

WEIRD DREAMS



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RAINBOW

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Chapter One

Day broke over Plymouth, bringing a slow grey sky, damp morose streets and damp morose milkmen, finished off by a minor surge in the electricity supply as quarter of a million clock radios turned on to the early morning show.

Waking up is hard to do, thought Steve. Radio playing, birds singing, Monday morning. He sighed, turned over, and without opening his eyes hit the radio right on the snooze button. That'd teach it. Another five minutes wouldn't hurt...

But radios are made of sterner stuff. Five minutes later, unbowed by such early morning violence, it resumed its unspeakable pop. Which turned, in time, into unpalatable news. Yawn... He really should get up now, or he'd have to run for the bus again. Strange - his usual warm sleepiness was mixed with something else...

Two records after the news. He really had to get up now. Least disgusting pair of boxer shorts, that shirt would do for today, and into the bathroom to shave his teeth... breakfast, paper and irresponsible TV weathermen later, Steve had diagnosed his problem.

He was feeling a bit peaky, as his mum would've said had she not been living in North Dakota. Nothing worse than that. Still, Steve mused, perhaps he was coming down with flu. Perhaps he ought to get something for it. To really get Monday going, among the junk mail was a note from his dentist reminding him of his six-monthly checkup. Which was, he noticed, tomorrow. Super.

He ran for the bus, went upstairs and he read the paper, then trudged the ten minute walk from stop to work. Wet pavements and grey skies - it wasn't actually raining, but that was only a matter of time - did nothing to remove his malaise. In the office, he mentioned his lack of well-being to Emily, a bright girl in the postroom he'd got his eye on. He had often wondered whether he should ask her out but, just as often, decided not to. Never know, keep the friendship going and who knows what might happen? He'd never noticed, which was a bit insensitive on his part, that Emily was bored with life. More importantly, and this really wasn't his fault, he'd never noticed that she was a bored daemon. One of those mythical creatures who spend their eternal lives pushing misery, evil and discord.

Emily hadn't started out as a daemon, few people do; her body had been possessed by the spirit Zelloripus as she waited out her punishment. Three thousand years ago, Zelloripus had been banished from the Central Circle of the court of Askarioum in Chael for a crime against fellow daemons. A crime so despicable that, had it worked, she would have challenged the Great One herself.

Given human form and stripped of many of her daemoniac powers, she was sent to live the life of a mortal being on one of the less pleasant planets, Earth. As each host body died, she hopped into a new one, taking over the mind and feeding on the soul. Three thousand years into her sentence, with three thousand more to go, she was not happy. Sixty centuries in Plymouth is enough to embitter anyone. Even one whose residual evilness could, if focussed, melt a toddler's

ice cream from a distance of ten miles.

Today there were many puddles of Giuseppe's Famous Italian Ice Cream on the pavements of Plymouth. For today was special. Exactly half-way through Zelloripus' exile, she was feeling mean and ornery and disposed to high mischief. She despised the humans whose form she took; they by and large achieved oblivion in just seventy short years. She especially despised Steve, whose somnolent form sonorously snoring through lunchbreaks was a continual reminder of a contented peace of mind denied her.

Daemons don't sleep; chances are that Another lurks nearby with designs on their soulstuff. A diabolic doze is the best they can normally manage; even this is denied those cast out of Hades because of the forces of Good that are on constant watch. Even, it has to be said, in Plymouth, where three thousand years of sleepless nights and boring days were driving Zelloripus close to breaking point. So far, she'd stuck to the rules, because using what remained of her powers to tamper with mortal affairs could double or treble her stay on Earth. But only if she was detected; the temptation to lash out at something or someone was growing. Her current job, with Plymouth's third most successful producer of soap, was not helping things.

So mere bad timing could explain Steve's unhappy encounter with Zelloripus, or Emily as she should be called, on this day in particular. Maybe it was just bad luck that accounted for the copious yawns, heavy eyelids and sleep-slurred voice with which he laced the conversation over her franking machine. But the following conversation was almost too bad to be true...

"Hiya Emily," said Steve. "You're looking wide eyed for a Monday morning. Wish I could be so awake, but I've been in bed most of the weekend."

"Poor soul," said Emily, "What's the matter?"

"Oh, I dunno. Think it's a touch of the flu; all I can do is sleep. It was a real effort to get up today. You don't know of anything that could perk me up a bit, do you?"

Emily, bitter from boredom, was close to the edge. "No," she said "I don't usually get that sort of problem. With sleeping, I mean."

It was probably his attempt at humour, or maybe it was a particularly clumsy chat-up line, that did it. "Perhaps you should sleep with me - it would maybe rub off a little. There's nothing like a good night's kip to make your fellow man seem a bit nicer..."

"I'm sure" said Emily with a smile so sharp it was opening the letters, "that you're right there. Tell me, Steve, do you dream?"

"Dream? No, can't say that I do. Not that I remember, that is. But if I did, it would be of you."

"How sweet. Perhaps I can help you, at least" and here the smile was diamond-tipped "with the flu. I think I might just have something in my handbag. Hold on, let me go and get it."

Steve was pleased. It might be worth asking her out after all, let's see, there's the funfair out of town... no, she's too bright for that... Outside, the weak sunlight darkened for a moment, as if a cloud had passed.

