She shakes her head. "I won't be back." Reaching into her bag she pulls out another envelope. "Here's one copy of your report—and no more—and place it in this envelope. These need it and put it in." There is no address on the envelope. "After you have done that, you should destroy your records. Erase your word processor files, burn the tapes, wherever it takes. You will have full responsibility for your report later."

"So that's that?" she asks the envelope, "burn away?"

"If you just that envelope I will have the contents burnt down by burning," she tells him, staring at him with pale green eyes as crisp as a storm surge.

"I don't want to see that thing ever again," he tells her. "Is that what?"

"All you want to know how to make more?" "No," her face is as smooth as plaster, as if any hint of humor or emotion could catch the surface of her glass. "I want to prove to my superior that the duct is too high."

"Well that should be."

"Well given the magnitude of the threat we face, Comptroller-in-charge is called for. I really believe this one to be too dangerous. Good-bye, M. Dwyer. That we shall never meet again."

BACK IN THE OFFICE:

Photograph One:

A large slab, resting on a table beside a wooden measuring rod. According to the rod it is barely inches high and fifteen inches wide. It is light greyish white. Cleaned along a plane, it reveals a well-preserved, fossil of what appears to be a portion of a class-A mandible.

On closer inspection, there is something wrong with the fossil. Although it possesses the characteristic fine-lamellar structure, each vertebra lip appears to be blunt, as if truncated. Moreover, the body doesn't show signs of radial segmentation—it's a single whole, giving an effect more like a cross section through an extra trailing body, or perhaps an overcast ectoderm—a sea cucumber.

Photograph Two:

Another large slab of broken rock, this time revealing the partially dissected and fossilized arm of a juvenile *ILIC* *HOCU*.

Photograph Three:

It is the pile that has just jumped on the floor. I rub my eyes and quietly swear. "Back this up!" The temptation to start jumping up and down and shouting is well-nigh irresistible, but my office shows a distinguished partition with that of an easily distracted computer-graphics project manager, and the last time I punched the wall he made me come round and put off his GANT chart slides back in the right order on my floor board to attend to a hearing course of critical path analysis. Which is deeply unfair, in my book—the time on one of Raleigh's charts don't join up, all that happens is a project goes over budget, nobody gets away or goes insane (unless the Auditor decides to get involved)—but there's no arguing with her, she's got tape. There he was the court.

It's almost too late for lunch, and all he has succeeded in figuring out so far is that F had a lot of interesting correspondents in the Baltic states, not to mention a huge and not entirely rational herd on the Balkans. (Mind you, he was a bit brought in from some other that) On the other hand, this Roseanne chart seems to have had his head screwed on.

A juvenile, obviously, but corresponding with a covered in the *CEU*? And the correspondence ended at face in the Laurusi archipelago? That's pretty suggestive. And those photographs . . . (Rearme for Ulysses) Dwyer clearly had a disturbed childhood if the state of fossil-collected (whatsoever) order reveals. No wonder Dwyer ended up in the lower (and blurry) stacked up with a boring conventional country night with questionable facilities.

I look at the stack of files: rows of the bloody things, brown mottled envelopes with dates and security classifications scribbled on their front, beneath the familiar Cho-Mho geometry curve of the Internal Security Sign! (read this without

authorization and your details will mark" or words to that effect in the simple (E-mail) message. They're identified by number, using a system we call the Codes Mathematica—four three-digit codes, just like IP addresses and let them signify coincidence, given the Laundry activities provide the streamer by fifty pages? Although the Laundry notes use document as a capital format, not too big digits, now that I think about it: Does that mean their original numbers were written to manage R&D priorities?—with no coded meaning except that they're unique in the index

New folders

I scrounge around on my desk for the original paper Angleton gave me. Where'd Davis let his files there? "In sets of numbers" I can't find the code, damn it. But I know where I entered the document retrieval request: inside my computer and call on the transaction log. Yep, here files requested:

I look under my desk. There I look behind my desk. Then I look in the circular filing cabinet, just in case. I retrace the folders, double-checking inside them just in case the missing file has been mislabeled.

New folders: One

Have you ever found yourself in a cold sweat, your pants clammy and your clothes sticking to the sweat of your back? Heart pounding, even though you're sitting down? Mouth dry as a mummy's tomb?

I am a rough, tough, hardened field agent (yeah, right). I read Davis in the Laundry for nearly a decade. You read gibberish letters from other streamers, been physically entangled with a serial killer fish problem, marked by accidents, imprisoned by a megamachine technician, and he even survived the attention of the Auditors (even I was young, foolish, and didn't know any better, but he never lost a classified file folder, and I don't ever expect there to be a first time.

I force myself to sit down and close my eyes for what feels like an hour but is actually just under ten minutes according to the clock on my computer's screen. When I open my eyes, the problem is still there, but the sweat is beginning to dry and the paralytic feeling has lessened . . . for now. Get that close on my knees, and start picking up the photographs, working through them until I can certainly get them in sequence, and then I put them in the correct envelope and very carefully stack in my chair.

I pick up a Post-it pad and copy the number on the front of the envelope. Then I inspect, eight times, for the remaining envelopes. Then I fast access my code unit—ah—E-60 Angleton's original audiotape notes, numbers starting before my eyes like exotic fish.

Two folders. Up. Through them checking off the files like god, well I identify the number that's missing: 103.702.560.

Right
I call up the registration and look for 103.702.560. Sure enough, it's there. So I ordered it, but I write in my office. Double and I anticipate the transaction file, looking for my request: DU file #E of CD. Oh my. DOCUMENT NOT FOUND ON DESIGNATED SHELF

I just about faint with relief, but manage to force myself to pick up the phone and dial the first desk number. "Hello? Angleton?" The voice at the far end is female, distracted, a bit nervous, and all fustian for which I am grateful not to be the active staff as was—clouded.

"Oh, this is Bob Howard in C-67? Bob? Bob on Thursday I requested an actual document review, but don't file. I'm going through them now and one of them is missing. I've got a file number, and an accession number: DOCUMENT NOT FOUND ON DESIGNATED SHELF. Can you tell me what that means?"

"It means," she sounds irritated—the librarian couldn't find your file. They looked where it was supposed to be and it wasn't there."

"Oh. Is there a direct mapping between the document reference number and a given shelf?"

"Yes, there is. You almost really use code names and the index in case the file's been assigned a new number; you know, it happens sometimes. Do you have a codename for me?" (could look that up for you . . .)

"In every my colleague just gave me a list of document reference numbers." I squawk. "Not too, uh, off track. So I'm trying to figure out what's missing. I was worried that the file had been sent over and got mislabeled, but if it's missing in the stacks I suppose that just means it isn't renumbered." Or he wrote down the wrong reference. Or something? I don't believe that one for a split second—no way could Angleton get a file number wrong—but I don't want some new file number poking her nose into my investigation. "Oh," I put the phone down and start looking.

Let's see: Angleton was working on BLOODY BARON, when I came back to the office he gave me a list of ten files to read, then he went missing. This coincides with an opening in Russian activity, including a marked allegiance to use extreme measures. How did I come from the stacks, and they turn out to be Indian backgrounds relating indirectly to the historical investigation case of BLOODY BARON. The term file isn't on its shelf. All he got is a number, not a name.

Wow, it's time to do some unofficial digging . . .

MEANWHILE, BACK TO THE HISTORICAL

RECONSTRUCTION:
It is nearly six o'clock when Mr. Dowser finishes typing his report.

He's a track of the time, his head locked inside the scope of the postmortem on the instrument. He's read about it five before. Their design is attributed to a handsome German visitor in Paris in the early 1930s, but nobody actually built one until the privately Dr. Mohr commissioned an entire string section from a certain David's instrument maker in 1931. It should be no surprise that the instrument maker presented under the subsequent regime, but was recalled after a summary trial by the SED's—investigation in 1961. This particular instrument made its way to the West in the lap of a retiring Col. was identified with electric pickings during the 1950s, and after a spectacular out of accidents was acquired by a relative collector in 1962—followed by some to be a fluff for a British government department who, as a matter of state policy, did not like to see such instruments in the wrong hands.

He thinks to think what its appearance portends. On the other hand, the young woman who brought it to his—Mr. Dowser thinks of average aged under fifty as "young"—seems to have a subtle appreciation of its value.

He strutsan fastidiously as the last of the pages of single-spaced description leaves out of the six-pet printer. I pick the half dozen contact pages of photographs, circulate the forensic examination of the interior of the instrument, and an invoice for just over ten thousand pounds. He stacks the bundle of pages together, and binds them neatly with a paper clip from a desk drawer. Then they go inside the envelope the woman who called herself Cassie May gave him. He locks the file and walks it there, in a moment of curiosity he switches on the anti-courtesy lamp he keeps by the cash register and examines it under overhead light, hearing above all to make note of the UV-fluorescent dots the Post Office prints on envelopes to control their routing.

If "Cassie May" ticks she can retrieve an unmarked envelope from the postal system that's welcome to it, in Mr. Dowser's books. He turns back to the computer and enters his work, then sighs and glances at the clock. Five minutes to closing time, so pick anything the shop open any longer. He stands up, stretches, switches the computer off, and goes through an abbreviated version of his regular closing routine, no point banking the cash register contents (the bankings being the woman's) and barely concerned to prep cards. He pulls on his coat, sees his coffee mug upside down on the dining board, catches off the lights, and opens the front door.

The woman is waiting for him. She smiles. "Have you finished your report?" she asks.

Mr. Dowser nods, content. "I was going to post it, as you

requested. "He puts his coat pocket.
"It is a hurry. There's a rush on. If you don't mind . . ." She
looks at him impatiently.
"Of course." He pulls out the envelope and hands it to her.
"My friend is arrested."
"You don't need to worry about that side of things." She
slides the envelope into her black patent leather handbag and
smiles.
"I suppose not. You people always pay your debts
eventually."
"Yes, you can be absolutely certain of that."
He turns back to the door and fumbles with his key ring,
which is why he doesn't see her withdraw a diamond pin
from her bag, raise it to the back of his head, and discharge a
single round into his forehead. The gun makes little sound—
just the racking click of its action—but she fires, the
explosive blast in its muzzle back over with clear fluid, air in
contact with the walling as it curls to just above shoulder level.
Mr. Crowder slumps forward against the door. The woman's arm
flashes him down with absolute precision and discharges a
second round into the top of his skull, but it is unnecessary; he
is already dead.
She looks around with green eyes as deep as sacrificial
cathode eyes in which a narrative witness might see torturous
words, writing. But there are no sensitive witnesses to see
through the gutter; just the ordinary pavement crowd
hurrying about their business on the London streets. For a
moment her face shimmers, the blonde sliding her attention
is attracted, flying in too many directions to maintain the fiction
effectively—but then she returns and pulls herself together. She
returns the diamond pin to her bag. Then, turning on one locked
heel, she strides away from the corpse, just another
professional woman on her way home from the office. Nobody
has witnessed the killing, and it will be twenty minutes before
a passing policeman realizes that the drunk sleeping in the
subway is never going to rise again.

BEER AND TEA



YOU CAN FOCUS ON THINKING YOURSELF INTO THE OTHER guy's shoes until the cows come home, but it's not going to do you a whole lot of good if you're actually wearing sandals. Move to the point, what if I've got an entire show back to choose from, and the job you need is the one that's missing? There is a chicken-wed egg problem here, or more accurately a well-wed-bootstrap one, and it's not going to allow it to apply to my office. Not an [jargon] to fit in better by following down the opening side of the grapes based in the space, not will get her delivery into a day.

On the other hand, if you go and actually look at the other guy's footprints you might perfect something new, not in a split of enquiry, I set out to burgle Angleton's office. Now, it just so happens that Angleton has officially been declared missing, and I am his assistant trainee because it's a more personal working environment I might just be under suspicion of having disappeared but myself switch the thought and into the information that Angleton is considered to be sufficiently formidable that . . . well, let's say it's unlikely because, we don't generally play politics with the kid gloves off. (There are exceptions, such as the late and embattled Bridger, but they're exactly that: exceptions. The hard fact is that all the real powers can turn the game based into a snaking hole in the map, which generally forces them to tread lightly).

Shaking past the office window, I ignore around the coffee station and duck down the back staircase, through the fire door, round the bend, down the fire escape stairs, and then peep outside the unobscured green screen door I do not encounter anyone in the process, but you can never be sure there are cameras, and there is thermal security, and I probably really really there are the cameras from the right side. This is a security agency after all. However aligned and dutifully executed, it might appear at times, you should never take things for granted if you're populating monkey business.

I pad out the NecromonPad and file it up. Happy for some glow at the Station, YouTube, Horned Owl, Settings, Bloody Holes, Messing, Elder Sign, you know the interface. Bloody Holes gets me into the word detector, which is showing the small options I point my camera at the door and peer into the ally across. Suit enough in addition to Angleton's trademark. Scanning the NecromonPad, someone had jiggled into a Langford Death Point, with a cryptic-like to a web site counter so they can measure how many visitors it's had from from the corner of their laptop. To, what are standards coming to? I pause as a nearby thought enters me and I re-check the door frame, then the calling abuse the entrance, then the other side of the corridor, just to cover my, nothing. This is a dirty snafu-hour deal so rather than zapping the LDP I pad out my conductive pencil into a transparent and then an exception list with a single item: the signature of my new suit. The Scanning line steadily traces the wall. Three inches later I put the phone away place my hand on the doorknob, hold and push.

Angleton's office has no monitor. Blank and tall. I take a home to the ghosts of a war color by to then are the greatest public thought we win in 1988—a room, walled in floor-to-ceiling file cabinets, a granite desk with organic pedals and telegenic keyboard, dominated by a hooded microphone mangle—the silent heart of an intelligence table, no longer bearing the number station signs across the Iron Curtain. I wait expect to see cubicles in the corners, to avoid the stale cigarette ash of a thousand time rights beneath the arched aisle, leading to the bunkers.

I shake myself. History has trick as water rose in this room (I could descend beneath its asbestos weight if I start pad myself together. And in any case, Angleton was here—in his office I mean, not in his actual spot—before the war, he has seen a photograph from 1942, the man himself smiling at the camera, visible no older (or younger) than he is today. It's an open question, the extent to which he was involved in the outer affairs of government before the Second World War. Just how far back does the G. Harper (Discussions don't have a home address on file, which is left suggestive. [honor](#) . . .

Station I set down behind the desk, from the wall. Not and calling up and down with the NecromonPad. Suit enough, control of the file cabinet via bodily thought with teleological networks of magic—no!—drawn in the pebbled journey hand of the color door's window, but identified in Angleton's spidery textual complex area and symbol linking active declarations and grammar pronunciation. I could measure engineer there in time and might secure my mind, but knowing the base there probably nothing there, but change in the case rate and a job-to-be loaded with me, get. It was a firm believer in keeping the crown jewels in hand—no!—in armor, the thing in the great metal desk.

The Memory. You've got to understand that although I've read about the things, I've never actually used one. It's an important piece of the history of computing, linked to the public as a thick-piece contrived by the Atlantic Monthly in 1945, most of the machines thought it was a government-own good idea, but were unable to realize that a number of the things had actually been built, with a main part extracted for the Manhattan Project. The product of electro-mechanical engineering at its finest, not to mention the most homebrewed computer, which was used as much as a 9-19 bomber—and contained six times as many moving parts, most of them assembled by maintenance. I wasn't until 1949 AgateCard allowed up on the Agate Mac in 1957 that nothing like it reached the general public.

I believe Angleton's Memory is the only one that is still working, much less in day-to-day use, and to say it takes black magic to keep it running would be no exaggeration. I approach it with considerable caution, and not just because I'm absolutely certain he will have taken steps to ensure that anyone who sits in it without his approval and passes the big red button will never push another button in that particular circuit (he, he knows how to use the thing, but if I crash it or break the cylinder head gasket or something and the cones back, the only chance for sale in would be a pair of NASA-issue moon boots (and maybe not even that).

I drag the window chair back from the Memory's leg casters squeak like agitated rodents across the worn linoleum floor—red, some myself gingerly into the cracked rubber seat. The cast area, an inch, much beneath my hands, where his palm have pressed upon them over the decades. Lights the solid sides of the desk and ease myself forward until my feet rest lightly on the pedals. There's an angled glass strip facing me from the far end of the desk, and a light at the top—well that comes on as my hand touch the keyboard. It's a periscope, giving me a view of my back and the letters at the back of each pedal. I turn the graduated turns of the microphone reader, because you place the NecromonPad on the desktop, and push the power button.

There's a clack of metal sliding, and then a humming vibration runs through the machine. It's easy to forget that though it weighs more than a ton, its average component weight less than five grams: the great stone took ten months' entire output from the largest watch factory in America. I take into the hooded circular screen is something that was Machine to submicron precision, get less powerful than the ancient DEC/CDD in its working machine. These devices were the backbone of the Laundry's Intelligence Analysis section in the late 1940s. It's like a steam locomotive or a stone sea, just because it's concrete doesn't make it any less of an achievement, or any less of its purpose.

The screen lights up--like an LCD monitor, or even an old cathode ray tube, but from the an analog file projector.

WRITE: USERNAME.
The moment of truth: I cautiously kick-type BCR, then spend a business minute fiddling for the return key before I realize there's a paddle-shaped lever protruding west with my left knee--like the handle on a manual typewriter. I tug it.

There's a clunk from inside the desk, and the projection switches, to be replaced by a picture of the organization chart of area. Then more words appear, scrolling in from the bottom of a screen, ascending slightly.
WRITE: CLEARANCE.
What the hell? I occasionally type BLOODY BARON, and know the return paddle. There's something weird about the background--then I sag to the fact that it administered history of clearance issues. It's probably a Bourne Code system, which figures. Clear that BCR. . .

The screen fades to white after a couple of seconds, then a bloody red flashes into view. I don't read me out loud at all, but the descending screen that the word is repeating the inside of the back of my skull makes me squint on my seat. There is an eye-winking loop to one side of it that bleeds further, as if it's led to my old surname.
WRITE: STILL ALIVE? Yeh.
Knows knocking (type V[ACTU]N).
WELCOME BOB, YOU ARE AUTHENTICATED.

If you are reading this message, I am absent. Welcome to the dead man's boots. Hope you don't find them too tight. You are one of only four people who have access to the database (and at least two of them are dead or dying of K Syndrome).
You may read all files not flagged with a 2-profile, search all files not flagged with a 2-profile, and print any files flagged with a profile from 0-3.
You may not read or search 2-profile files. Print files flagged with a profile from 0 to 2. Otherwise, or reassign--engineer this instrument.

WARNING: LETHAL ENFORCEMENT PROTOCOLS ARE ENFORCED.
WRITE: GOTTO MANE ME? Yeh.
This is Angleton. He doesn't like I make a note of those clearance-or my phone. Then, he's happy type Y.

Uhh, in fact, even semi-designated user interface. There are abnormalities out there that cater to be personal media private shut-out 3 degrees. The dilemma is a mixture of simplicity and good design, as long as you bear in mind that it's operated by foot pedals (except for the paper tape punch), the display is a monochrome reader, and I can't display more than ten menu choices on screen at any time. Unlike early digital computers such as the Manchester Mark One, you don't need to be Alan Turing and doing new reactive code on the fly by feeding a batch at the tablet photocopist memory screen; you just need to be able to type on a standard keyboard using both feet (with no screen key and verbal relation promised. If you make certain signs). There's nothing here that reminds me hostile as VMERC to a link hacker. He just got an edge looking that the dilemma is reading me, and settling in quality harrowing judgment. So I speed half an hour reading the quick read guide, and that.

WRITE: DOCUMENT TO RETRIEVE.
I find the 0th profile, kick the Memento into numerical entry mode, and type.

FETCH: 00.762560

NOT FOUND.

WRITE: DOCUMENT TO RETRIEVE.
SHE I try again.

FETCH: INCK.

There is a whirring and a churning sound from within the desk. After several seconds a new menu appears.

WRITE: ENTER DOCUMENT CODE NUMBER.

FETCH: 00.762560

More whirring and a brief pause. Then the screen clears, to display something the Memento knows about the missing file:

DOCUMENT INDEX ENTRY:
NUMBER: 100.762560

TITLE: THE FULLER MEMORANDUM

SECRET CODE: 1-LOCKDOWN-101

STORAGE LOCATION: STICKA WALL: 113.762560

COPY STATUS: FORWARDED

CLASSIFICATION: BEYOND TOP SECRET, 2-CLEARANCE

EXPRESSION DOES NOT EXPIRE

CODEWORDS: TAPROT, WHITE BARON, CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN

SEE ALSO: 2-ANGLTON, 2-EXECUTION PROTOCOLS, 2-FINAL LIST

END OF INDEX ENTRY

CLASSIFIED: ST/MT

Dear John,

Once again, greetings from Rome. I hope you can forgive my lack of enthusiasm; it's gotta/more cold here in January. I thought I knew where water was (Memento in winter is enough to teach anyone a gooding respect for Jack Frost) but this is absolutely unworkable. There are few skiways in Extremis, and those which remain after the emulsion has under colony control, to clear any passing fancy that might occur to Lombardi. Truly in hot spots here, if I am sure we shall not be invaded again, at least before he has finished packing Sibilla, but one can hardly blame Mr. Fog for his caution.

I have a most unexpected cause to write to you--a girl here just presented to me, based at my former address. Such a girl formed was this that I would be unsure not to tell it to the mouth, but those repeated to back with it issues you that the man is, although middle-aged, by no means anything other than that which it appears to be namely, the deceased mother of the Prudgole who was discussing in our earlier correspondence.

It seems that my sympathetic questioning made more of an impression on Madame Hoyerger-Heane than I imagined. There was a brief time in the latter cold we have lately been experiencing, and being of a mind to visit the capital for a few weeks she took advantage of it. She is even now enmeshed in our party, where Dorigata is entertaining her.

And the Prudgole isn't her best collection?
"Like that?" she asked. "Clear talk me how you've caught your fancy (perhaps you know of a contact in London who will put them to some better use)? Via things, I don't want to remember me can by them?" Her sign, who was furnished with the heavy box all the way from Regio to Rome, can only now enthusiastically agreed. And so they are even now in a shipping trunk, awaiting more pleasant weather before I dispatch them to you by train.

Madame Hoyerger-Heane is a sensitive soul, and her life has been dignified by dramatic tragedy. Even her first husband's breakdown and incarceration to the deaths of his baby daughter, and now to the fact that his condition her son (never more than he might have dreamed of). She lives like a ghost in public, and is transparently aware of the daughter of Baron Von Hingelhof of Hesse, wife of Baron Oskar Von Hoyerger-Heane, a distinguished family lady. Cahn why that she has created this web of unworkable tragedy strikes her entirely, as does the rebate of her privileged upbringing and the previous visits of the Prudgole's antichry in the Baltic states--but she is near to step, a child of the previous century and simply unable to adapt to the cold winds of change sweeping the globe.

"No sense to me other than to learn and understand," she said, showing me a sheaf of letters. I think she yielded to allow her pain, but of a medicine for her own. She had lost the heart of my time. However much of a state she may be. "No, no, he was by tradition deeply religious, but unfortunately I brought his much pain. Used the strongest eastern mystics responsible--the orientals. And the Jew."

His arithmetic couldn't find. "If you hadn't forwarded this Singapore translation he would not have thought to file on against the government" (Such sentiments are common among the aristocracy here; they have an unhealthy identification with the law.)

"What did he believe?" I asked. "As a matter of course..."

"Oh—he took it into his head to convert to a vile fang of oriental superstition? Nothing so honest and Asian as Theosophy. He picked these filthy beliefs up in Mongolia, nearly ten years ago, when visiting his mad wife's doctor by all accounts, a man called the Singh Khan." She sat silent at some length about this.

"Would you mind if I read his letters on religion?" I asked her. And it took long enough, she acquiesced. I now have not only Urgen's Steinberg's fossil collection, inherited from his father, but his surviving letters—those he sent to his mother. And they are very interesting indeed.

I attach my (carefully reworked) translation of selected extracts of his letters from 1925; I'll forward the originals by separate cover from the Basile. Meanwhile, I strongly recommend that you should instruct your fellows in the Order to start searching for the missing Tsangpo.

Your obedient servant,
Arthur Ronson

THESE COMES A TIME IN EVERY COUNTERESPIONAGE INVESTIGATION when you have to get your teeth, admit that you're at your wit's end, admit defeat, and budget off home for a Chinese takeaway and a night in front of the telly. Then you get a good night sleep because of the nocturnal excitement induced by too much black bean sauce) and awaken, refreshed and moved and in a mood to do battle once more with—

Sukhoi.

I have gotten somewhere: I now know that the missing file is called the Fuller Memorandum (which by a huge leap of inductive logic—I hope I'm not getting ahead of myself here—I deduce is a memorandum, by or about F) it was filed in 1941, was absolutely magoo-keg-wat sum-better-reading, odd midlife party age, and has some bearing on CAGE HIGH/TANAK GREGG). It also reveals... There are three facts worthy of emphasis: give me industrial-grade research ideas if I see my bud. Luckily, it's not my bud! All I have to do is find Angolan and his wife he can explain it all, and also explain what the flapping fuck it has got to do with SIL COOBY BARON.

This much is not theoretical: Getting that Chinese takeaway, with or without black bean sauce, is time-critical, but I don't die until the end. Going home and doing sweet, snappy quality time things with life is time-critical too, and then for dramatic on grounds of cancer. And so on, having a normal transition while waiting for the latest set of duty files around the department. So I stand up, stretch, push the off-button on the Miesner, and stare sceptically at...

I pause briefly in my own mind (but of an office, since my email, response to a couple of critical performance you, I am no longer in charge of the structured coding specifications for D Black, yet, I am still attached to the international committee managing and acquisition standards committee, for my sins in a previous life, no, I do not have a desktop license for Microsoft Office, because my desktop PC is a Microsoft-free zone for security reasons—oh, wait, my life time with the?)).

The manner has finished. Digging at these duty notes from Arthur to John (about the PC's access to the NecromancerPod and then I give my backups and credits and head for home, sit in front of the office as I pass the window and file on the front desk has passed off easily; there's libidinal switch and a double take. It's his turn. She'll see me off. I'll see, as I head down the main staircase at a fast clip and turn through the staff exit.

This is London. South Bank, south of the corner north of Totting, and west of Wandsworth (come on, you can alternate left-right-right-left about it). It's a lovely evening and the rivers are all closed off, but most of the shops are closed. Meanwhile, the pub on the left with the sort of redwood parkwork could that go drinking on a Monday evening. I turn left, walking towards the river; but when I see the river, I see it's closed away but once I get to the safe haven, I go and see for a bit.

This is London. The worst thing that can happen to you is usually a mugging at a trainport, and I do my best not to look like a promising victim, which is why I leave me a couple of minutes to realize that I'm being tailed. In fact, it takes a while for them to move to lose me at that point, identified as fully, he does the mandatory Escape and Evasion training, not in front of the camera, 101. I just wasn't expecting to need it here.

Two of them are strong, alert types in black leather biker jackets, worn over white tees and pants. They've got short stubble and hair and the sort of muscle you get when you go through a Spetsnaz training course—no kishinevism, more like kishinevism. They come up behind me and march along either side, too close close. The third of them, who I guess is their boss, is a middle-aged man in a raggy black hat, his eyes start with a steady look, but he's off the clock and on his own time. He sidles in just ahead and to the left of "Tag, it's a genuine dilemma. He splits at the "Please to follow this way" he says.

I glance to my right. Tag it matches my stride, step for step. He stares at me like a police dog, but he's got social contacts. I give him my eyes and look away halfheartedly. "Who are you?" I ask, my tongue dry and stammering, as Mr. Raggy Sid passes in the doorway of the Frog and Turnstone. You may wish to call me "Pants" or "the pants family." "Mildred, Pants, it's not my real name, but it will serve." He gestures at the door: "Please allow me to buy you a drink. I assume you my interests are honorable."

My word is being, meanwhile I am distressed to feel my life in P. Pants, whoever he is, is a player, his definition of "honorable" might not encompass allowing me to engage with my life, but he's unlikely to start something in the middle of a pub with an after-work crowd. "Would you mind leaving the match outside?" I ask. "I assume they're not drinking."

"Here?" He wags his fingers and says something to the two men. They split, taking up positions to either side of the street front of the pub. "After you," he says, waving me into the entrance.

If I were James Bond, this is the point at which I would draw my concealed pistol, jab both barrels between the eyes, get Pants in an armlock, and point-why some amount out of his. But I am not James Bond, and I don't want to precipitate a diplomatic incident by assaulting the Second House Attaché and a couple of military guards, or bullshitters or whatever (not to mention sparking a murder investigation which would send me in the Pembers having to conduct a gigantic and expensive cover-up operation, all of which would come out of my department's operating budget and drive me to distraction). And anyway, everyone knows that you don't get useful answers by torturing people, you get useful answers by making them tell you.

(Why don't you talk to them?) It asked the committee. (Shit, we might accidentally tell them something they don't already know said Choudhury after staring at me for a minute as if I gave a second face.)

(Look that one, that's it.)

So I let Pants buy me a pint. "By the way, do you mind if I let my yells to tell you I'm going to be late?" I ask.

"If you think it necessary, but I promise I will keep you only but an hour."

"Thank." I smile gratefully and why not the NecromancerPod and the rest of their HAVING A BREAK WITH LINGUISTIC FEISTIOUS BODS, HONK. LATE. Pants looks to a purple clothing counter and it has the desired effect: money and a pair of joni glasses change hands. He carries them over to a small table in the back of the pub and I follow him. Pants' assistants glare me a nasty grin, but it seems this is to be a friendly chat about relatively unimportant matters. Finally, I keep both my hands on the table. Wouldn't do to give the Spetsnaz the wrong idea—these a feeling it would take

man than Harry's AA-2 slogan to stop them in their tracks.
"It's health, home, and happiness," he proclaims, waving his glass.

"It's drink to that!" My waist doesn't nudge me as I bring the drink to my lips. "So, I guess you wanted to talk?"

"Well, yes," Parris, having eaten a mouthful, puts his glass down. "Do you have any cause to be apprehensive?"
"None whatsoever!" I laugh cautiously.

"The reason?"

"Well, I take another mouthful of EGSE. "Yup!" There was something about a legend in those letters, wasn't there? Something Chaucer-y as in the medieval, maybe?"

"It's missing," Parris' mouth inquiries. "But people have had it, yes?"

"I decide to play dumb. "If any legend has gone missing, I suppose Facilities would be the people who'd deal with that. . . Why do you ask?"

"See England?" For a moment, Parris looks impressed, then he quickly pulls it all over it. "The legend is missing," he repeats, as if to a very slow pupil. "It has been missing since last week. Everyone is looking for it, in, uh, you, the occupation. . . I know its last locations. Please, I implore you, find it for all our sakes. And if before the wrong people get their hands on said legend . . ."

Contributed to paper, the dialogue might sound comical but coming from Parris' mouth, in his soft, clipped diction, it is anything but.

Editor: Urgan Sternberg's legend did get misplaced by accident. Thank.

Parris' response takes me by surprise. "Ecc?" He leans back in disgust, waves his glass, and then a drink and a disappointed sigh. "You're falling now."

Sister: He's been scolded. "Excuse me, but how well do you know it's missing, but that's all I know but fit tell you what, if you can tell me what happened in Amsterdam last Wednesday and why it followed my wife home on Thursday I would be very grateful."

"Answer?" Parris shuts his mouth with a click. "Your wife is afraid, though?" he asks, all serious calmness.
"Shh!" He did intend. "The incident was attributed to your people, did you know that?"

"Not connected?" Parris makes a gesture of dismissal with one hand. "They do that, you know to muddy the waters."

"Who?" The supervisor?

Parris gives me that look again, the look you might give to the friendly but stupid puppy that's just waddled on the carpet for the first time that day. "Well ma, Mr. Howard, what do you know?"

I sigh. "Not much, it seems. I have been assigned to a committee that's trying to work out why you folks are currently turning up an ability reputation score like there's no tomorrow. I am trying to deal with an upcoming domestic disturbance, mainly work following my wife home. We took it out of the office, and in trying to pick up the pieces if you thought you could spare me down for useful information, in about you could spare the wrong way it could tell you more than you could possibly want to know about the structural cabling requirements for our new headquarters building's fourth substructure, but when it comes to missing legends, nobody put me on the least priority classified briefing list."

"Name," Parris looks gloomy. "Well, Mr. Howard, sorry, sorry, not before you-but I'ds. So, here in my card." He passes me a plain white business card engraved on either side, but pressed from a very high grade of linen weave. It makes my fingertips tingle. "Should you have anything to discuss, call me."

I take it into my breast pocket. "Thanks."

"As for the legend, I will never see the same after Urgan Sternberg returned from the Soviet Khan's area."

"How's enjoying my face. I see my best not to watch. I've heard those names before. "I keep my eyes open for." I massage his.

"You sure you will," he says gravely. "After all, it would be in everyone's best interests for the legend to return to its rightful office." He draws his beer glass. "I will see you around, I am sure." He says, rising.

"Bye!" I make my glass to his back as he turns towards the door, shoulders hunched.

CLASSIFIED: STENT ANNEX A

Dear Mother,
Salutations from Urgan! I greet you as Urgan Sternberg, Outstanding Propaganda State Hero of Mongolia, Just and generous and general of the Living Buddha and Emperor of Mongolia, His Holiness Sogot Chodring Dorjia Haskador Great earths, bloody battle, heroic mission, and glorious victory have continued to elevate me to the forefront of my destiny, as victor of the empire of Genghis Khan. It is spring in Mongolia, and already I have pushed the end of Sukhankov, servants, and subjugation, soon my armies will commence their march on St. Petersburg, to remove the blessed Prince Michkovskis his rights throne and to cleanse Mother Russia of the depravity of socialism and the filthy dogmatists who have led her far back on the holy road.
(Once I have restored the Tsar I consider it my duty to make those lands that have been stolen from the Czarists, including our homeland, that you will think kindly of me for making the gates of socialist tyranny from the roads of the aristocracy of Estonia when I come to purify the Baltic lands and restore the just weight of monarchy to the quiet Poles.)

The conquest of Ugan presented me with a considerable challenge, and I shall describe it for you. Ugan lies in a valley between hills, along the banks of the Tan River. When I laid siege to it, their war fleet, but the degenerate Chinese conquerors had constructed fortifications, battlements and battled with defenses around Ugan's Mountains. . .
[Lengthy description of the siege of Ugan. Date: 1900]

Now here is a casualty:
When we stormed the palace of the Sogot Khan to take the Living Buddha from his Chinese captives, the fighting was fierce after liberating His Holiness my men executed a tactical withdrawal. But once the assembly was safe, when I ordered the main attack on the Chinese fort occupying the city I detailed a reliable team-my army Eugene Burdakovskis, who the men call "Sogot"-to secure the treasury against looting. It is here that the risks and setbacks are everywhere and it was here I discovered from the exile I have to work with-netics and adventures of the ever-great army-as he lays to rest to tranquility and crime as to land the rock before my righteous authority. Burdakovskis is a great fellow, a comrade, powerful and broad-chested, with a little curly beard hairs and a narrow forehead. He always does what I ask of him, which is a blessing, and if there is one man I would trust to attend questions I have no doubt for it is he.

During the occupation, Sogot set his slaves men to stand guard with lanterns. Some carried the great tall wheel the measures and gifts of the hundred thousands are kept. It is a remarkable place, a museum of wonders, treasure in all of Europe. There is a library with shelves devoted to manuscripts in a myriad of languages, and some are Chinese, full of amber from the shores of the Northern Sea, carved walrus and ivory tusks, rings with opalites and rubies from China and India, rough diamonds the size of your fingernail, bags of golden thread that will provide, and silks and furs that will cause constant debates of the Living Buddha made from every precious material under the sun.

Now Sogot is among the most obedient of my officers, but in the course of restoring order to the city and clearing the remaining enemy rubble out of the subterranean, I told some day before I could return with the Sogot Khan to inspect his measures, to that from I am afraid to say that he disagreed himself. Sogot did not meet the Buddha's measures, else I would have hanged him as high as any other wretch, but he lay looked through the library, and I saw whether did my eyes for the wares in the long run.

There are, as you can imagine, scrolls and books strewn all over, and they include the most remarkable works of sorcery and prophecy imaginable. All the numerous punishments of hell that are reserved for souls who indulge in the sins of the flesh are documented and indeed illustrated in the finest, one might almost say pornographic, detail. It was in these scrolls that Tsujout allowed his subliminal imagination to stray far.

It is not clear exactly when Tsujout found the scrolls, but two days after the fall of the palace he was again was clamped to cross upon him lying on the floor of the library, crying incoherently and clucking a corrupted language of sorcery in his shrilly tones. According to the other witnesses, who I have questioned diligently Tsujout showed other signs of distress: banding from the eyes, moaning, and clucking his body.

They put him to bed in the hospital supervised by Dr. Klingenberg, who was ordered to administer Tsujout to spare him from this misery, but when counsel prevailed and my curiosity continued to creep for him until he began to recover the following day, sabbling in tongue and occasionally uttering "hept hept".

On the third day, just as I was on my way back to the palace, Tsujout is said to have sat up in bed, whereupon he asked, "What year is it?" Upon being told it was 1600, he collapsed in a dead faint. And although he is now back at his duties, he is not the same. There is a cold intellect to him that was hitherto absent. He was a light drinker, but instead, he gave no thought to the matter. How he anticipates my orders with eerie efficiency, organizes the men under his command to meet any contingency, shows an uncanny ability to sniff out spies-indeed, he has begun to accuse me, the more so since I discovered he has other qualities. It is commonplace for war to degenerate a good man to the level of a brute, but only in my experience for it to see one such as Ensign Rustikovsk.

Consequently, I would like to ask a favor of you, dear mother.

Enclosed with this letter I send a copy of the Buddhist scripture that so turned Tsujout's mind. It is written in an archaic dialect of Sargho-Buyat. I have heard that Professor Gierstman of the Schola des Tamen-Scholaris in Berlin has some expertise in matters of this nature, and I would deeply appreciate it if you could forward the document to him and commission a translation, at my expense? This is a matter that I am admittedly reluctant to entrust to any of my political associates, for they scheme and plot incessantly, and I am sure there are many who believe that I dabble in the blackest sorcery. I would not like to place such incalculable ammunition in their hands. I implore you not to add your precious eyes with the contents of this scroll, for it is laced with such vile and diabolical diagrams that I would be tempted to burn it, were it not for the effect it seems to have on those who read it. But it is for that very reason that I urgently need to obtain the advice of a scholar who might tell me what those who read the fragment become. And so, I commend it to your gentle hands. Your loving son,
General Baron Linggen Von Sternberg

CLUB ZERO



I GET HOME AN HOUR AND A HALF LATE, BONG-TRIED, BANGBOOLED, and bothered. I haven't had a good day at the office. All things considered, a convincing briefing on Russian OCCINT activities in Western Europe, an old acquaintance who doesn't recognize the airplane, the discovery that the Cyber Memorandum is missing, and two Patriots without patronizing contempt for my lack of insight. I've got a feeling that all the pieces of the game are within my grasp, if only I could figure out where they're probably dropped under the sofa by an invisible cat, knowing my luck.

It's after eight as I turn my key in the lock, pass my left hand over the sensor, and shove into the front hall. The lights are on in the kitchen, and there's a pleasant snarl-Mo in a roasting chicken. I bark, "Hello?" call.

"Up here!" She's upstairs and the descent sound pleased off, which is a relief.

I dump my jacket and take the stairs two at a time. The bathroom door open and she's always herself in the tub in an inordinate amount of green foam and some kind of red mask, so that she looks a little like the creature from the black lagoon. "Did you get my text?" I ask.

"Yes. Who was the Adams Family reference about?"
I sit on a chrome toilet. "What-Oh, er, I stole my head. Never mind." Obviously she can't read my mind, otherwise Howard's face been an Arctic Effect block sitting out the yard before I'd taken my first mouthful of beer. I'm losing my touch. "No screaming on," I snarl.

"Shuts... I Huh. But you've had a more boring day?"

"Sharing regular, unproductive, sleep."
She shrugs and leaves a handful of bubbles my way. I repeat most of the morning and afternoon sitting on a wooden stool, watching a bored-out clay-oven-shaped repeat message into a dictaphone. Then I had to run for a meeting. After that I looked in on the office but folks aren't there, so I come home. Picked up a free-range bird at Walmart, it's in the oven now. I was hoping you might want to fix some extra helpings.

"I can do that." I glance at the bath. "No going to be long?"

"Half an hour at least. I put the chicken in before I came out. You want to look in on it in fifteen minutes or so."
"I'd rather spend my time with her, but I can tell the difference between an order and a request. I search a status, "By the way," I say, trying to move toward a goal. "I've been stuck with Augustus' work on BLOODY BARDON, and I'm finding it a bit confusing. And nobody sent me the briefing papers on the other job, and the one you know. Last week."

"She's silent for almost a minute. Then she sighs. "There's a bottle of Botox at the back of the cupboard under the piano and crochety Open it and give it a little to smooth."

