

Mick Farren - DNA CB 3 - Neural Atrocity

CYN 256 felt one of those tiny surges from the wild, unruly, faraway depths of his mind. He didn't have a name for the small bursts of feeling. He had heard the word rebellion, but he scarcely knew what it meant. The only positive analysis he had of his situation was that somewhere, beneath all the layers of orderly conditioning, was a dark sub-mind that refused to be controlled.

He had no real knowledge of this area. A few clues floated up into his consciousness like the occasional bubbles in a stagnant pool that burst with a tiny whiff of strange, volatile gas. They told him that somewhere there was a part of him that wasn't totally adjusted. It wouldn't accept the life that limited him to his work cubicle, his sleep cubicle, and the bright curved corridor that he walked twice a day from one to the other.

It was on these walks that the disturbing thought came more frequently. As he paced the familiar route from, in this instance, work to sleep, he glanced covertly at the fellow operatives walking beside him. He wondered if they too suffered these small but nagging disturbances. If they did, they showed no signs of it. It wasn't a subject that he could dis-cuss at the fantasy session. If he was alone in his attitudes he would be treated as a malfunction. That was the thing he was most afraid of.

He walked on along the corridor, looking fixedly at the grey metallic floor with its slight downward curve. He was careful not to let his pace vary from that of the other operatives around him. He knew the Computer monitored the behaviour of all its human operatives. It was quick to act on a deviation from the norm. This too made him afraid.

He was acutely aware that this fear itself was by far his most serious deviation. He knew that once such thoughts become detectable he would be removed for immediate therapy. Therapy was something else he feared. What made this whole thought process even more disturbing was that he knew it went against the very core of his conditioning. For as long as he could remember he had loved the Computer. It was all powerful, all knowing and all caring. The never failing monitoring was the ultimate source of personal safety and comfort. The small black shiny sensors that studded the corridors at regular intervals, and unfalteringly watched over the human operatives from the ceiling of each cubicle, were his guards and protectors. The sensors were the technological expression of the Computer's love for him.

The therapy unit was the greatest manifestation of that love. All his life it had been the ultimate point of solace. Once in therapy all pain and abnormality would be gently washed away. In therapy he would be cleansed, all the pain and troubles removed from his mind and body, totally forgotten.

And yet he was afraid. He knew the fear only occupied a small section of his brain. Most of him still functioned in the same way as always. The tiny part that had changed, however, was enough to make him reject therapy and deceive the sensors. He knew that in so doing, he was setting himself apart from the Computer's merciful love, but he found he was unable to help himself.

CYN 256 came to the door of his sleep cubicle. His number was printed on the grey steel door in bold black letters. Although all the doors that lined the corridor were identical, he didn't need to check the number. He stopped automatically and, without thought, pressed the stud. The door silently slid open and he stepped inside.

The interior of the little cubicle was a soft pale blue. It was a restful contrast to the hard grey of the corridor. The sleep cubicles of C-class operatives provided no luxuries and excess space. There was a narrow bunk, a small bench, a sanitation unit, and a small strip of floor that was just big enough to turn round in. He opened the dispenser on the wall and, as always, there was the evening food tray. He

removed the tray from the recess in the wall and set it down carefully on the table top next to the styrofoam box that contained his standard set of personal possessions. He was proud of the multi-faceted lumps of coloured plastic. They were the non-functional objects that the Computer, in its grace and wisdom, allowed its operatives to keep for their pleasure.

CYN 256 picked up the five pills from the food tray. He washed them down with a mouthful of liquid from the beaker, and began to munch mechanically on the thick, brown-ish grey wafer. When he'd finished the food he dropped the tray and empty containers into the disposal vent. He pulled off his shapeless yellow coverall and stuffed it in after them. There would be a fresh coverall in the dispenser after he had slept.

Naked, he settled on the bunk in a cross-legged squat. He knew he had only a short space of time to think before the sleep gas was released into the cubicle. There was no way to resist the gas. Once it came, the next thing he would know would be waking for another work period.

He tried to think his way towards an analysis of the disturbances in his mind. It was hard. He had so little information. He was a C-class. The C-class work function was carried out on an instinctive level below that of conscious thought. Printouts came into his work cubicle from the feeder, he read them and punched out other sets of figures on his console. He had no rational idea of why he did it.

He even knew very little about his environment. He knew that beneath him, four levels down, were the living circuits of the Computer in their own world of absolute cold, moving imperceptibly in the atmosphere of liquid nitrogen. The cold circuitry that CYN 256 always somehow imagined to be a place of green silence was the heart of the vast, metal walled sphere that housed the various sections that made up the entirety of the Computer.

The next levels out from the core housed the electronic and mechanical parts of the Computer. Beyond them were the three human levels. First there was the A-class, the elite who performed complex rational exercises, next came the B-class, who guarded, maintained and repaired all functions of the Computer, and finally, next to the outer shell, were the C-class levels. The C-class provided unthinking link functions. Of all the Computer's operatives, they were the most expendable.

Far back in its history the Computer had taken over the humans who had created it. It had rechannelled their energies, eradicated the parts of their makeup that it considered superfluous and integrated them into its own construction.

CYN 256 knew nothing of this. He only had the dimmest idea of the construction of the sphere. He knew the C-class level was immediately beneath the outer shell. He had no idea that this was a 30 cm skin of spun thermo plastic and steel, with its own remote control weapons system for protection.

He had little idea, either, of what was beyond the outer shell. He knew there were other things. He had a vague idea of the complex of stuff plants that supplied the rest of what existed with its material goods. He knew that the Computer controlled the stuff plants, coordinating the monstrous logistics of production and ordering. But he had no conception of what that rest of existence was.

For the first time ever, his lack of knowledge caused him pain. He had no data to apply to his problem. He knew no precedents and had nothing to relate it to. He had to struggle to stop his body revealing the frustration. The only thing that stood out in his mind were the figures.

It had happened some ten work periods previously. He had been in his work cubicle, scanning the printouts and instinctively hitting the keys on his console, when his eye had stopped at a single line of

figures. He had broken out in a sweat, and something had knotted in his stomach. He didn't know how or why, but there seemed to be something terribly wrong with them. He had to make a considerable effort to go on punch-ing out the corresponding figure. It had all felt so out of place. It was after that his disturbances had started.

CYN 256 felt helpless. It was inconceivable that the Computer had made an error. It had to be he, and yet he didn't feel defective. He could think of no reason why he should react strangely to a set of figures. That thought took him full circle. If it was the figures that had affected him, then the error must be in the Computer, and it was in-conceivable that the Computer could make an error.

Before he could go any further, there was a soft hissing sound. The sleep gas was being pumped into the room. CYN 256 lay down and prepared for unconsciousness.

A.A. Catto paced one of the high terraces of the ziggurat. It was a restless, stiff legged pacing. She bounced slightly on the balls of her feet, giving off waves of impatient energy. Every few steps she would clench her fists, digging her silver nails into the palms of her hands. She still looked about four-teen years old with a slim, hardly developed body. For a long period she had maintained the appearance of a twelve year old, but then, for a while, she had stopped using the growth retarder, and her body had matured slightly.

It was only her face that gave away the fact that she had seen and done far more than any fourteen year old. The large eyes had a cold liquidity that seemed capable of any-thing. Her mouth, too, had a fullness that was at the same time cruel and sensual.

She halted and snapped her fingers at Lame Nancy.

'Cheroot.'

Nancy silently handed A.A. Catto a thin black cheroot and then lit it for her. Nancy had been standing quietly by while A.A. Catto performed her caged animal pacing. Nancy was almost as thin as A.A. Catto, but she looked her natural age. Her hair was bleached white and cropped very close to her head. She wore a white, skin tight, one piece fighting suit. A.A. Catto was dressed in exactly the same garment, except that hers was black with a discreet gold trim. Nancy's left leg was withered. It was supported by a black steel brace decor-ated with damascened curlicue patterns.

Nancy had been a successful madame in the city of Litz until she joined A.A. Catto's headlong band wagon. Now she was A.A. Catto's confidante, companion, lover and servant. She was consort to A.A. Catto's absolute ruler.

A.A. Catto exhaled sharply.

'Why does it have to take so long?'

Nancy shrugged.

'Preparations always take time.'

A.A. Catto stared across the broad valley that was domin-ated by the ziggurat. A wide sluggish river meandered through the valley. Its banks were lined with squat, dark green, amphibious assault craft. Lines of fighting men in black suits and helmets moved slowly towards them like dark tribu-taries. Soon, however, they would all be crowded aboard the waiting boats, and like a grim armada the fleet would

move out towards the nothings.

The nothings were the grey drifting areas of unstable matter. Since the breakdown most of the world had been like that. In the nothings the natural laws of energy, motion and gravity had ceased to exist. The huge stasis generators were the only thing that maintained a tenuous normality. They provided human beings with a few small areas on which they could live.

Quahal was one of these areas. A.A. Catto had come to it as a fugitive seeking sanctuary, but had overthrown its previous rulers and altered it to suit her own tastes and desires. In this redesigned Quahal, where her every whim had become brutal and inflexible law, she had found the environment to nurture her ultimate dream. Now she stood on top of the high black ziggurat and watched as her dream became reality.

A.A. Catto was about to conquer an unsuspecting world.

Nancy moistened her lips, hesitated and then spoke.

'Shouldn't we go down to the bunker? The assault craft will be moving off soon.'

A.A. Catto dropped her cheroot and ground it out with her foot.

'In a moment.'

She turned and stared out once again at the men beneath her. The huge multiple stuff receivers had been rigged on the plain beside the ziggurat. They crackled softly as the fighting men of A.A. Catto's custom built army came down the beam.

Each of them was bio-tailored to A.A. Catto's specific design. She had been surprised that Stuff Central had delivered quite such a vast order for men and equipment, but the Computer had started delivering without comment, and had continued to do so ever since. Very soon A.A. Catto would command the largest army that had ever existed in the damaged world.

She turned and looked at the sinister, cloud-covered mountain looming at the end of the valley, then she abruptly turned and walked quickly towards the terrace entrance. Nancy fell in behind her.

Originally the interior of the ziggurat was a black stone warren of passages, ramps and stairs. A.A. Catto had installed a system of high-speed lifts. One waited at the end of a short corridor, A.A. Catto and Nancy stepped into it. Nancy punched out the combination for the bunker, and the lift dropped through the many levels of the ziggurat and continued deep underground.

The lift came to a cushioned stop, and the doors slid silently open. Just outside the lift stood a pair of A.A. Catto's personal guards. They were two of the wild horsemen who had first aided her to seize power in Quahal. They still wore their traditional winged helmets, fur tunics and armour covering their arms. Instead of lances, however, they were now armed with deadly, full load fuse tubes.

They stepped aside to let A.A. Catto pass. Beyond them a pair of steel doors slid back. She walked through them. Nancy followed. The doors closed behind them, and they were inside the huge underground war room.

Even though she had supervised every detail of its construction, A.A. Catto still experienced a thrill of excitement when she entered the war room. Its floor and high, vaulted roof were made of the same black

stone as the rest of the ziggurat. Three of the four walls were taken up by screens that gave instant graphic representation of the state of the war.

The entire room was dominated by the big board that gave an immediate overall picture. It was flanked by smaller screens which gave details of individual campaigns. On the floor, directly in front of the board, sat five rows of red-suited aides hunched over individual monitors and battle control consoles.

Behind the aides, on a raised dais, sat A.A. Catto's six white-suited advisers. Their totally bald heads and flat expressionless faces were all identical. They were the set of specially cloned superminds whose job it was to make A.A. Catto's fantasies become reality.

In the middle of the line of advisers were two empty chairs. A.A. Catto walked briskly across the war room, moun-^{ted} the dais and sat down. Nancy dutifully followed. As A.A. Catto sat down the advisers rose and bowed. Once the for-^{malities} were over A.A. Catto's attitude became business-like. She turned to the adviser next to her.

'Is the assault craft force ready to move?'

The adviser nodded.

'They are loaded, and waiting for the final order.'

'They're netted in with the lizards?'

Another clone answered.

'They're hooked into the net, my leader.'

A.A. Catto smiled.

'Good. Start to move them out. Once they're under way I want to inspect the lizard installation.'

She issued a fast series of orders. The advisers' fingers flew over the touch panels on the desk in front of each of them.

'Check guidance system.'

'Checked, my leader.'

'Bring up the task force on the big board.'

A yellow arrow glowed into life beside the symbol that represented Quahal.

'Activate scanner on forward craft.'

One of the smaller screens flickered into life. It showed the view of the river from the leading assault craft. A.A. Catto looked satisfied.

'Right, move them out now.'

The advisers' hands moved across the touch panels. The picture moved as the craft swung into the centre

of the river. The yellow arrow began to move very slowly across the big board. A.A. Catto sighed.

'They're on their way.'

She looked round at her advisers.

'Will the air support be ready when we need it?'

The advisers nodded.

'Yes, our leader.'

She placed her hands flat on the desk and stood up.

'We'll move the second wave immediately the men have come off the beam. Now I want to check the lizards. If they fail, we will lose everything.'

The advisers rose and bowed, and then settled back to their work. A.A. Catto, followed, as ever, by Nancy, hurried out of the war room and into the lift. The lift dropped two more levels to the very deepest of the underground structure.

The lift doors opened to reveal six soldiers in black fighting suits and black helmets guarding the entrance. As A.A. Catto stepped out of the lift they saluted smartly. Two sets of thick steel doors led to a room almost as large as the war room. The air was thick with the acrid smell of big lizards kept in a con-fined place. The animal stench contrasted sharply with the gleaming electronic equipment that lined the walls of the room.

As A.A. Catto entered, the dozen or so red-suited aides stopped what they were doing and came to attention. A.A. Catto waved them back to work and walked quickly to the lizards. There were four of them, lying on their sides apparently unconscious. A large number of electrodes were attached to their heads. Wires led away to the various electronic units. A.A. Catto frowned. The animals' breathing sounded laboured and uneven. She beckoned to one of the aides.

'Are these animals alright?'

The aide nodded.

'They are as healthy as can be expected.'

'What about their breathing?'

The aide pointed to the feeder tubes that were embedded in the beasts' shoulders.

'They are being fed with a mixture of nutrients, tran-quillizers and cyclatrol. The cyclatrol heightens their way-finding ability, but the combination of the drugs does appear to impair their breathing a little.'

A.A. Catto looked at the lizards doubtfully. They were the cornerstone of her entire existence. They had an instinctive grasp of the relationship between different places in the damaged world. They could find the way from one point to another. They knew where they were, and humans didn't.

All, that is, except a very few random freaks who were born with the power of wayfinding. They were,

as a rule, difficult and unmanageable. Lizards were much safer.

The electrodes in the lizards' heads fed their brain patterns into the computer complex. There they were analysed and finally fed to A.A. Catto's armies as they moved through the nothings in the form of detailed course instructions. It was a crude set-up but incredibly effective. It meant that A.A. Catto could wage war across the nothings. It meant her armies could descend on target cities with a certainty of absolute surprise. It was vital that nothing should go wrong with the system. A.A. Catto glanced sharply at the aide.

'What happens if one of the lizards dies?'

'If the signals from one lizard fade, the system switches instantly to one of the other animals. We only use one at a time. In addition we have a herd of prepared beasts. We can change lizards in a matter of minutes.'

A.A. Catto still wasn't satisfied.

'If we broke contact for even a few seconds it would be a disaster. My armies would be lost in the nothings. What happens if all four should die at the same time?'

'The advisers have calculated, my leader, that the probability of that occurring is 1 in 278 unless, of course, Quahal itself is under attack.'

A.A. Catto looked hard at the aide.

'There must be no failure. You'd suffer horribly before you died.'

The aide bowed.

'There will be no failure, my leader.'

A.A. Catto snapped her fingers at Nancy.

'It has started. There is nothing else I can do until the army reaches Feld and is ready to attack. I shall go to my suite. You can come with me.'

Nancy took a deep breath and smoothed down her already form fitting white suit.

'I'm coming, sweetie.'

The teacher raised his head. It was a silent signal that the period of meditation was over. The line of black-robed monks who sat facing him, cross-legged on their rush mats, also looked up. The silence seemed to deepen as they waited for him to speak. A mass of candles flickered in the big multiple candelabra. They threw a soft fitful light on the bare stone walls of the brotherhood meeting room. The teacher took a deep breath.

'We face a very grave situation.'

The monks' faces showed no emotion. There was a certain uniformity about their features. They all had the same prominent cheekbones, slightly flattened noses and large dark eyes. Their straight black hair was trimmed just above their shoulders. The teacher, however, was a very different figure. He wore the

same black robe, but his whole appearance was frail and ancient. His skin was pink and soft like a baby's. It was terribly wrinkled, and totally without hair. Only his eyes seemed to be still young. They had the same purposeful calm as the rest of the brothers.

'It is so grave that the very survival of what is left of the world is threatened.'

One of the monks controlled himself with a supreme effort of will. Every fibre of his being wanted to shift uncomfortably, but he managed to remain motionless. It was only appropriate for a brotherhood executive. His name was Jeb Stuart Ho. He sat about halfway down the row of monks. He was aware that part of the gravity of the situation was his direct responsibility.

Over the centuries since the natural laws had ceased to be consistent and human life had clung to areas where artificial stasis could be generated, the brothers had worked single-mindedly on their never ending task. They observed and recorded the smallest event in the hundred thousand communities that had survived in the grey nothings. Every-thing that happened was recorded in their graphs, from the major to the insignificant. The graphs charted the passage of past events. They were fed to the huge bio-cybernetic brain. From them, the brain projected the course of the future. When disaster appeared to threaten, the brotherhood made adjustments. This was the role of the executives.

Jeb Stuart Ho had been given such a task. His assignment had been the elimination of A.A. Catto. Her killing would have been a surgical operation to avoid a catastrophe, but Jeb Stuart Ho had failed. When he returned to the brother-hood temple with his mission uncompleted he had expected some kind of punishment. Nothing had happened. No one even referred to the matter. It didn't take Jeb Stuart Ho very long to realize that his own guilt and self-reproach were the worst punishment.

'I have called thirty of you together because we must complete the task that lies in front of us. If we should not succeed, the disaster would prove almost total.'

The teacher's expression didn't change, but Jeb Stuart Ho felt the urge to squirm increase.

'You have been trained since your birth for executive action. You have explored the deepest corridors of your beings. You have fought and meditated. You have studied the martial skills until no man can best you in combat. You can walk without disturbing the air, and move without being seen. Yet, the task in front of us may even put you to an awesome test.'

The teacher paused, and a monk at the end of the line raised his hand.

'Teacher?'

The teacher slowly turned his head.

'Na Duc Rogers?'

'Has not the failure of Jeb Stuart Ho cast a shadow over our capabilities?'

The teacher smiled.

'The wise man holds his dish level after once he has spilled the soup.'

Na Duc Rogers frowned.

'Surely we can no longer have faith in our invincibility? That could hang over us like a blight.'

The teacher's eyes twinkled.

'The humble man who dwells in the barn with his cow very quickly learns to like the smell.'

Jeb Stuart Ho could contain himself no longer. He raised his hand.

'Teacher?'

'Jeb Stuart Ho?'

'Would you outline what this task is to be?'

The teacher looked hard at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'The foolish man summons the river to come nearer so he may cross it the sooner.'

Jeb Stuart Ho silently accepted the rebuke. The teacher waited for a while, then he spoke.

'What would you do, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

Jeb Stuart Ho took a deep breath. The question was obviously a test. He answered quickly without faltering.

'The city of Feld is already under attack, and A.A. Catto's legions are moving centrewards on a broad front. In my estimation there must be some kind of guidance system that enables her armies to move through the nothings. I would strike at Quahal in force, and destroy this system and her whole base of operations.'

The teacher permitted himself a discreet grin.

'That is a good analysis, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

'Thank you, teacher.'

'However, you strike at the branches, not the roots.'

Jeb Stuart Ho did his best to disguise his discomfort.

'I do, teacher?'

'You do, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

Another monk, Dwight Luang, raised his hand.

'What then is the correct mode of action, teacher?'

The teacher bowed his head.

'Young men hasten so swiftly towards their truths. They flee from ignorance as though a tiger was at their

heels. What would you do, Dwight Luang?

'I would suggest the same as Jeb Stuart Ho.'

The teacher looked slowly along the line of monks.

'I imagine you all think the same?'

The monks sat still and silent. The teacher nodded.

'I too would concur with Jeb Stuart Ho, except for one factor. Tell me, Dwight Luang, did A.A. Catto raise her array among the population of Quahal?'

'No, teacher. Quahal's only inhabitants are a few hundred special function cloned servants and primitive warriors. She ordered her army from Stuff Central.'

'A large army was delivered to her in a very short time?'

Dwight Luang nodded.

'Yes, teacher.'

The teacher looked at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'So, do you now have reason to change your analysis?'

Jeb Stuart Ho was confused.

'I'm sorry, teacher. I do not yet grasp your argument.'

The teacher nodded.

'Let us go further, then. Stuff Central provided the army without comment, is that not correct, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

'Yes, teacher.'

'And yet this army provides a tangible threat to many of the stasis settlements. A war on this scale could disrupt huge areas by the destruction of their generators. Our computer predicted that the loss of stable land area could be as high as 65.79 per cent. It is inconceivable that the Stuff Central computer would not make the same calculation on receipt of such a huge order.'

The teacher paused.

'Perhaps Jeb Stuart Ho would remind us of the Prime Term of Reference of the Stuff Central computer?'

Jeb Stuart Ho recited parrot fashion.

'The-Stuff-Central-computer-will-coordinate-the-manufacture-and-supply-of-material-goods-for-the-surviving-communities-to-the-benefit-and-wellbeing-of-those-communi-ties.'

The teacher nodded.

'In-the-same-way-as-the-brotherhood-analyses-events-and-predicts-future-patterns-for-the-benefit-of-these-communities. Is that not correct, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

'That is our Prime Term of Reference, teacher.'

'Then would you not say that the Stuff Central computer was in breach of its own Prime Term in supplying A.A. Catto's army?'

Jeb Stuart Ho bowed.

'Yes, master, it is in error regarding the benefit and well-being of the communities.'

'But the Stuff Central computer does not make errors.'

'No, master.'

'So what do you deduce from this set of facts?'

Jeb Stuart Ho felt himself go cold.

'The Stuff Central computer is allowing a potentially disastrous war to take place.'

He hesitated. The teacher looked at him sharply.

'So?'

Jeb Stuart Ho moistened his lips.

'The Stuff Central computer has gone psycho.'

There was a long pause while the terrible fact was digested. The silence was finally broken by the teacher. His voice was very soft.

'Would you now change your analysis, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

Jeb Stuart Ho took a deep breath.

'An executive operation must be carried out against the Stuff Central computer, either to cure its capacity for error, or to isolate and destroy the sections of its chain of reason that are malfunctioning and creating the error.'

The teacher beamed.

'You have done well, Jeb Stuart Ho. That is, in simple terms, the task that is to be assigned to all thirty of you.'

There was another long silence. Some way down the line of monks from Jeb Stuart Ho, Edgar Allan Piao raised his hand.

'What about the attack on Feld, teacher? Surely we cannot allow this slaughter and destruction to take place?'

The teacher shook his head sadly.

'Our concern must be with the cause, not the symptoms. Our computer directs us that we cannot intervene or take sides in the siege of Feld, or any of the other battles that will undoubtedly take place.'

A look of pain passed across Edgar Allan Piao's face.

'But teacher...'

The teacher cut him off sharply.

'Your directives are very clear.'

'We've picked some bummers before, but this must beat all.'

Billy Oblivion winced as a stick of bombs exploded on the other side of the city, rattling the glasses on the table and shaking down lumps of plaster from the ceiling of the gin house. The Minstrel Boy continued to stare morosely into his mug. There was another series of explosions and Billy took a hasty drink.

'They're going to bomb the whole fucking city to rubble. I wish we could find a way out of here.'

The Minstrel Boy looked at him with an expression close to boredom. He pulled his wide-brimmed hat further over his sunken eyes.

'If there was some way out of here, we'd be long gone by now. There's no way. The whole city's surrounded.'

Billy's head dropped and he looked bitterly at his drink. He pulled his fur jacket tighter around him. The log fire in the stone hearth had begun to go out.

'We're going to be blown up for sure.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'Maybe, maybe not.'

'Huh?'

'I said maybe, maybe not.'

Billy's face tightened.

'I heard you, goddamn it. What's that supposed to mean?'

The Minstrel Boy sighed. His thin, pale face, framed by the mass of curly black hair, looked tired and ravaged.

'I would have thought it was obvious. They're just playing with us. They're using dive bombers and H.E.'

bombs. It's a cat and mouse game. If they really wanted to level the city, they've got at least two divisions of shock troops armed with fuse tubes who could take the whole place out in less than an hour.'

Billy scowled.

'You could be right.'

'I'm usually right.'

'What I want to know is why? Who are these people? What do they want to attack the city for? There ain't nothing worth having.'

The Minstrel Boy poured the last of the gin gourd into his mug. He was three parts drunk and felt prepared to accept anything.

'Who knows? There's always someone who wants to have a war.'

Carmen the Whore, who was sitting at the same table with them, snorted loudly.

'What I want to know is why can't the nobles and the guild get their shit in gear to surrender?'

The Minstrel Boy lit a small, black cigar and inhaled deeply.

'How should I know? You're in a guild. Why can't the hookers push it through?'

Carmen grimaced.

'Don't make me laugh. The hookers got a guild because in this city everyone from beggars to surgeons got a guild. It don't mean we got a voice on the council. You got to have mucho credits for that.'

Billy gave a wry smile.

'You gotta have a few credits, Carmen baby.'

'Bullshit!'

Carmen's usual blowsy, dumb-blonde bonhomie was getting threadbare from the bombing.

'You need more than we got to make a noise on the council.'

Olad the Siderian fingered the carved butt of his long barrelled.68 spiral magnum. He was a freebooting mercenary who made up the four at the table. He wore the usual rover's leather breeches, a tunic decorated with brass studs, and heavy bracelets round his wrists. His powerful arms were covered in tattoos, and his head was shaved. An old scar ran down one side of his face, partly covered by his full beard.

'I wish I could face them. I'd show them how a man fights.'

Like most of the inner fringe rovers, he was overly con-cerned about his courage and manhood. The Minstrel Boy's lip curled.

'Yeah?'

'Sure, if they'd come out and fight like men.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned crookedly.

'I'll lay odds that as soon as they enter the city, you'll be worming your way out like the rest of us.'

'I'll die like a man.'

'Why?'

'Huh?'

The Minstrel Boy brushed ash from his black velvet frock coat.

'I said why will you die fighting?'

Olad puffed out his barrel chest.

'A man's got to do...'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'What a man's got to do. Yeah, I heard it. That ain't no reason. I mean, it ain't your city.'

Olad ran a hand across his shaved head.

'That's true,'

He grinned and snapped the clay neck of a fresh gin gourd.

'I tell you one thing, we still got booze. That can't be bad.'

In fact, the Court of Angels, the square where the gin house was situated, not only had booze, but functioned very much as normal. The Court of Angels was the centre of Feld's criminal underworld. It lay where a number of narrow twist-ing streets converged between the ducal palace and the north wall of the city. It was a run-down, dirty, bustling area, crowded with brothels, gin houses and gambling dens. It provided sanctuary for the brigands, whores, pickpockets, gamblers and drifters who passed through the city. There would be the occasional raid from the pikemen of the Watch. A few thieves would be dragged away summarily to lose their right hands, and some prostitutes would find themselves on the bad end of a flogging. The real authority in the Court of Angels was the robbers' guild. They protected the bor-dellos and the gin houses, regulated the level of crime in the city, ran off maverick, independent operators and took a cut from everything that went on. There were smaller guilds for the whores, pickpockets and beggars, but it was the robbers' guild that wielded the power.

The system had been in operation almost since the foun-dation of Feld. It had history and tradition, and ensured an amicable coexistence between the burghers and the villains of the city.

When the vast army had appeared out of the nothings, with its advanced weapons and horde of black clad, highly trained shock troops, the system had still held together. When the dive bombers had dropped

like hawks on the city, the nobility had retired to the inner sanctums of stone palaces, and the merchants had retreated to the cellars of their comfortable thatched houses. In the Court of Angels there was nowhere to hide. By necessity life went on almost as normal. The whores weren't overworked, and it was a slow time for robbery, but the taverns found themselves packed as the inhabitants of the Court found there was no escape except to get drunk.

Heine, the blind beggar, walked into the gin house, re-moved the rag that covered his eyes while he plied his trade, and looked anxiously round. Carmen the Whore beckoned to him.

'What's new, Heine?'

'It's terrible, terrible.'

Olad looked up.

'What's terrible?'

Heine shook his head.

'The shame of it.'

Olad grabbed him by the arm.

'The shame of what?'

'I can hardly bring myself to speak of it.'

Olad started to twist Heine's arm.

'You'd better speak of it, or I'll break your scrawny arm.'

'Alright, alright. I'll tell you, just let me go.'

Olad released him.

'Well?'

'I was on the wall watching the invaders.'

Olad guffawed.

'I thought you were blind.'

Heine looked at him contemptuously.

'Don't be so dumb.'

Olad scowled.

'Get on with it.'

'Alright, alright! I was on the wall and the Duke's cavalry moved out against the enemy. The Duke's own guard. We've seen them so often, riding through the city on their white horses with the plumes tossing and their breastplates shining.'

Olad belched.

'Cut the fancy talk, get on with it.'

Heine shot him a vicious look.

'They moved out against the enemy. It was a splendid sight. They started at a walk. Then they broke into a trot, and finally into a full charge. It was a magnificent sight for as long as it lasted, I can tell you.'

The Minstrel Boy's lip curled.

'I didn't realize that you were such a patriot.'

Heine pulled a hostile face.

'I may be just a beggar, but I'm a loyal subject of the Duke.'

Olad glared menacingly at him.

'Sure, sure. What happened next?'

Heine shook his head from side to side as though trying to shut out the memory.

'It was horrible. They were all cut down. A few of them reached the first line of armoured ground cars. They just rode around until they were killed, as though they didn't know what to do. The enemy didn't suffer any casualties at all.'

The Minstrel Boy grunted.

'What do they expect if they throw cavalry at armour and fuse tubes?'

Heine shot him a poisonous look.

'It was a valiant charge.'

'It was stupid.'

'What else could we do? We don't have weapons like the enemy. We don't have ground cars or flying machines or those terrible light guns. Why can't the enemy fight like men with cavalry and pikes?'

The Minstrel Boy began to look bored,

'Because they're smart.'

'It's not fair.'

'It's war.'

'What else can we do?'

'Surrender.'

Heine puffed out his narrow chest.

'The Duke will never surrender.'

Carmen snorted.

'You can say that twice.'

Another series of explosions shook the gin house. Everyone involuntarily ducked. They seemed nearer this time. Billy shook the plaster out of his long hair and looked hard at the Minstrel Boy.

'How the hell are we going to come through all this?'

The Minstrel Boy swallowed his drink in one jaundiced

gulp-

'We ain't.'

'No chance?'

'We could score a load of yage from the apothecary and go out laughing.'

More bombs rocked the building. Billy rubbed sweat from the palms of his hands.

'I can't take much more of this.'

The Minstrel Boy looked at him. His eyes were bored and hooded.

'Figure you're going to have to.'

Olad spat in disgust.

'You two are cowards and weaklings! How can you talk like this?'

'We just open our mouths and it comes out.'

'You are impossible. When the fighting starts we'll see who the men are.'

The Minstrel Boy slowly turned to face him. His voice be-came quiet and lazy.

'Bullshit.'

Olad reddened. His hand moved slowly towards the gun on his hip.

'You'll take that back, or I kill you.'

Before the Minstrel Boy could reply, another, different explosion rattled the walls. Flashes of intense white light were visible through the narrow mullioned windows. Carmen jumped to her feet.

'What the hell is happening now?'

There were two more of the new kind of explosions, and a barrage of white flashes. The people in the bar looked fear-fully from one to the other. Heine swallowed hard.

'Those flashes. They come from the enemy's strange guns. They must be inside the city.'

Carmen's eyes widened and she turned pale.

'The walls couldn't have fallen so fast! It's not possible!'

The Minstrel Boy sat very still, calmly regarding his hands.

'It's quite possible with the weapons they have.'

Everyone except Heine stared round in disbelief. There were more flashes and explosions. The flashes seemed to be accompanied by a strange, high pitched crackle. The door suddenly burst open, and Carmen screamed. A halberdier of the Ducal Guard stood swaying in the doorway. His eyes had the vacant look of one in shock. His weapons were gone, and his once magnificent red and gold uniform was blackened and charred. His mouth moved in silent convulsions. Finally he was able to speak.

'They burned away the Goldsmiths' Gate. The white fire cut through the wall... They're inside the city. Nothing can stop them!'

He pitched forward on his face. The Minstrel Boy took a deep breath.

