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The Concrete Jungle

by Charles Stross

<http://www.antipope.org/charlie/index.html>

The death rattle of a mortally wounded telephone is a horrible thing to hear at four o'clock on a Tuesday morning. It's even worse when you're sleeping the sleep that follows a pitcher of iced margueritas in the basement of the Dog's Bollocks, with a chaser of nachos and a tequila slammer or three for dessert. I come to, sitting upright, bare-ass naked in the middle of the wooden floor, clutching the receiver with one hand and my head with the other – purely to prevent it from exploding, you understand – and moaning quietly. “Who is it?” I croak into the microphone.

“Bob, get your ass down to the office right away. This line isn't secure.” I recognize that

voice: I have nightmares about it. That's because I work for its owner.

“Whoa, I was asleep, boss. Can't it – ” I gulp and look at the alarm clock “ – wait until morning?”

“No. I'm calling a code blue.”

“Jesus.” The band of demons stomping around my skull strike up an encore with drums.

“Okay, boss. Ready to leave in ten minutes. Can I bill a taxi fare?”

“No, it can't wait. I'll have a car pick you up.” He cuts the call, and *that* is when I start to get frightened because even Angleton, who occupies a lair deep in the bowels of the Laundry's Arcana Analysis Section – but does something far scarier than that anodyne title might suggest – is liable to think twice before authorising a car to pull in an employee at zero-dark o'clock.

I manage to pull on a sweater and jeans, tie my shoelaces, and get my ass downstairs just before the blue and red strobes light up the window above the front door. On the way out I grab my emergency bag – an overnighter full of stuff that Andy suggested I should keep ready, “just in case” – and slam and lock the door and turn around in time to find the cop waiting for me.

“Are you Bob Howard?”

“Yeah, that's me.” I show him my card.

“If you'll come with me, sir.”

Lucky me: I get to wake up on my way in to work four hours early, in the front passenger seat of a police car with strobes flashing and the driver doing his best to scare me into catatonia. Lucky London: the streets are nearly empty at this time of night, so we zip around the feral taxis and somnolent cleaning trucks without pause. A journey that would normally take an hour and a half takes fifteen minutes. (Of course, it comes at a price: Accounting exists in a state of perpetual warfare with the rest of the civil service over internal billing, and the Metropolitan

Police charge for their services as a taxi firm at a level that would make you think they provided limousines with wet bars. But Angleton has declared a code blue, so . . .)

The dingy-looking warehouse in a side street, adjoining a closed former primary school, doesn't look too promising – but the door opens before I can raise a hand to knock on it. The grinning sallow face of Fred from Accounting looms out of the darkness in front of me and I recoil before I realise that it's all right – Fred's been dead for more than a year, which is why he's on the night shift. This isn't going to degenerate into plaintive requests for me to fix his spreadsheet. “Fred, I'm here to see Angleton,” I say very clearly, then I whisper a special password to stop him from eating me. Fred retreats back to his security cubbyhole or coffin or whatever it is you call it, and I cross the threshold of the Laundry. It's dark – to save light bulbs, and damn the health and safety regs – but some kind soul has left a mouldering cardboard box of hand torches on the front desk. I pull the door shut behind me, pick up a torch, and head for Angleton's office.

As I get to the top of the stairs I see that the lights are on in the corridor we call Mahogany Row. If the boss is running a crisis team then that's where I'll find him. So I divert into executive territory until I see a door with a red light glowing above it. There's a note taped to the door handle: *BOB HOWARD ACCESS PERMITTED*. So I “access permitted” and walk right in.

As soon as the door opens Angleton looks up from the map spread across the boardroom table. The room smells of stale coffee, cheap cigarettes, and fear. “You're late,” he says sharply.

“Late,” I echo, dumping my emergency bag under the fire extinguisher and leaning on the door. “'Lo, Andy, Boris. Boss, I don't think the cop was taking his time. Any faster and he'd be billing you for brown stain removal from the upholstery.” I yawn. “What's the picture?”

“Milton Keynes,” says Andy.

“Are sending you there to investigate,” explains Boris.

“With extreme prejudice,” Angleton one-ups them.

“Milton Keynes?”

It must be something in my expression; Andy turns away hastily and pours me a cup of Laundry coffee while Boris pretends it’s none of his business. Angleton just looks as if he’s bitten something unpleasant, which is par for the course.

“We have a problem,” Angleton explains, gesturing at the map. “There are too many concrete cows.”

“Concrete cows.” I pull out a chair and flop down into it heavily, then rub my eyes. “This isn’t a dream is it, by any chance? No? Shit.”

Boris glowers at me: “Not a joke.” He rolls his eyes toward Angleton. “Boss?”

“It’s no joke, Bob,” says Angleton. His normally skeletal features are even more drawn than usual, and there are dark hollows under his eyes. He looks as if he’s been up all night. Angleton glances at Andy: “Has he been keeping his weapons certification up-to-date?”

“I practice three times a week,” I butt in, before Andy can get started on the intimate details of my personal file. “Why?”

“Go down to the armoury right now, with Andy. Andy, self-defense kit for one, sign it out for him. Bob, don’t shoot unless it’s you or them.” Angleton shoves a stack of papers and a pen across the table at me. “Sign the top and pass it back – you now have GAME ANDES REDSHIFT clearance. The files below are part of GAR – you’re to keep them on your person at all times until you get back here, then check them in via Morag’s office; you’ll answer to the auditors if they go missing or get copied.”

“Huh?”

I obviously still look confused because Angleton cracks an expression so frightening that it must be a smile and adds, “Shut your mouth, you’re drooling on your collar. Now, go with Andy, check out your hot kit, let Andy set you up with a chopper, and *read* those papers. When you get to Milton Keynes, do what comes naturally. If you don’t find anything, come back and tell me and we’ll take things from there.”

“But what am I looking for?” I gulp down half my coffee in one go; it tastes of ashes, stale cigarette ends, and tinned instant left over from the Retreat from Moscow. “Dammit, what do you expect me to find?”

“I don’t expect anything,” says Angleton. “Just go.”

“Come on,” says Andy, opening the door, “you can leave the papers here for now.”

I follow him into the corridor, along to the darkened stairwell at the end, and down four flights of stairs into the basement. “Just what the fuck *is* this?” I demand, as Andy produces a key and unlocks the steel-barred gate in front of the security tunnel.

“It’s GAME ANDES REDSHIFT, kid,” he says over his shoulder. I follow him into the security zone and the gate clanks shut behind me. Another key, another steel door – this time the outer vestibule of the armoury. “Listen, don’t go too hard on Angleton, he knows what he’s doing. If you go in with preconceptions about what you’ll find and it turns out to be GAME ANDES REDSHIFT, you’ll probably get yourself killed. But I reckon there’s only about a 10 percent chance it’s the real thing – more likely it’s a drunken student prank.”

He uses another key, and a secret word that my ears refuse to hear, to open the inner armoury door. I follow Andy inside. One wall is racked with guns, another is walled with ammunition lockers, and the opposite wall is racked with more esoteric items. It’s this that he turns to.

“A prank,” I echo, and yawn, against my better judgement. “Jesus, it’s half past four in

the morning and you got me out of bed because of a student prank?"

"Listen." Andy stops and glares at me, irritated. "Remember how you came aboard? That was *me* getting out of bed at four in the morning because of a student prank."

"Oh," is all I can say to him. *Sorry* springs to mind, but is probably inadequate; as they later pointed out to me, applied computational demonology and built-up areas don't mix very well. *I* thought I was just generating weird new fractals; *they* knew I was dangerously close to landscaping Wolverhampton with alien nightmares. "What kind of students?" I ask.

"Architecture or alchemy. Nuclear physics for an outside straight." Another word of command and Andy opens the sliding glass case in front of some gruesome relics that positively throb with power. "Come on. Which of these would you like?"

"I think I'll take this one, thanks." I reach in and carefully pick up a silver locket on a chain; there's a yellow-and-black thaumaturgy hazard trefoil on a label dangling from it, and NO PULL ribbons attached to the clasp.

"Good choice." Andy watches me in silence as I add a Hand of Glory to my collection, and then a second, protective amulet. "That all?" he asks.

"That's all," I say, and he nods and shuts the cupboard, then renews the seal on it.

"Sure?" he asks.

I look at him. Andy is a slightly built, forty-something guy; thin, wispy hair, tweed sports jacket with leather patches at the elbows, and a perpetually worried expression. Looking at him you'd think he was an Open University lecturer, not a managerial-level spook from the Laundry's active service division. But that goes for all of them, doesn't it? Angleton looks more like a Texan oil-company executive with tuberculosis than the legendary and terrifying head of the Counter-Possession Unit. And me, I look like a refugee from CodeCon or a dot-com startup's engineering department. Which just goes to show that appearances and a euro will get

you a cup of coffee. “What does this code blue look like to you?” I ask.

He sighs tiredly, then yawns. “Damn, it’s infectious,” he mutters. “Listen, if I tell you what it looks like to me, Angleton will have my head for a doorknob. Let’s just say, *read* those files on the way over, okay? Keep your eyes open, count the concrete cows, then come back safe.”

“Count the cows. Come back safe. Check.” I sign the clipboard, pick up my arsenal, and he opens the armoury door. “How am I getting there?”

Andy cracks a lopsided grin. “By police helicopter. This is a code blue, remember?”

* * *

I go up to the committee room, collect the papers, and then it’s down to the front door, where the same police patrol car is waiting for me. More brown-pants motoring – this time the traffic is a little thicker, dawn is only an hour and a half away – and we end up in the northeast suburbs, following the roads to Lippitts Hill where the Police ASU keep their choppers. There’s no messing around with check in and departure lounges; we drive round to a gate at one side of the complex, show our warrant cards, and my chauffeur takes me right out onto the heliport and parks next to the ready room, then hands me over to the flight crew before I realise what’s happening.

“You’re Bob Howard?” asks the copilot. “Up here, hop in.” He helps me into the back seat of the Twin Squirrel, sorts me out with the seat belt, then hands me a bulky headset and plugs it in. “We’ll be there in half an hour,” he says. “You just relax, try to get some sleep.” He grins sardonically then shuts the door on me and climbs in up front.

Funny. I’ve never been in a helicopter before. It’s not quite as loud as I’d expected, especially with the headset on, but as I’ve been led to expect something like being rolled down a hill in an oil drum while maniacs whack on the sides with baseball bats, that isn’t saying much.

Get some sleep indeed; instead I bury my nose in the so-secret reports on GAME ANDES REDSHIFT and try not to upchuck as the predawn London landscape corkscrews around outside the huge glass windscreen and then starts to unroll beneath us.

REPORT 1: Sunday September 4th, 1892

CLASSIFIED MOST SECRET, Imperial War Ministry, September 11th, 1914

RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES, Ministry of War, July 2nd, 1940

RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET REDSHIFT, Ministry of Defense, August 13th, 1988

My dearest Nellie,

In the week since I last wrote to you, I have to confess that I have become a different man. Experiences such as the ordeal I have just undergone must surely come but once in a lifetime; for if more often, how might man survive them? I have gazed upon the gorgon and lived to tell the tale, for which I am profoundly grateful (and I hasten to explain myself before you worry for my safety), although only the guiding hand of some angel of grace can account for my being in a position to put ink to paper with these words.

I was at dinner alone with the Mehtar last Tuesday evening – Mr Robertson being laid up, and Lieutenant Bruce off to Gilgut to procure supplies for his secret expedition to Lhasa – when we were interrupted most rudely at our repast. “Holiness!” The runner, quite breathless with fear, threw himself upon his knees in front of us. “Your brother. . . ! Please hasten, I implore you!”

His excellency Nizam ul Mulk looked at me with that wicked expression of his: he bears little affection for his brutish hulk of a brother, and with good reason. Where the

Mehtar is a man of refined, albeit questionable sensibilities, his brother is an uneducated coarse hill-man, one step removed from banditry. Chitral can very well do without his kind. “What has happened to my beloved brother?” asked ul Mulk.

At this point the runner lapsed into a gabble that I could barely understand. With patience the Mehtar drew him out – then frowned. Turning to me, he said, “We have a – I know not the word for it in English, excuse please. It is a monster of the caves and passes who preys upon my people. My brother has gone to hunt it, but it appears to have got the better of him.”

“A mountain lion?” I said, misunderstanding.

“No.” He looked at me oddly. “May I enquire of you, Captain, whether Her Majesty’s government tolerates monsters within her empire?”

“Of course not!”

“Then you will not object to joining me in the hunt?”

I could feel a trap closing on me, but could not for the life of me see what it might be. “Certainly,” I said. “By Jove, old chap, we’ll have this monster’s head mounted on your trophy room wall before the week is out!”

“I think not,” Nizam said coolly. “We burn such things here, to drive out the evil spirit that gave rise to them. Bring you your *mirror*, tomorrow?”

“My – ” Then I realised what he was talking about, and what deadly jeopardy I had placed my life in, for the honour of Her Majesty’s government in Chitral: he was talking about a Medusa. And although it quite unmans me to confess it, I was afraid.

The next day, in my cramped, windowless hut, I rose with the dawn and dressed for the hunt. I armed myself, then told Sergeant Singh to ready a squad of troopers for the hunt.

“What is the quarry, sahib?” he asked.

“The beast that no man sees,” I said, and the normally imperturbable trooper

flinched.

“The men won’t like that, sir,” he said.

“They’ll like it even less if I hear any words from them,” I said. You have to be firm with colonial troops: they have only as much backbone as their commanding officer.

“I’ll tell them that, sahib,” he said and, saluting, went to ready our forces.

The Mehtar’s men gathered outside; an unruly bunch of hill-men, armed as one might expect with a mix of flintlocks and bows. They were spirited, like children, excitable and bickering; hardly a match for the order of my troopers and I. We showed them how it was done! Together with the Mehtar at our head, kestrel on his wrist, we rode out into the cold bright dawn and the steep-sided mountain valley.

We rode for the entire morning and most of the afternoon, climbing up the sides of a steep pass and then between two towering peaks clad in gleaming white snow. The mood of the party was uncommonly quiet, a sense of apprehensive fortitude settling over the normally ebullient Chitrali warriors. We came at last to a mean-spirited hamlet of tumbledown shacks, where a handful of scrawny goats grazed the scrubby bushes; the hetman of the village came to meet us, and with quavering voice directed us to our destination.

“It lies thuswise,” remarked my translator, adding: “The old fool, he say it is a ghost-bedevelled valley, by God! He say his son go in there two, three days ago, not come out. Then the Mehtar – blessed be he – his brother follow with his soldiers. And that two days ago.”

“Hah. Well,” I said, “tell him the great white empress sent me here with these fine troops he sees, and the Mehtar himself and his nobles, and *we* aren’t feeding any monster!”

The translator jabbered at the hetman for a while, and he looked stricken. Then Nizam beckoned me over. “Easy, old fellow,” he said.

“As you say, your excellency.”

He rode forward, beckoning me alongside. I felt the need to explain myself further: “I do not believe one gorgon will do for us. In fact, I do believe we will do for it!”

“It is not that which concerns me,” said the ruler of the small mountain kingdom. “But go easy on the hetman. The monster was his wife.”

We rode the rest of the way in reflective silence, to the valley where the monster had built her retreat, the only noises the sighing of wind, the thudding of hooves, and the jingling of our kits. “There is a cave halfway up the wall of the valley, here,” said the messenger who had summoned us. “She lives there, coming out at times to drink and forage for food. The villagers left her meals at first, but in her madness she slew one of them, and then they stopped.”

Such tragic neglect is unknown in England, where the poor victims of this most hideous ailment are confined in mazed bedlams upon their diagnosis, blindfolded lest they kill those who nurse them. But what more can one expect of the half-civilized children of the valley kingdoms, here on the top of the world?

The execution – for want of a better word – proceeded about as well as such an event can, which is to say that it was harrowing and not by any means enjoyable in the way that hunting game can be. At the entrance to the small canyon where the woman had made her lair, we paused. I detailed Sergeant Singh to ready a squad of rifles; their guns loaded, they took up positions in the rocks, ready to beat back the monster should she try to rush us.

Having thus prepared our position, I dismounted and, joining the Mehtar, steeled myself to enter the valley of death.

I am sure you have read lurid tales of the appalling scenes in which gorgons are found; charnel houses strewn with calcined bodies, bones protruding in attitudes of agony

from the walls as the madmen and madwomen who slew them gibber and howl among their victims. These tales are, I am thankful to say, constructed out of whole cloth by the fevered imaginations of the degenerate scribblers who write for the penny dreadfuls.

What we found was both less – and much worse – than that.

We found a rubble-strewn valley; in one side of it a cave, barely more than a cleft in the rock face, with a tumbledown awning stretched across its entrance. An old woman sat under the awning, eyes closed, humming to herself in an odd singsong. The remains of a fire lay in front of her, logs burned down to white-caked ashes; she seemed to be crying, tears trickling down her sunken, wrinkled cheeks.

The Mehtar gestured me to silence, then, in what I only later recognized as a supremely brave gesture, strode up to the fire. “Good evening to you, my aunt, and it would please me that you keep your eyes closed, lest my guards be forced to slay you of an instant,” he said.

The woman kept up her low, keening croon – like a wail of grief from one who has cried until her throat is raw and will make no more noise. But her eyes remained obediently shut. The Mehtar crouched down in front of her.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked gently.