She came back. "Here we are, something I got from a drug store last time I had the flu." It was a small brown bottle, with an indistinct label and, just visible in the powdery interior, three white pills. "You're supposed to have them before a meal, just take the lot tonight with a bottle of red wine and some cheese and you'll be a new man."

"Thanks very much, Emily" said Steve, taking the bottle from her hand. "I'll do that. Look, what are you doing this weekend? Do you fancy a trip to see the new Stallone film or something?" "I'm not sure" lied the being with three thousand years' worth of identical Plymothian weekends stretched out in front of her. "Let's see how you're feeling in a couple of days. Wouldn't want to over-exert you during your convalescence".

"Oh, I'm sure I'll be fine. I don't think I'll change my mind!"

"We'll see" said Emily, allowing just a hint of cold, evil-tinged boredom to slip out.

That evening, Steve wondered about Emily's last words. There was something not quite right, he decided, and came to a similar conclusion about the thrice-microwaved chilli con carne sitting in a bowl in the fridge. Then he remembered that wine and cheese had been recommended, and, although he was feeling fine by now, he thought that taking the lady's medicine followed by a triumphal Tuesday morning could do no harm. He had the cheese, and trotted out to the nearest 7-11 to get a bottle of red wine.

Back at home, he emptied the three pills out of the bottle into his hand. Nothing special, thought he, and with a flourish popped them into his mouth and washed them down with a long draft of Burgundy. The cheese sandwich followed. A quick scan of the TV pages - why is there never anything on a Monday night? - convinced him of the desirability of bed.

It's not generally appreciated that much magic is real, test-tubed and white-coated, science. Merlin's laboratory technique would have brought murmurs of approval from Pasteur, and watching Shiva smite (from a safe distance) might well have enlightened Einstein still further. It's just that while the great unwashed mass of men were more interested in squabbling, sex and smallpox it contented the Immortals to hide their rational prowess behind a web of mystic mishmash.

Sure, there is true magic to be had, but using it brings many repercussions which might not be completely controllable. Many magicians had lost their souls in the long research programme which, although almost half as old as the Universe, was still not producing results. But boy, was it over budget. Some of its more spectacular failures were still puzzling astronomers from a thousand worlds; more than few of whom were unexpected by-products from an experiment or two themselves.

Emily was especially wary of employing the Dark Art. Not only had it landed her in this mess in the first place, but its use could signal loud and clear her position to any number of undesirable companions from the busybodies at Askarioum, or something far more sinister. As it was, materialising the pills had been risky enough. Her excellent knowledge of human biochemistry helped her from there.

As Steve dropped off to sleep, the pills were lying inert in his stomach. Slowly the gastric acid ate away the outer case, and the compounds within began to diffuse out. And what compounds, the like of which had not been seen on Earth before or (it is safe to assume) since. Any chemist worth his NaCl would have given his spatula to have been in on the action.

First, the long chain molecules from the cheese were broken down to several interesting substances. The alcohol from the wine helped carry these and others from the pills themselves to the stomach wall, through which they slipped like Mexicans into Texas. On the other side of the wall, the usual gang of enzymes were waiting to digest the evening meal; but they weren't

ready for what came at them. The scene of chemical carnage was brutal but short.

Past the first stage of digestion, the intruding substances reached the blood stream. Dissolved in the plasma, they drifted up until they got to Steve's brain. The blood brain barrier - that wonderful filter that keeps hunks of pizza molecule out while letting oxygen in - was as effective as a traffic cop against a battalion of Soviet tanks. Emily's dark designs began their invidious work.

Steve's brain was defenceless against the chemical onslaught. The vast, and mostly unused, network of neurones lay in front of them. Even as the last molecules were arriving, the compounds got to work. They diddled the dopamine receptors, they speeded up the cortical synapses, they nobbled the noradrenaline. A thin web of complex bonds spread deep into Steve's cerebellum, like frost over a tree. Further and further they went, until every part of his brain was invaded and controlled. For the moment they did nothing, but somewhere else in the Plymothian night a small chuckle of anticipation bounced off the flock wallpaper. In his sleep, Steve stirred and shivered.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 2 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The next day, Steve woke up, as usual, to the clock radio. Unusually, he found himself listening to it, and, even more strangely, it annoyed him. He turned over in bed and thumped the switch, leaving the bedroom to the birds, noisy Fords and myriad other sounds of morning. He stared at the ceiling. Hangover? No, he'd only had a couple of glasses of wine last night. Anyway, his head didn't hurt and he felt all right, sort of, except... He was wide awake. That was odd, too, as most days he only started to really wake up on the bus into work.

He glanced at the clock radio; he still had a good half-hour until he had to leave, so he tried to doze. As he closed his eyes, the world spun. About fifteen years ago, he'd gone to Scotland with his parents, and once he'd crawled up to the edge of a granite cliff and peered over at the rocks and sea hundreds of feet beneath. He remembered amazement, awe and no little fear, but most of all he remembered the spiralling vertigo. That was what he was feeling now - he gripped the sides of the bed and opened his eyes rapidly, sweating.