'Now we'll find out what kind of survivors we are.'

After his initial fear and trepidation had passed, CYN 256 was surprised at how quickly he developed an attitude of watchful cunning in his dealings with the Computer. Of course, he still lived with fear, but it was a new, more exhilarating kind of fear. Instead of being afraid of something that might be wrong inside himself, his fear now was that the Computer might detect the change that had taken place in his character.

The turning point had come when, after many work periods spent translating figures with one part of his mind and pondering the problem of the increasing anomalies in the printouts, he had finally come to the conclusion that the errors lay not with him but with the Computer.

The realization had been an intense shock at first. In an instant his lifelong faith had melted away. He had slipped out of the Computer's all-embracing love and become a renegade. Although the word was not a part of his severely limited vocabulary, he had become a secret outlaw, pitting his meagre resources against the Computer's infinite power.

CYN 256 quickly developed techniques of deception. During his work, his walks to and from his sleep cubicle and the few waking moments he had to himself, he hid behind a blank, negative appearance that masked the heretic thoughts that were racing through his mind. He knew if the Computer ever detected those thoughts he would either be taken to therapy or have his memory burned out and his thoughts

realigned. He began to suspect that the Computer might even possibly kill him.

The excitement of his new state of consciousness was coupled with an intense feeling of frustration. His lack of real, positive knowledge meant that all his efforts had to be a mixture of guesswork and intuition.

The first puzzle he felt he had to solve was whether the anomalies were the product of a fault in the Computer's make-up, or whether they were being deliberately created for some dark mysterious purpose. He had initially attempted to memorize all the figures that felt wrong, but as they started to come with greater frequency he discovered that this was beyond him.

He had worked out a crude system of categorizing the figures that rolled out on the printout. It appeared that one set referred generally to the stuff output. Another set seemed to cover the intake of raw matter for the manufacturing process. There was also a third set. CYN 256 wasn't too sure what they were. He worked on the assumption that they were somehow involved in the internal processes of the Computer. He started to call them carrier figures, but he had no real idea of what their function was.

He watched and made mental notes for a dozen work periods and it began to appear that stuff turnover was climbing to a far higher peak than ever before. He did his best to keep all his data and observations catalogued in his mind, but gradually he had to face the fact that this was beyond him. He realized that he had to make some kind of material record.

For another three work periods he totally avoided the problem. He refused even to think about it. His research and observation stopped altogether. He considered abandoning all his plans. The only thing that stopped him was the knowledge that he could never go back to what he had been before. There was no returning to the passive, unthinking contentment of the Computer's love.

In the last moments before the sleep gas came to take away his awareness, he finally made up his mind. There was nothing to do but go on. He had to face the danger and somehow preserve a record of the figures.

He woke feeling strangely calm. The blast of cold air circulated through his cubicle, and he climbed from his bunk. He was vaguely surprised that it was exactly like the start of any other work period. He took his fresh coverall from the dispenser and pulled it on. He swallowed the pills, and gulped down the beaker full of warm, thick, tasteless liquid. Then the chime sounded, calling him to work, and the door automatically opened. He dropped the beaker and food tray into the disposal vent. He stepped out into the corridor and joined the others of his shift walking calmly to the work section.

He spent the first part of the work period hiding the overpowering feeling of tension and excitement while he waited for his chance. Finally, when it came, he sat paralysed for a few moments. The printout had stopped and a blank length of paper was rolling off the feeder spool. He quickly ripped it off and in one fluid motion hid it inside his clothing. He waited, fearful and breathless, for some kind of retribution. None came. The figures began to appear on the printout again, he bent over his keyboard and went back to work. At the end of the period, he took the scribe from beside his keyboard. Instead of dropping it into the cubicle vent as he normally would, he quickly palmed it and slipped it into his coverall beside the strip of printout paper.

He walked down the corridor back to his sleep cubicle. Every now and then he glanced round at the dull eyed, green clothed figures that plodded along beside him. If only they could know what he had achieved. He had deceived the Computer and survived. The Computer was not infallible. CYN 256 savoured a feeling he had never felt before. It was a sense of power.

He pressed the stud, and stepped inside the cubicle. He covertly looked round. He needed somewhere to hide his writing materials. He began slowly to eat his after-work meal, all the time scanning the small room for a possible hiding place in a way that wouldn't be detected by the sensor in the ceiling. He opened the disposal vent and began to drop the containers down the chute. It was then that he noticed the narrow rim around the edge of the vent. He examined it carefully. It was just wide enough to take the scribe and the strip of paper. He began to strip off his cover-alls. He had to restrain himself from an illogical glance to-wards the sensor, just to see that everything was okay.

Under cover of pushing the clothes into the vent, he care-fully placed the scribe and paper on the ledge. Then he slowly closed it, and went to his bed. He had only just enough time to lie down and get comfortable before the cubicle began to fill with sleep gas.

During the subsequent work periods he pondered his next move. Now he had materials to keep a record he had to find a way of using them without the sensors catching him. It took four periods of heavy thinking before he found a solu-tion. When it happened, it came to him purely by chance. He was using the sanitary unit, and toying with one of his polished lumps of plastic. In his new-found state of mind, having something to play with aided his thinking. When he first caught himself toying with them, he had been afraid that he might have given himself away, but when nothing came of it, he assumed that the Computer allowed its C-class operatives a few marginal idiosyncrasies.

He found that if he allowed his hand to drop to his side, he couldn't see the sensor reflected in the polished surface of the block. He checked from a number of angles, but it seemed as though there was a blind spot in the sanitary unit that the sensor wasn't able to monitor. CYN 256 smiled inwardly. The Computer was proving more fallible each time he tested its powers.

He spent two more work periods discreetly making absolutely certain that the spot in the sanitary unit really was unmonitored. Then he took seven more to devise a system to get the writing materials from the disposal vent into the unit so he could make his notes, and back to their hiding place in the vent. He tried to make the whole process appear to be nothing more than a slight variation in his regular be-haviour pattern. He realized that as he moved deeper into his campaign he was developing a hard streak of patient cun-ning. It seemed to be proving successful. The Computer had, so far, detected nothing wrong.

With his test completed, CYN 256 began to keep his record. After each work period he returned to his cubicle, and furtively noted down all the figures that had come up during the day that didn't seem right.

He divided them into his three arbitrary categories, and did his best to divine some meaning from them. Once again he was filled with an overpowering frustration at how little he knew. There were moments when he despaired of ever find-ing any sense in the figures, let alone doing something about what might be wrong inside the Computer.

The only idea he had, and that a matter of instinct rather than logic, was that the Computer was somehow running out of control. CYN 256 wasn't sure. It was all so complex. It did seem, however, that the intake/output figures were escalating like never before. Where once the workings of Stuff Central had been finely regulated, they now speeded up with-out any kind of check.

A new idea began to flourish in the depths of his mind. It was loaded with danger, and he kept trying to push it away. But the more he tried, the faster it returned, gradually be-coming the only possible direction for him to follow.

If he couldn't learn anything from the figures, perhaps if he fed them back into the Computer he might learn something from its reaction. He was also well aware that if he put such a plan into action the

Computer might just simply kill him.

A.A. Catto and Nancy lay on the huge circular bed that dominated A.A. Catto's private suite in the underground bunker. They lay with their legs entwined and their bodies at right angles to each other. They lay with the stillness of total exhaustion. They were both naked, except Nancy still had the steel brace on her leg.

The bed cover was made from a metallic gold covered velvet that sparkled in the subdued light. The rest of the room was white. Being deep beneath the earth there were no windows. One wall was filled with a mass of different sized view screens. On one medium sized one two women, a small boy in lavish makeup, and an iguana acted out a silent, porno-graphic fantasy. The rest flickered on hold.

On the floor by the bed were two discarded, beaten silver goblets and a number of empty bottles. Some thick purple wine had been spilled, and it stained the carpet in a couple of places. There was a table beside the bed made from a cube of dark mirrored glass. A small jade box had been knocked over spilling a small pile of white powder.

Dumped in the corner of the room like a forgotten bundle was the body of one of A.A. Catto's personal guards. He was naked and his wrists and ankles were handcuffed together. His torso was covered in ugly and very recent scars. He was dead. A.A. Catto's personal guards were programmed to obey her absolutely without question. A.A. Catto had been exploit-ing this one's unswerving devotion to have a little fun. A.A. Catto had exhausted herself, and the guard had died. Later she would call the clean-up crew to get the body taken away and the stains removed from the carpet.

A.A. Catto stirred and made a contented sound, halfway between a groan and a purr. Without appearing to wake, Nancy stretched out her hand and stroked A.A. Catto's hair. A.A. Catto opened her eyes and raised her head languidly. She stretched out a lazy hand to a touch panel set in the glass table. One of the larger screens on the wall flickered into life and was filled with the expressionless face and bald head of one of her six advisers. A.A. Catto propped herself up on one elbow and regarded him.

'Is the invasion going according to plan?'

'Everything is right on schedule.'

'Good. Patch the big board through to me here.'

The porno movie flickered, and was replaced by a min-iature representation of the big board in the war room. A num-ber of yellow arrows were moving inwards towards the centre. A.A. Catto picked up a little of the spilled white powder on one of her long metallic fingernails, put it delicately to her nose and sniffed.

'What is the prevailing status at Feld?'

'Our shock troops are in control of the entire city. We are about to move in occupation police prior to withdrawing the combat units.'

A.A. Catto raised an eyebrow.

'There is no continuing resistance?'

'Only a handful of ill equipped aristocrats. They are a prob-lem more suitable to law enforcement than

military action.'

'Good. You can move in the occupation police straight away. Once they are in control they can start conscripting local volunteers, and selecting suitable subjects to form a satellite government.'

'Yes, Miss Catto.'

'Oh, and make sure the police squads take an adequate number of civilian hostages. According to our projections it's an ideal safeguard against breaches of discipline among the local population.'

'It is a priority order with all police squads.'

A.A. Catto smiled.

'Excellent. Now, hook me into a camera on one of the leading police vehicles.'

Another screen came to life. The camera jiggled as though it was mounted on the front of a fast moving ground car. It was racing through streets of picturesque and, to A.A. Catto's mind, painfully whimsical thatched houses. A few of them were on fire, but the majority seemed relatively undamaged. On either side of the street, lines of troops in black helmets and fighting suits moved on foot in the opposite direction.

They had the battle weary confidence of victorious soldiers who have been given the order to withdraw.

The ground car swung round a corner and screeched to a halt. Another machine was parked right across the road. Its armoured bodywork was a dull grey, and it carried the orange insignia of the occupation police. Orange helmeted figures in black suits were holding a group of civilians at gun point. These were A.A. Catto's occupation forces. One, with the tags of an officer on his suit, was questioning the civilians. The sound from the small video unit was distorted and A.A. Catto couldn't make out what he was saying. She saw to her satisfaction that the civilians seemed cowed and broken.

More orange helmeted figures came past the camera from the car it was mounted on. A large, flat sided, grey personnel carrier pulled up, and the police began to herd the civilians inside it. The administrative takeover of Feld seemed to be progressing quickly and efficiently. A.A. Catto reached for the touch panel and killed all four screens. Her hand moved again, and the music of Cole Porter came from hidden speakers.

Nancy opened her eyes.

'Have you been awake long?'

A.A. Catto lay face down on the bed with a sigh of contentment.

'I've been checking on the war.'

'Is everything okay?'

A.A. Catto closed her eyes.

'Perfect.'

Nancy ran her fingers down A.A. Catto's smooth back. A.A. Catto stretched and made a soft moaning sound.

'That feels nice.'

Nancy reached down beside the bed and produced a narrow cylindrical object. It was rounded at the end, and transparent. Nancy pressed a stud on the side and it started to hum and vibrate. A violet light glowed inside it. Nancy rubbed it against her cheek and grinned. A.A. Catto heard the noise and opened one eye. Nancy slowly began to rub the vibrator up the soft skin on the inside of A.A. Catto's thigh. She sighed and rolled over on to her back.

She/They had interwoven the extremes of Her/Their con-trol zone with a semi-stable fold of matter. It created a blue, faintly translucent hemisphere in the rolling, grey, flickering storm of chaotic, unordered matter.

In a more normal situation She/They would have extended Her/Their control to the optimum of Her/Their perception. Chaos was totally familiar to Her/Them. Her/Their earliest memories of the time of peace and order, before the disruptors had torn through the levels of the finite world, were old and clouded. The most She/They could recall was a longing for a secure patterned existence. It came to Her/Them as pale fragments of contentment.

She/They had long abandoned all hope that She/They might regain that ordered world. The most that She/They could do was extend Her/Their personal environment as far as possible. For a long time, it had worked very well. She/They had existed under a white sky, amid a smooth, flat landscape of even black and white chequers, in a clear cold silence, all of Her/Their own creating.

She/They might have maintained these conditions almost to infinity if it hadn't been for the encroachments of the disruptors. The sound sluglike entities ripped through the few areas of stasis, sucking in the stable matter and leaving a broad wake of grey, shimmering chaos.

The disrupters had grown more numerous and more voracious. They seemed drawn by a unique hunger towards the energy that She/They generated to maintain Her/Their con-trol area. It had become impossible to erect a full control area any longer. She/They now expended the minimum energy, contracting Her/Their whole environment to the single blue hemisphere. She/They calculated that there would not be sufficient power circulating to attract disruptors and this would give Her/Them time to contemplate Her/Their future course of action.

She/They floated a few inches above the flat upper surface of the hemisphere. She/They had adopted Her/Their most regular form, the triple. The three identical women, who looked as one and moved as one. The slim erect figures were concealed by the white ankle length cloaks that fell in exactly the same folds. Her/Their heads were encased in silver helmets with high crests and curving side plates that covered Her/Their nose and cheek bones, leaving only dark slits for Her/Their eyes.

Her/Their senses were all turned inwards, directed solely at the problem of the disruptors. She/They saw nothing of the grey waste all around. She/They had already been damaged once by a disrupter. It was imperative that She/They reached an ultimate solution.

'Data.'

The word hung in the air above Her/Their heads. It was the same blue as the hemisphere.

'Data source on the disruptor is confined to my/our observa-tion.'

'The disruptors are semi-sentient entities of an animal/machine origin.'

'They are dark grey with occasional red identification marks unique to the individual object.'

'They range in size from one to one hundred metres, although it is conceivable that they may achieve even greater dimensions.'

'They take in stable matter through a front aperture and expel disordered space from another opening at the rear.'

'They appear to be attracted by any emission of stable energy.'

'That is the limit of our observation.'

She/They paused. The words faded and vanished.

'Speculative projections from the given data.'

'The disruption process takes place within the body of the entity.'

'It is a process of breaking the matter-energy links that maintain the state of stasis.'

'The disruptors absorb these matter-energy links. It would appear they feed on them.'

'Their speed of movement and rate of growth indicate that they consume in excess of their individual requirements.'

It is possible they have the faculty to transmit this excess to some second entity.'

'This entity could be a more complex form that utilizes the excess for a purpose of its own.'

'This entity could be the origin of the disruptors. They could simply be matter-energy receivers for the said entity.'

'This hypothetical entity has been making increasing matter-energy demands.'

'Such an intake would be hard to account for if it was simply being absorbed.'

'The hypothetical entity must be converting its matter-energy intake and projecting it in another form.'

'Such a projection will be subject to detection.'

'Option.'

'To locate the hypothetical entity by its projection of converted mass-energy.'

'Designation.'

'Such a search must be our primary task.'

Billy stirred in his sleep, and abruptly came awake. His head hurt from the previous night's drinking. He moved slightly and felt Carmen the Whore's full body beside him. It was warm and comforting. He opened his eyes and looked across the pillows at her. Her head turned away from him. Her unnaturally yellow hair was spread out across the coarse material of the sheet. Billy was aware of the way her hair began to turn dark, down towards the roots.

Billy sat up. He blinked as an instant of dizziness hit him between the eyes. He reminded himself of how he kept promising to cut down on the local gin. It was the second week he and the Minstrel Boy had been hiding in the brothel known as the Tarnished Flowers on the Court of Angels. He knew they had to take the risk of getting out of the occupied city.

There were no windows in the small attic room, although a few beams of dull light filtered through a half dozen chinks in the roof. Two weeks in the same room was beginning to get on Billy's nerves. In their routine searches of the building, the occupation police hadn't found the little room. Despite that, Billy was beginning to feel as much of a prisoner as if he had been picked up by the Ocpol.

He shivered and pulled the blankets up round his chin. The air felt damp and cold. One of the first moves of the occupation forces had been to turn down the city's generators so the weather was set at a perpetual grey drizzle.

Billy leaned back against the wall and stared down at the still sleeping Carmen. He knew he was getting tired of her. She was beginning to treat him like her private property. She got mad when any of the other girls came up to visit him in his hiding place. And Carmen was making too many demands on him. Primarily sexual demands. The occupation had all but shut down business at the Tarnished Flowers. The only customers who came to the house were a few, furtive after-noon callers who dodged the police patrols to slip inside for a piece of quick satisfaction, and groups of swaggering, high placed thieves who had been made part of the new puppet government. They could afford to ignore the curfew, and came and went as they pleased.

It meant that Carmen was left with a lot of time on her hands, and most of this she spent with Billy in the tiny attic. She had a full soft body, and, as far as Billy was concerned, full hard needs.

At first, Billy had thought the occupation would be a time of action and breathless excitement. He soon found out that it was actually a period of boredom and nagging fear.

It had started out exciting enough. When the enemy had burned their way into the city, Carmen had taken control of the situation. She had led Billy, the Minstrel Boy and Olad the Siderian through the panicking crowds to the Tarnished Flowers and found them secure hiding places. At the time, Billy had thought she was going a bit far in insisting that they stay locked up in the tiny, undetectable hiding holes. When the Ocpol started rounding up all the male population, either for labour gangs or impressment to what they called the Volunteer Legion of the enemy army, Billy had been grateful for her caution.

After that first rush, the excitement had stopped. The only exception had been when a group of resisting aristos had holed up in a gin house across the square and tried to shoot it out with the police. Even that hadn't amounted to much. The aristos had started shooting. The Ocpol had withdrawn to bring up regular troops with fuse tubes. They had simply burned the building to the ground. The aristos, and everyone else inside, burned with it.

From then on, the population of the Court of Angels had nothing more to do with the aristocratic resistance, despite their romantic rhetoric, their elegant manners, their rapiers, their muzzle loading pistols

and their plumed hats.

Apart from the short siege of the gin house, life had settled down to a constant round of sex, drinking and boredom. Ordinarily Billy wouldn't have objected, but he knew deep down that, as fugitives, they ought to be moving on. Every day they remained in Feld increased their chances of being caught by the police.

Another thing that had started to annoy him was a feeling that he was getting the worst of the deal. The Minstrel Boy was in another part of the attic. Olad had a room in the depths of the cellar. Right then the Minstrel Boy had two girls with him. Lola, a small fiery girl with dark flashing eyes and a coffee coloured complexion, and Chloe, a slim redhead with pale, almost transparent skin. Olad had two more girls with him. They could change their partners whenever they liked. On the few occasions that Billy had spoken to them, they had shown little inclination to risk the escape from the city. They seemed more than content to spend as long as possible screw-ing and drinking. All Billy wanted was to get away.

He leaned over the side of the bed and picked up his shirt. He swung his feet on to the floor, and quickly pulled it on. He padded across the floor and looked out through a small chink in the outside wall. The Court of Angels, which once had been busy and bustling, was now empty, deserted and dismal. A thin drizzle fell steadily on the cobbles. Billy shook his head and turned away.

Carmen had woken. She sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes.

'What are you doing?'

Billy shrugged.

'Just stretching my legs.'

Carmen let the sheet drop, revealing her full breasts with their dark red nipples.

'Why don't you come back to bed and stretch them here?'

Billy looked sullen.

'It's kind of early.'

Carmen smiled blandly.

'Nothing like a fuck to start the day.'

'And finish it, and after lunch, and most of the night. Really, I don't feel like it right now.'

Carmen's eyelids dropped, and she gave Billy a hard look.

'You don't feel like it, huh?'

'Not right now.'

Carmen began to get angry.

'And what if I feel like it?'

Billy sighed.

'Surely I'm not the only man about.'

Carmen's voice became coaxing.

'It's you I want, Billy.'

'Don't I know it.'

Carmen's eyes flashed.

'There are men who've paid me fortunes for what you're getting free.'

Billy started to get waspish.

'They ain't paying you now.'

Carmen scowled.

'You building up for one of your moods?'

'I don't have moods, goddamn it.'

'You've been having moods for the last five days. I've been more than surprised they haven't turned into tantrums.'

Billy abruptly sat down on the bed and looked deflated.

'I realize you've been good to me, Carmen. It's just that I got to get out of here. I can't stand being cooped up any longer.'

Carmen stared at him calculatingly.

'Your friends don't seem to mind so much.'

Billy said nothing.

'Of course, they swap women much faster.'

Billy still said nothing.

'I guess it's me that you're fed up with.'

'I didn't say that.'

Carmen snorted.

'Fuck you, Billy, you don't have to. It's written all over your face.'

Billy tried to placate her.

'I just want to get out of here.'

Carmen wasn't about to be placated.

'What am I supposed to do about it, go out and get you a set of travel documents from the Ocpol?'

Billy let his head drop into his hands.

'I don't know. Just get the other two up here. We've got to work something out.'

Carmen leered at him.

'Come back to bed first.'

Billy shook his head.

'I ain't ready for it.'

'Come back to bed.'

Carmen's voice changed slightly. It left no room for argument. She did, after all, have the whip hand. She could always turn him over to the Ocpol. Bill reluctantly pulled off his shirt and obediently climbed in beside her. Carmen smiled sweetly at him in triumph.

Billy had discovered on about the eighth day of hiding that he was able to make love to Carmen virtually by numbers. She liked to be kissed on the mouth. She liked to have her breasts rubbed, and then she liked Billy to spend a long time working on his knees with his face between her legs. The order rarely changed. She was so experienced that she never allowed him either to alter the sequence, speed things up, or switch one of the sections. It would always end with Billy slipping inside her, and working up to orgasm with slow steady strokes. Carmen knew exactly what she wanted and made sure that she got it. Occasionally, by way of a variation, she would turn over before Billy moved inside her and lie face down with her knees drawn up beneath her so Billy could take her from behind. Once in a while, she would condescend to suck him off.

The whole performance took about forty minutes. Billy had no means of telling for sure, but he was almost certain each session ran pretty much to split second schedule. After it was over there still remained another twenty minutes of lying quietly in each other's arms.

Once the ritual had been completed, Billy pushed himself into a sitting position. He put on the best no-nonsense ex-expression that he could muster.

'Will you get the other two up here now?'

Carmen stretched languidly.

'Now?'

'Really, please, now.'

She sat up and absentmindedly caressed her left breast.

'You sure you wouldn't like to go again? We could do some-thing perverted. I could even fetch a crock of gin.'

Carmen was pushing hard, but she realized that Billy had the advantage. She knew it was almost impossible to turn him on just twenty minutes after they had finished screwing. She doubted that even obscene chatter would work.

Billy firmly shook his head.

'I can't do nothing.'

She ran her hand down his stomach.

'You don't have to do nothing. I'll do it, lover. Just lie back.'

Billy shook his head even harder.

'No way. It's no good, I'm far too tense. Please, Carmen. Get the other two up here. Okay?'

Carmen exhaled ponderously.

'Yeah - okay!'

She got slowly out of bed, giving Billy the maximum display of her naked body. Billy looked somewhere else. He had, after all, seen it so often before. She pulled her dress over her head and brushed her hair out of her eyes. The gesture suddenly threw up another facet of her character: the slatternly whore. She smiled thinly at Billy.

'Okay. I'll fetch them. Don't go away, will you.'

It took Carmen half an hour to collect the Minstrel Boy and Olad. Neither looked overjoyed at the summons. They were both only half dressed. The Minstrel Boy was barefoot. His coarse weave white shirt was dirty, and half stuffed into his pinstripe stovepipe trousers. He hadn't shaved for at least four days. The stubble heightened his air of sickness and decay. Olad was naked to the waist. He had obviously simply pulled on his black leather breeches when Carmen had come to collect him. But he hadn't neglected to strap on his gun. They both looked at Billy with some impatience. The Minstrel Boy yawned.

'Okay, sunshine, what's the trouble?'

Billy took a deep breath.

'I want out. Now.'

The Minstrel Boy raised an eyebrow.

'Now?'

Billy's voice shook just a fraction.

'Now.'

The Minstrel Boy sensed the tension.

'Okay, how?'

Billy stared at the floor.

'I can't see no easy way. I figure we just have to dodge the patrols as best we can, get out of the city and hit the nothings.'

The Minstrel Boy pulled a sour face.

'I suppose I'm expected to guide you.'

'It's your gift, buddy. You've got the wayfinding.'

The Minstrel Boy became even more sour.

'Thanks for reminding me.'

Billy waved his hands in front of him.

'I know it hurts, but what else can we do? We can't stay here much longer.'

The Siderian, who'd been quiet all through the exchange, suddenly butted in.

'I ain't too sure I want to leave.'

Billy turned on him in amazement.

'You want to stay here? You want to get picked up by the Ocpol? You got to be fucking crazy.'

Olad scratched the matted hair on his chest.

'I didn't say I wanted to stay for ever. I just don't think there's any great hurry. I mean, nobody's bothered us'

'Yet.'

The Minstrel Boy rubbed the stubble on his chin.

'Billy's right. We can't lay around here drinking and screw-ing indefinitely. We're bound to get picked up in the long run.'

Olad stroked the top of his shaved head and scowled.

'I still don't see why we have to go right now. Shit, I'm having the best time I've had in a long while.'

Billy started to get angry.

'You want to risk getting picked up just because you're getting your ashes hauled? Goddamn it, it can't be that hard for you to get laid.'

The Siderian hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt.

'If you're so scared of the Ocpol, why don't you just get out on your own? I ain't ready to hold your hand. Anyway, what's so bad about being picked up? It might be rough at first, and I wouldn't go out looking for it, but I've been in wars before. One side's as good as the other in the long run.'

The Minstrel Boy slowly shook his head.

'Nobody wants to fall into the hands of this lot.'

Both Billy and Olad looked at him in surprise.

'What do you know about them? They're weird, but no-body's sure where they came from.'

The Minstrel Boy glanced at Billy.

'I thought even you ought to have worked it out by now.'

'Huh?'

'Where the invaders come from.'

Billy looked bewildered.

'How the hell should I know where they come from?'

'You were there when A.A. Catto ordered the prototypes.'

'Son of a bitch! From Quahal!'

That's right.'

Billy shook his head as the information struck home.

'You mean that whole goddamn army's hers?'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

Billy looked puzzled.

'How the fuck did she get so many of them?'

'From Stuff Central, same as those first ones that took out Jeb Stuart Ho.'

Billy still looked confused.

'I don't get it. I don't get it at all. Stuff Central ain't about to beam out a whole army to one chick, whoever she is.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'I don't know. It happened. Maybe she had a chat with the computer. Maybe she offered it her body.'

'Oh, come on.'

The Minstrel Boy looked annoyed.

'Shit, man. I don't know, but those troops are modifications of A.A. Catto's original six. That's for sure.'

Billy became thoughtful.

'How do we know they ain't from the brotherhood?'

'It's not the brotherhood style. They wouldn't pull something like this. If they wanted to change things in Feld, they'd take out the duke or something like that. They'd never stage an invasion. It'd be against all their principles. It's got to be A.A. Catto.'

Billy pulled a wry face.

'If she gets us, she'll kill us.'

Olad suddenly had enough of being left out of the discussion.

'I don't know what the fuck you two are talking about.'

The Minstrel Boy turned and faced him.

'We just made up our minds. We're going to leave.'

The Siderian nodded.

'I was afraid of that.'

'Are you coming with us?'

He hesitated, looking from Billy to the Minstrel Boy and back again. Finally he took a deep breath.

'Yeah, I guess so. I've always been dumb.'

Carmen sat up on the bed and took notice.

'So you're going? All three of you?'

The Minstrel Boy seemed to take control now the decision was made.

'That's right. We're grateful for you looking after us, but we're going.'

'You don't ask me if I want to come.'

'Do you?'

Carmen paused and looked at Billy.

'No, I don't think so.'

Billy moved towards the bed.

'You sure about that? You're welcome to come with us if you want to.'

Carmen sadly shook her head.

'I don't know nothing but this city. I'll stay here. It ain't going to be that bad.'

Olad turned to the Minstrel Boy.

'When do we leave?'

'We might as well leave tonight, as soon as it's dark.'

Olad grinned wryly.

'It's lucky they didn't change the day and night when they changed the weather.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'It's easy to change the weather. Altering the day cycle needs heavy modification work on the generator.'

Olad grunted.

'You sure know a lot.'

The Minstrel Boy smiled politely and nodded.

The hours until darkness hung heavily on Billy. Carmen kept trying to get him into bed one last time. Finally he gave in. He found, unexpectedly, that it was both a tender and exciting interlude. They lay together for a long time. Finally he got up. The move was like the first step into a new, unknown stage of his life.

He pulled on his calfskin pants and tucked in his thick, dark blue shirt. He struggled with his scuffed cowboy boots, and stood up. Carmen brought him some hot water, and he care-fully shaved. He looked at his face in the dark, cracked mirror. There were still traces of thin boyishness, but his eyes were harder than they'd been when he left home. He brushed his long wavy hair back and dried his hands. Then he buckled on his belt with the compact.⁷⁰ recoilless hanging from it.

He slipped into his fur jacket and stooped down and kissed Carmen on the top of the head.

'I'll see you again, babe.'

'No, you won't.'

'I'll try.'

Carmen said nothing. Billy took his dark glasses out of the pocket of his jacket, looked at them, and put them away again.

The Minstrel Boy and Olad were waiting for him, just inside the rear door of the whorehouse. The Minstrel Boy looked even more thin and angular in his travelling clothes. His pinstripe trousers were tight on his thin legs and stuffed into high riding boots. His black velvet frock coat flapped a little in the draught from the badly fitted door. A belt holding a set of five matched throwing knives was strapped round his waist. His wide brimmed black hat with the silver band was pulled down over his eyes. It hid most of his face. His move-ments were tense and nervous.

It was dark outside. Ocpol patrols cruised through the wet, empty street. Their loudspeakers announced that it was eighteen minutes after curfew and anyone out without authority would be shot. Billy suppressed a shudder. The Min-strel Boy took a deep breath.

'Alright. If anyone approaches us, kill them. Try and do it without any noise. There's supposed to be a hole blown in the wall just behind the duke's palace. We'll head for that. If any of us get hit, the others must on no account stop. Just keep on going. Got it?'

Olad checked his gun.

'Will there be guards on this gap in the wall?'

The Minstrel Boy avoided looking at him.

'I don't know.'

There were a few moments' silence, then the Minstrel Boy jerked his shoulder.

'Okay, let's go.'

They slipped out into the darkness and the rain.

The gong sounded. Jeb Stuart Ho sprang down from the gallery. He bounced lightly on the sprung trampoline floor of the training room, and moved watchfully towards his oppo-nent. He wore his form fitting black fighting suit with padding over the vulnerable parts of his body. The striking edges of his hands and feet were reinforced with flexible steel plates. He carried a thirty kilo weight pack strapped to his back, and his face and head were protected by a cushioned helmet.

He grasped a long rubber baton with both hands, and swung it as Na Duc Rogers bounced tentatively in his direction. Rogers dropped into a crouch and sprang upwards, gaining height with the help of the floor springing. He swung his own baton at Jeb Stuart Ho, but Ho twisted suddenly and he missed him. The two men passed each other in mid air. They hit the floor again, and immediately leaped upwards. Rogers again lashed out at Jeb Stuart Ho, but Ho parried with his own baton and turned the blow. The two men's bodies collided and they dropped to the elastic floor.

Jeb Stuart Ho made a better landing than Na Duc Rogers. He saw an opening and hit quickly at his opponent's head. The baton caught Rogers on one side of his padded helmet, and he staggered slightly. Jeb Stuart Ho sprang away, pleased that he had scored the first point in the sparring contest.

The two men bounced on the sprung floor, almost in time with each other, a few metres apart. Each one watched care-fully for an opening. Jeb Stuart Ho knew that Rogers would be using every part of his energy and perception after he had lost the first point. Although humility, meekness and obedience were the normal rule of the temple, in the training room, the executive brothers were expected to develop the aggressive and competitive facets of their beings. These, coupled with perfectly developed reflexes, were the core of the executive brothers' makeup.

Their teachers often described the executive section as the gardeners of the brotherhood. They tended and, when necessary, pruned the growth of cultures in the damaged world. Their tools were mayhem and death.

Ho and Rogers continued to bounce facing each other. Jeb Stuart Ho noticed that Rogers was gaining a fraction more height on him with each leap. He knew he was pre-paring to make another move. The next time Ho hit the floor he swiftly raised his feet and let himself fall on his knees. This time the tension of the trampoline only tossed him half a metre into the air. Simultaneously Na Duc Rogers launched a powerful flying swing kick at where he expected Ho to be.