The crooning stopped. “You are the royal one,” she said, her voice a cracked whisper. “They told me you would come.”

“Indeed I have,” he said, a compassionate tone in his voice. With one hand he waved me closer. “It is very sad, what you have become.”

“It *hurts*.” She wailed quietly, startling the soldiers so that one of them half-rose to his feet. I signalled him back down urgently as I approached behind her. “I wanted to see my son one more time . . .”

“It is all right, aunt,” he said quietly. “You’ll see him soon enough.” He held out a hand to me; I held out the leather bag and he removed the mirror. “Be at peace, aunt.

An end to pain is in sight.” He held the mirror at arms length in front of his face, above the fire before her: “Open your eyes when you are ready for it.”

She sobbed once, then opened her eyes.

I didn’t know what to expect, dear Nellie, but it was not this: somebody’s aged mother, crawling away from her home to die with a stabbing pain in her head, surrounded by misery and loneliness. As it is, her monarch spared her the final pain, for as soon as she looked into the mirror she *changed*. The story that the gorgon kills those who see her by virtue of her ugliness is untrue; she was merely an old woman – the evil was something in her gaze, something to do with the act of perception.

As soon as her eyes opened – they were bright blue, for a moment – she changed. Her skin puffed up and her hair went to dust, as if in a terrible heat. My skin prickled; it was as if I had placed my face in the open door of a furnace. Can you imagine what it would be like if a body were to be heated in an instant to the temperature of a blast furnace? For that is what it was like. I will not describe this horror in any detail, for it is not fit material for discussion. When the wave of heat cleared, her body toppled forward atop the fire – and rolled apart, yet more calcined logs amidst the embers.

The Mehtar stood, and mopped his brow. “Summon your men, Francis,” he said, “they must build a cairn here.”

“A cairn?” I echoed blankly.

“For my brother.” He gestured impatiently at the fire into which the unfortunate woman had tumbled. “Who else do you think this could have been?”

A cairn was built, and we camped overnight in the village. I must confess that both the Mehtar and I have been awfully sick since then, with an abnormal rapidity that came on since the confrontation. Our men carried us back home, and that is where you find me now, lying abed as I write this account of one of the most horrible incidents I have ever witnessed on the frontier.

I remain your obedient and loving servant,

Capt. Francis Younghusband

As I finish reading the typescript of Captain Younghusband's report, my headset buzzes nastily and crackles. "Coming up on Milton Keynes in a couple minutes, Mr Howard. Any idea where you want to be put down? If you don't have anywhere specific in mind we'll ask for a slot at the police pad."

Somewhere specific . . . ? I shove the unaccountably top-secret papers down into one side of my bag and rummage around for one of the gadgets I took from the armoury. "The concrete cows," I say. "I need to take a look at them as soon as possible. They're in Bancroft Park, according to this map. Just off Monk's Way, follow the A422 in until it turns into the H3 near the city centre. Any chance we can fly over them?"

"Hold on a moment."

The helicopter banks alarmingly and the landscape tilts around us. We're shooting over a dark landscape, trees and neat, orderly fields, and the occasional clump of suburban paradise whisking past beneath us – then we're over a dual carriageway, almost empty at this time of night, and we bank again and turn to follow it. From an altitude of about a thousand feet it looks like an incredibly detailed toy, right down to the finger-sized trucks crawling along it.

"Right, that's it," says the copilot. "Anything else we can do for you?"

"Yeah," I say. "You've got infrared gear, haven't you? I'm looking for an extra cow. A hot one. I mean, hot like it's been cooked, not hot as in body temperature."

"Gotcha, we're looking for a barbecue." He leans sideways and fiddles with the controls below a fun-looking monitor. "Here. Ever used one of these before?"

"What is it, FLIR?"

“Got it in one. That joystick’s the pan, this knob is zoom, you use this one to control the gain, it’s on a stabilized platform; give us a yell if you see anything. Clear?”

“I think so.” The joystick works as promised and I zoom in on a trail of ghostly hot spots, pan behind them to pick up the brilliant glare of a predawn jogger, lit up like a light bulb – the dots are fading footprints on the cold ground. “Yeah.” We’re making about forty miles per hour along the road, sneaking in like a thief in the night, and I zoom out to take in as much of the side view as possible. After a minute or so I see the park ahead, off the side of a roundabout.

“Eyes up, front: Can you hover over that roundabout?”

“Sure. Hold on.” The engine note changes and my stomach lurches, but the FLIR pod stays locked on target. I can see the cows now, grey shapes against the cold ground – a herd of concrete animals created in 1978 by a visiting artist. There should be eight of them, life-sized Friesians peacefully grazing in a field attached to the park. But something’s wrong, and it’s not hard to see what.

“Barbecue at six o’clock low,” says the copilot. “You want to go down and bring us back a take-away, or what?”

“Stay up,” I say edgily, slewing the camera pod around. “I want to make sure it’s safe first . . .”

REPORT 2: Wednesday March 4th, 1914

CLASSIFIED MOST SECRET, Imperial War Ministry, September 11th, 1914

RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES, Ministry of War, July 2nd, 1940

RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET REDSHIFT, Ministry of Defense, August 13th,

1988

Dear Albert,

Today we performed Young's double-slit experiment upon Subject C, our medusa. The results are unequivocal; the Medusa effect is both a particle *and* a wave. If de Broglie is right . . .

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Ernest has been pushing for results with characteristic vim and vigor and Mathiesson, our analytical chemist, has been driven to his wits' end by the New Zealander's questions. He nearly came to blows with Dr Jamieson who insisted that the welfare of his patient – as he calls Subject C – comes before any question of getting to the bottom of this infuriating and perplexing anomaly.

Subject C is an unmarried woman, aged 27, of medium height with brown hair and blue eyes. Until four months ago, she was healthy and engaged as household maid to an eminent KC whose name you would probably recognize. Four months ago she underwent a series of seizures; her employers being generous, she was taken to the Royal Free Infirmary where she described having a series of blinding headaches going back eighteen months or so. Dr Willard examined her using one of the latest Roentgen machines, and determined that she appeared to have the makings of a tumour upon her brain. Naturally this placed her under Notification, subject to the Monster Control Act (1864); she was taken to the isolation ward at St Bartholomew's in London where, three weeks, six migraines, and two seizures later, she experienced her first Grand Morte fit. Upon receiving confirmation that she was suffering from acute gorgonism, Dr Rutherford asked me to proceed as agreed upon; and so I arranged for the Home Office to be contacted by way of the Dean.

While Mr McKenna was at first unenthusiastic about the prospect of a gorgon running about the streets of Manchester, our reassurances ultimately proved acceptable and he directed that Subject C be released into our custody on her own cognizance. She

was in a state of entirely understandable distress when she arrived, but once the situation was explained she agreed to cooperate fully in return for a settlement which will be made upon her next of kin. As she is young and healthy, she may survive for several months, if not a year, in her current condition: this offers an unparalleled research opportunity. We are currently keeping her in the old Leprosarium, the windows of which have been bricked up. A security labyrinth has been installed, the garden wall raised by five feet so that she can take in the air without endangering passers-by, and we have arranged a set of signals whereby she can don occlusive blindfolds before receiving visitors. Experiments upon patients with acute gorgonism always carry an element of danger, but in this case I believe our precautions will suffice until her final deterioration begins.

Lest you ask why we don't employ a common basilisk or cockatrice instead, I hasten to explain that we do; the pathology is identical in whichever species, but a human source is far more amenable to control than any wild animal. Using Subject C we can perform repeatable experiments at will, and obtain verbal confirmation that she has performed our requests. I hardly need to remind you that the historical use of gorgonism, for example by Danton's Committee for Public Safety during the French revolution, was hardly conducted as a scientific study of the phenomenon. This time, we will make progress!

Once Subject C was comfortable, Dr Rutherford arranged a series of seminars. The New Zealander is of the opinion that the effect is probably mediated by some electromagnetic phenomenon, of a type unknown to other areas of science. He is consequently soliciting new designs for experiments intended to demonstrate the scope and nature of the gorgon effect. We know from the history of Mademoiselle Marianne's grisly collaboration with Robespierre that the victim must be visible to the gorgon, but need not be directly perceived; reflection works, as does trivial refraction, and the effect is transmitted through glass thin enough to see through, but the gorgon cannot work in

darkness or thick smoke. Nobody has demonstrated a physical mechanism for gorgonism that doesn't involve an unfortunate creature afflicted with the characteristic tumours.

Blinding a gorgon appears to control the effect, as does a sufficient visual distortion. So why does Ernest insist on treating a clearly biological phenomenon as one of the greatest mysteries in physics today?

“My dear fellow,” he explained to me the first time I asked, “how did Madame Curie infer the existence of radioactivity in radium-bearing ores? How did Wilhelm Roentgen recognize X-rays for what they were? Neither of those forms of radiation arose within our current understanding of magnetism, electricity, or light. They had to be something else. Now, our children of Medusa apparently need to behold a victim in order to injure them – but how is the effect transmitted? We know, unlike the ancient Greeks, that our eyes work by focussing ambient light on a membrane at their rear. They used to think that the gorgons shone forth beams of balefire, as if to set in stone whatever they alighted on. But we know that cannot be true. What we face is nothing less than a wholly new phenomenon. Granted, the gorgon effect only changes whatever the medusoid can see directly, but we know the light reflected from those bodies isn't responsible. And Lavoisier's calorimetric experiments – before he met his unfortunate end before the looking glass of l'Executrice – proved that actual atomic transmutation is going on! So what on earth mediates the effect? How can the act of observation, performed by an unfortunate afflicted with gorgonism, transform the nuclear structure?”

(By nuclear structure he is of course referring to the core of the atom, as deduced by our experiments last year.)

Then he explained how he was going to seat a gorgon on one side of a very large device he calls a cloud chamber, with big magnetic coils positioned above and below it, to see if there is some other physical phenomenon at work.

I can now reveal the effects of our team's experimentation. Subject C is

cooperating in a most professional manner, but despite Ernest's greatest efforts the cloud chamber bore no fruit – she can sit with her face pressed up against the glass window on one side, and blow a chicken's egg to flinders of red-hot pumice on the target stand, but no ionization trail appears in the saturated vapour of the chamber. Or rather, I should say no direct trail appears. We had more success when we attempted to replicate other basic experiments. It seems that the gorgon effect is a continuously variable function of the illumination of the target, with a sharply defined lower cut-off and an upper limit! By interposing smoked glass filters we have calibrated the efficiency with which Subject C transmutes the carbon nuclei of a target into silicon, quite accurately. Some of the new electrostatic counters I've been working on have proven fruitful: secondary radiation, including gamma rays and possibly an elusive neutral particle, are given off by the target, and indeed our cloud chamber has produced an excellent picture of radiation given off by the target.

Having confirmed the calorimetric and optical properties of the effect, we next performed the double-slit experiment upon a row of targets (in this case, using wooden combs). A wall with two thin slits is interposed between the targets and our subject, whose gaze was split in two using a binocular arrangement of prisms. A lamp positioned between the two slits, on the far side of the wall from our subject, illuminates the targets: as the level of illumination increases, a pattern of alternating gorgonism was produced! This exactly follows the constructive reinforcement and destruction of waves Professor Young demonstrated with his examination of light corpuscles, as we are now supposed to call them. We conclude that gorgonism is a wave effect of some sort – and the act of observation is intimately involved, although on first acquaintance this is such a strange conclusion that some of us were inclined to reject it out of hand.

We will of course be publishing our full findings in due course; I take pleasure in attaching a draft of our paper for your interest. In any case, you must be wondering by

now just what the central finding is. This is not in our paper yet, because Dr Rutherford is inclined to seek a possible explanation before publishing; but I regret to say that our most precise calorimetric analyses suggest that your theory of mass/energy conservation is being violated – not on the order of ounces of weight, but by enough to detect. Carbon atoms are being transformed into silicon ions with an astoundingly high electropositivity, which can be accounted for if we assume that the effect is creating nuclear mass from somewhere. Perhaps you, or your new colleagues at the Prussian Academy, can shed some light on the issue? We are most perplexed, because if we accept this result we are forced to accept the creation of new mass *ab initio*, or treat it as an experimental invalidation of your general theory of relativity.

Your good friend,

Hans Geiger

A portrait of the agent as a (confused) young man:

Picture me, standing in the predawn chill in a badly mown field, yellowing parched grass up to the ankles. There's a wooden fence behind me, a road on the other side of it with the usual traffic cams and streetlights, and a helicopter in police markings parked like a gigantic cyborg beetle in the middle of the roundabout, bulging with muscular-looking sensors and nitesun floodlights and making a racket like an explosion in a noise factory. Before me there's a field full of concrete cows, grazing safely and placidly in the shadow of some low trees which are barely visible in the overspill from the streetlights. Long shadows stretch out from the fence, darkness exploding toward the ominous lump at the far end of the paddock. It's autumn, and dawn isn't due for another thirty minutes. I lift my modified camcorder and zoom in on it, thumbing the record button.

The lump looks a little like a cow that's lying down. I glance over my shoulder at the

chopper, which is beginning to spool up for takeoff; I'm pretty sure I'm safe here but I can't quite suppress a cold shudder. On the other side of the field –

“Datum point: Bob Howard, Bancroft Park, Milton Keynes, time is zero seven fourteen on the morning of Tuesday the eighteenth. I have counted the cows and there are nine of them. One is prone, far end of paddock, GPS coordinates to follow. Preliminary surveillance indicated no human presence within a quarter kilometre and residual thermal yield is below two hundred Celsius, so I infer that it is safe to approach the target.”

One unwilling foot goes down in front of another. I keep an eye on my dosimeter, just in case: there's not going to be much secondary radiation hereabouts, but you can never tell. The first of the cows looms up at me out of the darkness. She's painted black and white, and this close up there's no mistaking her for a sculpture. I pat her on the nose. “Stay cool, Daisy.” I should be safely tucked up in bed with Mo – but she's away on a two-week training seminar at Dunwich and Angleton got a bee in his bonnet and called a code blue emergency. The cuffs of my jeans are damp with dew, and it's cold. I reach the next cow, pause, and lean on its rump for a zoom shot of the target.

“Ground zero, range twenty metres. Subject is bovine, down, clearly terminal. Length is roughly three metres, breed . . . unidentifiable. The grass around it is charred but there's no sign of secondary combustion.” I dry-swallow. “Thermal bloom from abdomen.” There's a huge rip in its belly where the boiling intestinal fluids exploded, and the contents are probably still glowing red-hot inside.

I approach the object. It's clearly the remains of a cow; equally clearly it has met a most unpleasant end. The dosimeter says it's safe – most of the radiation effects from this sort of thing are prompt, there are minimal secondary products, luckily – but the ground underneath is scorched and the hide has blackened and charred to a gritty, ashlike consistency. There's a smell

like roast beef hanging in the air, with an unpleasant undertang of something else. I fumble in my shoulder bag and pull out a thermal probe, then, steeling myself, shove the sharp end in through the rip in the abdomen. I nearly burn my hand on the side as I do so – it’s like standing too close to an open oven.

“Core temperature two six six, two six seven . . . stable. Taking core samples for isotope ratio checks.” I pull out a sample tube and a sharp probe and dig around in the thing’s guts, trying to tease a chunk of ashy, charred meat loose. I feel queasy: I like a well-cooked steak as much as the next guy, but there’s something deeply wrong about this whole scene. I try not to notice the exploded eyeballs or the ruptured tongue bursting through the blackened lips. This job is quite gross enough as it is without adding my own dry heaves to the mess.

Samples safely bottled for analysis, I back away and walk in a wide circle around the body, recording it from all angles. An open gate at the far end of the field and a trail of impressions in the ground completes the picture. “Hypothesis: open gate. Someone let Daisy in, walked her to this position near the herd, then backed off. Daisy was then illuminated and exposed to a class three or better basilisk, whether animate or simulated. We need a plausible disinformation pitch, forensics workover of the paddock gate and fence – check for exit signs and footprints – and some way of identifying Daisy to see which herd she came from. If any livestock is reported missing over the next few days that would be a useful indicator. Meanwhile, core temperature is down to under five hundred Celsius. That suggests the incident happened at least a few hours ago – it takes a while for something the size of a cow to cool down that far. Since the basilisk has obviously left the area and there’s not a lot more I can do, I’m now going to call in the cleaners. End.”

I switch off the camcorder, slide it into my pocket, and take a deep breath. The next bit promises to be even less pleasant than sticking a thermocouple in the cow’s arse to see how long

ago it was irradiated. I pull out my mobile phone and dial 999. “Operator? Police despatch, please. Police despatch? This is Mike Tango Five, repeat, Mike Tango Five. Is Inspector Sullivan available? I have an urgent call for him . . .”

REPORT 3: Friday October 9th, 1942

CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES, Ministry of War, October 9th, 1942

RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET REDSHIFT, Ministry of Defense, August 13th, 1988

ACTION THIS DAY:

Three reports have reached SOE Department Two, office 337/42, shedding new light on the recent activities of Dr Ing Professor Gustaf Von Schachter in conjunction with RSHA Amt. 3 and the inmates of the Holy Nativity Hospital for the Incurably Insane.