The flu? Those pills he took last night? Could be, but he'd never been ill like that before, nor taken anything from a chemist that shook him up so badly. For a moment he was worried, but then the morning took over again, and the sound of a bus pulling up the hill reminded and reassured him that another normal day was waiting. He got out of bed and, standing up, felt fine once more. The coffee and eggs of breakfast tasted really good, but he didn't feel like reading his paper on the bus. For some reason, he wasn't interested in "Rock Star Eats Own Hand, Sells Guitar", which seemed to be the most earthshaking intelligence on offer. Back in the office, he homed in on Emily.

"Hey, Emily" he said "Those pills seemed to have done the trick. No flu, not a sniffle. I'm feeling really awake. They're good stuff - what're they called? I'd like to get some, just for next time, you know?"

She giggled, a short, high-pitched stutter like a pony neighing. "Glad they seem to have worked, Steve. I can't remember their name, though, I've had them for a while. Still, if it comes back to me I'll let you know."

"You've usually got such a good memory, Emily" said Steve ingratiatingly. "Me, mine's like a sieve. Can't even remember things like buying milk or doctor's appointments. Oh no!"

"What's up?" asked Emily, wondering for a moment whether she'd miscalculated something and wondering, just for a moment, what exactly she'd done. Just for a moment, and then she realised. "Forgotten an appointment?"

"Dentist. What's the time? Look, I've got to rush. See you at lunch - if I've got any teeth left" And he dashed into the boss' office to explain his impending absence.

He rushed out of the building. His dentist was about half a mile away, and by walking fast he could make it. Past the bombed church in the roundabout, past the police station, up the hill, past the library, past the reservoir and into Dr V. Sells, known since childhood as Dr Weasel. The receptionist looked through her window - hello Mz Wilkinson, hello Mr Trevathen take a seat he's running a little late - and he dived into the piles of *House and Garden* from 1972.

Back in the office, the morning post had been sorted and distributed, and there was, as usual, half-an-hour's hiatus before the pre-lunch mailbags came in. Jill went out to round up all the

outgoing mail from the seven floors, leaving Emily to herself. She checked her watch, and felt the sea of infinite boredom recede a little. Any minute now, and the first part of her plan would start to work.

Deep within Steve's brain, profound changes were taking place. The tendrils of diabolic chemistry insinuated into his hippocampus, a small lump of grey matter normally concerned with sorting Steve's experience (such as they were) into long-term recall, and started to subtly rewire his memory mechanisms. Large portions of his mind were converted into the biological equivalent of RAM; ready to record experiences and, having recorded them, control his mind as a program controls a computer's processor. Elsewhere similar changes were taking place, but for now things were ready just to record. Just for now.

The triggers to load the program were complex. If Steve was interested, then whatever it was that held his interest would be sorted, stored, activated. If he was frightened, amused, intrigued, it would all be recorded. But for this to work, he had to be capable of taking an interest in the first place. So part of Emily's chemical mishmash sharpened his wits, heightened his awareness, upped his IQ to just short of genius. This, she thought, was a nice move. Not only did it ensure that the data recorded would be powerful and particularly apt, but when the second stage began he would be only too capable of, mmmm, appreciating what was happening to him. He might even fight back, which would round off the whole thing nicely. And, she thought with a daemonic delight, it would serve him right to be given a glimpse of what it's like to have an intelligence confronted with infinite boredom.

Steve was, as the plan demanded, unaware of the mental mayhem crystallising beneath his cranium. But he was getting painfully aware of a lot of other things as he sat in the formica and chipboard waiting room. The posters of rabbits noshing carrots and jaunty poems about plaque ("Clean Clean Clean your teeth! Or else the germs get underneath!") were fading and a couple flapped loose at the corners. They'd been there since he'd started seeing Dr Weasel, and, he mused, the place probably hadn't seen a touch of paint for ten years before that.

The bright orange and grey polypropylene bucket chairs finished off a fine example of early 'sixties public health design. Now why did he think that? He'd been here every six months for years, and usually only worried about whether he'd get a filling or not. Those old magazines - did people really think that the ideal home looked like that? The clothes they wore in the photos looked laughable too, but he could remember when he'd thought they looked good. How strange... perhaps the jacket and jeans he was wearing now would be equally ridiculous in ten years time.

The buzzer chainsawed its way into his daydreams, and the receptionist looked up. "Mr Trevathen?" He stood up, and went into the surgery. Dr Sells was shuffling through some papers at a desk, and the Chair sat in the middle of the room beneath the usual battery of technology.

"Hello Steve", said the dentist. "Sit down please. Now then, any problems since last time? It's good to see you keeping these checkups. Some people just don't bother after they leave home, and when something goes wrong there are all sorts of things to put right. How's your mother, by the way? It was America she moved to, wasn't it?"

As usual, Steve had to wait for three or four questions to go past before he could get a word in. "Yes, she's settled down in North Dakota and she's doing fine. I might go over to see her at Christmas. My teeth are OK, too, but I wouldn't want to miss anything that needs looking at."

"A fine attitude. Now then, lie down and open up."

Steve looked up at the light. "That's new, isn't it? The old one was a different colour."

"That's right, very observant! This one's a new low-voltage design, much more reliable and brighter too. I don't think anyone else has noticed. Open wide."

The nurse hooked in some suction, and went to get Steve's notes.

"Three's OK, two's OK, one's OK, one's OK, two's OK, three's OK, filling on four's a little bitty; we'll sort that out..."