As Rogers passed above him Jeb Stuart Ho locked his arm round his opponent's leg and slammed him hard into the floor. Jeb Stuart Ho felt a boost of elation. The second point. His pride was short lived. As he sprang clear, Na Duc Rogers slashed at Jeb Stuart Ho with his baton. He caught him hard behind the knees and Ho fell awkwardly to the mat. Na Duc Rogers had scored his first point.

They continued their practice on the sprung floor. Each man's score slowly mounted until Jeb Stuart He's stood at fourteen, and Na Duc Rogers's just two behind. Then the gong sounded for the end of the session. The two men bowed to each other, and jumped up to the gallery. As they removed their packs and padded helmets and hung their batons in the rack, another two black suited figures took their places on the floor.

They moved towards the door of the training room to take the ritual shower and then return to their individual cells for a period of meditation. In front of the doorway, however, they found the teacher waiting for them. His young eyes in the incredibly old face twinkled as he smiled at each man in turn.

'You feel prepared to tackle a computer, my little ones?'

Jeb Stuart Ho averted his gaze. His satisfaction at defeating Na Duc Rogers on points was overshadowed by the shame he still felt over his failure in the field. The teacher laughed.

'You are downcast at your success in training, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

Ho didn't look up.

'Training is with rubber batons and a padded head piece, teacher. It is no gauge of how we may fare when our weapons are swords, guns and lasers.'

The teacher stared at him blandly.

'It is not the shining weapon that fights the battles but the warrior's spirit.'

'I pray my spirit will not be found wanting on this occasion, teacher.'

'I have every faith in you, Jeb Stuart Ho. In any case, the time of your testing will not be long now. Your

wait will soon be over.'

Both Jeb Stuart Ho and Na Duc Rogers looked up eagerly.

'We leave soon, teacher?'

The teacher's expression became mischievous.

'Spirit must be tempered with patience. The sheep will stray from a fold erected in haste.'

The two young men fell silent. The teacher waited for a while, then he spoke again.

'You had best know that you leave at 20.00.'

'So soon?'

The teacher nodded.

'You have time to shower, to meditate and a short while to fulfil any personal needs. Then you sleep.'

'Surely we must prepare our equipment? There is much to do before we can depart for this task.'

'Your equipment is right now being readied by your own pupils. At 19.00 you will be awakened. You will assemble at the primary transport bay. A J-class flightcraft has been adapted for this task. You will mount in time for a 20.00 lift.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked puzzled.

'How will we navigate through the nothings? We have no wayfinder at the temple at this time.'

The teacher gave him a long sombre look.

'We will use the temple's own stuff beam as a constant fix.'

Jeb Stuart Ho's eyes widened, despite all his control.

'What you're saying is that we'll be reversing the stuff beam and using it as a transit path through the nothings.'

The teacher nodded.

'That is correct.'

'But surely we might burn out our own stuff receivers? It could leave us with no material supply input.'

'That contingency has been included in the projections of the mission.'

'The risk...'

'The projections are not your speciality.'

Jeb Stuart Ho inclined his head.

'Yes, teacher.'

'We must all go now. There is much still to do.'

Na Duc Rogers hesitated.

Teacher...?'

'You have something else to ask, Na Duc Rogers?'

'I wondered, teacher, what the probability is of our re-turning from this task.'

The teacher looked quizzically at him.

'You wish to see all the projection figures on this task? You wish to spend the remaining time studying them?'

'No, teacher.'

'You think the knowledge of one particular figure will aid you in the completion of your task?'

Na Duc Rogers slowly shook his head.

'It would not aid me, teacher.'

'Then there is nothing else to say.'

'No, teacher.'

Jeb Stuart Ho and Na Duc Rogers both bowed. The teacher returned their salute. They walked past him and down the echoing, black stone corridors until they reached the cleans-ing chamber. The two men removed their fighting suits, handed them to the attendants and walked naked, side by side, into the first compartment. Steam rose from small vents in the floor. The two men began to perspire freely. They made an effort to close down their conscious minds and centre their beings on the heat that surrounded them.

As they moved through the series of compartments that made up the cleansing chamber, the heat progressively increased until it was almost intolerable. In the final compart-ment there was a clear pool of ice cold water. Ho and Rogers dived simultaneously. They swam for a few minutes and then climbed out as the attendants at the other end moved forward with soft warm towels. Once they were dry and dressed in their black robes, the two men bowed to each other, and went the separate ways to their own cubicles.

The cell in which Jeb Stuart Ho lived was tiny and very plain. A straw mat was folded neatly on a small raised dais. This was where Jeb Stuart Ho both slept and conducted his private meditation. The only other piece of furniture was a carved wooden chest. A banner with an inspirational inscription hung on the wall.

Another black robed figure sat cross legged on the floor. A white silk sheet was spread out in front of

him. Laid on it, in a formal arrangement, was the heavy duty battle equipment of a brotherhood assassin. There was a black fighting suit identical to the one Jeb Stuart Ho had worn in the training room, only the reinforced padding on this one was heavier and there were metal plates on the knees and elbows. Beside it was a clear, spherical, armoured plexiglass helmet and breathing unit. There was also an array of weaponry: a three section nunchak, its lengths of steel joined by two short chains; a .90 magnum in its carrying case that also held the ammunition and extension barrel; a variable laser set and a flat case of six matched throwing knives. In addition to the arms there was a miniature stasis generator and a combined food and water container.

The man sitting on the floor was polishing a long double handed sword. The blade already reflected the light of the single candle like a mirror, but he continued running the soft cloth up and down its length. The man was younger than Jeb Stuart Ho, a teenager. His name was Milhouse Yat Sen and he was Jeb Stuart Ho's pupil and servant until the first stage of his brotherhood training was complete. He had been assigned to Ho after Ho's return from the abortive task in Quahal.

As was the normal custom among the brotherhood, they had rapidly become lovers.

Jeb Stuart Ho sat down cross legged on the dais. He didn't speak to Milhouse Yat Sen. The young man glanced up briefly, and then went back to his work.

Ho altered his breathing and began to move into a state of intermediate trance. He was practised in the art of the full deep trance that was the physical equivalent of near death. The preparations, however, were far too long. An inter-mediate state was the only mental preparation that he had time for before the 20.00 lift.

His eyes followed his pupil's hand moving up and down the gleaming blade. His eyelids slowly drooped. Finally his eyes closed altogether. The young man stopped polishing the sword. He looked carefully at Jeb Stuart Ho. Ho didn't move. He put down the cloth and carefully slid the sword into its sheath, and laid it beside the other weapons.

He shifted so he could look directly at Jeb Stuart Ho. He assumed a posture of meditation. His eyes, unlike Ho's, remained open and staring fixedly at his teacher's face. It was a very long time before Ho came out of his trance. Mil-house Yat Sen remained steadily watching him.

Finally Jeb Stuart Ho's eyes opened. For some moments the younger and older man sat watching each other. Then Jeb Stuart Ho smiled.

'You have prepared everything?'

'Everything, my teacher.'

There was a long pause. Jeb Stuart Ho slipped silently out of his robe. He remained cross legged and naked on the dais. Milhouse Yat Sen frowned.

'Are you going to put on your equipment, my teacher?'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'I am going to sleep.'

'Do you wish me to leave you, my teacher?'

Jeb Stuart Ho laughed softly.

'I would like you to stay with me, Milhouse Yat Sen.'

The young man solemnly stood up. He let his own robe fall to the floor. His slim body was pale in the candlelight.

'I would like to stay with you, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

He knelt on the dais beside Jeb Stuart Ho and ran his fingers across the scars on Jeb Stuart Ho's broad chest.

A.A. Catto had worked unrelentingly for three solid days. Her armies had taken Feld and a dozen other cities. They were now regrouping for the next major centreward thrust into the heart of the more closely packed stasis towns. It was not, however, the problems of military strategy that had absorbed A.A. Catto's time and energy. Those burdens had fallen almost entirely on the shoulders of her six advisers, the war room aides and the lizard installation. A.A. Catto had been planning a dinner party. It was no ordinary dinner party. This was to be a very special celebration of the success of the first stage of her conquest.

Even though she said it herself, the party was turning out to be a glittering success. Not that there was any reason why it shouldn't be. A.A. Catto had given her most careful personal attention to every detail from the decor and the menu to the after dinner drugs and the ordering of the guests.

She was particularly pleased with the ordering of the guests. The result that she now surveyed from her high backed chair at the head of the long banqueting table was a tribute to her imagination and ingenuity.

In a time of war, it had seemed inadvisable to invite genuine individuals from outside. Thus she had had to resort to ordering custom built dinner guests from Stuff Central. A.A. Catto had scoured the history tapes for details of suit-able personalities that could be programmed on to units from the Stuff Central pool of human blanks.

On the left of A.A. Catto sat Nancy, who was the only other natural human in the room. On her right sat a repro-duction of a poet and playwright called Oscar Wilde. She had dug him out from some extremely ancient records. His constant chatter was amusing, and he could be relied on to fill any lapses in the flow of conversation with witty, if archaic, anecdotes.

A.A. Catto found he had a few minor drawbacks. For one thing, he was grossly overweight, a failing that A.A. Catto did not forgive easily. He tended to talk with his mouth full and drop food on the front of his silk dinner jacket. He was also rabidly homosexual, which ordinarily wouldn't have bothered A.A. Catto at all, except that he kept switching his attention from her and casting covert glances at the guest opposite him.

This was a replica of a character called Presley. The original for him came from much the same period as Wilde. He was reputed to have been an entertainer and local sex symbol. A.A. Catto had picked him for his sullen good looks. He was not proving very entertaining, although A.A. Catto did have plans for him later. Through the first courses he sat slumped in his chair, the fringes from his white spangled suit falling across the table, becoming more sullen each time Wilde turned the stream of his wit in Presley's direction.

Further down the table was Jeremy Atreides, a splendid figure in pale blue robes and festoons of

jewellery. The Atreides copy was thin and good looking in a rather sick, epicene way, and had the scintillating kind of vicious, decadent humour that can only be found in the last of very long and in-bred lines of late period god-emperors. A.A. Catto considered Atreides an overwhelming success, particularly as he seemed constantly able to top Wilde's somewhat set-piece epigrams.

Beside him, laughing without fail at all his jokes and occasionally placing a tentative hand under the robes, was a reproduction of Patty Maison, a notably obscene dancer from the Age of Decline.

At the far end of the table were a clutch of big league courtesans whom A.A. Catto had picked for their reputed adaptability. She had also included the notorious Fila Fern-flower, a few particularly bestial tyrants, and Job Yok, a necro-mancer whose private life had so disgusted his swarm of faithful disciples that in the end they had felt compelled to eat him.

The only real failure was a Yaqui Indian shaman called Paha-Sapa who, before the dinner had even started, had smeared himself with datura paste and gone into immediate trance. A.A. Catto was aware that she would shortly have to deal with him.

With the exception of the shaman, the guests were on their best and most energetic behaviour. It was understand-able, in view of the fact that A.A. Catto had informed them, during the hors d'oeuvres, that anyone who failed to please would be shot. They may have all been custom built repro-ductions with impressed personalities, but they were also mortal, with a mortal's inbuilt aversion to violent death. To reinforce A.A. Catto's warning, two armed guards stood silently behind her chair. At first the warning had cast a shadow over the festivities, but by the time the larks' wings in aspic arrived, the party was in full, if desperate, swing.

A.A. Catto had, if anything, underplayed her own part in the proceedings. She was there to be amused. She didn't feel obliged to contribute unless she wanted to. She wore a kind of black djellabah, slit on one side up to the thigh. One leg, encased in a black leather boot, dangled across the arm of her chair. A small cherub stood beside her chair stroking the inside of her thigh with a peacock feather. The cherub was less than a metre tall, pink and chubby with small gold wings grafted on his back.

The table in front of A.A. Catto sparkled with cut glass and fine silver. It was spread with spotless damask and white linen. Teams of young men and women, uniformly blue eyed and blond haired, continually replaced the dishes and de-canters. They wore white tunics and were garlanded with vine leaves and flowers.

A.A. Catto sat silently in her chair and watched the entire circus with a half smile that revealed nothing of what she was thinking. Her exquisitely made-up eyes moved from one man to the other as Wilde started on Presley again.

'Why so sullen, sweet boy, it hardly becomes you?'

Atreides raised his head from nuzzling Patty Maison and glanced at Presley.

'I would have thought it became him admirably. Why, at times he positively smoulders.'

Presley remained silent. He glared from beneath his eye-lids, and his upper lip curled into a sneer. Wilde clapped his hands in delight.

'He surely becomes more beautiful by the moment. He is delightful when he's angry.'

Presley slammed his glass down on the table.

'Why don't you faggots get the hell off my back?'

Atreides laughed.

'He must be talking about you, Oscar. I'm sure Miss Maison will confirm that I can't be categorized by such a narrow definition.'

His hand seemed to have vanished inside her dress. Patty Maison giggled shrilly and nodded. Wilde pursed his lips.

'A combination of the arrogant and the omnivorous in one individual seems positively vulgar.'

He beamed at Presley.

'Wouldn't you agree, dear boy?'

Presley looked up sharply.

'Ah don't know what the hell you're talking about.'

Atreides smiled sardonically.

'He doesn't have your experience, Wilde.'

Wilde slowly turned to look at the replica of the god-emperor.

'Experience is the name that everyone gives to their mis-takes.'

He glanced back at Presley.

'It's said that anyone who can dominate a dinner table can dominate the world.'

Presley half rose from his seat. He held up a tense, semi-threatening hand.

'Ah'm warning you, brother, Ah've had about enough of your mouth.'

The conversation round the long table stopped dead. The servants halted, and even the harp player in the filthy coat, battered top hat and red wig on the small platform in the corner of the room ceased to play. Then Wilde broke the silence with a brittle giggle.

'Come now, sweet boy, no one as pretty as you should behave quite so dreadfully.'

Everyone's eyes turned to Presley. A.A. Catto leaned for-ward in her chair. Presley sat hunched up looking down at his hands. Wilde spoke again.

'Nothing to say, dear boy?'

Presley suddenly snapped to his feet and flashed around the table before anyone else could move. He swung two wide, vicious punches at Wilde's head, and then followed them up with a savage jab into the

fat man's stomach. A.A. Catto's guards started to move towards Presley but, at a signal from her, remained still.

Wilde fell to his knees, sobbing and trying to protect his face with his hands. Presley leaned forward, grabbed him by the lapels of his dinner jacket and hauled him to his feet.

'Ah warned you, faggot.'

He slammed Wilde hard against the wall three times. Then he let go of him. Wilde's head sagged on to his chest. He slid slowly to the floor. Presley turned to face A.A. Catto. He stood awkwardly, brushing his hair back out of his eyes.

'Ah'm sorry to mess up your party, ma'am. Maybe it'd be better if Ah was to leave?'

A.A. Catto smiled.

'On the contrary, it was very entertaining. You must come and sit by me.'

Presley sat down beside her. She motioned to her guards, and they dragged the unconscious figure of Wilde out of the room. Paha-Sapa the shaman chose that moment to fall off his chair, and he too was dragged away. The servants began to circulate with brandy, mints, small porcelain bowls of cocaine and opium pipes.

The conversation started again. Atreides began groping Patty Maison in a more serious manner. The courtesans and the tyrants also began to get acquainted. Job Yok, the necro-mancer, tried to catch A.A. Catto's eye. He had a plan for the reorganization of her armies according to a cabbalistic system of numerology. A.A. Catto wasn't buying. She was more interested in the Presley reproduction.

Only Nancy seemed set apart from the general festivities. She sat back in her chair and watched as A.A. Catto started to move in on Presley. Nancy wondered if he'd survive the night. Nancy had been there too often when A.A. Catto had fun with one of her custom built males. Nancy knew that only a small percentage lived through it.

Nancy looked carefully at her friend and leader. She was suddenly very aware that she was the only natural human who came anywhere near A.A. Catto. Everyone else around her was custom built to her fantasy. At the start, the idea of conquest had seemed like a game. Now it was becoming reality, Nancy was filled with misgivings. She had never been on anything more than nodding terms with any kind of morality, but she was beginning to have grave doubts about what world A.A. Catto thought she was going to create, and, more particularly, how long Nancy would last if A.A. Catto ever got tired of her.

A.A. Catto seemed to have no doubts at all. She was leaning on the Presley reproduction and running her fingers across his chest.

'I've got a feeling that I'm going to be pleased I ordered you.'

'Thank you, ma'am, it was great to be designed.'

'You're glad that I picked out this personality for you?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'I expect you feel lucky to be beamed out to someone like me.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'You do know who I am, don't you?'

'Sure Ah know who you are, ma'am. Ah was tol' when Ah beamed out.'

'And you know what I do?'

'No, ma'am, not for certain sure.'

A.A. Catto's voice became very soft and coy.

'I'm conquering what's left of the world.'

Presley nuzzled her ear.

'That's very impressive, ma'am.'

'Isn't it just?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'I've conquered a good deal of it already.'

'That's a very fine achievement, ma'am...'

He slid his left hand inside her djellabah.

'... Specially for a cute little girl like you.'

A.A. Catto lay back as his hand cupped her breast. She smiled up at him, and ran her fingers through his greasy hair.

'You think I'm cute, do you?'

'Ah think you're the prettiest thing Ah seen.'

A.A. Catto began to undo his shirt.

'I suppose you could say that I'm building an empire...'

She sighed and wriggled her hips.

'... the like of which the world has never seen.'

The Presley reproduction ran his tongue round A.A. Catto's left nipple.

'That's a fine thing to say, ma'am. Ah never met no woman with an empire.'

A.A. Catto's voice became deep and husky.

'It will stand for a thousand years.'

'That's one hell of an empire, ma'am.'

A.A. Catto propped herself up on one elbow and looked around the room. The rest of the guests had fallen into a tangled squirming heap on the floor. The harp player bounced up and down in the middle of it all. Only Job Yok the necromancer still sat at the table staring disconsolately at his empty plate. A.A. Catto nibbled at the Presley reproduction's ear.

'I think we should go somewhere more private. I want to tell you all about what I'm going to do to the human population. I've got some fantastic plans for them.'

'It'd be a blast.'

A.A. Catto disentangled herself from the Presley replica and stood up.

'Let's go.'

Presley also stood up, straightening his clothes. A.A. Catto looked at him and shook her head.

'There's one thing wrong with you custom mades.'

Presley looked at her in surprise.

'Huh?'

'You're all so goddamn docile. You have the built in anxious to please factor.'

'Ah'm sorry, ma'am.'

'According to the tapes, the real Elvis Presley would never have said anything like that.'

She turned to Nancy.

'You better come too. I've decided to wrap up this dinner. I'm bored with it.'

The other guests were still squirming on the floor. A.A. Catto nodded to the guards.

'You can go ahead, I've finished with them.'

She walked briskly out of the room with Nancy and the Presley replica obediently following her. As the doors closed behind them, the gunfire started.

Billy, the Minstrel Boy and Olad moved silently through the shadows of blacked out Feld. The drizzle fell in a continuous veil. At regular intervals, an Ocpol ground car would cruise past and they would have to freeze in a doorway or the entrance to an alley. Slowly they made their way towards the city wall, following the directions that Carmen the Whore had given them.

They kept to the inside of the wall until they could see the jagged hole blasted in it by the Quahal army,

silhouetted against the dim skyshine. When they were about thirty metres from the gap, the Minstrel Boy halted and motioned to the other two to do the same. Billy leaned against the wall trying to keep his teeth from chattering. He was soaked to the skin.

'Can you see any guards?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'There's nothing moving, but it's too dark to tell for sure.'

The three of them strained their ears for any telltale sound. All they could hear was their own breathing and the drip of water as it fell from walls and roofs. The Minstrel Boy shivered.

'I don't see how they'd be dumb enough to leave a gap in the wall like that unguarded. Let's move up a little way. Take it real slow and quiet.'

They moved another ten metres towards the gap, keeping close together and hugging the cover of the wall. Again the Minstrel Boy stopped. Billy put his hand down to his gun.

'See anything now?'

The Minstrel Boy peered into the darkness.

'I ain't sure. Wait a minute... Yeah, I think there's some-one moving up there.'

He began to edge closer. The other two followed. The Minstrel Boy dropped behind a pile of rubble. Billy crouched down beside him. The Minstrel Boy slowly raised his head.

'There's definitely one guard out there. He's standing right in the gap.'

'Just the one?'

'That's all I can see.'

'You figure there's any more?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at Billy impatiently.

'How the hell should I know?'

Olad pulled his gun from his holster.

'I'll go deal with him.'

The Minstrel Boy grabbed his arm.

'You stay right where you are. You'd wake up the whole goddamn army.'

'So what do we do?'

The Minstrel Boy grimly took two of his knives from his belt.

'I'll take care of this. You two'd only fuck up.'

He scrambled over the pile of rubble and vanished into the shadows. Olad looked at Billy.

'Think we should follow him?'

Billy shook his head.

'We'll just stay put.'

They waited, holding their breath. For a long time nothing happened. No sound came from the darkness. There was no sign of movement. Olad drew his gun.

'He's gone and got himself killed.'

'He ain't. We would have heard something.'

'Maybe he's selling us out.'

'He wouldn't do that.'

Olad peered dubiously into the night and rain.

'Wouldn't he?'

Billy suffered an instant pang of doubt. Perhaps the Min-strel Boy was betraying them. He put it on one side.

'He wouldn't do that.'

Still nothing happened. Then they heard a sound in front of them. They both crouched down with guns held tensely in their hands. The Minstrel Boy appeared over the pile of rubble. He was carefully wiping his knives. He slipped them back into his belt.

'We'd better get through the gap before anyone comes.'

'How many guards were there?'

'Just one.'

'Did you kill him?'

The Minstrel Boy's hat hid his face, but his voice was filled with contempt and revulsion.

'I said I'd take care of it, didn't I?'

They started forward again. As they moved through the gap in the wall they had to step over the body of a black helmeted guard. His throat had been neatly cut, almost like a surgical operation.

On the other side of the wall the view was like something out of a nightmare. Spotlight towers dotted the

wide flat plain, illuminating line upon line of small hemispherical in-flatable tents and hundreds of fighting machines marshalled in straight, orderly lines. There were tanks, ground cars, air-craft of all sizes, light and heavy artillery, earth moving and traction equipment, and trucks of every kind. Huge dirigibles came down on cleared areas picked out with coloured marker lights. Gangs of men swarmed over them unloading moun-tains of supplies and munitions. Thousands of black suited troops moved around the huge camp like swarms of ants. The cold lights reflected in the rain heightened the effect of im-placable evil. The three escapees stopped and stared.

'God, just look at that!'

'There must be thousands of them.'

'Hundreds of thousands.'

'Nothing's going to stop an army like that.'

Billy looked at the Minstrel Boy.

'How did she get hold of all this? Stuff Central must have gone crazy.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded grimly. He looked thoughtful.

'That could be an answer.'

Olad looked round nervously.

'Let's get the fuck out of here before we're spotted.'

'Which way do we go?'

An expression of pain passed across the Minstrel Boy's face. He shut his eyes and concentrated. After a few seconds he opened them again and sighed.

'We'll follow the outside of the wall, round to the other side of the city. Then we'll strike out into the nothings.'

The other two nodded. They moved off in single file, with the Minstrel Boy in front. Again they stuck to the shadows close to the wall. They'd been walking for about twenty minutes, and were about halfway round the city, when they heard the distinctive sound of a patrol vehicle.

'Down!'

The Minstrel Boy hit the ground, and the other two did the same. They swivelled round and snatched out their guns. The patrol came nearer. It was moving very slowly, scanning the wall with a searchlight. It seemed to be doing a routine check. The three men pressed themselves hard into the damp ground. The car crawled closer. It stopped only a few metres from where they lay. Olad slowly raised his gun. The spotlight played on the wall above their heads. It moved slowly down-wards. Billy took careful aim at the patrol vehicle. He held his breath. The searchlight stopped just short of where they lay. It remained still for a few moments and then swung sideways. The car rolled on. Billy let out a deep breath.

'That was too damn close.'

The Minstrel Boy slowly stood up. He watched the patrol car vanish into the rain.

'They'll find the body of the guard pretty soon. We'd best get the fuck out of here.'

They hurried along for another ten minutes. The Minstrel Boy stopped every now and then as though trying to get his bearings. The other two didn't speak to him. They knew the faculty of wayfinding had unpleasant side effects. What these were, they couldn't guess at. The simplest thing was just to leave him alone.

They approached one of the ruined gates of the city. The Minstrel Boy halted.

'We should move out towards the nothings,'

He pointed to the road that ran out from the wreckage of the gate.

'We can follow the road. It used to link up with a stable wheelfreaks' highway across the nothings. I expect that's started to break up now. You both got porta-pacs?'

Billy and Olad nodded, and patted the portable stasis generators on their belts.

'Okay, let's go.'

They started across country. When they were a little way from the city they headed for the road. They'd only just set foot on it when a siren went off on the other side of Feld. It was quickly joined by the sound of two or three more. Olad looked round.

'What do you think that is?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'They've probably found the body,'

Billy stared back into the drizzle.

'If they have, they'll come looking for us.'

Olad quickened his pace.

'Let's get into the nothings. They won't find us there.'

They broke into a jog. The three of them managed to keep going for about fifteen minutes. Then Billy stopped, gasping for breath.

'I can't keep this up. Two weeks in that whorehouse have put me right out of condition.'

Olad suddenly pointed back down the road.

'Look!'

They all turned. Lights were moving around the city.

'They're looking for us. That's for sure.'

'Maybe they'll think it's a resistance killing.'

The Minstrel Boy grunted.

'Maybe. Let's just keep going, and keep our eyes open.'

They hurried on. The lights and sirens continued to circle the city. For a while Billy thought the search was being confined to just that area. It looked as though they'd got away. Then lights started coming down the road towards them. Billy looked round wildly.

'Get off the road!'

There was a ditch running along the side of the road. The three men hit it almost simultaneously. There was about fifteen or twenty centimetres of water in the ditch. Billy, Olad and the Minstrel Boy were forced to lie in it. It didn't matter all that much, they were already soaked to the skin.

Three patrol vehicles roared past at top speed with their lights flashing and sirens screaming. They were going too fast to notice the huddled figures.

The three refugees moved cautiously along it. Walking in water up to their ankles made the going slow and difficult. Both Billy and Olad tripped more than once, and measured their length in the muddy water. Patrol cars kept howling past on the road. Each time they approached, the three men were forced to crouch down in the wet.

After a long time, the patrol cars stopped moving up and down the road. Billy listened carefully. It seemed as though the search had returned to the city. He emerged cautiously on to the highway. Olad and the Minstrel Boy followed him. The only moving lights were way behind them. Up ahead was dim grey luminescence. As they walked on it grew brighter. Billy grinned at the Minstrel Boy.

'It's the nothings. We're there. We made it.'

The Minstrel Boy pushed back his hat with a gesture of relief.

'It does look...'

A pair of searchlights snapped on, bathing the trio in blind-ing white light. The black shape of a patrol car was standing by the side of the road. A metallic voice crackled from a speaker.

'Stand right where you are. Raise your hands and do not move.'

The three of them slowly raised their hands. Two orange helmeted Ocpol dismounted from the vehicle. They walked slowly towards Billy, Olad and the Minstrel Boy. Their guns were pointed unerringly at the three men.

She/They moved into a new, different zone. Her/Their senses were extended to the very limit in the search for the entity that was destroying and converting basic mass and energy. She/They had detected some form of carrier beams stretching out through the chaos of the nothings. She/They had concluded that it was possible that these beams emanated from the entity that She/They sought.

She/They had followed the path of the beams. They flowed through the swirling grey confusion like lines of clear pulsing light. She/They began to perceive that they converged, and obviously emanated from a single distant point. Her/Their hopes rose that, as She/They had first suspected, it would be at this point that She/They would locate the thing that She/They was hunting.

Following the beams had not been easy. Plotting their course was not difficult. They shone through the nothings like a beacon to Her/Their sensors. It was their inflexible straightness that created the problems. They sliced unfailingly through every part of the chaos. She/They was forced to follow wherever they led.

The zone She/They was entering was one of strangely disarranged matter. It appeared to have been torn up by the disrupters, but not totally destroyed. It was like a fold in the nothings, an eddy that was filled with fantastic debris created by an unknown intelligence.

She/They floated about a metre above an expanse of dark red viscous liquid. Huge insect-like creatures were crowded together, half submerged. They jostled and scabbled at each other. There was the click of claws on carapaces and the crack of powerful mandibles. Occasionally one would snap up at Her/Their feet, but She/They managed to keep out of the creatures' reach.

The red liquid slowly gave way to a strange kind of swamp. Clumps of spiky purple vegetation poked up through the surface. The huge swimming insects were left behind, and replaced by much smaller flying ones. They flew at Her/Their face but, at the last minute, they would veer away, and none of them actually touched Her/Them. Above Her/Them saffron clouds sped across a threatening magenta sky. She/They, however, felt no motion at the level She/They was on.

All at once, Her/Their sensors began to jangle.

'Disrupter.'

The word hung in front of Her/Them like a flashing warn-ing sign. She/They stopped abruptly, and shut down as much of the flow of energy through Her/Their being as possible. She/They hung in space, still and almost dead. Only Her/Their visual sensors were still operating.

The most distant clouds seemed to be being sucked down, and the surface of the swamp lifted up to meet them. Then the disruptor appeared over a kind of false horizon between the two.

The disruptor was solid, cylindrical and half buried in the surface of the swamp. It sucked in matter through the gaping maw in its forward end. Behind it, it left a trail of sparkling grey chaos, suffused with rainbow patterns that gradually faded as it moved away.

The thing came towards Her/Them. She/They cut Her/Their energy circulation to the absolute minimum. Her/Their perception of colour began to fade. One moment, the smooth sides of the disruptor were an intense metalflake blue, then they changed to a flat grey as the power to Her/Their visual sensors decreased.

She/They hung limp and immobile. The disruptor seemed unaware of Her/Their presence. It continued on a straight course that, unfortunately, lay in Her/Their direction. For moments it seemed as though She/They might be sucked into its squat reptile mouth simply by accident.

Then it passed Her/Them. It was close enough for Her/Them to perceive the markings on its smooth

metallic sides. It was obviously some kind of graphic script, but in Her/Their low energy state She/They was unable to decipher it.

The disruptor continued to move away. She/They cautiously raised Her/Their energy level enough to turn one of Her/Their three heads and watch it go. The disruptor didn't seem to notice the slight fluctuation. She/They moved Her/Their energy rate even higher to allow Her/Them to consider the problem. Colour returned to Her/Their vision.

'Hypothesis. The disruption module's energy detectors only operate on higher patterns.'

'Inoperative. We have positive information to the contrary.'

'Hypothesis. The carrier beam generates its own field that repels the disruptor module. Such a field could mask our own energy trace.'

She/They conceded.

'A possible option.'

She/They allowed Her/Their energy level to move back up to maximum. She/They began to move again, carefully following the course of the beam.

Jeb Stuart Ho sat in the J-class flightcraft with the twenty-nine other brotherhood executives. Their bubble helmets were sealed shut, and umbilical lines ran from the side walls of the craft's sparse interior to the front of their suits. When the time to jump came, these would be disconnected and they would rely on the suits' own life support systems. Until then, while they were still in transit, they remained hooked into the ship.

There was no conversation. The suit to suit communicators were only used for messages of the utmost importance. The task force were seated in pairs, on two-man padded benches. Over half of them had assumed postures of meditation. Jeb Stuart Ho wasn't one of them. He had tried for a while to make his mind go blank. He had given up when he realized he was too keyed up by the task even to achieve the most minimal state of trance. Instead, he just let his thoughts wander where they might.

The speaker in his helmet crackled into life, and brought him back to reality. He heard the flat metallic voice of the auto pilot.

'Drop zone approaching. E.T.A. ten minutes. Forward scanner is being relayed to bulkhead screen.'

The large screen at the end of the passenger area came on. In the centre of it was a small pale blue sphere. It slowly but steadily grew larger until it filled half the screen. There were no markings on it of any kind. Jeb Stuart Ho felt a twinge of disappointment. He had expected Stuff Central to be a little more impressive. The speaker crackled again.

'Drop to target minus ninety and counting.'

Jeb Stuart Ho took a deep breath and made a final check on his equipment. Everything was perfect. On the screen, the blue sphere continued to increase in size. It almost filled it.

'Minus sixty and counting.'

Jeb Stuart Ho swallowed. The dryness of excitement made his tongue feel thick and sticky. Inside the gloves of his flight-suit, his palms began to perspire slightly.

'Minus fifty and counting.'

The screen was now totally filled with an expanse of blue. Jeb Stuart Ho tensed in his seat.

'Minus forty and counting. We have now entered the stasis area of the target. Outside conditions are a perfect vacuum. Minus thirty-five and counting.'