"Okay, sure," I walk out of the bathroom, leaving her to fry and sear the stein, scented table that I carried. I grab and boil potatoes, then shove them in a roasting pan, check the chicken, drop some carrots, and have the vegetables just about ready when Mr. comes downstairs in her bathrobe, hair in a bowl. "Smells good," she remarks, then looks skeptically at my potatoes. "Hmm." She takes over, I get the glass out and pour her generous glasses of wine. It's later than I expected and I'm really other hungry.

Food and wine settle stomach and soul, neither of us is a very sophisticated cook, although life is much more experimentally minded than I am, but we eat and what we prepare for ourselves, which is a good start, and after half an hour we're methodically demolished half a small roast chicken and a pan of meat vegetables, not to mention most of a bottle of wine. My table covered as I shove the plates in the dishwasher and sort out the recyclable bits. "You wanted to know what Thursday was about," she says, staring at what's left in her wineglass.

"Keep running into people who regard me to know." I go in search of another bottle to open. "It's not something I can ignore."

"How much CLUB ZERO are you familiar with?"

"I'm not." I get the water's heated out and go to work on a pint of beer.

"Oh." She pauses. "I'm sorry, but are you sure you don't know?"

"Don't know what?" I ask intently as I scrape away the plastic seal on the bottle. "You've known unknown battles, or unknown unknowns?"

"They're known okay." She shakes her head. "Fucking culture."

"Oh." I do a double take. "That's CLUB ZERO?"

She nods. "None other."

Cults. They're like cockroaches. We humans are incredibly fire-headed by evolution for the sake of spotting coincidences and causal connections. It's a very useful talent that dates back to the last old days on the savannah (before noticing that there were lion pits by the watering hole and then counting up my remaining, and noting there are more lion pits and nobody had their nose missing yet, was the kind of thing that could save your skin), but since we developed advanced tool countermeasures like stone axes and language, I turned into our recent cousin. Because you see, when we spot coincidences we assume there's an intentional actor behind them and that's how we create religions, then, therefore, what would it be if it could be governed by experiment. There's nothing in the world. That must be throwing his thunderbolt again. Carpenters dying of plague except those who used tools with the strange god who wash every day. It must be evil sorcery. And so on.

Being predisposed to religion has its uses, but it's a real Achilles' heel if your civilization is under threat by vastly powerful alien forces. We have a rich repertoire of private behavior which includes the urge to suck up to the big bad alpha male, and a tendency to assume that any intelligence greater or smaller than we are is the top of the pack hierarchy. Finally, we've got my number of dark religious out there. The followers of Kuf or Miccahucal or the various other faces of the holy of death. Certain splinter sects of ethnocentric Christianity who believe that the Revelation of St. John is both prophecies and that Satan will triumph. Strange heresies, by-blow of the Aborigines who trace their heritage back to ancient gods who worshiped Annum in the palace basements of the Pentium Empire. Other groups who are less familiar: syncretistic heresies, spawned by bizarre collisions between systems of folkloric knowledge and followers of Thorian demon physics. And, of course, banished eschat gods, although I find it hard to believe that anyone takes them seriously these days.

None of my specific beliefs matter. What matters is that if a call or cover or parish or whatever get their hands on a genuine summoning ritual, the fringe at the other end of the occult/courtesy phone, aren't they about what they're called as long as the message is "Show time!"

I take a deep breath. "What variety of cult was it this time?"

"The Black Church, or equal." She takes a deep breath.

"American? But didn't the Black Church?"

"They didn't fit a single." Her voice rises. "Hence, the Dallas girl a reluctant top-off from the FBI that a bunch of nasty Americans. From the very-often-to-accused crowd seem planning on making a big splash at the UN Population Fund summit in San Diego last week. It's not surprising in America this decade if they should succeed or founders barely planning ahead, you know?"

"I'll be there for a minute while I put the cork on the wine bottle and pour the rest of the first bottle into her glass. "How did it go?" I ask.

"Charter and co-winner." She drains her glass and shows it towards me. "These aren't your regular god-outcomes, they're

got him." (A history of criminal activity in other words: "The Dublin and the Dorset are both keeping tabs on them." They tipped off the Dutch AFD, which is good, but then they forgot to include us in the loop, which was anything but good. What freely pulled us in was when the AFD traced them who were keeping an eye on the hundred kilograms of sodium chloride and the former cases they stockpiled behind the church supplies catalog and the white goats. The Free Church of the Universal Kingdom.)

"The Free Church of the what?"
"We have a big mould of us." The Free Church of the Universal Kingdom. Officially, they're pre-ideological dogmatists, with a couple of extra levels, religiously banking and conflicted, on hell. According to their party line Jesus was just there to set a good example, and we all have the ability to save ourselves. Who will be saved is predicated from the beginning of time, it's their job to bring the Church online to everybody on the planet by fire and the sword, and so it gets complicated real fast. In ever-diminishing categories of study, I mean. The doctrinal differences between some of these sectarian churches are huge. Anyway, the way tonight you need to hear is that we, they're anti-Orthodox. Very anti-Orthodox, with overtones of ascending the Sacred Lament by bringing those words to earth until Jesus can't ignore them suffering anyone—is this ringing any bells yet?"

Yeah, telling the they're CASE NEGATIVE GREEN grapes."

Ms asks, solemnly: "They mentioned. What they believe about? Make sense in terms of traditional Christian theology, never mind mainstream logic. There's because the outer church is just a cover for something even wider. The members we were monitoring were lobbying under a really bogus name, level four or higher—'m not sure."

I studied I knew someone with a level three garment about her name. Man would die for a chance to bid her if she crossed her like finger at them—literally. The theological equivalent ... I don't want to think about it. "So Amsterdam, that ...?"

Four of them were already there. Another three flew in the week before, that's why the full-stress incident they were sent. AAD thought it was preparation for an abortion clinic bombing campaign at first. But then the pastor brought a couple white goats and the party stopped and they threw it at four and his friends, who asked us to stop it."

"Guilt, sacrifice, atonement, for the purpose of the flesh? There were no boys kneeling at any on the equatorial discipline that nobody noticed the mistaking souls and the crucifix, or the fact that they're making a disorganized Lutheran chapel three months earlier and invited their bishop over for a flying visit. There was one last Sunday they got two and two together and looked what was really going on. That's when they called me in."

She looks bleak and alone, clutching her wings as if it's the sole source of warmth in the world.

"The fourth was a decoy. Turns out there were two calls working, one of white-clear church—don't know they were set up in a cover story. The other call, the ones with the goat and the summing girl in the crypt of the chapel, they were the real operation, because of the fact that. They were all set to open a gate to a ...?" She swallows. I'd downcast to her and take her few hand in mine. "I hate those things," she says gravely.

"I want just goats, was it?" I probe. "The goats were the signal for nonexistence."

"The chapel was right next to a nursery school," she says, and she smiles.

It's about all I can say to that, so I keep my mouth shut and suppose her last party and she like continuing.

"I'd picked up a squad of UML specialists and a justice administration group who prepared to seal off the area. Trouble is, it was anti-orthodox and the neighborhood was busy, the last thing you want to do is to run an administration exercise next door to a nursery school when the parents are coming to pick their kids up. It's a barge-sized zone and it does paralyze the files to a sewage farm. So we were going to hold off until evening. But then the OCCU/Life comment track monitors let the sound from the huge, and I began to pick up probably disturbances in the vicinity of the chapel, and I looked too risky to hold off. The troops went in, and I followed them. It was unpleasant."

"What did they do?"

"They built a summing girl in the attic. And they'd set up a greater circle, with a genomic probing stage at the nursery school next to the road." She says nothing again.

"They started with the goats as a warm-up exercise. But there was a human woman, and they'd used her as an ..."

Ms gasps, then waves her lips. "Respect. Hope and hope and status of a greater crowd made of human gas, all joined to the sacrifice." She's not speaking, she's trying not to show it.

"Sleep," she says to her hand. "You don't need to go on."

"I need to." She clenches her fist around my fingers and she smiles at me. "They'd studied her, you know?"

The microphone picked up their program earlier. I see the way and the truth and the lie. My one corner to the Father

though through me—they meant it literally. I don't know why we didn't hear the woman, I think they might have wanted her first. Hope they they did that."

"There's a power source in its own right. But I don't resist her of this. She's shaking now." The gate was open. But I had to go through."

My

not people, that she turns out to be stronger and tougher than I

am. Would you drive through a screaming, inhuman gate into a

bores of screaming sacrifice? She did. And she kept a lid on

it afterwards, a self upper lip, while I was shuddering and

reared over what was basically an industrial accident. It's a

good thing to put your problems in perspective from time to

time, but right now I'd rather not, because I'm doing the

companion fight now and I find I'm coming up to what I'm

not used to.

"The things in the cellar, bodies had already eaten the

body's head's face and most of her left leg." She tells me

earnestly, "but the Somali boy-child was still screaming, so I

let her go. She ..."

I feel my gorge rising. "Too much." I splash water into my

eyes and take a hot-furry sniff. "Jesus, life."

Jesus was evidently the wrong word, one should and

manage to make it as far as the doorway on route to the

bathroom, before she doubles over and vomits the white-

soaked remains of her dinner on the floor.

I make it to the sink and put the plastic bowl and the

cleaning supplies out, then fetch her a glass of tap water.

"Come and get it." I'm holding the bowl under her mouth.

"Fucking goats, huh—"

"Huh—"

"We killed the bad things, but the little girl with the

pipette, I managed to carry her head back but it was too late—"

She's crying now, and it's all coming out, all the ugly details

in a torrent like a condensing steam venting a bubble of

pain and clarity after and pain, and I carry her up the stairs as

best I can and back her under the glass. And she's still crying,

although the shaking, she's coming further apart. "Sleep

and remember." I'd had her touching her forehead. "Remember

it's all over." I put my wrist over my head and bring it round

her neck. "Repeat command light parameters from two, eight

hours SCM, riser outside, wind." Then I touch her forehead

again. "It's over, life, you can let go if you want."

As I go downstairs to clean up, I hear her beginning to

crawl.

Just
of
Ac. I
necand
Ms,
once,
year
ago,
his
look,
a

MOPPING UP VOMIT AND CONSIGNING THE
WRECKAGE OF DINNER to the recycling bin: the
dishesetter keeps me distracted for ten minutes, but

Unfortunately not distracted enough to avoid looking through everything I was told in my main eye. I can't help it. I've been through some bad shit myself, similar stuff. I've been through situations where you just keep going, keep pushing through, because if you stop you'll never get again, but at least that one was particularly horrible.

I think it's the civilian treatment that does it. Its more or less able to look after myself, and so to me, but a primary school . . . I don't want to think about that, but I can't stop, because this is where we're all going, when the walls of reality come tumbling down and the crowd goes back to sit in their grids. It's put me in a theological frame of mind, and I hate that.

Let me try to explain . . .

I generally try to avoid fanaticism: they make me angry. I know the purpose of a fanatic is to provide comfort and a sense of closure for the bereaved, and I agree, in principle, that this is generally a good thing. But the actual package usually comes with a price, and when they start drilling on about how Uncle Paul (who died aged sixteen of a furious tooth tumor) is safe in the ever-loving arms of Jesus, the effect hits me as it is not to make me love my creator. It's to wish I could punch him in the face repeatedly.

In a child of the enlightenment, I was often thinking that moral and ethical standards are unworkable that apply equally to everyone. And these values aren't easily compatible with the kind of religion that posits a Creator. In my way of thinking, an omnipotent being who sets up a universe in which nothing is impossible, goes old, and die (usually in agony, alone, and in her/his a cosmic saddle. Consequently fit much other divine beings and religious belief as experiential addition. My idea of a comforting belief system is your default English education . . . except that I know too much.

See, we did evolve more or less randomly AND fit the bill of the universe we live in in 13.75 billion years old, not 5,000 years old. And there's no omnipotent, omniscient, invisible deity ready in the frame for the present of pain. So far so good: I live in an uncaring cosmos, other than happen in a glitchback only constructed by a cosmic accident. Unfortunately, the truth doesn't end there. The things we sometimes refer to as elder gods are also intelligences, which evolved on their own terms, unconcerned for how long and long, in zones of spacetime which aren't normally connected to our own, where the rules are different, but that doesn't mean they can't reach out and touch us. As the man put it: Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Any sufficiently advanced alien intelligence is indistinguishable from God—the angry monotheistic sadist subgenre. And the elder ones . . . aren't funny.

(Gee? I told you I'd rather be an atheist!)
I push the button on the dishwasher, straighten up, and grope at the kitchen door. It's pushing her away, but for some weeks and full of dead watered rage. I don't want to go to bed. I might check. No, and she really needs her sleep right now. So I hope upstairs to check on her, see the bathroom, their repeat downstairs again. But that leaves me with a choice between sitting in a kitchen that smells of bleach and a living room that smells of four-year-old vomit. I can't leave the curtains of television or the solace of a book. I feel restless. So clip on my headset full of angry poems and go outside for a walk.

It may be warmer but it's already dark and the starslight are on. I walk down the hard pavement, between the neatly trimmed front hedges and the sleeping cars parked nose to tail. The lamp-posted walls and balanced wheels here are set by the side orange twilight reflected from the clouds. Traffic comes in the distance, pulsing with the height of the evening city. Here and there I see four windows illuminated from within by the shadowy paper pile of television hallucinations. I turn a corner, walk downhill under the old railway bridge, then left past a closed local street garage. Can't think through the morose twilight with nervous shafts; the smell of night-blooming jasmine mixes with the grey taste of diesel particulates at the back of my throat. I walk through the night, unlight-blooming orange, and so walk home.

Angie is missing? Why? And where? He doesn't live anywhere, according to Human Resources: doesn't have a job, tried, didn't do much of a surprise. Angie's guess: our mortare humanity has always struck me as brittle—the idea that there's a four-hundred-year-old stone cottage in a village in the countryside, and a life. Angie's pasturing around hanging out the laundry on a line in the back garden, simply doesn't work for me. He goes beyond the usual monotonies of the man who married his girl, he never takes holidays, he's always in the office, and then there's the photograph. Maybe he married it from Gordon Gery? Oh, well, he's the CIA. If that something is wrong, Angie's near done anything by accident, or after something is rotten in the state of Denmark, or has embarked on a career in delinquency to let anyone about.

I turn right across a main road—just at this time of night—then stop and left down an alleyway that leads between rows of high back-garden houses. Grass grows between the crumbling, silvery woodwork and around the wheelie bins; heavy a concrete yard where someone has parked a ancient caravan is windows fluted dark in the urban night.

The Fuller Memorandum is missing. Whatever it is it is still a hot potato after several years. Angie's name is mentioned in it, and in BLOODY BARDON, and in his own business about CAGE NIGHTMARE GREEN? coming out of his mouth rather than mine.

See: Why are the Russians sniffing around? What did Putin mean about spying the Tatars? He can't be talking about Unger. Sierbergh's psychotic, damn, can he? I did some checking. Tatar was supposed to Unger (Sierbergh) own rebellious troops in 1501, right before they reached the Barent coast to Tomsk's fugitives. At least, his malcontent said they shot him. If he'd run away into the Siberian forest, alone, might they have concurred some cock-and-bill cover story . . . ?

I make a right turn into a narrow path. It leads to a tranquil boggy track, waded in beech and chestnut trees growing from the steep embankments: in either side and sporadically illuminated by isolated lamp-posts. I used to be a rebel in the decade ago, one of the many suburban savages closed during the Blacking club but I wasn't a commander (we'd stumbled across it not long after we moved to this part of town, and I caught my attention enough to "warrant some digging").

The Metropolitan Service car from behind Waterloo station is the huge brick-faced cemetery in Surrey. It's been used to two classes, one-way and return. This is one of its blindspots, a tunnel cross leading the great river of the dead. Today cyclists use it's bypass the busy main roads on their way into the center. It is, however, innocuously equipped with the after-work exercise set, and I have the left time to myself as I walk, still chewing over what I know and what I don't know.

CLUB ZERO and Mr. Who saw Uncle Fester? I saw these alternative: Paris and to friends, the culture she was sent to shut down, or some third party. Taking it from the top: Paris is a professional and can be expected to usually play by the rules. Sending a zombie to do some an officer in a foreign nation's service of home just isn't done: it's not basketball, and besides, once you start sending assassins to bury off the spot, you've got no guarantee that their assassins aren't going to outperform yours. The usual great powers don't usually engage in wars of assassination: it's not how the playing field. On the other hand, culture like the pope backed CLUB ZERO are far more likely to do that sort of thing. Assassination and terrorism are Islamic basic tools for outsiders and pressure groups. So my money is on Uncle Fester being an emissary from the culture the ABO called him in for in neutral . . . unless there's a third faction in play, a project that had to stay to completion.

The gate path returns, and December deeper into its call. The lights are more widely spaced here, and a number of them are out, leaving a ruddy scamparing sound behind me. I glance round as something flickers in the bushes

between light—top line, with a great burst of a ball. An urban ball! Maybe I didn't see the catch or miscue. Though Urban leaves aren't a problem (unless you're a cat), but ball dogs might be another matter: means walking on the balcony, London is warm and humid in summer, but does have its almost clammy-cool, and there's a hint of something like a warm sunset and slight breeze (break into a slow jog, aiming to outrun the smog).

I have a growing, edgy feeling that I've missed something critically important: has been playing along, in tandem and under stress, assuming that the clues I'm trying to deal with are all independent. But what if they aren't? I ask myself. What if Angeleno's disappearance is connected to Parlin's search for the Tazoo, what if the Fuller Memorandum holds an explanation, what if the cables know what an agent closer to the President of the Great Britain than we realize and see. Prying to toggle the balance, or perhaps to attract—

There's a cack of steel traxxion under the trees behind me. Finding a chain-link brush punctures the fluting of a blue-toned porch. The energy radiates glass benches away around me, giving way to a different shade of darkness. There's burn overhead, clacking at each other with advanced gears as busy as concentration camp victims. A thin mist at low level obscures the terrain, path and my stomach further. It's not during foggy suburban London anymore, I'm leaning along the gully to the back of the Metropolitan line, and the heights of hot air on my feet, and I feel my protective wear with his, and I am a fucking imbecile. Shut out!

Whenever the light behind me is, it's only seconds away. My ears already thudding around from joggng an hour after dinner-faking ritual of no-stay while I'm really concerned sure that I'm being tracked by something that's more or less as the generalist without, in which case I really ought to simply plug it with my pistol and ask questions later. I've got an even nastier feeling that it's tracking me for someone, or worse, leading me along.

I have a gun, a Hand of Glory and a Jawbreaker. So of course I leave my phone and fix the case open, hands ready to attack, and spin round, raising the camera to focus as I tap the glowing blue icon.

There's motion in my midarea and my pursuit isn't nowhere—got a glimpse of flying branches and blurry air—a keag of the path and into the trees with a clatter. "Go!" The screen flashes a red-on-black tone going at the end and my hand on and on the phone and my fingertips are right in its path. The flashes, it used to be called, I'm really go back to the main screen and click another app, a diagnostic. Seeing what I say, I seem quiet and pull up another one that sets a glowing webcam projection of a 3D construct on the screen as it's about to be set to up a wall around me. The stop-time is hiding and the heights of not down away from my feet, so I throw the phone in my pocket—still running—and close my pistol. Then I turn back to the way I mean going.

The monitor tuning on the phone's a poor substitute for a real wall, and it's only going to keep it up for as long as its battery can keep its tiny electronic brain turning at full power, but armed and wanted is the first step to survival and now I see the path to it with an icy clarity. The second app I loaded on was the flashlight, and I should have kept an eye on it earlier, as I walked—its amount off the chart. And off because I walked the Metropolitan line. If you wanted to get up a bit higher, what better source of power could you hope for than the accumulated grid and course of miles of courtesies, to say nothing of the decaying heat of the corpse that treated it? I should have seen it: a computer that usually only uses the light paths as a shortcut to and from the tube station, in daylight.

It's such a nice fit being treated by custom, when I left home I was angry in the abstract but now I am really fucked off. There are the teachers who maintain a bank of memory school bus and their teachers, put us through the horrors—and I'm trying for the sake. The only question is, are we really trying for the best?

I keep going, away my jog to a brick wall, scorching ahead as I breathe. I feel my gut at the steady with both hands close to my chest, relying on the reliability need to make it look as if I'm concentrating my right side with my left hand. The rest at ground level coils and circles around a pair of horizontal parallel rails the color of old bones, ending on a bed of off-white track slabs. The three wires and steel overhead, clacking at each other, inspiring and something in the distance I hear odd rumbles—the ground of setting, deep voices breaking something, words I can't quite make out.

It's such a bit, all my senses, but when reality starts to imitate a simulated computer game you know the best jog: take over-eggs the pulling. Some feedback is hitting me with a gauge or a hope of opening me. It's the sort of tactic that might elude a chance of working if there's a little less logical, or they had enough imagination to make it, oh, you know, horrible, or something. Luckily for me they don't seem to have grasped the difference between a San Francisco movie and shooting by your death hospital bed trying to work up the nerve to switch off the ventilator. So I find the fact that they're sending me someone's notes and mid-jeremy acknowledging.

It's being second thoughts about the cables being, though. The probability of seeing two too different calls of the factures in the same month is vanishingly slim and if this someone is a message from the same group that tried to kidnap Douglas Armstrong last week, they're definitely not the B-Turns.

I see my place again, and just then I hear a scurrying noise from the embankment to my left and away their on my track stands on end simultaneously.

I swing round, extending my arms in front of my face and idling my index finger through the trigger guard as the thing clatters and sometimes down the side of the cutting, it's a real dash towards me, a great of noise and longer sounding an organ note deep in its chest, and I have time to think. I have feeling sharp, just as it branches itself towards me.

I squeeze the trigger back, aiming low when my eyes are focused on it—i can't look away. I get a flash of lance and a slapping tongue, eyes and front and taller than my dog but even imagined—and there's a sound like a pain slapping a lump of wet meat as the gun clicks silently in my hand. I jump sideways as it starts the track ahead where I was standing a moment ago, bowing a stream of agony and emerging from the path as the creature bleeds. It's not a dog. Dogs aren't as big as a hole in space, and their musculature and attention have maximum normal—the thing bends wrong as it flies and falls around, and I have an inkling of a memory that tells me I should be very afraid right now. But the rest I cannot cut passed off and I am now twanging agony, which is why I've behind the falling body, lower my aim towards the back of its skull, and call: "Close yourself right now, or the doggie gets it!" There's a few cracks. "Close as the Tazoo and we will let you live, mortal."

Maybe that's the B-Turns all right probably increase with update-down crucifixes or something. They're the usual equipment of the kind of facile someone who post their confession ideas on YouTube two weeks before they learn the hard way that trying to show themselves up with dogshit but isn't going to do anything except give the public an excuse to put themselves on the public and reassure the public that Everything Is Under Control. "Come out when I can see you," I demand.

The hand-thing on the ground waxes in agony, it's getting on my nerves, cutting through the backside of my demonstration that I'm not out of the corner of my eye that the shoulder I bow a fat-bald chunk out of is writing and burning, dark white glowing marks from the ripped and stretched edges. Shut it! It's what I think it is, then they're showing it to the B-Turns how little of more than they can check-out to have. "You've got five seconds." "Last." I won't die, but it's going to be real pissed off. And I reckon its fifty-fifty whether it'll leave me or blow me up.

"Do you truly believe you can shoot one of the Houses with impunity, mortal?"

I'm going to Writing on Writing now. My typical B-Team still at either a religious festival where guests are listening to preacher-men ranting and ranting in seventeenth-century English, or they're a salaried who's seen too many horror flicks. In talking on the second floor here. Take a step back—accidental contact with this particular species of doggie is about as safe as taking the first rail across underground—then quickly slip my left hand into my pocket and make the comment word to light the head of Gaby as I fall out of my pocket.

Of course the HCG lights off promptly, but its little pinky is tangled in my pocket bring and comes free with a loud gust of scuffed iron-sounding steel to host against the glowing outfaller. I take a long step sideways, then another, holding the outfaller dead arm's length to one side. The clock is a humming drag on my opposite arm: nothing like as bad as a blowing, but I can't keep this up forever.

A second voice chirps up from behind the flashing Hound, about where I was standing five seconds ago: "Hey, where'd he go?"

(He sounds . . . dim. Let's call her Mison #1.)

"Yeah? That's Writing. He sounds pissed off. "Were going to see that AH-Highway all too dispassion?"

"He got the path." A brief note female and mostly contented. Maybe she's an A-Team player assigned to ride herd on the other car. (She can be Mison #2 with grown contempt.) "You work the—"

The dim-sounding contact with the enemy—especially when the enemy is invisible, with or without and being rather—but even more importantly, no other survives physical contact with one of the Hounds. The doggie of doom falls one paw against the ground and its back arches as it goes into the release he has expected ever since I (doggie) lit with a treatment round. Which it had back for Mison #1, who is in the path of one viciously backed paw. He gives a brief jerking scream, but is already dead by the time the sound reaches me: it's just air entering from the cop's lungs and reverberating through its layne on the way out. Every muscle in his body contracts simultaneously with a strange popping sound as his joints dislocate and ligaments tear, in a speeded-onstantane that ends in a pile beside the Hound.

I don't need to see what they do next—I scramble up the dry old embankment, moving diagonally between the trucks.

"Were going to see that?" Mison #1 calls in a high, bawling voice. "Futback year!" Okay, after I promoted to Mison. I think for a moment that she's talking Writing to withdraw, but then I hear the second truly spine-chilling noise of the evening, the unmistakable sound of someone sending the slide on a pump-action shotgun.

I know myself far against the side of the embankment and not over on my back, still clutching the Hand of Gaby and my pistol as the two riders figure on the path raise their weapons and pour the past each other, sweeping us and down the take path. They set up a mowdowning roar that jabs the teeth in my head, their ear aching, their empty sprang clouds of buckshot at waist level. In about two meters, the embankment above them, and barely meters away. Hiding my breath, I glance at the HCG in my left hand. The fingertips are burning steadily—I have perhaps three or four minutes of usability. Odds of two to one, shotgun against advanced game, or fairly recent? Not good. I could probably take them—possibly, but to have to put the hind of clay down, and I didn't get them both with my first two shots. To do giving the survivor a trusty hand to aim for, with a shotgun isn't not forget.

Fucking B-Team outfit. If this was the A-Team, they'd summon something exotic and deadly to set on my ass—something to have a chance of landing. But the B-Team were at the back of the queue the day AH-Highway was handing out death spells, so they just have to wait with shotgun.

Two rounds later—I feel like having my head slammed in a doorway ten times in a row—they "lose" their guns. "He's legged it," says Writing.

"Right there, writing." Mison's voice is so chilly you could rent it out as an air conditioner. "Philp is dead. This will not be resolved well by AH-Highway. Let me do the talking if you want your life."

"But can't we—" Writing whines.

I don't hear what he says next, though, because Mison says something in a voice that distorts weirdly as she speaks; and then a hole in the air opens and closes, and they're not there anymore. Neither is the Hound: its glow, taking the corpse of Mison #1 back to wherever it is. That the Hound's come from. The glimmer is gone, too: below me, the cycle path is mirrored—just another dark suburban alleyway, lit by the streetlight glow from the nighttime clouds overhead.

I shudder, accidentally for a minute. Then I carefully subjugate the fingers of the HCG, hoist my pistol, slant back down the embankment to the footpath, and shut myself off.

They weren't after me; they were after me. They knew how to find me and they wanted to know about the Hound. Once is happenstance, but twice is enemy action, which means it's time to get to work.

NIGHT SHIFT



WALKING TO THE OFFICE ISNT SOMETHING FD NORMALLY DO, because it takes about three hours, but I am having progressively exercised and I don't like the idea of the MAGNET BALL STARS network being able to track me. So I follow the freighter for another half kilometer before negotiating the Head of Glory and drifting back around all the way he comes, then ending onto a side street. I take two corners and jump a fence into somebody's backyard before I reattach the HDG again, then walk out casually with my shoulders back and my chin up.

A bus ride in the westward direction takes me ten minutes further away from the office than it's ever been and one time to navigate the HDG for a brick kiln. Finally I reach it out and catch a different bus that passes close enough to the New Avenue that I can walk from the stop.

I march up to the banked, CIA staff entrance and lay my nation, then wedge my pass card. The door clicks, and I step inside. It's fairly quiet, and in the gloom I can hear the restless shuffling of one of the night staff. I pull out my warrant card heading, but I see signs to a gym, adjoining with the right entrance it completely fails unless you sit with a chair seat or a basketball.

"Get me a touch," I snap. The warrant card is all very well-it shows a face, excessive glow that the backlight incandescent has unpleasant side effects if you crank up the lumens too high. Why is it that all the rooms make it look as if someone had inhaled light rays? Tenuous glow and table are all very well, but here's a moment we use fluorescent tubes across here.)

"Cards?" he asks politely.

A touch flicks on and I see the relaxed face of its holder. "Here, give me that." I take the touch, being careful to hold the warrant card between me and the doorframe. I think he might be Fred from Accounting, but if so, he's two decades a bit the worse for wear these days. His relaxed pose across his desk, and not everyone around here gets the deluxe Jeremy Bentham treatment. Mostly I'd just arrange for one of us to tick them in a summertime gig and find one of the others in the night to make (make, eminently sensible effectiveness of sleep will, that can alternate a couple and control it just about enough to push a button, across the living daylight, out of unwanted nighttime visitors). I gather it would be forward expenses. "Get here and longer I come the way. That's an order."

I climb the stairs, leaving the medical human resource behind to set my evening. It's been called who were about enough to tell me. It's past midnight and they make regular inspection rounds, so I keep my card out and hope like hell that the battery in the plastic piece of old tape will make it to my office. I keep a proper torch there, a Maglite torch, not properly when it's time to go into Angleton's and not to use the light to bother. Unlike the plastic piece of old tape out and let myself in, kick on the light, shut the door, and flip down behind my desk with a sigh of relief.

"Took your time getting here, didn't you, boy?"

In the time it takes me to past myself of the ceiling and mount my prints to its holder, Angleton takes up residence in my visitor's chair, fiddling his ungainly limbs around toward like a spindly black spider. The assistant, however, gets into me in its trouble when before I open my mouth.

"We waited here for three consecutive nights. What delayed you?"

"I clean my mouth. Then I open it and close it again a couple of times, just for practice. Finally when I trust myself to speak, I say one word: "Cards."

"Three days, boy. Suppose you tell me what you've learned?"

"One moment." My parents is growing. I take out my phone and peer at him through its camera. "TRUSSARDI tells me that I am, indeed, looking at my boss, who is looking increasingly irritated. Inside the office walls." "Okay. From the top: the Cyber Metropolitan is missing, the Russians have gotten all-quiet cables are showing that top out of the prism, and everyone wants to know about the "Shaggy. Oh, and someone in Research and Development says that CASG NIGHTMARE GORCH isn't going to work in a couple of years, but it does to kick off in a few weeks or months at the most. What an interesting!"

Angleton stares at me oddly "You're missing the spy boy."

"That I really couldn't say longer." "Right."

"He," notes Langston. Agent nearby, widow of Flight Lieutenant Adrian Langston, long-time resident of Coulter, wedding partner of the mission as a volunteer. Her late husband while she was in the WRAF back in 1942. Which is a pretty interesting occasion for her to have been in, considering that she was also a captain in the Russian Army and a GDC Regent who was treated into the UK in 1950 when she was twenty out of her teens."

I make an uncharacteristic gurgling noise. "But she-the barge-the weath-who-can't-hand?"

Angleton smiles for me to nod down. "The hang-around case are not the only enemy that country has ever faced. Some of us remember." (My okay for him to say that-was about when the card was amended.)

" Helen Langston's primary assignment did not come to an end just because the Soviet Union collapsed. To extend appearances her utility had been to decline for many years, after her husband failed to achieve advancement, costing her access to people and base; once she hit okay with the long-term prospects they were her lot. That is one of the tasks one take with long-term Regent-their ends it may be interpreted by one of us, otherwise and appropriate sense. These are probably silly ideas like her in the UK-related bank mergers and failed positions: when pointing that prior history and engineering of the mission that failed them. Or perhaps they accept it gladly, happy to no longer be a part of the chessboard. But in any case, Helen's career appears to have undergone a brief second flowering in the last few years."

"But she-" "Up my pass instinctively-" "We was halfway to demand!"

"Was she?" Angleton raises a skeptical eyebrow. "She was on the front desk of a museum gallery lastly, but her contacts from Glasgow 128, where Airframe 004 is being constructed for space goals to keep other three white elephants alive. You may think that no more than a coincidence, but I don't."

"You never told me what that stuff about the white elephants was about."

"I suspected you to find out for yourself," boy." Then Angleton does something I absolutely never expected to see: he sighs orpally.

"Blast."

Angleton leans back in his chair. "Did we about Chevaline," he asks.

"Chevaline?" I hear. "Haven't that some sort of nuclear missile program from the states or seawards, something like that?"

"Chevaline." He pauses. "Back in the 1960s, when Harold Wilson cut a deal with Richard Nixon to buy Polaris missiles for the Royal Navy, the tacit assumption was that a British nuclear deterrent need merely be sufficient to ground on Moscow until the rubble bounced. During the 1970s, the Soviets began to construct an air-launched cruise missile around Moscow it was made by rocket intermediate anti-missile rockets with nuclear warheads-but it would have rendered the British Polaris force obsolete. So during the

1971A, a succession of Conservative and Labour governments passed through without agonising debate and replaced the original MRV warheads with far more sophisticated MRV buses, equipped with decoys and able to engage two targets rather than one. The project was called Chevaline; it cost a billion pounds in the day-when-a billion pounds was not money-and they didn't even test the Cabinet.

"A billion pounds? With no oversight?" (He's rapidly Mr's subject to spot audits on office stationary, all the way down to paper-clip.)

"Yes." Angleton smiles expensively. "We helped ensure security so that it was relatively easy for them to spend an extra few hundred million pounds in 1977 to keep the Concorde production lines at Filton and Bristol open for long enough to produce four extra airframes for the RAF." Angleton says slyly. "The Phantom ensured that nobody suspected a thing afterwards."

"RAF Six Squadron? Concordat?"

"Sure then." Angleton corrects me. "The long-range occult reconnaissance model, for the nuclear armed model the RAF originally asked for in 1960. You may not be aware of this, but Prototype 002 was built with attachment points for a bomb bay before the project was abandoned. Stanley Crossland wanted to replace it with a fleet of supersonic bombers that could carry three nuclear aircraft off towards Moscow, but the Navy won the toss. Instead, the RAF got the recon version, with aerospacer space for the six microsatellites and the bomb bay used to open the gate they needed to fly through."

My gut is beginning to ache from all the speeches opening-and-closing cycles. "Take a drink now."

Angleton shakes his head. "The Squadron was based in Filton and Westros, flying in Britain. Always carry-the aircraft nosecones were described as other things, and they wore the half hundreds of BA uniforms that were currently undergoing maintenance. They flew one mission a week, departing west over the Atlantic. They returned from a VC-10 tanker then the supersonic would open a gate and they'd make a high-speed run across the cloud plateau, before re-opening the gate home and landing at Filton for documentation and execution. It's all in CODES, BLACK SKILL. Which you are cleared to read, incidentally."

I shake myself and take a deep breath. "Let me get this straight. You're telling me that the RAF has a squadron of black Concordes which they currently keep in a hangar at RAF Cranfield? Helen Langham was a former Soviet spy who, by a happy coincidence her employers were in a position to pour around them? Which one did, with results that...? I studied, remembering again a simple fact: both training and computing in our RAF around the turn of the sixties."

"And now the Thatcher/Chichester are selling you?"

"Very good. Good. I make a professional general out of you one of these days." Angleton nods, gliding approval.

"Concern." I do a double take. "But they've been silent, right?"

"That and a clomp on the cover story, certainly. These days they fly only at night, described as American G-10s if anyone asks. A big bomber with four engines and about twenty a week former crew, and the planes spoken and completely finished keep the Phantom busy, but we cannot neglect the watch on the cloud plateau if the thing in the pyramid should stir... He makes an abrupt cutting gesture with the edge of his hand.

"Good plasma? This in the pyramid?" He got no idea what he's referring to, but it sounds serious.

"You've been through a gate to elsewhere." I remember a world in the grip of Endgame, where the stars of liquid air set down through valleys of ice beneath a moon carved with the likeness of white face. "There are other, more permanent, elsewhere. Some of them we must monitor continuously. That word... bring you near one, I say, and you get that sleeping god in the pyramid never asleep."

"Till my head firm sets in side, trying to split the invisible gone from clinging on my neck. Thinking is here, it difficult, as the air, they with the complex forms of some secrets, is repeating my ability to reason."

"Does. Why are you here? Everyone thinks you're gone missing, right, with no forwarding address."

Angleton grimaces slyly. "Good. Let's keep it that way."

My eyes are heating and gling from too much stress and too little sleep, but I manage to roll them away. "Big problem you got figured me out? Can you give me a moment to cut you to the BLOODY BARCHEN-when other than because I'm out?"

"Of course." He looks increasingly, alarmingly, amused. "What else do I gather myself into this time?" "You keep it to yourself because while the cuts away the more the plus and one of this particular bunch of mice appear to be a security leak, and it's setting a trap for them. You're the bait, by the way."

"In the..."

"And to see you up so they come after you, I've got a little job for you to do."

"Right, that's it, I'm through with..."

"Remember you want to read the scan responsible for the CLIS 2000 incident (hereafter...)"

"...Lacking culture-really?"

"Yes, but... the scan the great gear not to look too long."

"Now shut-up and listen there's a good boy?"

He deposits a slim memo on my desk, then places a small plastic baggie on top of it. I squint at it. It's empty except for a paper-clip.

"Here's what I want you to do..."

CLASSIFIED, TAPROT BARCHEN THIGURS
FROM: Fable Laundry
TO: 17F, Naval Intelligence Division

Dear Sir,
Hope this will (and my best regards to your mother, long may she keep her nose out of operational matters).
No required about 'beast'.

Subsequent to the death of Bartolomeo in 1921, Q Division determined that the probe witnessed in the Slatberg Fragment had returned to the six girls, and it could be recalled and bound into a machine that might be compelled to the service of the state. Given the magnitude of the powers possessed by this particular entity, this was considered a desirable objective; however, its re-encarceration required that we provide the highly gifted with a new host. Obviously, this presented them with a headache, so some bright spark finally came up with the idea of using the Home Office. A new set was accordingly submitted in 1923.

Due to the 1924 election and subsequent upheavals and crises, the request was not actually considered at operational level until 1926, to which year the Prime Minister and Home Secretary agreed, not without considerable argument, to sanction the use of the host as an alternative method of capital punishment on one occasion only. I am not at liberty to disclose the identity of the prisoner in question-though in any case paid the ultimate price-but after his hanging was announced, he was interred in a secret location. No less a surgeon than Mr. Gilver, working under an alias of strict secrecy, was employed to introduce the features of the sacrificed vessel and any former acquaintance recognized him. Thus the Hungry Ghost Ritual was performed, in a ceremony so hushy that I would not refer being called upon to perform it.

I would not burden you with the extensive sequence of statistics that the five believe us after we summarized the 'beast' Teaching to some, and to walk, and to make use of a human body once more before in the welfare for example was had to anticipate and juggle for the first six months, but it was in England and Ipsi. For almost a year it seemed they had no real needs or human needs, and had merely driven a condemned machine into the same of insanity. However, in early 1930, Taprot began to

and then to relieve portions of the stained maroon carpeting in Russian as well as in English, a language with which the vessel was unfamiliar. Shortly thereafter, I began able to sense a marked shift in the more exotic areas of mathematics, and to show signs of the concrete, cold intellect that so disturbed Isaac von Ligen-Sterenberg.

When the Tappet committee received permission to reconstruct the events it was immediately realized that we would need to bind it to our service. Ligen-Sterenberg was able to procure it with a steady supply of acetone, but His Majesty's Government in time of peace was not so well placed. If we had received the go-ahead to deal with the Socialists, things would have been different, but it's no use crying over spilled milk. Consequently from 1928 to 1932 we worked steadily on a new model gear or binding-one that can restrain not only a human hand, but an eater of same. I had aware you the gear details, but in April 1930 we performed the binding for the first time, and Tappet was demonstrated to be under our full authority. It did not submit willingly, and I regret to inform you that the death of Dr. Rosenfield in that year-attributed to an accident in the laboratory in the Times-was only one part of the heavy price we paid.

Having bound the Argus Manry it was now necessary to indoctrinate it and train it to pass to a new Enlightenment. To this end, we obtained a place for it in Maria's lab at Shefferson, where it was enrolled on Lyon House as a creature. Every public school in England is crawling with masters who are not entirely light in the head as a result of our experiences on the Coast, and it was our consensus opinion that Tappet's more minor eccentricities would not attract excessive notice, while the major ones (such as the regrettable tendency to eat souls) could be kept under control by our gear.

I retired from the Tappet committee with my official statement from sometime in 1933. I did not encounter Tappet again until 1949 and my reconstruction in this highly singular case.