Dr Sells continued chanting his litany as Steve noticed, for the first time it seemed, the antiseptic smell, the faint noise of the machinery behind the dentist, the charts on the wall and the rows of dentures on the shelves. He felt the faint scratching inside his head as the dentist probed away. As Steve had forgotten about the appointment, he hadn't given his teeth the customary vigorous pre-checkup brushing and this was apparently noticeable.

"Hello, we haven't been very thorough with our brushing, have we?" Typical quack, thought Steve, lapsing into patronising parental tones. Doctor knows best. "Well, there's a cavity just starting on one of your premolars, and a slightly messy filling to tidy up. We'll have a poke around and fix them."

Steve had collected a lot of fillings from a chocolate childhood, and had the memories to match. As various instruments of torture were produced and whined, sucked and scrunched their way around his mouth, he remembered the old fears with a vividness that surprised him. He winced as the drill scoured the cavity, and was very relieved at the instruction to rinse and spit. Strange taste, this pink liquid.

"While I was fixing those teeth, Steve, I spotted something that might be serious. I'd better have a look at it."

This was new. He opened his mouth obediently, and became more apprehensive as Dr Sell's usual banter failed to intersperse his dental deliberations. Finally the dentist stood up, and Steve closed his mouth.

"One of your molars is misplaced - I don't know why I didn't catch it before, but there you go. Normally I'd leave it, as it's been there for years without causing any problems, but there are signs that you've got some more teeth coming through underneath."

"Eh? You mean I'm teething?"

"No, not quite. It's not uncommon for some people to have a third set of teeth at some time during their lives, and you might be one of them. In any case, I should really get that molar out otherwise it could be very bad for your jaw. It's not really fair that you should have to have a tooth pulled, since you're one of my better patients, but it's a good thing I caught it. Gas or needle?"

He means it, Steve thought. He hadn't had a tooth out before, and the prospect frightened him. Adrenalin started to seep into his blood stream. His heart speeded up, but in his brain the new mechanisms fired up and channelled the stream of his senses into the almost infinite capacity of the revamped memory.

"Oh, gas I think. Is it dangerous?"

"No, not very." Oh, how reassuring, what soothing Weasel words.

"Is the needle safer?"

"There's nothing to worry about with either method. But the gas hurts less."

"Fine. Will it take long?"

"About half an hour, and you should be OK within the hour. Not driving, are you?"

"I walked here."

"No problems then. You might find things a bit fuzzy for a while, but it wears off."

Steve remembered something Emily had said, and for the first time felt sadness for a thing which had never happened.

"Will I dream?"

"Hard to say. Some people do, but most don't."

The nurse had been tinkering with a mess of tubes and cylinders, and brought it to the side of the Chair. While she prepared a tray of gleaming steel instruments, some of which Steve thought would look more in keeping in his local garage, Dr Sells continued his spiel.

"Now then, I'll want you to breath deeply from the mask while counting to ten. You won't get past about seven, but you won't notice that. Ready, Sandra?"

The nurse passed over a facemask, which the dentist placed over Steve's mouth.

"Righty-ho - start breathing and counting. Sweet dreams!"

Here we go, then. One... suck... two... blow.... three... suck... four... blow... hmmm, this is quite pleasant... where was I... teeth...

In the surgery, the dentist checked Steve's pulse, eyes and respiration. Satisfied that his patient was well under, he gave him a few seconds more and started to prepare for oral excavation.

Back at the office, Jill wanted to know what Emily was finding so funny. Emily merely giggled, and carried on sorting the post. All that day, she'd be in high spirits, surprising those who were used to her normal sarcastic mood. To those who asked why, she'd reply only that 'Life's a gas, isn't it?'

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 3 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Teeth... five... jive... on the third stroke... hey, why aren't I under yet? Better warn the Weasel not to start pulling just yet. Steve opened his eyes.

If this is dreaming, thought Steve, I haven't missed much. The view reminded him of Dartmoor, where he used to spend the school holidays camping and walking. Only this place was flat for miles, with no inviting tors to clamber up or run down. Behind him the plain stretched out as far as he could see, so for want of anything better to do he started to walk towards the mountains. After a few minutes, he looked at his watch. Or he tried to, but on raising his arm all he saw was a bare wrist. He was greatly troubled. It wasn't so much the lack of a watch that bothered him, nor the fact that the rest of his body was, on inspection, entirely bare, but the troublesome actuality that the body in question wasn't the same one he'd grown up in. In fact, it was borderline as to whether it was Homo Sapiens or not, what with the long hair on the legs and the excessive number of flattened toes. The blue colour didn't help either.

For some reason, he calmed down. Out of curiosity, he tried to yell out "Anyone there?" and was intrigued by the guttural explosion that forced its way out of his mouth, past his fangs and into the leaden air. Fangs. Hmmm. That would startle the good Doctor. He realised with some surprise that he must still be in the Chair, with Dr Sells tapping away like a sculptor producing a miniature statue out of a chip of marble.

He was vaguely uncomfortable about the fact that he'd forgotten so easily who he really was, and tried to shut his eyes to block out the flat dullness of wherever he was. And was gripped by the vertigo as he had been back in his bedroom. This time he got the impression of falling down a well by starlight; a fast fading sprinkling of light and the infinite void waiting...