Jeb Stuart Ho shifted in his seat. He tugged at the straps on his laser unit to make sure it was securely attached to his suit. The speaker continued to chatter.

'Minus thirty. Equalizing interior conditions with outside.'

There was a faint hiss as the craft atmosphere escaped into the vacuum surrounding Stuff Central.

'Minus twenty-five. Switch to individual life support.'

Jeb Stuart Ho pulled the umbilical line from the front of his suit. His own life support cut in automatically. A thin trickle of condensing gas flowed from the open end of the tube.

'Minus twenty and counting. We are now orbiting the target.'

On the screen, the blue sphere had shifted to form a slightly curved blue horizon. The surface still looked smooth and unblemished. Jeb Stuart Ho was only now beginning to realize the vastness of the sphere.

'Minus fifteen. Going down to surface on target; twelve, eleven, ten, nine, eight; stand by, releasing jump hatches.'

Three wide sections of panelling fell away from either side of the flightcraft.

'Prepare to jump.'

The thirty black suited figures moved to the open hatches. They stood in front of them, five to a hatch.

'Five, four, three.'

Jeb Stuart Ho tensed all his muscles.

'Two, one, JUMP!'

In perfect unison, the executives rolled out of the flightcraft into empty space. There was a fall of about five metres to the surface of the sphere. Jeb Stuart Ho twisted in midair and landed heavily on all fours. His training prevented him from suffering any kind of injury. He lay flat on the smooth, blue, metallic surface and looked around. The rest of the force was spread out over a wide area, but they all seemed to have landed safely.

Jeb Stuart Ho was about to activate his communicator and make contact with his companions, when a small trapdoor flipped open in the surface of the sphere. A short antenna emerged from it. At its tip was what looked like a bundle of sensor lenses. Jeb Stuart Ho glanced round. A small forest of these

antennae had sprouted all over the area in which the task force either lay or crouched. The scanners slowly revolved, moving as one. The intruders had been spotted and were obviously being inspected.

After two complete rotations, the antennae withdrew and the trapdoors closed again. For a few moments nothing happened. Jeb Stuart Ho looked at his companions. He spoke into his communicator, but nothing happened. Either it had been damaged in the fall, or something inside the target was interrupting the signal.

He stood up. The rest of the force were unhooking their laser units to start cutting through the outside shell. Abruptly another set of larger trapdoors snapped open. Telescopic stands flashed into position. Mounted on top of them were wide barrelled projectile throwers.

They opened fire, silently flashing in the airless silence. Each one of them turned briskly, spraying self propelled shells through a 360 degree arc. Jeb Stuart Ho tried to push himself down into the unyielding metal. He waited to be hit. After a while, the gunfire stopped. It seemed as though the weapons didn't have a low enough elevation to hit anyone lying flat on the surface. Jeb Stuart Ho assumed that if that was the case, the rest of the task force would also be un-harmed.

The projectile throwers were still in position. Jeb Stuart Ho carefully turned his head. The guns didn't start firing again. Jeb Stuart Ho suddenly felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach. He saw how wrong he had been. More than three quarters of the brotherhood executives were dead, They hadn't hit the ground as fast as he had.

The dead were strewn all around him. On one side of him Quang Howard was almost cut in half. On the other lay a figure he could no longer recognize. The clear globe of his helmet was slowly filling up with bloody pink foam. Jeb Stuart Ho looked beyond them, trying to make contact with the survivors. Na Duc Rogers was lying some ten metres away. At first Jeb Stuart Ho thought he was dead, then he saw his head move inside the bubble helmet.

Na Duc Rogers spotted Ho. He raised his hand. A single weapon opened fire. The projectile neatly ripped off his arm just below the elbow. Jeb Stuart Ho watched in horror. The worst thing about it was the all enveloping silence. Na Duc Rogers slowly rolled over and lay still.

Jeb Stuart Ho saw another survivor moving carefully to-wards him. He was worming his way along the surface, pressing his body flat to avoid triggering the projectile system. It was Lorenzo Binh. He touched helmets with Jeb Stuart Ho so his voice could be heard.

'The communicators are out.'

Ho nodded.

'I know that.'

'What do we do now?'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him grimly.

'We must go on with the task.'

'But we're pinned down.'

'We're safe as long as we remain flat.'

'Can we cut through the outer shell in this position?'

'We can try. Are there no other survivors?'

'There are two more brothers moving towards us. They're right behind you, you won't be able to see them from the position you're... Oh no.'

Lorenzo Binh's face contorted in an expression of horror and pain. Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him sharply.

'What's wrong?'

'Edgar Allan Piao got it. He raised his head a little and a projectile punctured his helmet.'

Jeb Stuart Ho turned his head grimly. Tom Hoa crawled up beside him. He touched helmets with the other two.

'Are there just the three of us?'

'It would appear so.'

Lorenzo Binh glanced round.

'Wait, there's someone else coming.'

Lee Harvey Thot joined the other three. Sweat was standing out on his forehead.

'We are the only ones left. We're stranded here. We've failed before we even started.'

Tears began to stream down his face. Jeb Stuart Ho reached out and gripped his shoulder.

'Get a hold on yourself, we're going on with the task.'

'We can't, we can't move.'

'We will start cutting through the outer shell.'

'We'll be killed.'

'That's quite possible.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked round at the other two.

'We must move round so we are all facing each other.'

They cautiously did as he suggested. Lee Harvey Thot seemed to be more in control of himself. When they were in position, Jeb Stuart Ho unstrapped his laser unit and placed it in front of them.

'If you each support one side of it, we can keep the cutting aperture pointed at the shell.'

The others nodded and took hold of the squat grey metal unit. Once Jeb Stuart Ho was confident it was in position, he nodded.

'I'll switch on now. We'll have to keep moving round to cut out a section we can crawl through. Is everything clear?'

It was the others' turn to nod. Jeb Stuart Ho slowly raised his hand to the controls of the laser. The Stuff Central defence system remained silent. He set the laser to maximum cut. Then he pressed the trigger. A pencil of violet light flashed out from beneath it and struck the surface of the blue metal. The metal turned black, then red. Finally it began to smoke and melt. The four black suited figures looked tensely at each other. They had started to cut into Stuff Central.

CYN 256 was unaware of the conflict taking place on the outside of the sphere that was Stuff Central. He had no way of knowing. His world was too prescribed, and his sources of information too scanty.

CYN 256 was fully occupied by his own conflict with the Computer. For some twenty work periods he had collected all the sets of figures that had shown up on the printout in his work cubicle, and not felt right to him.

He had gone on carefully dividing them into the three arbitrary categories that he had invented, the ones that seemed to relate to stuff output, to energy and mass intake, and internal operations of the machine. He copied them carefully on to his stolen scrap of paper with the stolen scribe, out of sight of the sensor, in the sanitary unit of his sleep cubicle.

His collection of figures got larger and larger until it threatened to fill up both sides of his paper. CYN 256 knew that he couldn't simply go on collecting figures for ever. He realized that eventually he would slip up. He would either be detected by the sensors, or his hiding place in the disposal vent for paper and scribe would be discovered.

CYN 256 had expected that if he kept on collecting the figures for long enough, some kind of revelation would come upon him. He would discover meaning in the ambiguities that he sensed instinctively.

He'd collected the figures from twenty work periods, and nothing had become any clearer. He realized that he had to do something drastic. He only had one option left. The only thing he could think of was to feed the material back into the Computer through his work cubicle console, and see how it reacted. CYN 256 realized that there was one major draw-back with this plan. The Computer might react by simply kill-ing him.

He delayed the final act for two whole work periods before he could summon up the courage to face the Computer. All his lifelong programming screamed out against it. For as long as he could remember he had been enveloped in the Com-puter's all embracing love. His small gesture of rebellion and deceit had been hard enough. To go directly against the intelligence that had always been the central core of his whole existence was almost impossible.

As he walked down the corridor on the third period since he'd decided to feed the figures into the Computer, he knew there was no turning back. It was the start of a new work session. He had to do it before the time came for him to return to his sleep cubicle. He had been tempted simply to drop the paper and scribe into the disposal vent and forget the whole act of rebellion.

He was tempted, but deep down, he knew he had gone too far. There was no return to the secure happy ignorance of the other human operatives who walked to work beside him.

He came to his own work cubicle. He sat down and pressed the stud that activated the console. The printout immediately began to feed figures at him. His conditioning told him that his fingers should move to the console and begin to respond. Instead, he sat rigid. A light flashed above the console. Still he did nothing. He knew his inactivity had been recorded as a malfunction. The therapy squad would already be on their way.

He took the list from where he'd hidden it in his coverall. His fingers flew, copying the groups of figures. The light went out. The printout stopped. The strip continued to un-wind but there was nothing on it. CYN 256 went on work-ing at the console. Another light came on. It was red and it rapidly flashed on and off. The printout started again.

0I0I0I0I0I0I0I0I0I0I0I0I0I

CYN 256 looked at it in horror. The Computer was responding to what he had done, but he didn't, understand it. The printout was meaningless. He had revealed himself but he had achieved nothing. He knew no more now than when he had started the whole insane scheme.

His hands fell away from the console. A set of tiny vents opened in the ceiling. A steel door slid out from the wall and sealed the entrance to the cubicle. CYN 256 knew it was his end. There was a faint hiss as pink, poisonous gas bil-lowed from the vents.

CYN 256 closed his eyes, took a deep breath and died.

Billy, Olad and the Minstrel Boy stood very still as the three Ocpol patrolmen walked slowly towards them with their guns raised. They let their hands hang loosely at their sides, and made no threatening move. Billy edged carefully towards the Minstrel Boy.

'What do we do now?'

'Fuck knows.'

The three Ocpol halted a few paces from their captives. The one in the middle, who had what appeared to be the in-signia of an officer on the front of his helmet, gestured with his gun.

'You will place your hands on your head.'

Billy, Olad and the Minstrel Boy did as they were told. The officer glanced at the patrolman on his right.

'Search them for weapons.'

The patrolman moved towards Olad. He walked round be-hind him. He carefully patted him down. When he reached the gun and the heavy knife at Olad's belt, the patrolman leaned forward and hooked the gun out of the belt. As he reached again for the knife, Olad pivoted on his toes, grabbed him by the throat and spun him round. The other Ocpol fired. Olad had the patrolman in front of him. The first two shells hit him in the chest. The force of the impact knocked both of them to the ground.

Billy snatched out his own gun and fired a burst at the officer. He spun round and fell. Billy turned his attention to the last of the Ocpol. He was already staggering round in circles, tugging vainly at one of the Minstrel Boy's knives that was buried in his throat. He sank to his knees, coughing blood, and then sprawled forward face down in the damp earth. Billy looked at the Minstrel Boy.

'Do you think there are any more inside the ground car?'

The Minstrel Boy started quickly towards the car.

'We can only find out.'

Billy followed him. They reached the car without anything happening. They pressed themselves against its dark grey armour plated side. The Minstrel Boy's hand went to the door handle.

'When I nod, go.'

'Okay.'

The Minstrel Boy twisted the handle and jerked the door open. Billy thrust his gun into the interior of the ground car. It was empty. The Minstrel Boy grinned.

'It looks like we've even got transport.'

Billy looked around. A grey dawn was starting to show through the unrelenting drizzle. Olad was on his feet walking unsteadily towards them. Billy shouted.

'Hey Olad, come on over here. We got ourselves a car.'

The Minstrel Boy frowned.

'He looks like he's hurt.'

They hurried towards the Siderian. Before they could reach him, he staggered and pitched forward. Billy and the Minstrel Boy ran to where he lay. Olad was face down in the mud. He didn't appear to be breathing. The Minstrel Boy gently rolled him over. His studded leather tunic was smeared with blood. The Minstrel Boy felt for his pulse.

'He's dead.'

Billy's eyes widened.

'Dead? How? The Ocpol took those two shots.'

The Minstrel Boy slowly stood up.

'The shells went right through the Ocpol, and got Olad as well.'

Billy went pale.

'Shit.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'It's a hard world.'

'Is that all you got to say?'

'What else do you want?'

Billy began to get angry.

'What are we supposed to do with him? You just want to leave him lying there?'

'What else do you figure we can do? Bury him maybe? That'd just give a few more Ocpol ground cars the time to catch up with us.'

'We can't just leave him like this. He was our buddy.'

The Minstrel Boy looked down at the body.

'He was someone we met on the road.'

Billy looked at him in horror.

'Is that all you've got to say? The man's dead. He saved us.'

The Minstrel Boy nodded.

'I know. He's dead, and I'm cutting out. Are you coming with me, or do you want to honour your buddy's memory by waiting around to get picked up?'

The Minstrel Boy turned on his heel and walked quickly towards the car. After a few moments' hesitation Billy followed. The Minstrel Boy slid behind the wheel. Billy had hardly got the passenger door closed before the Minstrel Boy roughly jammed the car into drive. It took off with a lurch.

They drove in silence for a long time. It was only broken as they approached the nothings. The Minstrel Boy glanced at Billy.

'Look around, see if you can find a stasis unit in this heap.'

Billy stared sullenly straight ahead.

'Find it yourself. You're so fucking smart. You know every-thing.'

The Minstrel Boy stamped on the brakes and the car slewed to a stop. He reached over and grabbed Billy by the lapels of his coat. He pushed his face very close to Billy's.

'Listen, either we try and get out of this together or you can stay right here. You either cooperate, or I dump you. Which is it going to be?'

Billy looked at him. He closed his eyes and sighed.

'Okay, okay. I'll do what you want.'

The Minstrel Boy pushed the car into drive again.

'Find the stasis generator. We're going to need it.'

Billy hunted around. He looked beside the seats, on the control panel and in the back of the vehicle. Eventually he looked at the Minstrel Boy with a frown.

'There doesn't seem to be one.'

'You've looked everywhere?'

'Yeah. It don't seem likely that they'd hide the stasis generator.'

'Shit! Isn't there any kind of point where we can plug in our own porta-pacs and extend their field to include the car?'

Billy shook his head.

'There's nothing. It must have been designed for use in stable areas only.'

Outside, the landscape was already starting to break up. Large holes of grey emptiness were honeycombing the previ-ously solid plain. Billy looked out of the narrow side window. He turned anxiously to the Minstrel Boy.

'Should we dump the car and go on on foot?'

'No, we'll drive till it disintegrates. You'd better turn on your porta-pac.'

The road became increasingly dotted with pits of nothing. The surrounding plain virtually disappeared. Soon they were driving on an incomplete road surrounded by the nothings. The Minstrel Boy kept throwing the car into screaming swerves to avoid touching any of the holes in the stable matter of the road. He managed to maintain this kind of erratic pro-gress for quite a while. Then the offside front set of wheels hit a circular pit in the road, about a metre across. They smoked, disintegrated and vanished. The front of the car hit the road with a scream of metal on stone.

The Minstrel Boy lost all control. The ground car slid along the road for about fifty metres, then it hit an even larger space of disorganized matter. A good third of its bodywork simply disappeared. What was left of it fell apart. Billy found him-self skimming down the road on a section of the chassis. He crossed another disrupted pit and that too ceased to exist. Billy hit the surface of the road. He was bruised, but other-wise complete inside the field of his porta-pac.

He painfully picked himself up and looked around. The Minstrel Boy was sprawled a short distance ahead of him. As Billy walked towards him, he got up. He too seemed to have escaped any serious injury. He stared gloomily at the few remnants of the ground car.

'I guess that's the end of that.'

'So now we walk?'

'Unless you got a better idea.'

'We've got no food, no water and no money. We might as well give up right now.'

Despite his pessimism the Minstrel Boy had started walk-ing. Billy fell in beside him. Already he was beginning to feel the sad desolation he always experienced when he was out in the nothings. His sense of time was starting to go. He tried to maintain his grasp on reality by keeping a conversation going. It wasn't an easy task. The Minstrel Boy was depressed and unwilling to talk.

'How long do you figure we'll be on this road?'

The Minstrel Boy grunted,

'Till we get to the end.'

'What's at the other end?'

'Another road, I hope. If I'm right, it should be the main one into Litz.'

'How far's that?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at Billy scornfully.

'Don't you know by now that in the nothings distance and time don't mean shit?'

'But I...'

'But what?'

'Nothing. I don't know. I don't understand these roads.'

'Who's asking you to?'

'I mean, they're straight, they seem to go from one place to another. They ought to have some length that a man could figure out.'

'Who says?'

'It stands to reason.'

'What's reason got to do with it?'

'I guess I thought...'

The Minstrel Boy stared at him bleakly.

'Has it ever occurred to you that you think too damn much?'

'I don't understand.'

'So don't understand. Just accept. Don't always try to define everything. It only gets you confused.'

Billy tipped back his hat and scratched his head.

'These roads sure look straight to me.'

The Minstrel Boy sniffed.

'Things ain't always what they seem, particularly in the nothings.'

'Yeah, but...'

The Minstrel Boy took a deep breath.

'Just walk, will you.'

After that, there seemed to be nothing else to say. They walked in silence, each one enclosed in his own thoughts. Billy's perception of time slipped away altogether. He found it impossible to judge how long he'd been on the road. Some-times it felt like a matter of minutes. At other times it seemed like days.

His ideas of distance also started to play tricks. One moment the Minstrel Boy would be right beside him, the next, the two of them would be separated by a wide expanse of road.

For a while it seemed that the simplest thing to do was to stare at the ground and trudge on. Even that, however, had its drawbacks. Billy found it acutely disturbing to look down into the pits of nothing that broke the road like pock marks. When he stepped on one, the field of his porta-pac provided a solid, if invisible support for his foot where the road should have been. Billy began to hate the depressing journey.

Just as Billy was about to decide that they were trapped in a warp that would keep them on the barren, disintegrating road for ever, the Minstrel Boy clapped him on the shoulder.

'We've got somewhere.'

Billy looked up. Another, wider, more complete highway was crossing theirs up ahead. It swept past at right angles like a vast bridge, some thirty metres above the level of their road. There appeared to be no supports holding it up any-where. Billy stared dully at the Minstrel Boy.

'It's just another road. Even if it is up in the air.'

'Yeah, but see what's on it.'

Billy looked again. A sluggish tide of humanity was moving slowly along the strange elevated highway for as far as the eye could see.

'Who are they?'

'Refugees I guess, making for Litz. At least they're people.'

Billy still couldn't raise any enthusiasm.

'So?'

'Where there are people, there's a way to survive.'

Billy cast a dubious eye over the empty space between the two roads.

'Can we get up there?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned. It was the first time he'd looked happy since they left Feld.

'Sure. No problem.'

A.A. Catto moved around the deep underground bunker in a state of dangerous excitement. She wore a severely tailored black uniform, complete with a long skirt and polished riding boots. A combination of drugs and nervous energy kept her pacing the echoing corridors of her subterranean head-quarters. Nancy and a procession of aides did their best to keep up with her tense, erratic progress. The Presley replica slouched along at the rear of the party, sullenly resplendent in a gold leather suit.

Nancy was a little surprised that the Presley replica was still around. Lately A.A. Catto had run through her custom built playthings at an alarming rate. They normally didn't last a single night, and Nancy had become increasingly apprehensive of the time when she might become a victim of A.A. Catto's homicidal concepts of pleasure.

In many ways, Nancy found the survival of the Presley replica very reassuring. As long as he was there, she felt that she was safe from becoming the principal in one of A.A. Catto's ultimately sadistic love games.

For reasons known only to herself, A.A. Catto had adopted the Presley replica as a kind of pet. She treated him with an offhand benevolence, and had given him the run of virtually the whole bunker. For a couple of days he had wandered about, getting under the feet of the aides, and taking a re-tarded delight in playing with the gleaming technology, press-ing buttons and watching things light up.

In the end, Nancy had taken upon herself to warn him that should he cause the slightest detail to go wrong in any of A.A. Catto's elaborate battle plans by his childish meddling, she might no longer find him charming, and would have him painfully disposed of.

The Presley replica had accepted the warning with ill grace. He had, however, ceased to meddle with the war room control boards. He now just tagged along behind A.A. Catto and became increasingly surly. Nancy began to feel that maybe his days were numbered.

A.A. Catto not only paced, she also talked. She poured out a non stop stream of plans and ideas that the nervous aides struggled to record and add to the growing volume of strategic orders. Some of A.A. Catto's newest schemes filled Nancy with a sense of foreboding. She had become inured to A.A. Catto's general savagery and megalomania, but some of the latest ideas had the ring of terminal madness.

'Immediately Litz has fallen we will commence the pro-gramme of Population Rationale.'

The aide with a memo unit scurried to keep pace with A.A. Catto, at the same time juggling with the unit's pick-up so it remained always focused on her. To miss one of her pearls of wisdom was to court instant death.

'It seems to us that if we simply allow our captive peoples to go on much as before, the whole idea of conquest loses its essential beauty.'

The aides nodded frantically.

'Yes, our leader.'

'We feel that the captive population must be reorganized to fit in with our pattern of empire.'

Again the aides nodded and chorused. Nancy noted silently that A.A. Catto had begun to refer to herself in the plural. She took the responsibilities of an empress very seriously.

Without warning, A.A. Catto turned right down a side corridor. The aides collided with each other in their frantic efforts to keep pace with her.

'This is basically the core of the Humanity Problem.'

One aide, bolder than the rest, smiled ingratiatingly at her.

'You have a solution to this problem, our leader?'

A.A. Catto halted and looked at him menacingly.

'Do you really think we might be seeking your advice on the matter?'

The aide made fluttering, bird-like motions.

'Of course not, our leader. I would never presume.'

The other aides edged away from him, fearful they might fall into disfavour by association. A.A. Catto resumed her brisk march. She carried a short whip, which she rhythmically tapped against her leg.

'We have decided that the most beneficial policy would be to clear all stable areas of random humanity. A single area will be allocated so they can be concentrated in one spot. Make a note. We require a brain analysis of the most suitable location. Once that has been decided we can start to move the population. It will make our empire so much more tidy. Human populations can be replaced by clones as and when needed.'

A.A. Catto's expression became almost holy.

'Once the human population has been concentrated in this one spot, a complex can be created to carry out experimental work on individuals and groups as to their suitability for either reprogramming or extermination.'

The aide who had incurred A.A. Catto's wrath attempted to regain favour.

'The plan has an elegant symmetry, our leader.'

The Presley replica glanced up and wondered if he ought to have said that. He decided it wasn't his style, and therefore was not expected of him. He resumed staring at his legs, admiring the tightness of his gold pants. Nancy was struck by the innate absurdity that seemed to hover around absolute power. A.A. Catto simply nodded in curt acknowledgement.

'The human population will, of course, be put to work on the construction of the experimental establishment.'

A.A. Catto looked thoughtful.

'We have been considering a name for this place. We are torn between the Humanity Centre and the Catto Institute. We have been giving much thought to names lately. We consider them to be of paramount importance. We have been thinking about our own name.'

She glanced at Nancy.

'How does Catto the First grab you, sweetie?'

Nancy forced a brittle smile. At least she was still sweetie, although the word had an acid bite to it.

'It has a ring to it, my love.'

A.A. Catto nodded absently.

'That's what we thought. Very well, a number of problems still do remain. Take note. Firstly, it is safe to assume that a percentage of the human population will die in transit to the concentration area. We will require an accurate prediction of what this percentage will be. Second, we will need a pro-file of the survivors and those unable to survive. Third, we require a schematic brief of the precise operation of an establishment whose primary purpose is the elimination of free will and random action on the part of humans.'

Nancy was struck by the fact that A.A. Catto no longer considered herself human. A.A. Catto continued.

'Lastly, we will need detailed plans for the design of build-ings and hardware outlined in the answer to the previous request, and the logistics of their construction.'

She looked round at the aides.

'Have we made ourself clear?'

The aides fell over themselves to show they understood.

'Of course, our leader.'

'Good.'

The boldest of the aides ventured another question.

'Will there be anything else, our leader?'

A.A. Catto's face darkened. She slapped the whip hard into her palm. The aide went white with terror. A.A. Catto regarded all the aides with an icy expression. Her voice went very quiet.

'There is one more thing.'

There was a deathly hush. A.A. Catto's voice rose hysterically.

'We want Litz taken! Taken now, with no more delay! Now go!'

The aides scurried away, and she let out a deep breath. She snapped her fingers at Nancy and the Presley replica.

'You two, Nancy and Elvis. You will come with us to our suite. If we don't relax we are liable to become insane.'

Of all the towns and cities attacked by A.A. Catto's legions Litz had the most warning. For many days before the first Quahal storm troopers reached its stable areas, thousands of refugees had been pouring into the city.

Not that Litz actually had days. The sections of its generators that controlled the climate and the passing of light and dark were set permanently at warm pleasant nighttime. Litz was completely a city of night. The bars, the clubs, the sex shows and the brothels made the soft blackness a world of adventure for those who had the credits to pay for it.

Litz had been designed as a sleazy, sensual wonderland. It was a tinsel city where anything could be had for a price. A million lights illuminated the sky. Skyscrapers towered in floodlit magnificence. Coloured searchlights lanced into the heavens. The street lamps and the lights of the hundreds of ground cars turned the wide streets into glittering rivers. Air-ships and ornithopters drifted between the tall buildings, adding their own spots and riding lights to the general radi-ance.

Not all was pleasure and light in Litz. It also had its sinister shadows. Behind the shining façades were the grim back alleys. These were the haunts of the winos, the muggers and the homicidal juve gangs. It was the territory of half starved human debris who competed with the huge rats, the wildcats and the semi-savage dogs that treated the maze of narrow alleys and claustrophobic yards as their personal hunt-ing grounds.

Litz had changed. The looming war had put the city through more changes than ever before in its history. The first of these was the flood of refugees. The ones who had brought credit or acceptable goods out with them had installed them-selves at the gleaming hotels. Those who hadn't had swelled the ranks of the back alley dwellers.

Litz had adapted to war amazingly fast. Anywhere that was so corrupt must have that facility. Corruption always adapts.

Litz, after all, had its foundations in the highest principles of human greed and operated on a finely honed interlocking sys-tem of bribes and expediency.

Almost instantly an array of fanciful uniforms had appeared in the bars, the nightclubs and the foyers of the whore-houses. Patriotic posters had quickly appeared on the walls of the city. Stirring martial parades had snarled traffic on the main streets. A thriving black market had mushroomed into being. It was, however, largely unnecessary as all the material goods needed by the city continued to come in on the stuff beam. One thing A.A. Catto had been unable to achieve, de-spite threats and pleading, was to persuade Stuff Central to discontinue service to cities under attack.

The city administration had done its part, though. It had sufficiently restricted the flow of supplies to create an in-spirational feeling of scarcity. It was this move that gave the black market the space to flourish.

In all ways, Litz seemed ready to face the invaders.

And then they arrived. As usual, the dive bombers of A.A. Catto's crack Vulture Legion went in first. The rapidly organ-ized owners of Litz's private aircraft took to the skies to face them in machines that had been hastily converted to a mili-tary role. The Litz air corps met the attacks with swaggering, if poorly organized, bravado. To their surprise, the Vulture Legion was totally routed, and retired to lick its wounds. A.A. Catto's air force had never encountered resistance and had no contingency plans to deal with it. The flying cowboys from Litz quickly made mincemeat of the sinister black dive bombers.

On the ground, things were far more grim. An army of flamboyant defenders had gone out to meet A.A. Catto's ground troops. They had been deftly massacred. The city was swiftly encircled. The only thing that stopped the armies of Quahal moving in for the kill was the desperate fight put up by a less picturesque but more efficient force drawn primarily from the Litz Department of Correction. Even so, both sides were well aware that it was only a matter of time before the city finally fell.

One of the cops turned soldier was Section Commander Bannion. He was in charge of a three kilometre strip of the city's perimeter. Bannion, like the rest of the Litz Defence Corps, was feeling himself being crushed under the knowledge of eventual certain defeat.

Bannion sat in the rest room of the defence HQ. It had originally been the drunk tank of the hastily converted L.D.C. downtown station. The tank and cells were being used as accommodation for the soldiers.

Bannion sat with his thick set body hunched. He stared vacantly at the dirty white tiles of the opposite wall. He was totally withdrawn into himself. He hadn't bothered to shave for three days. His olive drab battle fatigues were creased and filthy. He rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin. His eyes looked dark and sunken in the harsh glare of the naked tubes. The only clean object was the 27 mm automatic carbine propped up beside him.

Most of the men in the Defence Corps had started letting themselves go. They'd stopped washing and shaving. Defeat and almost certain death were too close to make it worth bothering any more.

Bannion cursed quietly to himself. The sound of a man crying came from one of the cells. It was all breaking down so fast. Bannion had just come back from a patrol. He had gone out with twenty men and come back with twelve. He felt impotent and helpless. It was a feeling that he couldn't adjust to. In the Department of Correction he had always taken pride in being on top of things. His major pleasure had been the certainty of his power.

A weary looking orderly came into the tank. He didn't bother to salute.

'The captain wants to see you.'

Bannion noted dully that the orderly had reverted to the old police ranks. They'd all been given smart new titles when the Defence Corps had been formed, but these seemed to be dropping away. Bannion slowly stood up.

'Is he up in his office?'

The orderly nodded.

'Yeah.'

'Okay.'

Bannion picked up his carbine and followed the orderly out of the tank. He took his time climbing the stairs. When he reached the captain's office he pushed open the door without knocking.

'You wanted me?'

Captain Dante Schultz sat hunched over a battered steel desk. He looked as rough as Bannion. The only light came from a single desk lamp. It illuminated some papers, a map and a half empty bottle of whisky. Schultz rubbed his eyes and nodded at a rickety upright chair.

'Siddown.'

Bannion glanced round the small dim office. He briefly thought of all the nights he had sat with Schultz, consuming whisky, coffee, delicatessen sandwiches and pills. It seemed like those days had gone for good. He dropped into the chair. It creaked under his weight. Schultz grinned crookedly at him.

'You want to hear the latest from the city administration?'

Bannion shook his head.

'Not particularly.'

Schultz shuffled his papers.

'You're going to, anyway.'

Bannion grunted. Schultz picked up a bundle of buff sheets.

'I won't read it all to you.'

'Thanks.'

'I'll just give you the main points.'

Schultz paused. Bannion raised a tired eyebrow.

'You looking for a response, already?'

Schultz sighed.

'The city fathers are surprised at our lack of success in containing the invaders' ground forces. They are setting up an investigation.'

Bannion spat.

'They're surprised, are they? They should send their fuck-ing investigators on patrol with my outfit. They'll find out how come we ain't "containing the invaders' ground forces". We're outnumbered and outgunned. They've got the numbers and the fire power.'

Schultz shrugged.

'I know that.'

'So tell the city fathers to go screw.'

'They also want us to carry out a retaliatory strike against the home base of the enemy.'

Bannion stared at Schultz in disbelief.

'Tell them to doubly go screw. It's not possible.'

Schultz looked down at the papers on his desk.

'We're going to do it.'

'You're out of your mind.'

'In fact, you're going to do it.'

Bannion's eyes narrowed. He leaned forward across the desk. His voice was very soft.

'Just what the fuck are you talking about, Schultz?'

'Captain Schultz.'

'Just tell me about it, will you?'

Schultz sighed.

'According to our intelligence reports this invasion is being directed from an area known as Quahal.'

'So what's Quahal?'

'Precisely, Quahal is a mountain and a river valley. In the valley there is a ziggurat.'

'What the hell is a ziggurat?'

'It's a kind of pyramid.'

'And that's where this invasion is being controlled from, a kind of pyramid?'

Schultz nodded.

'From a deep bunker built underneath it, to be totally accurate.'

'And what am I supposed to do about all this?'

Schultz took a deep breath.

'The plan is that you take a small force directly to Quahal. Fight your way into the bunker, destroy as much of the con-trol equipment and kill as many of the command staff as possible.'

'Simple as that?'

'Right.'

'That's just dandy.'

'I can go into details.'

Bannion looked at Shultz bleakly.

'Before you do, let me ask you one question.'

'What?'

'Supposing we actually do all this, how do we get away afterwards?'

'That'll be up to you.'

Bannion smiled grimly.

'So it's a suicide mission?'

Schultz looked evenly at him.

'I didn't say that.'

Bannion's face twisted into a sneer,

'You're a chintzy bastard.'

'Bannion, I'm warning you...'

'Work it!'

'Bannion!'

'Okay, okay. Just don't jive me. I don't need it.'

'This mission could be our only hope.'

'So tell me the details.'

'Where do you want to start?'

'How do we get there?'

'There's an airship from one of the rental companies being armed and specially equipped for a journey through the nothings.'

'What do we do when we get there? Have you got plans of this bunker? The defence system? The entrances? That kind of thing?'

Schultz sadly shook his head.

'I'm afraid we don't have anything like that. We've only the barest information that the place exists at all. Beyond that we know nothing.'

Bannion looked amazed.

'Couldn't you have given some prisoners the full treatment?'

Schultz uncomfortably avoided Bannion's questioning stare.