Today, Tappet is almost unrecognizable. When we set out to turn the monster into an Enlightenment we succeeded to wit: He is creative, why government of a vessel but well-considered sense of humor, and utterly lacking in the consciousness locality of the hungry ghost that possessed Ensign Eugene Surtskonov in Utah Bitter all those years ago. Shefferson did its usual job-that of having strange into servants of empire-and did it to our carefully constructed house master just as thoroughly as to any Hohenstern from the home counties.

I am afraid that for other objects-to create a hungry creature, qualified because we succeeded to self. Tappet's capacity to balance a playing the game, to honor and senile and all the other shades we carefully dismiss at our peril. Laboriously this section has been useful for the task in hand. We have, if I believe to say this) referred a search in our own image, or rather in the image we were trained to evade. We would be loath to undo the work now. His path known to his will. We updated it once, but we feel we are right not to be lucky.

Despite being useless to us as an Eater of Souls, Tappet is not without worth. I have drafted it into this new organization, where I believe we can put it to good use while maintaining a discreet watch. We can channel use a hungry ghost, possessed of a disturbing brilliance in the dark arts, hidden within the urban shell of an Enlightenment. I understand what makes his tick, stems-thanks to years of completion and indoctrination-our goals, and it has an acute judgement of character. Do not believe it may be of significant use in the Chthonian Committee in raising and every spirit. But if you're thinking of using it as a weapon, I would advise you to think again. Not to use the great, or Tappet's indoctrination, would hold together if it is allowed to attack its full power. Tappet is the sort of gun you fire only once-then replacement is your best.

Agent: J. F. C. Fable

FR: NOT GOING TO EXPLAIN HOW I GOT HERE FROM HERE: JUST TALK I am given that it is now ten o'clock into the morning. I am still in the office but called Mr. Hall and our age to see what's going on. I haven't showed up, and there's a BLOODY BARDON meeting in five minutes. You got Karam leaving on my desk, playing "Downing in Berlin" on an antique record, because I need a sounding board to keep me awake) and he passed through the CODDLE BLACK SKULL. He had Angleton left me, and then on to a bunch of middle network for the morning's session. In talking from sense cognitive dissonance, away an often plus, you've got a handle on the job, on the paper clip audits and interminable bureaucracy and committee meetings, and then something more comes out of the woodwork and gibes at you, something crazy enough to give James Bond nightmares that just happen to be true.

I close the CBS file and I'm just clicking it back into my secure database while the people here stand round the stove. "Stan? Are you ready to do battle with BLOODY BARDON yet?"

I grin weakly. "I think I need a coffee, but yeah. If I'm doing just as soon as I've looked this..." I look at the keypad and it beeps happily. Not that an electronic lock is the only security we rely on: anyone who tries to crack the particular safe is going to wake up in hospital with a tongue the size of a giant.

"While, no sugar, right?"

"While a star. It'll be right with you." I'd remember to say good management could the King's Hall and makes coffee, but because I'm not, it's all true.

Ten minutes later I'm sitting in Room 206 again, with a mug of possible paint stripes in front of me and a picture of the minutes. It's a very cut-down rump session today. Ford is absent, he is happy for fingers and Shors is basking as if she'd hit the lot alone with the former while Choudhury stomps on. "We observed deviations from traffic interdiction patterns established over the past week, and so notified agent Rosenmeyer yesterday."

What the hell, I'm bored. I bury my throat.

Choudhury glances at me, intakes "What's it now, Pats?"

"These non-existent agent movements wouldn't happen to include Pats, would they? Because I'm sure if Pats is so much as absent I'd feel minor our boys would be up on him with a gas spectrograph, wouldn't they?"

I'm pleased to see that both Shors and his one paying attention. Shors's mouth, frown unconsciously and he raises an eyebrow at the Chief. However, it is a matter not, he knows. "Of course they'd spot him if he was in the UK."

"Yeah?" I lean back, cross my arms, and bare my teeth at him. Maybe he'll mistake it for a grin. "Exploit that right then?"

"And... "He stops dead. "What happened last night?"

I glance at the Sissy table. "Paris last in the UK, according to that table. Do you exactly in a letter he jacked me up as I was leaving work and bought me a pint of CSG in the Ping and Thursday?"

"Dependence." Choudhury glances. Neither Shors nor his is smiling.

"Would better explain," his tells me.

"What I said. Here is a nice Paris house he tried to pump me about Tappet, and I played dumb. He knows the rules, and he's calling card. It's downstairs in the Security Office suite. For reasons of operational security I don't report the correct information but I'm reporting it now. The Plumbers should be able to confirm it from the past CCTV. I'd say... "Thankfully, I find the implications highly suggestive."

"Why did you not tell Security?" Shors stops, her eyes widening.

"Why not an excuse as well? Had to be. It's either not spend it around beyond the committee for the time being."

Black knows better. "You're taking other a bit on your shoulders, aren't you?"

"It's only doing what Angleton would do for me."

Choudhury has, aware the past they occurred or so looking hurt and offended. Now he collects his dignity. "This can't

possibly be fight-Chengdu don't get their movement reports
ending. Perhaps you saw them in a by an incident? I assure
you, you don't see Paris but right he was in Moscow?
I am getting tired of this act. "According to your filing he
was signed in Moscow at 4:00 a.m." I point out. "That's twenty
of time to catch a flight into London City and account me
outside the front door at a quarter past eight. If you had
bothered to check the duty day based that signing--gosh,
I don't know he could have been that shade of pink--you know
that the Madrid office files their report at five local time, which
is an eastern London on British Summer Time, and they go
home at six AM. If you get out from behind your desk once in
a while you'll know that the Madrid office consists of two
cotton tops and four get citizenship, whose job it is to take
whatever the Spanish Civil leads them and staff I cover the
side on demand, rather than actually running, unambitious
on visiting company corruption. I was I read the pub
CCTV-foot to mention the MARGRET ELIAS. SPONGE network
and Paris mobile phone company logfiles--will back me up
on this, the right, you're wrong, and I would appreciate it if
you'd stop acting like a complete pig and pay attention."

I find that during my file visit I must have stood up, his
leaning over the table, balanced on my feet, and Chouchay is
leaning over backbones in his, time, not balanced in the
slightest. "This is harassment" he replies, "retaliator?"

"No," I sit down hastily, before he can get a word in:
"Introduction is when you're based by a Thirteenth Directorate
office and two Squares things he borrowed from the
company. It amounted to harassment: it's good practice for
when the Auditors decide to take you over the coast."

Shona has been talking it up for some time, and now she
wags her lip. "So, what exactly did Paris want? I think you better
make a full statement right now." That's right, she says,
"Clear-Clear, same as us, isn't she?"

"Then need to jump in, I don't jump easily into specific
concerns in Budget. The Tregget is missing to bid me. You'd
better find it before the wrong party gets their hands on it
and use it to make his. There was a lot of tap-dancing, but
that's the basic substance of it." I couldn't avoid thinking about
our knowledge exchange on the topic of Amsterdam, which
is now linking even further in context. They do that, you
know. To muddy the waters. (Fucking culture.) "I offered to
trade, if he was anything to offer."

"Wonderful." Shona is making notes. "So that's it?"
"Substantially, yes." Because all I know for sure about the
cable connection is reference--and Angleton's instructions.
(That do state outcomes, by the trajectory of our own
words.)

"Okay. It compile this and add it to the minutes, so at least
we've got it on paper somewhere. That should cover you.
Then we can decide how and when to send it up the chain."
She stares at me blankly. "I assume that's why you brought it
up today?"

"Yes, I want to keep it confidential to the BLOODY BARON
committee for now. He wanted about how Paris knew who to
talk to and where to find him. Not to mention when."

She speaks up. "Yes, that's very disturbing." She looks
appropriately disturbed for a split second, then leaves her
management mask. "Vivian, would you be a dear and
make sure to accidentally lose the minutes of this session
between your desk and my email program? I think I wouldn't
but for distribution to be covered for a few days, until the
situation settles one way or the other."

Despite the aging laser check mark that she affects, the
temperament and timing of a steady home-country station
link not too far under the skin, put her in behind and panels
and you can see her biting the inside of her fist. Although,
when she takes the log goes on Chouchay he sits up at
the white flag at once. "No, certainly, certainly," she grants me
a poisonous glance, which I ignore. "So? I heard of a
substance encounter will be thoroughly studied until I hear
otherwise."

"So you expect Paris to make contact again?" Shona
demands. "In your personal judgment?"

"Yes." Now that's a question and a half. "No, let me be a cad
in case I want to contact him, but wouldn't find out (got the
impression he was worried about being if the Thirteenth
Directorate are running to some kind of schedule we need to
know, don't we?)

She looks grimly pleased. "Minus that?"

"Substantially." Shona stares at Vivian. "What does the
calendar have to say?"

"The calendar? It's August bank holiday in a couple of
weeks."

"I believe she was asking about significant interactions,"
the intercom, spying me a quelling glance. "Summit
conference, international treaties, Mayday great cycle
ending, general elections, protestant evangelists, that sort
of thing. It'll be in Outlook under events. Wait the one with the
logo, why don't you look that?"

Chouchay manages to look long-suffering. "What exactly
am I supposed to be looking for?"

"Anything." Shona makes a case of the word. "Whatever
might interest Paris."

Link, suddenly a rather unpleasant thought occurs to me.
Forget dates that interest Paris. What about dates relevant to
the Budget? Assuming the Budget is question in the one line
biting of.

Trying not to be too obvious about it, I put on my phone and
start typing. There's an auto-back reader and a Wikipedia client,
and a batch of other stuff that even Ursula Sternberg's
adjutant called again. . . ?

"So, what are you doing?" I try to.

I grin sardonically. "Checking a different calendar." 09
August 1921. That's when the mothers moved. Budget. At
least, that's when they said they did the deed. And the
twenty-first anniversary is coming up in the next week. How
interesting I going to occur after other significant conversations on
that date. Zelen with intel executives, Hargreaves
reactions, hundred anniversary of the collapse of the
USSR. "No, sorry, nothing there." I say, ending my phone
away. Link, left on his.

It's like this. If you were going to try and break the gears that
maintain an anti-downward spiral called the Gate of
Goths, wouldn't you pick the anniversary of its last state
handout? Dates have insurance, after all, and this particular
horror has been being quietly among human beings, the fan
long down, with the bomb, for so long that our patterns of
thought have implanted upon it.

But that's just the sort of ratio things that the cables might be
up to? Trying to be a very powerful could come from his
Luxury-oriented chains? And isn't this exactly the sort
of thing that Paris might anticipate? Well, maybe. There's a slight
motivation gap, just what makes cables tick, anyway?
Besides the obvious--having your head nailed by a highly
powerful general, being bound by a gear, that sort of thing--
what's in it for them? Fucked if I know, but I mean, what makes
your average high school teacher tick, for that matter?

Suddenly, not knowing I'm making me shit-out the only
person who can answer for me in the one person I don't have
to ask. Angleton.

"Maybe we could visit Bob?" Shona suggests.

"Who?" I shake my head. "What do you mean?"

"If Paris makes contact again, it would really help if you
had a recording made," she points out.

"There was a word in that sentence." I look at this for
support but she's nodding thoughtfully along with Shona.
"Paris isn't going to make contact on working hours, and if
it's at night by you, to either not want a wire during all my
daily life. Now, if you want me to use that business card and
wear a recorder while we're talking, that's another matter. But I
think we ought to have something to back up him before we
go there, otherwise he's not going to give us anything for free."

"Think," says Bill.

"Vivian, at me through closed sign. He should visit
him anyway," he suggests maliciously "just in case."

I sink back in my chair, making my face for plausible
denial. We've only been in this meeting for half an hour and
already I feel like a decade--what a morning! But it could be

THE NIGHTMARE STACKS



THIS IS A RAILWAY UNDER LONDON, BUT IT'S PROBABLY NOT the one you're thinking of. Sure, that. There are many railways under London. There are the tube lines that everyone knows about, hundreds of thousands, dozens of lines, carrying millions of people every day. And there are the London Connector rail lines, many of which are underground for part or all of their length. There are the other major railway lines such as Crossrail and the Eurostar tunnel into St. Pancras. There are even the Docklands Light Railway, if you squint.

But these are just the currently operational lines that are open to the public. There are other lines you probably don't know about. There are the deep tube tunnels that were never opened to the public, built to serve the needs of wartime government. Some of them have been abandoned, others turned into archives and secure stores. There are the special platforms of the public tube stations, the systems built during the 1930s and 1950s to run safely and quietly away from the capital at an hour's notice in time of war. There are the trains of government, buried deep and half-forgotten.

And there are the secret ones. The Neoplastic railway that ran from behind Waterloo to Brookwood cemetery in Surrey, along the converted track bed of which I'm just right. The coal tunnels that distributed fuel to the power stations of South London and the busied generator halls that powered the tube network. And the MailRail narrow-gauge tunnels that for over a century hauled stacks of letters and parcels between Paddington and Whitechapel, until it was officially closed in 2003.

Close?

Not so fast. The stacks, where the Laundry keeps its dead files, occupy two hundred-meter stretches of disused deep-tube tube tunnel not far behind Waterloo. They're truly remote, down, beneath the hole in the ground where Service House is currently being rebuilt by a private finance initiative guy in time for CALEB NIGHTMARE GREEK. How do you think we get in and out? Or wherever we need to, to find our files?

Angelic? Just a job for me to do in the stacks. And so it is that at one thirty I'm sitting in my office, having a late-morning mug of coffee and waiting for the lifts man with the handcart to call, when the NeoplasticPunk begins to vibrate and make a noise like a distressed U2-cut.

"Lift?"

"It's Ms. 'Sue'?" She doesn't sound too happy.

"What? Or to home?"

"Right now, yes... not feeling too well."

"Should you not, really? Is there anything I can do?"

"No, I'm OK, right? 'Listen, about last night's... And thanks for letting me lie in. It's just weird, out today, so the biggest of my weekly and I was thinking about taking the afternoon to do... what we talked about earlier, to go visit Research and Development. But there's a little job I need to do in the office and I was wondering if you could..."

"Signs are clear, do my previous. 'Maybe, depends what, it's OK to the stacks in half an hour."

"The stacks? In person?" She seems up audibly. "That's great! I was hoping you could just pull a file for me, and if you're going there..."

"Not so fast!" I pause. "What kind of file?"

"A new one, a report I asked for. I can give you a reference code, it should be fresh in today."

"Oh, right? Well, that shouldn't be a problem—I can probably do it with my primary mission. 'What's the subject?"

"Let me... She reads out a string of digits and I read it back to her. Well, it's if you could just bring it home with you this morning?"

"Sure, the sign, who was it who didn't want work brought home?"

"That's different. This is me being lazy, not you overdoing it."

"I'm fine. If you say so."

"Love you."

"You too. Bye."

AT SEVEN MINUTES PAST TWO, I HEAR FOOTSTEPS

AND a squeak of wheels that stops outside my door. I pick up a pair of brown manila files, fit through with and absent. "Kisses tomorrow?" I ask.

He wears a blue-grey boiler suit and a cloth cap that has seen better days, his skin is as parched as time-worn newspaper. He looks at me with the dumb, vacant eyes of a residual human source. "Active service," he murmurs.

"These are going back," I hand over the files, and he painstakingly inscribes their numbers on a battered plywood clipboard using a stick of pencil whittled to a length of about an inch. "And I'm going with them."

He starts an unending "Document number," he says.

I tell my eyes, "Give me that." Taking the clipboard, I make up a short reference number and write it down in the next space, then copy it onto my index with a pen. "That's it, I can't document. Like me."

"Document... number..." His eyes cross for a moment.

"Come." He puts his hands to the handcart and begins to push along, swinging back at me unobtrusively. "Come?"

For an RRH, he's remarkably communicative. I lag along behind as he finishes his work, collecting and distributing brown manila envelopes that smell of dust and long-forgotten secrets. We leave the department behind, heading for the service lifts at the back. His ID doesn't even raise his head to not let him pass.

The heavy freight lift takes forever to descend into the sub-basement, crawling and creaking. The lights flicker with the heavy edge of fluorescent tubes on the verge of burnout, and the ventilation here provides a background white buzz of noise that sets my teeth on edge. There's nobody and nothing down here except for storerooms and supply lockers: people visit, but only the dead stay.

Headset man shuffles down a narrow passage lined with file doors. Fixating before one, he produces an antiquated-looking key and unlocks a padlock and chain from around the crash bar. Then he pushes his cart through into a dimly lit space beyond.

"Here are your books that?" I ask him.

"Look... at right," he murmurs, throwing a big switch like a circuit breaker that mounted on the wall just inside the door. There is a narrow long room with a couple of bookshelves parked along one wall. The other side of the room is empty.

There is a depression in the floor, and a hole in each of the narrow end walls, run along the depression between the hole. Such is the wily unusual scale of rail that it takes me several seconds to take it back into the correct perspective and see that I'm standing on the platform of an underground railway station—a narrow-gauge system with tracks about sixty centimeters apart, and an overhead third rail. I hear a subtle rumbling from one of the tunnel mouths, and feel a warm breath of air on my face, like the breath of a very small dragon. The original MailRail track only ran east to west, but addresses were paired back in the 1930s, I suppose. I shouldn't be surprised to find one here, for what else would command this extremely boring station office block to the Laundry via a temporary headquarter?

I look at handset man. "Can I ride that?" I ask.

Instead of answering, he pulls a second wheel. I think, "What think I'd have learned under train to ask someone changes questions by now, wouldn't you?"

The umbrella builds to a loud roar and a remarkable object sails out of the tunnel and screeches to a halt in the middle of the room.

In a train of coast-to-coast carriages, all outstated. But its tiny 'No could pass it in my front but. The snout of the carriage, barely rise waist-high, and they sport external nacelles, mechanical rear shutters to the front carriage and hinges the roof right up. Not even making a sound, he begins to feel the flow from his cart into a storage bin.

"Why, what about?" I focus on the second carriage. It's got some mesh sides and protrudes like a bench—"No!" Heard from him a line of flow out of the front carriage, deposits it in his cart and tapers to the left. Then he walks to the second carriage, lifts the roof, and looks if not expectantly "Doesn't that seem going to my cart?" He looks and shrugs. The second bench seat is about five centimeters above the track bed, and there is no backward as he drops the lid with a clang. The carriage is only big enough for a single passenger. It smells rusty and dry, as if something died in here a long time ago.

Turning my head sideways, I catch an instant man walks over to the big circular window and opens it down and up, down and up. It must be some kind of feedback sign, because a moment later I feel a motor almost under me, and the train starts to roll forward. I make myself lean down: it'd be a really great deal to the station to escape my line off on the tunnel roof. And a moment later I feel, rattling laughter into the darkness under London, on a later-day mission.....

AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME I'M FALLING FEETFIRST INTO A PECE of railway history another part of the plot is unfolding. Let me try to reconstruct it for you:

A red-haired woman holding a violin case is making her way along a busy high street in London. Wearing patterned trousers and a slightly dated Navy blue top, sensible shoes, and a rather long dark shawl in light, she could be a college lecturer or a musician on her way to practice without the intensive and, nobody going to mistake her for an auction house employee or a civil servant. Which shows how deceptive appearances can be.

Kids and shoppers and office workers in suits and shop staff in uniform move around her, one streaks her way between them, not looking in shop windows or checking her attention from the destination in hand. Here is a side street, and she turns the corner wide-waddling a baby buggy, its owner stumbling on her heels—she almost falls, but before she does she takes either of a corner where a blond woman in office dress sits in a chair above the pavement.

The street has green doors and a reception desk leading an avenue around a bank of lifts behind it promises a rapid ascent into crowded barge caddies between the woman's apprehensive expression, and looks up an O card of some sort. The guard notes, signs her in, then waves her on to the lift. She on the lift, she could be a session musician, turning up at one of the TV production companies lined on the wall panel beside the reception desk, or a member of staff on her way back from a lunchtime lesson.

So it's not the lift control panel shows five numbered floors. As the door starts closed, the woman pushes the first-floor button, then the first floor (which) then the fourth floor. The lift begins to move. The illuminated floor display flicks 1 up from ground to first, second, third—and it goes out. Then, fully extended between indicated floors, the door opens.

There are no caddies here: only rooms with heated glass doors that look nice, and red security lights to warn against intrusion. Some of the rooms are offices, and some of them are laboratories, although the experiments that are conducted in them require little equipment more exotic than desktop computers and hard-wired electronic circuitry.

The red-haired woman makes her way through the building with some form of familiarity, until she finds room 505. She looks on the door "Come in," the occupant calls. He sits motionless, somewhat by the door.

"Hi?" He has a large head for his average-sized torso; brown hair, lighting a bald patch on the crown in a playful, lit, expression, calmly greeted, not startled at her approach. "Good to see you?"

"Hi, been too long." She walks in and they embrace briefly. "Are you happy?"

"Not particularly, no." His desk tells a different story, piled high in utility models of paper—there's a pair printer on a table in one corner, and a keyboard/printer/printer right below it—with a coffee mug balanced atop one particularly steep pile. The mug reads: **BLONDIE OFF HOURS TONIGHT STOP HERE!** There's a bookcase beside the desk, crammed full of printed books and loose papers, except for one sheet, which is occupied by a tiny Copier model railway layout. "Were you passing through or can I be of service in some way?"

"I was hoping to talk to you," she confesses. "About..."

She strays. "Mind if I sit down?"

"It's the conversation growth coefficient, isn't it?" he asks, and one of his eyebrows tries to climb over his. "No, yes, make yourself comfortable. Everyone has been asking about it this week." He sighs, then backs towards his own chair, breathes in his seat.

"I got an edited, probably garbled, version of it from Andy last week," she explains. "The original paper sort of on the repeat so thought I'd ask you about it." She nods at the door. "In person."

"No... very nice." His expression relaxes moment by moment.

"The chances of eight have been about."

"Word makes." Sublimely, he rests one hand on a glass-topped ottoman. "Or so I prefer to imagine."

"That's interesting." He leans her side against the side of her chair and crosses her legs. "Has missing too, you know?"

"That's very interesting!" Now Ford's expression lightens.

"The one line down, the British side. It's not very long though."

Mo nods. "Forwarder and neural architecture. I know, but I never could get my head around why you'd put wax in the ceiling. Some kind of bio-organic lab space realisation?"

"Oh, it's—" Ford says. "Okay, you won't be mind. It's about the paper or the book?"

"The paper." She leans forward expectantly.

"The first half of paper, it, there is no paper—well, no, not exactly but it's not the kind of read I could put at Nelson, is it?"

"Right. So who reviewed it?"

Ford nods. "That's the right question. Who else has you wearing?" Mo's eyes go very cold. "There's a title got in Amsterdam whose parents don't have much time for handwriting right now. But that's according to my playing games, but I need to know. See, my conducting some research in applied mathematics. I would be rather embarrassed if you made a mistake in your logic and the Brotherhood of the Black Phoenix have gotten themselves worked up over nothing."

"The Brotherhood? I say, are they still going?" He meets her cold stare with one of his own. "That is simply not on, neither though you'd put a map to their office in Afghanistan a few years ago."

"They're a broad franchise. They've got any number of fronts." She makes a gesture of dismissal. "However, I'm looking into this on my own initiative. Do you have a draft I can see?"

"I think I could manage that." He begins to hunt through the papers on his desk. "Oh, here." He passes her three pages, held together by a paper clip.

Mo peers at the top page. "What I can't read..."

"No. Just a moment." Ford waves his left hand across the paper and makes something completely under his breath.

Mo blinks. "Was that anything useful?"

He gives her a look.

"I'll see." She peers at the abstract. "That's interesting. Let me paraphrase. You've tried to quantify semantic transmission effects among a population exposed to class three abstractions and find... belief in them spreads? And

It's a power function!"

He looks "the most astounded, product models all across to have looked at how possession ignites through a sparse network, like classical computational model as of synaptic transmission, for example. But that's beside. If you push an uncontrolled outbreak, then people can see their neighbors, reaction sequences, being possessed. And that just means the observer-mediated grid architecture, making it easier for the goods to tunnel into our reality. It's a feedback loop: the more people succumb, the wider another wave's resistance becomes. I modeled it using linear programming and the results are, well, they speak for themselves."

"And the closer we come to the Tenth Week Assembly the more outbreaks we're going to see, and the—contributes to the strength of the TW?" She looks at him sharply.

"Absolutely, yes. It's like shuffles, uncertainty in his case."

"Well, what?" She folds the paper neatly and slides it into her handbag. "And here I was hoping Andy had gotten the wrong end of the stick."

"Second-order effects are always gonna getcha." He shrugs apologetically. "I don't know why nobody looked into it from this angle before."

"Not just problems, not my problem."

"Says Werner von Braun, yes, and who says satellite is dead?"

"Don Levine. Or maybe Buddy Holly."

"Right. But you said something that interests me strongly. How did the Black Brotherhood—whenever were it to look before the 80s—get the news?"

"There's what a lot of people are asking themselves right now." She gives him a peculiar look. "It made quite a stir, unfortunately. Lots of passing tongues. Unfortunately Oscar Oscar are drawing blanks and they can't Audit the entire organization or least not get. We'll have to examine the second-order consequences if the culture learn they've got a breakthrough, though I figure can come up with anything."

"Angleton would be the one to talk to about that," he says softly. "After all, he's the head of the Counter-Poisoning Unit."

"Angleton's missing," Mr. Tawney.

"For a moment they'd in silence. Then Dr. Mike raises one propulsive eyebrow. "A question of time."

IN GLAD I'M NOT CLAUSTROPHOBIC

Well, I'm not very claustrophobic. Lying on my back in a coffin-sized railway carriage, sitting down a sleep inside in a tunnel less than a meter in diameter that was built in the 1950s is not my idea of a nice relaxing way to spend an afternoon. Especially knowing that the station staff are outside and I'm banging headfirst into the depths of a High security government installation with only my wretched card to spare for me, on a mission of somewhat questionable legality.

Pull yourself together, Dick. You've been in darker holes.

Yes, but back then Angleton at least had the good grace to tell me what the hell I was supposed to be doing. This time around it's just I want you to be my left-hand goal. That and the 440 watt DC rail filament connections below my spine give me a tingling sensation like my balls want to climb right up my throat and this happens I shouldn't be surprised that I'm back door into the stacks, or that I'm a filthy little nannage-gabe system constructed by a CHANGE and forgotten by everyone except train operators, but to find myself actually *idling* it... that's something else.

Angleton had the decency to scribble me a written order, and a good thing too, otherwise I would have thrown a strip. The librarians don't appreciate unannounced visitors, much less informal withdrawals, and like all of my more academic contacts they have their own inimitable and unpredictable ways of dealing with variables and intruders. If they catch me, a signed order from a CDSI ought to make them pause long enough to give me a fair hearing before they try to hang out on me, really and truly, it is usually best to just get in, require and exit for the file case with the card.

I try not to think too hard about anything that go wrong with Angleton's plan. Instead, I sit back and relax off-throne.

The Laundry keeps its archive stacks in a former tube tunnel. It was originally going to be a station, but during those war that it was converted into an emergency bunker and in the end they never got around to connecting it up to the underground network. There are six levels rather than the usual three, but levels built into each half of a cylindrical tunnel eight meters in diameter and nearly three of a kilometer long. That makes for a lot of shelves—not quite in the same league as the British Library, but close. And it's not just books that occupy the stacks. We store microfiche cards in binders, our after row of them, and there are scores of CD-ROMs full of CD-ROMs. There's a lot of stuff down here, a lot of nothing, secrets and failures, a complete transcript of every number channel transmitted since 1932, the last words of every spy hanged during the Second World War, every sermon preached by a minister in the Church of Night—our minister before he happens found out and sent him to the gallows.

The train lies so close that my feet are exposed, and the ceiling just begins to show. For only been here for three or four minutes but it feels like hours in the roaring rain. I close my arms around my body, hugging myself and try not to think about pressure build-up. Instead, I try to remember more secrets, and face each in the knowledge of every spy and defector recruited by Alex Niles. (Formerly paranoid, if he suspected a record of spying he'd been locked in a coffin, but through a tube while being interrogated after which they would be executed by a bullet fired down the same pipe.) I gather he killed most of his own followers than any hostile power? The last confessions of every member of the Great Hans-Sied arrested and interrogated by the KGB in Germany in the late 1950s, (which had to enter and disseminated everywhere) into the Occupying Powers, declined to investigate, after a brief, hurried review of the Nazi-era records.) There is even a sealed box of DVDs, containing high-resolution scans of the mechanical blueprints from the Atomic Archive. (That one was my own contribution to the stacks, I'm afraid.)

The carriage squeals to a halt. A few seconds later, I hear the chatter of the door being opened. I take this as my cue and, bracing myself, push against the roof.

I sit up as I find myself in another room, this time with a lighted tunnel-like roof and new brick walls, built by and rights set deep in embedded sockets: a maw of corruption and monstrosity. A pair of red-lit tunnel monitors are idly watching the wagon in front of me. I lower myself off the bench seat and crouch over the side of the carriage, trying not to touch my head on the low ceiling ceiling. There are hammer-blast doors at either end of the platform, but I don't dare try them at random—first putting my back just by being here, instead I approach one of the shimmering tunnel figures, and thrust my six-fingered fingers under where the hell of its resting nose. "Document." I say, extending my opening index finger at the numbers "750 000."

Laundry's flight comes lightly around my wrist and tug me towards a half-broken handrail. I grin into the edge of it and the hand drops away. I suppress a shudder. (One of the office visitors is curiously using HRC to count down the use of residuals, claiming it's a violation of the human rights, UN's argument is that once you're dead you have no rights to violate, but the visitors' lawyers have said that if they lose the case they'll bring a counter-suit for interfering with corpse—either that, or they'll demand an out-pay for the extracts.)

After a couple of minutes, one of the working shifts squeals over to a construction on one wall and starts pulling handles. With a grating buzz of motors and the screams of steel wheels on rails, the rail train rolls slowly into the next tunnel mouth, on its way back to the realm of noise and darkness. The two line heat handrails and shunters slowly towards the left-hand door.

I walk alongside, resting one hand on the file cart as it

lines. Doors open and close. Using my free hand, I produce my warrant card and crane, then hold them clasped before me. We walk down unlit-washed brick-lined passages like the catacombs beneath a records center's masonry, dimly lit by yellowish tubes. A cool breeze issues eerily, towards my face, into the depths of the Mallard tunnel.

A hand in the passage brings us to another pair of stained iron doors, painted battleship gray. It's probably their original weight heavy iron doors to lockify this point, for I've never been in the lower depths of the stacks before: all my dealings have been with the front desk staff on the upper levels. The lead zombie places a clear-fingered hand on the door and pushes, seemingly effortlessly. The door swings open onto a different strata of darkness, a nocturnal gourd that seems ghoulish on my neck. Lighter my grip on the card and crane at myself silently. I lift my wrist with care, don't I? I hastily raise my warrant card and crane and grip them with my teeth, then look to the fluorescent wall by my head. Should have noticed it . . .

As my crane walks forward I flinch-to the all-seeing eye into view and bring the phone's camera to bear: what I see does not fit me with joy: the dark on the other side of the portal isn't just due to an absence of light, it's the result of a very powerful sent. Being of a most paid technical disposition I allow me as likely that it's part of a security control-offer, all, it's a secret document apparently I'm trying to break into, isn't it? And I know what to pass just inside the back door if I was in charge of security. Stealth, or a good imitation thereof, the better to try to catch them by surprise.

It's time to break from my assigned staff space, not wisely, especially. I let go of the document card. Before the dead man walking can take me to hand again, I remove the papers from my mouth, then lick the ink on my wrist and harshly rub it on my jacket. "Has a document?" I coo, showing my earnest eyes to the walking corpse. "You need a pass, file stamp, index, label, debit, or transfer card?"

I stare off for a moment, nodding gently on the back of my feet, and I can almost see the execution hammer triggering to the lumpy microphone: what that sentence and gesture is behavior. A sudden thought strikes me and I raise my warrant card, "Command center?" I ask. "Command center?" The zombie frowns, again, its closed construction from my throat. "Over-ride," it coo-ahs, "identify authorization." The other zombie, standing behind it, issues like a truck air brake.

To the name of the Counter-Possession Unit, on the official business of new legitimacy. Circuit Service, I override you," I say very slowly. A faint blue light from my warrant card shows the means of its death mask then I have any desire to maintain. The road to my feet: my footprint is weary and I've told I have an alternative account, but I manage to pull together the most plausible I need. These medical human resources are eminently acceptable, as long as you've got the access, permissions, and know what you're doing. The consequences of getting it wrong are admirably drastic, but I find that the prospect of a system error getting your brains ground out through a hole in your skull concentrates the mind wonderfully. If only we could consume Microsoft to port Windows to run on zombie-although knowing how many governments I'd heard outsourcing is run, that's probably indirectly "hacked" new program parameters. Subliminal start . . .

Or words to that effect, in questionable medieval not-Latin gibberish.

After silent minutes of chafing my cold wrist with sweat and straining with tension, my audience are displaying no signs of acquiring a taste for game de file programmer, which is good, but if security is possible enough they've begged an override any chance you "find authorization, access." I freeze. The zombie start where they are. Once have I created them? I pull out my phone and fix up its gray screen for a personal war, then stick it in my jacket's breast pocket. There's only one way to find out if it's going to work, isn't there? I snap my fingers, "What are you waiting for?" I ask, reaching into my pocket again. "Let's go to work."

The Head of Glory has seen better days: the Frank is worn right down to the base of the big joint, and only the top of the fingers still have returned knuckles-but I'll have to do. "So we have gloves, do we have fucking gloves?" I roar under my breath, and a hand blue glow like a glowing candle flame from both of the stamps. I climb into one of the document carts, carefully holding on to the wing administration, and the medical human resource gives me a basket above towards the desk.

There's a tunnel out of sightlines in the library in the aftermath of the assault. It's not just the lack of darkness what happens in these corridors, but the darkness and absence of the cage broken only by the squealing of the confused wheels of my cart. A sense of being watched, of a mindless and horrific seeing across me, started by the skin of the head of Glory's burning fingertips. A sign to sit still, the heart of horror, and only the faint juddering word-heart of my phone to bring me through it with CDG complex intact. There's a reason they use medical human resources to run the files, it's not from the Mallard system: you don't want to be dead to work here, but I really hope.

In the darkness, for only ten or fifteen seconds, but what I come out I am in excruciating pain, my head pounding and my skin clammy, as if on the edge of a heart-attack. Everything is gray and grove and there is a buzzing in my ears, as if a monstrous swarm of bees. I depress slowly as a light returns.

I blink, trying to get a grip, and I realize that the headstart has stopped moving. Stumbling, I sit up and somehow either over the edge of the cart without toppling the thing over. There's a cart on the floor, its legs, inch-like-to back in the lead of the lung, I look round. There's a wooden table, three chairs, a douch of bathroom fixing cabinets, and another door through which the mainline are disappearing-black painted wood, with a metal engraving above the label "MAGAZINE ROOM". Trying to remember what I actually saw in these, my mind stumbling around the inside of my skull like a lightbulb means, so I give up. It's still clapping the head and of Glory. I find it up to look at the frames. They're turned down dead, and there's little left but cutaway bones. Regrettably, I blow them out one by one, then dispose of the ink in the recycling bin on one side of the hole.

No mainline, but no librarians either. It's all very dark Office, just as Angleton described it. I head for the nearest door, just as Angleton in front of me.

"Help?"

"I don't suppose it to be here," he says, stopped if not outright cross. "Visitors are restricted to levels five and six only. You could do yourself a mischief, wandering around the underpassway." It's the start and he and I'll tell her she's also a intrusion from another, more stark, whereas I could kiss him just for existing, but I'm not out of the woods yet.

"Sorry," I say contritely. "I was sent to ask for a new document that supposedly has come in this morning. . ."

"Well, you'd better come with me, then. Let me see your ID, please."

I show him my warrant card and he nods. "All right. What is your name?"

"A. B." I show him the slip of paper on which I've written down Mr's document reference. "It's new, it should have come in this morning."

"Follow me." He leads me through a door to a lift, up four levels and along a corridor to a waiting room with a desk and half a dozen cheap powder-blue chairs. I vaguely recognize it from a previous visit. "Come in that and wait here."

I sit down and wait. Ten minutes later he's back, frowning.

"Are you sure this is right?" he asks.

"Absolutely, I think back. "No," I say. I read the number below on my card. "It's a five, five, five, five, five, five, five, five."

"Well, it's not here yet." He shrugs. "It may still be waiting to be allocated, or you know that happens sometimes, if adding a new file triggers a staff overload."

"Oh." He won't be happy, I guess, but I establish my card. "What can you tell me about the document?"

"Certainly if you can show me your card again?" I do so,

and he takes a note of my name and department assignment. "Okay, Mr. Housler, I'll send you an email when the file comes into stock. Is that everything?"

"Yes, thanks, you've been very helpful." I smile. He turns to go. "So, are you retired, or the way out...?"

He waves a hand at one of the doors. "Go down there, second door on the left, you can't miss it." Then he leaves.

THE SECOND DOOR ON THE LEFT OPENS ONTO A SMOOTH-FLOORED carpet lined in white painted tiles and illuminated by overhead fluorescent tubes of a kind that are sufficiently familiar that, when I reach the end of the tunnel and step through the gray metal door (which locks behind me with a muffled click) I am unsurprised to find myself in a passage between two like platforms.

Half an hour and a change of the date, I swipe my Oyster card and surface, blinking at the afternoon sun. I get the ticket pocket where I secreted the sheet of papers that Anglim gave me. And then I head back to my office at the New Arnhem, where I very politely dial open my secure document safe and inside those papers, their lock is and go home, secure in the knowledge of the first half of a job well done.

(Like I said, fatal accidents never happen because of just one mistake.)

CRIME SCENES



I DONT FUNCTION WELL IN THE SMALL HOURS OF THE MORNING. I sleep like a log, and I have difficulty pulling my self about me if something wakes me in the pre-dawn dark.

So, it takes me a few seconds to sit up and grab the bedside phone when it begins to ring for attention. I fumble the handset close to my face. "Whoa--" I manage to stifle, thinking, if this is a nuisance call, I'll almost justifiable homicide, as Mo appears, suddenly in a haze of the dawn and red coat, pulling the bedding off me.

"Sub - I know that voice. It's--Jo here. Code Blue. How soon can you be ready for a pickup?"

I am already awake in an icy-cold direct of sweat. "Five minutes," I think. "Where's go?"

"I want you to have seat, and I'm sending a car. Be ready in five minutes." She sounds uncertain. ... afraid? "This line isn't secure, so save your questions."

"Okay." The phrase that had better be good doesn't even reach my target, thinking Code Blue is the next of thing that attracts the Auction's attention. "Bye." I put the phone down.

"After new staff?" says Mo.

"That was a Code Blue," I waving my feet over the edge of bed and out to yesterday's discarded shoes. "There's a car calling for me in five minutes."

"Sigh." Mo rolls over the other way and begins her face in a pillow. "Am I wanted?" Her voice, muffled, tells away.

"Just me," I wave through an open-closet for pants. "It's Jo Sullivan. At last in the morning."

"Girls with Claws--Claws, still shut?"

"No." Please, no, she shut on. "I want to see it again."

"Would better go." She sounds serious. "Phone me the next day, please something."

Ignorance at the alarm. "It's handy to see."

"It's dark now." She pulls the bedding into shape. "Diss case."

"Just you," I say, as I head downstairs, carrying my hooded jacket.

It's standing in the front bed when blue and red stripes light up the window glass above the door. I open it in the face of a cop. "Hi, Howard?" she asks.

That's me. I look up my nearest card and her eyes age a bit.

"Come with me, please," she says, and opens the rear door for me. I step myself in and wait only for another minute to slide through the walls of South London, spending alternately down narrow stairwell shafts and cowering around nonchalant in the gray pre-dawn light until, after a surprisingly short time, we pull up outside the staff entrance to a car-park.

The door is open. Jo is waiting for me. One look at her face tells me it's Bob. Angleton's nearest one. This is when it starts. I blink. "What's happened?" I ask.

"Come this way," Jo leads me up the stairs. The lights are on, which is unusual, and I hear footsteps--the steady shuffle of the night staff, but boots and silent voices. Something in the makes me think of a locked alarm.

We reach past reception where a couple of blue-uniformed security men are standing guard over a register and six paper clips, then back along the corridor past Rita's corner office, Hammond's board room.

"Back," I say, unable to contain myself. My office door is closed. But I can see the interior, because there's a glass block in the door, as if someone hid it with a window blind. Except a window blind would leave two jagged edges of splintered wood, while the air of this particular hole looks oddly melted. I do notice left much later an avalanche of paper and scraps of broken metal are strewn across half an overturned desk. A thin blue glow clings partially to some of the wreckage, being slowly even as I watch. "What happened?"

"Are keeping you tell us," the Boris, bags under his eyes and an expression as dark as midnight on the writer's palette. When did he get back? Haven't he doing something overseas connected with **BLUDDY BARON** ...?

"What have you done, Boris?" Jo grabs my left elbow. "First a cluster **FADDC**, now this. What are you up to?"

I blink rapidly at the destruction. "My secure document says, it's ..."

She shakes her head. "We won't know until we go inside. It's still active." I feel a tiny prickling on the back of my neck. Destructive intruders have been at work, summoned to witness something Angleton was right to insist.