The landscape looked much more inviting after that. If this was a gas-induced dream he'd sit it out. Half an hour wasn't so long. But it felt like much more than that by the time he decided to get up and explore some more. Maybe his sense of time had gone the way of his skin colour. And, for that matter, the rest of his body, which had acquired several disquietening features which would surprise any osteopath, ear, nose and throat specialist or proctologist. Not that there seemed to be anybody (indeed, any body) else in the place, although once he caught what seemed to be a flash of motion in the sky. He squinted up into the grey light - the shapes that had sped by looked more like fish than birds; he must have been dreaming. That thought made him laugh.

He wandered over to one of the boulders, with the vague intention of climbing up it and looking for something - anything - on the horizon. The surface caught his eyes; like granite it was composed of a myriad tiny facets of crystal, white, orange, black, grey. Unlike granite some of these were quite large, and faintly grooved. These bigger lumps were uniformly white, and they puzzled him. It wasn't until he came across one that was protruding from the rest of the rock, pure white with a blunt point, that he twigged.

Teeth. The rocks were granite, he was sure of that from the mica, feldspar and quartz he recognised - any Dartmoor bog trotter knew granite as the city dwellers recognised concrete - but with an uneven sprinkling of teeth stirred in, like peanuts in a chocolate bar. Again, he thought of the Weasel's constant invectives against refined sugar when he was young; again reminded himself that somewhere his real body was supine and slightly more gummy.

But granite couldn't have teeth in it. Long-distant school geography lessons sprang to mind. Born

of elementary fire, hot lava from the earth's core slowly cooling under tremendous pressure with crystals of hard rock forming over centuries, any organic matter would be fried, powdered and assimilated in minutes. It was, he reminded himself, a dream. One which would offend doctors, geologists and dentists in equal measure, but still a dream.

It had to have something to do with being in just such a dream, he thought, but he felt curiously elated. He felt plain curious too - he was looking forward to the next discovery, the next fact to fall out of this strange place. Again, he felt a little disquiet about the ease with which he'd forgotten about his real status as an office worker in Plymouth, but then that place had its fair share of grey skies and boredom too.

He hunted around in the grass until he found a small lump of rock. Odd - he looked around, the scattering of the stuff was fairly even as far as he could see - what on earth (or wherever, he reminded himself) could have caused this place to be like this. He imagined great glaciers slowly melting, dropping rocks as they retreated down the vast gouge they in earlier youth had carved, but that wouldn't explain the flatness of the place. Glaciated valleys - once more, those geography lessons with Rolly Jones surfaced after a decade submerged - were U-shaped. This was plain plane.

This blue and hairy body must belong to a blue and hairy geologist, he thought. He raised the rock above his head, and brought it down hard on the large boulder he'd been examining. The shock jarred his hand, but cracked off a small amount of the boulder's surface. He looked at the spray of chips that littered the grass. They were sharp, like flakes from the surface of a choc ice. The image of an ice cream, he couldn't remember the name, with small fragments of nut in the hard chocolate layer around the soft cream inside, came to mind, and on a whim he nibbled at one of the chips with his recently-enlarged canines. It tasted like a rock.

He looked at the place on the boulder where the chips came from, expecting to see more of the same, perhaps a little more colourful and sharp. Instead he saw a smooth skin, black as the night, underneath what must have just been a shell of toothed rock. He prodded it with one ridiculously long finger (without a fingernail; for a moment he couldn't decide whether it was sillier to have a finger without a fingernail or one with - why did humans have fingernails anyway? He resolved to find out when he was back in the real- he nearly thought other - world) and it gave way a little, like the skin on a dead pig.

Down at his feet, he found a particularly long shard of rock skin. With a roar he jabbed it into the gap on the boulder as hard as he could. This was, he discovered, very hard, and the skin broke. A gush of cold brown liquid shot out and over his - his? - body. He stood there for a moment, surprised, as the sticky coolness trickled down, matting the fine hair which covered him. He poked the same finger into the new gash, expecting to find a void. Instead he encountered a soft, sludgy gunk. It was very cold.

He pulled his finger out (for some reason, an image of his boss came to mind) startled by the unexpected feelings. Again on an impulse, he licked the finger. Chocolate ice cream. He pulled at the rock shell around the gap, removing scabs of the stuff and widening the hole until he could get a fist in. One part of his mind stood back, aghast, as a feeding frenzy took over and he pulled, tugged, hit at the shell, reducing it to fragments and revealing an interior entirely composed of ice cream. With a whoop, he started to scoop the stuff into his mouth, not minding whether it ran down his chin, onto his chest, caking him with stickyness.

"No. Chocolate. No chocolate. Bad for the teeth"

Eh? Where did the voice come from? He looked up, and realised that he was cold, shivering, and standing in a spreading puddle of molten ice cream. He was very, very messy.

"It'll ruin your teeth. Not good at all".

Was that - that was the Weasel. "Steve, you mustn't eat so much chocolate. Steve, you have to wake up to the fact that your teeth must last you the rest of your life. Steve, wake up. Steve!"

He shook his head, and suddenly felt very cold indeed. The grey of the sky lightened to orange, to white and he shivered.

"Steve, wake up!"