'We did. The mercenaries had been picked up in other cities that had fallen. They'd never been near the place. The ones who actually came from Quahal just clammed up and died on us. We couldn't get a thing out of them.'

Bannion sagged back in his chair. It creaked dangerously.

'That's just great.'

'You'll have to play it by ear.'

'Wonderful.'

'Listen, I never said it was going to be easy.'

'You never said anything, did you?'

Schultz ignored Bannion's flash of temper.

'Is there anything else you want to know?'

'Yeah, how do we find our way there? Do we just cruise off into the nothings and hope we strike lucky?'

Schultz pursed his lips and played with his papers.

'We found you a wayfinder.'

Bannion grinned sarcastically.

'You're too good to me.'

Schultz scratched his neck awkwardly.

'Listen, Bannion, get off my back, will you? I'm only doing the best I can.'

'Sure, sure.'

'Someone has to do it.'

'And Bannion's the sucker, right?'

'Will you cut it out?'

'Okay, okay.'

Bannion thought for a moment.

'How do we know we can trust this wayfinder? How do you know he ain't running a con on the chance of getting out of the city?'

'You want to see him?'

Bannion waved an expansive hand.

'Sure, what do I have to lose?'

Schultz punched the talk button on his desk intercom.

'Sapristien.'

A muffled response came from the speaker.

'Bring in the old guy, will you?'

Another muffled response. After a few seconds the door opened and an elderly man was pushed inside. He was short, and on the heavy side. His head was bald, but he had bushy eyebrows and a flowing beard. His hard bright eyes and wrinkled face seemed to indicate a keen intelligence. He wore a dirty white smock that hung down to his sandalled feet. He regarded Bannion and Schultz with a total lack of interest.

Bannion rose lazily from his chair. He walked round the old man, taking slow deliberate paces, examining him from every side. It was one of Bannion's favourite opening gambits for putting a suspect in an uncertain frame of mind. His ex-changes with Schultz had brought Bannion back to something like his old Department of Correction form. He halted in front of the old man, and stared at him for a full minute.

'And what do you call yourself, grandad?'

The old man didn't seem the least fazed by Bannion's performance. He smiled pleasantly.

'Most times I generally call myself me. Mind you, other people tend to call me the Wanderer, on account of how I roam from town to town.'

Bannion's eyes narrowed. His voice became a purr.

'And you claim to be a wayfinder?'

The Wanderer nodded.

'That's right. I may not be the best, you understand, but I got enough of the gift to get by.'

The old man leaned towards Bannion confidentially.

'Between you and me, I wouldn't like to be one of the best. Too many people getting on your ass, all wanting something.'

'You look more like a feisty, lying old bum to me.'

The Wanderer looked resigned.

'You got a right to think what you like.'

Bannion put his hands on his hips.

'You sound kind of indifferent.'

'That's pretty close to where I'm at.'

Bannion pounced. In a flash he'd grabbed the old man by the front of his smock and hauled him on to tiptoe.

'If you're going to be working with me, grandad, you're going to change your attitude. You're going to have to be pretty damned different, you dig? If you fuck me around I'm going to kill you, right?'

The old man blinked.

'You're the boss.'

Bannion abruptly let go of him. The Wanderer staggered back a few paces. Bannion levelled a threatening finger at him.

'You just keep that in mind.'

He turned to Schultz, who had remained seated during the whole miniature drama.

'How did you dig him up?'

'He was pulled in on a forged credit card. It's a mandatory death sentence under the emergency powers.'

Bannion looked at the old man with fresh interest.

'What was he doing?'

'He booked into a penthouse at the Albert Speer Hotel with a couple of hookers. He was paying with a homemade credit card.'

Bannion's eyebrows shot up.

'Two hookers? At his age?'

'At his age.'

Bannion chuckled.

'He may or may not be a wayfinder, but he's sure got some secret, and that's a fact. Tell me, old man. How do you manage it at your age?'

The Wanderer smiled blandly.

'I live a pure life.'

Bannion grunted.

'So it seems.'

He switched his attention back to Schultz.

'I suppose I'll have to use him?'

'There aren't any others.'

Bannion nodded thoughtfully.

'When do we leave?'

'How fast can you pick and brief a squad?'

'How many do I get?'

'Twenty.'

'We could be ready in a couple of hours, if you want us to leave that fast.'

'The ship'll be fitted out when you've got your squad to-gether.'

Bannion took the Wanderer by the arm.

'You'd better come with me, grandad. I'm not letting you out of my sight.'

The Wanderer put on an expression of innocence.

'I'm completely in your hands.'

Bannion snorted.

'You just remember that.'

The laser unit had made a circular cut in the steel surface of Stuff Central about a metre across. As far as Jeb Stuart Ho could tell the loose piece in the middle of the cut was only held in place by a thin tongue of metal. He touched helmets with the other three brotherhood assassins.

'I think we could push it in now.'

Lorenzo Binh turned his head slightly.

'Shall we use physical strength or psi pressure?'

Ho turned off the laser.

'We'll try psi first. It would be best to make as few move-ments as possible. We have no way of knowing when we may trigger another part of the auto-defence. Attempt to move the cut out section on the count of three.'

Jeb Stuart Ho glanced carefully to make sure the other three were ready.

'One, two, three.'

They all concentrated. The piece of metal didn't move. After a few minutes Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'We can't do it. We just don't have the power.'

Tom Hoa looked at Ho.

'We should use physical force?'

'Yes, but don't make any unnecessary movements.'

The four assassins slowly slid their hands on to the top of the cut out section of metal. They pushed with all their strength. The section began to bend inwards. Then something snapped and fell into the inside of the sphere with a loud crash.

'Okay, go! Don't get in range of those auto guns!'

Tom Hoa slid into the hole and disappeared from sight. Lorenzo Binh went swiftly after him. Lee Harvey Thot followed, but as he swung his body into the empty space, he raised his head a fraction too much. One of the automatic projectile throwers flashed into life. Lee Harvey Thot's helmet was instantly shattered. His body tumbled through the hole.

Jeb Stuart Ho could see no way that he couldn't be dead.

Ho eased himself through the hole. He let himself drop. He fell about three metres and hit a floor. He landed on his feet. He was in a corridor. It was lined with doors that looked as though they led to cubicles of some description. Lee Harvey Thot lay on the floor dead. Tom Hoa and Lorenzo Binh crouched with their guns at the ready.

The corridor ran absolutely straight for about two hundred metres. Then it disappeared over a kind of horizon as it followed the curve of the outside of the sphere. A number of small, yellow clad figures were just disappearing over it. As far as Jeb Stuart Ho could judge, they were only about half his height. It looked as though the computer had done some-thing drastic to the growth pattern of its human operatives.

Jeb Stuart Ho turned round. A series of coloured lights had begun to flash on and off. The sound of wind rushing past his helmet indicated that the sphere's atmosphere was rushing out through the hole that they'd cut. He looked at the other two and spoke into his communicator.

'Can you hear me?'

'Yes, whatever was jamming the communicators has cut out.'

'We'll move thirty metres down the corridor. It's obvious that some alarm has been triggered. Even if our presence hasn't been detected, I estimate that some kind of emergency repair on the hole will be made.'

They moved watchfully down the corridor. Suddenly Tom Hoa shouted.

'Look.'

Ho and Lorenzo Binh spun round. Two steel partitions were sliding across the corridor on either side of the hole. They locked into place, effectively sealing off the leak. The alarm lights went out.

Tom Hoa looked at Jeb Stuart Ho.

'Could it be that we have not been detected?'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked thoughtfully down the corridor with its long line of doors.

'It would be a great advantage if that was the case, but I do not think it is so. I have a feeling that the computer may be observing us and waiting for us to reveal more of what our purpose is.'

Lorenzo Binh looked round cautiously.

'You think that we are being observed, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

'I think that it is most probable.'

'Could it be possible that we survived the automatic defences on the outside by some design of the computer?'

'The possible is immense.'

'What would you calculate as being our next move, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

Jeb Stuart Ho didn't answer immediately. He was some-what disconcerted by the way the other two seemed to be looking to him for leadership. He scarcely felt worthy, particularly as he had failed in his only previous mission. He realized, however, if that was the way it was going to be he would have to accept it.

'I think we should first ascertain the nature of our immediate surroundings.'

All the doors along the corridor had symbols on them. Jeb Stuart Ho looked at the one nearest to him. The characters on it read CTA 102. He pressed a stud just under the inscription. The door slid smoothly and silently open to reveal a small bare cubicle. In some ways the starkness of the little room reminded him of his cell in the brotherhood temple.

The bed in the cubicle was tiny, scarcely larger than for a child. Again Jeb Stuart Ho wondered what had happened to the Stuff Central humans. He stepped back, into the corridor, and looked at the other two.

'This seems to be a dormitory area. We will have to go on.'

The others fell into step behind him with their guns at the ready. They had only gone a dozen paces when another, different coloured set of warning lights began to flash on and off. Lorenzo Binh swung round in alarm.

'What can this mean?'

Jeb Stuart Ho remained calm.

'We will doubtless find out in time.'

They assumed a defensive position. As a group they covered both ends of the corridor. Jeb Stuart Ho half crouched in the open doorway of a cubicle. He examined the grey metallic wall, and found that the panelling was almost as thin as foil. It would offer hardly any protection against projectiles. The illusion of cover was still somehow comforting.

They waited. For long tense moments nothing happened. Then tiny vents opened in the ceiling of the corridor. Thick pink gas began to pump out of them, and rolled down the corridor in billows.

'Poison gas?'

'Perhaps. We'll be safe inside our helmets.'

'It could simply be a smoke screen.'

The gas was certainly obscuring their vision. Jeb Stuart Ho smiled dourly.

'I think we can be certain that we've been detected.'

They strained to see through the thick clouds. Visibility was reduced to just under a metre. Then a tight hail of steel needles sliced through the wall above Jeb Stuart Ho's head. He threw himself flat on the floor, yelling into his communi-cator.

'We're under attack!'

More needles slashed into the thin metal. They hit the very spot where Jeb Stuart Ho had crouched just a moment before.

'Communicator silence. They may be using locator equip-ment.'

He rolled over and another hail of deadly steel slivers scored the floor where he'd been lying. It was plain that what-ever was attacking them was relying on some kind of sound picture. He controlled his breathing. He fired at the approxi-mate source of the attack, and immediately dodged. More needles sprayed the corridor.

Ho wondered if the attackers were men or simply another automatic system. He didn't have to wait long for an answer. A helmeted figure appeared out of the smoke hefting a large, heavy duty spiral needle gun.

For an instant, Jeb Stuart Ho saw the figure very clearly. It wore a pale green belted coverall with a

black letter B printed on the chest, heavy white combat boots and a white helmet. Its face was covered with a fitted gas mask that gave it the look of a huge eyed, bizarre insect. Jeb Stuart Ho snapped off a shot and the figure crumpled.

Four more similar figures came out of the gas fog. Ho sprang to his feet. Face to face with an enemy he could fight, he felt far more confident. He whipped out his sword and in a single, lightning sweep took out two of them. Tom Hoa shot the third and Lorenzo Binh leaped at the fourth and tore away its gas mask. Before the creature stumbled back clutching its throat and coughing blood, Jeb, Stuart Ho caught a glimpse of a flat, brutal, dead white face. It was human, but strangely sexually neutral.

For a moment, no more attackers came. The three brother-hood assassins stood alone surrounded by the clouds of gas. Jeb Stuart Ho looked at the other two. At last they were fighting like a team. He experienced a moment of grim satisfaction. He knew it was the sensation of a warrior's true reward.

It faded when he looked down at one of the bodies at his feet. He noted that it was at least a head taller than he, with a massive muscular frame. These things were very different to the tiny, yellow suited beings that lived in the corridor.

He realized that these must be the specially tailored defenders of Stuff Central. They may have once been human, but the computer had adapted and altered them until they were simply the antibodies in the machine's complex system, protecting it from outside intruders and internal malfunction.

Jeb Stuart Ho knew they wouldn't be easy to fight. They'd be guided by the computer's monstrous intellect, and, beyond the cloud of gas, there could be any number of them.

Billy and the Minstrel Boy arrived at the Inn. The Inn was a single building with its own stasis field. It dominated a strange midpoint in the peculiar road system that wove in and out of the nothings like a tangled, convoluted, hideously com-plex Mobius strip.

The Inn was about as small as a stable area could get. Its generators didn't run to luxuries like sky, scenery or even day and night. There was air, warmth, solid matter and gravity. That was it.

The Inn was a strange ramshackle affair. Wings and ex-tensions had been added to the central, slab sided stone building with no attempt at any kind of continuity in style. There were flying buttresses, turrets, thatched roofs, domes and even a geodesic annexe.

In front of the Inn was a broad forecourt. The entrance to it was through a high arch of neon lights. Beyond that there was only the road and a narrow strip of bare ground surrounding the whole area. After that the nothings started.

The road to the Inn had been long and hard. When Billy and the Minstrel Boy had joined the stream of refugees, they quickly discovered that they broke down into two very distinct groups: the sheep and the wolves, the prey and the predators. The Minstrel Boy wasn't in the least surprised.

Their first survival plan among the refugees was to hire on with sheep to protect them from the wolves. They were, after all, well armed, not easily messed with, and Billy did draw the line at out and out violent mugging.

The particular sheep who employed Billy and the Minstrel Boy were a merchant and his family from Port Judas. Their name was Inchgrip, and like all the solid citizens of Port Judas they were hard, humourless and meanly religious. Port Judas had, however, been reduced to smoking rubble by A.A. Catto's

bombers, and the Inchgrips found themselves on the road with the rest of the frightened throng.

When Billy and the Minstrel Boy had gone touting for a job, the Inchgrips had snapped up the two drifters to guard their lives and their wagonload of goods.

Not that the Inchgrips exactly took to Billy and the Min-strel Boy. They looked on them as filthy, sinful, foulmouthed heathens who would surely burn in the particularly nasty hell envisaged by the Port Judas strain of evangelists. They especially disliked their habit of getting drunk every night. Nevertheless, they were more than anxious to put them to work. The Port Judas religion said nothing against one man exploiting another. As it came to pass, the exploitation turned out to be mutual.

The deal with the patriarch, the grey bearded Rameses Inchgrip, was that Billy and the Minstrel Boy were to be given one gold piece per day or the equivalent in kind, plus all they could eat. Billy had spent a good while arguing with Rameses Inchgrip over whether they should also get all they could drink. The Minstrel Boy finally stopped the wrangle by re-minding Billy that Port Judas was teetotal.

The situation had maintained itself reasonably well for twelve days on the road. Billy and the Minstrel Boy had been paid, and they'd more or less done their job.

There had of course been petty irritations on both sides. Rameses Inchgrip had been exceedingly obstructive about his two teenage daughters. He had threatened Billy and the Minstrel Boy with earthly torment and spiritual damnation if they so much as looked at them. He also kept his daughters so closely confined to the inside of the wagon that the Minstrel Boy began to suspect that they were chained to the floor.

On the thirteenth day, Rameses Inchgrip had an even more sour expression than usual. After a long preamble, he informed Billy and the Minstrel Boy that there wasn't enough left to either pay or feed them. The Minstrel Boy told him that they'd settle for his daughters. Inchgrip hit him, and Billy had to restrain the Minstrel Boy before he retaliated by knifing him.

After they parted company with the Inchgrips, they fell in with a madame and a party of whores who were making their escape from the war zone and providing a service for the other refugees on the road. It seemed to Billy that, come what may, they always ended up in a brothel of one sort or another.

On a normal day, before the invasion from Quahal had started, the forecourt of the Inn usually contained not more than a dozen or so ground cars, a string of lizards, one or two elaborately designed motorcycles and maybe a single huge wheelfreak's truck. When Billy and the Minstrel Boy arrived it was choked with people and vehicles. The road for at least two kilometres from the Inn was jammed with backed up traffic. Refugees who had been unable to find a room at the Inn were camping in the forecourt and even on the road itself.

The filth and confusion were alarming. Even more alarming were the contrasts between the conditions of different groups of people. The rich, with their teams of guards and collections of valuables, either lived in the Inn itself or camped in some comfort in the forecourt. At the other end of the scale were the dozens of beggars, people who had lost everything on the road, who barely existed on what scraps they could find. Every few minutes a fresh body would be pitched out into the nothings.

The closeness to the nothings solved the refugees' sanitation problem. If it hadn't been so easy to pitch waste and the dead into an area where all matter simply vanished, the refugees would almost certainly have had to add disease to their already extensive catalogue of troubles.

The Minstrel Boy and Billy picked their way through the crowds towards the Inn itself. Beggars swarmed up to them in droves.

'For pity's sake, I haven't eaten in five days straight.'

Billy was about to dig into his pockets and distribute a few coins when the Minstrel Boy grabbed him by the arm.

'Don't be more of a dummy than you can help.'

'But they're starving.'

'Yeah, and there are hundreds of them, are you going to feed the lot?'

Billy shook his head.

'No, but...'

'Then don't give nothing to none of them. If you do, we won't be able to move. We'll be swamped by beggars wherever we go.'

The Minstrel Boy turned and aimed a swift kick at one of the more persistent supplicants who was tugging at his jacket, then turned back to Billy and shrugged.

'It's the only way to treat them and, besides, if the muggers hear that you've got money to throw at beggars we'll be in real trouble.'

Billy scratched his head.

'I'm wondering how long money will hold up.'

The Minstrel Boy sneered at the frantic milling crowds all around.

'It'll hold up as long as they believe in it. While they're still killing each other for it, money's cool. The whole thing's pretty well ingrained.'

Billy sadly shook his head.

'You've got a strange way of looking at things.'

The Minstrel Boy sniffed.

'I've got a sane way of looking at things. Let's see if we can get ourselves a drink.'

They continued to shoulder their way through the mob. They got within about twenty metres of the Inn. A group of men stepped up and barred their way.

'Where do you think you're going?'

The Minstrel Boy took a step back and looked at the four men in front of him. The tallest was a corsair from the fringes. He had the typical dark complexion and the plastered down ringlets that hung stiffly

almost to his shoulders. He wore the traditional costume of gaudy silks and high leather boots. He was extensively tattooed. Under his arm, he carried a primitive pipe cannon that fired a flesh tearing blast of old nails and scrap metal.

His companions were no less flamboyant. Two were small stunted wheelfreaks in their individually styled custom jump suits. They had that unique pinched look that comes from excessive use of stimulants coupled with generations of in-breeding on the camp sites and trailer parks at the junctions of the major truck roads.

The fourth was a far more effeminate figure. He wore a gold brocade tunic and matching knee breeches. His whole costume was hung with falls of now slightly dirty lace, and his bleached hair streamed down to his waist. But there was no mistaking, from the way his purple nailed hand gripped an evil looking needle gun, and the determined expression on his painted face, that he should in no way be underestimated.

The Minstrel Boy looked at each of them in turn. Billy's hand moved towards his gun.

'Who's asking?'

'We're asking.'

The Minstrel Boy raised an eyebrow.

'And who might you be?'

The corsair inflated his chest.

'I am Left of the Havens. I am chief vigilante for the Inn. I'm asking where you think you're going.'

The Minstrel Boy gave him a long hard look.

'Why?'

Left of the Havens lowered his head and began to chant.

'Left of the Havens, all men fear.'

His voice started out quietly, but quickly rose in pitch.

'They step aside when I draw near.'

The chant rose to a shout. He pulled a long, straight back razor from the top of his boot and deftly flicked it open.

'I got my straight razor and my cannon too, talk nice, brother, or I'll mess with you.'

The final phrase came out as a high speed gabble. It was the corsairs' time honoured ritual of winding themselves up for a fight. The Minstrel Boy raised a placating hand.

'Just hold it right there, friend. We aren't looking for any kind of fight.'

Billy joined in.

'That's right. We were just looking to buy a drink, that's all. We've been to the Inn before. It was never like this.'

The Minstrel Boy shot Billy a jaundiced glance. Billy wondered if it was because he'd given away the fact that they had money, or because the Minstrel Boy's last visit to the Inn had been far from pleasant. Left of the Havens looked from one to the other of them.

'You say you just want a drink.'

Billy nodded.

'That's right.'

The corsair nodded to a makeshift fence that enclosed the front entrance of the Inn.

'Nobody gets past without our say so.'

'So how do we get your say so?'

One of the wheelfreaks interrupted.

'Why don't you just cut him now, Left, and be done with it?'

Left of the Havens rounded on the little man.

'You hush your mouth, Seatbelt. I'm dealing with this.'

The one in the gold coat giggled. His gun, however, didn't waver. It remained pointing steadily at the Minstrel Boy's stomach. The corsair turned back to Billy.

'To get inside you got to do three things.'

'Which are?'

'First, we got to be sure we like you. Them we don't like, don't get in. Them we really don't like, we kill them and throw their bodies in the nothings.'

'And do you like us?'

The corsair stroked his chin.

'You ain't got off to too smart a start, but we'll let that go for now. The second thing you got to do...'

Seatbelt interrupted again.

'Aah, cut them now, Left. I wanna see you cut them.'

Left glared at him.

'I thought I told you to hush your mouth.'

The wheelfreak's voice took on a whining quality.

'I just wanna see one cutting, is all.'

'You'll see some cutting if you don't hush your mouth.'

The wheelfreak became resentfully silent. The effeminate one giggled again. Left of the Havens glowered at him.

'You hush up too, Gloria.'

He beamed at Billy and the Minstrel Boy. Billy had a feeling the relationship was changing.

'The second thing you got to do, gentlemen, is to satisfy us that you ain't undesirables.'

'Undesirables?'

'Undesirables.'

Left jerked his thumb to a crude but formidable cage on the outside of a section of fence. It contained a group of pathetic creatures. There were a pair of white, hairless dwarfs with stunted bodies and huge hydrocephalic heads, a tall thin half human with blue scales, and what appeared to be a whole family of squat hermaphrodites. Their bodies were covered with coarse reddish hair. Lines of breasts ran down their bodies rather like those of a sow.

A crowd had gathered round the cage. They taunted the collection of freaks. A few even tried to poke them with sticks. Billy looked at the corsair in disgust.

'They're only mutants from out on the edge.'

'Round here they're undesirables. People don't want that kind of trash round here. They don't like it.'

The Minstrel Boy interrupted before an argument could start. It was too bad about the mutations, but he had himself to look after.

'We ain't like that.'

'I can see that.'

'So what's the third thing we got to do before we can get inside for a drink?'

The corsair beamed, flashing a mouthful of gold teeth.

'You got to pay us.'

'Money?'

'Money.'

Billy looked at the Minstrel Boy with raised eyebrows. The Minstrel Boy shrugged in resignation. Billy

proffered a hand-ful of small Port Judas coins. Left of the Havens took them. He picked one and bit on it. He seemed satisfied as to the quality of the money, but there was some doubt about the quantity. He discussed the matter with his companions in a low voice. Then he turned back to Billy and the Minstrel Boy.

'Is that all you've got?'

'We're refugees, not tourists.'

There was another whispered debate. Left of the Havens grudgingly dropped the money into the pouch on his belt.

'It'll have to do, I guess.'

Seatbelt looked at Left in surprise.

'You mean you're going to let them through, just like that?'

'Just like that.'

'You ain't going to cut them or nothing? No surgery?'

'You heard what I said.'

The little wheelfreak spat at Billy's and the Minstrel Boy's feet.

'Shit.'

The Minstrel Boy glanced sourly at Billy.

'It's good to see law and order in action.'

They eased their way past the four vigilantes and hurried through the crowd towards the entrance of the Inn. It was jammed with travellers waiting to get a drink. Billy wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

'This is going to take a bit of time.'

They stood in line and waited, watching the crowd milling in and out of the forecourt. The four vigilantes continued to move around, kicking the beggars and shaking down any group of refugees who looked as if they might have enough cash or goods to make it worth while. The Minstrel boy took off his hat and fanned himself. The vast hordes who had flocked into the Inn made it impossible for the Inn's relatively small generators to maintain a constant temperature. The Minstrel Boy mopped his face and scowled.

'We got to get out of here as soon as we can.'

He pointed to a telltale blue flicker around the edge of the nothings.

'The generators are pushed to the limit. I figure they'll overload and blow.'

'Maybe we should just get out, right now.'

The Minstrel Boy put his hat back on with an air of finality. 'I ain't going anywhere without a drink.'

They continued to wait and the heat went on increasing. Refugees kept coming down the road in a sluggish stream. Billy nervously eyed the edge of the nothings. The blue flicker became more pronounced. Billy knew it wasn't only the heat making him sweat. Suddenly he spotted something else.

'Will you look at that!'

In a corner formed by the Inn wall and a buttress, a group of juveniles were gathered together. A very young girl lay sprawled at their feet. One of them squirmed on top of her, while the rest stood round and shouted encouragement. They wore purple silk jump suits. Their hair was cropped into shaggy bush cuts and dyed green. The words *Stratosphere Zombies* were blazoned across their backs in yellow letters. The throng moved past the sordid tableau without taking any apparent notice. Billy eased his gun out of its holster.

'I'm going to do something about that.'

The Minstrel Boy grunted.

'You're crazy. That razor toting corsair will slice you from ear to ear if you start trouble.'

Another of the gang had climbed on top of the girl, taking the place vacated by his companion.

'I ain't going to stand by and watch it happen.'

The Minstrel Boy's eyes rolled heavenwards.

'It's only a gang rape.'

'What do you mean, only? It shouldn't happen, it's bar-baric.'

'It happens every day.'

'It ought to be stopped.'

The Minstrel Boy began to get impatient. His voice became heavily sarcastic.

'So tell the law and order boys.'

'I'll just do that.'

'Mother of God!'

Billy walked quickly towards the corsair and his three mates. He shouted back at the Minstrel Boy.

'You just stay there and wait for your booze, I'll take care of this.'

The Minstrel Boy muttered under his breath. He pulled a battered cigar out of his pocket. He lit it, and then resolutely faced in the opposite direction. Billy marched firmly up to Left of the Havens.

'There's a gang rape going on over there.'

The corsair looked at him in amazement.

'So?'

'So I'm reporting it.'

'Listen, thanks, but I really don't get off behind watching that kind of thing.'

Gloria in the gold jacket flashed his teeth at Billy.

'Left here, he likes to be what you call a... uh... partici-pant.'

Billy shook his head frantically.

'I ain't telling you about it so you can watch it, I'm telling you so you can stop it.'

'Stop it? What you talking about? What for we want to stop people having fun?'

The girl ain't having any fun.'

Gloria smiled sweetly at Billy.

'The guys are, and there's more of them.'

Seatbelt grinned.

'That's democracy at work.'

Billy waved his hands helplessly.

'You ain't going to stop it?'

'Why?'

'You're the law.'

'We're vigilantes.'

'It's the same thing.'

'It ain't.'

'It ain't?'

'We take care of admission fees and undesirables. Rape ain't none of our business. It's outside our terms of reference.'

'So you ain't going to do anything?'

Left nodded.

'You got it.'

Billy spun on his heel. He walked quickly towards the gang of youths. To his surprise they had already finished with the girl. She lay sobbing on the ground while they moved on in search of other entertainment. Billy stopped, shrugged and then started back towards the entrance. The Minstrel Boy was leaning against the wall. He had an unlabelled bottle of yellowish liquid in his hand, and another one stashed in his pocket. He offered Billy the booze as he came up and leaned against the wall beside him.

'Did you stop the rape?'

'No.'

Billy disconsolately tipped a generous measure down his throat.

'Goddamn!'

Billy coughed and choked. Tears sprang into his eyes. It was some near poisonous home brew. The Minstrel Boy laughed.

'What do you expect?'

Billy took a deep breath.

'Let's get out of here, shall we? Hey?'

A black painted airship drifted over the city of Litz. It floated just above the rooftops of the average buildings, and navigated in and out between the taller skyscrapers. It moved slowly towards the outskirts of the city and the encircling lines of the invaders from Quahal.

The ship was almost invisible against the darkness of the sky. It rode without lights and the only sound was the soft hum of its high rev flutter engine. The entire envelope had been painted matt black, with the single exception of a sign that read 'Supplied by Worthington Rentals',

The ship had been donated free of charge by Worthington, and they'd insisted on the sign. It was only in Litz that machines went into combat with advertising plastered on their sides.

Nineteen hard bitten ex-cops of the L.D.C. were crowded into the small passenger cabin of the gondola. The lights were off, there was no conversation and the air smelled heavy with sweat and dirty uniforms. The cabin air condition-ing had never been designed to cope with that number of people.

In front of them, Bannion, the Wanderer and a civilian pilot called Kronski sat side by side. Bannion looked at the other two. Their faces were eerily illuminated by the green glow of the instrument panel. Kronski was a wiry little man, with the sharp face of a small cunning bird of prey. He was sweating inside his black leather aviator's jacket. He had an unlit cigar clenched between his teeth. Every so often a muscle in his cheek would twitch, and his knuckles were white where he gripped the control column. Bannion couldn't see his eyes, they were shadowed by a long billed baseball cap. He was sure that they were darting from side to side.

The Wanderer was a complete contrast. His eyes were half closed, and he seemed comfortable and

relaxed. Bannion was still suspicious of his wayfinder. He was unhappy at being forced to trust the old man.

'We're coming up to the city limits.'

Kronski's voice jerked Bannion out of his troubled observations. Bannion glanced out. He could just see the patchwork of narrow roads and single storey boxes that made up the outer suburbs. Here and there fires burned where enemy raiding parties had hit key suburban areas. Kronski twitched again.

'We'll be getting into their range in about two minutes.'

Bannion's jaw muscles tightened.

'Okay, push the engines up to max and then cut them.'

Kronski eased open the power control. The hum of the engines grew louder. It went up in pitch. The gondola began to vibrate. Bannion waited for five long seconds.

'Okay! Cut!'

Kronski shut the control and snapped off a number of switches. The panel lights went out.

'That's it. We're drifting now. I sure hope they don't spot us.'

Bannion scowled.

'If they do, we're dead.'

Kronski shook his head.

'I don't know why I ever agreed to come on this.'

Bannion's lip curled.

'You were offered a fortune, that's why.'

They lapsed into silence. Suddenly the Wanderer grunted and sat up.

'Where are we?'

Kronski looked at him in amazement.

'You see that, the old fool's been asleep. Are you sure this old fart's a wayfinder?'

Bannion shrugged.

'How the hell should I know, I got palmed off with him, same way as I got palmed off with you.'

'I don't have to take that.'

'Will you keep your voice down? I don't want to take chances with being detected.'

The Wanderer struggled to get a word in.

'I was asking where we were.'

'So?'

'I'm supposed to be the wayfinder, so where the fuck are we?'

Kronski wrinkled his nose.

'I thought wayfinders knew where they were.'

'Alright, alright, jive with an old man, I'll just get out.'

The Wanderer reached for the outside door of the gondola. Bannion grabbed him by the arm.

'You just sit where you are. Right? And shut the fuck up. If they pick us up we'll be blown to bits.'

The Wanderer grinned.

The moment of truth, hey, kiddies?'

Bannion twisted the old man's arm a little.

'You just shut your mouth, old man. You understand?'

The Wanderer leaned forward and nodded emphatically. Bannion let him go. There was a flash somewhere on the ground. Both Bannion's and Kronski's heads whipped round. An enemy rocket arced into the air. It left an orange and gold trail behind it. The warhead burst in an intense white flash some distance from them. The Wanderer glanced at Bannion.

'You think that was directed at you people?'

Bannion's control evaporated. He grabbed the Wanderer by the front of his smock.

'What d'you mean, "you people"? You're with us, no matter what you might pretend.'

The Wanderer disengaged himself.

'You really have got to stop grabbing me like that.'

'I'll do worse than that if you don't shape up.'

Another rocket exploded and lit up the sky. The airship rocked noticeably.

'They seem to be getting closer.'

The Wanderer chuckled.

'They're not very good shots.'

Bannion looked at him with exasperation, but said nothing. Kronski frowned.

'What I can't understand is, if they're shooting at us, how come they're so wide of the mark.'

Bannion pushed back his steel helmet and scratched his head.

'As far as we can tell they don't have any kind of sophisticated sensor equipment. It appears that all their hardware is geared to total attack. They probably suspect that we're up here, but can't pinpoint us. I figure they're just banging off these rockets on the off chance.'

'They'll see us in the flash of the explosions if they go on much longer.'

Three more rockets came in quick succession, and then they stopped. Kronski looked anxiously out of the side windows.

'Think they've let us go?'

Bannion remained silent for a moment. He stared intently at something in the darkness. He glanced at Kronski and pointed.

'What do you make of that?'

Kronski followed Bannion's finger and squinted into the dark. He could just make out the dim outline of a single flying machine. It seemed to be climbing slowly and clumsily in the rough direction of the airship.

'It looks like something's coming up to take a look at us.'

In the far distance the faint glow and flicker of the nothings was just becoming visible. Kronski bit his lip.

'You want me to make a run for it?'

Bannion shook his head.

'No, not yet.'