Our first report ref. 531/892-(i) concerns the cessation of action by a detached unit of RSHA Amt. 3 Group 4 charged with termination of imbeciles and mental defectives in Frankfurt as part of the Reich’s ongoing eugenics program. An agent in place (code: GREEN PIGEON) overheard two soldiers discussing the cessation of euthanasia operations in the clinic in negative terms. Herr Von Schachter had, as of 24/8/42, acquired a Führer Special Order signed either by Hitler or Borman. This was understood by the soldiers to charge him with the authority to requisition any military resources not concerned with direct security of the Reich or suppression of resistance, and to override orders with the effective authority of an *obergruppenführer*. This mandate runs in conjunction with his existing authority from Dr Wolfram Sievers, who is believed to be operating the Institute for Military Scientific Research at the University of

Strasbourg and the processing centre at Natzweiler concentration camp.

Our second report ref. 539/504-(i) concerns prescriptions dispensed by a pharmacy in Frankfurt for an unnamed doctor from the Holy Nativity Hospital. The pharmaceutical assistant at this dispensary is a sympathiser operated by BLUE PARTRIDGE and is considered trustworthy. The prescriptions requisitioned were unusual in that they consisted of bolus preparations for intrathecal (base of cranium) injection, containing colchicine, an extract of catharanthides, and morphine. Our informant opined that this is a highly irregular preparation which might be utilized in the treatment of certain brain tumours, but which is likely to cause excruciating pain and neurological side effects (ref. GAME ANDES) associated with induction of gorgonism in latent individuals suffering an astrocytoma in the cingulate gyrus.

Our final report ref. 539/504-(ii) comes from the same informant and confirms ominous preparatory activities in the Holy Nativity Hospital grounds. The hospital is now under guard by soldiers of Einsatzgruppen 4. Windows have been whitewashed, *mirrors* are being removed (our emphasis) or replaced with one-way observation glass, and lights in the solitary cells rewired for external control from behind two doors. Most of the patients have disappeared, believed removed by Group 4 soldiers, and rumours are circulating of a new area of disturbed earth in the countryside nearby. Those patients who remain are under close guard.

Conclusion: The preparation referenced in 539/504-(i) has been referred to Special Projects Group ANDES, who have verified against records of the suppressed Geiger Committee that Von Schachter is experimenting with drugs similar to the catastrophic Cambridge IV preparation. Given his associate Sievers's influence in the Ahnenerbe-SS, and the previous use of the Holy Nativity Hospital for the Incurably Insane as a secondary centre for the paliative care of patients suffering seizures and other neuraesthetic symptoms, it is believed likely that Von Schachter intends to induce and

control gorgonism for military purposes in explicit violation of the provisions for the total suppression of stoner weapons laid out in Secret Codicil IV to the Hague Convention (1919).

Policy Recommendation: This matter should be escalated to JIC as critical with input from SOE on the feasibility of a targeted raid on the installation. If allowed to proceed, Von Schachter's program shows significant potential for development into one of the rumoured *Vertlesgunsaffen* programs for deployment against civilian populations in free areas. A number of contingency plans for the deployment of gorgonism on a mass observation basis have existed in a MOW file since the early 1920s and we must now consider the prospects for such weapons to be deployed against us. We consider essential an immediate strike against the most advanced development centres, coupled with a strong reminder through diplomatic back channels that failure to comply with all clauses (secret and overt) of the Hague Convention *will* result in an allied retaliatory deployment of poison gas against German civilian targets. We cannot run the risk of class IV basilisks being deployed in conjunction with strategic air power . . .

By the time I roll into the office, four hours late and yawning with sleep deprivation, Harriet is hopping around the common room as if her feet are on fire, angrier than I've ever seen her before. Unfortunately, according to the matrix management system we operate she's my boss for 30 percent of the time during which I'm a technical support engineer. (For the other 70 percent I report to Angleton and I can't really tell you *what* I am except that it involves being yanked out of bed at zero four hundred hours to answer code blue alerts.)

Harriet is a back-office suit: mousy and skinny, forty-something, and dried up from spending all those years devising forms in triplicate with which to terrorize field agents. People like Harriet aren't supposed to get excited about anything. The effect is disconcerting, like

opening a tomb and finding a break-dancing mummy.

“Robert! Where on earth have you been? What kind of time do you call this? McLuhan’s been waiting on you – you were supposed to be here for the licence policy management committee meeting two hours ago!”

I yawn and sling my jacket over the coat rack next to the “C” department coffee station. “Been called out,” I mumble. “Code blue alert. Just got back from Milton Keynes.”

“Code blue?” she asks, alert for a slip. “Who signed off on it?”

“Angleton.” I hunt around for my mug in the cupboard over the sink, the one with the poster on the front that says CURIOUS EYES COST LIVES. The coffee machine is mostly empty, full of black tarry stuff alarmingly similar to the toxic waste they make roads out of. I hold it under the tap and rinse. “His budget, don’t worry about it. Only he pulled me out of bed at four in the morning and sent me off to – ” I put the jug down to refill the coffee filter “– never mind. It’s cleared.”

Harriet looks as if she’s bitten into a biscuit and found half a beetle inside. I’m pretty sure that it’s not anything special; she and her boss Bridget simply have no higher goal in life than trying to cut everyone else down so they can look them in the eye. Although, to be fair, they’ve been acting more cagy than usual lately, hiding out in meetings with strange suits from other departments. It’s probably just part of their ongoing game of Bureaucracy, whose goal is the highest stakes of all – a fully vested Civil Service pension and early retirement. “What was it about?” she demands.

“Do you have GAME ANDES REDSHIFT clearance?” I ask. “If not, I can’t tell you.”

“But you were in Milton Keynes,” she jabs. “You told me that.”

“Did I?” I roll my eyes. “Well, maybe, and maybe not. I couldn’t possibly comment.”

“What’s so interesting about Milton Keynes?” she continues.

“Not much.” I shrug. “It’s made of concrete and it’s very, very boring.”

She relaxes almost imperceptibly. “Make sure you get all the paperwork filed and billed to the right account,” she tells me.

“I will have before I leave this afternoon at two,” I reply, rubbing in the fact that I’m on flexitime; Angleton’s a much more alarming, but also understanding, manager to work for. Due to the curse of matrix management I can’t weasel out completely from under Bridget’s bony thumb, but I must confess I get a kick out of having my other boss pull rank on her. “What was this meeting about?” I ask slyly, hoping she’ll rise to it.

“You should know, you’re the administrator who set up the mailing list,” she throws right back at me. *Oops*. “Mr McLuhan’s here to help us. He’s from Q Division, to help us prepare for our Business Software Alliance audit.”

“Our – ” I stop dead and turn to face her, the coffee machine gurgling at my back. “Our audit with *who*?”

“The Business Software Alliance,” she says smugly. “CESG outsourced our COTS application infrastructure five months ago contingent on us following official best practices for ensuring quality and value in enterprise resource management. As you were *too busy* to look after things, Bridget asked Q Division to help out. Mr McLuhan is helping us sort out our licencing arrangements in line with guidelines from Procurement. He says he’s able to run a full BSA-certified audit on our systems and help us get our books in order.”

“Oh,” I say, very calmly, and turn around, mouthing the follow-on *shit* silently in the direction of the now-burbling percollator. “Have you ever been through a BSA audit before, Harriet?” I ask curiously as I scrub my mug clean, inside and out.

“No, but they’re here to help us audit our – ”

“They’re funded by the big desktop software companies,” I say, as calmly as I can.

“They do that because they view the BSA as a *profit centre*. That’s because the BSA or their subcontractors – and that’s what Q Division will be acting as, they get paid for running an audit if they find anything out of order – come in, do an audit, look for *anything* that isn’t currently licensed – say, those old machines in D3 that are still running Windows 3.1 and Office 4, or the Linux servers behind Eric’s desk that keep the departmental file servers running, not to mention the FreeBSD box running the Daemonic Countermeasures Suite in Security – and demand an upgrade to the latest version under threat of lawsuit. Inviting them in is like throwing open the doors and inviting the Drugs Squad round for a spliff.”

“They said they could track down all our installed software and offer us a discount for volume licensing!”

“And how precisely do you think they’ll do that?” I turn round and stare at her.

“They’re going to want to install snooping software on our LAN, and then read through its take.”

I take a deep breath. “You’re going to have to get him to sign the Official Secrets Act so that I can formally notify him that if he thinks he’s going to do that I’m going to have him sectioned.

Part Three. Why do you *think* we’re still running old copies of Windows on the network?

Because we can’t afford to replace them?”

“He’s already signed Section Three. And anyway, you said you didn’t have time,” she snaps waspishly. “I asked you five weeks ago, on Friday! But you were too busy playing secret agents with your friends downstairs to notice anything as important as an upcoming audit. This wouldn’t have been necessary if you had time!”

“Crap. Listen, we’re running those old junkers because they’re so old and rubbish that they can’t catch half the proxy Internet worms and macro viruses that are doing the rounds these days. BSA will insist we replace them with stonking new workstations running Windows XP and Office XP and dialing into the Internet every six seconds to snitch on whatever we’re doing

with them. Do you *really* think Mahogany Row is going to clear that sort of security risk?”

That’s a bluff – Mahogany Row retired from this universe back when software still meant silk unmentionables – but she isn’t likely to know that, merely that I get invited up there these days. (Nearer my brain-eating God to thee . . .)

“As for the time thing, get me a hardware budget and a tech assistant who’s vetted for level five Laundry IT operations and I’ll get it seen to. It’ll only cost you sixty thousand pounds or so in the first year, plus a salary thereafter.” Finally, *finally*, I get to pull the jug out of the coffee machine and pour myself a mug of wake-up. “That’s better.”

She glances at her watch. “Are you going to come along to the meeting and help explain this to everybody then?” she asks in a tone that could cut glass.

“No.” I add cow juice from the fridge that wheezes asthmatically below the worktop. “It’s a public/private partnership fuck-up, film at eleven. Bridget stuck her foot in it out of her own free will: if she wants me to pull it out for her she can damn well ask. Besides, I’ve got a code blue report meeting with Angleton and Boris and Andy and that trumps administrative make-work any day of the week.”

“Bastard,” she hisses.

“Pleased to be of service.” I pull a face as she marches out the room and slams the door. “Angleton. Code blue. Jesus.” All of a sudden I remember the modified camcorder in my jacket pocket. “Shit, I’m running late . . . ”

REPORT 4: Tuesday June 6th, 1989

CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES REDSHIFT, Ministry of Defense,

June 6th, 1989

ABSTRACT: Recent research in neuroanatomy has characterised the nature of the stellate ganglial networks responsible for gorgonism in patients with advanced astrocytoma affecting the cingulate gyrus. Tests combining the “map of medusa” layout with appropriate video preprocessing inputs have demonstrated the feasibility of mechanical induction of the medusa effect.

Progress in the emulation of dynamically reconfigurable hidden-layer neural networks using FPGA (fully programmable gate array) technology, combined with real-time digital video signal processing from binocular high-resolution video cameras, is likely within the next five years to allow us to download a “medusa mode” into suitably prepared surveillance CCTV cameras, allowing real-time digital video monitoring networks to achieve a true line-of-sight look-to-kill capability. Extensive safety protocols are discussed which must be implemented before this technology can be deployed nationally, in order to minimize the risk of misactivation.

Projected deployment of CCTV monitoring in public places is estimated to result in over one million cameras *in situ* in British mainland cities by 1999. Coverage will be complete by 2004–06. Anticipated developments in internetworking and improvements in online computing bandwidth suggest for the first time the capacity of achieving a total coverage defense-in-depth against any conceivable insurgency. The implications of this project are discussed, along with its possible efficacy in mitigating the consequences of CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN in September 2007.

...

Speaking of Mahogany Row, Angleton’s picked the boardroom with the teak desk and the original bakelite desk fittings, and frosted windows onto the corridor, as the venue for my debriefing. He’s sitting behind the desk tapping his bony fingers, with Andy looking anxious

and Boris imperturbable when I walk in and flip the red MEETING light on.

“Home movies.” I flip the tape on the desktop. “What I saw on my holiday.” I put my coffee mug down on one of the disquietingly soft leather mats before I yawn, just in case I spill it. “Sorry, been up for hours. What do you want to know?”

“How long had it been dead?” asks Andy.

I think for a moment. “I’m not sure – have to call Pathology if you want a hard answer, I’m afraid, but clearly for some time when I found it after zero seven hundred. It had cooled to barely oven temperature.”

Angleton is watching me like I’m a bug under a microscope. It’s not a fun sensation. “Did you read the files?” he asks.

“Yes.” Before I came up here I locked them in my office safe in case a busy little Tom, Dick, or Harriet decided to do some snooping. “I’m really going to sleep well tonight.”

“The basilisk, is found.” Boris.

“Um, no,” I admit. “It’s still in the wild. But Mike Williams said he’d let me know if they run across it. He’s cleared for OSA-III, he’s our liaison in – ”

“How many traffic cameras overlooked the roundabout?” Angleton asks almost casually.

“Oh – ” I sit down hard. “Oh shit. *Shit.*” I feel shaky, very shaky, guts doing the tango and icy chills running down the small of my back as I realise what he’s trying to tell me without saying it out loud, on the record.

“That’s why I sent you,” he murmurs, waving Andy out of the room on some prearranged errand. A moment later Boris follows him. “You’re not supposed to get yourself killed, Bob. It looks bad on your record.”

“Oh shit,” I repeat, needle stuck, sample echoing, as I realise how close to dying I may have been. And the crew of that chopper, and everyone else who’s been there since, and –

“Half an hour ago someone vandalized the number seventeen traffic camera overlooking Monk’s Road roundabout three: put a .223 bullet through the CCD enclosure. Drink your coffee, there’s a good boy, do try not to spill it everywhere.”

“One of ours.” It comes out as a statement.

“Of course.” Angleton taps the file sitting on the desk in front of him – I recognize it by the dog-ear on the second page, I put it in my office safe only ten minutes ago – and looks at me with those scary grey eyes of his. “So. The public at large being safe for the moment, tell me what you can deduce.”

“Uh.” I lick my lips, which have gone as dry as old boot leather. “Some time last night somebody let a cow into the park and used it for target practice. I don’t know much about the network topology of the MK road traffic-control cams, but my possible suspects are, in order: someone with a very peculiar brain tumour, someone with a stolen stoner weapon – like the one I qualified for under OGRE REALITY – or someone with access to whatever GAME ANDES REDSHIFT gave birth to. And, going from the questions you’re asking, if it’s GAME ANDES REDSHIFT it’s unauthorised.”

He nods, very slightly.

“We’re in deep shit then,” I say brightly and throw back the last mouthful of coffee, spoiling the effect slightly by nearly coughing my guts up immediately afterward.

“Without a depth-gauge,” he adds drily, and waits for my coughing fit to subside. “I’ve sent Andrew and Mr B down to the stacks to pull out another file for you to read. Eyes only in front of witnesses, no note-taking, escort required. While they’re signing it out I’d like you to write down in your own words everything that happened to you this morning so far. It’ll go in a sealed file along with your video evidence as a deposition in case the worst happens.”

“Oh shit.” I’m getting tired of saying this. “It’s internal?”

He nods.

“CPU business?”

He nods again, then pushes the antique portable manual typewriter toward me. “Start typing.”

“Okay.” I pick up three sheets of paper and some carbons and begin aligning their edges.

“Consider me typing already.”

REPORT 5: Monday December 10th, 2001

**CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES REDSHIFT, Ministry of Defense,
December 10th, 2001**

**CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET MAGINOT BLUE STARS, Ministry of Defense,
December 10th, 2001**

Abstract: This document describes progress to date in establishing a defensive network capable of repelling wide-scale incursions by reconfiguring the national closed-circuit television surveillance network as a software-controlled look-to-kill multiheaded basilisk. To prevent accidental premature deployment or deliberate exploitation, the SCORPION STARE software is not actually loaded into the camera firmware. Instead, reprogrammable FPGA chips are integrated into all cameras and can be loaded with SCORPION STARE by authorised MAGINOT BLUE STARS users whenever necessary.

. . .

Preamble: It has been said that the US Strategic Defense Initiative Organisation’s proposed active ABM defense network will require the most complex software ever developed, characterised by a complexity metric of >100 MLOC and heavily criticized

by various organisations (see footnotes [1][2][4]) as unworkable and likely to contain in excess of a thousand severity-1 bugs at initial deployment. Nevertheless, the architectural requirements of MAGINOT BLUE STARS dwarf those of the SDIO infrastructure. To provide coverage of 95 percent of the UK population we require a total of 8 million digitally networked CCTV cameras (terminals). Terminals in built-up areas may be connected via the public switched telephone network using SDSL/VHDSL, but outlying systems may use mesh network routing over 802.11a to ensure that rural areas do not provide a pool of infectious carriers for demonic possession. TCP/IP Quality of Service issues are discussed below, along with a concrete requirement for IPv6 routing and infrastructure that must be installed and supported by all Internet Service Providers no later than 2004.

There are more than ninety different CCTV architectures currently on sale in the UK, many of which are imported and cannot be fitted with FPGAs suitable for running the SCORPION STARE basilisk neural network prior to installation. Data Disclosure Orders served under the terms of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (2001) serve to gain access to camera firmware, but in many regions upgrades to Level 1 MAGINOT BLUE STARS compliance is behind schedule due to noncompliance by local police forces with what are seen as unreasonable Home Office requests. Unless we can achieve a 340 percent compliance improvement by 2004, we will fail to achieve the target saturation prior to September 2007, when CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN is due.

. . .