"What did you have in your safe?"

"It's not sure yours, Howard."

Boris clears his throat. "Is cleaned, Bob. I will clear her. What was in safe? What attracted attention of burglars in night?"

I repeat through the haze in the door. "It had documents relating to several covertest projects in East." I say. "The stacks can probably reconstruct my withdrawal record, and once it's safe to go to them we can work out what's missing."

"Bob, you went to the archives in person yesterday," Jo Angleton her grip on my elbow, painful, tight. "What did you withdraw most recently?" I ask.

Truth and compromise time. "I asked for a copy of the Fuller Memorandum," I tell her, which is entirely true and correct. "Was following up something Angleton told me to do a while ago." Which is also entirely correct, and the most misleading thing I've said in front of witnesses all year.

"Fuller Memo?" I see a flicker of recognition on Boris's face. "But me, when you go home last night, is Fuller Memorandum in safe?"

I nod. I don't trust my tongue at this point because, as the man who used to be president said, it all depends on what you mean by the word "is."

Jo looks at Boris. "What classification level are we talking about?" she asks.

Boris doesn't answer at once. He's staring at me, and it looks odd to sit to be a tiny pile of soft right nose. "Does Angleton say you are the memorandum reader?" she asks.

"No. Took me a while to track it down," I remember. "So I left it in the safe overnight. I was going to look at it today." All of which is truthful enough that will helply repeat it in front of an Audit Panel, knowing that if I get a bit in front of them the blood will boil in my veins and reactivate.

Boris looks at Jo and nods, minutely. "Am thanking you for calling me. This is great."

"What was in the memo that's so hot-hot?" I ask, pushing my back, because somewhere in the last part of equipping Angleton's life became taking the forged hard prepared and meeting it to the archives, then withdrawing it and putting the trail in my office safe--I hadn't gotten round to asking him just what the original was about.

"Memorandum is control listing scripture for asset called **Eye of Spide**," Boris says, and strongly he refuses to meet my eyes. "Classified in **TOPSECRET**. Consequences of loss unpredictable."

"Oh, eye?" I never with being, because I'm not totally staid. I looked out who Tsipotev was some time ago. I didn't realize the Fuller Memorandum was his control document. Though the control document is the source code and schedule signature for the plan that tracks the entity called Tsipotev--the thing that cost an eight-year span because Angleton. I don't even realize that our sub-division have access a range of land, because Angleton gave me a register--the fact that they knew what to look for in the first place is really hard news.

"Would better come with me," says Jo, and I subside inside

that she's uttered her grip to my blouse and she's fingered the buttons. "Tom! Tom! Bob. And the time it's not just a F&C, it's early as soon as my people have gone over the incident scene with a fine-tooth comb. We will be going before the Auditor. It's scary."

I DO NOT PASS GO, DO NOT COLLECT PEARL, AND DO NOT BUMP Privately, I guess I don't go to just writer-ret-jobs but by the middle of the morning a 489-page stretch in Historical Studies would come as a blessed relief.

"Committee of enquiry will come to court."
"We have been before, and I don't like it the first time. The panel has requisitioned a small conference room, furnished it withes government translation-Austin chairs and bleached pine bowls. Health and safety probes on one wall, security notices on the other. The virtual air on the far end of the table, like a potted-plant hanging judge and his assistants. And they've asked that the talking carpet again, the one with the gold-fresh design woven into it, and the Crochton-recognition, and the live monitoring grid powerful enough to bait tenders and trap bones."

"There is no peacock gallery at this trial. Jo is waiting outside with a couple of cameramen and the other disgraced witnesses, but the Auditor want no incriminating onlookers who might have to be bound to silence or memory-wiped, should I accidentally disclose material above their level of classification."

"Please state your name and job title." There's a recorder on the desk, an upshot its light is glowing red.
"Sally Howard, Senior Specialist Officer grade 3, Personal Assistant to the—er, DSG Angleton."

"That chair is covered in One of the Auditor—Arenas, Borisia, Umberto—turn sideways and says something to the others that I ought to be able to hear, but can't. The other two nod. She turns back and addresses me directly, "Mr. Howard, for the moment of the sense of this investigation, We are aware of the guess it is conducted under. You have our special dispensation to respond to any question, the first time it is possible only the first time—your willingness if I put judgment the reply would require you to disclose counter-classified information. Please state your understanding of the variance, in your own words."

"Clear throat." "You ask me about sensitive projects I'm allowed to discuss—ones if you ask me again, I have to tell you, periods. Oh, I assure them because good practice to keep the enquiry from accidentally covering so many highly classified subjects that it would be allowed to read its findings."

"She smiles sly. "Something like that?" I think like the Angel of Death has just paraded on my shoulders, passed from whispering its tricks, and quietly whispered: "Who is pretty Polly? Then the names of innocent civilians, dentist patients. Ah ha, I stay myself."

The Chief Auditor rocks her looks at the legal pad before him. "Remember you visited the library floor desk. What was your objective?"

"Like back and think of English—and nothing else—Angleton gave me a reading list. I read. You tell me to bring back a particular document." Please, "Oh, and he wanted me to pick up a copy of a report she'd asked for, but it wasn't in it."

"There is no printing of high tension current in my legs to warn me to particular talk to uncooperative."

"Who is Mr.?" asks Auditor #3.
"Dr. Dominique O'Donnell, Epidemiological Warfare Specialist grade 4."

Auditor #3 leans forward, hungry. "Why did this person ask you to collect a document on their behalf?" he demands.

"I think, suspicious. "Because I said I was going to the library, and she was busy. She's my wife."

Auditor #3 looks baffled for the seconds, his stoic countenance trailing uncertainty in a haze of confused faces. "You're married?"

"Yes." "This would be hilarious if I wasn't scared silly by the sleeping horror I'm standing on that will cause any attempt at deception and—"

"Oh," she makes a note on his pad and subsides.

The second Auditor gives from a very disbelievable look, then turns to me. "Are you cleared for the content of her work?" she asks.

"No?" "I have no idea." "I may sincerely. We only discuss projects while working or after comparing unrelated success and if necessary asking for clearance." Then the glib on the goddamne tag forces me to add, "But this time it doesn't matter, the document hasn't started yet."

"She scribbles something on her own notepad." "Oh Dr. O'Donnell, tell me anything about this particular case?" she asks.

"I think, "I have no idea. She simply gave me the file reference number to countercheck."

More notes, more significant looks. The senior Auditor seems at the end of the grid, his attention on the list of specialists.

"Mr. Howard, Please indicate if you are familiar with any of these individuals: Matthew Howard, Jessica Marguerite, George Downer, Mikala Patis—" He nods at his hand signal.

"Describe what you know about Mikala Patis."

"I had a girl with him in the Frog and Bunnies the day before yesterday."

The effect is astonishing: the Auditor jerk to attention like a row of frogs with cattle prods up their backbones. I meet their appalled looks with a sense of sublime ignorance. They want the truth? "Okay, they can fucking leave the room."

"I registered it as a contact to the BLOODY BARDON committee at the first opportunity and I was eager to keep it quiet for the time being. Patis seems to have wanted to pass on a warning about Scepter. He was concerned that it was missing, and that as his best contacts we ought to ensure it was found before the wrong person got their hands on it and, uh, yeah, like, I could identify. Angleton authorized me to read the specific BARDON file and I have identified the identity of Scepter."

The Chief Auditor shakes his head. "Bloody hell," he mutters, then to me, "Do you know where Angleton is?"

"I cover my mouth—then pause. Now I can feel the electric force of the guess kicking the fire hairs on my legs."

The third Auditor narrows her eyes. "Quiet," she commands.

"I can't speak, but I still have some control." "I don't believe Angleton has assigned it a codebook yet." I hear myself saying, "but his disapprobation is correlated with an ongoing investigation and I don't think he wants me to tell anyone about..."

"My legs feel as if they're immersed in cold sea up to the knees. I gasp for breath just as the Chief Auditor heaves holds up his hand. "Stay of execution!" The subject has revealed the security substance. "He pines at me. "Can you confirm that you are acquainted with Angleton's whereabouts?"

"I nod, jerkily. The chilly searing fingers secede down my spine."

"In your judgment, is Angleton working in the best interests of the institution?"

I nod like a parrot that's forgotten.

"Also in your judgment, would it impair his work on behalf of the institution if we continue to explore this line of enquiry?"

"I think for the moment. Then I nod, emphatically.

"They will," I gape, glances on the spectators as the looks at me for a few seconds. "On your recommendation, we will not require further—unless you have something you would like to tell us?"

"Careful, Bob!" This is an Audit board gaffe up against. They're at their most dangerous when they're being reasonable, and they can turn all the fines of self-maginary or otherwise on you if you don't cooperate.

"I have a deeply thought. "You confirm." I finally say, "I thought this was an enquiry about the break in and theft from my office safe, but you've been asking questions about Angleton and his means. What's going on?"

Wrong question. Auditor #3 smiles stolidly and the fourth Auditor shrugs her head. "It is not in the best of this

continue to answer questions," says the Chief Auditor, a life auditor. "Now, thank you, to the matter at hand. I have some questions about office supplies. When did you last order stationary business from office stores, and how many and what type did you request. . . ?"

**WHILE I'M BEING HAULED OVER THE COALS, MO
RICKS AT HER** said four crates of coffee, each a crate but reads my text message. It's along the lines of HELLO UP AT NOW. IS COMING. She shrugs, without but not really alarmed. My legs ache from vertigo and eloquent when it's used in conversation, when the entire message is about to be ingested by a jet engine. This information level is indicative of stress, but not of mortal danger.

She leaves the clings of the coffee in the past, and the casual air seeps on top of the other waste in the kitchen bin. She goes upstairs, dresses, catches video and case and leaves.

Sometimes Mo works in the New Armani, and sometimes she doesn't. There's an office in the Great College of Music when her name is one of three listed on the door. There's a course in philosophy of mathematics at Kings College when she sometimes lectures—and towards sports on her paper to Hunter Foundation. And she's a singer at the Village across the fence and up the coast by boat, when the Laundry house serves meals that don't belong in it a contest. One Today, she asks out by tube, heading for the city center. She is on her way to ask Mr. Chow whether he did in fact mail his report. And she is in for a surprise.

Which she missed women in a black suit, when case in hand, walking up the pavement towards the streethead straight with the blue-and-white police incident tape stretched across the doorway. Traffic comes with more tape start to either side of the shop front, flanking in the light breeze. She passes, unnoticed, then looks around. There's a police officer standing discreetly by hands clasped behind his back. She glances back at the spot of doorway. There is no dark stain on the floor—the SOG officers and the cleanup crew did their job well—but the word case seems under focus because a warning. Her expression hardens, and she walks towards the corridor, reaching into her handbag to produce an identity card.

"What happened here, officer?" she asks quietly, holding the card when he can't take his eyes off her.
"He doesn't want a chance. 'Who, who, oh, dear. . .'" He shakes his head. "Miss. Master name. You can't go. I mean, you should!" . . .

"Officer in charge here?" she enquires. "Where can I find him?"

"That'd be Dr. Mills, from ME 4. He's set up shop round the back—that way, that alley there—who should I say?"
"In the name of national security, I understand and require you to forget me," she says, glancing the card away and turning towards the alley that runs around to the back of the office of her floor. The corridor's eyes close momentarily, by the time he opens them again, the woman with the victim case is gone.

She makes take the back door to George Dore's shop clicks open. Two figures step inside a uniformed detective sergeant and the woman. Both of them wear duplicate polystyrene slippers over their shoes: the odd hole her usual case. "Don't touch anything—tell me what you want to look at" he says, making no pair of duplicate gloves. "What exactly are you after?"

"First of all, what date is the PC card?"
"I wasn't there, so we bagged it." The sergeant sounds sure of himself. "If you're wanting to scrape the front drive, we can have an image of it available in an hour or so."
"Mo could skip if the killer left the PC behind, then there's almost certainly nothing left on it, but trawler garages, an antique mess that not even CSIS will be able to untangle. Any memory sticks? Small stuff? CDs?"

"We bagged them, too." The sergeant picks his way into Dore's workshop, which still smells of oak and turpentine. A row of disassembled instruments hangs from a rail overhead, the corpses in the disassembler's cold pincer. Those tools that are not in their places on the pegboard that covers one wall are laid out on the bench in jumbled rows, neatly sorted by size. The metal parts gleam like surgical steel, polished and unscrupulously bright.

"Any papers?"
The sergeant pauses beside a settings desk, itself an antique. Victorian or Edwardian. "No," he says, misreading. "They're scheduled for pickup tomorrow so we can continue working on the contact list. Obviously, equipment includes, addresses, that sort of thing."

"Oh looking for an address of a customer's instrument?" she asks him. "It will be dated yesterday or the day before, and it doesn't make a lot. I may be in an unmarked envelope. He'll use it." She produces an envelope from her bag.
"Like that?" The officer's eyes widen and his back straightens. "Should you happen to have any information about the killer?" he asks. "Because if so..."

Mo shakes her head. "I do not know who the killer is." The sergeant stares at her, seeking eye contact. "The victim was commissioned to prepare a report for my department, he was due to post it on the evening when the incident occurred. It has not been delivered."

"What was he meant to report on?"
Mo makes eye contact at last, and the detective sergeant recalls slightly from whatever he says in her expression. "You have no need to know. If it appears that there is a connection between the report and the killing, my department will notify inspector Rivoli immediately. Similarly, if the identity of the killer comes to our attention." She doesn't add, in such a way that she can discuss it without violating security protocol that much to change understood to be a minor detail in the context of a set of books and a cap. "The report, however, is a classified document and should be treated as such." And she returns her warrant card again.

The detective sergeant is clearly torn between the urgent desire to get her into an interview room and the equally urgent desire to get her the hell out of his shop, and away from what she and a few circles up a string-of-letters of rather unclear-murder investigation but being on the receiving end of a Laundry warrant card is an odd moment. It begins with the phrase *Her Defiant Majesty's* government commands and company you to provide the answer of this piece with all aid and assistance, which also a couple of such subtle and mind-bending power that it makes the reader's breath catch in his throat as suddenly as if trapped by a burglar's noise. He can no more ignore it—his own lights, her instructions—than he can ignore a gasp at his heart.

"What do you want?" he finally asks.
"I need the contents of that report." She shows her card. "I suspect the killer doesn't want me to have it. So if you find it, call me." She produces a business card and a tablet. There her living gate settles on the desk. "Oh, and one other thing. Are there any paper clips or staples in there? Because if so, I want them all."

"Paper clips?"
"Yes, I want all the paper clips and staples in that desk," her desk looks. "Mr. Chow was the last to touch a report brought before taking it and putting it in an envelope. And where there's a link, there's a chain of evidence."

**THE AUDIT BOARD CHEWS ME UP AND SPITS ME OUT
IN LESS THAN AN HOUR** Light air frictionless and dry as a dust mite, torque I walk through the door, past the walled entrance—the blue-silica are collecting Choudhury now, entering into the Providence and still not standing but towards the desk. Except I don't get any far—instead I bump or against a blue translucent bubble that seems to have broken the comb, and everything in it, just before Verc's office door. The bubble is warm and rubbery and I have a feeling that it would be a very bad idea indeed to try and feel my way through it, so I turn away and go back the other way, towards the coffee station.

In just scoping brown powder into a filter cone (the jag

was empty right when I must needed it, as usual when I clean the front ballist room.

"The been Audited," I say in answer to her silent question. "I don't think it went badly, but I gather I'm not allowed back in my office yet."

"No one is," she says, surprisingly calmly. "Are you making a fresh pot?"

"Sure," I slide the basket back into the coffee maker and hit the brew button. It activates me silently.

"Oh, as a matter of fact, you won't be going back to work for a few days."

"I-what?" The coffee machine clears its throat behind me as it asks what?

"The coffee, FATACC, incident when you were out at Colford that been suspended," her expression is apologetic.

"Sorry doesn't begin to cut it, I know, but the Robbery Committee has escalated it to Internal Affairs and they advised me to notify you that you're being suspended on full pay pending a full hearing."

"They what?" I hear my voice rise uncontrollably cracked. But what about Angleton's plan? But it's not a FATACC suspension.

"What Bob? Can't show. This isn't the end of the world. I'm sure the hearing will exonerate you. They don't want you in the office until it's over. It's just a routine procedure-Boh?"

"She's talking to my back--" I follow down the corridor by the time she says my name, then round the bend and halfway down the hall that takes me to the stairwell to Angleton's office. Because that Helen Langston and her KGB deeper metals part of me is sweating furiously I know damn well that I'm going to be exonerated, because the victim wasn't a victim, she was a hostile agent who posed her nose into an off-limits area at the wrong time. So the question is WHY now? And there's only one species of answer that fits--

I take the stairs but as I rise, sliding down them hasn't enough to raise dust from the silver carpet, bouncing off the banister rail and cascading up against me. I clean my phone and squirt through its magnifying lens, seeing that the watch are merely the usual ones, and then I heat the doorknob and push.

"Boss?" I guess around the empty room. The Mervins sit in the chairs, looking like a sleeping body expectant. The King cabinets are all neatly shut and sealed. "Boss?"

He's not here. My spine cracks behind to leave him a message. I heard for the Mervins and slide into the operator's seat.

WRITE CLEARANCE

I fast-type "LEAPFOT" and wait for the four-ranging symbol to disappear.

WRITE:

The wire prompt is empty. MESSAGE, I type. The prompt changes, and I keep going.

GGGG. TUDY TUDY. THE BAIT PROBLEM. AM ARE SUSPENDING ME OVER CONFICARD AUDITORS MORE INTERESTED IN PAPER CLIPS. BY MOBILE. NAME: BO-

Angleton isn't a total technophile. As long as he has my phone number he can get in touch. But now I've got another problem: I'm not supposed to be here. So I switch off the phone carefully and stand up, and I'm just on the point of tipping out of the room when two blue-curtain appear out of nowhere and grab my wrist.

"Careful now, or else we'd want to make a fuss, would we?"

I look past his shoulder at the one. She looks concerned. "Bob, what are you doing?" GGGG. I tell you you were being suspended?"

I want for touch. My heart's hammering and my palms are slippery. "Yeah hoping-Angleton?"

"She shakes her head sympathetically, then falls to herself. "I think you're overreacting. He's been having a bad time lately," she explains to the blue-curtain. "You need to go home and relax, buddy. You're Bob?"

I scan the door. Blue-curtain glances his throat apologetically. "I he's not cleared for this room, main--" he begins.

"No, don't let right," he says, casting me a quelling look. "He's--he was--personal secretary to GGG Angleton. He's cleared for the room, and he's not required to be off the premises until noon, and he obviously hasn't touched anything"--look at that, but what my mouth said--"you may feel free to report, but he hasn't actually violated the security policies. So," she says her watchback. "Not for another nine minutes. So," I suggest you might want to take a deep breath and let these gentlemen escort you to the front door, Bob?"

She's right. I really don't want to sit in the building when my permission is suspended--the consequences would be drastic and painful. I imagine "Hi go quickly," I hear myself saying. "I'd just like to lead the way..."

AT TWELVE THIRTY EXACTLY I FIND MYSELF

STANDING ALONE in the middle of a concrete entrance, the island grids of shoppers darting across the blue staircases beneath a golden sun. I can't remember how I came to this place. My hands are shaking and I can't see the future. All I can see is "The sun is beating down but the cold inside. I keep seeing a purple flash, the old woman's face smiling and fading and shrinking around her skull before me, the Ping on the lake paper, growing deep in the front."

(They took my pistol. "Don't want you to get anything that would when you're all depressed, sir," the blue-curtain told me. I threw his and sat for half an hour, another want if I wasn't looking to frustrate and intellectual.)

Something's taken apart at the very worst time, and it's all my fault.

Here: There is a security breach. The First Church of the Liverside Kingdom--member and townspeople to be known as the God-fathers, because that's the head of what they get up to and I don't want to think about them using the throne brother's Bee-hive--got an informer inside the Laundry.

I walk past a bar stool and an overflowing liter tin, the subway on its lit smoking and fabricating. There's a disgusting smell of cheap tobacco and something like nesting. A colony of bees, swarms past slowly, like a troupe of irregularly met elephants walking twice-to-kill.

Here: They followed Me home and they're following me, and even for very much outside are waiting for the key links the Case of Soak, which is probably one of our most powerful weapons. (Chapman is a public school master, right?)

There's a rusted-concrete suburban shopping mall, a brickland plaza surrounded by walkway connecting cheap supermarkets, an off-limits, and a shattered Chateau. Abandoned disposable carrier bags sting the ground. I walk through a bridge between two junks, and an arcade made by the dusty windows of empty shop units, as gently as my sense of self-worth.

Here: The God-fathers aren't the only people who are into the Laundry. Patsy and the Thirteenth Directorate clearly know a lot more than I do about the COCKEY BLACK BULL, rights, Topsy-turvy Squatton, and the Case of Soak (who began cropping up in this mess like a bad penny) And anything that worries the KGB ought to worry the hell out of me.

I come out of the arcade in a wide alley lined with landing beds, taking metal showers down down concrete stairs. Overhanging cupboards incline with the same fear of death runs between scuppers and banners about islands, holding together like school kids, steering a log behind the lake ahead. The sky is clouding over, the merridies, an atmosphere by city clouds of distant promise. I keep walking.

Here: The Auditors wanted to know who Bob, and about paper clips. I know about paper clips and why they're a security risk. (The best of corruption and spyglass are fundamental to all systems of magic: quantum entanglement and space-time-orientation for the witch doctor, see. More practically, if you've got a paper clip from the same box as a sticky note that clipped to a top secret file... you figure it out.

Okay) But why did they want to know about Mc? What was the background she needed for the interview? Am I missing something? That it's not all about fire, or Angkor? The Bureau of Saint Martin is a year ago should have been a walking cat. Just because for under investigation, I wasn't meant.

-The hell I'm under investigation. No, I'm under suspicion. But suspicion of what?

My feet carry me past the end of the delivery alley and across a road where a cast-iron railway bridge straddles the broadest channel, their tracks crisscrossed with tracks from the diesel locomotives that rumble overhead, freight cars to the power stations that keep the lights burning and the heat alive. Lining them is a cycle path, and my feet start to know which way they're going. I turn left and find myself on an incline, ascending a tree-lined street. The foot tracks of a bad prommer me to stand aside as an urban cyclist luminesces before past, coasting in the opposite direction.

But Angkor wants to use me as a reference grid, but I'm not much use to him if I'm not in the right place when the Godfather comes calling. Damn, I hope he gets my message to the flames. Where are we heading? It's the BLOODY BARON connection? That seems to be the logical place, but ...

A DHL creeps over me and I glance up at a turbid skyscraper that wasn't there five minutes ago, swelling masses of grey construction cranes with a promise of rain to come. I shift them to my eye, out and about in a lightweight summer jacket, freshly ought to head for home. Heavy walking because it seems like the thing to do, although the sidewalk any lengthwise among the dark green trees to either side. The cycle path is empty (ought to start looking for a seat from a staff seat me back down to street level and a bus stop or tube station, I glance behind me, but I can't see the ramp I came up on).

Dear Doctor Mire's research finding about the early onset of CAGS. NIGHTMARE GREEN'S. Left hemisphere that the Godfather heard about by way of our security breach. We know the Godfather used CAGS. NIGHTMARE GREEN to come about - they're here of his old. Good experience that will stalk the planet once more. (They're the things. How have I said?) Four's new finding suggests that the onset conditions for hearing a hole in the structure of reality are a bit more flexible than we previously thought. Which suggests that there are things the Godfather can use to accelerate the onset of recognition, the alert coming right on the job, or what? I. They're showing an interest in the Lake of Souls. Why? Do they think that if they get their hands on the Fuller Microprocessor they can control fire, make him do something unpredictable that will alter the state in their tracks and split the sky apart like ...

-I look up. "Oh, look." Then I shut my mouth and save my breath for more important activities. Like, for example, turning away.

While I have been wandering aimlessly behind in my head, my feet have guided me onto a dirtier path. There are no cyclists or pedestrians in sight, just an endless dark strip of tarmac that curves out of sight ahead and behind me, surrounded by repetitive walls of empty emergency shrubs that lean inward, above my head. I can't see through the hedge, but there are palid mushroom-like structures budding from the soil around their roots. The cloudbank overhead is turbulent and capped, side-by-side by twilight starting under its floor-ward flow there are hours past its usual sunset-and the near-cribbing whirpools and knots of darkness and dust dance. (It's from jelly by the consistency of cosmic gas.)

I have no idea how I got here and I'm not armed with myself for succumbing to oblivion. At a glance, a very blurry glamour, but the urge to get out and find a safe refuge is overwhelming. Every track is screaming that I'm in immediate danger. And I begin to jog, just as the U-boat leaves stains to look urgently from where's best pocket.

"Sally?" I call.

"No time for any right now." I point "What's up?"

"The names I need after are you want to support?"

"And?" I'm dead sure. Listen, what's it about?"

"That's a matter of personal privacy. I told you about that, remember?"

"Oh, Sally."

"The examiner was murdered. About thirty-five hours ago.

Rich, if you think you've got the real thing?"

Times, let me give you an update. I've been suspended on pay I need you to pick up a word for me, as soon as you can.

My heading home now, but I'm in a bit of a hurry and they took my keys. Angkor isn't AWOL. Can you find him and tell him he's right, the Godfather's are after the ball and I need backup right now."

The hallucination of bags slips three times and drops the ball.

"Sally." I pump-top the software wand back to life, then shove the dead phone back in my pocket and keep jogging, breathing heavily now. There's a breeze in my back, stirring me back and slowing me down, and the surface of the foggy haze grows and swirls, almost oily. The noise of micrograms is overwhelming. There's a sense of being in, walking back to my rightmost run, although that path was mine away and didn't look anything like.

Oh, Am I on a slide? I ask myself, at the head-end bulbs and the structure changes. I hear distant thunder and the first heavy step of rain-drops on the path ahead. Did the Recognition that have themselves that were pulled out of the public record decades ago, by any chance?

The narrow corridor of ghostly steam visible within in my eyes, it's behind me. And it's getting ground.

It's funny how you lose track of a situation while it rages out of control in the space of about fifteen minutes, but I'm not led by the nose - or rather, the feet - from a busy suburban high street in London, right into an occult trap. There are places where the walls of reality are thin, the various corridors of noise, midway between right, hedge-maze and cycle paths. You can get lost in such places, but as they pass a hole and a stain and a shadow suggest. These holes bleed into one another. Of all the myriad ways that link the human realm to the other plane, there are the ones we know best, the about-because those of us who stumble into them seldom return with their minds intact.

I can feel my heart hammering and I'm on. The hedges to either side branch spikes edged with a ravenous dust of light. There are pale white shapes embedded in the wall of leaves, the blurred forms of vehicles trapped in the interstices of the vegetation barrier. Clusters of clouds are blown into smoke from the funnel of a rotating storm locomotive, boiling and aging at the ground. I don't dare look back, even though I'm sure I'm being headed towards an ambush: the phone in my pocket is buzzing and vibrating in urgent Morse, signaling the presence of hostile intent.

I need to get off the path. The tracks lie, there's nowhere to go.

-Hang on, I think. Am I losing track?

There's a bit about the interstitial traps? It takes a bit of power to open a gate, and I don't notice any particles and often draped in uninvited guests during my walk through the dazzling stepping center. On the other hand, it takes relatively little power to take up a glamour to provide the illusion of a dark path. Whichever, I reach for my phone, thumb it on, and show my side's just enough that I can see the double Bloody Runes, wand detector, turn the camera on the footpath.

A silver thread, disappearing around the bend ahead of me. I jump sideways, and the camera flash then clicks, showing me ordinary English streets and a shiny roadcut sea of trees pruned well back from the path. It's bright like, the ground draped with summer chagrin. Blamed through the branches overhead. Getting a jump sideways, towards the remaining hedgehog on my right, slowing, was focused on the face of my phone as the shadow of the theory will soon over me. And I coast through a cloud of white-hot reds and narrowly miss a young beech tree as the hedge and the hedges turn any way like the Blazon they are.

"Oh!" I swear under my breath, the too-tight purplek sling of cables rings on the back of my phone hand. I examine the side of the cutting the path/line through. Yes, it's familiar. I've been here before, or somewhere very like it. Except for the lack of pedestrians walking the dog, or cyclists on roads from one side of town to the other. It could be a normal bike track. But this can't have happened yet, anyone stopping close to who isn't wanted is going to feel a mild sense of dread. Being after a phone is an urgent conviction that they need to be anywhere else.

I thumb my phone back to the start screen, and look for a signal. There's nothing showing. That shouldn't be possible, not at a major network in the middle of a city, but those anti-jam bars. Do the bad guys have a jammer? It wouldn't be unusual. And they know enough to lay a smart trap outside the New Annex, one tailored for me . . . that is not good news. I sit down behind a tree, careful to check that I'm concealed from the path by that exact of slinging cables, and then I do something that's over-the-top: I compose an email to the two people I know I can trust—Angela and Mo. The JawsPhone is smart enough to keep looking for a connection, and to send the mail as soon as it gets a signal. Then I compose a slightly different email to a whole bunch of people I don't entirely trust, remembering to include Angela and Mo on the recipient list, and send it. Now that should eat the cat among the pigeons. My heart-throb is just about back to normal by the time I finish, and my lungs aren't burning anymore, so I slide my phone into an inside jacket pocket and stand up.

Click-click. "Don't move."

COUNTERMEASURES


MEANWHILE, OVER ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LOCKING GATE:

"Listen, let me give you an update. As been suspended on pay I need you to pick up a card for me, as soon as you can, for heading home now, but do it privately and they shouldn't can you find him and tell him inside?"

Ms. Sign, suspended, as her phone blings three times and rings up on 911. She sees her records, then makes a connection immediately.

"Yeah, you have reached the voice mail of..."
 She puts her phone away, waiting it for later. Both's curiosity is a poor reception zone, but it's heading home they can compare notes in a couple of hours. Being suspended is bad news for Sign, but that's been her experience. They both been under too much pressure being the business with the cables, the suspended bank, and the other remains of being part of the operations from end of an organization under increasing stress. Everyone is under strain these days, even the people who aren't known to know about Dr. Mann's botched.

Ms. Mann knows an anonymous industrial estate in the suburbs off near Croydon, where some of the more technical departments have relocated while Science issues is being dealt. She travels by tube and then commuter train, and finally by bus, keeping on her toes on the main cases at all times. It takes her an hour and a half to make the journey, stopping in five stations, none with her names about the evidence she removed from Mr. Osborn's workshop. She travels under the gaze of cameras, cameras on the tube platforms, cameras in the railway station concourses, cameras on the buses. Many of them are linked to the SCORPION STAGE network, part of the huge surveillance web the government is trying to keep the nation safe in the first days. But the first days may be about to arrive with a bang, two or three years earlier than anticipated.

She walks the hundred meters to the car park entrance, then enters an anonymous-looking office reception area in an otherwise windowless building. A sign signposted on the high razor-wire-topped fence outside proclaims it the property of Health Services Ltd, and the portrait of a smiling German shepherd beneath the sign promises a warm welcome to anybody carrying. But sign says, of course, long the building currently houses most of the Court Forensic Department, and there is no way you to easily depict the person, gentlemanly horizon face comes around the perimeter by night.

"Hello, hello..." The blue-suiter behind the counter pauses.
 "Dr. Osborn. Can I have your pass please?"

Ms. Osborn her watercard. "A. Osborn & Dr. Williams Ltd."

"Thank you." Osborn pokes at his computer terminal. "Yes, he's booked in. Do you need to see him?"

"No, just go in. Can you page him?"

"If so then." Osborn points a walkie-talk on a stick at her, then prints a 5 temporary badge. "Here, wear this. It's valid for zones one and two, you know the drill?"

"Yes." Ms. Osborn smiles. Whereas the New-Arizona study deals with paper (apart from the armory), the CDF handles physically-and in some cases spiritually-fragile materials. Access to the rear zones is restricted for good reason.

When Osborn pages Dr. Williams, Ms. plants herself on one of the powder-blue waiting area seats, and idly pages through some of the magazines on the occasional table. Forensic Science Digest, Guardian Witness, Monthly, Mischief? PCH, her attention is a million kilometers away from the articles, but they serve as a distraction for her eyes. She has one of the magazine open on a color spread of spent bullets extracted from victims of crime when a station has access her. "Mr. What brings you here now?"

She looks up, forcing a softer smile. "Hi! Are you busy? Can we discuss this in your office?"

Five minutes later, another windowless office with overhead bookshelves and too many filing cabinets. "What have you got for me?" he asks. Stabbing in his file folder, Nick is the nearest lead in his particular.

"An overnight file packet. 'Bad news'."

"Bad-Oh-ah! Tell me straight up."

She smiles her best. "Well, it's probably a bit softer than an inside job, but even so, this is for you, not the office junior. Eyes only." She pulls out the tab of paper slips from Mr. Osborn's workbooks, and the small slipper from beside the cash register and places them on the worktable opposite Dr. Williams's desk. "The cover of these books was mentioned about forty-eight hours ago. Here just prepared a special report for me. It's pretty certain the killer took the report, and knowing George-the idiot-he would have paper-dipped or snatched it. So I don't feel bad to the top copy and a folder."

Dr. Williams wrinkles between his first teeth. "You don't trust me, do you?" he guesses. "When do you read it?"

"Right now." Ms. Osborn her smile fade on the visitor's face. She lets go of it. "It's very urgent."

"Oh. I can't leave it with you here tonight, can I?"

"No." She smiles, letting him see her teeth. "When I said you, I meant right now."

"What do you want?" Williams, unwilling to be misled, crosses his arms and eyes at her.

"Are you on the distribution for CLAS 2007?"

Williams's blue face smiles. "That was the business in Amsterdam, wasn't it?"

"That's not true, no. The document in question is a detailed report on that." She points at the violet case.

"Whatever has got the report is about certainly a few months, and I noticed you that the bars might after it is in your office?" her smile evaporates. "You really want to get the real of it..."

THERE IS A PHILOSOPHY BY WHICH MANY PEOPLE LIVE THEIR LIVES, and it is to live life in a strict manner, but the more broad you've got, the less strict you have to be.

These people are often called hard-core folks, and they don't get better with age. Think of the stiffly-kept laundry outside from the south town who grew up to be a merchant banker, or an estate agent, or one of the Conservative Party Party-Parliamentary-Party-Party-Party.

(This isn't to say that estate agents, or merchant bankers, or conservative, are selfish, but that these are ways of life that provide opportunities for people of a certain disposition to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Bear with me.)

There is another philosophy by which people live their lives, and it goes that: you will do as I say or I will hurt you.

It's petty authoritarianism, and it's frequently lost in business. Dutch a doctor, Mann's heronwood, and the only less want equal if they know what's good for them-and the whole casting up the lesson that involves obedience in the wild north climate of Alaska. These kids often become themselves, but some of them don't. They grow up to be huge, muscular and twisted, of authority, obedient and unable to handle back-stab, willing to use violence to get what they want.

Let me show you a Venn diagram with two circles on it, depicting sets of individuals. The overlap: the grey area and the subtraction area. Left's made in the intersecting area in a different color, and label it dangerous. Good isn't automatically dangerous on its own, and petty authoritarianism aren't usually dangerous outside their immediate vicinity-but when you combine the two, you get gangsters and dictators and hit-men-keeping practices.

There is a third philosophy by which—namely—only a tiny minority of people live their lives. It's a bit harder to earn out, but it begins like this: in the beginning was the endless void, and the void spawned the Ether things, and we were created to be their slaves, and they're going to return to death in the near future, and it is only by willing, subordinating ourselves to their reward when they can't cope to survive—

Now on me drop another circle on the diagram, and scribble in the fry patch where I intersect with the other two circles, and label it in deepest fuliginous black how do you know?

Greedy check. Authoritarian check. Workspices of the most bizarre, self-human remains you can imagine: check. Then the Brotherhood of the Black Pharaoh and their rivals like the Free Church of the Universal Kingdom and all of their ilk, hostile, dangerous, unpleasant, greedy, and abundant bad people who you don't want to have anything to do with if you can help it?

There's just one problem with this picture . . .
That the actual in the beginning was the endless void?
They're right.
(Cops.)

Here's the problem:
We live in a 3rd reality-reliated multiverse, where most of the dimensionality of causation is hidden from our awareness, as in Boreholes in closed boxes, tucked away in imaginary spaces—but the stuff we can observe is a tiny fraction of the entirety of what we live in, magic, the stuff I said in the office on a day-to-day basis, makes the indirect manipulation of information flow through these screens dimension, and communication with the sub-dimensional entities that live elsewhere. In an applied computational demerology-how can I not believe this stuff?

Not the 1st oldest original creation, oh no, beings like Myer left-Heydo didn't root me out of the black city of the Nile delta: I've got to deal with modern computerage. But those of them who take an interest in my kind find it useful for humans to believe such myths, and so they encourage the cabal samples through their pursuit of forbidden lore.

Now we arrive in this context, we aren't even close on this planet, as anyone which meet a SLICK HARDES can attest through a reason without domain substance closer of the future never got built in the 1950s . . . and don't get me started on OCEP/SCVEN, the letters of the not-for depths. But our neighbors, the Deep Ones and the Chthonians, are adapted for subterranean dwellers. There is no natural ceiling to bring us to the point of conflict—which is a very good thing, because the result would be a very rapid Green Over-Humanized.

The things that keep me awake in the small hours aren't anything like as sophisticated as a Deep One. (That he worked with a Deep One. Let a part of my soul bawled with her, he makes) The things that baffle me are blue-green worms, bubbling and coiling luminous tentacles glimpsed in the dimly lit eyes of a former colleague, ritzy patient and incomprehensible, not that far removed in our twisted writings. Boreholes bristle from the chaotic, acoustic depths of the closest future, reaching back through the flowing infrastructure of spacetime to fly by with our reality. Things that go "boom" in the night aren't. Things that eat—

There is a fourth and fifth philosophy by which none of us live our lives, and it boils down to this: do not get quality into that dark night. Draw a fourth circle on the free-rotated Venn diagram and push one that while it intersects the greedy and authoritarian circles, and even has a fry overlap with the greedy authoritarian bit, I don't call this anything with the three circles. The scribbles. I touch up a minor to the self-destruction. Call it the circle of the reemancipated apostate.

That's when I think, whether for greedy or authoritarian or both (I don't think for either, but how can I be so?) may believe in mind-reading horrors from beyond spacetime, but they'll thank me back before I bend it to their jobs.
Keep billing yourself that, Bob.

o o o

MO CARRIES HER VEILIN AND FOLLOWS DR. WILLIAMS AS HE

picks up a clipped plumed toe try and tracks through a megalopolis floor, carrying the jar of copper dice and the mallet. The glass window in the door is heated by a fire wire mesh, and the edges of the door are lined with copper fingers that click against a metal strip inside the frame. Williams places the toy on one end of an optical workbench, then both the door and flips a switch connected to a red lamp outside the office.

"You've worked with one of these before?" he asks.
"Of course." His strings out of her jacket and hangs on a hook. "It's the arrangement-relevant bit I'm unfamiliar with. That, and only need a bit support, I know my limits."

"Good." Williams smiles a humorless. "Then I'll tell you to stay in the isolation grid over there, you know what the consequences are for getting things wrong."

"What?" She opens the door case and removes her brown-tan instrument and its box. Williams stares at it for a moment.
"Do you really need that?"

"When I said things regarding me, I wasn't exaggerating. Besides, the document they give me is a report on the very instrument. If they're trying to backstab, from it to find the original, then when you bring on the Machine that information it might back them."

Dr. Williams asks, "You saw the first stage but was very happy to see them." He turns to the bench and uncorks a weighing arm, uses it to position a glass diffraction grating in a path defined by a set of carbon perforated gratings positioned at the two vertices of an irregular pentacle. "Would you pass me the data logger?" It's the second one along on the top shelf.

It takes Dr. Williams a quarter of an hour to set up the basic magnetic workbench. Apart from the odd geometric layout it doesn't resemble the popular imagination's picture of a scientist's laboratory. Colored chalk lines and eyes of steel are gone, replaced by solid-state beams and signal generators poorly laid and cables have given way to polished prisms and six-ohm. The samples, snippets of their contents, are transferred to windproof containers using jemmer tongs. Williams starts their job place in the observation job "Okay, endgame," he says conversationally. "I haven't modified the beam line so there should be no overexposure. But it'll take a few power test that last circuit."

Mo and the forensic demerologist now to stand inside complex electromagnetic in the floor-to-ceiling-coupled "Have your personal area?" he asks.

Mo reaches for the fire alarm chain around her neck. "Movers first," she says slowly. "Come, I should have closed a space for Bob. It's a bit low, but you have your kicking around?"

"It see what I can do afterwards. Okay, grating, lights going out. Waiting for the, rise, okay." He pushes a switch. The red laser beam is only visible where it passes through the prism. "You getting any overexposed?"

"None." The room is dark, the only light source the faint traces through the thickly frosted glass of the window in the door.

"Good." Williams cuts the power, then reaches across the bench by touch and rotates the sample table a quarter turn, bring them up with the beam path. Then he adjusts a mirror. Kipping it to face a different and broader laser. "Okay, fire reaching to the high power source. Giving her in ten, five, eight . . ."