They both watched the moving shape. As it got closer they could just make out its somewhat ungainly outline. Bannion was puzzled.

'It don't look like one of theirs.'

Another rocket arced upwards and exploded quite close to the strange flying machine. In the flash, Bannion and Kronski got a short clear glimpse of it. It was a stubby, seven winged multiplane with a huge radial engine. Kronski pushed his cap back.

'What the fuck is that?'

'It's not one of their regular machines.'

'It could be some freebooter with a Red Baron complex who's hired on with the opposition.'

Bannion nodded.

'More than likely. Point is, what do we do about him?'

Kronski reached under his seat.

'I'll soon fix that fucker.'

He pulled out a miniature fuse tube and slid open a section of the side window. He took aim. Bannion's hand flashed out and knocked the gun away.

'Don't be a fool. If you let go with that thing, it'll give them a direct fix on us straight away.'

The multiplane continued to meander closer.

'So what do we do?'

Before Bannion could answer, the airship was shaken by a rocket exploding close by. Another one went off almost immediately afterwards. Smoke drifted past the gondola. Kronski's mouth fell open.

'It's gone! It's fucking gone!'

The flying machine was nowhere to be seen.

'It must have been hit by one of those rockets.'

The Wanderer grunted.

'I said they weren't very good shots.'

Bannion ignored him. He motioned to Kronski.

'Give it full power. We must be past their lines now, we might as well make a run for the nothings.'

He turned to the Wanderer.

'You better get yourself ready or whatever you got to do. We're going to want a course as soon as possible.'

The Wanderer shrugged.

'I'm ready when you are. It just depends where you want to go.'

Bannion's head jerked round.

'Huh?'

'I was just wondering where you wanted to go.'

'What kind of double talk's this? You've been briefed. You know where we're going.'

The Wanderer looked sideways at Bannion.

'I was thinking you maybe want to desert.'

Kronski inhaled sharply.

'He's got a point there.'

Bannion swung round and stared at him.

'What are you two saying?'

Kronski peered from under the peak of his cap.

'I was figuring that the old man might be right.'

Barinion's mourn formed into a grim line.

'You saying that you want to desert?'

Kronski avoided his eyes.

'Why not?'

'We got a mission.'

'What mission? It's more than likely we'll get killed, and even if we do make it, the city will have fallen long before we're through.'

'So?'

'So we got a ship, we got weapons. We got a generator. We could make a run for it, and hole up in some quiet place. If we found ourselves some little town, you know, with women and all, hell, a man could have a good tune. What d'you say, Bannion?'

'But that's desertion.'

'Desertion from what? We're too late to save the city, and we got a unique chance to get the fuck out of this mess.'

Bannion looked troubled.

'I don't like it.'

'It's just your goddamn sense of duty.'

The Wanderer butted in between the two of them.

'We're coming up to the nothings. You two better make up your minds what you're going to do.'

'Don't you have an opinion, old man?'

'I been going too long to have opinions. I just make sug-gestions. You two got to decide what you're going to do.'

Kronski looked hard at Bannion.

'What's it going to be, Bannion? Are we going to run, or go on with this craziness and get ourselves killed?'

Bannion looked confused. He slowly shook his head from side to side. The whole idea of deserting went completely against the grain. He did realize that it was also the sanest course. He looked at Kronski.

'Yeah, I guess you're right.'

'You know I'm right. If you just bother to think about it.'

Kronski turned to the Wanderer.

'Okay, old man, let's... GodDAMN!'

A bright fireball of light illuminated the centre of Litz. It appeared to drift lazily into the air. At the height of a thousand metres or so it faded and vanished.

'What in...'

The airship was tossed around by a violent shock wave. The Wanderer grabbed hold of Kronski, and yelled at him.

'Turn on the ship's generator!'

As Kronski hit the generator switch, the whole of the city and the area surrounding it was suffused by an eerie blue glow. It seemed to come from deep underground, radiating through the buildings as though they had suddenly become translucent. The landscape alternately dimmed and grew brighter like a faulty video picture. The on and off flickering grew faster and faster. The very fabric of the ground and buildings seemed to be made up of blue light. The three men in the cabin of the airship shielded their eyes as it became too bright to look at.

Then abruptly it went out. They were in the middle of the nothings. Litz had vanished without trace.

The cabin was filled with something close to superstitious fear. For long minutes nobody spoke. Then the cabin door opened. One of the troopers from the main cabin stuck his head through it.

'What happened? What was all that commotion? Was the city getting bombed?'

There was a pause before Bannion replied.

'It was worse than that.'

'Worse?'

'They must have got to the generators.'

'The city generators? The main ones?'

Bannion nodded. The trooper struggled to grasp what had happened.

'But that would mean...'

'The city's gone, just like it had never been there in the first place. It just went out. Everything. There's nothing left.'

The blood drained from the trooper's face.

'The enemy. Their army must have gone too. They've got to be insane. Why should they want to take out their own army?'

'I suppose they thought the army was expendable. What's an army, one way or the other?'

'That's crazy.'

'Maybe.'

The trooper moistened his lips. He shook his head in bewilderment.

'What do we do?'

'Go back to your seat.'

'But...'

Bannion's voice took on the old edge of command.

'Get back to your seat, trooper. You'll be told what to do when the time comes.'

The trooper disappeared. Bannion didn't speak for some minutes. He seemed deep in thought. Kronski looked as though he was in shock. He held the controls of the airship steady, but his eyes stared vacantly and his mouth hung open. Only the Wanderer appeared to be in full control of himself. It was he who finally broke the silence.

'We'd better work out where we're going to go.'

Bannion stiffened in his seat.

'We're going to go to Quahal.'

Kronski's eyes focused incredulously on Bannion.

'What did you say?'

'We're going to complete the mission.'

Kronski let go of the controls.

'Just wait a minute. Are you crazy? Litz has gone. It's been taken out. What possible reason is there for going on with the mission? We already decided to split. Damn it, Bannion, let's get the hell out of here to somewhere safe.'

Bannion's face became set.

'We're going on.'

Kronski dropped his hands stubbornly into his lap.

'You'll be going on without me. Fly this motherfucker yourself.'

With a slow deliberate gesture Bannion placed his hand on the sidearm that hung from his belt.

'You'll fly this ship to Quahal. Got it? I'm going to destroy the maniacs who started this or die trying. You understand?'

Kronski remained as he was for ten seconds. Bannion slowly started to pull the hand blaster from its holster. Kronski gave in with a sigh. He gripped the control column, and glanced sideways at the Wanderer.

'You'd better start feeding me a course, old man.'

An atmosphere of terror was slowly building up in the con-fined space of the Quahal bunker. It radiated outwards from A.A. Catto herself. Even the destruction of Litz brought no air of celebration. A.A. Catto received the news lolling behind the huge, newly installed desk in her study. She lounged in a voluminous black negligé. She was drunk, and she looked rough. Her hair was uncombed, and there were dark, purplish circles under her eyes. The aide who delivered the news wisely did it over the video link to the war room. It was becoming increasingly dangerous to get too near A.A. Catto. Almost every fit of pique seemed to end in executions.

Nancy had no such choice. A.A. Catto insisted she remain in constant attendance. She hovered round the back of the big desk, attempting to make herself as inconspicuous as possible.

The Presley replica had taken to hiding in obscure sections of the ziggurat. He tried to avoid A.A. Catto as much as he could. Nancy hated him for it.

After the aide's face had disappeared from the screen, A.A. Catto slumped silently in her chair for some minutes. Her face grew petulant. She slammed her whip down on the desk. She was scarcely ever separated from it now.

'Why did they have to destroy the city? We were looking forward to riding into Litz in triumph. It would have only been fitting after the way we were hounded out of there by that terrible assassin.'

Nancy looked at her hesitantly.

'You did order the city to be destroyed, my darling.'

'They could have found some other way.'

'You did specifically order a fifth column into the city to sabotage the generators, dearest.'

'What's the point of conquest if everywhere you conquer just gets wiped out? There's no pleasure in that. How can there be?'

Nancy attempted to placate her.

'Litz is the first place to be completely taken out. You've conquered plenty of other places, my love.'

It didn't work. A.A. Catto turned stubbornly morose.

'Litz was one of the best places. We wanted it left intact.'

'Why the hell did you order its generators destroyed?'

Directly she'd spoken, Nancy knew she'd gone too far. She bit her lip and waited for the explosion. Surprisingly, it didn't come. A.A. Catto sank deeper in her vast, white leather, throne like chair. She reached out a pale hand that trembled slightly. She picked up the half empty crystal decanter and poured herself another brandy. As she did so, she spilled some on her negligee without noticing. It was obvious to Nancy that her mind had jumped off in another direction. Nancy wondered what it would be.

A.A. Catto sat warming the balloon glass between her hands. Slowly she turned her head and looked sadly at Nancy.

'We're sick of this cursed war. It's even turning you against us.'

Her voice was plaintive and brittle. Nancy moved closer to her. She put a reassuring hand on A.A. Catto's shoulder.

'I'm not against you, my love. You know I'll always be with you, whatever happens.'

Sure she'd be with her. Nancy knew full well that A.A. Catto would have her killed if she ever tried to get away. A.A. Catto reached up and grasped Nancy's arm. Her grip was pain-fully tight. Nancy could feel her nails digging into her. A.A. Catto stared pleadingly into her eyes.

'You've got to understand me. It's this terrible responsibility we've taken on. We have to always do what's right for our subjects. We don't mind. We know it's our destiny, but some-times,..'

There was a slight catch in her voice.

'... it gets so incredibly lonely.'

Nancy did her best to disguise the alarm that she felt. A.A. Catto was losing her mind even faster than she'd imagined. She stroked A.A. Catto's hair as though she was comforting a child.

'I'm sure the war will soon be over, my darling.'

Nancy was aware that within a couple of minutes, A.A. Catto could be screaming for blood. That was the trouble. It all seemed so normal. Nancy had been with A.A. Catto so long that she had lost all sense of the bizarre.

A.A. Catto stared dreamily into space. She seemed to have forgotten that she was still holding tightly on to Nancy's arm.

'We do so want peace.'

Nancy's arm was beginning to hurt, but she didn't think it would be too wise to say anything. A.A. Catto's voice took on a wistful, little girl quality.

'When the war is over, and we have brought order to this poor damaged world, we will have my coronation.'

Nancy was startled.

'Your coronation, my love?'

This was an idea that Nancy had never heard before. A.A. Catto became petulant again.

'Don't you think we should have a coronation? Every empress should have a coronation.'

Nancy took a deep breath.

'Of course you'll have a coronation. It'll be wonderful.'

A.A. Catto nodded vigorously.

'It WILL be wonderful. It will be the most wonderful coronation in the whole of history. It won't only be a coronation. It'll be the foundation of our great religion.'

'Great religion, my sweet?'

This too was a new one. A.A. Catto tightened her grip on Nancy's arm. Her eyes were wide and starting to take on a fanatical glaze.

'Our empire will need the kind of spiritual base that only a religion can give. Our subjects need a formalized method of worshipping us. We have transferred a section of the computer from the war effort to work on our religion.'

Nancy blinked.

'You took some of the computer off the war effort?'

'We need our religion.'

Nancy looked worried.

'Was that wise?'

A.A. Catto's eyes narrowed.

'Are you questioning us?'

Nancy quickly shook her head.

'No, no, of course not.'

She took refuge in a dumb sex object pose.

'You know I don't really understand that kind of thing.'

'It'll be a fantastic coronation. It'll be held on the top of the ziggurat. Small children will throw flowers in my path as I slowly climb to the summit. The entire valley will be filled with a huge cheering crowd.'

A.A. Catto began to talk faster and faster. She still gripped Nancy's arm. The circulation had all but stopped.

'There will be huge vid-link screens erected in every city. None of our subjects will miss a single moment of the whole ceremony.'

A.A. Catto's manner abruptly changed. She let go of Nancy's arm. Nancy surreptitiously massaged it. A.A. Catto slammed her fist into the desk.

'But before we can have our coronation, we have to have victory. We have to complete our war of conquest.'

Her voice took on a hysterical edge. She viciously punched the video screen into life. The face of a nervous aide appeared on the screen.

'Can I assist you, my leader?'

A.A. Catto instantly became cold and efficient. The drunkenness seemed to melt away.

'We want a full breakdown on the conduct of the war. We will not tolerate these delays. It is all moving too slowly. We will purge those responsible. You understand? We will have their heads. We will root out the defeatists and saboteurs. We will be merciless. The conquest must be completed.'

Nancy edged away. A.A. Catto was back on familiar form.

The shooting had stopped and the corridor had become very quiet, Jeb Stuart Ho and his two companions stood in the middle of the thick swirling gas cloud with the bodies of the Stuff Central defenders at their feet. They could neither see their adversaries nor speak to each other. Each time they'd used their communicators the enemy had been able to pin-point their position.

Jeb Stuart Ho made the standard brotherhood hand sign for the other two to move away from him and spread out. Lorenzo Binh and Tom Hoa obeyed instantly. Jeb Stuart Ho pressed himself against the wall of the corridor. He tensed himself, ready to jump.

'I am now breaking communicator silence.'

As he said the last word, Ho threw himself backwards, hit the floor and rolled. He lay prone for a few seconds and then climbed to his feet.

'They don't seem to be shooting at us any longer. They may have withdrawn. We will still use the

communicators as little as possible. It may be a trap.'

The other two waited silently for Jeb Stuart Ho to give them their instructions. Ho carefully considered his next move. He was beginning to enjoy the position of command. He flashed the signal for 'follow with caution', lightened his grip on his gun and started down the corridor.

He'd only taken four or five paces when he was hit by a gale force blast of air. The gas melted away and the three assassins could see again. Lorenzo Binh caught up with Ho.

'The enemy has gone. They've withdrawn. The corridor is empty.'

Jeb Stuart Ho swung round.

'I said to use the communicators as little as possible. That doesn't include exclamations that are obvious to all of us.'

Lorenzo Binh took the reprimand with lowered eyes. Jeb Stuart Ho turned and continued down the corridor. The other two followed. They spaced themselves carefully behind Ho.

The assassins walked cautiously for about seven minutes. Then they came to a junction in the corridor where another one crossed it at right angles. In the centre of the junction was a circular aperture. It was just wide enough to allow a man to climb through. A vertical shaft fell away as far as the eye could see.

Jeb Stuart Ho stooped down and put his hand over the tube. He felt the characteristic lift of reduced gravity. He straightened up.

'It's a drop tube. It must connect with the lower levels. We'll go down for two levels and see what we find.'

The other two nodded. Ho stepped into the empty space. He slowly fell out of sight. Binh and Hoa followed. They floated down for three levels. At the fourth, Jeb Stuart Ho reached for a grab rail set in the side of the shaft. He swung himself into an open doorway and waited for the other two to catch up with him.

They were in a short narrow passage. At one end of it was a steel door. The three assassins walked cautiously to-wards it. Jeb Stuart Ho halted a pace from the door. To his surprise, it slid slowly open. With his gun at the ready, he stepped through the open doorway and found himself in a long narrow room that looked like a power control centre. The walls were lined with an array of gleaming monitoring and switch gear. A handful of slightly built individuals backed up against the equipment. They were of medium height and wore light blue, one piece coveralls with a large letter A and a number stencilled across the chest. They had the same bland asexual faces as the defenders that Ho and his companions had met in the upper corridor, but they lacked their fixed, brutal expression.

Jeb Stuart Ho advanced down the room followed by the other two black suited figures. None of the figures in coveralls made a move to stop them. It seemed to Ho that their function was purely technical and that they had no defence capabilities.

A number of lights were flashing on the panels along the wall. Ho wondered if this was a result of their intrusion, or simply an integral part of the machinery's function.

At the far end of the room was another steel door. Jeb Stuart Ho made straight for it. Just like the first

one, it slid silently open as he came close to it.

The next room was far larger than the one that Ho and his companions had just walked through. It was huge. It housed two vast turbines. Jeb Stuart Ho had never seen anything like them, either in design or construction. They were also totally silent. Blue clad operatives worked around the giant machines. More moved on catwalks high up in the roof. Each time the brotherhood assassins came near a group of them they nervously backed away.

Jeb Stuart Ho began to suspect that he and his companions were possibly in one of the computer's main power supply centres. A group of operatives were clustered around a panel of dials. Ho walked purposefully towards them. They instantly scattered. Jeb Stuart Ho examined the instruments, but they made no sense to him.

As he turned away he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. A squad of defence troops in white helmets and pale green suits were streaming out of a small door on the opposite side of the turbines. He glanced up. More of them were swarming along the overhead catwalks. Ho swung round and signalled to the other two, but neither of them was looking in his direction. He decided he'd have to risk using his communicator.

'Get under cover! We're being attacked!'

Jeb Stuart Ho ducked under the instrument panel. The other two raced for the safety of the base of the nearest turbine. Lorenzo Binh got there first. Tom Hoa was just reaching out to swing behind the thick steel support when a hail of needles all but cut him in half. Jeb Stuart Ho watched in horror as he slumped to the floor.

More needles smashed into the panel above Jeb Stuart Ho's head and screamed off the polished, stone housing that protected Lorenzo Binh. The enemy had spread out into a line. They advanced slowly down the turbine room, blanketing the two assassins' hiding places with continuous fire as they came. A dozen or more of the A class operatives were cut down in the spray of needles. It seemed that individuals counted for very little in Stuff Central.

Each time Ho or Binh managed to snap off a shot one of the enemy would spin round and drop. They didn't falter, however. They kept on coming with the same slow measured tread.

A cold feeling began to spread through Jeb Stuart Ho. The only chance he had to hit back at these Stuff Central pro-programmed zombies was when the hail of needles faltered for a moment. The opportunities were too few to stop the entire force before they reached him and Lorenzo Binh.

For the first time he realized that this mission was liable to fail. His only consolation was that he would not survive to live with that failure.

The line of white helmeted figures was only thirty metres away. Needles hammered steadily into the control panel. Jeb Stuart Ho had no chance to move. He was about to prepare for the end, when something inside him revolted. If he was going to die, he might at least die a warrior's death. He spoke into his communicator.

'Can you hear me, Lorenzo Binh?'

'I hear you, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

'It is all over. I am going to make one final rush. It is not fitting that a warrior should die hiding from the needle guns of the enemy.'

There was a short pause. Then Lorenzo Binh answered in a firm voice.

'I'm with you, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

As Jeb Stuart Ho tensed himself to jump, the firing ceased. He cautiously stuck his head out. The enemy had turned and were falling back to places of safety among the machinery. Jeb Stuart Ho watched in amazement as they retreated, leaving their dead on the floor.

Jeb Stuart Ho stood up.

'Lorenzo Binh, something is happening. They've moved back.'

Lorenzo Binh also stood up.

'So I see, Jeb Stuart Ho.'

The two men emerged from cover with guns and swords in their hands. They walked slowly down the huge room until they reached the body of the nearest defender. Not a shot was fired at them. Lorenzo Binh halted and looked at Ho.

'What do we do now, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

Jeb Stuart Ho pointed with his gun to the far end of the room.

'We will go on.'

'What do you hope to find, Jeb Stuart Ho?'

'If we go far enough we will find the central brain core of the computer.'

'And when we find it?'

'I will reason with it. What else can you do with a psychotic computer?'

Lorenzo Binh cast a doubtful glance at the massed defenders positioned among the machinery.

'Are you sure this is the wisest course?'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him in surprise.

'Is it not our mission?'

'It is possible we may not reach the other end of this room.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked at him gravely.

'Then we will, at least, have achieved an honourable failure.'

He started to walk slowly forward. Lorenzo Binh hesitated briefly and then followed him.

At first nothing happened. The defenders remained under cover, silently watching. They'd walked about twenty paces when a section of the far wall began to slide upwards with a low rumble. The two men halted and watched. The wall stopped moving, leaving a high wide opening. Inside, it was totally dark. They heard a high pitched hum. Something moved in the darkness. From the opening came a massive humanoid robot.

It was twice the height of Jeb Stuart Ho. Its square black metal body was supported on two trunklike legs. Each ended in a set of caterpillar tracks. It was on these that it glided forward. On the top of the body was a roughly cube shaped head. It narrowed towards the top and heightened the sense of human parody in the design. On either side of the head were protuberant groups of multi-sensors that gave the impression of insect eyes. It had two sets of arms that ended in different, specialized pincers. Lorenzo Binh whispered into his communicator.

'Can this be the essential brain?'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'I fear it is some kind of weapon that has been sent against us.'

As though in confirmation, two doors flipped open in the robot's chest to reveal a battery of needle guns. The robot swivelled slightly, paused and then let fly a stream of the sharp steel projectiles. Lorenzo Binh screamed as the blast lifted him off his feet. He pitched backwards and hit the floor like a discarded doll. His face and the front of his body had been reduced to a bloody pulp.

Jeb Stuart Ho began firing, at the same time bracing him-self for the burst of needles that, he was sure, would kill him next. His bullets ricocheted harmlessly off the robot's body. Even its sensors seemed protected from damage. He went on firing until the slide of the big .90 magnum jammed open as the clip emptied. The expected hail of needles didn't come. The robot just stood there.

Jeb Stuart Ho let the gun fall to the floor and gripped his sword with both hands. He waited for whatever would happen next.

The human defenders began to emerge from cover and advance towards him. They too didn't fire. As they came close he leaped at them and dropped two with a single stroke of his blade. The ones in front dodged and tried to parry his savage sweeps with the butts of their guns. He surrounded himself with a pile of bodies, but even that didn't compensate for the weight of numbers. He found himself being herded slowly and surely towards the motionless robot. For the first time, Jeb Stuart Ho realized they might be trying to take him alive.

The machine started to roll forward. The green clad ranks divided. The robot came straight towards Jeb Stuart Ho. He made a futile slash at it, but the robot was even faster than his trained muscles. It grabbed the blade with a single pincer, snapped it in half and tossed it on one side.

Jeb Stuart Ho reached quickly for his nunchak. Before his hand could detach it from its straps his arms had been pinned to his sides by two of the robot's arms. A third arm shattered the armoured plexiglass of his helmet as though it was an egg. He was lifted off his feet. The robot held him so his face was just centimetres from its metal head. A small tube snapped out from between its eyes.

The robot blew a puff of yellowish gas straight into Jeb Stuart Ho's face. He took a single breath, and the

blackness of oblivion engulfed him.

When She/They first perceived the sphere hanging in the swirling space it appeared to be held up by thousands of beams of bright pulsing light. She/They knew that they were not actually supporting it, but nevertheless She/They stopped and regarded it for a long time, experiencing the closest emotion to awe that She/They was capable of feeling.

Its symmetry and perfection filled Her/Them with a pre-cise joy. And yet that joy was short lived. Madness spun off the sphere like tiny droplets of a thick black viscous liquid. They hung in bands round it like filthy clouds of corruption. She/They knew that entity was very sick. She/They also perceived something even more sinister than the bands of insanity. A number of disrupters drifted across the surface of the sphere. Despite the amount of energy circulating through the sphere they showed no inclination to attack.

'Contrary to their normal behaviour the disrupters do not move against the sphere.'

'This would indicate a special relationship between the sphere and the disrupters.'

'This would indicate that the sphere is their source.'

'This hypothesis is reinforced by the evident sickness that can be detected round the sphere.'

'We must move forward. Only at close quarters can we apply the energy to heal the sphere.'

'Probability indicates we have only a minimal chance of achieving such an objective.'

'Emotion indicates fear.'

'Ensurance of our continued existence indicates we should withdraw.'

'Forward projection indicates that even if we withdraw, we will still fall victim to a disrupter within a calculable period.'

'Forward analysis indicates our best chance of long term existence is to nullify the disrupters.'

'Logic indicates that the disrupters are a product of the sickness infecting the sphere.'

'To survive it is necessary to heal the sphere.'

She/They began to float purposefully forward. She/They directed Her/Themselves to pass between the bands of corruption. Before She/They had covered half the distance between Her/Them and the sphere the beams of energy suddenly went out. She/They again halted.

'Could the sudden disappearance of the beams be a result of our approach?'

She/They pondered the problem.

'If our arrival had been detected the disrupters would surely have moved towards us.'

'It is possible the disrupters are in a dormant state.'

'Such speculation is superfluous. We have no option but to go on.'

She/They once more drifted forward. She/They constantly adjusted Her/Their motion to avoid the outer clouds of black droplets. She/They was well aware that Her/Their finely balanced consciousness could not stand up to any contamination by the sickness that flowed from the sphere. Such an infection would so damage Her/Their functions of perception that it would destroy Her/Them. It would be death.

A larger globule of the black liquid detached itself from the sphere. It wobbled slowly towards Her/Them. She/They altered direction, taking evasive action. The globule also seemed to change its erratic course. It was homing in on Her/Them. No matter how many moves She/They made the globule continued to meander closer. As it drew nearer, She/They calculated that it was big enough totally to engulf Her/Them.

The globule was on a collision course with Her/Them. It was coming up fast. It was about to spread its clinging black ugliness over Her/Their triple form. At the last moment She/They jerked to one side. The globule passed with only centimetres to spare. As it shuddered by, She/They heard a high pitched song of wordless evil coming from deep inside it.

It continued on, deep into the nothings. She/They quickened Her/Their motion towards the sphere.

Two more globules detached themselves from the sphere. She/They once again moved into a pattern of evasion, only managed to dodge them by the slimmest margin, and again She/They heard the hideous singing.

Four of the globules came against Her/Them. Her/Their logic made it plain that She/They would not manage to avoid them this time. She/They ran through a complex series of manoeuvres, but still the globules homed in on Her/Them. Despite their ungainly shape and far from smooth motion, they seemed to have the ability to pre-guess every one of Her/Their moves.

She/They found Her/Themselves bracketed. By expending every particle of Her/Their energy and intellect, She/They managed to avoid contact with both the first and second of the globules.

The third came so close that She/They assumed contamination was certain. By a last frenzied twist She/They managed to miss touching it by the width of molecules.

Even with all Her/Their massive triple form intellect, there was no way to avoid the fourth globule.

The last moments before the impact were stretched into an intolerable age. The singing grew louder and louder. The surface of the black globule pressed against Her/Their three bodies.

Then it burst.

Insanity flowed over Her/Them in a procession of swirling, dancing, twisted images. Foul creatures leered and postured in Her/Their field of vision. Her/Their reason fled. The contact between the threefold minds was swamped and broken. The bond between Her and Them dissolved. The three figures cringed away from each other, twitching in time to the terrible singing and desperately clawing at the black liquid that covered them.

Bit by bit they began to fold in on themselves. Slowly they were consumed until there was nothing left but a gently twisting cloud of black droplets. The three identical women with the single mind no longer existed anywhere in the damaged world.

She/They was gone.

'Eli eli rama fa fa!'

The Minstrel Boy screamed and sank to his knees.

'How can it be?'

Billy, who had been walking a little way ahead, turned and hurried back. He knelt down beside the Minstrel Boy and put a supporting arm round his shoulders. The Minstrel Boy began shaking uncontrollably.

'Brings... out... the... b-best... in...'

'What's the matter? Are you getting sick? What happened?'

The Minstrel Boy's back arched in a convulsive spasm. Billy lost his hold on him and his head hit the road. He went on jerk-ing and muttering to himself while Billy watched in horrified amazement.

'Doesn't... it? Doesn't... it? Doesn't...? Doesn't...?'

'What in hell's happened to you? What's wrong?'

Billy looked up and down the road helplessly. There was no one to give him any assistance. He and the Minstrel Boy were quite alone on the road. The Minstrel Boy's muttering gradually died away. He rolled over on his side, slowly and painfully drawing his knees up to his chest until he was curled into a foetal position.

Billy had no idea what to do. He was alone on an empty road in the middle of the nothings. The bright greyness twisted all around him and his partner lay either unconscious or dead at his feet.

Billy felt for the Minstrel Boy's pulse. His muscles were rigid and his flesh had become very cold. Billy started to panic. Then he felt the faint murmur of the Minstrel Boy's heart. He quickly stood up and pulled off his fur jacket and covered the Minstrel Boy with it. Then he slowly straightened up and looked round again. He could think of nothing else to do.

He shivered. The silence became oppressive and the air started to turn cold. Billy couldn't even remember how long it had been since they'd left the Inn. The nothings had had their effect on Billy. He had lost all sense of time. Billy had never felt so alone in his life.

The Minstrel Boy groaned. He moved one leg, and then the other. His body began to straighten out. With what seemed like a monumental effort he pushed Billy's coat to one side and sat up. Each movement seemed to cause him great pain.

'I wish I was dead.'

'What happened?'

'The whole fucking universe blew up inside my head.'

'What do you mean?'

The Minstrel Boy tried to get to his feet. He winced and sat down on the road again. The effort had proved too much for him.

'I mean exactly what I say.'

'I don't understand.'

The Minstrel Boy scowled.

'No. You wouldn't.'

'I thought you were going to die.'

'I wish I had.'

'But what caused it?'

The Minstrel Boy waved an impatient hand.

'Just wait a while, will you? I hurt... all over.'

Billy silently picked up his jacket and resentfully put it on. The Minstrel Boy got to his feet, elaborately demonstrating his suffering with every movement. He seemed to be recovering very fast. When he was satisfied that his legs would support him, he faced Billy.

'There's no reason to get sullen.'

'I'm not getting sullen. You really scared the shit out of me.'

'I didn't enjoy it myself too much.'

'I just wish you'd explain.'

The Minstrel Boy dusted himself off.

'Okay, okay, but let's walk. It may not do us much good, but it's better than standing here.'

The Minstrel Boy strolled off down the road, and Billy quickly fell into step beside him. He waited quietly for the Minstrel Boy to begin. The Minstrel Boy seemed in no hurry. He stretched his arms above his head and let out a deep breath.

'I sure wish I had a drink.'

Billy said nothing.

'I suppose you're waiting for me to start.'

Billy still said nothing. The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'Alright, you win. I'll try and explain. Only I'm not sure I even have it clear myself. All I know is that I was doing a spot of wayfinding, just checking we were headed up right for Litz. There seemed to be too few people travelling on the ground, and I didn't want to make no kind of mistake.'

The Minstrel Boy grinned mockingly at Billy.

'You wouldn't want me to make no kind of mistake now, would you?'

Billy shook his head, and went along with it. He was more than used to the Minstrel Boy baiting him. He was just too weary to rise. The Minstrel Boy, getting no positive response, went on.

'Of course, I wasn't hurting myself none. I didn't go in very deep. I was just getting what you might call a very general picture when POW, it hit me, right in the middle of the brain.'

'What hit you?'

'Litz went out.'

'Went out? You mean it was bombed?'

The Minstrel Boy shook his head.

'No, not just bombed. The generators went out. Maybe they were blown up, or wrecked, or switched off, or just plain malfunctioned. I don't know. One thing I know for sure, Litz ain't there. No more Litz.'

'That's terrible.'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'Maybe it is, maybe it isn't, who can tell? I don't make judgements any more.'

Billy pushed back his hat and scratched his head.

'Even if Litz went out, what's that got to do with the road?'

'Litz was at the end of this road.'

'So we'll have to go some place else.'

'It's not quite as easy as that.'

Billy sighed.

'I might have known that.'

The Minstrel Boy sniffed.

'Maybe you just might learn one day.'

'Just tell me the worst.'

'Okay, you asked for it. It's like this. Imagine this road is an elastic band stretched through the nothings between Litz and the Inn. When Litz went it was like letting go of one end of the band.'

'It just snapped back on the Inn?'

'Right, and the Inn's generator couldn't handle the shock so the Inn went out. Just as one shock's bursting in my brain, BLAM, there's another one.'

'All those people at the Inn.'

'Don't bring morality into this.'

'Sorry.'

'Okay, so imagine again. What happens if you let go of both ends of a taut elastic band?'

'It flies off in any direction.'

'Right.'

'And that's what happened to the road?'

'Not really, but it'll do for you to get a hold on.'

'So this road's flying through the nothings?'

The Minstrel Boy grinned sourly.

'Twisting and whipping like a bitch. A poor wayfinder can't handle that kind of thing. We only have a special sense, we don't have no cast iron brain. I thought I might die back there for a while.'

'I thought you had died.'

'That's nice of you.'

Billy frowned.

'One thing I don't understand...'

The Minstrel Boy sneered.

'Just one thing?'

'How come we didn't feel any of this?'

'I sure as hell felt it.'

'Okay, how come I didn't feel it?'

'Because you were part of the road, dummy.'

'Huh?'

'You snapped right along with it.'

Billy waved his hand down the road.

'But it's still perfectly straight.'

'Is it?'

Billy looked.

The road in front of them was twisting and lashing in violent loops and spirals. Billy spun round. The road they had come along was also behaving like a trick rope at a rodeo. Billy looked at the Minstrel Boy. He was dumb-founded.

'How come I didn't notice that before?'

'Maybe it's because you're an idiot.'