Installation has currently been completed only in limited areas; notably Inner London (“Ring of Steel” for counter-terrorism surveillance) and Milton Keynes (advanced next-generation MAN with total traffic management solution in place). Deployment is proceeding in order of population density and potential for catastrophic demonic takeover and exponential burn through built-up areas . . .

...

Recommendation: One avenue for ensuring that all civilian CCTV equipment is SCORPION STARE compatible by 2006 is to exploit an initiative of the US National Security Agency for our own ends. In a bill ostensibly sponsored by Hollywood and music industry associations (MPAA and RIAA: see also CDBTPA), the NSA is ostensibly attempting to legislate support for Digital Rights Management in all electronic equipment sold to the public. The implementation details are not currently accessible to us, but we believe this is a stalking-horse for requiring chip manufacturers to incorporate on-die FPGAs in the one million gate range, reconfigurable in software, initially laid out as DRM circuitry but reprogrammable in support of their nascent War on Un-Americanism.

If such integrated FPGAs are mandated, commercial pressures will force Far Eastern vendors to comply with regulation and we will be able to mandate incorporation of SCORPION STARE Level Two into all digital consumer electronic cameras and commercial CCTV equipment under cover of complying with our copyright protection obligations in accordance with the WIPO treaty. A suitable pretext for the rapid phased obsolescence of all Level Zero and Level One cameras can then be engineered by, for example, discrediting witness evidence from older installations in an ongoing criminal investigation.

If we pursue this plan, by late 2006 any two adjacent public CCTV terminals – or private camcorders equipped with a digital video link – will be reprogrammable by any authenticated MAGINOT BLUE STARS superuser to permit the operator to turn them into a SCORPION STARE basilisk weapon. We remain convinced that this is the best defensive posture to adopt in order to minimize casualties when the Great Old Ones return from beyond the stars to eat our brains.

“So, what this boils down to is a Strategic Defense Initiative against an invasion by alien mind-suckers from beyond spacetime, who are expected to arrive in bulk at a set date. Am I on message so far?” I asked.

“Very approximately, yes,” said Andy.

“Okay. To deal with the perceived alien mind-sucker threat, some nameless genius has worked out that the CCTV cameras dotting our green and pleasant land can be networked together, their inputs fed into a software emulation of a basilisk’s brain, and turned into some kind of omnipresent look-to-kill death net. Even though we don’t really know how the medusa effect works, other than that it relies on some kind of weird observationally mediated quantum-tunneling effect, collapse of the wave function, yadda yadda, that makes about 1 percent of the carbon nuclei in the target body automagically turn into silicon with no apparent net energy input. That right?”

“Have a cigar, Sherlock.”

“Sorry, I only smoke when you plug me into the national grid. Shit. Okay, so it hasn’t occurred to anyone that the mass-energy of those silicon nuclei has to come *from* somewhere, somewhere else, somewhere in the Dungeon Dimensions . . . damn. But that’s not the point, is it?”

“Indeed not. When are you going to get to it?”

“As soon as my hands stop shaking. Let’s see. Rather than do this openly and risk frightening the sheeple by stationing a death ray on every street corner, our lords and masters decided they’d do it bottom-up, by legislating that all public cameras be networked, and having back doors installed in them to allow the hunter-killer basilisk brain emulators to be uploaded when the time comes. Which, let’s face it, makes excellent fiscal strength in this age of outsourcing, public-private partnerships, service charters, and the like. I mean, you can’t get

business insurance if you don't install antitheft cameras, someone's got to watch them so you might as well outsource the service to a security company with a network operations centre, and the brain-dead music industry copyright nazis are campaigning for a law to make it mandatory to install secret government spookware in every walkman – or camera – to prevent home taping from killing Michael Jackson. Absolutely brilliant.”

“It *is* elegant, isn't it? Much more subtle than honking great ballistic missile submarines. We've come a long way since the Cold War.”

“Yeah. Except you're *also* telling me that some script kiddie has rooted you and dialed in a strike on Milton Keynes. Probably in the mistaken belief that they think they're playing MISSILE COMMAND.”

“No comment.”

“Jesus Fucking Christ riding into town on top of a pickup truck full of DLT backup tapes – what kind of idiot do you take me for? Listen, the ball has gone *up*. Someone uploaded the SCORPION STARE code to a bunch of traffic cams off Monk's Road roundabout and turned Daisy into six hundred pounds of boiled beef on the bone *a la* basilisk, and all you can say is *no comment?*”

“Listen, Bob, I think you're taking this all too personally. I can't comment on the Monk's Road incident because you're officially the tag-team investigative lead and I'm here to provide backup and support, not to second-guess you. I'm trying to be helpful, okay?”

“Sorry, sorry. I'm just a bit upset.”

“Yes, well, if it's any consolation that goes for me, too, and for Angleton believe it or not, but 'upset' and fifty pence will buy you a cup of coffee and what we really need is to finger the means, motive, and murderer of Daisy the Cow in time to close the stable door. Oh, and we can rule out external penetration – the network loop to Monk's Road is on a private backbone

intranet that's firewalled up to the eyeballs. Does that make it easier for you?"

"No shit! Listen, I happen to agree with you in principle, but I am *still* upset, Andy, and I want to tell you – no shit. Look, this is so not-sensible that I know I'm way the hell too late but I think the whole MAGINOT BLUE STARS idea is fucking insane, I mean, like, bull-goose barking-at-the-moon hairs-on-the-palm-of-your-hands crazy. Like atomic landmines buried under every street corner! Didn't they know that the only unhackable computer is one that's running a secure operating system, welded inside a steel safe, buried under a ton of concrete at the bottom of a coal mine guarded by the SAS and a couple of armoured divisions, and *switched off*? What did they think they were *doing*?"

"Defending us against CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN, Bob. Which I'll have you know is why the Russians are so dead keen to get Energiya flying again so they can launch their Polyus orbital battle stations, and why the Americans are getting so upset about the Rune of Al-Sabbah that they're trying to build censorware into every analogue-to-digital converter on the planet."

"Do I have CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN clearance? Or do I just have to take it on trust?"

"Take it on trust for now, I'll try and get you cleared later in the week. Sorry about that, but this truly . . . look, in this instance the ends justify the means. Take it from me. Okay?"

"Shit. I need another – no, I've already had too much coffee. So, what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, the good news is we've narrowed it down a bit. You will be pleased to know that we just ordered the West Yorkshire Met's computer crime squad to go in with hobnailed boots and take down the entire MK traffic camera network and opcentre. Official reason is a suspicion of time bombs installed by a disgruntled former employee – who is innocent, incidentally – but it lets us turn it into a Computer Misuse case and send in a reasonably clueful team. They're about

to officially call for backup from CESG, who are going to second them a purported spook from GCHQ, and that spook is going to be you. I want you to crawl all over that camera network and figure out how SCORPION STARE might have got onto it. Which is going to be easier than you think because SCORPION STARE isn't exactly open source and there are only two authorised development teams working on it on the planet that we know of, or at least in this country, one of them is – surprise – based in Milton Keynes, and as of right this minute you have clearance to stamp all over their turf and play the Gestapo officer with our top boffin labs. Which is a power I trust you will not abuse without good reason.”

“Oh great, I always fancied myself in a long, black leather trench coat. What will Mo think?”

“She'll think you look the part when you're angry. Are you up for it?”

“How the fuck could I say no, when you put it that way?”

“I'm glad you understand. Now, have you got any other questions for me before we wrap this up and send the tape to the auditors?”

“Uh, yeah. One question. Why me?”

“Why – well! Hmm. I suppose because you're already on the inside, Bob. And you've got a pretty unique skill mix. Something you overlook is that we don't have many field qualified agents, and most of those we have are old school two-fisted shoot-from-the-hip-with-a-rune-of-destruction field necromancers; they don't understand these modern Babbage engine Internet contraptions like you do. And you've already got experience with basilisk weapons, or did you think we issued those things like toothpaste tubes? So rather than find someone who doesn't know as much, you just happened to be the man on the spot who knew enough and was thought . . . appropriate.”

“Gee, thanks. I'll sleep a lot better tonight knowing that you couldn't find anyone better

suited to the job. Really scraping the barrel, aren't we?"

"If only you knew . . . if only you knew."

* * *

The next morning they put me on the train to Cheltenham – second class of course – to visit a large office site, which appears as a blank spot on all maps of the area, just in case the Russians haven't noticed the farm growing satellite dishes out back. I spend a very uncomfortable half hour being checked through security by a couple of Rottweilers in blue suits who work on the assumption that anyone who is not known to be a Communist infiltrator from North Korea is a dangerously unclassified security risk. They search me and make me pee in a cup and leave my palmtop at the site security office, but for some reason they don't ask me to surrender the small leather bag containing a mummified pigeon's foot that I wear on a silver chain round my neck when I explain that it's on account of my religion. The idiots.

It is windy and rainy outside so I have no objection to being ushered into an air-conditioned meeting room on the third floor of an outlying wing, offered institutional beige coffee the same colour as the office carpet, and to spending the next four hours in a meeting with Kevin, Robin, Jane, and Phil, who explain to me in turn what a senior operations officer from GCHQ detached for field duty is expected to do in the way of maintaining security, calling on backup, reporting problems, and filling out the two hundred and seventeen different forms that senior operations officers are apparently employed to spend their time filling out. The Laundry may have a bureaucracy surfeit and a craze for ISO-9000 certification, but GCHQ is even worse, with some bizarre spatchcock version of BS5720 quality assurance applied to all their procedures in an attempt to ensure that the Home Office minister can account for all available paper clips in near real-time if challenged in the House by Her Majesty's loyal opposition. On the other hand, they've got a bigger budget than us and all they have to worry about is having to read other

people's email, instead of having their souls sucked out by tentacular horrors from beyond the universe.

“Oh, and you really ought to wear a tie when you're representing us in public,” Phil says apologetically at the end of his spiel.

“And get a haircut,” Jane adds with a smile.

Bastards.

The Human Resources imps billet me in a bed and breakfast run by a genteel pair of elderly High Tory sociopaths, a Mr and Mrs MacBride. He's bald, loafers around in slippers, and reads the *Telegraph* while muttering darkly about the need for capital punishment as a solution to the problem of bogus asylum seekers; she wears heavy horn-rimmed glasses and the hairdo that time forgot. The corridors are wallpapered with an exquisitely disgusting floral print and the whole place smells of mothballs, the only symptom of the twenty-first century being a cheap and nasty webcam on the hall staircase. I try not to shudder as I slouch upstairs to my room and barricade the door before settling down for the evening phone call to Mo and a game of Civ on my palmtop (which I rescued from Security on my way out.) “It could be worse,” Mo consoles me, “at least *your* landlord doesn't have gill slits and greenish skin.”

The next morning I elbow my way onto an early train to London, struggle through the rush hour crush, and somehow manage to weasel my way into a seat on a train to Milton Keynes; it's full of brightly clad German backpackers and irritated businessmen on their way to Luton airport, but I get off before there and catch a taxi to the cop shop. “There is nothing better in life than drawing on the sole of your slipper with a biro instead of going to the pub on a Saturday night,” the lead singer of Half Man Half Biscuit sings mournfully on my iPod, and I am inclined to agree, subject to the caveat that Saturday nights at the pub are functionally equivalent to damp Thursday mornings at the police station. “Is Inspector Sullivan available?” I ask at the front

desk.

“Just a moment.” The moustachioed constable examines my warrant card closely, gives me a beady-eyed stare as if he expects me to break down and confess instantly to a string of unsolved burglaries, then turns and ambles into the noisy back office round the corner. I have just enough time to read the more surreal crime prevention posters for the second time (“Are your neighbours fox-hunting reptiles from the planet of the green wellies? Denounce them here, free of charge!”) when the door bangs open and a determined-looking woman in a grey suit barges in. She looks how Annie Lennox would look if she’d joined the constabulary, been glassed once or twice, and had a really dodgy curry the night before.

“Okay, who’s the joker?” she demands. “You.” A bony finger points at me. “You’re from – ” she sees the warrant card “ – oh shit.” Over her shoulder: “Jeffries, *Jeffries*, you rat bastard, you set me up! Oh, why do I bother.” Back in my direction: “You’re the spook who got me out of bed the day before yesterday after a graveyard shift. Is this *your* mess?”

I take a deep breath. “Mine and yours both. I’m just back down from – ” I clear my throat “ – and I’ve got orders to find an inspector J. Sullivan and drag him into an interview room.” Mentally crossing my fingers: “What’s the J stand for?”

“Josephine. And it’s *detective* inspector, while you’re about it.” She lifts the barrier. “You’d better come in then.” Josephine looks tired and annoyed. “Where’s your other card?”

“My other – oh.” I shrug. “We don’t flash them around; might be a bit of a disaster if one went missing.” Anyone who picked it up would be in breach of Section Three, at the very least. Not to mention in peril of their immortal soul.

“It’s okay, I’ve signed the Section, in blood.” She raises an eyebrow at me.

“Paragraph two?” I ask, just to be sure she’s not bluffing.

She shakes her head. “No, paragraph three.”

“Pass, friend.” And then I let her see the warrant card as it really is, the way it reaches into your head and twists things around so you want to throw up at the mere thought of questioning its validity. “Satisfied?”

She just nods: a cool customer for sure. The trouble with Section Three of the Official Secrets Act is that it’s an offense to know it exists without having signed it – in blood. So us signatories who are in theory cleared to talk about such supersecret national security issues as the Laundry’s tea trolley rota are in practice unable to broach the topic directly. We’re supposed to rely on introductions, but that breaks down rapidly in the field. It’s a bit like lesbian sheep; as ewes display their sexual arousal by standing around waiting to be mounted, it’s hard to know if somebody else is, well, you know. *Cleared*. “Come on,” she adds, in a marginally less hostile tone, “we can pick up a cup of coffee on the way.”

Five minutes later we’re sitting down with a notepad, a telephone, and an antique tape recorder that Smiley probably used to debrief Karla, back when men were real men and lesbian sheep were afraid. “This had better be important,” Josephine complains, clicking a frighteningly high-tech sweetener dispenser repeatedly over her black Nescafé. “I’ve got a persistent burglar, two rapes, a string of car thefts, and a phantom pisser, who keeps breaking into department stores, to deal with, then a bunch of cloggies from West Yorkshire who’re running some kind of computer audit – your fault, I believe. I need to get bogged down in *X-Files* rubbish right now like I need a hole in my head.”

“Oh, it’s important all right. And I hope to get it off your desk as soon as possible. I’d just like to get a few things straight first.”

“Hmm. So what do you need to know? We’ve only had two flying saucer sightings and six alien abductions this year so far.” She raises one eyebrow, arms crossed and shoulders set a trifle defensively. Who’d have thought it? Being interviewed by higher authorities makes the

alpha female detective defensive. “It’s not like I’ve got all day: I’m due in a case committee briefing at noon and I’ve got to pick up my son from school at four.”

On second thought, maybe she really *is* busy. “To start with, did you get any witness reports or CCTV records from the scene? And have you identified the cow, and worked out how it got there?”

“No eyewitnesses, not until three o’clock, when Vernon Thwaite was out walking his girlfriend’s toy poodle which had diarrhoea.” She pulls a face, which makes the scar on her forehead wrinkle into visibility. “If you want we can go over the team reports together. I take it that’s what pulled you in?”

“You could say that.” I dip a cheap IKEA spoon in my coffee and check cautiously after a few seconds to see if the metal’s begun to corrode. “Helicopters make me airsick. Especially after a night out when I was expecting a morning lie-in.” She almost smiles before she remembers she’s officially grumpy with me. “Okay, so no earlier reports. What else?”

“No tape,” she says, flattening her hands on the tabletop to either side of her cup and examining her nail cuticles. “Nothing. One second it’s zero zero twenty-six, the next it’s zero seven fourteen. Numbers to engrave in your heart. Dennis, our departmental geek, was most upset with MKSG – they’re the public-private partners in the regional surveillance outsourcing sector.”

“Zero zero twenty-six to zero seven fourteen,” I echo as I jot them down on my palmtop. “MKSG. Right, that’s helpful.”

“It is?” She tilts her head sideways and stares at me like I’m a fly that’s landed in her coffee.

“Yup.” I nod, then tell myself that it’d be really stupid to wind her up without good reason. “Sorry. What I can tell you is, I’m as interested in anything that happened to the

cameras as the cow. If you hear anything about them – especially about them being tampered with – I’d love to know. But in the meantime – Daisy. Do you know where she came from?”

“Yes.” She doesn’t crack a smile but her shoulders unwind slightly. “Actually, she’s number two six three from Emmett-Moore Ltd, a dairy factory out near Dunstable. Or rather, she was two six three until three days ago. She was getting along a bit, so they sold her to a local slaughterhouse along with a job lot of seven other cows. I followed-up on the other seven and they’ll be showing up in your McHappy McMeal some time next month. But not Daisy. Seems a passing farmer in a Range Rover with a wagon behind it dropped by and asked if he could buy her and cart her away for his local family butcher to deal with.”

“Aha!”