He blinked, and felt the ground somersault like a funfair ride. He tumbled, was lying down. He was on the couch, looking up at Dr Sells.

"Steve, can you hear me?"

"Uh" why was his mouth so horrible? "yeah. Yes, I can hear you. I've been dreaming, I think"

"Don't talk. Take deep breaths. Do you feel OK?"

Stupid dentist. How can I tell you if I can't talk? "Uhuh".

"Good. I hit an artery, though what it was doing there I don't know, and we had a bit of an emergency. You're OK, though, not too much blood lost, and I've called an ambulance just in case. Ruined your clothes though - I'm sorry."

His head spun. He tried to sit up, and in the couple of seconds before he collapsed back to the Chair he saw a blood-soaked body. At least it had pink hands.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 4 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The doctors at Freedom Fields Hospital weren't concerned with his dream. "Happens all the time, old man" one particularly young one said "You're dreaming about walking through a town when a fire engine goes past, bell ringing like billy-oh. You wake up, and the alarm clock's going nineteen to the dozen. Brain's made the connection, you see."

Apart from the fact that he'd never owned an alarm clock with a bell, and suspected that the doctor had been watching too many Sunday afternoon wartime films, Steve saw. It had been a particularly vivid dream, but perhaps everyone dreamed like that under gas. He'd been given two pints of blood, which gave the lie to Dr Sells' soothing words, and was under observation for the rest of the day. According to the ward sister, he'd be out by seven since they needed the bed and he was young enough to survive "seeing what you young people do to yourselves nothing like this should worry you" by himself.

The tooth had been removed, and in its place was a lump of surgical padding. Steve explored it with his tongue, it seemed much larger and ten times rougher than the tooth it replaced but he expected that was just the unfamiliarity and weirdness of the pad. Again he felt strange, he wasn't used to such ideas and didn't know where they came from. That they might come from himself seemed impossible.

The young doctor came back. "How are we doing?" "I'm feeling OK." He took Steve's blood pressure and pulse rate. "I think you'll be OK for this evening, but take it easy for the next week or so".

"Er, Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"I'm still worried by the dream I had."

The doctor sat down on the bed, and carefully placed his clipboard on the sheets before looking, seriously and with obvious intent, at Steve.

"We all have dreams, old man."

"No, I don't get dreams, apart from this time. It was so real, like being there, only I've never been anywhere like that before. Do you think it could have been the gas?"

"That's possible. It's really nothing to worry about, though. It's been quite a traumatic experience for you. Look, if the dreams come back or you're still worried about things a week from now I can recommend a friend of mine who should sort you out."

"He's a doctor too?"

"Yes, but not a blood and guts man like me. He's a psychoanalyst."

"Um... thanks. I think."

The doctor laughed "Nobody's saying you're anything but sane. It's just if you're troubled by this thing I don't know anyone better. He's especially good on dreams. Wrote a book about them a while back, I think he's quite famous."

"Among shrinks."

"Yes, I suppose. Look, hold on a minute."

The doctor scribbled out a name and phone number on his pad, and tore off the sheet. "Here you go. If you do give him a call, tell him Dr Chapman sent you, OK?"

"Thanks, mate. I hope I don't, if you see what I mean."

"Right. Anything else?" And as there was nothing else, the doctor left.

He caught the bus home. Experimentally probing the top of the wadding, he decided that soup and stuff would be on the menu for the next week. That night he slept soundly, for the last time, as the day's happenings were sorted and stored. For later.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 5 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Emily wasn't in the office the next day, and Steve didn't feel much like talking anyway. Sue mentioned, with a smile, that "Em had said that she hoped you were better from that nasty business at the dentist, and she hoped to see you soon". That should have made him feel a bit better, but he wasn't quite sure that it did. At lunchtime, instead of sandwiches in the Swan, Steve wandered up to the city library. It wasn't a place he'd been in since his childhood; like the dentist's, the smells reminded him of times long gone and - he'd thought - forgotten. Dust and polish. He went up to the desk.

"Excuse me, where can I find something on dreams?"

"Is that dreams as in romantic, or psychology, or something else?" asked the librarian.

"Psychology, what people dream and what it means" said Steve.

"Oh yes, third bookshelf from the back over there, under medicine. Where that big orange book is, that's the section."

The big orange book was "Subconscious in the 1970's" by some impossibly glottal Eastern European name. Steve hunted about, remembering more and more of when he'd been forced into the place to find out things on shrimps for biology homework or the Battle of Waterloo for history.

A few promising titles turned out to be full of words longer than most of Steve's sentences, and a lot of German. Eventually he came across a new book called the "Oxford Companion to the Mind"; although the cover was mostly black with an orange splodge (what was it about orange and these people?) it seemed to be written in English. He took it back to a table.

He looked up "Dreaming". It did not start well. "In our sleep we all intermittently experience insanity". Great, he thought. First Doctor Wotsit and now this book think I'm a nutter. It didn't get much better, and after a page or so of REM, NREM and hypnagogic hallucinations (hypno what?) concluded that dreams could be affected by their surroundings and that nothing useful could be learned from them.