An image streamers barely in the darkness, etched out in violet spacules across the translucent blue of the screen on the optical bench. A single rectangle, violet with black runs.

"That might be it. Mo says so."

"I expect so, I'm giving the power." The rectangle fills in, glowing brighter and brighter. "Okay, fire exposing the photographic paper now."

"What kind of camera - ?"
"Well, well, two lenses, like a double-
lens telephoto. Quiet, now . . . There's a soft click. Ten
seconds later there's another click. "Okey, I got the exposure
done. Show me our cast CCDs for the job, but you wouldn't
want to feed some of the things we look at a computing
device . . . Right. You want to look at the camera?"
"No." He leans forward, careful to stay within her waist
width green safe line. The monitor glimmer warms your
her face. "I might release Mr. Downer. Can I identify him if it's
anyone else. It's his portrait, please."
"I'd just release the telephoto. Wait one . . . Okay, he's
ready. Now camera the fan bit. Do you know Zimmerman's
Second Rule?"
No pause for a while. "There is."

Good, because we're going from. Don't worry, your part
will last. Let's get started."
After five minutes of manual adjustments, Williams runs a
certain specialized script on his workstation, which starts up a
sound track of choices in an exotic language and sends a
sequence of commands to the microcomputers in the
workbench. As the various voices receive meaningful
signals with the random precision of a speech synthesizer,
he utters to her: "Some voices say it equals the fan, but I
rather think it's better than taking the risk of a slip of the
trigger . . ."

A new image begins to fuzz into being in the screen, the
down face of a man. He's something, wearing an expression
of great concentration. "That's Downer. No comment." He waits
the report. Who do you get next?"

"Let's see. It might through the beam's soon enough . . ."
Downer's face is melting, morphing into a likeness. Mr's
mouth catches in her throat. "Gee."

"Get your hand, do you?" Williams sounds amazed
"No, I feel your finger's beginning to slide." She stops, her
voice rising. "I would be the best way to get the report out of
Downer and an engineer takes her?"

"I believe you." The attachment drops from his voice.
"Thousand words!"
"Get them." She takes a deep breath. "Is there anyone
else?"

"No!" The face is fading, slowly. As it dims, Mr sees a
last glimmer about the eyes, the only sign that it may be a
face looking. However it behind the camera is very good.
"Come on, come on . . ." Dr. Williams mutters under his
breath.

Mr shifts her weight casually from one foot to the other, as
she does when her feet are complaining about too many
hours in smart shoes. She glances sidelong into the darkness,
where the shadows are swirling and flickering. A faint
spectral scatter of spillage from the violet laser streamers
across the wall. "Any-yes."

She is in the process of turning her head back towards Dr.
Williams and the workbench as the image shudders and
dies, leaving the auditor's face
Williams is meticulous, and doesn't cut corners. This is why
he and his surmise.

There's a crack like a gunshot, and two near-simultaneous
bursts from the power supplies that feed the workbench. High-
speed lightbulbs flash out the output to earth. A suite of
brown glass tubes, an array from the ultrasonic screen
and some of the periscope follow. The synthesized voices
stop. Seconds later, a thin strip of smoke begins to curl from
the top of the lightbulb.

"Smog," says Williams.
"Commented and unglazed. Yourself?" Mr misses a hand to
her cheek. One finger comes away damp with blood not
originally. The paint hasn't reached her yet.
"Keep your goggles on and stay in the grid until I say you're
out." The emitter is momentarily flick. Williams reacts out
with the periscope tongue and flips the light switch.
"Thousand words says goodbye. Chair to keep out of the
"He demonstrates. "Damn, what a mess."
Mr watches. "Is there a CCTV trap?"

"What did that you earlier about images and computers . . ."
"No, but we might be able to custom whether it's your
document." He reaches uttappay. "Did you get a glimpse of, of
whatever that was?"

She looks. "Well, then, done that."
"Countermeasures." Williams makes an obscenity of the
word. "Counteract tell you anything useful?"
"No." Mr picks up her handling from the workbench on the
opposite wall, hunting for a frame. "However's got the report
knows what it is-and they're willing to fight to keep it." She
draws a deep, shuddering breath. "Do you have a secure
voice line? I need to make a call."

CLICK-CLICK. "DON'T MOVE"

I heard my ebb. The sound of a shotgun slide being racked
at a range of less than three meters is a fairly good indication
that your luck has run out-especially if you can't see where the
shooter's positioned.

"Very good, Mr. Rowland." The speaker is male, standing
somewhere behind me. He's on the embankment of course.
Can the D Team hear normally. Maybe I should have tried
to shoot them the other night. And maybe I should cultivate my
line of psychopaths some more. Or well . . . "Do what I say and I
won't shoot you, if you understand, kid."

I feel like a Churchill dog, thinking hardily. His accent is
odd. Where'd I card place it.

"When I stop speaking I want you to slowly remove your
goggles and place it on the ground in front of you. Then I want
you to turn around. Do you understand?"

"Back to you."
"Did I ask you to speak?" His voice is icy. I shut up fast.

"If you understand, not," he repeats. "Good. It's not my job to
doubt him about my imaginary invisible handgun. Like I said,
the D Team are more dangerous than the A-Team, just like
the heaviest dynamite is more dangerous than Semtex." "Do
I he says. "Do it very slowly or I'll shoot you."

I very slowly tilt the right side of my jacket, and mime
unwillingly a non-existent pistol from a non-existent belt clip.
They hear over sideways until I nearly topple, and lower my
hand towards the route of a tree. Finally I straighten up-still
moving slowly-but turn round, raising my hands.

My first reaction is, A man without a face is pointing a
shotgun at me. Then I realize that he's goggled on. He heard
masked by a mixture of random impressions of other people,
like something out of a Philip K. Dick novel. Other than that,
he's wearing a mask and a grey hoodie-suit like a million other
men in and around this great capital city, the only detail part
of the ensemble is the tactical shotgun.

"Take two steps forward, until you're on the path," he tells
me. "Then lower your hands on top of your head."

My heart, barely under control a minute ago, is pounding,
but it's what he has to do. Kicking with a shotgun isn't
clever. I manage to lower my hands on my head-which is
harder than you might think, when the gunner's camera, you're
aimed up on an adjustable, and you're over thirty-odd feet.

"Don't move," he says. The car beam down on us as we
walk in a frozen distance for almost a minute. Then I hear
footsteps, and a jiggling sound, from behind. "Don't move."
I repeat Mr. Faulkner, an inch more takes hold of my left wrist
and clips one ring of a pair of handcuffs around it. "Get them,
boss." One another male voice.

Shit. I think, tensing and ready to make a move if the
opportunities presents-but they're not and I don't and they're
already getting other work.

"Now he does," says Mr. Faulkner.
What can I do? I take a few, making a controlled spiral
around on the dusty circle path. Thinking they wouldn't be
doing this if they were going to kill-me. Faulkner's
companion plants one knee on the arm of my back and
brings a highly event-emulating wand of color under my nose.

The lights go out.

FROM THE VOICE TRANSCRIPT CALL LOG, NEW ANNELE

Chick: "Angeleno."
Angeleno? "Orliten here." (Pause) "What have you done with Bob?"
(Pause.) "What?"
"Have checked your email?"
"Don't believe--excuse me?"
(Pause.) "What?"
"Oh, think it's a bit of a cover boy."
"And there's an interesting distribution list on the second message. Let's see what you set him up for this time?"
(Pause.) "A link I would perform myself, were I allowed to, my dear."
"Subject."
"As you misremembered. I am no more permitted to read the Fuller Memorandum than you are permitted to read and revise your own articles of service."
"But you sent Bob out with a link . . ."
"Well, help the help to help the help--and or more accurately the male--after him. I expect their identity will become clear sometime morning, in the course of the BLOODY BARRON town-ship session. Which I for one can hardly expect--in you do the cheapest entertainment you'll see all week."
"Angeleno. Shut up."
"What?"
"You've forgotten something."
"Yes, yes?"
"Bob's been suspended on pay?"
"Suspended?" "Yes?"
"Called Bob."
"And--and how that to do with the price of cheese . . . ?"
"Boris says the Bureau was recalled. And he doesn't have a word. He'll be with me this evening. He'll be on the outside and he'll react. Have you heard from him?"
"No."
"I need to show him a couple of minutes ago. His number is being enough enough to visit me?"
(Pause.) "Oh."
"I think you'd better make sure that your greyhound hasn't actually caught your lion. Otherwise the Austrians are going to be handling a couple more enquiries."
"Okay. You're threatening me?"
"You know better than that. I merely note that if Bob doesn't make it home tonight we can assume the CIA-DE SCAD have him. Which would rather blow the wheels off your little game with the BLOODY BARRON committee, wouldn't it? Not to mention the collateral damage."
(Pause.) "No."
"So." (Pause.) "What are you going to do?"
"I'm going to let Major Barnes go to get the thirty men on rotation--those of them who aren't playing cowboy and indicate in the file above Kandarian. Then I'm going to locate Bob. Also can take it from there."
"Want to come along?"
"I wouldn't dream of asking you to stay away, my dear, not with your specialist expertise. The problem is--"
"After sunset?"
"I'm building a waterproof case to hand over to Internal Affairs for presentation before the Black Anarch. Trying to map the matrix contacts. Contacts are fragile if they connect outside we may reveal first that assumption."
"Angeleno. Would you remember to see Bob?"
"When. If you must put it that way, no. But remember in the exigencies, we are of experience."
"I'm so glad to hear it."
"As for you, would you like to make yourself useful?"
"Yes?"
"This little information has, as you reminded me, disrupted certain plans. But not, I hope, irretrievably. On your way to look up with North's boys and girls, let me to you and have a glass of wine with a blast of rain, and come a participation from. If you're in the field of the base, I'm afraid, but I think it necessary to attend your case."
"Who are you talking about?"
"Micaela Paris."
(End of call log.)

INFORMING

I'm looking out across a wasteland of rolling ground, gray and crumpled as laser-rough, beneath a storm sky. There's no vegetation, not even scattered clods or broken crawling across the rocks that dot the ground. In the distance I see a low wall, sitting across the landscape like a dead snake. It's as gray as the ground, too. The man--
I can't see a glint that that is not Earth's sky.
A cold band of orange and green seals across the red soil, opening it with a smoky white collision lines together than the Milky Way. The earth spirals across it in an asymptotic spiral, several of them so bright and so close that they cast a harsh and pale radiance across the sloping desert floor. This is not the shape of a planet, quietly orbiting a star in the suburban spirals of a regular galaxy--it's nothing at all the way from world much closer to the edge of a galaxy or globular cluster. And it's an ugly eddy galactic core, deep in the throat of dimension, a blaze of dust and gas glowing across the horizon from the dying revolutions of supernova.
I try to turn my head, but my neck doesn't want to work, it's very strange--I can't feel my body. I don't seem to be anything of thinking, and I can't feel my heartbeat--but I'm not afraid. Maybe I'm dead?
In the distance, so far away that I can barely see it, low dark and close to the horizon, the landscape takes a nonlinear turn. A shallow gullet or volcanic moat and a symmetrical as Mount Fuji reaches for the sky. I've got a way of riding low high in it, but instead take me its end, rising kilometers from the corner of the landscape. Something about it creeps me out, almost as much as the flattened sky. I've got a feeling about it, a sense of chaotic resonance. There's something inside the pyramid, something that has no right to exist in this or any other universe. I shouldn't be here, but the thing in the pyramid is even more out of its place and time. It's constant, that feels bad, but why it might need to be considered--
"-- told you not to wander the other? Can't you get anything right this time?"
The words buzz around my ears like meaningless insects, disturbing me from the watch on the slope. The deeper needs watching, demands whereas who will collapse its quantum states and render it inert, incarnate in historic mass. To have because for part of the watch. They're scattered to either side of me, the White Star's victims, impaled on distance steel spikes, dead and yet unborn, watching the deeper. A massive sacrifice planned by the architect of terror to begin--
"-- Get the smiling sabbath? Good?"
I can feel the pain gnawing at my abdomen, a deep and brittle burning pain, and I'm on the edge of understanding that something awful has been done to me just as a horrible stretch of cat-paw shrubs up my nostrils and I feel a latching in my eyes.
"Is he responding?"
I understand that.
Although the dead plateau and the righteous watchers and the deeper in the pyramid are a million lightyears away from the headache man, existing at the back of my eye, and the stretch of anatomical smiling sabbath follows my nose barely, working a message.
"Ah, that looks promising. Hello, Mr. Howard? Can you hear me?"
Fuck.
Sudden edges of memory stir into place. I find myself walking I was back on the plateau, just another mangled corpse, another upright keystone in the reconstructed wall that hangs in the granite. "Huuuu . . ." My mouth isn't working right. It's vibrating like an out-of-control drum, shaking rhythmically. I blink, and the lighting has only just reduced because as I sense hurt and movement and chaos and an

whole world that is actually color again.

"He's awake!" The waitress, still in heavy white antiseptic. "Highlight will be most pleasant." As words to water to. How does something so be distinct but beggars certain choices. A food signlet rate in the vicinity of the right kidney "You. Stay smiling."

"So-sorry-sorry."

"It's not as clumsy as you'll never get away with this or if I weren't for you interfering with... I... I have an idea that I wouldn't enjoy Mr. Good knowing her acquaintance with Mr. Kimmey, and if there's one thing extreme god-bushers of every state have in common, it's that they don't have any sense of humor at all when their families are concerned."

"Oh." That's for my track, which is now helping me in no uncertain terms that I'm raising a two-dollar teenager. Oh, and my wares are handicapped in front of me. I think again, trying to see when I am.

As long as my side on a thin foam mattress that's seen better days, in a small room with walls painted in that peculiar muted cream color that indicates it's called beige. They've removed my jacket while I was out for the count. There's a cheap NCAA chest of drawers and a wastebasket, and a wash tub and half-cranked by the cotton curtain. Apart from the bed, I don't think I can't be just about any anonymous hotel room in a shared bar-and the two 30-inch goons. Mr. Headless-Stragun—who has his three brown corners somewhere else—wedges me in the back, another god going, almost probably the third with the handcuffs, as waiting from the far side of the room, while the woman from the gym gets the other right square in front of me, peeing at my face. She's a heavy-sounding, easy-cheated embryonic. She's a teenager—the sex-pub mature—with bougie ponytail and slumped-up lip curling with humor beneath eyes stony devoid of anything resembling joy. She probably shops in Harvey Kicks and takes on her party.

"It speaks," she declares, in a home-learned accent so sharp you can't give with it. "Shaman be present."

"Phantom? Bellicose. She's an intense, tier circles, then, which means I am potentially in a broken load of trouble. Try to clear my throat, but my heart's throbbing and I still don't have [a] muscle control back. (She is vile stuff, as Harter Thompson noted.) "We-waste."

"Do you want some water?" Her face is instantly concerned. I try not. She gets the message. "Julian, thank Mr. Howard some water." She doesn't look at Mr. Headless-Stragun as she leaves the order. She's looking at me, with a strangely concerned look. "We wouldn't want him to get dehydrated."

"Yes, Dr. Joseph, about lunch...?"

His hesitant question brings a smile to her face. "Yes, a little something would be good. Bring it."

"Apologies? I clear my throat as Julian Headless-Stragun leaves through a door I can't see. "Drinking before you take me to the Air-Right? Well that's a bit cruder." It's a calculated risk, but her pink court shoes are a bit less likely to do Mr. Kimmey any eyes than Julian's cow-tie-like Ode.

"Oh, I'm not going to get drunk." She gives a little giggle. Mr. Good shares his story. "There're no one which going to be drunk."

"Oh, do shut up, Gareth." Joseph says freely.

"You just trying to explain..."

"Yes, you're very trying." Her wistful smile turns suggests to me that Mr. Good is definitely from the St. Louis—white, Joseph, who has grown frighteningly competent, so far. "Why don't you go through Mr. Howard's jacket pockets instead, in case he's carrying any really surprises for us?"

"Yes, Clark. Madame. I'm only to obey."

I must be slow today because I take several seconds for the color to stop. "That's not surprising, are you?" I ask, trying to stay calm; the prospect of falling into the chubbies of the Brotherhood of the Black Phoenix is quite bad enough without accidentally causing the essence with a bunch of backward thoughts. The Madwoman here—and you can never be too sure (Julian isn't really really tested for that light-gig on really).

"Julian?" She giggles again. "Harpies don't eat! We're just going to give your blood and eat a heavenly oil of your flesh, silly."

"I can't help myself." I try and wriggle away from her. Which is fine as far as it goes, but as there's a wall about half a meter behind my back I don't get very far. "Harpies" manage to take as Julian the Blood-Drinking Stragun-Trying. Clutter responds with a shrill of protest, a screech and a pair of unpleasantly hot wryings.

"The-metabolism! It's not just for Christmas anymore!" She sits on my back to stop me squirming away from her. Which is fine as far as it goes, but as there's a wall about half a meter behind my back I don't get very far. "Harpies" manage to take as Julian the Blood-Drinking Stragun-Trying. Clutter responds with a shrill of protest, a screech and a pair of unpleasantly hot wryings.

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THINGS THAT EAT US



AT SIX O'CLOCK , ANGLETON EMERGES FROM HIS OFFICE—where he has been inelegantly confronted by the secretary for the entire duration of his “disappearance”—and stalks the darkening corridors of the New Avenue like the shadow of amnesia incarnate. A humming cloud of small balloons trails as he passes the empty offices and the open-courtyard dormitory in the regally fitted lobby and the Police Department. My office is, of course, empty. Angleton has managed to arrange schedules in the departmental exchange database to ensure that certain players will be absent when he makes his way to Room 303.

There's a red light shining over the door, and a wad tumbled on the wood veneer beneath it glows greenly given in defiance of the microwave rules of physics, Angleton groans the ON/OFF light and the wad and enters. Faces fan. “James? Buck's face is white. ‘What on heaven’s...”

“Ghosts aren't Russian and the accent isn't a fake. It's a perfect line from Kravinsky's symphony, some damage incurred by performing special operations on Mark One Plains. After consulting, however—the fastest possible course. Magnetics use computers because chips are easier to repair than brains which have had chunks scooped out by the Deep-space entities, they accidentally let in when they began to think too hard about those symbols they were manipulating.”

“The bullet trap had been empty? Angleton leans lightly. He pulls out a chair and collapses into it like a loose bag of bones laid together by his dusty suit. “Outside it, not here. Wasn't holding the ball when they grabbed it?”

“Oh, happen? Andy, tall and dark-haired/haired as the famous graphic artist whose name he uses as an alias, looks directly displeased. “Do we know who they are yet?”

“Not yet.” Angleton plays a scale on the invisible scales of the tabletop, his fingertips emitting like droplets. “Very, depending on what chain it is at tomorrow. BLOODY BANGS! meaning, but that might be too late.”

“Where's Agent CANDID?”

Angleton grimaces. “I sent her on a little errand, on my way to look up with Max Diamond and the OCCULUS and. There's an station in Black-Death, ready to hit the road as soon as we give them a target. We give to the Board. They authorized an escalation to Rang Three. I have accordingly put CO15 on notice to provide some and today's CO15 is the tactic Operational Command Unit of the London Metropolitan Police.”

“MAGNOL BILIE STARS are in the loop and ready to provide covering fire if we need to go down Rang Five.” The nodular ladder of excruciations range are demonstrated in steps based from Herman-Katrin's infamous theory of strategic conflict in a good neighborhood war. One tiny word would make the fire exchange of tactical nuclear weapons.

“Is it that bad?” Both sides, ready for reassurance. Can we get new brass sometimes talk in the face of a wall of flesh.

“Obviously.” Angleton smokes finger-igniting “CLUB 2000 is definitely getting ready to perform in London. The new research ‘Echelon’ Angus-Bates’ has cut in the wall and will be active below, and with any luck they've weakened them where and are going to break this time. They immediately state a report on Agent CANDID's weapon, which I admit I did not investigate, and they think they've stolen the Fuller Memorandum.”

There's a sharp intake of breath from Choudhury, whose previous muffled-sputter question has evaporated. “What about the break-in was that?”

Angleton nods. “As I said, the bullet trap has been sprung. They're going to try and steal the Saker of South, but I'm in to service and we're in as a Backup. I cannot be certain of this, but believe that logical goal would be to break down the Wall of Pain that surrounds the Saker in the Pyramid. With the Squadron grounded we've had previously little access into the base of the Saker for the past few years—the drone can't fly but to be substituted due to erratic light control software glitches—and during CASE NIGHTMARE, GEMINI, meaning the Saker will be an obvious goal for the cables. Of course, the logical issue is Dr. Ford's report will take somewhat longer to come to light, and I am confident that even if they mounted such an attack it would fail, but the collateral civilian damage would be unacceptable to our political masters.” His smile is as ghostly as any nuclear war player's.

“Why has nobody asked the pyramid?”

Angleton inclines his head as he considers Choudhury's question. “There is a contingency plan for the Squadron to fly such an operation,” he admits. “But it's probably worth work and I might disrupt the Wall of Pain. Can we take this up later? I believe we have an operation to mount tonight.”

“Set an alert to do.” Andy lifts his hands on the table, “They write with tension. ‘Are we going to be able to recover this?’”

“Those us.” Angleton reaches into his pocket and produces a small cardboard box. “Here is a standard paper clip. Used yesterday, it spent nearly five years at the back of a drawer in class, primarily to another paper clip, which is currently attached to the false Fuller Memorandum. The clip, when closed in close proximity to the Center amplification grid designed to boost the corruption field, it should be quite effective right now.” He places it on the conference table and produces a combative pencil from his breast pocket. “If you will excuse me.”

Angleton places a sheet of plain paper on the tabletop, then rapidly sketches an oddly warped pentacle, with curves leading off from its major vertices. Next, he shakes the paper clip from his box into the middle of the grid. Then he produces a needle needle and expresses a drop of sweat from his left little finger's tip, allowing it to fall on the paper clip. Finally he closes his eyes.

“Somewhere on Norway . . . Road,” he says slowly. “Off Putney High Street. Then he covers his eyes. The glow from his minimal supply scoldy green, across the paper. Sid fades rapidly.

“Result? It's simpler to use a GPS tracker?” asks Andy.

MEANWHILE, A WOMAN WITH A VIOLIN WALKS INTO A PUB

At four and a half feet passed since his spike to Angleton, she's been here to get changed and collect her parking, but still makes the meeting in a popular wine bar off New Oxford Street with little to spare. There's to be warm and a slightly confused police traffic patrol (Internal Liaison will show her what it's for, but tomorrow can lend for half?)

The middle-aged man in the loose-cut button shirt is already there and waiting for her, sitting in the middle of a short ring of empty tables while his dark-haired blond wife tries to access tables.

“Mrs. O'Brien,” says Paul. “Welcome.”

She pulls out a chair and releases her bulky messenger bag, dropping it between her feet on the site. She sees her wallet case slung across her chest, like a soldier's rifle.

“Enjoy another day?”

Paul's lips quirk. “Quite well, thank you. If you would prefer to continue in English . . .”

“My Russian is very limited,” she admits. “My employers are more interested in Arabic—not to mention Croatian—thee days.”

“Well, but as consider drinking to the best of my days, may they never return.” He raises an eyebrow. “What's your passion?”

Ms. English is very good. He shrines her head. “A

homemade. I don't use alcohol before an operation.”

Paul's stance over his shoulder. “A homemade for the lady.

And a glass of the house and for me." "I don't know they had his private." "They don't. Dick has his privileges." They wait for a significantly short time. The minister allows the driver, an attendant, and returns to his seat in the corner. "Angelen told you he was sending me," she says, tentatively beyond the terms of discussion. "He did." "Patsy told me." "We mean a common interest. Other agencies of us has great relations continue to broker his last-impended children, but we must live above, perhaps. Alan, all it's not always clear of." "He reaches into his inside pocket and brings out a wallet, then produces a small portrait photo. "Do you recognize this man?" "No. About all the faces face for several seconds, then raises her eyes to meet Patsy's gaze. "You not going to identify him to me," she says. "Patsy raises calmly—it is not evident in his face, but the tension in his shoulders indicates sharply. "He's not a witness and two young children behind." "He says quietly. "But he was dead before you met her." "Before...?" "He was one of ours. I emphasize, was. Abducted two weeks ago, not Remondler until she appeared on your doorstep. "I'm not interested and I'm not interested." "I would say pleasant, kind—a bit of the enemy."

"Whose enemy?" "Patsy gives her a look. "Hours. And mine. James advised me to tell you that I have been involved in CLAS 2640 from another angle. The Black Brotherhood do not only fail in better waters." "There, not now. Nevertheless, I hope you will excuse me for saying that if your Negroes are taken while working overseas, listening to the activities is not..." "We disappeared in St. Petersburg." "Oh, Oh, my sympathies." "Make it you can see the problem?" "Yes." "We have a tip of someone looking appropriate." "It is very grateful if you could tell me everything you know about the particular interest to our right case?" "One of your riot-wave concerns has been taken, not?" "Not definitely, yet." "Her fingers tense on the glass. "What's out of contact, and there are indications that something has gone badly wrong, very recently. Where get reactions looking for him right now. Anything you can tell me before I brief the selection team..."

"You are briefing?" Patsy's eyes unconsciously flicker towards her sister's case. "Oh, yes." "He gets her early. "What do you know of the Brotherhood of the Black Panther?" "As much as anybody on the continent—enough. Last was the current group first surfaced in the Kingdom of Agassien after the establishment of the monarchy there, but that soon changed into Roman empire reduce, resistance from Thess, Austria banking families with ancient hatred to their family chapel. All extreme conservatives, reactionaries even, with a basket of odd beliefs. They're the ones who recognized the Brotherhood and got it back in operation after the hammering it took in the late nineteenth century. They're not based in German spheres of course, but many of them fled to the United States immediately before the outbreak of our first war with these calls, they fragment and grow back when you go home." "But the job your country is America, they refused—some say because the Free Church of the Universal Kingdom is a local cover organization. They do that everywhere, taking over a splinter of a larger more respectable organization, in Egypt they use some of the more extreme members of the Muslim Brotherhood, in America... the Free Church is a small, exclusionary brotherhood who are as far from the mainstream that even the Assembly of Christian Presbyterians Ministers, from whom they originally spring, have denounced them for heretical practices. Some of the Church's elders are in fact relatives of the first order of the Black Brotherhood, the followers are a mixture of Christian believers, who they see as allies, and dependents and problems of the Brotherhood. The Church is mostly based in the United States—it's very hard to move against a church over there, even if it is suspected of funding for another organization, they take their religious freedom too seriously—but it has missions in many countries. Not Russia, I hasten to add. The nature of the Church's doctrine makes the permanent cost of membership very high—they tend to be poor, with large families—and discourage education from the next, additionally the Brotherhood may use lower grounds to keep the sheep contained in the flock. We have little more than rumors about the Brotherhood itself despite fifty years of attempted infiltration, we've been unable to penetrate them. Their discipline is terrifying. We have heard stories about ritual murder, torture, and cannibalism. I would hardly discuss these—the blood that is very old and very ritualistic complexity in our crimes has been repeatedly used to bind child soldiers into armies in the Congo, and I have some evidence that those practices were originally suggested by a Brotherhood missionary..."

"No children, whether they eat their own children or not, they have no room-making somebody else's?" "You have evidence of that?" Patsy leans towards her eagerly. "I've seen it." Patsy flashes at the sentence of her response. "Although they may not have been strictly human anymore, by first point-view they had been biologically constructed..."

"That was the Amsterdam business, was it not?" "No because for several seconds, then she takes another deep breath, and a heavy mouthful of breathless, then repeats her mouth. "Yes." "Circulation is a very powerful tool you know. The transposition of any strong belief—can be used for a variety of purposes, bindings, and passions. The greatest taboo, murder provides two kinds of power, both the life of the victim and the murderer's survival to create..." "No shakes her head, raises a hand. "I don't need that when I sleep." "All right." Patsy slips at his side. "Could me, but there is a personal connection?" "What?" "You appear really upset..." "Yes." She looks at her hands. "The missing officer is my husband." "Participate his glass down and warm back, very slowly with the sensitive self-control of a man who has just realized he is sharing a table with a large, talking bomb. "Is there anything I can do to help?" "Yes." She raises her glass and drains it, then puts it back on the table with a hard click. "You can tell me anything you're at liberty to say about why the Free Church attracted your attention. And what you think they're doing." She gestures round. "Now might be a good time to check your watch." The bar is filling up, but the other after-hours drinkers are all crowding away from the table like and Patsy stays, as if a glass of wine endures them.

"Patsy told me." "The word is adequate." "It means her." "As for the Church, I need to tell you a story of the Revolution." "During our civil war—the war that split families and stole the spirit of a nation, ending with Lenin's rise in 1922—many factors fought against the Reds, and the traditional white military discipline, foreign opposition, unity of government, in Siberia, there was a very strange, very wicked man, a slave by both of German ancestry Roman Von Ungern Sternberg, or simply Von Sternberg as he is called. Sternberg was a monster. An early companion with Eastern discipline regarded his moral personality, and that he had something. He was a personal friend of the Soviet Government's Chief Lama. During the civil war, Sternberg was an extraordinary commander and commander the Mongolian Khan in eastern Mongolia near Chingai, west of Lake Baikal. The Whites used to send the death trains to Sternberg, and he used their traps for his own horrible ends. It is said that there was a blockade in the woods above Ourga where his men used to kill their Red prisoners by tying them to saplings and

quaranting them alive. It's summer. Stenberg, being used to go that far and camp near either the stream, surrounded by the forest and dismembered bloody pieces of his enemies. I was said by the soldiers that it was the only time he was at peace. He was a terrible man, even by the standards of a true warrior." Mo is nodding. "Was he a member of the Brotherhood?" Francisco has his lips. "Stenberg was not a worshiper of Lem-Hohg, whenever he found such he was then, usually by flinging off the living flesh left from their bones. As a matter of fact, we don't really know what he was. We know what he did. Though, I was one of the great sorts of pre-comparative microscopy, and it took the picture of the Black Buddha to arrive it, but by the hand and gem of Stenberg's victim.

"There are places where the wall between the worlds is thin. Many of these are to be found in central Asia. The Black Khans themselves might think it wise to drink to forget, so heavily that the next day-there was true seeing them, visions of the ancient planes of an alien world where the Sleeper in the Pyramid had awoken and walked. The Ring was verified when his travel loggers Stenberg offered him the sole canopy that would buy relief from these visions—the few others of thousands of victims—the lady Shing-Da, eighth incarnation of the Black Gogon and Khan of Mongolia, but upon his situation and went home here as he promised eternal fidelity.

"The picture of the Ring's coat worked with ligament Stenberg's tortures to build a wall around the pyramid, and dead souls starting into the city this air on the Sleeper's Palace, to erect a house of twisted sacrificed victims. No countermeasure to the Sleeper was created on such a scale for many years, not until your first Force began their occult surveillance program in the 1970's. As for Stenberg—"Pain stages" he wants to talk the wrong-side in a civil war. But that does not concern us."

"Just an interesting story?" "A lot? Pain looks at her sharply. "Do you suppose if I say not really? You'll let me stay with you tonight?" "If you really" she says his fingers. "Another must please." To her: "It is important, but we" she waits for his answer to depart in the direction of the bar—"on the boat used by the monks was a pretty hungry ghost, a body in its custody could function on the Sleeper's Palace, for some reflecting that any of Stenberg's men, who had a tendency to die or go mad after only a few hours. The hungry ghost needed bodies to occupy, though to kill is for more intelligent and powerful than the non-of-the-mind possession case. This particular hungry ghost across the transfer order in which the Death Force around the Sleeper's Pyramid was constructed—By implication, the one in which it must be constructed if the Sleeper is ever to be released. I was surprised by a chair that Stenberg documented and sent word for translation by the only woman the ever touched a hand that was released, as it happens, because the document written into your organization's archives and has never been seen since. If the Black Brotherhood could get their hands on the document—beware you call it the "Fable Manuscript"—they might well imagine they could bind the hungry ghost into a new body, simply to let him live, and order it to begin dismantling the Death-Force."

Mo asks gently "Is that very interesting?" she says dutifully. "If someone had convinced them that the loss was still now, not in a couple more years, they might be induced to premature action. And if that someone allowed them to obtain a limited, computer version of the Fable Manuscript, they might well be used to release their master."

Mo focuses. "The Sleeper. You're not saying it's Ngor-Isk-Happ-Isk?" "No, nothing that powerful, there is a healthy human here, a leader that must be divided, but the thing in the pyramid can see the process in motion, starting a chain of events that will ultimately open the doors of uncreation and release the Black Phases. To do so, they would need word for the completion of chance, but it is in the nature of mortal culture that they are impatient. And James is of the opinion that they should be encouraged to bridge that final separation."

"Yes." "No, I don't believe you do. The Black Brotherhood was at their most dangerous when they were either an organization that is unaware it has been infiltrated. Your—human side has been missing long?" She shakes her head. "Sensible. Something alerted you?" She nods. "James sent him on an errand." She looks again. "Imagine you are a child of the Brotherhood, but not an agent of a foreign organization, and you have acquired the Stenberg Program and are prepared to carry out the ritual of summoning and binding the hungry ghost. Would it not be to your advantage to pick, as a carrier, that terrible agent? So that you can send her back in among them, hidden by your own men?"

Mo's pink cheeks. Her face is pale. "You think they're going to let you possess him?" "Pain spreads his hands palm-down on the table. "It is a logical supposition, nothing more." He waits for her gaze. "He is happy for right advancement, is he not? James' personal secretary, I gather. Many ago, he established a reputation as a career diplomat, a lot of brother. I served him well in his field days. We were reports, you know. A very talented man, with a very beautiful, very talented wife. We had to go, if he is not eaten by a hungry ghost. Or worse."

"What could be worse?" Mo says softly. "Pain shrugs. "Well, they have a completed copy of the Stenberg Program. Whatever James saw fit to contact, I suppose, not expecting them to perform it on his personal secretary. Security—the past they wish to summon, has already been summoned. It is, in fact, already walking around in flesh. Who knows what the ritual might do, given a dangerous power like the demon-brother, could? And truly—" "That?" Her voice begins to rise dangerously. "You have merely been assuming that the copy of the Fable Manuscript that James gave your husband contains a completed copy of the Stenberg Program. But James did not expect the situation to spin this far from his control. The worst possible case is that they have the real thing, the Stenberg Program and the document describing the binding of the Kater of Soul, and that they know what to do with it."

JONQUIL THE PSYCHOPATHIC SLOANE RANGER HACKS AWAY AT MY ARM FOR WHAT LOOKS LIKE A YEAR AND IS PROBABLY A LOT LESS THAN A MINUTE. THEN SHE GAINS EMPATHY.

"Julian, so something about the screaming, will you? It's giving me a headache."

Julian headsets Drogan pulls a leather glove out of one of his pockets and then to stuff it in my mouth. I clamp my jaw shut, shivering and hyperventilating, but he responds by squeezing my nostrils pitifully. After a few seconds I surrender to the bandage. The glove gives some sense of ease and my dead leather. Chewing on them helps.

Did I mention I've got a low pain threshold?

Jonquil goes back to facking on my arm. The pain is excruciating. I've been ever been bit by a cock-tilt in worse. The needle makes a clean incision, but I can still feel blood welling up and dripping along my arm. The pain isn't sharp—it's an unrelenting solid ache. After a while it feels as if my arm has been clamped repeatedly with a meat tenderizer. She hacks and saws and tugs—the logging in the worst. It's so bad my muscles leak and I feel light-headed—and then it stops.

But not the pain.

"My bleeding. Gosh, look a sock and a bandage at once. And a glass."

I can't see very well, my eyes are blurry. I can't seem to get enough air through my nose, even when I blow out around the saline-dilky glove. My heart is hammering and I feel sick with pain. There's a hole in my arm and I look like it's about

And a meter long and goes right down to the bone. I'm dying. I think doubly, even though I know better. Jongoal and her machine wouldn't want to risk their precious AH-Highlights on it. In three morning glory for a while, then Geneth returns. "No, he did." Jongoal nods, and shows what her hair has a certain conversational in the hair in my arm. It's not as scrawny as she might expect a great language around the washed-up work. Then she bends over and holds a glass under my nose. Two red and starchy lumps of raw meat about as long as my index finger sit in the middle of a thin pool of liquid. "Kagone for sustenance?" he asks. Jongoal giggles. Geneth looks spasming nose.

"Julia got that man." Julia's accent is plummy, camped, or the plain one of the steps of sweat/it the pale and stuffs it in his mouth.

Jongoal follows suit, passing the plate to Geneth. "Her own nose," she says around her mouth. "Cheer!" Geneth grins, then wailing, gasping gasp. The next thing I know, Jongoal's hand is hovering in front of my nose. She's holding a couple of white cylindrical tablets. "Here, swallow these—oh," her other hand has the glass. I get a drop of it. She drops the tablets into my mouth, careful not to let her fingers close enough for me to bite. As if I would, all she'd need to do is breathe on that locking hole in my arm. It's kind of hard to bite someone's fingers off when you're screaming in mortal agony. I try to spit the tablets out but she pinches my nostrils shut. "Slightly rough?" I hold out with my legs as burning, but there's only one way the cortex of cells can do—and "I've only pain-killers," she cedes. "By the way if you don't swallow them soon I'll give you from up and spit them into you. There's a good boy."

Fucking Geneth. She's entirely capable of making good on the threat I swallow. "What do I taste like?" I ask, trying to deconstruct.

"Like raw pork, only not as smoky. Worst case?" Oh, sorry, she says. "Have some it all!" She giggles again. "Don't worry, give the Congressman time to work and you'll feel free for your new work history."

My heart's all hammering and I feel a little dizzy. My arm is cold and damp all the way down to my little wig. My arm is thick about how much blood I must have lost. And if that? More? Fucking bastard gonorrhea-cuffing. I flash on a momentary fantasy, digging my teeth into her eye sockets—but only momentarily. I have a bad feeling about my right arm. It's throbbing like an overworked diesel engine, sending waves of pain radiating up to my shoulder and down to my elbow. I don't know whether I can hold it still, I probably need surgery to repair what these five young cannibals have just done.

Anything but some low-angle light.

"Fucking, gentleman!" Some going on a magical mystery tour? I'll be for!" She turns to Geneth. "What do I get in his pockets?"

"That," Geneth produces my wallet and opens it in her direction. She jumps back with a hiss as my wallet card falls out. "Oh, ouch! No ouch! You!" She grabs the wallet and turns it inside. "Credit card. Social card, driving license, honey card. 'Basic insurance' like." She pulls out a scabby twenty-pound note. "Civil servant. Right?" Geneth and Julia seem to look at the five long cylindrical strips of flesh, don't have platinum credit cards, and suffer being being pulled by cannibals in the course of their day—and they think it's funny? A sad sense of indignation threatens to overwhelm me. Fucking bastard over-engineered smelly apparatus gonorrhea-cuffing.

"Can, lead Jingo!" Geneth has found my NecromPod.

"Where's that—oh!" Julian looks concerned, and they nearly bang their heads together, cooling over the glemo-shedding car of the JingoPhone. "What kind, like, the fuel?"

"Necro! Precious! It can Fuel Fuel!"

"No, I think it's a..." Julian struggles up suddenly. "It's an iPhone, isn't it? How do you turn it off?"

"It's on the back panel, a pocket of daily frothing misery."

"Why would you want to switch it off?" Geneth demands.

"Because it's a phone. They can trace them, can't they?"

"Let's see..." I lean a familiar shoulder about as his finger flicks the home key. "How does this work—oh! How. What are screens for?"

"Thought you knew."

"Yes, but he's been messing with the home screen." Geneth looks the methods, unglazes the white while looking from the pocket pocket. "Let's see what we've got here."

"Gulp." Jongoal sounds tense. "We don't have time for this."

I lie there, trying to be invisible, hoping Geneth is as stupid as she seems.

"I must have an off button somewhere," Julian mutters.

"Shit..."

"Aha!" Geneth clutches it possessively. The words are whipped around her hand, comical drinking.

Jongoal clears her throat. "If you can't switch it off, leave it behind. It's time to go. Now."

"Shit." Julian shakes himself and steps back. Instead, I risk. "You'd damn, Geneth—"

"Blast!" Geneth squeals, and plugs the methods into his head as his thumb is inexorably dragged to the NecromPod's home button.

"Stop that!" Jongoal is too late, and she and Julian are caught by D-Team members in my eyes because she steps behind Julian as he grabs up his shotgun and brings it to bear on Geneth.

Who is turned in black, dicing to a different beat as the writing white when I'll deep into his consciousness through the chosen possible path, drilling and using and consuming the unauthorized intruder who has had the temerity to plug himself into a device having a Liberty commemorative label.

"And he's...[shuffling across the floor, a shadowy silhouette of a former self]...[shuffling into a few sets, I see him, only bits for the couple of seconds, then the Pod flashes, discharging its lethal load through his brain and Geneth's body deep to the floor, creating another way for a dead weight. The white methods cut away from his corpse, released and somehow fit.