“And if you believe that, I’ve got a bridge to sell you.” She takes a sip of her coffee, winces, and strafes it with sweeteners again. Responding on autopilot I try a mouthful of my own and burn my tongue. “Turns out that there’s no such farmer Giles of Ham Farm, Bag End, The Shire, on record. Mind you, they had a camera on their stockyard and we nailed the Range Rover. It turned up abandoned the next day on the outskirts of Leighton Buzzard and it’s flagged as stolen on HOLMES2. Right now it’s sitting in the pound down the road; they smoked it for prints but it came up clean and we don’t have enough money to send a SOCO and a forensics team to do a full workup on every stolen car we run across. *However*, if you twist my arm and promise me a budget *and* to go to the mat with my boss I’ll see what I can lay on.”

“That may not be necessary: we have ways and means. But can you get someone to drive me down there? I’ll take some readings and get out of your face – except for the business with Daisy. How are you covering that?”

“Oh, we’ll find something. Right now it’s filed under ‘F’ for Fucking Fortean Freakery, but I was thinking of announcing it’s just an old animal that had been dumped illegally by a

farmer who didn't want to pay to have it slaughtered.”

“That sounds about right.” I nod slowly. “Now, I'd like to play a random word-association game with you. Okay? Ten seconds. When I say the words tell me what you think of. Right?”

She looks puzzled. “Is this – ”

“Listen. Case-Nightmare-Green-Scorpion-Stare-Maginot-Blue-Stars. By the authority vested in me by the emissaries of Y'ghonzzh N'hai I have the power to bind and to release, and your tongue be tied of these matters of which we have spoken until you hear these words again: Case-Nightmare-Green-Scorpion-Stare-Maginot-Blue-Stars. Got that?”

She looks at me cross-eyed and mouths something, then looks increasingly angry until finally she gets it together to burst out with: “Hey, what *is* this shit?”

“Purely a precaution,” I say, and she glares at me, gobbling for a moment while I finish my coffee until she figures out that she simply can't say a word about the subject. “Right,” I say. “Now. You've got my permission to announce that the cow was dumped. You have my permission to talk freely to me, but to nobody else. Anyone asks any questions, refer them to me if they won't take no for an answer. This goes for your boss, too. Feel free to tell them that you can't tell them, nothing more.”

“Wanker,” she hisses, and if looks could kill I'd be a small pile of smouldering ashes on the interview room floor.

“Hey, *I'm* under a geas, too. If I don't spread it around my head will explode.”

I don't know whether she believes me or not but she stops fighting it and nods tiredly.

“Tell me what you want then get the hell out of my patch.”

“I want a lift to the car pound. A chance to sit behind the wheel of that Range Rover. A book of poetry, a jug of wine, a date tree, and – sorry, wrong question. Can you manage it?”

She stands up. "I'll take you there myself," she says tersely. We go.

* * *

I get to endure twenty-five minutes of venomous silence in the back seat of an unmarked patrol car driven by one Constable Routledge, with DI Sullivan in the front passenger seat treating me with the warmth due a serial killer, before we arrive at the pound. I'm beyond introspective self-loathing by now – you lose it fast in this line of work. Angleton will have my head for a key-ring fob if I don't take care to silence any possible leaks, and a tongue-twisting geas is more merciful than most of the other tools at my disposal – but I still feel like a shit. So it comes as a great relief to get out of the car and stretch my legs on the muddy gravel parking lot in the pouring rain.

"So where's the car?" I ask, innocently.

Josephine ignores me. "Bill, you want to head over to Bletchley Way and pick up Dougal's evidence bag for the Hayes case. Then come back to pick us up," she tells the driver. To the civilian security guard: "You, we're looking for BY 476 ERB. Came in yesterday, Range Rover. Where is it?"

The bored security goon leads us through the mud and a maze of cars with POLICE AWARE stickers glued to their windshields then gestures at a half-empty row. "That's it?" Josephine asks, and he passes her a set of keys. "Okay, you can piss off now." He takes one look at her face and beats a hasty retreat. I half-wish I could join him – whether she's a detective inspector or not, and therefore meant to be behaving with the gravitas of a senior officer in public, DI Sullivan looks to be in a mood to bite the heads off chickens. Or Laundry field agents, given half an excuse.

"Right, that's it," she says, holding out the keys and shaking them at me impatiently.

"You're done, I take it, so I'll be pushing off. Case meeting to run, mystery shopping centre

pisser to track down, and so on.”

“Not so fast.” I glance round. The pound is surrounded by a high wire fence and there’s a decrepit Portakabin office out front by the gate: a camera sits on a motorised mount on a pole sticking up from the roof. “Who’s on the other end of that thing?”

“The gate guard, probably,” she says, following my finger. The camera is staring at the entrance, unmoving.

“Okay, why don’t you open up the car.” She blips the remote to unlock the door and I keep my eyes on the camera as she takes the handle and tugs. *Could I be wrong?* I wonder as the rain trickles down my neck. I shake myself when I notice her staring, then I pull out my palmtop, clamber up into the driver’s seat, and balance the pocket computer on the steering wheel as I tap out a series of commands. What I see makes me shake my head. Whoever stole the car may have wiped for fingerprints but they didn’t know much about paranormal concealment – they didn’t use the shroud from a suicide, or get a paranoid schizophrenic to drive. The scanner is sensitive to heavy emotional echoes, and the hands I’m looking for are the most recent ones to have chilled from fright and fear of exposure. I log everything and put it away, and I’m about to open the glove locker when something makes me glance at the main road beyond the chainlink fence and –

“*Watch out! Get down!*” I jump out and go for the ground. Josephine is looking around so I reach out and yank her ankles out from under her. She yells, goes down hard on her backside, and tries to kick me, then there’s a loud *whump* from behind me and a wave of heat like an open oven door. “Shit, fuck, shit –” I take a moment to realise the person cursing is me as I fumble at my throat for the bag and rip it open, desperately trying to grab the tiny claw and the disposable cigarette lighter at the same time. I flick the lighter wheel and right then something like a sledgehammer whacks into the inside of my right thigh.

“*Bastard . . . !*”

“Stop it – ” I gasp, just as the raw smell of petrol vapour reaches me and I hear a crackling roar. I get the pigeon claw lit in a stink of burning keratin and an eerie glow, nearly shitting myself with terror, lying in a cold damp puddle, and roll over: “*Don’t move!*”

“Bastard! What – hey, what’s burning?”

“Don’t move,” I gasp again, holding the subminiature Hand of Glory up. The traffic camera in the road outside the fence is casting about as if it’s dropped its contact lens, but the one on the pole above the office is locked right onto the burning tires of the Range Rover. “If you let go of my hand they’ll see you and kill you *oh shit* – ”

“Kill – *what?*” She stares at me, white-faced.

“You! Get under cover!” I yell across the pound, but the guy in the blue suit – the attendant – doesn’t hear me. One second he’s running across the car park as fast as his portly behind can manage; the next moment he’s tumbling forward, blackening, puffs of flame erupting from his eyes and mouth and ears, then the stumps as his arms come pinwheeling off, and the carbonized trunk slides across the ground like a grisly toboggan.

“Oh shit, oh shit!” Her expression changes from one second to the next, from disbelief to dawning horror. “We’ve got to help – ”

“Listen, *no!* Stay down!”

She freezes in place for a full heartbeat, then another. When she opens her mouth again she’s unnaturally cool. “What’s going on?”

“The cameras,” I pant. “Listen, this is a Hand of Glory, an invisibility shield. Right now it’s all that’s keeping us alive – those cameras are running SCORPION STARE. If they see us we’re dead.”

“Are you – the car? What happened to it?”

“Tires. They’re made of carbon, rubber. SCORPION STARE works on anything with a shitload of long-chain carbon molecules in it – like tires, or cows. Makes them burn.”

“Oh my sainted aunt and holy father . . . ”

“Hold my hand. Make skin to skin contact – not that hard. We’ve got maybe three, four minutes before this HOG burns down. Bastards, *bastards*. Got to get to the control shack – ”

The next minute is a nightmare of stumbling – shooting pains in my knees from where I went down hard and in my thigh where Josephine tried to kick the shit out of me – soaking cold damp jeans, and roasting hot skin on my neck from the pyre that I was sitting inside only seconds ago. She holds onto my left hand like it’s a lifesaver – yes, it is, for as long as the HOG keeps burning – and we lurch and shamble toward the modular site office near the entrance as fast as we can go. “Inside,” she gasps, “it can’t see inside.”

“Yeah?” She half-drags me to the entrance and we find the door’s open, not locked.

“Can we get away round the other side?”

“Don’t think so.” She points through the building. “There’s a school.”

“Oh shit.” We’re on the other side of the pound from the traffic camera in the road, but there’s another camera under the eaves of the school on the other side of the road from the steel gates out front, and it’s a good thing the kids are all in lessons because what’s going on here is every teacher’s nightmare. And we’ve got to nail it down as fast as possible, because if they ring the bell for lunch – “We’ve got to kill the power to the roofcam first,” I say. “Then we’ve got to figure a way out.”

“What’s going on? What *did* that?” Her lips work like a fish out of water.

I shake my head. “Case-Nightmare-Green-Scorpion-Stare-Maginot-Blue-Stars tongue be loosed. Okay, talk. I reckon we’ve got about two, three minutes to nail this before – ”

“This was all a setup?”

“I don’t know yet. Look, how do I get onto the roof?”

“Isn’t that a skylight?” she asks, pointing.

“Yeah.” Being who I am I always carry a Leatherman multitool so I whip it out and look around for a chair I can pile on top of the desk and stand on, one that doesn’t have wheels and a gas strut. “See any chairs I can – ”

I’ll say this much, detective training obviously enables you to figure out how to get onto a roof fast. Josephine simply walks over to the ladder nestling in a corner between one wall and a battered filing cabinet and pulls it out. “This what you’re looking for?”

“Uh, yeah. Thanks.” She passes it to me and I fumble with it for a moment, figuring out how to set it up. Then another moment, juggling the multitool and the half-consumed pigeon’s foot and looking at the ladder dubiously.

“Give me those,” she says.

“But – ”

“Listen, *I’m* the one who deals with idiot vandals and climbs around on pitched roofs looking for broken skylights, okay? And – ” she glances at the door “ – if I mess up you can phone your boss and let him know what’s happening.”

“Oh,” I mumble, then hand her the gadgets and hold the ladder steady while she swarms up it like a circus acrobat. A moment later there’s a noise like a herd of baby elephants thudding on the rooftop as she scrambles across to the camera mount. The camera may be on a moving platform but there’s a limit to how far it can depress and clearly she’s right below the azimuth platform – just as long as she isn’t visible to both the traffic camera out back and the schoolyard monitor out front. More shaking, then there’s a loud clack and the Portakabin lights go out.

A second or two later she reappears, feet first, through the opening. “Right, that should do it,” she says. “I shorted the power cable to the platform. “Hey, the lights – ”

“I think you shorted a bit more than that.” I hold the ladder as she climbs down. “Now, we’ve got an immobilized one up top, that’s good. Let’s see if we can find the controller.”

A quick search of the hut reveals a bunch of fun stuff I hadn’t been expecting, like an ADSL line to the regional police IT hub, a PC running some kind of terminal emulator, and another dedicated machine with the cameras showing overlapping windows on-screen. I could kiss them; they may have outsourced the monitoring to private security firms but they’ve kept the hardware all on the same backbone network. The blinkenlights are beeping and twittering like crazy as everything’s now running on backup battery power, but that’s okay. I pull out a breakout box and scramble around under a desk until I’ve got my palmtop plugged into the network hub to sniff packets. Barely a second later it dings at me. “Oh, lovely.” So much for *firewalled up to the eyeballs*. I unplug and surface again, then scroll through the several hundred screenfuls of unencrypted bureaucratic computerese my network sniffer has grabbed. “*That* looks promising. Uh, I wouldn’t go outside just yet but I think we’re going to be all right.”

“Explain.” She’s about ten centimetres shorter than I am, but I’m suddenly aware that I’m sharing the Portakabin with an irate, wet, detective inspector who’s probably a black belt at something or other lethal and who is just about to really lose her cool: “You’ve got about ten seconds from *now* to tell me everything. Or I’m calling for backup and warrant card or no you are going in a cell until I get some answers. Capiisce?”

“I surrender.” I don’t, really, but I point at my palmtop. “It’s a fair cop, guv. Look, someone’s been too clever by half here. The camera up top is basically a glorified webcam. I mean, it’s running a web server and it’s plugged into the constabulary’s intranet via broadband. Every ten seconds or so a program back at HQ polls it and grabs the latest picture, okay? That’s in addition to whatever the guy downstairs tells it to look at. Anyway, someone *else* just sent it an HTTP request with a honking great big file upload attached, and I don’t think your IT

department is in the habit of using South Korean primary schools as proxy servers, are they? And a compromised firewall, no less. Lovely! Your cameras may have been OwnZ0r3d by a fucking script kiddie, but they're not as fucking smart as they *think* they are otherwise they'd have fucking stripped off the fucking referrer headers, wouldn't they?" I stop talking and make sure I've saved the logfile somewhere secure, then for good measure I email it to myself at work.

"Right. So I know their IP address and it's time to locate them." It's the work of about thirty seconds to track it to a dial-up account on one of the big national ISPs – one of the free anonymous ones. "Hmm. If you want to help, you could get me an S22 disclosure notice for the phone number behind this dial-up account. Then we can persuade the phone company to tell us the street address and go pay them a visit and ask why they killed our friend with the key ring – " My hands are shaking from the adrenalin high and I am beginning to feel angry, not just an ordinary day-to-day pissed-off feeling but the kind of true and brutal rage that demands revenge.

"Killed? Oh." She opens the door an inch and looks outside: she looks a little grey around the gills, but she doesn't lose it. Tough woman.

"It's SCORPION STARE. Look, S22 data disclosure order first, it's a fucking murder investigation now, isn't it? Then we go visiting. But we're going to have to make out like it's accidental, or the press will come trampling all over us and we won't be able to get anything done." I write down the hostname while she gets on the mobile to head office. The first sirens start to wail even before she picks up my note and calls for medical backup. I sit there staring at the door, contemplating the mess, my mind whirling. "Tell the ambulance crew it's a freak lightning strike," I say as the thought takes me. "You're already in this up to your ears, we don't need to get anyone else involved – "

Then my phone rings.

* * *

As it happens we don't visit any murderous hackers, but presently the car pound is fronted with white plastic scene-of-crime sheeting and a photographer and a couple of forensics guys show up and Josephine, who has found something more urgent to obsess over than ripping me a new asshole, is busy directing their preliminary work-over. I'm poring over screenfuls of tcpdump output in the control room when the same unmarked car that dropped us off here pulls up with Constable Routledge at the wheel and a very unexpected passenger in the back. I gape as he gets out of the car and walks toward the hut. "Who's this?" demands Josephine, coming over and sticking her head in through the window.

I open the door. "Hi, boss. Boss, meet Detective Inspector Sullivan. Josephine, this is my boss – you want to come in and sit down?"

Andy nods at her distractedly: "I'm Andy. Bob, brief me." He glances at her again as she shoves through the door and closes it behind her. "Are you – "

"She knows too much already." I shrug. "Well?" I ask her. "This is your chance to get out."

"Fuck that." She glares at me, then Andy: "Two mornings ago it was a freak accident and a cow, today it's a murder investigation – I trust you're not planning on escalating it any further, terrorist massacres and biological weapons are a little outside my remit – and I want some answers. *If* you please."

"Okay, you'll get them," Andy says mildly. "Start talking," he tells me.

"Code blue called at three thirty the day before yesterday. I flew out to take a look, found a dead cow that had been zapped by SCORPION STARE – unless there's a basilisk loose in Milton Keynes – went down to our friends in Cheltenham for briefing yesterday, stayed overnight, came up here this morning. The cow was bought from a slaughterhouse and transported to the scene in a trailer towed by a stolen car, which was later dumped and

transferred to this pound. Inspector Sullivan is our force liaison – external circle two, no need to know. She brought me here and I took a patch test, and right then someone zapped the car – we were lucky to survive. One down out front. We’ve, uh, trapped a camera up top that I *think* will prove to have firmware loaded with SCORPION STARE, and I sniffed packets coming in from a compromised host. Police intranet, firewalled to hell and back, hacked via some vile little dweeb using a primary school web server in South Korea. We were just about to run down the intruder in meatspace and go ask some pointed questions when you arrived.” I yawn, and Andy looks at me oddly. Extreme stress sometimes does that to me, makes me tired, and I’ve been running on my nerves for most of the past few days.

“All right.” Andy scratches his chin thoughtfully. “There’s been a new development.”

“New development?” I echo.

“Yes. We received a blackmail note.” And it’s no fucking *wonder* that he’s looking slightly glassy-eyed – he must be in shock.

“*Blackmail?* What are they – ”

“It came via email from an anonymous remixer on the public Internet. Whoever wrote it knows about MAGINOT BLUE STARS and wants us to know that they disapprove, especially of SCORPION STARE. No sign that they’ve got CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN, though. They’re giving us three days to cancel the entire project or they’ll blow it wide open in quote the most public way imaginable unquote.”

“Shit.”

“Smelly brown stuff, yes. Angleton is displeased.” Andy shakes his head. “We tracked the message back to a dial-up host in the UK – ”

I hold up a piece of paper. “This one?”