There then followed another, shorter article on Dreams in Ancient Greece which could have been written in ancient Greek for all the sense it made. The book switched to Drugs and Dualism; Steve glanced at his watch (which at least had the decency to be there this time) and saw that it was time to get back to work. Getting up to leave, he remembered the dash back over North Hill to school in the rain. He used to be able to do it in ten minutes, now he'd be lucky if he could do it in twenty.

On the way out, on an impulse, he asked for a ticket application form. He wasn't sure why, but he thought he might come back at the weekend and sort out this business once and for all. The rest of the day was normal, boring even, except that he was hungry what with no breakfast and no lunch. His tooth was aching, but he didn't think that he'd be able to eat enough soup to stop feeling starved.

But soup it was. As he was washing up the dish, he wondered if there would be anything he could do to distract himself from that tooth, but nothing seemed attractive. The garden really needed a good going-over; the roses hadn't been cut back since last summer and with spring in the air they were threatening to get out of control. He wanted to get that done before the weather warmed

up, anyway; he avoided gardening in August when the wasps were out. He'd been stung by a hornet when he was younger, and was still scared by insects flying by.

The gardening was really a weekend job, though, and he didn't fancy getting dirty. Another night in front of the television then. A science program called "Dreams of the Past" sounded promising, but turned out to be about the Easter Island statues. Great blocks of stone, carved into giant faces, they stood around the island staring into space from blank eyes. One tradition said that they were giants once, but were petrified by an immortal witch in a great battle. Very interesting, Steve didn't think, and felt himself drifting off to sleep... the announcer on the TV seemed to be saying something...

"Steve. Steve, wake up. Come on, you'll be late. Wake up" It sounded like Emily, and he stirred and looked up.

She held out the Companion to the Mind, orange on black. Steve blinked and looked around at Plymouth City Library; there was nobody around but him and Emily.

"Emily? I was... what are you doing here? Why am I here, anyway?"

"You were sleeping" she said. "Dozed off - if you don't hurry up you'll be late back to the office. You could always blame yesterday's anesthetic, but then you're so dozy anyway."

"But I've left - I've been back and gone home. It must be the middle of the night!" Steve glanced at his watch; quarter of an hour and he had to be back. The date was right - so what had he been doing?

"Here, check here," and she opened the book, flicking through the pages at a blur "Lucid dreams. And you were the one that never dreamed, said you. It must have been that tug at the head, you dodo".

"Er, yes, look, I've got to dash back. I thought Sue said you were off today?"

"I am; I was meeting someone in town and thought I'd pop in to get something to read tonight. Lucky I did, really, otherwise you'd have been out 'till three."

"Yeah. I'll check this tomorrow - I've really got to go."

"Why not take it out - glance at it when Stewpot's not around". Stewpot was what everyone called Pat Roberts, nobody's favourite boss.

"Er, no ticket."

"That's no problem. I'll take it out for you."

They went to the checkout together; the librarian smiling at Emily in recognition. Emily picked up an application form, used it to mark the place in the book which she handed to Steve. "You really should get one of these; never know when it will come in handy. I use mine all the time."

"You come here often, then?"

"You might need some new pickup lines one day, for example" continued Emily, as she pushed through the brass-railed swing doors. Steve, clutching the Companion, followed out to the street, lit by sunlight pushing through high grey clots of cloud onto the damp pavements.

"Oh very funny, Em. Thanks for the ticket though, and the wotsit dreams..."

"Lucid. As in clear. You should find it interesting, if you've just had one. Normally it takes years

of practice. Now hurry! It's ten to."

And she turned around, and headed up the hill. Steve was going to yell after her, but realised what 'ten to' actually meant and started running towards the subway.

He made it, although his heart was thudding and his tooth hurting like it was never out by the time he collapsed at his desk. He dropped the book onto the desktop and started through the memos waiting for him.

"Oxford what?" asked Roberts as he wandered past. "It's going to be lonely with only your mind for company. Don't waste your time. Especially don't waste any we're paying for."

"No, Pat."

"Right then. Since you missed yesterday, you won't know about the meeting this afternoon. Try and wade through the stuff about it before three. But don't strain your brain, you'll need to keep it in reserve for that book."

Wit, thought Steve as Roberts strolled off, and he fished out the five-page memo - five pages! What was there in a special promotion for soap that needed five pages? Another blooming Stewpot special - and read it through twice in five minutes. Which left three-quarters of an hour free with the boss sleeping off lunch in his office and nothing better to do than read the book.

Lucid dreaming, he learned, was some peculiar state where dreamers think they are awake; going through day-to-day routine and even dreaming about falling asleep again. With practice, the book continued, the dreamer can control the dream but only when they realise what's really happening. This can be someone saying a code word, or an alarm bell, or a certain piece of music. Then anything is possible, until the dreamer wakes.

That would tie in with what had happened - what he thought had happened - with the library. But lucid dreaming, said the book, was rare and limited to certain individuals - beyond that little was known.

The meeting was boring, Steve was hungry (again) and his tooth hurt (again), and nothing happened. Nothing did, as a rule.

There was nothing, as a rule, on the television mid-week. One side had an opera, fat women screaming at an orchestra. Another looked more promising, Disney's Alice in Wonderland. He watched that for a bit, hoping for some different cartoons, but the programme turned out to be about Charles Dodgeson, alias Lewis Carroll, that strange Victorian vicar who wrote the Alice books and was a fair mathematical philosopher besides.