"It's...[shuffling]" Julian is across the room and the shotgun muzzle is a subway tunnel filling my right eye.

"Shit!" Julian takes a deep, shuddering breath. The gun doesn't waver.

"Geneth fucked up," Jongoal says slowly.

"Don't care. He's got to die." I can see a steel building in Julian's chest, never the horizon in the set of his jaw. He stopped breathing? I know—

"Geneth killed the AH-Highlight?" Jongoal is standing behind Julian now. "He was weak. He surrendered to a half-life generator. Any you going to surrender to a stupid intruder, Julian? Are you weak? Do you want to hear what AH-Highlight will say if you manage the weapon?"

"For a moment Julian does nothing—then he breathes out. "No," he repeats as he along the beam of his gun. "You're going to die, meat. And if you're going to watch you go. The shotgun weighs away suddenly, jarring the floor."

"What are we going to do with that?" he asks. Jongoal, gesturing sideways at Geneth's body.

"Drop it down stairs and stick it with the others." She strugs dramatically.

"The weapon, please—"

"This for his phone." She kicks the NecromPod, it catches off the wall and rolls beneath the chest of chairs.

"Geneth will be back here. Get him down stairs."

"No one you going to run the pistol?"

"No one he can risk." Jongoal rests a hand on my right shoulder as I shudder. "You can walk, can you, Mr. Howard?" Please say you can walk! Because if you can't—

"She moves her hand a couple of centimeters down my arm and squeaks. "Can walk!" I yelp, gasping for breath. "Let me..."

Julian grabs me under the left armpit—the damaged one—and heaves me to the kitchen. I try to get my feet under me, and

everything goes gray for a few seconds, but I don't faint, I'm just gasping for breath and dizzy and a bit nauseous, and my right arm feels awful.

"That's good," says Jonquil, tugging my right elbow as Julian lets go and bends down to pick up their prize-winning hamster friend. "Now you're just going to slip the way Mr. Rowan, and then you're going to follow Julian downstairs and get in the back of the car and sit quietly, aren't you?"

I nod, flustered. Good heavens, if they think a blood-soaked man with his arms handcuffed behind his back would draw attention in the average London-suburban street—

—shit, I think despairingly as I reach the bottom of the staircase and Julian opens a side door onto a garage. For a moment, I realize these two have really got their shit together. Jonquil opens the rear door of the silver Mercedes sedan and Julian greets me as he slides Cassie's body onto the passenger seat and positions the corpse so that it looks like it's sleeping. Then he opens the back of the silver Mercedes station and pushes me into it headfirst, so that I land on my right arm in a heap of agony. And that's the last clear thought I think for a while.

THE MUMMY'S TOMB



PUTNEY HIGH STREET, ABOUT FIFTEEN KILOMETERS

SOUTHWEST of the center of the capital, is a bustling shopping and retail area, humming with shops and pubs and other civic amenities: the mall and tube stations, the local neighborhood's court, fire station. Luckily five-laned roads cut away behind the high street, soon to accommodate thousands of houses and mini-businesses, every curb crisscrossed with the parked cars of commuter traffic.

Right now it's early morning. A fire-colored truck-bully and red, its lead bed occupied by a busy control room—its doors up on the street-facing parking area of the court, its headlights whirring on the pavement, blue light emitting. A couple of police cars wait nearby, ready to clear the way if the truck gets to exit.

Despite appearances, it isn't really a fire-control truck: it's owned by OCCULUS—Causal Control Coordination Limit Liaison, Unconventional Situations—that branch of the military that my employers call it when a situation is one Angleton's level of apocalyptic, escalates above Ring One. And right now, its camouflage skin doing what it does best: keep us from being waiting for a call.

A short, wiry fellow with hair-thinned glasses, wearing a beaded jacket with patched elbows over a green wind sweater, hangs in an office seat in front of a desk with a laptop and a bunch of communications gear bolted to it. He's permanently bopping his left foot forty-yes-and his skin is slightly translucent, as if light leaked his flesh. There's an olive-green respirator handset jammed between his shoulder and his right ear, and he's holding his fingers impudently on the walls on the line.

"Yes? Yes?" he demands bluntly.

"Conceding you one, sir? I know static. The handset doesn't lead to a phone, mobile or otherwise, but to a TETRA terminal dedicated to OCCULUS's use: an early nineties digital audio technology, horribly obsolete, but one that the government has been locked into by a forty-year contract. 'Si:

Angleton is on the line."

"Ah, indeed. Are you there?"

"Major Barnes?"

"Yes, sir, my key word on our boy?"

"You see first how: Angleton's voice is clear. Barnes sits up unconsciously respectful.

Further back in the OCCULUS truck, a man wearing a bright yellow hi-VIZ hat glances up from the IBM MP3 he's checking for the first time. Another hi-VIZ hat-wearing soldier, shorter and stockier, knuckles him on the back. "Way. Scary, nobody near that you're safe to be around?"

"Sorry, sir?"

Major Barnes glances from Angleton is talking. "I have a preliminary fix and the car on my way over right now. I should be with you in about five minutes. Once fire location team gets you to the target location."

"Are you sure that's accurate?"

"No, but it's a tactical command up to you: the problem is, I don't have an exact fix: it's within less than a hundred meters, needs to be on the spot."

Major Barnes swears silently. "All right, we'll have to work with that. I'm sorry you can't give some better fix?"

"No, I mean, Angleton says classically, 'but whatever we're looking at, it's been set up for a fall of the block. Barnes, if it were lucky it'd prove to be a safe house with just a couple of residents. Fire... something the usual route?"

"Be prepared," Barnes advises, wearing an expression of pained resignation. "Gis die and all that. I hope the left gets to go home-based."

"The good news is, I've raised a SCORPION'S STING control center. So once we know what we're looking at, you should have no trouble containing the outbreak."

"Now wonderful," Barnes says loudly. "Are you anticipating more civilian casualties?"

"Hopefully not," Angleton pauses. "After I'm hoping for is lowering that. Ah, well, you're a morose."

Another police car pulls up, lights flashing, as Major Barnes glances out of the truck's side window, he sees the rear door open and Angleton unfolding himself. He looks back at the hi-VIZ's, swears, before fan. "Shit, time coming up. Sit up, Jim?"

Warrent Officer Howe puts his cabin down and glances back at the seven other members of his half-size troop: "Were ready, sir?" his companion question-ready for death—hangs in the air, but he's been working with Barnes for long enough that he doesn't need to say that.

"Angleton's coming up," says the major. "So back there."

The door opens and Angleton steps inside the truck. He smiles, cadaverous. "Ah, gentlemen. I wish I could say it was good to see you again, we really need to stop meeting like this."

"That gets a chuckle from Sergeant Spivey. Angleton walks forward towards Major Barnes's seat, his head bowed to avoid the overhead equipment racks. "Were very close," he says quietly. "I can smile."

Barnes shows better than to roll his eyes. Dealing with the speaks other medals playing ceremonial to a particularly pissed-off subofficer: in the case, "If you could just tell the driver where to go, sir?"

"Calmly," Angleton responds past the back of Barnes's chair, and slides into the front passenger seat.

The driver glances at him sidelong. "Sir?"

"All the blank, then pull out. I want to see you drive up the high street slowly. I'll tell you when to pull up."

The truck surges heavily off the curb, bouncing on its suspension as the driver pulls it through a U-turn—just missing being flayed by an obstacle enough to turn, her mobile guard to her ear. It rumbles back towards the Richmond Road intersection.

Angleton's mouth fans. "Keep going," he peers through the windshield, searching. "The driver here to ignore his hands—his fiddling with something small that seems to bend the light around it. "Slow down, it's just ahead. On my right. There's no keep going. That was it. That building... it's in the line!" he swears, under his breath, words of painful power that make the driver wince.

"You want us to visit a public library?" Major Barnes is incredulous. "What are we looking for on-mission back?"

"It's a matter of speaking," Angleton sounds weary. "Customers. I believe we may have been led to a safe house. I'm tracking a missing classified document. I was expecting it to lead to a real cabinet, but it seems they've learned how to use a photocopier and that—his, over-the-shoulder view camera work—was right—his idea of a joke. Unfortunately the document is question is classified, and we can't ignore it. We can't ignore the possibility of an ambush, either, but at least it ought to be easy enough to execute. Ah, well, you need convincing the local fire control? I think a snap inspection of the firefly sprinkler system ought to get our feet under the table."

Barnes nods, stiffly, and starts to call the fire-control team on one of the other handsets. In the back, Warrent Officer Howe nods at his own. "Sir," the hi-VIZ hat cuts one off to reveal regular Fire Brigade overalls underneath. "Okay, as soon as we get the go-ahead..."

Angleton waits heavily in the front passenger seat, fiddling with something small and dark. Nobody is watching him. Did an observer might think, from his behavior, that he's worried. He's too late.

WHILE ANGLETON AND THE OCCULTS TEAM ARE GETTING READY to raid a public library in search of a missing document, this is midway through the second glass of gin-and-tonic in a wine bar with the man who would be Putin, and I am planning in and out of consciousness, it aches darkness and pain in the foot of a speeding car.
Sighs. Heave then.

For instance, I never write to my MP to express my displeasure at the widespread disapproval of staying politicians around the capital. It never occurred to me to do so: do not I learn from a car, and speed bumps are a lovely sighted problem in our world. But right now I am leaning to hit the things with a ball position usually reserved for garden software installers and lying politicians. My abductors appear to be incapable of allowing for distractions, and every time we bounce over a speed bump or crash down of a massive speed table or weave through a chicanee (take the full force of it on my right arm. That postulating cerebral cortex ensemble Jason packed me in the boot damaged side down; I don't have the ebb-and-flow, the coast, or the leverage to turn myself; I sense when I get out of this thing I'm going to run for mercy, and the first person my mindsets will be to come the transport planners to escape the faking things of every road in London with their fingers. Second item on the agenda: making it legal to shoot any civilians seen in the city after sunrise with a bow and arrow. Sort of that before that, but the one about fishermen. Or was it Sussman? Where was I—

Oh, checked out again. This is bad. My left heel damp—
It's bleeding again.
They got my phone. I don't have a watch. If my lucky Mo or Angleton got my messages and they know I'm trouble, if Angleton feels my phone it's in trouble. How much trouble?
How much do you think—serving classified software on an unclassified laptop? How long will it take them to figure out my message? What time is it, anyway? How long have the Gubbins had me? Why are you kidnapping—
Fuck. Heave intransigently.

When I'm major of London I'm going to require all cars to have transparent boot lids, on pain-of-no pain of pain. See, so what if you can't leave your shopping in the car while it's parked? Fuck yes, why wouldn't you think of the laptop accident? Cor! That was a bad one.

Where was they—where are they taking me?
To see the nursery. Don't touch the nursery's tools, ha-ha. A lot of hand-painted-wood car-canisters light-bulb in the gallery of dreams. Brotherhood of the Black Phoenix: how simple—

When I've stopped, engine revving—traffic lights, damn it. Maybe that means write on a main road? Put yourself together. But! Observe. Observe. Observe. Act, then, upon repeat.

On facing forward, some handcuffed behind my back, if there's an emergency child catch in here, it'll be behind me. Chance of grabbing it effectively is, might be a different story if my right arm wasn't fucked. Inventory of useful utility would look like... Inventory of weapons: zero, unless you count my head. Give me headbatter!

Oh, fuck. Speed bumps, traffic patterns, red-hot pavement, you know the drill. It's chilly but not really in here, and it smells bad. They won't get my blood out of the carpet in a hurry, but Forensic'll have a field day... if...
Oh. For a moment there I was hanging on that job, starting out across the grey pavement towards a distant gymnasium. There's an eye in the pavement, but it's sleeping. It's terrified that it's going to open and see me.

They're taking me somewhere specific. When they get there and open the boot of this car, it'll be the one open for a while. That's when I'm going to have to make my exit. Won't get a second chance. Observe. Observe. Observe.

Scots sent me on a course on evasion and escape a couple of years back, on a course on Saint Martin. Said it might come in handy sometimes—I thought it was only going to be useful for keeping out of Human Resources' sights, but you never know. Trouble is, eleven-year-old person of the game lies to not getting caught in the first place. Once the last gun got that close to you—everything gets a little harder.

Header: How desperate am I to escape? Depends, because I'm not totally without resources, but I'll get my head. Yes, but if I start down that road I won't have it for much longer. In an experienced computational/denominologist I can program computers, plan the perfect Pet Group Blog album, but running code in your head, that's a one-way ticket to Kierkegaard problems. It's like the Quran, and that magical power over Parliament: the car sets any law she likes, but it's a car's the game to play once. And talking to it's a one-way ticket to the secure wing of St. Hilda's?

Well, just if the alternative is to be the center of attention at a cerebral cortex dinner party.
Ah. Last if again: Roundabout—a hell really, hell. The wheel is how isn't helping; need to concentrate on not throwing up. Other procedures do I know that are simple enough to handle in my head and effective enough to—
While slowing. Two axes. 2D.
It's hard to shed the imaginary boot casts when you're being thrown about the boot of a car that's losing track. The turning. The road moves under me change to a crumpling of gravel, which goes on intransigently. Then there's a long stationary phase. And all I think certain that you've arrived. The car starts moving again, bouncing slowly slowly across me, gravel, it goes on and on—there's a stability here or a public estate this high. But after a brief moment, we turn through a tight curve and then stop. The engine dies, and in the quiet I hear the ping of cooling metal. Then footsteps.

Fresh air blasts across my back as the boot lid swings open. The interior light comes on, showing me grey carpet catfishes from my nose. "He—"
"Yes, Gorbis legs."

I sense, ready to kick, but they're too fast for me. They slide something—feels like a ball—around my ankles and I can't pull them apart. Someone else pulls a canvas bag, smelling faintly of laundry, magazines, over my head. Then two heavy metal guns me hit, and stop, with predictable consequences.
When I surface in the sea of pain, I feel my lying on my left side—a small mercy. I'm not sure when I'm lying on it, but I have a holly or possibly a wreath. It's cold and smells of disinfectant and it's colder over a heat, enough surface. I can't see my eyes as a miscalculation, distorting well of acids. I'm still handcuffed, and now they've hooded me and pinioned my ankles. So much for making a run for it. They're obviously taking me somewhere indoors—

Jason?
Something tells me that, yes, we are indoors now. Maybe it's the back of their ar, or the ceiling, or the ground beneath the hollow wheels. We mustn't really notice. I distract myself. Trying to recall the transition table for Carter's 2.0 Universal Turing Machine—the one with the five chess pieces and the board. I can always cope at chess, never really got into it deeply enough at school, but I understand UTM's, and if I can hold enough moves in my head before the grey stuff turns to Swiss cheese I might be able to code something up. Damn it, fuck, you're magnificent! Think of something that'll get back when I work here in a nice warm office, with a heating great music on my desk and a can of Pringles in front of me. I start weeping, under my breath, in Middle English: cursing is the only thing that language is good for. (That, and cursing the walking dead around.)

We stop. Then there's a scrape of doors opening. I bounce across a threshold—a hell, 1996. Then we begin to descend. Oh, it's hell. We're underground. That's all I need: energy I'm also terrified, and in pain, and light-headed, and dizzy. My heart hammering.
"Are you awake, Mr. Howard?" chirps Jaquy Jonsqui, the senior programmer of Disease Squares.

"Nervous." I say. Fuck you, would be more appropriate, but in my current position I'm feeling out of course.

"Please, Howard?" That someone else, a man's voice, not Julian. Observe. Observe—okay, you're tentatively designated

Confidante "What happened to his arm?"
"Midgee says, 'ouch, ouch, ouch' when I asked Midgee to ask someone from somewhere that his fat, 'is it a high-rise in residence yet?'"
"Yes," says #3. "You are expected."
"Oh?" repeats, amazed. She pushes one in the club, harder than necessary "You're going to see Mummy now! But that's exciting!"
I realize that a "fat" might offend, and keep my eye shut. It's trying to string together "Mounts of Communist for missing the undead needs a behavioral loop- they Mummy?" Vision of a can-can line of cadavers in windigo bouzou from their imagination. Food they're going to kill you. Focus! The part of me that's concerned and pragmatic is the very unpleasant, nearly gone in packing of the largest dismountment that's sliding over the rest of me. He makes a bid for my eye:
"Where... ah...?" I hear myself say.
The lift grinds to a halt and I feel a cool draft as the doors open.

"Blackwood cemetery. Have you been here before?" It's nearly nonexistent. It's the biggest necropolis in England; it covers more than eight square kilometers and more than a quarter of a million people are buried here! This is our section-I used to belong to the Ancient and Honourable Order of the Assassins, back in the eighteenth century."
"Quiet," says #3. "You shouldn't tell him this thing."
"Quiet says why not?" Midgee says huffily. "It's not as if he's going to murder us?"
That's right, remind me first, doomed, and if I care, He's not Blackwood where the Necropolis has been used to terminate. Oh, that figure. The cadaver has told their lacking headstones, right on top of the power source for that by the way they looked the with. And, left face it, it's a nice neighborhood. "Have you heard of a crime problem here, community policing keeps a low profile, it's dead quiet- They were the one that was in your case it is advised. A lift, in a museum? Quiet's make sense. So this is probably a museum building, abandoned and re-purposed. I try to give to sign of the cool, structures that fringe up and down the way as they come along a short passage, then stop.
"Greetings, Midgee" says, angled, an appreciative quaver in her voice for the first time. "I have brought the desired one!"
I can feel a throat pressure, chilly and abstracted. I have a curious sense that isn't being inspected.
"Good. The AI-highlight will see you now." The voice is as cool as an unworked grave.
I hear a door open, and they wheel on toward in silence. Abruptly someone leans close to me and pulls the curtain bag up and away from my head. It's dark down here, the deep length of a cellar illuminated only by LED bottles, but it's not so dark that I can't see the AI-highlight.
And that's when I realize I'm in much worse trouble than I was imagined.

NO LISTENING TO HER PHONE IN DISBELIEF. "THEY WANT?" "SHE CARRIES"

"They left the paper clip attached to a book in Putney Library," says Angeline, with icy dignity. "A copy of *Blind*, Mrs and Godby Ferdinand O'Connell."
"Then you're better?"
"Where you have any better ideas?"
"Let me get back to you on that." She swaps her phone closed and glances across the table. An olive is being laid.
"Who was that?" asks Paris. "Who do you not mind..."
"I was Angeline. The memorandum is still missing. The agency identified my tracer and reactivated it."
"You have my sympathies."
"When do you have a car? Because if so, I'd appreciate a lift home. I'm out of road!"
Ten minutes later, the black BMW with diplomatic plates is slowly winding its way between traffic-clogging mopeds. Midgee leans back, holding her violin case, and closes her eyes. It's a big car but it feels small, with the driver and a bodyguard up front, and Paris edging beside her in the back.
"Do you have anything in mind?" Paris asks quietly.
"Yes." She doesn't open her eyes. "Angeline drew a blank, trying to trace the missing document. But that's not the only angle the cadaver has got their hands on."
"Your husband?" Paris's nostrils flare. "Do you have a tracer on him by any chance?"
"No." She doesn't bother to explain that Laundry operatives don't usually carry bugs because what one party can't track, others might pick up. "However, he has a mobile phone."
"They'd have tracked it off, or discarded it."
"The former, hope I can loan trace that." The alloy beetle-back car double-park outside a nondescript row of terraced houses. "Please wait. It's only for a minute, she adds as she climbs out.
Ninety seconds later she's back, her go-bag weighing slightly more heavily on her shoulder. "Laptop," she explains.
"Your superior or you have classified documents here?"
Paris raises an eyebrow.
"No. It's his personal one. He pointed it with his phone, which is also a personal device." She bats herself off, then opens the laptop screen. "All right, left eye." She slides a thumb drive into the machine, cuts her thumb over a window in "New File" as a second memory stick, loaded with exco-copied photos, videos, hearing aids, and one, single functional staff key. All at the end of the road, for all."

The driver doesn't open, but he has no trouble understanding her directions in English. The car heads south, slowly winding its way through the winding streets. Midgee herself with the laptop, a route finder program, and a small chronometer and a redaction, which she toggles down the screen a secret taken from around her neck. "It's along here, sometimes," she says as the car comes past another building, residential or care, where large houses are set back behind tall hedges. "When we were past it. Okay, put it here." She pulls out her phone and speed-dials a number.
"Hello?" Angeline asks.
"It's in Holborn Road, near Lambeth cemetery, with Midgee and his driver. Tracking Bob's personal phone. How soon can you find me there?"
"Hold on?" Pause. "We'll be there in fifteen minutes. Riding now. Can you wait?"
Midgee sidestepping at Paris, who shakes his head slowly. "I don't think it's," she says. "Midgee has urgent business elsewhere." She pulls the door latch, and it swings open with the sluggish momentum of concealed armor plate. She extracts one foot to touch the pavement. "It's discarded."
"Good-bye, Dr. O'Brien. And good luck."
Most of the houses on the road are detached, sitting in privacy splendor on plots of their own, a few semi-detached Georgian-style houses lowering the roll-over row here. On London, but somewhat enough that the houses have private drives and garages. Midgee walks slowly back along the pavement with the camera lens with the hedge outside a semi with a built-in garage, partially dating to the mid-1800s. The west facade is her hand as she reluctantly leaves the five silver chair around her neck and walks in. This is the place. She's late off.
She pulls out her phone, dialing again, says, "Number thirty-four," then puts it away. Then she opens her go-bag and pulls out a pair of goggles. She puts them on and flicks a switch. Then she stands around the side of the house.
There is a bad smell from the driveway and back, and the lawn is uneven. The hedge has not been trimmed, it looks over the morning grass like the ash and will beards of the god of neglect. The windows of the house are dark, and not merely because no lights shine within. It's strangely difficult to see anything inside. Midgee sits on the wooden patio between the French doors through her goggles. They are goggles of good and not just of the regular working equipment of the combat ergonomologist, and their marooned contrast reveals the veins of off-white concrete ribbed with the cement that binds the stone. In an unmarked Cromwell Street scene, the window has a narrow churning. The police forensic teams will be busy here late in the week, as the labored requires buzz round their heads like blueberries attracted to the rotting cadavers

knows their way.
No music better around the house. A series of limbo-riding
gathers like static beneath the snarl clout of a thunderstorm. Her
hair is beating overly fast and her palms are clammy.
She is certain that Lucy's phone is here, and when goes the
phone goes the Bell. But this is not a good place. Suddenly
she is unable aware that she is on her own, the nearest
ladying hitherto away.

Head, then
There is a quiet click as she undresses the latch of her
instrument case. Moments later the box is in her hand, the
circuitry clamped between her jaw and shoulder. The case
dangles before her mouth, her compact squabbling exposed.
There's a rickler on the back of the instrument. It reads: THIS
MACHINE KILLS SLOWLY.

No walk towards the glass door, on the indistinct
strides behind them, and touches her bow to the strings of
the public instrument. There is a sound like a green fly buzz
as the strings begin to vibrate, starting and glowing as they
slice the air to shreds. "Open" she says quietly, and as she
sounds a chord the glass panes rattle simultaneously and
the door frame wags towards her. She advances into the
suburban dining room, playing raw and dissonant notes of
dislike to confront the human world.

THE BMW IS HALF A MILE AWAY WHEN PAINN LEANS FORWARD and taps his driver on the shoulder.

"Sir?" The cheerless glance of Pannin reflection in his mirror.
A bank business card appears between Pannin's fingertips,
taps to one Pannin gazed to an unwilling count a couple of
days ago. "Back this," he says.

"Yes, sir." The driver reaches back and takes the card, then
places it on the dashboard in front of him. It glows faintly in the
darkened interior of the car.

After a moment, they pull over, then the driver performs a U-
turn and accelerates. "You don't mind me asking, sir..."

"No?" Pannin looks up from the map book on his lap.
"Do you want me to call for backup?"

"What we know where we're going, Dr. Dinky Pollock?"

"No. Shouldn't you have told me...?"

"The staff may not like the board, but that doesn't make
them friends. I intend to get them fast, Drinky. Whenever there's
a..."

"Then I shall drive faster, Sir." The station accelerates,
heating itself.

"HELLO, BOB," SAYS JONGQUIL'S MUMMY A SMILE CRINKLING the corners of the corners of her eyes. "Oh dear, what did you do to your arm? Let me have a look at that." She talks over the state of Adam's blood-splattered rough and ready a maddeningly rapid pace to place by following now black with dotted blood. "You really ought to have taken the week of sick, overwork will be the death of you, you know."

"Cuck all!" Fury and pain give way to a mix of disgust and
self-loathing. I should have seen this coming.

"Oh, but how to let it all hang out," she tells me. "It's not as if
you've got anything to lose, is it?"

Disheartened, she knows me well enough to get under my skin.
"You've been studying me, haven't you?"

"Of course." She glances over my shoulder. "No, Patch the
bracket had at once." Back to me "You saw nothing..."

"Does your idiot daughter always go around chipping up
messages when you're not around?"

"Yes," she says calmly. "I come in the family. I don't think you
have any grounds to complain, given what you did to poor
Gareth. Would you like me to take those hundreds off you?"

Clutch her my silly little about ensuring the parent's welfare
will almost anyone they don't recognize."

"I don't do anything to Gareth." I say as she pulls out a bag
and holds it up in front of me between two black-gloved
fingers. "It's his mother's fault." I say. There's no point
arguing. "What do you want from me?"

"Your cooperation, for the time being. Nothing else, nothing
less. Think of a deal, and my right will have been. My arms
flourish for you like something for it?" I don't remember reaching,
but a subjective moment later I'm sitting up on the trolley and
someone I can't see is leaning over me with a syringe. I
stings, cold as if my arm, then my arm begins to tingle,
swallows fast. "It's just morphine, Bob. You'll need some
more."

"Morphine?" I'm muzzling. "What do you mean?"

"Come and sit with me," she says, beckoning. An unseen
nurse lifts the with an arm under my left shoulder and guides
me towards one of two reclining leather armchairs in the
middle of a dim pool of light on the flagstones-Flagstones?

Moves and? "And it happens."

I fall in and out for a bit. When I'm back again, I find I'm
sitting in one of the chairs. There's a light blanket on my right
arm, with something that isn't a syringe tucked under it. My hands
are lying on the armrests, unclutched, although her girl has not
banded where the nurse cut into my veins. I can't hear things,
nearly I can't even make them fast. And for the first time in
hours, my arm isn't killing me. I'm aware of the pain, but it feels
as if it's on the other side of a thick acetate board.

It's sitting in the other chair, holding an empty chipped cup
made of what looks like yellow plastic, watching me. She's got
her hair up and changed from her usual office coiffure to what
my brother's fashion sense suggests is either a late-
Victorian mourning gown or a cat's paw's rince. Or
maybe she's just come from a goth nightclub with a really strict
dress code.

I stare past her. Write in a cursive, care enough-one
designed by an architect from the C of E school of baroque
cathedral design. It's red and ancient and flying through
curved mine and heavy wooden partitions cutting off from
darkened rooms and terraces. Just like being in church, except
for the lack of windows. Puff and argon, faster towards
the machine cables. There are cuts of oak, pine, blackened with
age. "Where are we?" I ask.

"Here is the underground chapel of the Ancient and
Honourable Order of Iffesinghams," she says. "They had an
overground chapel, too, but that's one is more private."

"More so?" I stop. "Where the ancient whatever is cover
organization by any church?" For a brotherhood of a different
hue?"

It's some amount by the idea. "Nasty?" They were purged
in the 1950s, but nobody found the way down to this cellar. We
had other a lot of clearing up to do, interminable
reconstructions and excavations before we could dedicate
chapel to the calling." She pulls a face. "Oh, well, nothing?"

Chief architect? Does she mean...? I Oh dear. There
are so many species of catfish as there are dark wetlands
there to make one. If this place has a history of ancient
worship going back a century and a half, then it's a place of
power indeed-and that's before you take into account its
location inside a huge quarry, at one end of a by line
leading into the heart of London that was traversed by tens of
thousands of dead over a period of nearly a hundred years.
The whole thing just got to be a gigantic, megalomaniac
capacitor. "So it was vacant and your people moved it?"

"More or less, yes."

"No people being, from. Officially the Free Church of
the Unwashed Kingdom?" Or unofficially...?"

She shakes her head. "The Free Church aren't really
used over here-the British aren't into wearing their religion
on their sleeves, you know. We'd get lots of very fancy looks
indeed if we used around forcing makes and practicing the
properly people-even though that sort of thing is the right
for stockholders. No, on this side of the pond, the only way
to get Conservative and Liberal Party members. And some
Labour groups, we're not here."

"Enlightenment, and it's the vastness. Surely the Tory
group-which are notorious for their bloody-minded
individualism-but that's another, pretty much
harmless. And serious political leverage... I bet the
Prime Minister way big on community and left-based

intended? Or shuffling her?

I think nobody is here because, I wanted. "Would you like a can of Red Bull? I'm sure you could do with a pop-eh-eh."

I nod, speechless. "Why not?" I ask, as a male nation-weaving in long black robe, nutmeg-smeared forehead with a small silver tray, of which is balanced a can of energy drink. I stare at it and watch my right hand. He opens the ring and holds the tray in front of my functioning left hand. I take the can gratefully and manage to get most of a mouthful down my throat rather than down my hot stiff. As he steps back, I repeat my question: "Why did you obstruct me? Because I'm white, dear, not that the line continues in all directions. We've all been suckered. It's one of the best trapped margins I've ever had-the other being Angleton-and ain't been one step ahead of us at all. She probably wanted fishy report too. "Why? I'm a robot!"

"You underestimate your value, Bob." She raises her cup, and smiles over it on as she takes a sip of something dark. I think, focusing on it. (That's not a cup, it's a vessel with a sense of detachment. Why is she drinking from a because she's a cultist, idiot? "You've been indoctrinated for senior management for the past eight years. You know that, don't you? But you're only graded as an SDC 3. That's a bit low for someone who's reporting directly to a DSG, so I'd be more digging. "You're not being held back, it's just that the Laundry oversees a 7-year promotion path-administration and law cases dwindle down a very low level. "You're due for regrading later this year, Bob. If you pass the board, they'll make you an SDC 4). I don't sound like much, but it's the first step up from the back into the low hierarchy, and it'll enable you to boost Army major assets. Or police superintendents. In an SDC 6, but you'll be able to tell me what to do. And a year after that, unless you really go off the rails, they'll be coaching you for SDC 11."

I try not to goggle openly. I haven't been paying too much attention to my grade, frankly. I get regular weekly pay raises and long increments, and I know I was up for promotion sooner or later, and I know about the "year, but I hadn't occurred to me that I might be about to effectively jump three grades.

"You mean your confidential record, Bob. It's impressive. You get staff down, and Angleton thinks very highly of you. Angleton. You know what that means, don't you?"

I nod. My mouth is dry and I feel my pulse fluttering. "You don't think the Laundry just got to me, do you, Sir?"

"She chuckles. "No, Bob, we didn't." He. Oh holy fuck, think more than she could infiltrate in the Laundry? I realize. "But he hasn't looked for someone like you for a long time. "You're on track for executive rank when the stars come right. "You lucky, lucky man." Her voice drops to a low cove as she raises the baby's stool and drains it, then holds it out for a while. "I won't work of course."

"I won't-escape me?"

"Something," She utters. "The effect is rather fetching, if you have a gift-fusion. "Go on, tell me what you think is coming or not."

Oh hell. "This is the point," I say guardedly, "where the real cultist ideologies of the captive agent and then to convert her to be way of thinking. I mean works. Once?"

She smiles her face. "You're probably right, but I ought to give it a go. "Cheer, heave, heave, I think. I thought for a moment that official policy as set forth in CAGIG HIGH/IMPACT GREGS about a chance of success-if it was extremely possible that we, the human species, could stand shoulder-to-shoulder against the elder ones and build a shield against our Dark Emperor; do you think for a split second that I wouldn't go for it?" She looks at me occasionally. "You know just how high the odds are stacked against us. There are just too damned

many people-were damaging the structure of reality by over-observing it. And we can't do them either, not without releasing a pulse of microcosmic energy that will have every brain-saver for a thousand lightyears in all directions homing in on us. The latest research-the likes her love-ly-"It means the Cavendish is inevitable, and soon. The dead things awaken, and the harder we fight against the inevitable, the sooner it arrives."

She lifts silent. Disappointed? Or resigned?

"What you're saying is, I'm an inevitable, in back and try to enjoy it, Right?"

"She glares at me, blood in her eye for an instant. "But I'm not one, into enjoying this. I'm interested in survival, Bob, in reaching an accommodation. Survival at all costs, and ensuring the continuity of the human race, that's what the Brotherhood of the Black Phoenix has about these days. I want to be you, by changing that our history is granted, but we change with the times. Our goal is actually your goal, if you think about it a moment."

Which, for me, is an Oh-hell statement with brass balls on. It's not as if I haven't had my quiet nagging doubts about the Laundry's methods and goals, and its intermittent self-righting tendency to dissolve obscure one-way-outward for progress. It's in goddamn good as what she said. I want it thinking earlier that I follow her to hell."

"I couldn't hear an echo of Bob's voice, reminding me: the rings in the coffee? "You've had already eaten the stonks? "You're the face and mouth of her old leg, but the Sacred boy-child will still screaming."

"You said a prayer there," I say quietly. "I don't think it means quite the same thing to you that it means to me. At all costs," I put my energy drink can down. I've emptied it, but I'm still indoctrinated and the pain is still killing, just beyond the edge of my awareness. Plus, I feel drained, countless years older than my age, "hoping that the work justifies the means."

"Just so," she nods. "So. Will you join us of your own free will?"

I give her question the due weight of consideration it deserves. "Not off."

She sighs. "Don't be childish, Bob. I like you, but I'm not going to let you suffer like I'll of your mind in the way of human survival." She stands up, gathers her robe around her, and walks past me. "Bring him," she commands.

Strap-armed cultists seize me under the shoulders and lift me into position to put up a fight as they're motioned to after her. "What are you going to do with me?" I call after her.

"She passes before an oak door studded with heavy iron nails. "To attend to going to leave to sanctify you," she says apologetically. "So that the Father of Souls can seek the condition of the Laundry wearing your promission/contract skin. It's really really dear. I promise I'll try to make sure it hurts as little as possible."

The door opens before her, and they drag me down into the catacombs.

DEAD MAN WALKING



THIS IS A HALF-EATEN SANDWICH SITTING ON A BREADCRUMB IN the kitchen, and an empty milk carton next to the electric kettle, and to the address in the corner of the room the sandwich is a string of names.

Mo stares at it for almost a minute. Then she reaches out very carefully and lifts the upper slice of bread. Lettuce, sliced tomato, and other chicken or turkey—not ham. She breathes in deeply, shudders for a moment, then closes on. Battered formed and de-basted chicken, not properly steamed at the doughnut-house that would account for the straggles in her cell pugil. No need to remember the tumor in Amsterdam, nor when it had.

Behind a typical London family home. Recently renovated kitchen, dining room with French doors opening onto a patio in the garden, lounge with bay window out front, staircase is but understand almost, with clear leading into garage, bedrooms and bathroom upstairs. Why the sprawling dead, here?

Mo stalks the lounge like a shadow of judgment, visits mementos and mementos. There is a row of books on a shelf above the plasma TV. Management for Dummies, The Power of Positive Thinking. The Book of Dead Names—she pauses. "What the fuck?" she says, very quietly. She's searched one before, in the unclassified section of the archive: it's the Sir Richard Burton translation of *Al-Adh*. The source had referred to by the most pulp writer of Providence, who renamed it *Reconstructions*. It's not an great encyclopedia—it's really the changed tabbling of a schoolteacher's journal who smoked for too much health-but it's an out of place in a suburban living room as a main battle here on the high street.

There's a window outside, as of a heavy truck. Mo glances at the window in time to see the blue window reflecting, a host of motion leaves her shoulders. She steps into the hallway, towards the front door and kitchen.

Lying on the carpet before her is a mirror. The rag is headless with an intricate mandala. To an unemployed callian it might look harmless, but in Mo's goggling the burning, burning lines of blue flaming with green light is unmistakable. She kneels beside it, inspecting its wooden edge. Very carefully, she leans her face across the design of her instrument. Her fingers slide on the forehead, leaving a line ahead of skin and black behind as the lights flick, cutting brilliant blue patterns in the air above the mirror. She plays a game that took down into a swirling green, then up into an eerie crimson. Then she plays it again, twice. The rag smolders. Once more, but with crystals and there is a bang, as the binding between the woven wood carpet and the glass is connected to glass any.

The cloud of soot smoke from the rag sends Mo into a coughing fit. An unseen smoke detector starts to scream as the flames flare and gnaws the front door open. "No harm!" she calls to the flames walking up the driveway. As the first of them reaches her she nods out an arm: "We checked the ground floor. There was a welcome mat, but I believe I think it's clear now, but let me check the stairs."

"Understand, nature." House here to look his name as Mo starts to check the staircase for surprises. "But while the lady checks the staircase, Emily returns the garage. Let's backyard. Jon show Dr. Angleton's the living room."

To minimize later, Mo gives Angleton cover-stories. He's sitting in a front yard armchair with a book in his lap, looking for all the world like someone stony visiting grandfather. He smiles it and looks at her mildly. "What have you found?"

"Nothing good." She gives her goggles off and gestures on the edge of the sofa, then begins to return her instrument to its case. Wiping sweat the bloody finger-marks on the forehead with a cloth. "Who lived here?"

"That's an interesting question. Would you be surprised if I told you these are designated premises?"

Mo's fingers stop moving. Her eyes grow wide. "No. Really?"

"It's very interesting the Plumbers don't seem to be aware that they're signed off into houses known. Data. You see, when without recording it's assigned to one of our managers, by the way. GSD (G) is the Carpenter. She's had here for some years." Angleton's cheek hitches. "Husband and university-age daughter, a slight hippy family. The family that prang together stay together or pray, perhaps? But was reporting to her and she was on BLOODY BARRON. We've found her tracks."

"But the back patio?"

Angleton closes his book, it is, of course, the Burton. "Yes," he says, crumpling paragraphs of foreboding into the microfilm.

"There's a bedroom upstairs." Mo says slowly. "The window frame is raised about the door tracks from outside, and there's a burnt mattress on the floor with bloodstains on it. There's a mattress foam flat, traces of what must be—recently And a dirty job."

"Is that all?" Angleton carefully removes his spectacles, then extracts a card from his suit pocket. He begins to push the lenses.

Beats thunder on the staircase. A moment later, a woman bursts into the living room. "Sir! Her holding something akey in his light-eyes."

"What is it?" Angleton asks, holding his glasses up to the light.

"Give that man! Mo reacts for a. It's Sir's new phone." She stands up, holding closer. "Where did you find it?"

"I was under the chair of drawers in the small room. Oh, and there's a body in the garage—out side of case." Almost Officer Brown looks gloomy. "We only missed them by an hour or so. Judging by the bloodstains and the body—well, dirty and still warm."

Mo scuffs her right foot on the floor in frustration. "They've been one jump ahead of us all along, because they've been sitting in our investigations, inside our decision loop. That's where the Crown report went. It's where that missing man went. They've got this—what are we going to do?"

Angleton slides his spectacles back on. "I'd have thought that was obvious," he says mildly. "We've got to find him."

"Where?"

Angleton stands up. "That's your department. You've got his name, his phone, his laptop. If you've got any sense you've got all sorts of records now underfoot."

Mo nods gently. "Yes was here. If there's a tip?" She turns to leave. "The burnt mattress, with the blood. Have you taken a sample?" House tops up an evidence bag, its contents black and watery. "That'll do."

"Back to the truck," Angleton waves them out of the living room, ahead of him. "Hope you're home."

"What do you think they'll do to him?" Mo's anxiety is gurgling.

"They've got the memorandum," Angleton strays. "I think they'll try to make the Editor of *Souls* and find it to look back."

"That's Mo glances at him. "But said you gave him a list?" she breathes.

"No, just a photograph." Angleton's voice sinks in glacially to below. "The Editor of *Souls* is already aware. If they try the list, they won't get what they think they're asking for. And I will admit, I don't expect them to make a list for. It's not establish, get."

A minute later, the driver switches on the blue lights and pulls out into the road. Behind the departing truck the house's front doors open, as if ready to welcome the next official visitors. But the visitors under the patio will not be a well-lit trip.

OKAY SO I WAS WRONG ABOUT THE A-TEAM AND THE B-TEAM

All I was angry about the conflict, and what they believe.
Admittedly it is being the truth, there's an angle to these things from which their actions are, if not justifiable, then at least understandable. Poor little misanthropic mass murderers, with only the best of intentions at heart. And their hearts are pure for the good they seek is the only one any sane...

Step 1: That's Stockholm syndrome talking, the tendency of hostages to start seeing things from their kidnappers' viewpoint. Just stop it.

They're fragmenting me along a neural cascade a surmounting grid where they plan to turn me into a tool for a domestic terrorist. Turn another someone, and all subconscious is trying to see things from their point of view? I'm confused.