He squints at it. “I think so. We did the S22 soft-shoe shuffle but it’s no good, they used

the SIMM card from a prepaid mobile phone bought for cash in a supermarket in Birmingham three months ago. The best we could do was trace the caller's location to the centre of Milton Keynes." He glances at Josephine. "Did you impress her – "

"Listen." She speaks quietly and with great force: "Firstly, this appears to be an investigation into murder – and now blackmail, of a government department, right? – and in case you hadn't noticed, organising criminal investigations just happens to be my speciality. Secondly, I do not appreciate being forcibly gagged. I *have* signed a certain piece of paper, and the only stuff I leak is what you get when you drill holes in me. Finally, I am getting really pissed off with the runaround you're giving me about a particularly serious incident on my turf, and if you don't start answering my questions soon I'm going to have to arrest you for wasting police time. Now, which is it going to be?"

"Oh, for crying out loud." Andy rolls his eyes, then says very rapidly: "By the abjuration of Dee and the name of Claude Dansey I hereby exercise subsection D paragraph sixteen clause twelve and bind you to service from now and forevermore. Right, that's it. You're drafted, and may whatever deity you believe in have mercy on your soul."

"Hey. Wait." She takes a step back. "What's going on?" There's a faint stink of burning sulphur in the air.

"You've just talked yourself into the Laundry," I say, shaking my head. "Just try to remember I tried to keep you out of this."

"The Laundry? What are you talking about? I thought you were from Cheltenham?" The smell of brimstone is getting stronger. "Hey, is something on fire?"

"Wrong guess," says Andy. "Bob can explain later. For now, just remember that we work for the same people, ultimately, only we deal with a higher order of threat than everyday stuff like rogue states, terrorist nukes, and so on. Cheltenham is the cover story. Bob, the

blackmailer threatened to upload SCORPION STARE to the ring of steel.”

“Oh shit.” I sit down hard on the edge of a desk. “That is so very not good that I don’t want to think about it right now.” The ring of steel is the network of surveillance cameras that were installed around the financial heart of the city of London in the late 1990s to deter terrorist bombings. “Look, did Angleton have any other – ”

“Yes. He wants us to go visit Site Able right now, that’s the lead development team at the research centre behind SCORPION STARE. Um, inspector? You’re in. As I said, you’re drafted. Your boss, that would be Deputy Chief Constable Dunwoody, is about to get a memo about you from the Home Office – we’ll worry about whether you can go back to your old job afterward. As of now, this investigation is your only priority. Site Able runs out of an office unit at Kiln Farm industrial estate, covered as a UK subsidiary of an American software company: in reality they’re part of the residual unprivatised rump of DERA, uh, QinetiQ. The bunch that handles Q-projects.”

“While you’re busy wanking over your cow-burning nonsense I’ve got a ring of car thieves to – ” Josephine shakes her head distractedly, sniffs suspiciously, then stops trying to fight the geas. “*That smell* . . . Why do these people at Kiln Farm need a visit?”

“Because they’re the lead team on the group who developed SCORPION STARE,” Andy explains, “and Angleton doesn’t think it’s a coincidence that our blackmailer burned a cow in Milton Keynes. He thinks they’re a bunch of locals. Bob, if you’ve got a trace that’ll be enough to narrow it down to the building – ”

“Yes?” Josephine nods to herself. “But you need to find the individual responsible, and any time bombs they’ve left, and there’s a small matter of evidence.” A thought strikes her.

“What happens when you catch them?”

Andy looks at me and my blood runs cold. “I think we’ll have to see about that when we

find them,” I extemporise, trying to avoid telling her about the Audit Commission for the time being; she might blow her stack completely if I have to explain how they investigate malfeasance, and then I’d have to tell her that the burning smell is a foreshadowing of what happens if she is ever found guilty of disloyalty. (It normally fades a few minutes after the rite of binding, but right now it’s still strong.) “What are we waiting for?” I ask. “Let’s go!”

* * *

In the beginning there was the Defense Evaluation and Research Agency, DERA. And DERA was where HMG’s boffins hung out, and they developed cool toys like tanks with plastic armour, clunky palmtops powered by 1980s chips and rugged enough to be run over by a truck, and fetal heart monitors to help the next generation of squaddies grow up strong. And lo, in the thrusting entrepreneurial climate of the early nineties a new government came to power with a remit to bring about the triumph of true socialism by privatising the post office and air traffic control systems, and DERA didn’t stand much of a chance. Renamed QinetiQ by the same nameless marketing genius who turned the Royal Mail into Consignia and Virgin Trains into fodder for fuckedcompany-dot-com, the research agency was hung out to dry, primped and beautified, and generally prepared for sale to the highest bidder who didn’t speak with a pronounced Iraqi accent.

However . . .

In addition to the ordinary toys, DERA used to do development work for the Laundry. Q Division’s pedigree stretches back all the way to SOE’s wartime dirty tricks department – poison pens, boot-heel escape kits, explosive-stuffed sabotage rats, the whole nine yards of James Bond japery. Since the 1950s, Q Division has kept the Laundry in more esoteric equipment: summoning grids, basilisk guns, Turing oracles, self-tuning pentacles, self-filling beer glasses, and the like. Steadily growing weirder and more specialised by the year, Q Division is far too

sensitive to sell off – unlike most of QinetiQ’s research, what they do is classified so deep you’d need a bathyscaphe to reach it. And so, while QinetiQ was being dolled up for the city catwalk, Q Division was segregated and spun off, a little stronghold in the sea of commerce that is forever civil service territory.

Detective Inspector Sullivan marches out of the site office like a blank-faced automaton and crisply orders her pet driver to take us to Site Able then to bugger off on some obscure make-work errand. She sits stiffly in the front passenger seat while Andy and I slide into the back and we proceed in silence – nobody seems to want to make small talk.

Fifteen minutes of bumbling around red routes and through trackless wastes of identical red brick houses embellished with satellite dishes and raw pine fences brings us into an older part of town, where the buildings actually look different and the cycle paths are painted strips at the side of the road rather than separately planned routes. I glance around curiously, trying to spot landmarks. “Aren’t we near Bletchley Park?” I ask.

“It’s a couple of miles that way,” says our driver without taking his hands off the wheel to point. “You thinking of visiting?”

“Not just yet.” Bletchley Park was the wartime headquarters of the Ultra operation, the department that later became GCHQ – the people who built the Colossus computers, originally used for breaking Nazi codes and subsequently diverted by the Laundry for more occult purposes. Hallowed ground to us spooks; I’ve met more than one NSA liaison who wanted to visit in order to smuggle a boot heel full of gravel home. “Not until we’ve visited the UK offices of Dillinger Associates, at any rate.”

Dillinger Associates is the cover name for a satellite office of Q Division. The premises turns out to be a neoclassical brick-and-glass edifice with twee fake columns and wilted-looking ivy that’s been trained to climb the facade by dint of ruthless application of plant hormones. We

pile out of the car in the courtyard between the dry fountain and the glass doors, and I surreptitiously check my PDA's locator module for any sign of a match. Nothing. I blink and put it away in time to catch up with Andy and Josephine as they head for the bleached blonde receptionist who sits behind a high wooden counter and types constantly, as unapproachably artificial-looking as a shop window dummy.

"HelloDillingerAssociatesHowCanIHelpEwe?" She flutters her eyelashes at Andy in a bored, professional way, hands never moving away from the keyboard of the PC in front of her. There's something odd about her, but I can't quite put my finger on it.

Andy flips open his warrant card. "We're here to see Doctor Voss."

The receptionist's long, red-nailed fingers stop moving and hover over the keyboard. "Really?" she asks, tonelessly, reaching under the desk.

"Hold it – " I begin to say, as Josephine takes a brisk step forward and drops a handkerchief over the webcam on top of the woman's monitor. There's a quiet *pop* and the sudden absence of noise from her PC tips me off. I sidestep the desk and make a grab for her just as Andy produces a pistol with a ridiculously fat barrel and shoots out the camera located over the door at the rear of the reception area. There's a horrible ripping sound like a joint of meat tearing apart as the receptionist twists aside and I realise that she isn't sitting on a chair at all – she's joined seamlessly at the hips to a plinth that emerges from some kind of fat swivel base of age-blackened wood, bolted to the floor with heavy brass pins in the middle of a silvery metallic pentacle with wires trailing from one corner back up to the PC on the desk. She opens her mouth and I can see that her tongue is bright blue and bifurcated as she hisses.

I hit the floor shoulder first, jarringly hard, and grab for the nearest cable. Those red nails are reaching down for me as her eyes narrow to slits and she works her jaw muscles as if she's trying to get together a wad of phlegm to spit. I grab the fattest cable and give it a pull and she

screams, high-pitched and frighteningly inhuman.

What the fuck? I think, looking up as the red-painted claws stretch and expand, shedding layers of varnish as their edges grow long and sharp. Then I yank the cable again, and it comes away from the pentacle. The wooden box drools a thick, blue-tinted liquid across the carpet tiles, and the screaming stops.

“Lamia,” Andy says tersely. He strides over to the fire door that opens onto the corridor beyond, raises the curiously fat gun, and fires straight up. A purple rain drizzles back down.

“What’s going on?” says Josephine, bewildered, staring at the twitching, slowly dying receptionist.

I point my PDA at the lamia and ding it for a reading. Cool, but nonzero. “Got a partial fix,” I call to Andy. “Where’s everyone else? Isn’t this place supposed to be manned?”

“No idea.” He looks worried. “If this is what they’ve got up front the shit’s already hit the fan – Angleton wasn’t predicting overt resistance.”

The other door bangs open of a sudden and a tubby middle-aged guy in a cheap grey suit and about three day’s worth of designer stubble barges out shouting, “Who are you and what do you think you’re doing here? This is private property, not a paintball shooting gallery! It’s a disgrace – I’ll call the police!”

Josephine snaps out of her trance and steps forward. “As a matter of fact, I *am* the police,” she says. “What’s your name? Do you have a complaint, and if so, what is it?”

“I’m, I’m – ” He focusses on the no-longer-twitching demon receptionist, lolling on top of her box like a murderous shop mannequin. He looks aghast. “Vandals! If you’ve damaged her – ”

“Not as badly as she planned to damage us,” says Andy. “I think you’d better tell us who you are.” Andy presents his card, ordering it to reveal its true shape: “by the authority vested in

me – ”

He moves fast with the geas and ten seconds later we’ve got mister fat guy – actually Dr Martin Voss – seated on one of the uncomfortable chrome-and-leather designer sofas at one side of reception while Andy asks questions and records them on a dictaphone. Voss talks in a monotone, obviously under duress, drooling slightly from one side of his mouth, and the stench of brimstone mingles with a mouth-watering undertone of roast pork. There’s purple dye from Andy’s paintball gun splattered over anything that might conceal a camera, and he had me seal all the doorways with a roll of something like duct tape or police incident tape, except that the symbols embossed on it glow black and make your eyes water if you try to focus on them.

“Tell me your name and position at this installation.”

“Voss. John Voss. Res-research team manager.”

“How many members are there on your team? Who are they?”

“Twelve. Gary. Ted. Elinor. John. Jonathan. Abdul. Mark – ”

“Stop right there. Who’s here today? And is anyone away from the office right now?” I plug away at my palmtop, going cross-eyed as I fiddle with the detector controls. But there’s no sign of any metaspectral resonance; grepping for a match to the person who stole the Range Rover draws a blank in this building. Which is frustrating because we’ve got his (I’m pretty sure it’s a *he*) boss right here, and there ought to be a sympathetic entanglement at work.

“Everyone’s here but Mark.” He laughs a bit, mildly hysterical. “They’re all here but Mark. Mark!”

I glance over at Detective Inspector Sullivan, who is detective inspecting the lamia. I think she’s finally beginning to grasp at a visceral level that we aren’t just some bureaucratic Whitehall paper circus trying to make her life harder. She looks frankly nauseated. The silence here is eerie, and worrying. *Why haven’t the other team members come to find out what’s going*

on? I wonder, looking at the taped-over doors. *Maybe they've gone out the back and are waiting for us outside. Or maybe they simply can't come out in daylight.* The smell of burning meat is getting stronger: Voss seems to be shaking, as if he's trying not to answer Andy's questions.

I walk over to the lamia. "It's not human," I explain quietly. "It never was human. It's one of the things they specialise in. This building is defended by guards and wards, and this is just part of the security system's front end."

"But she, she spoke . . ."

"Yes, but she's not a human being." I point to the thick ribbon cable that connected the computer to the pentacle. "See, that's a control interface. The computer's there to stabilize and contain a Dho-Nha circuit that binds the Dee-space entity here. The entity itself – it's a lamia – is locked into the box which contains, uh, other components. And it's compelled to obey certain orders. Nothing good for unscheduled visitors." I put my hands on the lamia's head and work my fingers into the thick blonde hair, then tug. There's a noise of ripping Velcro then the wig comes off to reveal the scaly scalp beneath. "See? It's not human. It's a lamia, a type of demon bound to act as a front-line challenge/response system for a high security installation with covert –"

I manage to get out of the line of fire as Josephine brings up her lunch all over the incredibly expensive bleached pine workstation. I can't say I blame her. I feel a little shocky myself – it's been a really bad morning. Then I realise that Andy is trying to get my attention. "Bob, when you're through with grossing out the inspector I've got a little job for you." He pitches his voice loudly.

"Yeah?" I ask, straightening up.

"I want you to open that door, walk along the corridor to the second room on the right – not pausing to examine any of the corpses along the way – and open it. Inside, you'll find the

main breaker board. I want you to switch the power off.”

“Didn’t I just see you splashing paint all over the CCTV cameras in the ceiling? And, uh, what’s this about corpses? Why don’t we send Doctor Voss – oh.” Voss’s eyes are shut and the stink of roast meat is getting stronger: he’s gone extremely red in the face, almost puffy, and he’s shaking slightly as if some external force is making all his muscles twitch simultaneously. It’s my turn to struggle to hang onto breakfast. “I didn’t know anyone could make themselves *do* that,” I hear myself say distantly.

“Neither did I,” says Andy, and that’s the most frightening thing I’ve heard today so far. “There must be a conflicted geas somewhere in his skull. I don’t think I could stop it even if – ”

“Shit.” I stand up. My hand goes to my neck automatically but the pouch is empty. “No HOG.” I swallow. “Power. What happens if I don’t?”

“Voss’s pal Mark McLuhan installed a dead man’s handle. You’d know all about that. We’ve got until Voss goes into brain stem death and then every fucking camera in Milton Keynes goes live with SCORPION STARE.”

“Oh, you mean we die.” I head for the door Voss came through. “I’m looking for the service core, right?”

“Wait!” It’s Josephine, looking pale. “Can’t you go outside and cut the power there? Or phone for help?”

“Nope.” I rip the first strip of sealing tape away from the door frame. “We’re behind Tempest shielding here, and the power is routed through concrete ducts underground. This is a Q Division office, after all. If we could call in an air strike and drop a couple of BLU-114/Bs on the local power substations, that might work – ” I tug at the second tape “ – but these systems were designed to be survivable.” Third tape.

“Here,” calls Andy, and he chucks something cylindrical at me. I catch it one-handed,

yank the last length of tape with the other hand, and do a double-take. Then I shake the cylinder, listen for the rattle of the stirrer, and pop the lid off.

“Take cover!” I call. Then I open the door, spritz the ceiling above me with green spray paint, and go to work.

* * *

I’m sitting in the lobby, guarding the lamia’s corpse with a nearly empty can of paint and trying not to fall asleep, when the OCCULUS team bangs on the door. I yawn and sidestep Voss’s blistered corpse – he looks like he’s gone a few rounds with Old Sparky – then try to remember the countersign. *Ah, that’s it.* I pull away a strip of tape and tug the door open and find myself staring up the snout of an H&K carbine. “Is that a gun in your hand or are you just here to have a wank?” I ask.

The gun points somewhere else in a hurry. “Hey, Sarge, it’s the spod from Amsterdam!”

“Yeah, and someone’s told you to secure the area, haven’t they? Where’s Sergeant Howe?” I ask, yawning. Daylight makes me feel better – that, and knowing that there’s backup. (I get sleepy when people stop shooting at me. Then I have nightmares. Not a good combination.)

“Over here.” They’re dressed in something not unlike Fire Service HAZMAT gear, and the wagons are painted cheerful cherry-red with luminous yellow stripes; if they weren’t armed to the teeth with automatic weapons you’d swear they were only here because somebody had phoned in a toxic chemical release warning. But the pump nozzles above the cabs aren’t there to spray water, and that lumpy thing on the back isn’t a spotlight – it’s a grenade launcher.

The inspector comes up behind me, staggering slightly in the daylight. “What’s going on?” she asks.

“Here, meet Scary Spice and Sergeant Howe. Sarge, Scary, meet Detective Inspector

Sullivan. Uh, the first thing you need to do is to go round the site and shoot out every closed circuit TV camera you can see – or that can see you. Got that? And webcams. And doorcams. See a camera, smash it, that's the rule."

"Cameras. Ri-ight." Sergeant Howe looks mildly skeptical, but nods. "It's definitely cameras?"

"Who *are* these guys?" asks Josephine.

"Artists' Rifles. They work with us," I say. Scary nods, deeply serious. "Listen, you go outside, do anything necessary to keep the local emergency services off our backs. If you need backup ask Sergeant Howe here. Sarge, she's basically sound and she's working for us on this. Okay?"

She doesn't wait for confirmation, just shoves past me and heads out into the daylight, blinking and shaking her head. I carry on briefing the OCCULUS guys. "Don't worry about anything that uses film, it's the closed circuit TV variety that's hostile. And, oh, try to make sure that you are *never* in view of more than one of 'em at a time."