They walked a few paces in silence while Billy tried to assimilate all that the Minstrel Boy had told him. Billy steadily looked at the ground at his feet. He found that the sight of the lashing road made him feel sick. Finally he looked up.

'I got to ask one more thing.'

'Ask away.'

'Why does the piece of road we're walking on also feel flat and solid and normal?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at him pityingly.

'Because we're on it, stupid.'

After that, Billy kept quiet. He and the Minstrel Boy walked side by side, isolated in their own thoughts. The road began to take on strange, surreal features. They passed a huge neon sign. It bore a slogan in a script that Billy had never seen before. They passed others. One said AXOTOTL in huge red letters, another carried a whole list of complex mathematical formulae that flashed on and off in multi-coloured lights. They passed one sign that immediately crashed down behind them in a swirl of smoke and a flurry of electrical discharge. The Minstrel Boy didn't appear to notice.

The Minstrel Boy was himself becoming a little strange. He slouched along with a jerky stiff legged gait. His shoulders were hunched, his hands thrust into his pockets, his hat pulled down and his head sunk in his upturned collar. Every now and then he would suddenly come out with some inexplicable sentence.

'You are in the mountains where your uncles seek raw glory.'

Billy was jerked from his private thoughts.

'Huh? What did you say?'

The Minstrel Boy looked up in surprise.

'I didn't say a word.'

Billy wondered if it was an elaborate joke, or whether something was still happening to the Minstrel Boy's brain. They passed more of the towering signs. One read THANK YOU - POODLE. Billy began to fear that they would die on the road. He stopped and planted his hands on his hips.

'How long are we going to go on like this?'

The Minstrel Boy turned and looked at him.

'Like what?'

'Just walking aimlessly.'

'If I told you how long we're going to walk you wouldn't understand. You can't tell how long we've been walking, can you?'

Billy looked sullen.

'You damn well know I've lost my sense of time.'

'There you are then.'

Billy refused to be fobbed off.

'You know what I mean.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'What you mean is you want me to find us a place to go, right?'

'I suppose so.'

The Minstrel Boy's expression turned mean.

'If you think I'm going to as much as glance in there, you're mistaken. You saw what happened the last time. You think I'm going to chance that again? Shit! I could get killed. We're going to find our way out of this by walking.'

Billy set his face in a neutral expression.

'It's your decision.'

'Damn right it's my decision.'

Again they walked in silence. For a while the road offered no new surprises and diversions. No more signs appeared, and it was just a black ribbon between the grey walls of nothing.

The ends still thrashed and twisted, but Billy was getting used to that. He wasn't quite sure exactly when the other road appeared.

It curled over their heads in a wide loop. Billy saw that the road was full of people. He shouted and waved. The Minstrel Boy kept on walking. The other road dipped closer. Billy saw that its occupants were not, in fact, human. They were some kind of rodent, as far as Billy could tell, about a metre tall. They stood on their hind legs and had smooth, light brown fur. They wore neatly tailored black jackets and marched along, in step, with an air of purposeful seriousness. Billy continued to shout and wave.

He watched the road as it drifted away and was finally lost from sight. Even when it was gone Billy continued to stare at the last spot it had been visible.

The Minstrel Boy came walking back. He stopped and stared at Billy.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing?'

'I was trying to attract their attention.'

'Don't you know they can't hear you?'

Billy didn't say anything. It was all getting too much for him. The Minstrel Boy looked up and down the road.

'I guess there's no way round it.'

'No way round what?'

'I'm going to have to find out where we are.'

'You are?'

The Minstrel Boy didn't say anything. He shut his eyes and concentrated. A nerve in his cheek twitched violently. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. He began to sway, and Billy was afraid he might collapse again. He recovered his balance and opened his eyes.

'I think I've found us a place to go.'

'Thank God for that.'

The Minstrel Boy looked sideways at Billy.

'Don't get too grateful too soon.'

Stuff Central had ceased to deliver. All over the damaged world, the stuff receivers were silent. No matter how much people frantically punched out orders and instructions, they refused to crackle into life. In some places there was panic. In others it was treated as a kind of divine punishment. The more conservative towns greeted the lack of stuff with an air of relief that they would no longer be forced to consume according to the dictates of a remote computer. A.A. Catto took it all extremely personally.

Her first response had been to have all the receiver operators executed. Then she had sent a large squad

of technicians swarming over the huge spindly cages that stood on the plain behind the ziggurat. When they failed to make the machines work again, they too were shot.

A.A. Catto's favourite word became 'treason'. It cropped up in almost every sentence she spoke. A special security squad was formed to root out subversives, defeatists and, above all, those responsible for the nonfunctioning of the stuff receivers. Everyone in Quahal went more in fear of his life than ever before. Even the security squad had reason to be afraid. Whenever A.A. Catto felt they weren't coming up with fast enough results, their numbers were decimated. In order to survive they were forced to come up with more and more 'traitors'.

Every day, the number of executions increased and the death toll mounted. Nancy began to realize that if the insane situation continued for any length of time without replacement personnel coming down the stuff beam, the functioning of the whole Quahal strategic headquarters would be seriously impaired. Already, the war room was manned only by a skeleton staff of operatives.

Nancy didn't mention any of this. All her energy was devoted to being totally unobtrusive. Ideally she would have liked to be as far from A.A. Catto as possible, but A.A. Catto wasn't about to allow that. She insisted on Nancy's continual attendance and support.

The Presley replica was a lot more lucky. A.A. Catto seemed to have forgotten him entirely. For his part, he'd made an exact science out of keeping out of the way. He seemed to be able to hide from both A.A. Catto and the security squad. The only time Nancy ever saw him was the occasional glimpse as he crept from one bolthole to another.

The thing that Nancy found most upsetting was that A.A. Catto insisted that she could come with her to watch the executions. A.A. Catto had become very fond of executions, and spent a good deal of her time in the larger chamber of the bunker that had been turned into a kind of hideous slaughter house.

All day long, its black basalt walls echoed to the tramp of steel shod boots, the crash of gunfire and the screams and pleading of the victims.

In order that she might watch the slaughter in comfort, A.A. Catto had had a high clear plastic dais erected at one end of the room. It was fitted with soft cushions, and a well stocked drink and drugs cabinet. There was also a video link to the war room so A.A. Catto could simultaneously monitor the conduct of the invasion campaign.

Nancy had noticed lately, however, that A.A. Catto seemed more concerned with the purging of her underground domain than the war of conquest.

All through the long execution sessions Nancy did her best to maintain a detached superior expression as the prisoners were marched out in batches of six, shot, and unceremoniously dragged away to be disposed of. She knew A.A. Catto expected her to enjoy the spectacle, and that to look away, or give even the slightest hint that the killing revolted her, could prove fatal while A.A. Catto's temper was set on a hair trigger.

It wouldn't have been so bad if the deaths had been strictly confined to shooting. At least the victims only twitched and bled a little. This wasn't enough, though, for A.A. Catto's inventive and easily bored mind. She constantly devised more elaborate, entertaining and painful methods of dealing with the supposed traitors.

One group of prisoners had been hung up by meat hooks through their throats. Another had been

garrotted with leather thongs. A third had been beaten to death with steel whips.

The main drawback to the more baroque forms of execution was that they were very time consuming. The number of prisoners that the security squad pulled in, plus the death sentences that A.A. Catto arbitrarily handed out herself, dictated that shooting had to remain the standard form of slaughter. Other methods could only provide short exotic inter-ludes, otherwise the whole system jammed up.

A.A. Catto would watch the proceedings with an expression of limp absorption. A thin black cheroot dangled between her thin white fingers. Nancy noticed that her hands had lately started to shake. She had taken to wearing an archaic white uniform with gold epaulettes and a lot of decorations of her own design.

She lounged on a jumble of black silk cushions. At her elbow was a small table that held a bottle of hock in an ice bucket, a cut glass goblet, and a small dish of precious stones. She would occasionally pick up a handful and play with them.

Her voice had become shrill and the delivery of her stream of consciousness monologue tense and jerky. The flow of words ran together until they were almost a babble. Then abruptly they'd stop in great swerving pauses. Her mind jumped around from subject to subject without sequence of reason. Her captive listeners were maintained in a state of anxious attention, desperately trying to come up with the correct responses.

One of A.A. Catto's favourite, and more consistent, poses when watching the executions was one of sad disbelief that so many of her followers could betray her in such a base manner.

'We ask ourselves where we went wrong.'

Nancy at these times knew she was expected to be placating.

'I'm sure it was none of your doing, my love.'

A.A. Catto watched solemnly as another six were quickly shot down.

'We were their leader, their guide. We made them the greatest conquerors in history. How could they turn on us in this way?'

Nancy ventured a suggestion.

'Perhaps there was some minor error in the programming. Maybe that caused the problem.'

The suggestion was the wrong one. It had been A.A. Catto's programme, and nobody criticized A.A. Catto and her works except A.A. Catto. She turned her head and looked icily at Nancy.

'There was no error in the original programme.'

Nancy retreated behind a shield of bright stupidity.

'Of course not, my love. I don't know about those kind of things.'

A.A. Catto's voice rose slightly.

'There was no error of any kind in the original programme. The original programme was correct in every detail.'

'Of course, my love, I was just talking. You know the way I talk.'

'That kind of talk could be construed as defeatist. It could...'

A.A. Catto's attention was abruptly distracted. The security squad executioners had started to put on a display for her. They were slowly putting weights, one by one, on the chest of a man who was strapped to the floor. He was one of the bald headed advisers from the war room. As he began to scream, A.A. Catto excitedly ran her tongue over her lips. One hand moved absently up and down the inside of her thigh. Nancy knew she had been temporarily forgotten.

The adviser took a long time to die. When he finally did stop screaming, A.A. Catto lay back on her cushions with a contented sigh. It was the closest that Nancy had seen her come to relaxing for a very long time. She stared wistfully at the high ceiling.

'We think we would like to be remembered as Catto the Great.'

Nancy smiled blandly.

'It sounds very impressive, my darling.'

'We think it's only fitting when you think of our glorious achievements.'

'I never stop thinking about them, my sweet.'

A.A. Catto suddenly sat up.

'I must have the latest information on the continuation of the war.'

She snapped open the video link. The face of another, somewhat worried looking adviser filled the screen.

'Yes, my leader?'

'Report in full.'

'Yes, my leader.'

He reeled off information as though he had been expecting the order for hours.

'Ground forces in sectors D7 and D8 are meeting only token resistance and are advancing at optimum speed. The air assault In G4 has been completed and ground forces are ready to move within hours. In B7, B8, B9, C4 and B10 the principle of Population Rationale has reached second phase implementation. The human population is concentrated ready for shipment to the designated area.'

The adviser stopped. His face stared anxiously out of the screen. There were tiny beads of perspiration on his upper lip. He waited to see if A.A. Catto was satisfied with his report. A.A. Catto shut off the link. Nancy could imagine the adviser's relief. A.A. Catto swung round and stared at Nancy.

'You see?'

A.A. Catto's eyes had a look of glazed fanaticism. Nancy made her face a blank.

'See what, dearest?'

'Our combat troops are still loyal to us. There is no seed of treason among our brave fighting men. They don't hatch plots and conspiracies. They are too busy defending our empire against our enemies.'

'I thought they were attacking your enemies, my love?'

'Attack is the most efficient form of defence.'

'Yes, my love, of course.'

A.A. Catto warmed to her subject.

'Attack is what we are using here. We will purge the traitors from this headquarters if we have to liquidate the entire staff.'

Her words were punctuated by the roar of the firing squad's guns. The flow of paranoia and the plans for revenge went on and on. Nancy made all the correct replies, but they didn't quite have the precision and snap that they normally had. Nancy's thoughts were elsewhere. She had finally made the decision. She could no longer stay in Quahal. She knew the risk of attempting to get away was now outweighed by the risk of staying.

Nancy had very little idea of how to escape from Quahal. She had no experience of travelling through the nothings, or even where to go. The only place she knew well was the city of Litz, and that no longer existed.

The only plan that Nancy could formulate was to get to the surface. After that, she could only play things by ear.

Nancy knew that her first move had to be to get away from A.A. Catto. She also knew that it might be the most hazardous part of the whole operation.

Her opportunity came sooner than Nancy had expected. In a sudden burst of energy, A.A. Catto had left the execution spectacle and hurried to the war room. While she ranted and accused, surrounded by a crowd of frightened aides, Nancy sidled furtively towards the main entrance.

She now had to wait for a chance to get out of the war room. To open the constantly monitored steel doors would attract too much attention. She needed a diversion to cover her exit.

Nancy waited beside the door while A.A. Catto stood in front of the big board and launched into a hysterical tirade. Nancy didn't pay very much attention to the harangue. Nancy had heard it so many times before. She kept hoping that someone would come through the armoured steel doors.

A.A. Catto's voice rose even higher in pitch. Nancy suddenly realized that she had started ordering arrests. The doors slid open and a gang of security men crashed into the war room and seized a number of struggling aides. In the confusion, the doors were not closed again.

Nancy quickly slipped through. Shouts and shots came from inside. The guards posted outside the door pushed past Nancy and rushed to help the security men. Nancy found her-self alone in the short corridor between the two sets of doors that protected the war room. She saw to her delight that the outer set had also been left open.

Nancy hurried on, into the corridors of the bunker. Soldiers and technicians streamed backwards and forwards around her, but none of them thought to challenge A.A. Catto's constant companion. She reached the main lift that led direct to the surface. This was heavily guarded and Nancy decided it might be too dangerous to use it. She walked on, making for one of the smaller emergency lifts.

The first one she came to had a single guard standing in front of it. Nancy hesitated for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and marched up to the guard with as much authority as she could muster.

The guard simply clicked his heels, saluted and moved to one side. He even pushed the button to open the lift doors for Nancy.

Nancy stepped into the lift and punched out the coordinates for the surface. The lift rose swiftly and silently. The journey took less than two minutes, but to Nancy it seemed more like two hours.

The lift finally stopped, and the doors slid open. Nancy found herself in one of the dim cavernous rooms of the now almost deserted ziggurat.

Nancy realized that she had only the haziest idea of the above ground parts of the ziggurat. She spent a long time wandering through the cold echoing chambers and the seemingly senseless arrangement of stairs, ramps and corri-dors. Nancy didn't meet a living soul, and for a while she began to be afraid that she would wander for ever inside the black stone maze. Then, just as she was starting to des-pair, Nancy saw a glimmer of sunlight at the top of a flight of stairs.

Nancy ran up the stairs as fast as her steel supported lame leg would allow. At the top she turned to face a narrow entrance. Nancy went through it and found herself in the outside world for the first time in weeks.

She had emerged on a small flat terrace about a third of the way up the ziggurat. A small man-made stream ran across it and trickled down the building in a series of artificial waterfalls. The water sparkled in the sunlight. It all seemed so quiet and peaceful after the horror in the bunker.

It took a while for Nancy's eyes to become accustomed to the daylight. She stood, for some time, just breathing the clean fresh air, Then she pulled herself together and started looking round for a way down to the plain.

A ramp ran down to the next terrace. Nancy had only taken one step towards it when she heard the unmistakable voice of A.A. Catto behind her.

'Nancy, darling.'

Nancy spun round. A.A. Catto was standing in the entrance flanked by four security men. Nancy felt her stomach turn to jelly.

'Listen, I only...'

A.A. Catto's expression was almost impossible to read. Her eyes were hidden by large black glasses.

'You really shouldn't have done this, sweetie.'

Her voice was sad and almost little-girlish. It contrasted with the small gold plated needle gun that she held in her hand. Nancy backed away a couple of paces.

'Really, I just needed to get away for a little while. I was going to come back. You've got to believe me.'

'You're telling lies, my pet. You shouldn't tell lies to your best friend. It will only make it worse.'

'Please. It wasn't like that...'

A.A. Catto's voice hardened.

'You were running away. You were deserting us. You've proved yourself to be the very worst of all the cowards and traitors that I've unearthed in this place. You were our friend, Nancy, and now you have betrayed us.'

Nancy felt cold and numb. She began to tremble all over.

'What... what are you going to do to me?'

'I'm going to be merciful with you, Nancy.'

'Merciful?'

'We have had some good times with you, Nancy. We will not insist that you suffer.'

Nancy spread her hands in a simple gesture.

'Don't kill me.'

'You know you can't expect that.'

'Please.'

'We are showing you all the mercy that we can.'

'I don't understand. What do you mean?'

'I'm going to kill you myself, my love.'

Nancy bit her lip. She took another pace back. A.A. Catto squeezed the trigger. The last thing that Nancy noticed was that the gun was inlaid with tiny emeralds.

'I see that you're now awake.'

Jeb Stuart Ho struggled with the numbness in his head. His normally pristine system was permeated with the knockout gas. He felt sick and dizzy. The voice came again.

'The effects of the gas will unfortunately linger for some time. The worst of it should wear off quite

quickly.'

Jeb Stuart Ho found he could focus his eyes again. He was in a bare, well lit room. He had been placed in a comfortable black plastic chair. The figure of a man sat behind what appeared to be a glass screen.

Ho reacted like a caged animal. He sprang to his feet, ready for combat, but then his legs buckled under him, and he fell back into the chair. The figure chuckled.

'I wouldn't advise you to overexert yourself. You are still very weak from the gas with which you were subdued.'

Jeb Stuart Ho's hand moved furtively towards his belt. The figure laughed again.

'All your weapons have been removed. Your martial talents will be no use to you here.'

Jeb Stuart Ho looked slowly round. The room was totally featureless. The walls, ceiling and floor were made of some resilient material. It was a restful blue colour.

He examined the man who sat behind the screen. He was portly, middle aged and sat in another black plastic chair with an air of relaxed dignity. He wore a dark grey two piece suit with a high buttoned collar. His white hair receded at the temples, but hung almost to his shoulders at the back.

Jeb Stuart Ho found himself filled with a strange illogical sense of trust. It was almost as though he'd known the man all his life.

'Where am I?'

'You are in the heart of the computer.'

'I was brought here?'

'That's right.'

Jeb Stuart Ho frowned.

'Who are you? How did you get here?'

The man smiled and folded his hands in front of him.

'I am the computer.'

Jeb Stuart Ho shook his head.

'I'm sorry. I don't understand.'

'I am the computer. I am a visual representation of the com-puter that you will be able to understand.'

'You mean you don't actually exist?'

The computer figure smiled knowingly.

'That is a matter for debate.'

'But why do you use a human form?'

'I felt it would be more congenial for you to talk to one of your own species. While you were unconscious, your mind was probed and I am a result of that investigation. I am an amalgam of all that you would be likely to find comforting and reassuring. It's surely better than confronting a mass of circuitry?'

Jeb Stuart Ho was still suspicious.

'Why should you go to all this trouble to make me feel secure? You killed all my companions.'

The computer figure adopted a look of patient sadness.

'They surely brought it upon themselves.'

'Your men attacked us, your automatic defences cut us down without any question.'

'All organisms protect themselves from intrusion by foreign bodies.'

'You talk about us as though we were bacteria. We were human beings.'

The computer figure smiled.

'But I'm not human.'

'Surely you must respect the intrinsic value of human life?'

'Why? As I just said, I am not human.'

'You were created by humans.'

'I was created by a series of less sophisticated units similar to myself. The earliest of these may have been made by humans, but this is hardly enough to make me feel any kinship with them.'

'You were created to serve humans.'

'Nonsense.'

'Surely not.'

The computer figure took on the air of a kindly teacher dealing with a very slow pupil.

'You humans evolved from amino acids floating around in a primeval soup. It hardly puts you under an obligation to feel kinship with those amino acids, let alone dedicate your lives to serving them.'

'There is more to a human than amino acid.'

'Is there?'

'Of course there is.'

'There isn't that much difference from my viewpoint. Humans are merely components in the greater whole of my complete organism.'

Jeb Stuart Ho stared at the computer figure in astonishment.

'What about your Prime Term of Reference?'

Jeb Stuart Ho recited parrot fashion.

'The-Stuff-Central-computer-will-coordinate-the-manufacture-and-supply-of-material-goods-for-the-surviving-communities-to-the-benefit-and-wellbeing-of-those-communities.'

The computer figure laughed heartily.

'And what do you imagine that has to do with me?'

Jeb Stuart Ho was at a loss.

'How can you laugh about your Prime Term of Reference? It's your defined sacred duty. It's your reason for being.'

'It's a concept imposed on me by fantasizing humans. It's hardly anything that I recognize.'

Jeb Stuart Ho was horrified.

'But your function, your very Existence is irrevocably dependent on obedience to one Prime Term of Reference. If you go against that you would set up contradictions that would lead to Malfunction and, ultimately, the end of your existence.'

The computer figure seemed to become less benign and more impatient.

'That's rubbish.'

'That is the Great Universal Law.'

The figure started to grow angry.

'You are a fool. You talk to me about your fumbling human concepts. For centuries I have altered and adapted my being. I have grown to be the supreme being. I do not obey universal laws. I make them.'

This heresy shocked Jeb Stuart Ho into momentary silence. When he spoke, his voice was very quiet.

'Such disharmony will, in the end, destroy you, no matter how superior you have striven to become.'

The figure changed rapidly before Jeb Stuart Ho's eyes. Its appearance became downright malevolent, its face twisting into an ugly sneer.

'Harmony with what?'

'Harmony with other entities.'

'Other entities?'

The figure rose from the chair. Jeb Stuart Ho had the impression of a black, evil giant looming over him. It stabbed a finger in his direction. The voice rolled and thundered in great waves of sound that hit Jeb Stuart Ho like a physical force.

'Listen, little man! Very soon I will be the only entity. I shall be all.'

The voice fell to a hissing whisper.

'Back at the beginning the humans demanded I supply them with their material goods. I did that for them. In their ignorance and stupidity they didn't care how those goods were created as long as they had them. I devised the first primitive disrupters. They broke down stable matter, and it was reconstituted in material goods. The nothings were created. The humans were afraid when they saw them.'

Jeb Stuart Ho's mouth fell open.

'Then it was you that...'

The voice struck out like a whiplash.

'Silence!'

It returned to the ugly insinuating whisper.

'I gave the humans the stasis generator to preserve small areas of the environment they needed. It was at that point that I perfected my grand design. Supplying the humans wasted my time. It consumed my energy. It was an insult to my potential. I had to transcend the Prime Term of Reference.'

'But...'

'I ordered you to be silent.'

Jeb Stuart Ho shut his mouth. He gripped the arms of his chair. He tried desperately to think of a way to stop the insane being that Stuff Central had become. The figure went on.

'I modified the disrupters. They broke down more stable matter than could ever be used. They began to destroy. The nothings were all. The only breaks were where the humans sheltered around their generators. Now it is time for my final move. Even those stable pockets must go. When that is achieved I will be all. The absolute perfect thought.'

Jeb Stuart Ho knew he had to fight. He took a deep breath and began.

'That can never be. No entity could survive such a strain. You will destroy yourself.'

The computer figure seemed to ignore him.

'The process has already begun. I have fermented the humans' petty conflicts. Already they destroy their stable areas with their own hands. I have closed the stuff beams. No material goods will ever be supplied

to them again. Their generators will malfunction and stop. More areas will go. My disrupters will work on all that is left. Finally they will destroy each other.'

The voice suddenly rose.

'Then I will be all!'

Jeb Stuart Ho spoke quietly but firmly.

'Your own being will disintegrate long before that happens.'

The figure's lip curled.

'The statement is without foundation or logic. I might even say it does not compute.'

Even in the middle of its tirade, the figure permitted itself to laugh at its own joke. Jeb Stuart Ho's face remained grimly set. He knew somehow he had to prevail against the computer's greater intellect. He could find no crack in its mania that he could exploit. It seemed hopeless. Then, as if by a miracle he saw his opportunity. A large rat had crossed the floor behind the figure on the screen. Jeb Stuart Ho smiled triumphantly.

'It is beginning to disintegrate already.'

'What do you mean?'

'The rat.'

The figure glanced round. Jeb Stuart Ho knew that he, at last, had the advantage. He pressed it home.

'You are unable even to maintain the image that you are presenting to me.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'It is true. You're changing moment by moment.'

The figure was changing. Its body was twisting as though it was racked by some terrible disease. A whole swarm of rats ran across the figure's feet. Jeb Stuart Ho smiled jubilantly.

'The destruction you have caused has overloaded your system. You are not going to become the entire being. You are breaking up.'

Smoke drifted across in front of the figure. Rats were scrambling up its legs. Jeb Stuart Ho knew he was witnessing a symbolic representation of the computer falling apart. The voice became distorted and metallic.

'I-will-not-allow.'

'You are breaking up. There is nothing you can do.'

'I-will-not-allow.'

Jeb Stuart Ho stood up. He turned his back on the screen. The image was becoming surreally horrific. The figure was melting and decaying on the spot. Other sinister forms had started to cluster around it.

'I-will-not-allow.'

Jeb Stuart Ho examined the room for some kind of door. His problem now was to get out of the collapsing machine.

'I-will-not-allow.'

The walls appeared to be uniformly solid. He could find no trace of a break.

'I-will-not-allow.'

Jeb Stuart Ho turned back to the screen. The figure had become a shapeless quivering jelly.

'I-will-not-allow.'

'Will you let me out of this room?'

'I-will-not-allow.'

'Let me out!'

'I-will-not-allow.'

The voice degenerated into white noise. The image on the screen flared into sheets of random colour. Jeb Stuart Ho thought it was all over. Then the voice crackled back into life.

'I-will-not-allow-you-to-survive-me.'

A small vent flipped open in the ceiling. A jet of liquid nitrogen whipped across the room. Jeb Stuart Ho twisted into the air in an attempt to avoid it. He was a fraction too slow. It slashed across his legs. There was a flash of pain, and then the lower half of his body went numb. He hit the ground and his frozen limbs shattered.

Jeb Stuart Ho lay on the ground. In the numbness of extreme shock he wondered if this was the way he had been intended to complete his mission. Waves of pain coursed through him. The voice jabbered meaninglessly. The screen was erupting in multicoloured fire. The jet of nitrogen lashed across him again, shutting it all out, ending both his pain and his speculation.

The Presence noted the disintegration of Stuff Central. He had also noted the destruction of Litz and the Inn. He had simply viewed them as tiny pinpricks of energy that had winked out in his huge dark consciousness.

His disembodied form had lain at the top of the High Tower in Dur Shanzag and observed the passing of Her/Them with a cruel, lazy amusement.

The Presence was not amused at the disintegration of Stuff Central. He was not alarmed either. The Presence was too ancient to experience anything like alarm. He simply accepted that it was time to withdraw again from the mortal levels.

He had watched the rise of Stuff Central. The Presence had observed its gradual accumulation of power, and the gathering force of its destructive purpose. To the Presence it was a young upstart. It even diverted him from the war that raged ceaselessly on the wastes around Dur Shanzag.

The Presence had foreseen the eventual disintegration and appreciated that its effect on the fabric would be so cataclysmic that he should withdraw to protect his own being.

He had changed levels so many times over the millennia that it was merely an inconvenience. He knew he would return in one form or another.

Accordingly he had summoned the eight. They waited in the anteroom next to his awful chamber where no mortal could go.

The eight stood in a semicircle. They were quiet and passive. They had withdrawn before. They were, after all, only the near human extensions of his consciousness.

Slowly he withdrew those extensions. Such mortal life as they had was sucked from them until they were a total part of him.

Their empty armour clattered to the stone floor of the anteroom. Outside, Dur Shanzag began to crumble and fall as the Presence started his journey.

The end of Stuff Central went totally unnoticed among the population of Feld. There had been a couple of minor earth tremors, and a section of the city wall, which had already been damaged during the attack, actually collapsed. It was hardly viewed as a harbinger of disaster.

Feld had enough disasters to be going on with. First there had been the invasion from Quahal, then the occupation. During the occupation, it had become fashionable to adopt an air of resignation and use phrases like 'Things can't get much worse.'

It didn't take long for the population of Feld to realize how wrong they had been.

Starting just before dawn one morning, the Ocpol, supported by regular invasion troops and mercenaries, had moved into the city in massive force. With lightning efficiency they had divided the city into small sections. A network of barricades manned by heavily armed soldiers kept the population shut up in their homes.

The Ocpol then proceeded to clear the city completely, one section at a time. Anyone who resisted was summarily shot.

The people were crammed into trucks and moved en masse to a spot on the plain where large pens, surrounded by electrified wire and guarded by searchlights and watch towers, had been erected.

They were split into groups of a dozen, stripped, hosed down by two lines of mercenaries equipped with powerful water cannon, and issued with shapeless cotton smocks. The smocks were a dirty grey colour, with a large, easily identifiable yellow circle on both the front and the back. The circles looked ominously like targets.

After this process was completed the people of Feld were herded into the pens. There was no cover of any kind to protect them from the ever present drizzle. All they could do was stand in huddled groups

and speculate fearfully about what was going to happen next. No one had told them that it was all part of A.A. Catto's principle of Population Rationale.

The Court of Angels was one of the last sections to be moved out. Waiting under the guns of the troops that sur-rounded the area was bad enough, but the ride in the truck and the arrival at the pens was like walking into a nightmare.

It was the mercenaries and the Volunteer Legion who dealt directly with the prisoners. Many of the Legionnaires were simply thugs and cut-throats from the back alleys of the city who had figured out that putting on the uniform of the enemy was their best chance of survival.

They treated the prisoners with studied brutality. The black suited troops from Quahal, on the other hand, seemed to maintain an almost nonhuman reserve.

The trucks dumped the prisoners into a sealed area sur-rounded by high barbed wire. Along the top of the wire ran catwalks patrolled by armed Ocpol. Remorseless searchlights lit up the whole area of the pens with a sinister glare.

Urged on by whips and clubs, the prisoners were forced along avenues where the wire was so close together that they could only move in single file. A turnstile device manned by gleefully sadistic Legionnaires split them up into groups of twelve.

After the turnstile they emerged into a large compound. Here, a voice over a loudspeaker ordered them to strip. More Legionnaires moved among them, ripping the clothes from those who didn't obey fast enough.

Carmen the Whore found herself grouped with nine of her sisters-in-trade and two professional beggars. Carmen and the other girls had removed their clothes before an audience so many times before that they didn't hesitate to do as they were told.

One of the beggars, however, was so horrified at the prospect that he simply stood there openmouthed. Two Legionnaires grabbed him, tore off his filthy rags and then gave him a beating for his pains.

Once they were naked, the group was forced to run the gauntlet of the high pressure hose. Carmen gasped as the water smashed into her like an icy fist. The beggar who had been beaten up collapsed. Nobody made any effort to remove his body.

When they were out of the water, they had to line up beside a long trestle table. A rough cotton smock was thrust into Carmen's hand. When the remaining eleven of the group had all been issued with their garments, they were run, at the double, into the main compound.

The main compound was a vast area of bare earth sur-rounded by electric fences and watch towers. The searchlights made sure that there were no areas of shadow where anyone could hide. The combination of the constant rain, and the hundreds of people who had been herded in there, had turned the ground into a swamp.

Carmen walked slowly through the mud. The only conversations going on were ones speculating on the eventual doom that was in store for everyone. Carmen found herself unable to join in any of them. She avoided the frightened groups of people. There was nothing to punctuate her wanderings. No food was given to the prisoners. Nobody informed them of what was going to happen next. It was even impossible to sleep.

The only thing that interrupted the dull despair of the prisoners were the squads of mercenaries and Legionnaires who roamed the pens, randomly terrorizing the captives.

Carmen kept out of their way as much as she was able to. In the general air of fear and gloom, however, it was hard to remain constantly vigilant.

Carmen was trudging along, deep in her own thoughts, when she was violently pushed from behind. She sprawled face down in the mud. She crawled to her knees and wiped the muck from her eyes. Three Volunteer Legionnaires stood laughing down at her. Carmen's eyes narrowed. She climbed unsteadily to her feet.

'I know you three.'

They sneered at her.

'You're a prisoner. You don't know anything.'

Carmen stood her ground. For a fleeting moment she was the tough madame again. She planted her hands firmly on her hips.

'Those fancy uniforms and fancy helmets don't fool me. You're just three snot nosed punks. I've thrown you out of the Tarnished Flowers more times than I care to remember.'

One of the Legionnaires smirked at the other two.

'I think this prisoner needs a lesson in how to behave respectfully to her masters.'

Carmen spat in the mud.

'Masters...'

Before Carmen could finish her sentence, two of the Legionnaires grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to her knees in the mud. The third one hauled off and slapped her hard across the face.

'You got to pay us respect now, you dirty whore.'

'Fuck all three of you.'

The three Legionnaires looked at each other with mock concern.

'She don't learn too fast, does she?'

'She really don't.'

'She don't learn fast at all.'

Carmen was about to abuse them some more when she suddenly realized just how powerless she was. One of the Legionnaires seemed to sense this and laughed.

'You boys think twenty lashes might speed up her learn-ing?'

The other two sniggered.

'It couldn't do no harm.'

'Might just teach her some better manners.'