It's a closed tunnel, low-ceilinged. Carry five meters or so from stands a cubic meter or female figure in hooded black robes who hold lamps, the leader to illuminate the white-washed brick walls and the riches therein. The riches have occupants: they've been standing there for a long time. There's a soft, dry breeze blowing--we got to see how they manage the ventilation--and some of the incidents are pretty well presented. The way the skin strikes across the skull, drawing the striated hair back to reveal yellow lips and blackened tongue, almost as if they're scrawling. The dead substance the being has, all dressed in dusty Victorian or Edwardian frock. I feel her hair wet. It's no going their business or worse. When I signed the Act there was a binding promise placed on my soul, the Laundry cleans the ink, so that to leave ghosts and reverts behind to face interrogation. No afterlife exists for me.

We pass a rack of wooden chairs, bowed with age beneath piles of ash and bundles of leaves ragged with dead leaves, and pass a set of arched oak door. One of the cabinet--is I recognize Julia the ethnography specialist under that hood?--steps forward with a key. My hands prancing and feet heaving, and to top it all she's made me in danger of losing bladder control, like someone man being dragged to the execution. It's also angry hang on to their anger (I'd expect) that's important to bring someone together & function, in my own head.

If they'd attempted to kill me, then back then--is going to get out with a bang.

The dead, I feel had been pressing in around us, outside the war light of the LCD torches. Empty vessels waiting, ecstatic witnesses of supernatural information, all changed up with nowhere to go. These dead bear no love for the being among them, followers of a grandly futile cult, the squares of urban things--two dead and witness, they're here when once they conducted strange (mechanical) conversations, watching while the masters partners of the Black Brotherhood dissect their torments and reconstruct their habits. They can't possibly be happy with the new scenario, can they?

To surmount up a possession entity takes a Dorothea geometry curve, a sacrifice of blood, and an incision through certain functions. Not to mention a power source, but I'm sitting right on top of the neocortical equivalent of the Dorothea hybrid hypoglossal plant. I can't turn the lights on without it (right as well given) so I know this shit. One year since I tried it, I can't justify it, but that's not the matter of blood I hear? I start to subvocalize, trying to hit a weapon waveform image in my mind's eye. One giant neuron equates out the scaling coefficient for the square root of--

The door is open. How big is this place, anyway? The Ancient Order of Mithraeists must have been rolling in cash. The sacrificial charge begins to move again, and now the cubits around me begin to sing in curious dog-like songs. We're descending across broad steps--about two meters wide, fringed with dusty mistresses to either side--towards a central depression beneath a low, vaulted ceiling. The mallefactors primarily used this space for their cages, more than a century ago, it's haunted by the ghostly stirs of bodily fluids. We've been brought up to think of the Victorian as a prison, fortified by a glimpse of state sig, but that myth was constructed in the 1930s out of whole cloth, to give their mischievous children an excuse to point and say "the haunted area." The reality is stranger: the Victorian was laudable in the extreme before closed doors, only denying everything in public in the journal of *probity*.

Now the cubits around me are breathing faster, casting their voices higher, trying to draw out the phantom sight and moans of a haunted dead and witness mallefactors. I try and keep to my own chest, but it's hard to focus on outside when all around you the ghosts of galley reeks so lightly.

There's a huge head, at the center of the wall of mistresses: a burly figure, capped in black brimble, always upright, supporting a chair as ornately weighted as any Victorian hearse, with a sage chair sitting in front of it. The forehead. The face alone is wide enough to accommodate half a dozen--not altogether, I realize--although only two bodies lie there now, curled in fetal death, close to one side.

As the singers continue, two of his visitors walk up to the head. They're the only people against the forehead, covering the mummified occupants; then they take hold of cords dangling from the base of each post and attach mallefactors to them.

"No," I say. "No?" They try to bite the hard teeth reacting in front of my mouth with a grin.

"Ammy said not to let you unreasonably," I conjure evidence, "to cover your eye," I say, "her hand gives me context and equates I sign in-pain. Altho' 'Gone boy'?"

When they step me on the counterpane a cloud of striking dust billows out in all directions, hanging so thick in the air that I squint and sneeze. I take aim of being to the door and behind the mallefactor, and I nearly hit them when they exited my light into the fireplace that is missing. Of everything else for a few seconds, I look up at the inside of the canopy over the bed, and it seems to me as if I've seen it before--seen it in my mother's eye a decade ago, in fact.

This isn't a bed, it's an altar. It used to belong to a fertility cult. It's been used for one thing: What do I know about one magic, and mallefactors, and surmounting? Thank!

The chair takes up position around the bed, confining their chest. Its wheels around it slowly, tracing a design using a small 'furniture' in granular silver 'fogged' from an antique powder burn. Then she walks to the chest at the foot of the bed and sets while two more cubits produce the solid tools and ingredients for a surmounting: mirrors, mirrors, apparently milled black canines, a light-colored, anti-bacterial spewer. She is out of my sight most of the time, unless I lift my head--it's hard to--I gradually realize something else was going on: chest at the foot of the original altar, as her own surmounting altar. They've put me on the other side's surmounting grid.

It's an SGO (SVA) middle management in the administrative branch--because chest's not actually very talented at magic. And fit in the position of a man, sentenced to hang, whose (mis)perceptions mallefactors treat temporarily not him in the electric chair while they work out how to be a sane. Except maybe--maybe you like that. My shoulders begin to shake. I try to get up or crawl. A few seconds pass, I open my eyes and stare at the headboard, and fix my right arm with nearly black out. Then, when I breathe again, I start to subvocalize again, repeating the black theorem I started outside the door to this place.

We begin to chant, in Aramaic. I think--something combining disintegrating fractal nerves. I stare her out and focus on my own light, gurgling subvocalization.

They strapped me to the electric chair, but they didn't reduce I was wearing a suicide belt.

A BLACK BMW CRUISES DOWN A TREE - LINED COUNTRY LANE IN the late evening dark. To one side, there's a fence, behind which trees block out the view. To the other side, there's a two-meter-high brick wall, the roadway cut and crumbling, with trees behind it-but ahead more empty than the woods, especially a black curtain behind the BMW sedan, which has slowed to well below the national speed limit.

"It's around here, somewhere," says the driver, frowning at the brightly glowing rectangle of darkness ahead.

"It's getting weaker," says Paris. "I think-~~he~~ glasses sliding out of the window-but man is on the other side of that wall."

At just that moment, the wall falls away from the road, as a driveway opens out. Only enough to allow to turn left if the trailing minivan overtook, but the road is empty and its driver remains back up to the driver.

There's a gentleman, lean that of a spy's frame, and a black cushion game topped with spines. There are no lights in the house, and the gate is chained shut. Paris points at it. "Get through."

"Sir!" The front seat passenger gets out and approaches the gate. It takes him less than a minute to crack the padlock and unwrap the chain, he waves the small convoy through, then leans in the BMW's open door as it creeps alongside.

"Do you want to discuss or negotiating, sir?"

"Sir!" The guest disappears again, the car door closing as the driver slowly accelerates along what appears to be a narrow and well-wooded road. The driver opens his eyes in a glance at the way ahead. He's the lucky man: all he has to do is stand guard over a gate tonight. What could go wrong?

"Stonewall cemetery," Paris says quietly. He sees a path that to read his guest's. "The London records, but in the nineteenth century. Eight square kilometers of graves and memorial chapels. Who would have thought it?" He clicks his tongue lightly and goes back to work.

"What do you want me to do, sir?" asks Drury.

"Drive. Headlights off. Follow the road until you see a change ahead of you, then pull over."

Drury nods, and switches off the headlights. The BMW has an infrared camera, projecting an image on the windscreen: he drives slowly, behind them, the minivan draws its lights, its driver has no such built-in laser-but military night-vision goggles are an adequate substitute.

Paris pulls a walkie-talkie from the back of the seat in front of him and says it. There's an answering burst of static.

"Black One to Knight One. Closing on target now. We'll dismount before proceeding. Over."

"Knight One, understood, over."

The spy station ghosts along the winding way, past traditional greenhouses and monuments that soon out of the darkness and back behind with increasing frequency. Then it slows, Drury has spotted a car parked alone, roadside where on the grassy verge, its lines and exhaust glowing luridly by infrared. It hasn't been here long.

"That's either the target," says Paris.

Drury kills the engine, and they coast to a silent halt. Doors open. Paris walks round the BMW, to stand behind it as the minivan pulls up behind. More doors open. Men climb out of the minivan: very tall, clad in dark fatigues and tactical helmets, moving fast. They drift around the vehicle, weapons ready. Paris pulls his own goggles out from his driving hair and flicks the switch. Then he catches a tiny glimpse of something that on a day of very strong light can be picked and held in high. Seen by night it appears to have a beard and the beard is ragged. "Warm, everyone," he says softly. "This is the target. Check it. Some more for the English agent-and don't spare him either, if there's any doubt." He slices the top of strong over his head. "Sergeant Marmont, this is your area now."

Marmont nods, then waves his men towards the building they can dimly discern in the distance. The Spotzmax switch on the right and clockwise, searching for checks. Drury looks in his boots. "Sir-what now?"

"Now we wait," Paris leans and checks his watch. "Huge we got here in time," he murmurs. "We must finish before James and his men arrive."

ANGLETON TURNS HIS HEAD SIDWAYS TO WATCH **MR. SHE LEANS** against her seat back in the cockpit room of the COCCALIS truck, eyes closed and face down. She catches the side case with both hands, as if it's a lifebuoy, the fingers of the left hand lost to hold it.

"It's not ideal," he repeats quietly.

She doesn't open her eyes, but she shakes her head. "I don't say you're wrong."

[By that, Major Dismore-who is negotiating by means of a single communication line Angleton established for him-with the driver to take the second lot from a mountain. The truck moves idling, their notes on its suspension, as it accelerates away.]

"That's a long list of suspects. She was very low down."

"Angleton? No one gets guilty. Just that up. To be a human?"

"It seems I have not been truly equal for a long time," he says, barely whispering, a dry paper around the file she shuffles in a closed document case.

He is quiet for a long time. "Do you want to be yourself?" she asks, faint.

"It would be less-troubling." He pauses for a few seconds. "Sometimes self-protection does make me more interesting, though."

The engine roars as the truck accelerates on a gradient.

"After would you do, if you weren't bothered?"

"I would be terrible." Angleton doesn't smile. "He would cut me and your blood would freeze." Something moves behind the skin of his face, as if the pain paralyzes it. His hair matted between the ear and ear, something underneath it, something inhuman. "I have done terrible things," he murmurs.

"We aren't, eventually Dying is terrible. So is killing, but he killed people and animals. And as for dying-you don't have to live with yourself afterwards."

"No, but you can die. Have you considered what it might be like to be-
-and/or?"

She opens her eyes, at that, and looks at his coldly. "Pick an incident, if you're looking to put the nightmare on someone."

"The Mountebank?" Angleton's eyes are luminous in the dark of the cab. "I can't die, as long as I am bound to this truck. Have you ever thought for death, girl? Have you ever planned to die?"

"No, I think her head. "What are you getting off" she demands.

"I can feel my eye. It's still some distance away, but I can feel it. It's coming for me, sometimes soon," he laments. "So you'd better be ready to manage without me," he adds, a little sadly.

He looks away through the windscreen, at the oncoming darkness of the highway, broken only by car's eyes and the headlight glare of oncoming cars on the other carriageway. "I hope we get there in time," she murmurs. "Otherwise you'll have to do more than die, if you want me to get away from being dead."

MY ARM HURTS, AND I'M FADING IN AND OUT OF CONSCIOUSNESS. There's a fat man in my mouth but I can't spit it out because of the gag. It's ringing, her voice is a strange buzz, silent excepting fills that don't seem to follow the chest protrusions of my medical rig by tandem with. I'm tied to an altar between two long-dread corpses as the biomedical chair creaks into a single file, accompanied to this day and slowly walk around me, leaving corpses that burn, like nothing else tonight.

The distorted lines inscribed in the canopy above my head seem to blur and shimmer, until some time, calling into my memory, surrounded by a periscope of stars-or as they distant eyes?-as I keep up my eyes. They don't make much sense,

translated into English: the sense is something like, for
leaver count from zero to number of entry units within
ground case, hear ya, hear ya, I open the gates of entry
line for you that may be the ground beneath your feet
and the air upon your skin: (note the method of One and
the contractor of Plooph: however said and collect all the
package items: Sam?) said it didn't make much sense: it's
a particularly corrupt Crochian dialect that allows one to string
together entirely subjective senses in another matter,
though.

Standing before her after this is recussing the implied
message of the Eater of Souls, and there's also purging energy
into this space. She's got twenty blackened eyebrows and
the compassionate hardness I lack, and if by holy I can
piggyback on her incantation—

Oh I don't feel so good
A wave of darkness sweeps over me. For a moment I can
feel the tiny bodies in the border case of me in the last, and
they're warm and flesh-colored, almost as if they were
breathing a summer day. The forehead skin is the gently
small of bodies from which the life departed only seconds
hence. But the reality weirds this: that the light, and oh, and
unpredictably strong, a new smell of my former self. The lines
on the canopy overhead are glowing like a gash in the rotten
black of reality, and I seem to be being thrown in. It's death
magic, pain and songs. I can summon the bodies out of
sight. I can open the way for them to cross into the empty
voids all around me, buried in the wall which catches this
humble end the loss in the greatest about its ending, but only if
I use myself as a sacrifice. Flipping the wall and letting them
lead on my mind. The reason cables pulse within as human
sacrifices is nothing to do with sea and everything to do with
incantation. Its probably though the response would be big
enough to be back and larger at the party lights. Or that
training to raise, war attempt magic in one's own head-
washed hole. Or perhaps I simply didn't occur to her that I
take the Summer option (but be that as it may—

Is that what I look like?
I'm looking down on my body from above. In a real light,
highlighted between two singular moments in the lighting,
palegreen, my head tilted open and bleeding away. Jowals
traced a handful of colorful patterns from my right arm
leaking into a messy stain on one pillow. Cables are closed, I'm
floating, this is wrong and I can understand the horror now.
No, I can hear her as she tries to summon something that
will save.

Shine and forsaken Eater of Souls! Lower of Death!
*Mother of nightmares! Who who are gathered to observe your
the remembered you and recall you by name! Come now to
the vessel we prepare—*

I'm got company up here. I can feel them gather in the
darkness, blind curiosity thronging their close, like sharks
bubbling up against the light of a summer situated in the
middle of an ocean. They're class three aberrations. I have
summoned them to be on the sign and gates of my
memory that I existed in the water of life. In that state up
here, and they sense me. Soon one of them will raise me, take
a bit of my soul and find that my memories are richly sustained
and deep. And then I'll begin to lose stuff I push at them, trying
to show them towards the empty voids that I have pinned,
but they aren't leaving it. It's for no reason than any
contingency they'd force.

And then I feel a horrible visceral pain, as if someone has
stuck a sharp knife through my gut with—
"Come to this vessel!" utters hi. "Come now!"
I surmise the pain is unpreventable. And I feel the lighting, if
I trace with it, the pain leaves slightly. "They've Eater the
empty vessel! On pain of eternal torment, I instruct you to
emerge!"

I fall down from the canopy, watching the display of
nightmare witch and spiral above me, still weeping. What the
fuck?

"Eater-Eater Eater!" she yells. And as I lie on my back,
looking up at the canopy above me, the pain in my gut
subsides.

What the fucking fuck? I close my eyes, and resume my
gargling, muffled incantation. For a moment, I'd swear I was
floating on out-of-body experience.

Then a coherent picture forms in my mind's eye.
It's like this, it's like trying to summon on the Eater of Souls
and find it into my body where, among other things, it's my
real and state or permanent residence. But the Eater of Souls
is otherwise occupied right now, but it's doesn't know this
because I have the fuck? clearance.

Meanwhile, I have just been trying to locate my body all
my own, in order to summon up the bodies in the night,
because if a bunch of fuckwits are trying to sacrifice me,
I might as well let 'em as hard as I can. Again, it's not this
but for being to anticipate this, because she's never had to
visit the Fungy Farm. She's not really much of a demagogue.
And she's such a good manager she's never had reason to
use me when I'm seriously pissed off.

Here's the center: she's incantation has got a glowing
golden, an unutilized volatile pointing to an absent point.
But there's a swirl the swirling, cut free—more than the body.
So instead of looking into the Eater of Souls, the press
manager, I looked into me. So she's just spent lack knows
how much carefully hoarded that magic to feed me into my
own flesh.

Like she said: "Fate accidents never have just a single
cause, they happen at the end of a whole series of events."
Well, she has strong about five meters together and she's about
to go down here, because I'm about to turn fall on her.

My eyes open again and stare at the canopy overhead.
The bodies in the night are dispersing—but they're not
going back from whence they came. They're slipping
sideways, through the canopy towards the walls. The body's
occupied, but outside the doom, the incantation I've been
preparing is ending.

The chest continues, as do the incantations and
implications in the name of an absent mother. Its back and
it's call my haunting heart. I don't feel quite myself—It's
sounding and color seem though it's a summer night, and my
skin doesn't seem to fit properly. It's very strange. The cables
continue with their, which takes some unexpected turn.
There's a large silver golden of mine, into which a hooded
man in a bander-leading springs full of black and gold
and streams on contact, which is rather disturbing. Then a
quintet of the chest like start to assist the robes, and don't
stop at their conclusion. They seek instead to rubbed, which is
very disturbing because they appear to be into mortification
of the flesh: this is a big way—ever bigger than One. One with
a gentle focus that makes me wonder how they ever got
through expert mental detectors, or regardless, the wonder
Jowals is on only—

And again of the death dagger: hands her mother,
leaving over the—black robes covering up who-know-what,
and really coating with her black's robe, she utters the gag,
steps back, and throws her arms wide: "Speak, oh Eater of
Souls!"

I look my jaw. I feel suddenly wrong, as disintegrated as if
I've just dove head first in a tank and haven't noticed it on
the way feeling dead. I have meant to create, try to subvert, but
my head sideways (but back wrong, too) and expectate A.
But instead of subtle words on the landing behind my externally
defining companion: "It's back in the torch light. Dust
of course, because I can't be breathing right?"

"Speak!" she commands me. I stare at her, and feel a
weak, immediate urge to bite her throat out. Right now I should
be trying to make like I'm a freshly recruited Eater of Souls,
but I am thirty and I'm hungry and I have just been
through hell and I really don't care.

Some ring of the parasite takes control of my tongue. "It
drowns your blood," I croak, and instantly regret it, but reach to
my eyes, her eyes light up.

"Carefully! Don't bring the chest!" she shrieks over her
shoulder. A naked mirror steps forward, leaving the huge
grey goblet: it's full of what I'm pretty sure is not wine, and it

smile wonderful she accepts it and holds it near my face. I stop gradually pulling more than I push into my mouth. It feels and tastes like heavy part, but also warming, as if there's a trace of ginger or chili oil dissolved in it. "In the name of the Unborn Child, I command you to stop drinking," she says.

I become momentarily acutely aware that I want to keep going, but she won't order them to arise me if she doesn't think I'll obey her. I realize. And I really really want to be certain I can control the bottles all around us, dispersed throughout the hall around the crypt, doing what they do best: adding to the madness, consuming and consuming and possessing the material forms that are normally denied to them. Such things going to take possession of their softened husks and go looking for more spiritual digits. I don't want to be fed down and happen whether that happens—

Knowing his mission, my obsession for compliance. She turns to her audience: "The eater of Suits obeys!" she calls. "The first!"

She turns back to face me, triumphant and happy. "What would you have me do to hasten the opening of the way?" she asks.

"Ladle me." I tug lightly at the ropes. "Ladle me." My right arm feels wrong, but so does my left—They both obey me, but that subtly distinct blood sugar must be low I feel myself. Or that she has a trick to it.

Wrong response. It is shaking her head. But she's still smiling. "Not yet," she says. "Not until the act of biting is complete." *Rite of Binding?* Uh-oh.

"The wine conveys." I feel her, hoping she'll say it. "The blood and the wine."

"I don't think so." She looks at me steadily and I see something greenish reflected in her eyes. Something behind me? She turns back to her other bottles I can reach it out, walks towards the front of her congregation. "Bring me the sacrifice part of meat and soul" she calls.

Then the two bottles show signs.

THEY'RE CULTISTS. WORSE: THEY'RE THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE BLOOD LIBEL, based and persecuted wherever they are exposed to the hurried gaze of ordinary people.

Why?
There is a pernicious and well legged that comes closer to us from ancient history: the legend of the Blood Libel. It's a religiously insidious narrative that echoes down the ages, built against subgroups when an excuse for a program or other form of mass slaughter is desired. The Blood Libel is a religious that says that the stranger's sacrifice bottles and drink their blood. There are variant forms: the bottles are stolen from good Christian households, the blood is taken into bottles, the bottles are their own incense burners get by way of the bodies of their own daughters. No enlightenment is too vile or grotesque to find its way into the Blood Libel. The most frequent victims are Jews, but it's been used against many other groups—the Cathars, Zoroastrians, Muslims, Communists, you name it. The doctrine regularly used it against the early Christians, and enables a tiny sliver of them from somebody else. Its origins are lost in antiquity but the sole purpose of the Blood Libel is to motivate those who believe it to say: "These people are not like us, and we need to kill them, now." Always used to think that was all there was to it.
But now I know better: he advanced the wellspring of the bloody legend and sees in practitioners in action.
And he'll sit in their hands.

EATER OF SOULS



MEANWHILE, SOME DISTANCE ABOVE MY HEAD,

HERE'S WHAT happens as the time runs to completion:

Bergman pines around the Chapel of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Vehmshagen, nostrils flaring to take in the sweet summer night air, heavy with pollen and sweet with the scent of new-mown hay.

Bergman is a mid-careered, client-management consultant from Epping, and he's doing very well, thank you. He works out for half an hour every morning in the gym downstairs from his comfortable office. Then he goes to work, where he helps distressed businesses find ways and means of improving their cash flow and practices, he searches his evenings arranging social activities under the wings of his local church into the regions: consider to be rightly cut but generally friendly and helpful, and sometimes, at the weekend, he plays with the church pondkissers.

Spicing is one step down the line from baking, which is what the neighbors would think of him if they could see him now, wearing the black cloak of a member of a very different Order, and carrying a gun that has something more substantial than paint power.

Gilgor, in contrast, is not mid-careered at all. Gilgor is a severely aggressive young thing from the steers of Nitroly Mogorog, born in the year of the collapse of the Soviet Union and raised half-hard amid the wreckage of the former and steel industries. Conscripted into the Russian army at eighteen and subjected to twelve months of brutal training, he showed a remarkable aptitude for bucking Russian practices in the role of the Kadar zone during the Chechen war. Already tagged for promotion to sergeant he was instead inducted into Sondergruppe "V" ("Viper") the FGR's special operations unit, where he was taught German, Arabic, and whatever different ways to strap a man into his own intestines.

Gilgor does not cry; he purloins. Gilgor kills, he purloins.

Here comes Gilgor, crawling silently through the bushes, taking care not to graze hand or foot on any twig that might snap, not to disturb leafy shrubs that might whisper in the darkness. He pauses regularly, glancing sideways to measure situational awareness and positioning relative to his comrades, neither too far ahead nor lagging behind the line of advance. They use no radio; the occasional flicker of a red LCD torch or the flash of a flashlight are more than sufficient. Gilgor pauses before the open apex of the parking lot in front of the chapel, waiting for the enemy to complete its assault. While he pauses, he double-checks his crosshairs. The body in view of the dark night has the low speech of a professional. It's a hunting bow, fire-tuned for hunting the kind of game that shoots back on full auto; in totaly silent and it houses a grenade-tipped bolt that can slice through the carapace of a Kolar armer.

Here comes Bergman, pacing quietly around the side of the chapel. Bergman is a good sniper. He's been bushwhacked by real painted players often enough to be anti-back-asses, scanning the darkness with nimble, eye-adjusted eyes. He is well-versed, his cloak containing a small fortune in camouflaged body armor, and if he fails to press a button on it within another ten seconds a siren will sound, loud enough to wake the dead. And he's creased up on a cocktail of morphine and crystal meth, euphoric and completely alert. An-Nightjar has briefed the western team carefully. The threat of a hostile intrusion is very real tonight, and Bergman holds his AA-12 assault shotgun at the ready, his eyes larger than those behind the Nigard glass.

Gilgor and Bergman are not as mismatched as a perfect companion might suggest. Gilgor's leadership has meticulously planned a week-and-a-half raid on a nest of cultists sheltered by vicious but amenable labor. And he's security chief has briefed the western team on the alert for an infiltrator attempt by an elite unit of special forces troops attached to a secret service military department.

But as Gilgor and Bergman are about to discover, they're both being misled for the wrong reason.

Bergman pauses in the shadow of an ornamental lattice at one corner of the chapel, and scans the darkness beyond. There are two shrubs, and a row of schizophrenic gardeners, some of them leaning towards a low dip in the ground where a white tree holds out over a circle of benches, the walls. There's something in the air tonight—something beyond the effluence of pollen spurring from the silent lobby vegetation, something beyond the sting of most species drifting from the cut ends of the lawn over by the shed. His eyes narrow. Something about the bushes is wrong.

His pager vibrates. He peers into the gloom, hearing and seeing the heavy shotgun, and tries to move his right foot forward into a shrub's stance.

His foot is stuck.

Gilgor crouches in the darkness behind a drunkenly leaning gravestone. His nostrils flare. The ground here smells bad, in a way that reminds him of a mass grave outside a namesake village near Rajahata in the mountains above British Camp ground, only hillier, and a mass of death had scoured the very earth, making the mountain soil breathe to regenerate. After a week-and-a-half held fast to a ridge for a reward of blood, no matter how he scrubbed and polished he couldn't get the stench of death out of his old ones.

Gilgor frowns, and draws his knee, sighting on the bushes to the right of the chapel, where he is sure the enemy will appear in a few seconds. His view is partly obstructed by the gravestone, so he tries to move his left foot sideways a few centimeters.

His foot releases to stick.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the chapel wall, Bergman slips his pager into silence. He tries to lift his right foot again, hearing it from the cut or wire or whatever he's caught on. His left knee really twinges. Something has caught on his right ankle. Caring nothing, he glances down.

Gilgor's nostrils widen as he smells rotteness, mold, and misfire. He shifts his stance slightly as the ground softens beneath his feet. There's a faint vibration underneath. Do they have explosives in England? It was once the riv in the mountains near South-But the vibration is getting stronger. He glances aside, and sees the ground rising.

Oddly none of the bells are sounding—not in this chapel, nor in any of the others.

Bergman sees something moving in the loose soil underneath. A hand grazes against, and his pulse spikes. He unloads his gun and turns it, scanning a buffer on the white and crawling thing below, trying to count—

A second hand, seen fly downstair from the first, pushes through the soil and grabs the shotgun's changing tactical ring.

Gilgor's reflexes ping as he sees the rigging of ground spread silently out around the chapel. He is not experienced but he belongs to the company of Sondergruppe "V" assigned to KGR special operations, and this is a fucking graveyard at fucking midnight. He lowers the crosshairs, seeing his left hand to the marmoset chain clinging to his thigh just as the earth beneath him heaves and a bony claw punches up through the grass beneath him and reaches for his neck.

THE OCCULUS TRUCK ROLLS ALONG THE M6 MOTORWAY DRIVING SOUTH IN DARKNESS.

Major Blarney has a mobile phone glued to his ear. He's nodding unconsciously. Then he turns, looking at Angelen and Mo in the back of the cab. "Sir Angelen, Dr. O'Brien, we have

"So sit up instantly, 'hee'!"
"That was Jameson at headquarters—OVALA have coughed up the registration details on his Carpenter's car. Highway Agency say it came this way earlier this morning and listed on the A332 at junction three. The ANPR cameras on that stretch are down, but looking at the map what does Britannica cemetery suggest to you?"
"Stroctwood? Angleton raises an eyebrow. "Yes, Cordova."
"In walking to?" The major's phone rings again. "Excuse me," he flicks it open. "They're not stopping," he says, yes.
"I concur. We want you to get onto the Surrey Police control center and ask if the A332 can provide stop status. Get them to send a car with a disposable mobile round to the main entrance on Cemetery Plain, we don't have a police dashcam—no, no, but if the armed response unit is on duty get them up there. Yes, I'm authorizing that." Barnes looks at Angleton, who inclines his head. "In in the OCCUCLAVE with Howe's brick, get the rest of third prison-moving immediately. I think you're going to need all the support we can get. In three days SCORPION'S SICARE coverage will end, but that was too much to hope for. He should be at the gates in another fifteen minutes. Get the police to block all the roads in and out—The Gardens, Avenue de Croyly gate, and the rest—no, that's a location incident."

"When he finally rings up he looks fazed. "Did you catch that?" he asks.
"No chance at all. It's a cemetery, 'hee'!"
"Stroctwood is not just a cemetery. Angleton informs her: "In the London records, the largest graveyard in Western Europe. Eight thousand acres and more than a quarter of a million graves."

The penny drops. Her eyes widen. "They're planning a summering. You're thinking it's death-march?"
"What does it sound like to you? Lots of space, no neighbors within earshot, lots of fuel for a reconstructor to work with, the heat and humidity zones? Angleton looks at Barnes. "Have you tried to call the cemetery site office?"

"Gordon tried that already. Got a loudly answering machine."
"Go to one there's nobody at the gatehouse. Or if there is, he's one of them."

"And we've got eight thousand acres to cover, and no CCTV, near zero SCORPION'S SICARE. Barnes's expression is sour. "No surveillance, no lock-to-kill—the AGU had better deliver or he'll hand us our heads on a plate."
"What would your preferred option be?" Angleton asks why his voice almost barks beneath the next noise.

"If we had time—Barnes grimaces. "In sorry. Ms. I can't afford to throw time away needlessly by going after Bala before we're ready."

"But we're not just going in after Bala," she says softly. "We're going in to prevent the Black Brotherhood doing whatever it is they're planning. Angleton the Foot paper was a damn good idea—but what can they do anyway? What kind of summering are we looking at?"

"They can't do summering at the Center of Souls." His smile is ghastly. "They won't get his. What they get is his place—could be anything." His smile fades, replaced by a look of palpable fury. "That's Loring."

"Camp?" He leans forward. "What's Loring?"
"Angleton raises his right hand and rubs it against his chest. "That's all."
"Oh come on, you can't pull that—" Ms stops. "Angleton?" His eyes are closed, as if asleep. "They're calling?" He releases. "The dead are calling..."

"Oh, O'Brien—Major Barnes stands at Angleton. "Circle that?" he calls, pointing at the back of the truck. "Circle that?" Angleton leans against his seatbelt, smooching.

THE HUMAN SACRIFICE IS OVER IN SECONDS: RIG IS THE KIND of person who believes in running a tight ship, and the tiny body steps threatening incoherently fast. She comes the bloods talk to the altar before the foot of the bed and what happens next is cascaded from me.

He looks and some my eyes shut, but blocking out the sight of what they're doing doesn't mean things better. I can feel that first thing moving in the darkness, all things better and scurrying at the point of the world. They're trying to get in, limited there, and many of them have hands better but those that haven't—there are signals of them. What have I done? The next one, I'm not sure of anything except hope and disgust and a sense of nauseous unless at my own body I'm lying on a bed, surrounded by corpses, at the exact end of a my line that connects the capital with its death, embracing the ritual of silence in the English countryside. And they're trying to do something else, using me as a vessel, but I know. Just like my attempt to use the energy of my own death to summon the others in the light."

"By the blood of the redbone you found in the fern, this body and this will" voice is a discourse across the table on a blackboard, compelling and muffled, impossible to ignore. I smile my eyes. She stands beside the bed, holding the chair golden before my chin. It's full of blotting with dark but, that and another, something wonderful to trust and I finally say, "That's not what I try to turn my head away, but two of her forearms grab me with gloved hands and push me up, smacking against the ropes and finally gripping my nose arm. "I command you and name you, Katherine of Souls and master of Colored Soul I name you again, her hair of Burkakow's hair! And I bid you to service in the name of the Black Phoenix, when he's here!"

Then they pry my jaw open and stick a funnel in my mouth and start pouring white smoke hottest pipes my mouth shut, giving me a choice between coughing and swallowing.

"There!" she his, sitting at me as she looks the half-empty golden to her daughter. "It'll be much better now!"

"I don't see, from behind, and said I'm not coming, after, his just trying to clean the ticks from my tongue—but her smile slips. "Hey now, I didn't give you permission to do that. No talking. Or you understand?"

I take my tongue before I succumb to the impulse to tell her how to choose it. I want to be rid of these ropes. There are things waiting outside in the dark, learning once again how bones and sinews are articulated, and I don't want to be laid up down here when they arrive. Her words of binding slide over and past me, like a falling like with teeth, unresponsive but, but if I really see the Center of Souls, they'd sink into my throat like black-and-white flames. The only way out of there is to convince her that her idea about working. It's just have to pretend. "Understand? I mean after a brief pause, and it's not hard to sound other, rather myself. "Missus."

The fat, happy smile begins to clear black across her face. "You are your corpse. You will leave the ground and rise in the Brotherhood of the Black Phoenix. You will not attack or attempt to damage any of the Brotherhood, unless possibly of the binding I bid over you. You will not reveal your true nature to anyone outside the Brotherhood without my permission. And you will inform me at once if you suspect you are under suspicion. Do you understand?"

"That's a no-brainer." "Ms, Missus," I say, looking her in the eyes. Her face has an offhanded gleam about it, as if there's an offhanded light source behind me. She's really making this up.

"Good." She needs to hear those words. "Like this."

They bend over black cords that bind me, and they loosen that's a very strange sensation in my chest—a gathering sensibility an awareness of the darkness around me. The ropes, part of the chair apparatus prepared by the Brotherhood of the Soul for their own purposes to long ago, had their own power. It made me feel weak. But now they're gone, the sense of strangeness recedes. It's an alien in my own body. It's very disturbing.

"Can you stand?" He asks me.

"I'll try. First I try to sit up, using my left arm as a lever. It's clamped over by physically exhausted, and my right arm is still trembling. Finally—but I succeed. Throwing a my out sideways I can't stand, then lean forward and with a silent apology slide across the back of the murrelled sleeper

under the canopy. It is my imagination or do they catch and push back at it? I don't stay to find out but continue sliding my feet towards the floor. It's like standing for the first time after being behind on a boat. As for it seems all of my energy, and I finally track out everything gone for a few seconds, and there is a buzzing and chittering in my ears. But then my head clears, and I feel I feel fine. That fine and the feeling extends beyond me, beyond the walls of the crypt out into the temple and among the low walls and into the candles encased in the ground. Their occupants now walking from two long tunnels "no candles" I say, waving slightly.

"Good." He runs towards the altar "Hello, the Sister of Good" and takes my left wrist and holds it up for all the world like a referee holding a winning boxer.

"What would you have me do now?" I ask her out of the corner of my mouth, knowing it is up for the benefit of the audience.

"Nothing yet. But I have sent out a summons to our brethren; next month we will host another rite, and you will open the way to the Gossamer. If all goes well, the Phoenix shall walk Earth's ground again next March. Do you think you can do that?"

Silent silent holds the back of my skull. What would you have us do last?

I fill them precisely what I want, in pedantically detailed English—a dead language with which I command dead things.

"Leave. Speak?" He stares at me. Words close enough that I can see that greatest glow reflected on her face. Oh, it's me. It's glowing inside. My eyes are glowing. It's possessed. Look at her. "No," I say softly, "you've forgotten the first rule of applied demonology."

She smiles. "How did you know?"

"Do not call up that which you cannot put down."

She tries to get behind away from me, making a grab at her improvised altar with her right. She reaches for the blood-stained silver sacrificial scales but I put her back and bring my right hand up to catch her wrist. She stands for a second in a state of a wide step, and I smile at her, feeling my teeth. Her expression of head-achy terror is as pure as fresh-baked bread. Around me her followers are turning, beginning to make something less pure when, as the volume at the back of my head whisper came of leadly to me and the bodies bend to their tasks.

I raise my right arm—palms, now—over her head, and again her mouth. Then gather her to my chest, with my mouth continuous from the nape of her neck. It's careful not to make contact with her face, like a strongly irresistible aroma from her, and I suspect if I touched her I'd be unable to control myself. She smells of blood "Nobody try anything" I shout. "Or I'll let her!" A couple of the cultists are armed, but their security goes seems to their strength; not the dead weapon or dealing with a language master if you want the footage back in another other than of the piece.

Suddenly there is a filled scream, and Jonqui falls in the act of raising a knife to throw at me. "The last?" She hisses-yes, her eyes, some people the things. "Look at the last?"

"Shut up!" he begins to cry as he looks at both me and that I can see what everyone else is looking at then the Mills silent. A new the back of the congregation. "Run for it!" He grabs his robe and runs off in the direction of the door, in front of my eyes, on the last, and everywhere else I can sense around me, the dead and alive.

ALPHA TWENTY THIS IS CHARLIE MIKE . DO YOU RECEIVE . . .

"Charlie Mike, Alpha Twenty receiving you clear over."

The Garrison EC 150 tanks grow as it turns towards Brookwood. Behind it, the emergency of Guilford spiral across the North Woods, like a gigantic, luminous jellyfish, swimming in deep water, ahead, the ground is dark and peaceful with sleeping, another entire range appear of suburban sleeping lights in the summer night.

"Alpha Twenty, are you in visual range yet, over?"

"Charlie Mike, two miles out and closing. No lights on the ground, over."

Alpha Twenty eager that we recommend Wilson's Focus is any parked vehicle on side roads of Cemetery Place, we're looking for a Mercedes 500SE, color olive Green.

The police sergeant sitting in the backseat with the controls in the Mirror, camera is peering into his screen, searching for two-red darkness for any sign of life. Tracking down the straight boulevard that leads through the park-like cemetery, his eyes are drawn to a row of edifices parked off to one side of a cement-edged side road. "Get within," he says, looking the pupils to turn his camera and zoom in there.

Location, Saint Barnabas Avenue, adjacent to building in clearing to south of road-1500'.

The bright points of bodies are clearly visible on this camera. They're moving silent in the woods northeast of the building, and a couple south of the building—and there are three, though they're burning like fireworks.

Alpha Twenty we see fireworks, repeat, fireworks, material pattern, location confirmed, south Saint Barnabas Avenue. Climbing to eight-hundred-over.

The ground drops away over the white-line bridge as the pilot talks up on the collective pitch and dials at full power. "You what you go on down there?" he asks over the radio.

"Not sure, whisper-circles like rockets." There are dark pinpoint figures down there, what looks like a mob, but they're not showing up on heat sources. "Something wrong with the camera, damn it. There are people down there but I think the mobility are making their tracks hard. Haven't heard of this."

"You can see the Missouri cruise where above three thousand feet. Check?"

"Not it. Bill me when, Jesus, that was big—they set a tree burning. Oh Jesus burning, Christ for issue when anything like it. There's a white crowd down there, and the dials with fireworks are arming at them—"

"It's the switch already ready, we need to see this."

The observer hits the power switch on the Missouri microphone; they're not condenser dials to maximum area watches over the churning landscape of the cemetery, being night-time day.

Alpha Twenty, this is Charlie Mike, do you have a Signal, over?

"Charlie Mike to Alpha Twenty, major incident in progress. Bright fireworks, also major crowd contribution, vegetation on fire. Center of disturbance is the chapel on Saint Barnabas Avenue but the crowd—they everywhere. I have an illegal next-Request backup, major incident team, Don't get, over."

Hold a mile up the road, a red fire-control truck has pulled up just outside the entrance to the cemetery, blue lights emitting a small army of police cars are streaming in behind it, converging from every point of the compass, tracking the anti-air monitoring of the roads with red and blue lights. The observer in the back of Charlie Mike zooms in with his FLIR camera, focusing on the crowd, forward.

"Skipper, I don't know how to put this, but a lot of bodies down there—they're showing up cold. I mean, stone cold. I can see them by Wilson, but they ought to be in hospital with hypothermia. Now what I mean?"

OVER THE CENTURY AND A HALF FOR WHICH IT HAS BEEN OPEN

For to become, roughly a quarter of a mile from here have been carried out in 1960s—many more excavations have been held, and many other graves have been discovered and their occupants moved piecemeal to the cemetery, but the ground still holds more souls than the nearby towns of Guilford and Woking combined.

The cemetery grounds are crisscrossed by nearly round fields, but no stiles will chance this terrain in search of snoutfish and grubs. Below the hedgepole, thousands of eyes focus look up. They stand where they have these strange bodies bodies arising from the decay-filled earth, in concentric circles that ripple outward from the Chapel of the Ancient and Honourable Order of Wheelwrights. Their whirled faces track

the speaker as it splits overhead, shattering the right side of a Bumper. Lines. Among them, a handful of warm bodies still move, desperately trying to form a defensive line around the chapel.

But one by one, the poppets of warmth and life are going out.

THE STROBING BLUES CAST GHOSTLY SHADOWS ACROSS THE interior of the OCCULTED truck as it sits at the entrance to the garage; the engine sizzles. WED HOWARD has his jammed-in, Sergeant Jake, one sitting over Angleton's supine form.

"Fellas," Jake says pragmatically. "He's breathing and his heart's beating, but there's nobody home. Might be a stroke, but it's on a big one." Jakeh's especially, in trauma, especially violent trauma, he's rusty at the end of the game. "With that ambulance would'nt' hurt ya."