"And don't walk on the cracks in the pavement or the bears will get us, check." Howe turns to Scary Spice: "Okay, you heard the man. Let's do it." He glances at me. "Anything inside?"

"We're taking care of it," I say. "If we need help we'll ask."

"Check." Scary is muttering into his throat mike and fake firemen with entirely authentic fire axes are walking around the bushes along the side of the building as if searching for signs of combustion. "Okay, we'll be out here."

"Is Angleton in the loop? Or the captain?"

"Your boss is on his way out here by chopper. Ours is on medical leave. You need to escalate, I'll get you the lieutenant."

“Okay.” I duck back into the reception area then nerve myself to go back into the development pool at the rear of the building, below the offices and above the labs.

Site Able is a small departmental satellite office, small for security reasons: ten systems engineers, a couple of manager dogsbodies, and a security officer. Most of them are right here right now, and they’re not going anywhere. I walk around the service core in the dim glow of the emergency light, bypassing splashes of green paint that look black in the red glow. The octagonal developer pool at the back is also dimly illuminated – there are no windows, and the doors are triple-sealed with rubber gaskets impregnated with fine copper mesh – and some of the partitions have been blown over. The whole place is ankle deep in white mist left over from the halon dump system that went off when the first bodies exploded – good thing the air conditioning continued to run or the place would be a gas trap. The webcams are all where I left them, in a trash can at the foot of the spiral staircase up to level one, cables severed with my multitool just to make sure nobody tries to plug them back in again.

The victims – well, I have to step over one of them to get up the staircase. It’s pretty gross but I’ve seen dead bodies before, including burn cases, and at least this was fast. But I don’t think I’m going to forget the smell in a hurry. In fact, I think I’m going to have nightmares about it tonight, and maybe get drunk and cry on Mo’s shoulder several times over the next few weeks until I’ve got it out of my system. But for now, I shove it aside and step over them. Got to keep moving, that’s the main thing – unless I want there to be more of them. And on my conscience.

At the top of the staircase there’s a narrow corridor and partitioned offices, also lit by the emergency lights. I follow the sound of keyclicks to Voss’s office, the door of which is ajar. Potted cheese plants wilting in the artificial light, puke-brown antistatic carpet, ministry-issue desks – nobody can accuse Q Division’s brass of living high on the hog. Andy’s sitting in front

of Voss's laptop, tapping away with a strange expression on his face. "OCCULUS is in place," I report. "Found anything interesting?"

Andy points at the screen. "We're in the wrong fucking town," he says mildly.

I circle the desk and lean over his shoulder. "Oh shit."

"You can say that again if you like." It's an email Cc'd to Voss, sent over our intranet to a Mike McLuhan. Subject: meeting. Sender: Harriet.

"Oh shit. Twice over. Something stinks. Hey, I was supposed to be in a meeting with her today," I say.

"A meeting?" Andy looks up, worried.

"Yeah. Bridget got a hair up her ass about running a BSA-authorized software audit on the office, the usual sort of make-work. Don't know that it's got anything to do with this, though."

"A *software* audit? Didn't she know Licencing and Compliance handles that on a blanket department-wide basis? We were updated on it about a year ago."

"We were – " I sit down heavily on the cheap plastic visitor's chair " – what are the chances this McLuhan guy put the idea into Harriet's mind in the first place? What are the chances it *isn't* connected?"

"McLuhan. The medium is the message. SCORPION STARE. Why do I have a bad feeling about this?" Andy sends me a worried look.

"'Nother possibility, boss-man. What if it's an internal power play? The software audit's a cover, Purloined Letter style, hiding something fishy in plain sight where nobody will look at it twice until it's too late."

"Nonsense, Bridget's not clever enough to blow a project wide open just to discredit – " His eyes go wide.

“Are you sure of that? I mean, *really* and *truly* sure? Bet-your-life sure?”

“But the body count!” He’s shaking his head in disbelief.

“So it was all a prank and it was meant to begin and end with Daisy, but it got a bit out of control, didn’t it? These things happen. You told me the town police camera network’s capable of end-to-end tracking and zone hand-off, didn’t you? My guess is someone in this office – Voss, maybe – followed me to the car pound and realised we’d found the vehicle McLuhan used to boost Daisy. Stupid wankers, if they’d used one of their own motors we’d not be any the wiser, but they tried to use a stolen one as a cutout. So they panicked and dumped SCORPION STARE into the pound, and it didn’t work, so they panicked some more and McLuhan panicked even more – bet you he’s the go-between, or even the guy behind it. What is he, senior esoteric officer? Deputy site manager? He’s in London so he planted the crazy blackmail threat then brought down the hammer on his own coworkers. Bet you he’s a smart sociopath, the kind that does well in midlevel management, all fur coat and no knickers – and willing to shed blood without a second thought if it’s to defend his position.”

“Damn,” Andy says mildly as he stands up. “Okay, so. Internal politics, stupid bloody prank organised to show up Angleton, they use idiots to run it so your cop finds the trail, then the lunatic in chief cuts loose and starts killing people. Is that your story?”

“Yup.” I nod like my neck’s a spring. “And right now they’re back at the Laundry doing who the fuck knows what – ”

“We’ve got to get McLuhan nailed down fast, before he decides the best way to cover his tracks is to take out head office. And us.” He smiles reassuringly. “It’ll be okay, Angleton’s on his way in. You haven’t seen him in action before, have you?”

* * *

Picture a light industrial/office estate in the middle of anytown with four cherry-red fire pumps

drawn up, men in HAZMAT gear combing the brush, a couple of police cars with flashing light bars drawn up across the road leading into the cul-de-sac to deter casual rubbernecks. Troops disguised as firemen are systematically shooting out every one of the security cameras on the estate with their silenced carbines. Others, wearing police or fire service uniforms, are taking up stations in front of every building – occupied or otherwise – to keep the people inside out of trouble.

Just another day at the office, folks, nothing to see here, walk on by.

Well, maybe not. Here comes a honking great helicopter – the Twin Squirrel from the Met’s ASU that I was in the other night, only it looks a lot bigger and scarier when seen from a couple hundred feet in full daylight as it settles in on the car park, leaves and debris blowing out from under the thundering rotors.

The chopper is still rocking on its skids when one of the back doors opens and Angleton jumps down, stumbling slightly – he’s no spring chicken – then collects himself and strides toward us, clutching a briefcase. “Speak,” he tells me, voice barely raised to cover the rush of slowing rotors.

“Problem, boss.” I point to the building: “Andy’s still inside confirming the worst but it looks like it started as a fucking stupid interdepartmental prank; it went bad, and now one of the perps has wiggled out and gone postal.”

“A prank.” He turns those icy blue peepers on me and just for a fraction of a second I’m not being stared at by a sixty-something skinny bald guy in a badly fitting suit but by a walking skeleton with the radioactive fires of hell burning balefully in its eye sockets. “You’d better take me to see Andrew. Fill me in on the way.”

I’m stumbling over my tongue and hurrying to keep up with Angleton when we make it to the front desk, where Andy’s busy giving the OCCULUS folks cleanup directions and tips for

what to do with the broken lamia and the summoning altars in the basement. “Who’s – oh, it’s you. About time.” He grins. “Who’s holding the fort?”

“I left Boris in charge,” Angleton says mildly, not taking exception at Andy’s brusque manner. “How bad is it?”

“Bad.” Andy’s cheek twitches, which is a bad sign: all his confidence seems to have fled now that Angleton’s arrived. “We need to – damn.”

“Take your time,” Angleton soothes him. “I’m not going to eat you.” Which is when I realise just how scared *I* am, and if I’m half out of my tree what does that say about Andy? I’ll give Angleton this much, he knows when not to push his subordinates too hard. Andy takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, then tries again.

“We’ve got two loose ends: Mark McLuhan, and a John Doe. McLuhan worked here as senior occult officer, basically an oversight role. He also did a bunch of other stuff for Q Division that took him down to Dansey House in a liaison capacity. I can’t *believe* how badly we’ve slipped up on our vetting process – ”

“Take your time,” Angleton interrupts, this time with a slight edge to his voice.

“Sorry, sorry. Bob’s been putting it together.” A nod in my direction. “McLuhan is working with a John Doe inside the Laundry to make us look bad via a selective disclosure leak – basically one that was intended to be written off as bad-ass forteana, nothing for anyone but the black helicopter crowd to pay any attention to, except that it would set you up to look bad. I’ve found some not very good email from Bridget inviting McLuhan down to headquarters, some pretext to do with a software audit. Really fucking stupid stuff that Bob can do the legwork on later. But what I *really* think is happening is, Bridget arranged this to make you look bad in support of a power play in front of the director’s office.”

Angleton turns to me: “Phone head office. Ask for Boris. Tell him to arrest McLuhan.

Tell him, SHRINKWRAP. And MARMOSET.” I raise an eyebrow. “Now, lad!”

Ah, the warm fuzzies of decisive action. I head for the lamia’s desk and pick up the phone and dial 666; behind me Andy is telling Angleton something in a low voice.

“Switchboard?” I ask the sheet of white noise. “I want Boris. *Now.*” The Enochian metagrammar parsers do their thing and the damned souls or enchained demons or whatever on switchboard hiss louder then connect the circuit. I hear another ring tone. Then a familiar voice.

“Hello, Capital Laundry Services, system support department. Who are you wanting to talk to?”

Oh shit. “Hello, Harriet,” I say, struggling to sound calm and collected. Getting Bridget’s imp at this juncture is not a good sign, especially when she and Boris are renowned for their mutual loathing. “This is a red phone call. Is Boris about?”

“Oh-ho, Robert! I was wondering where you were. Are you trying to pull a sickie again?”

“No, I’m not,” I say, taking a deep breath. “I need to talk to Boris urgently, Harriet, is he around?”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly say. That would be disclosing information prejudicial to the good running of the department over a public network connection, and I couldn’t possibly encourage you to do that when you can bloody well show your face in the office for the meeting we scheduled the day before yesterday, remember that?”

I feel as if my guts have turned to ice. “Which meeting?” I ask.

“The software audit, remember? You never read the agenda for meetings. If you did, you might have taken an interest in the *any other business* . . . Where *are* you calling from, Bob? Anyone would think you didn’t work here . . . ”

“I want to talk to Boris. Right now.” The graunching noise in the background is my jaw

clenching. “It’s urgent, Harriet. To do with the code blue the other day. Now you can get him right now or you can regret it later, which is your choice?”

“Oh, I don’t think that’ll be necessary,” she says in what I can only describe as a gloating tone of voice. “After missing the meeting, you and your precious Counter-Possession Unit will be divisional history, and you’ll have only yourselves to blame! Goodbye.” And the bitch hangs up on me.

I look round and see both Andy and Angleton staring at me. “She hung up,” I say stupidly. “Fucking Harriet has a diversion on Boris’s line. It’s a setup. Something about making an end run around the CPU.”

“Then we shall have to attend this meeting in person,” Angleton says, briskly marching toward the front doors, which bend aside to get out of his way. “Follow me!”

We proceed directly to the helicopter, which has kept its engines idling while we’ve been inside. It’s only taken, what? Three or four minutes since Angleton arrived? I see another figure heading toward us across the car park – a figure in a grey trouser suit, slightly stained, a wild look in her eyes. “Hey, you!” she shouts. “I want some answers!”

Angleton turns to me. “Yours?” I nod. He beckons to her imperiously. “Come with us,” he calls, raising his voice over the whine of gathering turbines. Past her shoulder I see one of the fake firemen lowering a kit-bag that had been, purely coincidentally, pointed at DI Sullivan’s back. “This bit I always dislike,” he adds in a low monotone, his face set in a grim expression of disapproval. “The fewer lives we warp, the better.”

I half-consider asking him to explain what he means, but he’s already climbing into the rear compartment of the chopper and Andy is following him. I give Josephine a hand up as the blades overhead begin to turn and the engines rise in a full-throated bellowing duet. I get my headset on in time to hear Angleton’s orders: “Back to London, and don’t spare the horses.”

The Laundry is infamous for its grotesque excesses in the name of accounting; budgetary infractions are punished like war crimes, and mere paper clips can bring down the wrath of dead alien gods on your head. But when Angleton says *don't spare the horses* he sends us screaming across the countryside at a hundred and forty miles per hour, burning aviation fuel by the ton and getting ATC to clear lower priority traffic out of our way – and all because he doesn't want to be late for a meeting. There's a police car waiting for us at the pad, and we cut through the chaotic London traffic incredibly fast, almost making it into third gear at times.

“McLuhan's got SCORPION STARE,” I tell Angleton round the curve of Andy's shoulder. “And headquarters's security cams are all wired. If he primes them before we get back there, we could find a lockout – or worse. It all depends on what Harriet and her boss have been planning.”

“We will just have to see.” Angleton nods very slightly, his facial expression rigid. “Do you still have your lucky charm?”

“Had to use it.” I'd shrug, if there was more room. “What do you think Bridget's up to?”

“I couldn't possibly comment.” I'd take Angleton's dismissal as a put-down, but he points his chin at the man in the driver's seat. “When we get there, Bob, I want you to go in through the warehouse door and wake the caretaker. You have your mobile telephone?”

“Uh, yeah,” I say, hoping like hell that the battery hasn't run down.

“Good. Andrew. You and I will enter through the front door. Bob, set your telephone to vibrate. When you receive a message from me, you will know it is time to have the janitor switch off the main electrical power. *And* the backup power.”

“Oops.” I lick my suddenly dry lips, thinking of all the electrical containment pentacles in the basement and all the computers plugged into the filtered and secured circuit on the other floors. “All hell's going to break loose if I do that.”

“That’s what I’m counting on.” The bastard *smiles*, and despite all the horrible sights I’ve seen today so far, I hope most of all that I never see it again before the day I die.

“Hey, what about me?” Angleton glances at the front seat with a momentary flash of irritation. Josephine stares right back, clearly angry and struggling to control it. “I’m your liaison officer for North Buckinghamshire,” she says, “and I’d really *like* to know who I’m liaising with, especially as you seem to have left a few *bodies* on my manor that I’m going to have to bury, and this jerk –” she means me, I am distraught! Oh, the ignominy! “– promised me you’d have the answers.”

Angleton composes himself. “There are no answers, madam, only further questions,” he says, and just for a second he sounds like a pious wanker of a vicar going through the motions of comforting the bereaved. “And if you want the answers you’ll have to go through the jerk’s filing cabinet.” *Bastard*. Then there’s a flashing sardonic grin, dry as the desert sands in June: “Do you want to help prevent any, ah, recurrence of what you saw an hour ago? If so, you may accompany the jerk and attempt to keep him from dying.” He reaches out a hand and drops a ragged slip of paper over her shoulder. “You’ll need this.”

Provisional warrant card, my oh my. Josephine mutters something unkind about his ancestry, barnyard animals, and lengths of rubber hose. I pretend not to hear because we’re about three minutes out, stuck behind a slow-moving but gregarious herd of red double-decker buses, and I’m trying to remember the way to the janitor’s office in the Laundry main unit basement and whether there’s anything I’m likely to trip over in the dark.

* * *

“Excuse me for asking, but how many corpses do you usually run into in the course of your job?” I ask.

“Too many, since you showed up.” We turn the street corner into a brick-walled alley

crowded by wheelie bins and smelling of vagrant piss. “But since you ask, I’m a detective inspector. You get to see lots of vile stuff on the beat.”

Something in her expression tells me I’m on dangerous ground here, but I persist: “Well, this is the Laundry. It’s our job to deal with seven shades of vile shit so that people like you don’t have to.” I take a deep breath. “And before we go in I figured I should warn you that you’re going to think Fred and Rosemary West work for us, and Harold Shipman’s the medical officer.” At this point she goes slightly pale – the Demon DIYers and Doctor Death are the acme of British serial killerdome after all – but she doesn’t flinch.

“And you’re the *good* guys?”

“Sometimes I have my doubts,” I sigh.

“Well, join the club.” I have a feeling she’s going to make it, if she lives through the next hour.

“Enough bullshit. *This* is the street level entrance to the facilities block under Headquarters Building One. You saw what those fuckers did with the cameras at the car pound and Site Able. If my guess is straight, they’re going to do it all over again *here* – or worse. From here there’s a secure line to several of the Met’s offices, including various borough-level control systems, such as the Camden Town control centre. SCORPION STARE isn’t ready for nationwide deployment – ”

“What the *hell* would justify that?” she demands, eyes wide.

“You do not have clearance for that information.” Amazing how easily the phrase trips off the tongue. “Besides, it’d give you nightmares. But you’re the one who mentioned hell, and as I was saying –” I stop, with an overflowing dumpster between us and the anonymous doorway “ – our pet lunatic, who killed all those folks at Dillinger Associates and who is now in a committee meeting upstairs, could conceivably upload bits of SCORPION STARE to the various

camera control centres. Which is why we are going to stop him, by bringing down the intranet backbone cable in and out of the Laundry's headquarters. Which would be easy if this was a bog-standard government office, but a little harder in reality because the Laundry has guards, and some of those guards are very special, and some of those very special guards will try to stop us by eating us alive."

"Eating. Us." Josephine is looking a little glassy. "Did I tell you that I don't do headhunters? That's Recruitment's job."

"Look," I say gently, "have you ever seen *Night of the Living Dead*? It's really not all that different – except that I've got permission to be here, and you've got a temporary warrant card too, so we should be all right." A thought strikes me. "You're a cop. Have you been through firearms training?"