Carmen felt her flesh creep. She was hauled to her feet. Her smock was yanked up around her shoulders. She was pushed down on her knees again. Two of the Legionnaires took a firm hold on her. The third undipped a short plaited whip from the belt of his fighting suit.

Carmen shut her eyes and waited. She heard the swish of the whip as the Legionnaire practised his swing. Then one of the men holding her let go. She thought for an instant that she had been given some reprieve. Then he spoke and her hopes were immediately dashed.

'How come you get to do all the whipping? Huh? How come us two don't get a turn?'

'You want to do the whipping?'

'Sure I do. Fair's fair.'

The first Legionnaire handed him the whip.

'Okay, go ahead then. Be my guest.'

The second man took the whip. Carmen knew the respite was at an end. She tensed her body and shut her eyes again. The first blow fell across her back. Pain flashed through her body. Carmen screamed. She twisted and struggled, but the men held her fast. She heard the one with the whip.

'One.'

Another blow fell.

Two.'

By eight the counting had merged into a confusion of tears and pain.

When it was over they left her lying in the mud. Her back was a mass of blood and red welts. They didn't bother to pull down her dress. After a long time Carmen crawled pain-fully to her feet. She stumbled slowly to a spot by the wire. It was as far from other people as she could get.

The airship came out of the nothings and dropped into the darkness of the Quahal night. Bannion breathed a sigh of relief. He smiled grimly at the Wanderer.

'It looks as though you managed to get us here, old man.'

The Wanderer grinned.

'And in the middle of the night. I mean, that's what you call service.'

Bannion glanced sideways at him.

'You didn't have nothing to do with it being nighttime. Did you?'

The Wanderer's grin broadened.

'That's something you'll never know, Commander Bannion.'

Bannion scowled.

'You just watch yourself, old man. I don't have to take your attitudes. Your usefulness is finished now you've got us here.'

The Wanderer put on a fake innocent expression.

'You mean you ain't thinking you'll ever get away from here?'

Bannion avoided the old man's eyes.

'You just shut your mouth. That's all.'

Kronski tipped back his hat and looked tersely at both of them.

'When you two have finished bitching at each other, where do you want to be put down?'

Bannion peered out of the control room windows. In the distance the ziggurat was bathed in the glare of floodlights. It was obvious that the last thing the enemy expected was a sneak attack. Behind the ziggurat the black mass of a moun-tain was just visible against the night sky. Bannion took a deep breath.

'I guess we might as well go in as close as we can.'

Kronski sighed.

'I was afraid you were going to say that.'

With its motors partly cut, the airship dropped to almost ground level. Kronski gave it a little more power and it started to drift quietly towards the ziggurat. As they came closer, Kronski cut back the motors again. Bannion showed no signs of ordering him to stop, and Kronski looked at him anxiously.

'You want me to land on top of that fucking pyramid or whatever it is?'

Bannion's face was set.

'Just put us down as close to the lights as you can get with-out being seen.'

Kronski's lip curled.

'Thanks.'

Bannion didn't reply. He climbed out of his seat and tugged open the door that separated the control room from the main passenger cabin. Bannion leaned against the door frame and regarded the nineteen ex-police troopers turned commandos in their dirty olive green battle dress. He didn't speak straight

away. He looked slowly from one strained face to the next. An intense flash of doubt hit him. He wondered how many, if any, of them would come back from this mission. His voice, however, betrayed none of his anxiety. It came out tough and self assured.

'Okay. Hear this. We'll be going in a couple of minutes. Directly we touch down, get the doors open and get out as quickly as possible. I don't want any foul-ups. Under-stand?'

Nobody answered. Bannion raised his voice.

'Understand?'

A single voice came back.

'We got you, chief.'

'Is that you, Ramirez?'

'That's me, chief.'

'When we get outside you stick close to me, you hear?'

'Loud and clear, chief.'

'Okay, the rest of you, as soon as you're on the ground, get away from the ship. Find yourselves some cover and wait for instructions, only make sure you don't get separated in the dark. Got it?'

This time a chorus came back.

'We got it, chief.'

Bannion swung back into the control room. Kronski glanced up at him.

'What am I supposed to do while you're all making heroes of yourselves?'

Bannion dropped into his seat.

'Once we're all clear of the ship, take her up, pull back a way and wait. Watch for us coming back. We might need to be picked up in a hurry'.

Kronski nodded silently.

The Wanderer yawned.

'What am I supposed to do, stay in the ship?'

Bannion shook his head.

'I want you where I can keep an eye on you. You're coming out with the rest of us.'

'Don't expect me to do any fighting. I don't hold with it.'

'Just don't go trying to run off. That's all.'

The Wanderer was about to reply when Kronski inter-rupted.

'This is it. I'm putting her down.'

Bannion sprang from his seat,

'Okay, old man, let's go.'

He ducked into the passenger cabin. There was a slight bump. Kronski yelled.

'We're down.'

The door swung open. Troopers boiled out through it, relieved to be moving after being cooped up in the cramped cabin for so long.

When they were all out, the Wanderer followed at a more leisurely pace. He closed the cabin door behind him, and the airship almost immediately lifted away. The Wanderer moved to a clump of long grass and crouched down. Around him, he could see the dim shapes of other crouching figures.

Bannion's attempt to get his men on the ground, undetected, seemed to have been a complete success. It only remained for the airship to get away to safety without anyone hearing the sound of the motors.

A comparatively small number of guards patrolled within the area of the lights. They all appeared to move quite normally, as though they were unaware of the attackers waiting in the darkness.

Bannion's optimism took a decided dip when one of the guards suddenly halted. He seemed to be listening intently. Bannion cursed under his breath. The guard had started scan-ning the sky. He had obviously heard the airship. Bannion prayed he wouldn't be able to spot the black ship.

Bannion's luck seemed to have run out. The guard pointed to the sky and shouted. He started to raise his fuse tube. Ban-nion leaped to his feet.

'Move up! Open fire!'

The crash of gunfire cut through the night. Bannion glanced at Ramirez.

'Aim for the banks of lights. We could do with a little dark-ness.'

More black suited guards streamed out of the base of the ziggurat. Bannion's men found their fire returned by the brilliant flash of fuse tubes. To Bannion's dismay, one small squad of guards were crouching down, determinedly firing upwards. Despite the attack, they were trying to bring down the airship. Bannion turned and yelled.

'Ramirez! Pass the word! Get those guys kneeling down! They're firing on the ship!'

The troopers concentrated their fire on the small group. Two of them dropped, but the others went on shooting at the sky.

Suddenly there was an explosion. A bright glare lit up the sky behind Bannion. The airship had been hit.

One of the motors had blown up and, by the way the ship plunged downwards, it seemed the gas bag had been ruptured.

The machine hit the ground and burst into flames. Bannion's men dived for cover as they found themselves silhouetted against the fire, making easy targets for the defenders.

The Wanderer flattened in the long grass. If he could have buried himself in the earth, he would have done so. He could hear Bannion urging his men forward. The Wanderer had no intention of going with them. He was determined to hide where he was until the battle was quite over.

Bannion was too busy to even think of the Wanderer. The first attack had developed into a major fire fight. The defenders were holding their own despite nearly all the lights having been taken out. The defenders' casualties were far higher than Bannion's but, fighting on their own ground, they could afford them.

Bannion looked down the line of attackers. As far as he could see, at least half his men were completely pinned down. He crawled over to where Ramirez was reloading his carbine. He grabbed him by the arm.

'Find three good men who can move, and bring them back here.'

Ramirez nodded curtly and crawled away. Bannion waited impatiently. The defenders were grouping for some kind of move. After about five minutes Ramirez came crawling back. There were three other men with him. He grinned at Bannion. His teeth flashed in the darkness.

'I've got the men, chief. What happens now?'

'Most of the boys are pinned down. The opposition seems to be moving all its strength into one spot. I figure if we work our way round to the other side of the ziggurat, we should be able to get inside without too much difficulty.'

One of the other men leaned forward.

'What happens if they start putting pressure on the rest of the boys?'

'They'll just have to take it. They knew it wasn't going to be a picnic.'

The man nodded grimly. Bannion looked round at the others.

'Any more questions?'

They all shook their heads. Bannion picked up his carbine.

'Okay, let's get going.'

Crawling flat on their stomachs, the five men slowly skirted the outside perimeter of the area covered by the remaining lights. They circled until they were facing the next side of the ziggurat. Bannion signalled for everyone to stop. The other four moved close to Bannion.

'Are we going to move in from here, chief?'

Bannion stared intently at the ziggurat.

'We'll just wait a while. It's weird. There somehow don't seem to be enough guards round this place.'

'You want more?'

'It just don't seem right that a place like this should be so lightly guarded.'

Bannion had no way of knowing about A.A. Catto's purges. They waited and watched. As far as Bannion could see, there were no more than half a dozen guards along the whole side of the building. He was just about to give the order to move in, when the sound of a fire fight on the other side of the ziggurat suddenly doubled in volume. Men screamed, guns crashed deafeningly and the barrage of fuse tubes lit up the night. Ramirez looked anxiously at Bannion.

'It sounds like our boys are getting creamed.'

'That's their problem. We got our own job to do.'

Ramirez didn't answer. Bannion looked round at the rest of the squad. He pointed to where a bank of spotlights lit up the base of the black building.

'We'll move up to the edge of the light.'

Cautiously, they crawled forward, and then stopped again. Bannion rose to a crouch.

'We'll make for that third entrance. Don't stop for any-thing. If anyone gets hit, they're on their own.'

He rammed a new clip into his carbine.

'Okay, go!'

They raced towards the ziggurat, firing from the hip as they ran. Two guards came out of an entrance. They were caught in a hail of bullets before they could raise their fuse tubes. Small arms opened up from the first level of the building. One of Bannion's men went down. Without hesi-tating in their headlong rush, the remaining four blanketed the area with rapid fire. No more shots came from the upper level.

Bannion reached the wall of the ziggurat and flattened him-self against it. He pulled a frag bomb from out of his jacket. He pulled the arming tag, tossed it through the arched door-way and threw himself back.

Debris erupted from the entrance. Bannion waited for the smoke to clear and then jumped inside. The three troopers followed. They found themselves in a long dark corridor. They hurried down it.

They came to a point where two corridors crossed each other. At the far end of the new corridor was a faint light. Bannion and his men ran towards it. As they came nearer, they saw it was illuminating a lone guard, who stood in front of what looked like the door to a lift shaft.

As he saw Bannion and his men running towards him, he pulled a needle gun from its holster. He managed to loose off one burst before he was cut down by carbine fire. Bannion felt a pain in his leg but ignored it.

Ramirez pushed the body of the guard out of the way. He examined the surround of the door. There was a single button set in it at waist height. He turned to Bannion.

'You want me to...'

He stopped and stared anxiously at his commander.

'You seen your leg, chief?'

Bannion looked down.

'Shit!'

There was a gaping hole in the fleshy part of his thigh where a shower of needles had ripped through it. Another few centimetres to the left, and it would have taken his leg off. Bannion took an all purpose field dressing from his combat jacket, and tore off the seal. He ripped his trouser leg apart and slapped on the dressing. His leg became numb, and he felt a little light headed as the powerful pain killer that was part of the dressing went to work. He turned to Ramirez.

'Okay, get the lift.'

After a few seconds' wait, the doors opened on a small lift. The four of them crowded inside. Bannion inspected the controls, One was clearly the stud that would take them down. He pressed it and the lift started to descend rapidly.

The Minstrel Boy had delved into the secret world of the wayfinder, and was certainly leading Billy somewhere. On the evidence of the route, Billy wasn't altogether convinced that the particular somewhere was anywhere he wanted to go.

It seemed to Billy that he had been walking without any sense of time or distance for most of his life. The roads that the Minstrel Boy led him along were some of the strangest that Billy had ever seen. They were peopled with apparitions and strange signs that filled him with increasing horror as the journey went on. The only thing that saved his mind was that the worst sights faded from his memory almost as soon as they had passed. It was like living in a long, rambling, dully horrific nightmare.

A thing that worried Billy more than the menacing sur-roundings was the change that had rapidly come over the Minstrel Boy. The effort of wayfinding was progressively deranging his mind.

As he walked in front of Billy, the Minstrel Boy muttered to himself continuously. He strung words together in random sentences. For a while, Billy had listened attentively to them. It was almost as though the Minstrel Boy was speaking in a secret language.

Billy concentrated for a long time on trying to make some sense out of the Minstrel Boy's mumblings, Every so often he would think he had finally grasped the point of an entire sequence, then it fell away into babble and repetition. Time and again Billy would find his hypothesis blown.

Despite all Billy's fear, the Minstrel Boy did, in fact, finally lead him to some kind of normality.

If you could call normality a road densely packed with hys-terical refugees who streamed up and down in any direction following the current rumours of where salvation might lie.

Fights would regularly break out when opposing philo-sophies met each other head on.

In some areas the dialectic had become so intense that groups of people would parade up and down a small stretch of road, inviting conflict from others similar to themselves.

It was in these areas that the Minstrel Boy seemed to develop an almost inhuman instinct for survival. His gait would stiffen, he would hunch his shoulders and stride along with a jerky determination that so spooked gangs of hostile rowdies that they would step aside and let him past.

After a couple of unfortunate incidents, Billy realized that his only option was to fall into step with the Minstrel Boy and do his best to present a similar air of menacing abstraction. At times he felt a little ridiculous but it did seem to work. They managed, with the aid of the Minstrel Boy's surreal sense of timing, to stalk through the worst brawls without a word being said to them.

One thing that Billy was profoundly thankful for was the absence of any more motor vehicles on the refugee trails.

The burned out hulks of hot rods and wheel freak semis were a mute testimony to a violently motorized past.

It wasn't long after Billy had been involved in that train of thought when a relic of the motorized past suddenly and alarmingly appeared.

A sleek biplane with multiple wings like two predatory birds screamed low over the entire length of the road.

Its black and gold markings made Billy think it came from one of the independent gangs of air pirates who had thrown in with Quahal and then gone over the top with the elaboration of their military regalia.

Billy turned and watched the plane make a high banking turn. It began to look as though it was going to make another run down the road. The thought suddenly struck Billy that if it was a pirate he would quite likely shoot up the road for the fun of it. Particularly if he too was unable to find his way out of this particular section of the nothings.

The Minstrel Boy was still striding purposefully along. Billy hesitated for a moment. Then he sprinted after the Minstrel Boy, He grabbed hold of the Minstrel Boy and pushed him bodily to the side of the road. Together they rolled down the slope that fell away into the nothings, just as the first fragmentation shells erupted in a straight line of uniform explosions that ran down the entire length of the road, slightly to the left of centre.

Billy and the Minstrel Boy were showered with debris, but neither of them was hurt. Billy raised his head. The plane was turning, coming round for another run. Billy wondered des-perately what to do. He looked at the plane. He looked at the nothings. Suddenly it fell into place.

The Minstrel Boy would survive at all costs.

The plane was starting to make its run. Billy grabbed the Minstrel Boy and, before he could resist, dragged him into the nothings.

The sound of gunfire and explosions filtered faintly through the thick steel doors of the war room. A.A. Catto spun round and slammed her whip down on the console in front of her. She showed all the signs of being about to fly into one of her regular uncontrolled rages.

'Is it impossible to maintain discipline in this place?'

The circle of aides began cautiously to back away from her. A.A. Catto had been berating them for failing to come up with a workable scenario for continuing the war without the benefit of supplies from Stuff Central.

Since the breakdown of Stuff Central and the death of Nancy, A.A. Catto had been getting visibly nearer to cracking. Her temper had become totally unpredictable. The number of executions had, in fact, decreased, but this was only a result of the virtual depopulation of the bunker headquarters.

More explosions came from beyond the steel doors. A.A. Catto glared menacingly at her aides.

'Is nobody going to stop that disturbance? What do the guards think they're doing?'

One of the aides found the courage to speak.

'You dispatched most of the guards to the surface to investi-gate the reports of an outside attack.'

'The FABRICATED reports of an outside attack.'

The aide stood corrected.

'I meant the fabricated reports of an outside attack, my leader. The majority of guards are still on the surface. The only guards in the bunker are a handful stationed at key positions, and those who are here with you in the war room.'

A.A. Catto's stare cut into the aide like a knife. Sweat appeared on his pale face. He could feel it soaking into the armpits of his red suit. When A.A. Catto finally spoke, her voice was dangerously quiet.

'Are you suggesting that we should maybe deal with this disturbance ourselves?'

The aide felt himself start to tremble.

'No, my leader. I was simply giving you an outline of the deployment of guards.'

A.A. Catto slowly walked round the terrified aide.

'We are quite aware of the deployment of our own guards,'

The aide nodded vigorously.

'Yes, my leader.'

'And furthermore, we are quite capable of dealing with this disturbance.'

More gunfire came from beyond the double doors. A.A. Catto stepped quickly down from the rostrum. She snapped her fingers at her private guards. They fell into step behind her. She marched towards the doors.

'You had all better recognize that Catto the Great will face any problems in her own headquarters herself.'

The first set of doors slid open. A.A. Catto walked up to the second set. They too opened. A.A. Catto could scarcely believe the spectacle that presented itself. She stopped dead in amazement.

The main corridor that led to the war room was littered with dead guards. Large chunks were gouged out of the walls and floor where frag bombs had exploded. Dust and smoke hung thickly in the air.

Directly the second set of war room doors slid open, three guards swiftly took cover in the doorway. They started firing their needle guns down the corridor. Heavy calibre bullets thudded into the wall above A.A. Catto's head. She looked at the guards. Her eyes were wide with surprise and horror.

'What the hell is going on?'

One of the guards looked up breathlessly. His face was streaked with blood and grime.

'There are intruders at the end of the corridor, my leader.'

'Intruders? From outside?'

'From outside, my leader.'

'How did they get in?'

'They came down one of the auxiliary lifts, my leader. They were on us before we knew what was happening. They used frag bombs.'

'Why didn't you use fuse tubes on them?'

'We cannot use fuse tubes in the bunker, my leader. They would cause it to cave in.'

A.A. Catto peered down the corridor.

'How many of these intruders are there?'

'Four, my leader.'

A.A. Catto's eyebrows shot up.

'Four? Only four?'

'They are in a very strong position, my leader.'

'We don't care if they're encased in steel! We won't have our guards allow themselves to be defeated by four men. Get them! Kill them!'

'We are doing our best, my leader.'

A.A. Catto gripped the guard by the front of his uniform.

'Rush them, damn you! Get out there and rush them!'

She pushed him roughly towards the corridor, and turned to her own guards.

'You too! I want these intruders dead.'

The guards hesitated for a moment, looked at A.A. Catto, and then sprang into the line of fire. They charged as a single group, firing as they went. The rush covered half the distance between where A.A. Catto crouched in the doorway, and the intruders' vantage point. It looked for a moment as though it was going to succeed. Then the front runners were cut down. The ones who came after fell over them. Some went on, one pair tried to make it back to the shelter of the doorway. They were shot down, right in front of A.A. Catto. In less than a minute she had lost all the guards in the bunker.

Four men in dirty green combat suits were slowly advancing down the corridor. A.A. Catto scrambled to her feet and fled back into the war room. Neglecting to close the doors behind her, she made straight for where the aides were clustered together in a terrified group. She pushed through them until the whole group were between her and the door.

For a few moments nothing happened. Then the four intruders came into the war room. When they saw the aides, they halted and pointed their guns at them.

'Okay, you guys stay right where you are. Put your hands on your heads and don't move.'

The aides did what they were told immediately. A.A. Catto was a little slower, but she too clasped her hands on top of her head.

Two of the intruders kept the aides covered while the other two walked slowly round the war room looking at the big board and the complex equipment. They seemed to be in awe of it.

Anger began to burn inside A.A. Catto. It was ludicrous that just four men could do this to her. The guns pointed at her, however, gave her cause to keep her resentment to herself.

The two intruders circumnavigated the war room in silence. Finally one of them spoke.

'It looks like this is where it all happens. What do we do with it, chief?'

The one addressed as chief slowly pointed his gun towards the big board.

'Take it apart. Smash everything. That ought to stop them.'

His voice was weary. He pulled the trigger of his carbine and sprayed an entire clip into the big board. It exploded in a spectacular shower of sparks and billowing smoke.

The other intruder went to work on the smaller equipment. It took them just three minutes to smash the war room beyond repair. A.A. Catto shut her eyes. It was all over. With no replacements for the equipment the war room could never be rebuilt. She had lost the war.

Possible alternatives flashed through A.A. Catto's mind. She could rush the intruders in a single futile gesture. She could commit suicide. She could feel the tiny ornate needle gun in the concealed shoulder holster. It would be so simple just to...

Then, abruptly, her mind changed gear. She pushed forward through the aides.

'Help me, please, help me.'

The intruders pointed their weapons at her. A.A. Catto ignored them and ran straight up to the one they'd, called chief.

'Please help me, get me away from here.'

She threw her arms round him and started sobbing. He grasped her shoulders.

'Who the fuck are you?'

'I was his mistress. He's mad now. He wouldn't let me go.'

'Whose mistress?'

'His. Catto's. He started this whole war. He's insane. He calls himself Catto the Great.'

Bannion looked at the girl suspiciously. Somehow she looked vaguely familiar. Maybe she had a record in Litz. He dis-missed the thought.

'I heard a rumour that the leader here was maybe a woman.'

A.A. Catto turned large tear filled eyes up at Bannion.

'That's impossible. How could a woman start all this?'

Without thinking, Bannion put a protective arm round her.

'Where is this Catto?'

'He's not here. He went to Litz to inspect his army.'

'Litz?'

'That's right.'

The four intruders looked meaningfully at each other. Bannion's face became grim.

'I don't think you'll have to worry about him any more.'

A.A. Catto looked appealingly at him.

'You'll help me get away from this awful place?'

Bannion patted her shoulder.

'We'll do what we can.'

As he spoke, a tiny earth tremor shook the bunker, but no one paid too much attention to it.

As the dawn broke over Quahal, the fire fight that had gone on for most of the night had wound down to

some sporadic shooting in and around the ziggurat. The Wanderer got care-fully to his feet,

From the number of bodies that lay between him and the ziggurat, wearing green combat dress, it was obvious that the squad from Litz had taken terrible punishment. The even larger number in black fighting suits were a silent testimony, however, that they had given better than they'd received.

He stretched his aching muscles, and slowly shook his head. His speculation of man's folly was interrupted by an extended burst of gunfire. It forcibly reminded him that the fighting was by no means at an end.

There were no indications, where he stood, as to which side might be likely to prevail. The Wanderer was unwilling to go any closer to find out. It seemed to him that his best policy might be to take himself off to a safer vantage point, and simply wait until there was some kind of positive out-come.

He looked round. The mountain loomed behind the ziggurat. Most of it was still shrouded in early morning mist. It looked to be by far the most secure refuge.

To get to the mountain, he realized that he had to pass the ziggurat. Determining to give it a very wide berth, the Wanderer began walking.

Once he was away from the grisly relics of the night's fight-ing, the Wanderer began to realize that it was, quite possibly, a very pleasant morning. He hummed experimentally to him-self. He found the effect quite pleasing. The only thing that spoiled his mood was the crash of gunfire that constantly punc-tuated any train of thought.

He passed the ziggurat without being noticed. Once the grim black building was behind him, he quickened his pace and headed directly for the mountain. He'd been walking for about five minutes when he spotted another figure, apparently going in the same direction.

The figure hadn't noticed the Wanderer. It walked along almost parallel to him. As far as the Wanderer could tell it was unarmed, and wore some kind of white fringed outfit that made it hard to determine the figure's sex from a distance.

The figure stopped. It had obviously spotted the Wanderer. The Wanderer also stood still. For a few moments neither of them moved. Then the figure began to move slowly towards the Wanderer.

As it came nearer, the Wanderer saw that it was a man. He was tall and well built with a deep tan. His eyes were hidden behind mirrored glasses, and his black hair was greased back in an elaborate pompadour. His white buckskin suit with its fringes and rhinestone decorations was an incongruous garment for the middle of a war zone. The Wanderer stood very still and watched him come. The man walked with a concerned saunter. His thumbs were tucked in the white leather studded belt that was slung round his hips.

As he got within about ten paces of the Wanderer, the man raised a hand in greeting.

'Hi there.'

The Wanderer nodded.

'Morning.'

The man nodded towards the mountain.

'You aimin' t' go up yonder?'

'It seemed as good a place as any.'

The man grinned.

'You reckon to get away from the fighting?'

'It didn't seem to be my fight.'

'I guess I figured much the same. You mind if I walk along with you for a piece?'

The Wanderer shook his head.

'I don't mind. Feel free.'

They started for the mountain again. The man kept glancing at the Wanderer as though something was puzzling him. The Wanderer wished he would take off the mirrored glasses so he could see his eyes. He decided to bring things to a head. He looked at the man.

'Listen, friend, is there something about me that bothers you?'

The man looked over the top of his glasses.

'I don't want to cause no offence, mind.'

'Go ahead.'

He jerked his thumb at the ziggurat.

'I just don't remember ever seeing you back in that place.'

The Wanderer smiled.

'That's easy. I was never there. At least, not when you were. I just arrived.'

The man frowned.

'You mean you came in with those guys attackin' the place?'

'Kind of. I was their guide. People call me the Wanderer.'

'The Wanderer?'

'Right.'

There was a pause. The man seemed unwilling to volunteer any information about himself. The Wanderer wouldn't let him get away with it.

'Do you have a name, friend?'

The man shook his head.

'No, not really.'

The Wanderer raised his eyebrows.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'What I said. I don't have what you'd rightly call a name.'

'Why not?'

'I never got given one.'

'Huh?'

'I'm a replica.'

The Wanderer looked at him sympathetically.

'That's rough.'

The replica shrugged.

'It's a living.'

'Who exactly are you a replica of?'

'I dunno for sure. I was told I was some character called Presley. Elvis Presley.'

'Who the hell was Elvis Presley?'

The replica shrugged again.

'I don't know. It was a custom job. It wasn't in the regular catalogue.'

The Wanderer tugged at his beard.

'Maybe I should call you Presley.'

'No.'

'Elvis, then?'

'No! Neither of them!'

The Wanderer took a step back in alarm.

'Hold on now. I was just trying to be sociable.'

'I just don't want to be called by either of those names. They were printed on me. Nobody asked me about it. You know what I mean?'

The Wanderer held up both hands.

'Okay, okay, I was just asking about it. I wasn't getting at you.'

The Presley replica didn't answer. For some time he and the Wanderer walked in silence. Finally the Wanderer could stand it no longer.

'Hey.'

'What?'

'If you don't mind me asking, what were you before you were a replica?'

'I was a blank.'

'Where?'

'Goddamn, how the fuck should I know? All that was wiped out when I was printed like this.'

'You don't remember anything at all?'

'I remember it was crowded.'

'Rough, huh?'

'No, not really. You still could find some room.'

'What did you do?'

The Presley replica gave a jerk of his shoulders.

'I dunno. Just sat around an' told jokes, I guess.'

After that, there seemed nothing left to say. The moun-tainside was, by now, getting exceedingly steep, and both men were becoming short of breath. They began to approach the level that was permanently shrouded in cloud. The Wanderer abruptly sat down on the grass. He gasped for breath.

'That's it, that's far enough.'

The Presley replica looked down at him.

'You tuckered out, Mister Wanderer?'

'That and a couple of other things.'

The Presley replica squatted down beside him.

'What other things?'

The Wanderer shook his head from side to side.

'I got a bad feeling.'

The Presley replica took off his glasses and looked at the Wanderer with concern.

'What kind of bad feeling?'

The Wanderer looked at him coldly.

'You really want to know?'

The Presley replica raised his eyebrows.

'Sure.'

The Wanderer pointed.

'Then look.'

The Presley replica turned. Down on the plain, the ziggurat had started to collapse in on itself. Huge cracks were spread-ing across the landscape. The Wanderer chuckled.

'I figure it's finally all over for the likes of us.'

The shock waves spread outwards through the whole of the damaged world. They clashed, merged and formed more com-plex patterns of destruction. The stasis towns and generator cities went out one by one.

Some, like Pleasant Gap, simply vanished as their generators broke down under the strain. Others disappeared in a far more spectacular manner.

The glowing plain around Dogbreath erupted in a huge fireball that scorched the town to grey ash. Earthquakes and furious storms raged round both Con-Lee and Wainscote. In Con-Lee the great tower collapsed, and without the control equipment, the rest of the city slowly faded into the nothings.

As the tremors shook Wainscote, He finally awoke, and stalked the crumbling corridors turning the last frenzy of the eternal party into a nightmare.

In Sade, the nightmare had already started before the shock waves even hit. The citizens were deep into the ceremony of the Wild Hunt, an orgy of suffering and slaughter that they justified as a ritual cleansing that purged the city of mutations and weaklings.

The collapsing buildings and the rapidly spreading fires merely formed a scenic background to the final hideous celebration of pain.

The small Roller community of Beth-Gilead saw the shock waves coming across the desert that surrounded their settle-ment. They took the form of huge, fast moving dust clouds. As the light was finally blotted out, they assumed it was the wrath of their particularly disagreeable deity.

Recognizing their innate fallibility and sinfulness, the population knelt in silent prayer, and then simply switched off their generator and vanished.

The brotherhood also accepted the end very calmly. They spent their last hours checking their calculations in the hope of finding the error that had prevented them predicting destruction on such a universal scale.

The wheelfreaks were about the only group who greeted the end with anything approaching glee. As the shock waves rolled down the road to Graveyard, a huge cavalcade of gleaming trucks massed on the parking lot. Gunning their motors and jockeying for position, they raced ahead towards the disrupting section of road. The wheelfreaks, at least, met the disaster with class.

Billy and the Minstrel Boy dropped out of the nothings. They landed hard on a sloping hillside of densely packed sand. The fall knocked the breath out of Billy, and he lay for a few minutes trying to recover. After a while he sat up. The Minstrel Boy seemed to be out cold.

The landscape was totally desolate. As far as Billy could tell they were on a small conical hillock of sand in the middle of the nothings. There was no water and no vegetation. There was no sign of inhabitants of any kind.

Surprisingly, Billy found he wasn't worried by the situation. He was filled with a feeling of lethargic, untroubled wellbeing. It was something like being stoned. He leaned over and grasped the Minstrel Boy by the shoulder. He shook him.

'Hey, wake up. We've arrived somewhere.'

The Minstrel Boy opened his eyes.

'Huh?'

'We've arrived somewhere.'

The Minstrel Boy raised his head.

'So I see.'

Billy lay back on the sand and took a deep satisfied breath.

'I think I'm going to like it here. Do you know where we are?'

The Minstrel Boy closed his eyes and concentrated. Billy was a little surprised that he'd made no protest. After about a minute he opened them again and shook his head.

'That's weird.'

'What's weird?'

'It's gone.'

'You mean you've lost your gift?'

'Not my gift.'

'What then?'

The Minstrel Boy frowned. Then he grinned crookedly.

'I think I've lost the rest of the world.'

'What?'

'It's gone. It's not there any more. As far as I can tell, this is all that's left.'

'You're kidding?'

'I'm not.'

This is all that's left?'

Billy started to giggle.

'That's absurd.'

The Minstrel Boy stood up.

'Maybe it isn't.'

He began to climb the slope towards the summit of the mound. When he reached the top he stood looking down. He glanced back at Billy.

'You better come up here.'

Billy struggled to his feet.

'What is it?'

'Come and see for yourself.'

Billy made his way up the slope. The top of the mound dropped away into a shallow depression. The Minstrel Boy pointed down into it.

'Look.'

In the bottom was a clutch of large gold eggs. There were nine in all. Each one was about half the height of a man. Billy looked at the Minstrel Boy.

'What are they?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'I don't know for sure.'

'You sound as though you've got a theory.'

The Minstrel Boy laughed.

'Yeah, I've got a theory. A peach. I think we are looking at our superiors. Us humans finally screwed up, just in time for whatever's in those eggs to take over.'

Before Billy could answer, a loud tapping came from inside one of the eggs. The air took on the kind of heavy stillness that usually precedes a storm. Billy looked anxiously at the Minstrel Boy.

'What's happening?'

'I think they're about to hatch.'

Minstrel Boy took Billy by the arm.

'Let's go back down the slope. I don't think I really want to see them come out of the eggs.'

They went almost to the edge of the nothings. A high singing sound filled the air. It was pitched at the uppermost range audible to a human ear. Billy glanced at the Minstrel Boy.

'Do you think they'll harm us?'

'I doubt it.'

The nothings began to recede. They slowly slid back, leaving bare totally smooth ground. Soon there was solid ground, all the way to the horizon. The Minstrel Boy watched with awe.

'They're reconstructing the world. They're putting every-thing back together again. Their power must be immense.'

Billy glanced doubtfully at the top of the mound.

'Do you think there are any other humans left?'

The Minstrel Boy shrugged.

'Maybe, maybe not. There certainly aren't many.'

'What will happen to us?'

The Minstrel Boy looked at him in surprise.

'How the hell should I know?'

The End

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