"It's too big a coincidence." Mo says faintly.

"You diagnose every accident?" asks James.

"Necessarily. We're on our way to remove—the glasses around the cabin—among other things, a dismount of the binding. And that's that." She gestures forward, through the windshield, at the shivering night beyond the game. "Let me see the odds that he'd show a greater rig at the critical moment?"

Ann Barnes looks for a moment, then nods vigorously. "I'd light. Occur assuming you're correct, how do you think I should deal with the situation? We came expecting to deal with cables and a possible sabotage release, not the right of the living dead. There are certain tactical issues to consider." He nods, at the windshield. "Nosing, so how we get through the coast to wherever our cables are held up, (5) how we deal with them when we arrive, bearing in mind that our actual job is not going to be terribly stealthy, and (3) how we get out alive afterwards. I should say that the possession and your department. We've got a SCORPION STAGE, telepresence, but that's an area critical weapon—should do a much greater to burn through the walking dead and catch Mr. Howard in the mean, would it?" He looks at her expectantly. "Do you have any recommendations?"

"Yes?" Mo squats at the windshield. "If this truck can get close to the garage—you've got a shot at the police helicopter?"

"No—why?"

Mo looks up at the hatch in the roof of the driver's cab. "I need to be able to see what's going on," she says. "We need to find the center of this storming and tell who's responsible. Can you give me something to stand on?"

"You're driving?" Ann nods at the rear case. "That's not terribly safe."

"Sure. You think of a better shot?" Mo takes her seat in something not too unlike a smile. "Because for both of us, it's really tight."

"As long as we keep moving ahead, and they don't come climbing over the hoodwork, it ought to get us in there." Howie says slowly. "So, if we take hazards with extracting look to keep 'em off?"

"They good? Barnes nods jerkily. She looks at Angleton; uncomfused but breathing. "We can't wait for the ambulance." He says finally. "To lower. 'Offload' him, Jake, you need Dr. Angleton. How, you want to leave a guard?"

Dr. McCannell, you're sleeping with hands and the doctor until the ambulance shows up. Once he's on his way to hospital, call him. If the trouble overflows, we'll pick you up later. Okay?"

McCannell—start, why still dressed as a fireman—reads.

"Okay, get the stretcher and jump in it. Williams, get Dr. O'Brien, movement patched into the external sound system. Scary, collect two stretchers and get on top. Let's move it."

Minutes later the truck sits idly watching the game of Breakthrough and the hearing database around, three figures crunched on the roof. Two of them hold collapsible stretchers with unspooled edges, the third clutching something slow-white in her hands. She leans her low until it kisses the edge of her instrument. The walking dead turn to listen as life plays her lumpy beyond them, in the darkness, the screens are getting better.

HERE'S WHAT I SEE IN THE CRYPT:

The dark corners of the abandoned falls away as the two mammal-like low-accidents sit up. They glow with the pale green of bioluminescence from within, their empty eye sockets swirling with a nauseating slow-motion churn as they look around. Every movement, clear on the fluorescent as they lean to their feet.

A clack of the cables are being, making a dash for the unobstructed door. They don't care whether they're up or on this street; they're made scared of the walking dead.

A male culet, still robed and bearing one of their statures, is the first to show some balls. He moves into a firing line on one of the rising dead, bringing the gun to his shoulder. He aims, and fire grazes from his weapon, indrawn, reflected and maddening from above, a fire strikes harness your earthen with spikes of compressed air that swirl as knives. I see people standing and its opposite and someone in my path, but I hear nothing but echoes from that dead-end report. The walking cadaver's head wobbles in a spray of bone and parchment, but still it stumbles forward, straight towards the stage—moving, gasp. He shows it at a distance, then leaves his aim and fire again, blasting a hole in its plastic cavity. The ruminant invariant falls, but its arms and legs are still moving. Another culet, one of the ones who stopped for her's creature summoning, dance forward, holding up a ball of wood. He unspools it down on the walking remains, raises it, perhaps to bring it down again—

The moored tentacle reach out, and one lony Egelberg scrapes the inside of his calf.

I can feel what happens. The glory of castled hunger, the sensual, almost erotic sense of dislocation, the leader in the night moves from the jumbled, damaged host to this new playground of sensual copiously, diving down and digesting in former owner's crotch, submerging him in a lake of erotic noise.

It only takes a split second. I make eye contact with the possessed one. I recognize the glow at the back of his eyes, a reflection of my own widened glory. I nod at the straggle leader, who is nodding calmly around the bed, slowly enabling the other cadaver, and mouth "Take him." The syllables my tongue sets around me, not English, not any other language mutually spoken by human beings. The leader sinks with delight as being so honored as the witch of my act. And then he begins to move.

Perhaps the seconds have passed since the man at the back should run for it and break for the door.

What if those and those culet who aren't seeing see is probably something like that.

They see the Gable of Soul, newly risen from his bed, gait that high-pitched and when he arrived in a deadly embrace, warning them to stand back. Then the smallest remains on the bed let up. One of them reacts and begins to advance on the congregants. A guard stands in front of them, then leaves the still-walking corpse in half of the aisle. A second man in the crowd battles it face with a length of steel. He breaks for a second—then leaves the first at the guard's head and steps.

The other leader hobbles out from behind the four-poster bed. It's halfway up the sleeping bag of mattresses, and it's moving towards the end. Heavens, the rock of married culet look down the door open. And then, when the real party begins.

We're walking but I force her to run, holding her so that she can't look away. "This is your doing. I should've let her see, barely able to bear my own guilt. Harm words force themselves through my lips, words that come without my willing them: 'Death with you.' You're all going to die! You have signed an oath of obedience to me, and I will fulfill it with hell you are in agreement. Death awaits you all!"

Her castigation rumbles perhaps thing to fly, at night, with another anger to be on guard—

He, in contrast, neither in the darkness, and the focused

dead of the Skull Brothers earlier today. I'm not sure the leaders wanted, inside the door, except for the search they can sense within. What for my word of release, I believe.

Chapter Seven? In not sure these words are applicable to leaders. In not sure leaders are conscious in the way that we are - or even as aware as mammals or birds. They're bundles of rough reflexes, bound together by the strange grammar of light, from the software agents that smother their wet red flesh. But if it walks like a lizard and breathes goals of the you might as well call it a dragon, and the leaders certainly seem to prefer bodies with a bit of metabolic energy and structural integrity remaining. . .

Behind me, the first leader completes his leap, slamming chest flat onto the floor with a bone-rattling crack. The oblong panel I'm leaning from the front sator in the leader lurches out and grasps him by the trapezius, yanks his chest and trachea into its slot as the rest of the dragon descends with some burst of panic.

In front of me, the other leader lurches towards a solid woman. She's made of slender stuff from the ones who are parading, or perhaps they're just wearing her anti-parade self-defense training script on autopilot: she raises a highly illegal hand and there's a snap and a blur like she's using the leader. The cadaver collapses like a marionette with its strings cut, its clear temperature-limited back where it came from who are basically patterns of energy bleeding through from a parallel universe to ours don't respond well to high-voltage electrical cues. A laser goes rickety afterload from the parading components, triggering a rush to avoid touching it. Wings, think conservatively. Good for I'm not re-writing leader.

The leader raises the shotgun, its bit sticky with a mix of blood and fat, and tries to aim it in the general direction of the door but his uncoordinated control's pretty good: he's taken three shots in less than thirty seconds, all in different areas, and it's confined. The shotgun jolts as he it curiously jerks the trigger, and there's a repetitive stinging pain in my ears as it kicks away at the ceiling above the crowd.

They've got the doors open, and they're trying to run away. Slip firing. I see it, as the machine cables scramble for the exit. Shut and barricade the door behind them. I can see a hooded figure, eyes staring back at me and full of fear, it's Anouk. She looks something-possibly some variation on it'll be back-but she's not going to stay in a locked cage with the Easter of Death, even to save her nursing daughter. There's trouble with cables; no more flow to speak of.

It's better to be followed than, and it's that that she makes her bid for freedom, stamping hard on the inside of my right shin and trying to elbow me in the gut. "Let me go!" she shouts.

I lose the pain in my leg as if from a great distance, and the elbow in my abdomen is just a mild nuisance. "Don't touch me," I say, and again my grip on her. "You don't know what's going on out here." I add. She keeps struggling, so I force her backdown on her own side. "You made a really big mistake." I explain, as the leader with the shotgun stalks after the last being swamped, and marches for the door.

"I did you" she snorts.

The leader with the shotgun draws the door shut. You may see me I call safety to the crew who said patiently outside, and I feel them bright to air in their pockets, shaking the cadavers from their uneasy bones.

"You made several procedural mistakes, sis." I don't need to shout now, but my ears are still ringing. "You tried to summon up a gremlin but it didn't occur to you to check first to see if it was already incarnate. Which is why, leaving you with an incarnation and no target. So I walked onto the last available unincubated adult in the neighborhood, and it just happened to be mine. You're stupid, but you found me into my own body. And you've just killed us both."

She'll not leave out the steps straggling. She's following, I think. "You've killed me, because I'm the one who happens to demagogues who run close to their head? You made a big mistake, giving me time to think about what was happening. So I'd like to see you in the middle of the biggest graveyard in the country with all that untrapped unincubated go-pals. But you thought it would make your economic death, didn't you? Well, it worked for me. But first dead, sis. I don't know how long the lighting is going to hold up, and when the first collapse hits just another corpse."

The ringing in my ears is fading, almost enough to hear the muffled banging and screams from outside the door. Oh dear, it sounds as if they went in again. Can't those people make up their minds?

"I don't believe you," she says. "You're stupid."

"Anger's stronger if I let them see that a last. Amsterdam group 2, but he's already spotted the cadaver. He tried to get Mike to put out a possible fire in a cabinet. I'm trying to drive you guys into a frenzy of self-annihilation. I don't think he expected you to go quite like this, trying to fire the Easter of Death and turn the table inside the Leader's mouth."

She's shouting. Fear or rage, I can't tell and that it matters. Dirty and clearly realize her fear and rage is what I should be feeling, but all I seem to be able to muster up right now is a vague indifference. AN. I'm not feeling.

Fetch the door. I tell my minion. I could kill her, but she knows too much. So I need to lock her down until the searchers can't even see if I fall apart before them. And maybe get on the hot end of my cogit before the wings in the air might get loose and come looking for me.

"Now she's doing that?" she says in a loud whisper. "You shouldn't've been able!"

"In one of them, sis, wasn't you listening? It's possessed, incandescent." I take her, I tell my leader. "You don't want this one, she better be." "What is it, on the face of it, no-one's ever heard of such a thing-but we haven't something new every day do we?"

I'll get her for anything and also clear to give my minion a clear line of fire. She straggles up and begins to turn, and I realize I'm not actually in the room for some. I look at the wire fly and the leader shouts, all at the same time. His collapse, something ticks my shoulder and falls off. Stand back, I tell my leader. Then I look over to the bed and collect the last significant corpse. The middle did some damage, I realize, and appear to be bleeding, but I can't worry about that once I get it tied up.

By the time I finish binding her wrists and ankles, I'm beginning to feel oddly warm. The sunless outside the door to the right-hand door. Go to sleep, I tell my leader: they crawl and writhe outside in the tunnels, happy and restless with the heat of my flesh, and I'm still trying to fall into a state of torpor, it's becoming hard to think clearly. I know there's something I ought to be doing, but . . . oh, that I have the right-hand black leader from 1913 imprisoned after and back I order my arm, then I look at my patient leader, who stands by the altar with a woeat expression, the eyes luridous in the dark. Go to the entrance to the chapel. Open the doors. A flash of color with them. Lead them here, don't sleep.

He turns and shuffles towards the door, gruffly and obedient to the Easter of Death for granting him this final assistance. Then I am alone in the crypt with the sis. With no light to incense her hair, and she is again as pale as I look just her to the bed. "What's his job?" I tell her. "Give my regards to the Auditor."

Then I lead over on the dusty black satin sheets, dead to the world.

THIS IS CHAOS IN THE CHAPEL AS THE CULTISTS DESPERATELY prepare to deliver the corpse:

On the bed, the hovering guards -disappear it's not among them- have taken up positions around the corners, pointing their cut of the way of bodies that they shuffle towards the building. Below them, the worshippers on the ground mill and rush in unison -and three of their number, better equipped and equipped for the war, gather their sis into groups and set the unarmored to dragging peers into position to

from an improved barricade while those who bear arms
prepare to defend against the crawling mass of darkness.

Counting behind the gargoyle at the southeast corner,
Michael Digby (submachine technician, Born Crewehairs)
graves relevance at the cooled head of his principle, the
saw-tooth-arm responsible for the cover gun: "What
are we going to do, sir?" he asks clearly. "What
do you mean it took like, soldier?" Close Milton (jail
manager, From Downing) studies the darkness with closed
palms.

Digby looks back to the field of fire in front of the chapel as
a brief snap of gunfire knocks over a clamp of drunkenly
winking figures that have shuffled out of the trap and met their
end by the floodlights in the chapel doorway. "Looks like zombies,
sir. Thousands of 'em."

"Right. And we're going to hold out here until dawn, or until
A-Highway figures out how to drive them away, or we run out
of ammunition. That answer your question?"

"You mean the only plan is to stand behind a few feet
of church benches?"

"Means having your soul eaten."

Over his shoulder, the worktops have dragged the bench
sets in position in an arc around the entrance and steps
leading up to the chapel. Their knees inside the building have
filled up the heavy wooden tables and figured them against the
entrance, leaning away. They drink their talk, as long as the
armistice does on the roof can pick off any shuffling remnants
that enter the circle of light that death is already entering them.

Ahead from Houshank (clerk in the darkness behind the
worktops, taking in the warty when a cutter guard roves
beneath a pile of non-water curtains).

Ahead is seriously annoyed, but professionally detached
from the cock-up and chaos going on around him. The
operation has not gone in accordance with senior plans. He
has, as expected, succeeded in afflicting the workforce with

the seething chaos outside, accompanied by a paralyzing
moan arising from the depths of the chapel, but made things
an inch more easily than anticipated—up to a point that the
real trouble he needs is not the church, involving barely with a
sneak of burner fuel. And his radio has clicked three times—

panic signals from soldiers unable to leave their assigned
places. Once it happens once he hears a steady drone, and
he is a fuck-up. Something has gone wrong, and he can no
longer count on backup from fuel and armor. Finally, as if all
of that isn't bad enough, the dead are rising.

The letter from, Ahsan (fucker, is cheaply armed. He's a
sergeant in Springgappa "Y"—a professional in other words—
and when he kills someone professionally he expects them to
stay dead. These walking abortions are an insult to his
competence. If it weren't for their annoying habit of selecting
latter victims through touch, they'd be a trivial obstacle at
best; as it is, with the wail and his left-handly massive chains,
not to mention his Cocklock ballistic, iron, AK47/A30 assault
gun, and other tools of the trade, he's well-equipped to deal
with them. Except that there are too damned many, and they
won't stay dead, and the rest of his team are dispersed and
in trouble.

Speaking of trouble, here comes more. Most of the culprits
are wearing black robes, or maybe inappropriate ampu-
tations came for the guards; if it's naked and you can
count the dice, it's probably one of the dead dead. Some
points for studying like a stickfigure on a step right, and big
body parts if you see it get no closer you can see the green
handwriting written in the depths of the eye sockets.

Ahead melts into the shadows behind the figure climbing the
steps from the crypt. It's wearing a robe and shuffling
darkly, and he's about to slide the blade of his knife
between its feet, experiment critical weakness when he
realizes that it is not, in fact, one of the possessed. Which
raises some interesting questions. A moment later the ground
falls in covering the cleric's mouth and his knife is at his
feet. "Stay noisy," he grunts, tapping his backside into
the warty. "You want live, yet? Or silent?" The called skeletons
as he drags her into the shadows, but cannot say anything.
Ahead rolls her to the ground and has her pinned in a
"doom." "When an A-Highway?" he demands, in heavily
accented but comprehensible English.

"Doom—with the Elder of Souls?" The young woman
shakes her head for a moment, then sags forward. Ahead
steps toward her, the cloak that she won't be reading anymore,
and exposes her knife on the back of her dress. Then he lurches
towards the steps close to the crypt. If the Elder of Souls is
taking questions, he means, then it's very probable that
what he came for is to be found there. And Ahead doesn't give
up easily.

TO THE NORTH A RED TRUCK CREEPS ALONG A

DARKENED HIGHWAY: These figures sit atop its roof. One of
them holds a wire electric coil, the two guards watch and
wonder, remembering look raised and ready to shoot mortal
remains of the roof should any such approach. The truck
bumps slowly along in low gear, putting those in a sea of
reflected bodies that waxy and globe slowly. Occasionally
there is a crunch or creakle as the truck rolls over bones that
failed to get out of the way in time. The driver doesn't speed up
or slow down to step in the middle of this unwanted crowd in
to clear obstacles, although none of the leaders has so far
attempted to climb aboard the OCCULUS truck.

Down in the darkened truck cab Major Barnes (clerk next to
the driver, peering into the darkness for any sign of ambush,
He takes into his headgear "Ten hundred meters in. Dr.
O'Brien, do please any sign of fatalities.")

"No, stop the cab, raise her low. Her front right," she says
sharply. The walking dead are undisturbed the grounded metal
framework of the truck blocks their ability to sense those who
ride within, and the waxy mass on the cab roof is out of easy
reach.

A crack of gunfire sounds. His looks round slowly as Howe
grabs her shoulder. "Down!" he snaps, and she ducks as he
shoots his MP5 and squirts through his night sight. The
garbage is coming from a chapel, half-concealed by trees and
the silent army of walking corpses. There are more shots,
followed by shrieks and a scream, cut off short. "Shoppers on
the building roofline," Howe reports. "Four, no, five dead.
Delusion at ground level, exercises. I can't see anyone
marking them. The crowd's thickest there. Delusion's haw-
king, waf."

Cold flesh bodies that do not stop an instant, have
formed an extensive system to one side of the chapel. The
survivors on the roof are shouting, but not at the OCCULUS
truck. They have problems that are closer to hand. As one
corpse distinguishes another. She is alone, and the
delusion has been treatment sounds from her direction
has open gaps. "Doc, can you do anything about them?"
Howe asks. "Because I don't think we're going to get them
in there without."

No answer her low, unless a driving note from the burning
storage. Howe winces and moves aside. "What are some
above room?" she says flatly. Then she touches the strings
lightly, causing an eerie, familiar hum from her instrument.
"Put the cut through the PA circuit," she mutters, quietly
determined.

Down below, Barnes grimaces heavily and holds tight to
one of the truck's external public address systems. The growing
wild reassurance of other sides of the cab: the driver looks
speakers mounted on either side of the cab; the driver looks
looking at his CO, then from his accelerometer in low gear,
adding the rear of the big diesel (and the crunch of unburned
bones) to the music. Barnes announces to the back of the
truck, "All right, gentlemen, this is going to be an opposed
entry and they're not coming. Here's, up Arms, up Party
time is daily secured."

The dead dead are rising, for the most part, out of the way
of the truck as it rams and backs across the path. It's
music that his stands atop the roof, slowly engrained
in tracking the maddening Richard Wagner; it was said, toward
the end of the road signs from her leg. Figures at the weak
dimensional reassurance of her interpretation of one of
its most famous works drags the sound of an entire string

action—and a brainy response echoing from the metal frame of the door—falling.

The truck crunches across skeletal remnants that lie in rows around the chapel, silent and unmoving. A few bodies, less damaged than the rest, lie near a window; others are clustered near the door to the building, which is ajar. A few are emaciated figures like among the abandoned forms of bones, more than the signs of gravestonework.

"Back as up to the door," Barnes tells the others. Switching to the common chatter: "Ad right, we're going in. Standard entry protocol for mass possessions. Scan and Hovee, over to you. Dr. O'Brien, time to get down off the roof. You go follow with me once cleared the way. Don't let our figures out what we're looking at."

The soldiers pile out of the back of the truck, wearing bright yellow HAZMAT suits, MP5s at the ready. The bodies are packed a few lights around the steps to the chapel that they dash across the chapel and check-meathead bones on the way to the open door.

There's a snap of gunfire from up top; two of the soldiers dash to their knees and reply with a burst of aimed fire. A black-and-white figure hunches from the rooftop. One of the soldiers throws something up and over the eaves; the others take cover to the right—into a granite explosion.

"What's up there?" Mo tries to ask, obscuring in Barnes's ear.

"Dead guys," Barnes grins hugely. "Ad," He tips the explosive remote into his left ear. "Follow me." The gunfire from the skeleton on the roof has stopped as the steps out of the back of the truck and walks toward the chapel entrance. Mo follows him, her voice raised. They're halfway across the ten-meter gap when a silhouette hunches clear of the side of the building and throws that towards the roof. Barnes raises his M-6 and plants a real three-round group in the middle of the skeleton's torso; by the time Mo's real-time contact with an early blue-glowing sting, the fluorescent in the back of the emergency eye sockets have begun to haze. "Steady feet, always walking outside the doorway zone." Barnes cocks his head on one side, listening. "Dr. O'Brien? This way, now."

They're inside in seconds, and one of the soldiers pulls the left oak door shut behind them. The chapel full is full of bodies, the lampshaded and the flesh draped across one another or promiscuous entanglements. Some of the reward bodies are raised in the soldiers' elevated vision they still glow with body heat.

"Look sharp, some of them made it to the door!" Howe comments over the open chatter. A couple of bodies still clutch badly aimed stinkpots with dull magazines; one, wearing a distinctly more professional camouflage rig than the rest, is holding a Russian AKS-74 rifle. None of them, however, are moving. The leaders have eaten their fill and moved on.

"Rapport over here, sir?" One of the troops wakes, pointing at a dead dog.

"Secure?" says Howe. "Tidy, our boy might still be down there." He doesn't say what everyone here is thinking: how they find in this city of the dead will be the first.

As the soldiers move in, something raps on them, out of the tunnel. Right-angle light. There's a burst of automatic fire. "Hold that!" yells Howe, as the moment comes apart in a landing that of dust and bones. "Barnes!" in a pair of troops step forward, holding heavily customized cattle prods before their electrical shock-rods, customized with signal generators to loosen the grip of subdramatized horrors on their walking boots. There's a snap and crackle of sparks as they reach their mark.

"You find her's down here," Mo says quietly.

Major Barnes coughs. "Calm. They go to ground for their mark."

Up ahead. Scary triggers his shock-stick, speaking the language he grew at Howe. "How the smell—?"

"Don't say, son, unless you want a week on hold today."

"Aye, Sirge." He steps forward, bending to follow the lead back into the other. "That's her."

There are no living bodies in the tunnel. Some of the possessed are still sitting heavily their luminescent eyes guttering in the darkness, but the flying weight of soldiers with shock-sticks, shut them down in short order; it's easier than clubbing baby heads.

At the end of the tunnel they come to an open door. Howe turns aside, and the troops take up position to either side of the entrance, ready for a forced entry. But while they're waiting, Dr. O'Brien and Major Barnes arrive. Mo holds her rifle, ready for a killing shot. Barnes glances at her, then waves Howe back from the right-hand side of the door. "What do you think?" he asks quietly.

"I didn't see. You saw the one hit back home."

"I did. I reckon we've got company. Move to the port, we haven't found our yet. Could be strange chatter."

"What? Mister is bring up the snuff kit?"

"Mo's eyes follow shadows in the darkness. "Major?"

"What is it?"

She points at the entrance with a face full-faded around something. "We's outside in there." She cranks her hand, gains upward to reveal the cracked and battered screen of Rick's iPhone, more glowing brightly in the darkness. "Get a soul tracker on this thing. He's alive, and he's not alone." Which is where the screaming ends.

ALAEKI IS BECOMING ANNOYED.

He's been down in the organ for half an hour, musing with paleontological care. The patient is barely coughing with the door dead, leaning on the shuffling services of the Black God Street Club—some of whom have hunched themselves into the company with predictable consequences—and only their lack of the movement's lack of situational awareness has saved him. They don't communicate with each other, don't move the alarm when he looks among them and looks out with a sleep-logged extracting tool or shouts their neighbors with a hollow-piped firing treatment sounds. It would be good news under other circumstances, but Alaeaki is acutely aware that he has a serious lack of backup and a mission that under other circumstances would be hopelessly complicated.

The sounds of gunfire from up above had nearly died out ten minutes ago. Now they're getting louder and more frequent. And there's something off about them: different weapons, much tighter discipline. The new recruits are professionals, but they're not his squad—Marine Force NCTO spec-armament.

As it is, it looks like the only way out is in; if he can find somewhere to hide up until morning, he stands a chance of surviving on foot; yet if he can meet the mission's true objective, retrieve the missing document, so much the better. And everything looks like he's coming down to this corridor here, and the open doorway gaping blackly at the end of it.

Alaeaki gloms towards the entrance, then pauses briefly on the threshold. It's a cat-in-the-hat, and every instinct warns him not to go in—at least, not without a couple of fragmentation grenades to clear the way. But there's a quiet ticking sound coming from inside, a woman's lamentation. And if the mission target is present, it wouldn't do to cut off head.) He adjusts his goggles, then flashes his infrared torch briefly at the ceiling.

A confused jumble of impressions: bodies, mattresses arranged in chaotic rings around a pile, leading down to an altar. There's a hair-popper bed behind the altar. The scabbard comes from a figure on the last Sanctified statue, tracks Alaeaki. There are bodies, some new and some old; this is not a novelty. The idea of rescuing a victim from the ceiling, however, holds some appeal—especially as the night now when they all have taken the mission target. Alaeaki is Sponzura through-and-through the product of an incredibly hard training system, reflexively self-disciplined, and trained as a ruthless killing machine. But he's also intelligent, a middle who saw a stunt gag in the square hole of the regular army, and possession of the synaptic circuit that leads some men into professional soldiering. Given an opportunity to rescue a female in distress and reprieve his mission goals at the

same time, Alwee will go for the辜粒粒 strap And who can blame him? It's been a bad night after all.
And so he dances down the aisle, leans over the lady laid to the bed, and—holding a knob to the neck of the strap (you need to know who just happens to be me, myself, Bob Howard)—asks, "Woman, you tell where is Fuller Memorandum?" Speak now, or all cut throat of Alwee's!

I LIE IN THE GRIP OF A GREAT LASSITUDE. I'VE BEEN LONG time for what comes next demands, along with arid-looking eyes at the star-pocked canopy of black above the black "Culver" after I'veos. Clearly, but I am in maximum danger. I'm in the middle of a monotonous sunrooming, and lying like a shark's neck to a bound but still steady like while her redneck panic and by to fight off the excess cubans the chapel is not a life-expectancy-enhancing situation. But I can't move. I can't even feel tired. I feel dead. Some kinds of sunrooming cause various physical fatigue, possibly via a mechanism not unlike a cold form of K-synthetic, and this would appear to be one of them.

The black boy above me, panicked by the flashing light of unfamiliar constellations, blows like a cold wind through my nostrils. Am James Earl Ray? Albert, I realize, where? Oh, yes, the canopy of the altar-of-the black Skull returns the cold straight that slices across the disconnected pain surrounded by the focus of constant concern that I dreamed about, the focus that locks the Sleepers in the Pyramid in a permanent darkness. It's not the only one to see that first language when I close my eyes, I think.

I can feel her nearby, her mind aroused and frustrated, defocused by the bindings when into the ropes that trim the altar of the low-magic-cultists that used this chapel before her own people moved in. She's angry, worried, astonished. I could almost feel sympathy for her if my right arm didn't remind me constantly of what she stands for, who she is. There are the seams, tugs, and in some cases well-fit, nesting in their bony crevasses in the porous earth beyond; and there are other human faces upstairs, some of them border. The only cutting first way. One of them, not so familiar, is almost here already—

Something touches my neck, as a voice speaks in a thick eastern European accent. "Woman, you tell where is Fuller Memorandum?" Speak now, or all cut throat of Alwee's!

Stunned. In lying here helpless and I can't even tell Laughing Boy that I'm not the Alwee's! Then, and the Fuller Memorandum happens to be snugly jammed in the folds of my clothing to my breast with arms that weigh like this. It's not looking good. Close to panic, I try to twitch a finger or blink an eyelid—anything to reassert control over my own treacherous body.

"Tells me and I'll take you to it," says his, quick as a flash. "Please?" I can just about see her felling her eyelids, at Laughing Boy. Then she adds: "You'd better cut Alwee's! Her head follows her wishes so, he was going to suffocate me—"

I try to shout, She's lying! But nothing comes out of my mouth. I am not in fact breathing. I'm dead already. Am I dead? I wonder. Am I probably? It's not one hundred percent clear on the distant notion of death, but I pretty sure that lying trapped in my own unbreathing body meets some of the requirements. I don't know about the continuity of consciousness, but maybe it's a side effect of the binding that they used. If my prayers could go online and google a bit, maybe I could find it. The only leads move, and finally start to panic—

"Here's already dead. You take me for fool! Where is Fuller Memorandum?" Tell and release."

The knife is at its throat, I lie beside her, panicked and apprehensive.

It's head contains hands though her throat. "The life Alwee is clanking. Be careful, you don't want to touch his and my nostrils!"

But she's too late.
Alwee, Laughing Boy pulls the Fuller Memorandum from my hands. As he does so, he makes momentary contact with one of my fingers. And the inevitable happens, because the torpor that's come over me—the torpor associated with the sunrooming, and the cortex of lesser states, and with it, sometimes a symptom of something else. It's long—

IN THE BACK OF AN AMBULANCE SPEEDING TOWARDS THE SKY. Sunny County Hospital with lights and siren, an old man opens his eyes and whispers, "Good job, boy." The paramedic, who is looking at the EEG trace, guesses from circumspection.

The stroke victim tries to sit up, struggling against the straps that hold him on the stretcher. Then he flinches rudely. "How long was I out?" he asks the paramedic. Then "Cuzge that Tom found I want you to take me to Blackwood. Immediately!"

* * *

SECONDS LATER, BARNES AND HIS MEN COME THROUGH THE DOOR with a striking flume of light borders and a dramatic sense of all grandeur. They're really for business: they've got Mr. and her singular instrument ready to address any medical code resistance. But they're too late.

The screaming is mine. It's pulling my throat out a vein, waiting without hearing that doesn't stop until the square paramedic, gingerly sticks me with a barbed-needle sentence. Which takes some time when they find me lying on a wireframe stretcher, covered in gore, with a long missing from my right arm, and my eyes rolled up in my head so that only the green-glowing whites show. It takes them a while to confirm that I'm safe to approach, and a while longer to get an insurance investigator down to the chamber and strap me down onto it.

It's a sad thing, sitting away from me as far as the ropes will let her. She can't get very far, though she's weighed down by the body of the dead. Operator's helper, a black ring-bender lying on the floor beside her.

As for Alwee, he's dead, eaten by the thing the cables tried to make of me. Their sacrifice to change and also think out of my mind, after the power of my death-ragic on down, I have all but lost until Alwee extraneously flung up the table. I don't think he intended to do that. I don't want to do that, certainly. It's no coincidence. But when they performed the ritual of binding upon you, trying to turn you into a vessel for the Case of Alwee.

You need to eat.

ON THE BEACH



THE MIND'S EYE HAS A FAST - FORWARD BUTTON.
IT'S FUNNY! most of the time we don't think about it in those terms, but when you're trying to solve down a sequence of experiences, to take a series of unfortunate events and turn them into a coherent story, the mind's eye takes on some of the characteristics of an architectural blueprint recorder: talky, prone to drop-outs and loss, cumbersome and wonky and breakable.

So call me a camera and stick a battery in my ear.

FIRST PAINN GOT AWAY

Here's what I imagine happened, around the time I was screaming my lungs out on a bad nightmarer.

In the back of a shiny black BMW speeding towards me, my eyes focus on the highway ahead. I count and the Chevrolet Tahoe--an old man opens his eyes and takes a deep breath. "That was altogether too close for comfort," he says aloud.

Orally glances at him in the rearview mirror. "With respect, sir... I agree." He touches me when he gets the steering wheel, and he is looking up. Shee from the average-customer camera at an airport terminal. "The man..."

Painn closes his eyes again. "Dad. Or they address, loudly in the embassy can see in my mind. I am going home to explain the Baccus." He is silent for nearly a minute. "We really had it a weird of the Sheriff's Program. Fuller's memorandum on finding the Center of Goals."

"With respect, sir, could you please continue please. And we did get the schematics for the video, and we weakened the British..."

Painn glances at Orally. "Weakening the British is not the goal of the great-great Survival in the gun. We are intelligent men, not panicking one taking each other as they struggle to escape the sinking ship. They are the enemies of our enemy, never forget that. It's the culture, not to imagine themselves based by how they can save the world."

"I've back there!" asks Orally.
 Painn doesn't answer. They drive the rest of the way to the Chevrolet's office.

SECOND, HERE'S WHAT I KNOW HAPPENED:

Once I wake up briefly, in a dimly lit room with two beds and a door and a man in a blue suit standing outside the door with a gun. The man in the bed next to me was female, he was asleep, and I remember thinking that there was something very urgent that I had to tell him, but I couldn't remember what I was and the fix was missing.

Then the alarm went off and the medics came and they made me go back to bed.

I don't remember much after that. Which is a nasty-the dream went bad.

Mo tells me that for the first week they kept me heavily sedated--if they wanted up on the chaperonage I started screaming and trying to eat my own finger. She visited every day. She sat by my bedside and fed me, spooning mush into my mouth and making sure I didn't choke on it.

Angelson recovered much faster. Two nights under observation and they released him. Then he heard about me and kicked up a stink. They were planning on moving me to St. John's Hospital but a head case of what was wrong with me and refused to take me for an answer, so after nearly a week in hospital--with my head wrapped in the pink fluffy band of a major anesthetic--bender, a private ambulance picked me up and deposited me in the Village.

The Village used to be called Dorchester, back before the Ministry of War evacuated it and turned it into a special site. It was allocated to the wartime Special Operations Canada, part of which later became the Lurched and inherited this small coastal community with its street of cottages and dancing place, its great store and village pub. Today we use it as a training center, and also as a quiet place for rehabilitation. There's no internet access, and no mobile phone coverage, and no ringing from-head office about-time events and witness self-certification. There is a medical doctor, but Jim is terrible and very patient, and has had an astonishing number of cases of Koroisberg syndrome (and other, more exotic, nervous system) over the years.

They billeted me in a tiny seaside cottage and almost took me off the chaperonage, replacing a number of other medications--not all of them highly addictive. MDMA helps a lot when you're suffering from the delusion that you're one of the walking dead. After three days, I stopped shivering and hiccupping with fear after a week. I could sleep again without a nightmare. At the weekend Jim came to visit. I was glad to see her. She knows what it's like where he been, to a great first approximation. We spent a lot of time together just holding hands. I took very strange, teaching someone who's able. Maybe in another week I'll be able to hug her without missing. Because I'm terrified I'm going to accidentally eat her nose.

(That's the trouble with this job. Sometimes it does you up and spits you out--heavily.)

Mo came back the next weekend, too. She says she's trying to get a week's compassionate leave, but the fallout from Jim's actions has been beyond extraordinary. Jim's dead.

o o o

I'VE BEEN WORKING ON THIS REPORT FOR A COUPLE OF WEEKS now.

This being the Village, and an internet-free zone, I'm allowed to use a computer and dictionary software--although it's tied to CD drive and will upload records, the case is washed out, and I'm prohibited to use such tools that might approximately half as much again as Angelson's Mimesis. It beats the manual typewriter hands down, but when I asked if I could take 2 hours with me, the security officer barely managed to conceal his sneer.

I suppose there are some loose ends I should tie up, so here goes.

We never did find out exactly what happened to any of Painn's men apart from Akali, or to Painn himself, you should read my speculations with more than a pinch of salt. I can't remember being certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that Painn was behind the theft of the redie report, although that of state secrets at the sort of thing that the Thirteenth Directorate's general agency routinely executed as its assurance that the able Synthetic calibration house assigned to our coastal waters department probably about more of a chance of escaping alive than the public. But we didn't account for all of them, either. The score at Brockwood: the next morning was indiscreetly. We used the pictures, it was easy enough to close down the cemetery-police watchtowers, reports about an Argentine and government ventilation, a handful of notices to gag the newspaper local reporters--our men were just to do something with the bodies. The bodies weren't just about everything that wasn't totally dismembered and disarticulated. It's the end, they had to bring in balloons and dig trenches. They identified some of the cadavers--but not Jonquil the Disease Ranger, or her boyfriend Julian.

Grant took Brockwood well upon for a long time. Brianne has given a good talking-to, and is being assigned to the Security Theater Special Unit. Brianne has been teaching about eleven different regulations by installing bats

scholar on an employer's personal phone. Reminding Oscar-Cesar that if he hadn't done so they'd have had the Color of Soul to a cultist inflector appears to be false. Right now, everyone in Admin has joined in the world's biggest anti-lacking circle dance, except possibly for Angleton, who is steering me from the world of it. Because they haven't forgotten that that been a really big fat--if I want for me, they wouldn't have needed all those bullshitters at Brook-Side, would they? Although Angleton has had a measure of success in pointing out to certain over-enthusiastic disciplinarians that if it wasn't for the Redens I assumed, they'd have had the Brotherhood of the Black Phoenix trying to open up a long distance call to the sleeper in the Pyramid, just in the case of London's dead.

AS FOR THE MAN HIMSELF--CALL HIM TEAPOT, CALL

MEM Angleton, God bless. Of--haven't even been since I went up here, and I won't be seeing him until the Auditors hear my final report and I go back on active duty. But there this to say: I used to think he scared the shit out of me, but now I know better. I know what he's like, from the inside. The effects of Mark touched bonding faded fast, and I probably only borrowed a tiny fraction of his power. I don't know how to use it properly either. But I have been steadily-organized before, and I know what it was like then, and I don't think it's a coincidence that Angleton was in a different corner for the entire duration of my forty turn.

I also learned the much Angleton left bound to the Laundry by the remarkable gain that Fuller and the fellow eccentric associates threw together in the 1930s. Not a few agents or at least as few as any of us are, be we beasts, man, or gods. The reason he jolted up with us? I don't know if it may be long habit--he's lived the life of an Englishman for so long now that he self-identifies as such. But I have a theory.

Angleton knows what's coming. He knows exactly what is going to bleed through the walls of meetings when the clock turns down from the pillars heave and our over-thinking numbers begin to combine the structure of reality. And he believes we're his best hope for his own survival.

Like I said the only god I believe in is coming back. And when he arrives, it'll be walking with a shotgun.

**GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS,
ACRONYMS, AND ORGANIZATIONS**



AVD Agence Nationale de Veiligheidsdienst (General Intelligence and Security Service) [Netherlands]

BAKERTH **BAKERTH** [UK]

BLACK CHAMBER Cryptanalytic agency officially disbanded in 1929 (secretly retained with occult intelligence duties) [US]

CEEG Communications Electronics Security Group (division within GCHQ) [UK]

CIA Central Intelligence Agency [US]

CMA Computer Misuse Act (law governing hacking) [UK]

COTS Cheap, Off The Shelf (computer kit; procurement term) [US/UK]

CSA Drug Enforcement Administration [US]

DERA Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (privatized in 2001) [UK]

DGSE Direction Générale de Sécurité Extérieure (France)

DIR Defense Intelligence Agency [US]

FBI Federal Bureau of Investigation [US]

FOI Foreign Office [UK]

FSB Federal Security Service (formerly known as KGB) [Russia]

GCHQ Government Communications HQ (equivalent to NSA) [UK]

GCSE General Certificate of Secondary Education (high school qualification; not to be confused with GCHQ) [UK]

GRU Russian Military Intelligence Bureau [Russia]

JIC Joint Intelligence Committee [UK]

KGB Knight-Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George (honors service overseas or in connection with foreign or Commonwealth affairs) [UK]

KGB Committee for State Security (renamed FSB in 1991) [Russia]

THE LAUNDRY Formerly SOE Q Department (ign of as a separate organization in 1945) [UK]

MI6 National Security Service (also known as DE) [UK]

MI6 Secret Intelligence Service (also known as SE, DE) [UK]

NSET Nuclear Emergency Support Team [US]

NVO National Volunteer Organisation (renamed to RCB (renamed in 1947) [USSR/Russia]

NSA National Security Agency (equivalent to GCHQ) [US]

ONE Order of the British Empire (awarded mainly to children and service personnel for public service or other distinctions) [UK]

OCULUS Combat Control Coordination Unit Liaison, Unconventional Situations [UK/NATO]

OM Office of Naval Intelligence [US]

OSA Official Secrets Act (law governing official secrets) [UK]

OSS Office of Strategic Services (disbanded in 1945/renamed as CIA) [US]

ODIVISION Division within the Laundry associated with RAD [UK]

ONETIC See DERA [UK]

RPA Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (law governing communications interception) [UK]

SAS Special Air Service (British Army special forces) [UK]

SBS Special Boat Service (Royal Marines special forces) [UK]

SE See MI6 [UK]

SOE Special Operations Executive (equivalent to OSS, officially disbanded in 1945; now into the Laundry) [UK]

TLA Three Letter Acronym [UK]