Click-clack. "Yes," she says drily. "Next question?"

"Great! If you'd just take that away from my nose – that's better – it won't work on the guards. Sorry, but they're already, uh, metabolically challenged. However, it *will* work very nicely on the CCTV cameras. Which – "

"Okay, I get the picture. We go in. We stay out of the frame unless we want to die." She makes the pistol vanish inside her jacket and looks at me askance – for the first time since the car pound with something other than irritation or dislike. Probably wondering why I didn't flinch. (Obvious, really: compared with what's waiting for us inside a little intracranial air conditioning is a relatively painless way to go, and besides, if she was seriously pissed at me she could have gotten me alone in a nice soundproofed cell back in her manor with a pair of size twelve boots and their occupants.) "We're going to go in there and you're going to talk our way past the zombies while I shoot out all the cameras, right?"

"Right. And then I'm going to try to figure out how to take down the primary

switchgear, the backup substation, the diesel generator, *and* the batteries for the telephone switch and the protected computer ring main *all* at the same time so nobody twigs until it's too late.

While fending off anyone who tries to stop us. Clear?"

"As mud." She stares at me. "I always wanted to be on TV, but not quite this way."

"Yeah, well." I glance up the side of the building, which is windowless as far as the third floor (and then the windows front onto empty rooms three feet deep, just to give the appearance of occupation). "I'd rather call in an air strike on the power station but there's a hospital two blocks that way and an old folks' home on the other side . . . you ready?"

She nods. "Okay." And I take a step round the wheelie bin and knock on the door.

The door is a featureless blue slab of paint. As soon as I touch it, it swings open – no creaking here, did you think this was a Hammer horror flick? – to reveal a small, dusty room with a dry powder fire extinguisher bolted to one wall and another door opposite. "Wait," I say, and take the spray paint can out of my pocket. "Okay, come on in. Keep your warrant note handy."

She jumps when the door closes automatically with a faint hiss, and I remember to swallow – it only looks like a cheap fire door from the outside. "Okay, here's the fun part." I give the inner door a quick scan with a utility on my palmtop and it comes up blank, so I put my hand on the grab-bar and pull. This is the moment of truth; if the shit has truly hit the fan already the entire building will be locked down tighter than a nuclear bunker, and the thaumaturgic equivalent of a three-phase six-hundred-volt bearer will be running through all the barred portals. But I get to keep on breathing, and the door swings open on a dark corridor leading past shut storeroom doors to a dingy wooden staircase. And that's all it is – there's nothing in here to confuse an accidental burglar who makes it in past the wards in hope of finding some office supplies to filch. All the really classified stuff is either ten storeys underground or on the other

side of the cellar walls. Twitching in the darkness.

“I don’t see any zombies,” Josephine says edgily, crowding up behind me in the gloom.

“That’s because they’re – ” I freeze and bring up the dry powder extinguisher. “Have you got a pocket mirror?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

“Hold on.” I hear a dry click, and then she passes me something like a toothbrush fucking a contact lens. “Will this do?”

“Oh wow, I didn’t know you were a dentist.” It’s on a goddamn telescoping wand almost half a metre long. I lean forward and gingerly stretch the angled mirror so I can view the stairwell.

“It’s for checking the undersides of cars for bombs – or cut brake pipes. You never know what the little fuckers in the school playground will do while you’re talking to the headmistress.”

Gulp. “Well, I guess this is a suitable alternative use.”

I don’t see any cameras up there so I retract the mirror and I’m about to set foot on the stairs when she says, “You missed one.”

“Huh . . . ?”

She points. It’s about waist level, the size of a doorknob, embedded in the dark wooden wainscoting, and it’s pointing *up* the stairs. “Shit, you’re right.” And there’s something odd about it. I slide the mirror closer for an oblique look and dry-swallow. “There are two lenses. Oh, tricky.”

I pull out my multitool and begin digging them out of the wall. It’s coax cable, just like the doctor ordered. There’s no obvious evidence of live SCORPION STARE, but my hands are still clammy and my heart is in my mouth as I realise how close I came to walking in front of it. How small can they make CCTV cameras, anyway? I keep seeing smaller and smaller ones . . .

“Better move fast,” she comments.

“Why?”

“Because you’ve just told them you’re coming.”

“Oh. Okay.” We climb the staircase in bursts, stopping before the next landing to check for more basilisk bugs. Josephine spots one, and so do I – I tag them with the mostly empty can of paint, then she blasts their lenses from behind and underneath, trying not to breathe the fumes in before we move past them. There’s an unnaturally creaky floorboard, too, just for yucks. But we make it to the ground floor landing alive, and I just have time to realise how badly we’ve fucked up when the lights come up and the night watchmen come out from either side.

“Ah, Bob! Decided to visit the office for once, have we?”

It’s Harriet, looking slightly demented in a black pin-striped suit and clutching a glass of what looks like fizzy white wine.

“Where the fuck is everyone else?” I demand, looking round. At this time of day the place should be heaving with office bodies. But all I see here is Harriet – and three or four silently leaning night watchmen in their grey ministry suits and hangdog expressions, luminous worms of light glowing in their eyes.

“I do believe we called the monthly fire drill a few hours ahead of schedule.” Harriet smirks. “Then we locked the doors. It’s quite simple, you know.”

Fred from Accounting lurches sideways and peers at me over her shoulder. He’s been dead for months: normally I’d say this was something of an improvement, but right now he’s drooling slightly as if it’s past his teatime.

“Who’s *that*?” asks Josephine.

“Who? Oh, one of them’s a shambling undead bureaucrat and the other one used to work in accounts before he had a little accident with a summoning.” I bare my teeth at Harriet. “The game’s up.”

“I don’t think so.” She’s just standing there, looking supercilious and slightly triumphant behind her bodyguard of zombies. “Actually the boot is on the other foot. You’re late and you’re out of a job, Robert. The Counter-Possession Unit is being liquidated – that old fossil Angleton isn’t needed anymore, once we get the benefits of panopticon surveillance combined with look-to-kill technology and rolled out on a departmental basis. In fact, you’re just in time to clear your desk.” She grins, horribly. “Stupid little boy, I’m sure they can find a use for you below stairs.”

“You’ve been talking to our friend Mr McLuhan, haven’t you?” I ask desperately, trying to keep her talking – I *really* don’t want the night watchmen to carry me away. “Is he upstairs?”

“If so, you probably need to know that I intend to arrest him. Twelve counts of murder and attempted murder, in case you were wondering.” I almost look round, but manage to resist the urge: Josephine’s voice is brittle but controlled. “Police.”

“Wrong jurisdiction, dear,” Harriet says consolingly. “And I do believe our idiot tearaway here has got you on the wrong message. That will never do.” She snaps her fingers. “Take the woman, detain the man.”

“Stop – ” I begin. The zombies step forward, lurching jerkily, and then all hell breaks loose about twenty centimetres from my right ear. Zombies make excellent night watchmen and it takes a lot to knock one down, but they’re not bulletproof, and Josephine unloads her magazine two rounds at a time. I’m dazzled by the flash and my head feels as if someone is whacking me on the ear with a shovel – bits of meat and unspeakable ripped stuff go flying, but precious little blood, and they keep coming.

“When you’ve *quite* finished,” Harriet hisses, and snaps her fingers at Josephine: the zombies pause for a moment then close in, as their mistress backs toward the staircase up to the first floor.

“Quick, down the back corridor there!” I gasp, pointing to my left.

“The – what?”

“Quick!”

I dash along the corridor, tugging Josephine’s arm until I feel her running with me. I pull my warrant card and yell, “*Open sesame!*” ahead and doors slam open to either side – including the broom closets and ductwork access points. “In here!” I dive in to one side and Josephine piles in after me and I yank at the door – “*Close, damn you, fuck, close sesame!*” and it slams shut with the hardscrabble of bony fingertips on the outside.

“Got a light?” I ask.

“Naah, I don’t smoke. But I’ve got a torch somewhere – ”

The scrabbling’s getting louder. “I don’t want to hurry you or anything, but – ” And lo, there is light.

We’re standing at the bottom of a shallow shaft with cable runs vanishing above us into the gloom. Josephine looks frantic. “They didn’t drop! I shot them and they *didn’t drop!*”

“Don’t sweat it, they’re run by remote control.” Maybe now is not the time to explain about six-node summoning points, the Vohlman exercise, and the minutiae of raising and binding the dead: they’re knocking on the door and they want in. But look, here’s something even *more* interesting. “Hey, I see CAT–5 cabling. Pass me your torch?”

“This isn’t the time to go all geeky on me, nerd-boy. Or are you looking for roaches?”

“Just fucking do it, I’ll explain later, okay?” Harriet is really getting to me; it’s been a long day and I told myself ages ago that if I ever heard another fucking lecture about timekeeping from her I’d go postal.

“Bingo.” It *is* CAT–5, and there’s an even more interesting cable running off to one side that looks like a DS–3. I whip out my multitool and begin working on the junction box. The

scrabbling's become insistent by the time I've uncovered the wires, but what the fuck. Who was it who said, *When they think you're technical is the time to go crude?* I grab a handful of network cables and yank, hard. Then I grab another handful. Then, having disconnected the main trunk line – *mission accomplished* – I take another moment to think.

“Bob, have you got a plan?”

“I'm thinking.”

“Then think faster, they're about to come through the door – ”

Which is when I remember my mobile phone and decide to make a last-ditch attempt. I speed-dial Bridget's office extension – and Angleton picks up after two rings. Bastard.

“Ah, Bob!” He sounds positively avuncular. “Where are you? Did you manage to shut down the Internet?”

I don't have time to correct him. Besides, Josephine is reloading her cannon and I think she's going to try a *really* horrible pun if I don't produce a solution PDQ. “Boss, run McLuhan's SCORPION STARE tool and upload the firmware to all the motion-tracking cameras on the ground floor east wing loop *right now*.”

“What? I'm not sure I heard you correctly.”

I take a deep breath. “She's subverted the night watchmen. Everybody else is out of the building. Do it *now* or I'm switching to a diet of fresh brains.”

“If you say so,” he agrees, with the manner of an indulgent uncle talking to a tearaway schoolboy, then hangs up.

There's a splintering crash and a hand rams through the door right between us and embeds itself in the wall opposite. “Oh shit,” I have time to say as the hand withdraws. Then a bolt of lightning goes off about two feet outside the door, roughly simultaneous with a sizzling crash and a wave of heat. We cower in the back of the cupboard, terrified of fire until after what

seems like an eternity the sprinklers come on.

“Is it safe yet?” she asks – at least I think that’s what she says, my ears are still ringing.

“One way to find out.” I take the broken casing from the network junction box and chuck it through the hole in the door. When it doesn’t explode I gingerly push the door open. The ringing is louder; it’s my phone. I pull it wearily out of my pocket and hunch over it to keep it dry, leaning against the wall of the corridor to stay as far away from the blackened zombie corpses as I can. “Who’s there?”

“Your manager.” He sounds merely amused this time. “What a sorry shower you are! Come on up to Mahogany Row and dry off, both of you – the director has a personal bathroom, I think you’ve earned it.”

“Uh. Harriet? Bridget? McLuhan?”

“Taken care of,” he says complacently, and I shiver convulsively as the water reaches gelid tentacles down my spine and tickles my balls like a drowned lover.

“Okay. We’ll be right up.” I glance back at the smashed-in utility cupboard and Josephine smiles at me like a frightened feral rat, all sharp teeth and savagery and shining .38 automatic. “We’re safe now,” I say, as reassuringly as possible. “I think we won . . .”

* * *

The journey to Angleton’s lair is both up and along – he normally works out of a gloomy basement on the other side of the hollowed-out block of prime London real estate that is occupied by the Laundry, but this time he’s ensconced in the director’s suite on the abandoned top floor of the north wing.

The north wing is still dry. Over there, people are still at work, oblivious to the charred zombies lying on the scorched, soaked, thaumaturgically saturated wing next door. We catch a few odd stares – myself, soaked and battered in my outdoors gear, DI Sullivan in the wreckage

of an expensive grey suit, oversized handgun clenched in a death grip at her side – but wisely or otherwise, nobody asks me to fix the Internet or demands to know why we’re tracking muddy water through Human Resources.

By the time we reach the thick green carpet and dusty quietude of the director’s suite Josephine’s eyes are wide but she’s stopped shaking. “You’ve got lots of questions,” I manage to say. “Try to save them for later. I’ll tell you everything I know and you’re cleared for, once I’ve had time to phone my fiancée.”

“I’ve got a husband and a nine year old son, did you think of that before you dragged me into this insane nightmare? Sorry. I know you didn’t *mean* to. It’s just that shooting up zombies and being zapped by basilisks makes me a little upset. Nerves.”

“I know. Just try not to wave them in front of Angleton, okay?”

“Who *is* Angleton, anyway? Who does he think he is?”

I pause before the office door. “If I knew that, I’m not sure I’d be allowed to tell you.” I knock three times.

“Enter.” Andy opens the door for us. Angleton is sitting in the director’s chair, playing with something in the middle of the huge expanse of oak desk that looks as if it dates to the 1930s. (There’s a map on the wall behind him, and a quarter of it is pink.) “Ah, Mister Howard, Detective Inspector. So good of you to come.”

I peer closer. *Clack. Clack. Clack.* “A Newton’s cradle; how 1970s.”

“You could say that.” He smiles thinly. The balls bouncing back and forth between the arms of the executive desktop aren’t chromed, rather they appear to be textured: pale brown on one side, dark or blonde and furry on the other. And bumpy, disturbingly bumpy . . .

I take a deep breath. “Harriet was waiting for us. Said we were too late and the Counter-Possession Unit was being disbanded.”

Clack. Clack.

“Yes, she would say that, wouldn’t she.”

Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. Finally I can’t stand it anymore. “Well?” I demand.

“A fellow I used to know, his name was Ulyanov, once said something rather profound, do you know.” Angleton looks like the cat that’s swallowed the canary – and the feet are sticking out of the side of his mouth; he *wants* me to know this, whatever it is. “Let your enemies sell you enough rope to hang them with.”

“Uh, wasn’t that Lenin?” I ask.

A flicker of mild irritation crosses his face. “This was before then,” he says quietly.

Clack. Clack. Clack. He flicks the balls to set them banging again and I suddenly realise what they are and feel quite sick. No indeed, Bridget and Harriet – and Bridget’s predecessor, and the mysterious Mr McLuhan – won’t be troubling me again. (Except in my nightmares about this office, visions of my own shrunken head winding up in one of the director’s executive toys, skull clattering away eternally in a scream that nobody can hear anymore . . .) “Bridget’s been plotting a boardroom coup for a long time, Robert. Probably since before you joined the Laundry – or were conscripted.” He spares Josephine a long, appraising look. “She suborned Harriet, bribed McLuhan, installed her own corrupt gears on Voss. Partners in crime, intending to expose me as an incompetent and a possible security leak before the Board of Auditors, I suppose – that’s usually how they plan it. I guessed this was going on, but I needed firm evidence. You supplied it. Unfortunately, Bridget was never too stable; when she realised that I knew, she ordered Voss to remove the witnesses then summoned McLuhan and proceeded with her palace coup d’état. Equally unfortunately for her, she failed to correctly establish who my line manager was before she attempted to go over my head to have me removed.” He taps the sign on the front of the desk: PRIVATE SECRETARY. Keeper of the secrets. Whose secrets?

“Matrix management,” I finally say, the lightbulb coming on above my head at last. “The Laundry runs on matrix management. She saw you on the org chart as head of the Counter-Possession Unit, not as private secretary to . . .” *So that’s how come he’s got the free run of the director’s office!*

Josephine is aghast. “You call this a government department?”

“Worse things happen in parliament every day of the year, my dear.” Now that the proximate threat is over, Angleton looks remarkably imperturbable; right now I doubt he’d turn her into a frog even if she started yelling at him. “Besides, you are aware of the maxim that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely? Here we deal every day of the week with power sufficient to destroy your mind. Even worse, we *cannot* submit to public oversight – it’s far too dangerous, like giving atomic firecrackers to three-year-olds. Ask Robert to tell you what he did to attract our attention later, if you like.” I’m still dripping and cold, but I can feel my ears flush.

He focusses on her some more. “We can reinforce the geas and release you,” he adds quietly. “But I think you can do a much more important job here. The choice is yours.”

I snort under my breath. She glances at me, eyes narrowed and cynical. “If this is what passes for a field investigation in your department, you *need* me.”

“Yes, well, you don’t need to make your mind up immediately. Detached duty, and all that. As for you, Bob,” he says, with heavy emphasis on my name, “you have acquitted yourself satisfactorily again. Now go and have a bath before you rot the carpet.”

“Bathroom’s two doors down the hall on the left,” Andy adds helpfully from his station against the wall, next to the door: there’s no doubt right now as to who’s in charge here.

“But what happens now?” I ask, bewildered and a bit shocky and already fighting off the yawns that come on when people stop trying to kill me. “I mean, what’s really *happened?*”

Angleton grins like a skull: “Bridget forfeited her department, so the directors have asked me to put Andrew in acting charge of it for the time being. Boris slipped up and failed to notice McLuhan; he is, ah, temporarily indisposed. And as for you, a job well done wins its natural reward – another job.” His grin widens. “As I believe the youth of today say, don’t have a cow . . .”