The cartoon excerpt finished, and after ten minutes of standard documentary camera work, zooming in on faded ancient brown photographs and faded ancient faces talking about how wonderful Alice in Wonderland was, Steve lost what little interest he'd had in the beginning.

It was still early, but he didn't feel like any more television. There was the book; he'd read that. It should send him to sleep, especially with the pills for his tooth. He took the tablets, washed down with a little of yesterday's wine ("No reason not to drink" said the doctor "Just don't overdo it for a week or so") and started at the introduction.

It was boring enough, but it took two articles on the laws of thought and laxative abuse - he couldn't really believe that last one - before he drifted off. The book lay in front of him, splodged uppermost.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 6 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

And he dreamed.

"Dreaming again, sleepy? Have you done your homework?" said Emily, holding up the book in the library.

"Been here" said Steve.

"So you have." she said, her razor smile as sharp as ever, "And here." She pointed at the cover, fire on black. "Looks good. Looks familiar, like that toothache of yours. I'd guess you were about tired of the library by now..."

His tooth was aching; or rather the hole it was that hurt. Almost burning, he felt it get hotter as the blob on the cover of the book brightened and flickered.

The light was familiar too. Grey, rainy, coarse grass underfoot and silence everywhere. He was back on the plain. Or rather he wasn't, because the ground was quite steeply sloped. He stood in front of a too-orange fire burning at the edge of a cliff. The edge of the cliff either side of the fire was set with large stones, black-grey and regular. It looked like he was on the inside of some fortification; the fire burning in a gap ready to be pushed out onto attackers below at the cliff face. He walked up to the stones, although they were much taller than he was he could look through the gaps between them.

And there indeed, far beneath him, was the plain he remembered from that first dentist dream. The air was a bit hazy, but he could make out stones scattered just as he recalled, out to the point where all he could see was grey sky meeting the mist below. His body - oh - was the same as before, only bluer in hue. Just as hairy, just as much not his.

Above him, on the slopes, were more huge, regular lines of stone. He must be on those mountains he saw in the distance of last time, he decided. This time there was no Dr Sells about to wake him up, which meant he had to wait it out. Unless this was a lucid dream? It was clear enough. But he couldn't seem to change anything - an attempt to mentally get rid of the clouds worked just as well here as it would have done in Plymouth.

Nothing to do, except climb that hill. The fire showed no sign of going out, and shone brightly through the haze. If he needed to get back to his starting point, it wouldn't be a problem. He pushed upwards. The next set of stones were much bigger, though further away than he thought - it took him what felt like half an hour to reach them. The gaps between them were bigger too, he could squeeze through - cold, wet and slimy rock - to the other side.

Or he would have, if there'd been another side. There was a thin verge of grass, leading to... nothing. Half-way through the gap, he noticed that the ground ran out, but, unlike the cliff to the plains, there was nothing at the bottom. Just blackness. Dizzy, without thinking, he closed his eyes to blank out the sight and the vertigo hit him hard. He grabbed at the stones either side of him, hands slipping on the damp surface, staggered and fell headfirst over the edge.

Either the hole was very deep, or he fell very slowly, for he had plenty of time to look about him as he fell. and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, he tried to look down and make out what he was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything: then he looked at the sides of the hole and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and bookshelves: here and there he saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs.

Then, far beneath him, he saw the ground approaching. Gently, he drifted down. He seemed to be falling towards a beach, and with a bump he touched down on the sand.

"You're early" said the Carpenter. "Not good for a first day at work, even if you're just the walrus."

Steve looked at himself. He was, indeed, a walrus. A blue walrus, it had to be said, but a walrus. Of course.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 7 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The Carpenter was dressed in jeans, white T-shirt and some tatty trainers. He sat despondently on a rock, staring at the calm sea with his head propped on his hands.

"Aren't you supposed to be in an odd boxy hat" asked Steve, determined to play his part of the Walrus as best he could remember, but only if everyone else tried.

"The hat's behind the rock; I can put that on when the time comes." The Carpenter stood up and kicked at a small pebble before continuing in an impassioned tone.

"I really want a new job - I'm sick of standing on the shore wondering about seven maids with seven mops. Another thing, you're going to have to eat all the oysters. I'm vegetarian these days. Butter and bread yes - seafood, no. Nowhere does it say I have to eat the oysters if my conscience dictates otherwise. And we don't get paid 'till tomorrow, I can't afford to go out and buy anything else to eat until then. Pahl!"

And he kicked a spume of sand into the sea at the shore's edge.

"OK by me" said Steve "This is my first time on the job. I'm not really here, anyway. I'm just dreaming all this."

"What?" said the Carpenter, turning around from the sea and facing Steve. "You're a freelance? Oh, this is the last straw. Enough is enough. STEWARD!"

He yelled this last word at the top of his voice; scarcely had Steve recovered enough to hear the sea again before a familiar smile started to fade in above the rock where the Carpenter had been sitting.

"Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Steve; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!"

"Enough!" cried the Carpenter, jumping up and down on the sand with little leaps of rage. "Isn't it enough that you're that ridiculous blue, without quoting from the wrong book? Rank amateurism. You heard that, didn't you, Clive?"

This was addressed to the Cheshire Cat, which by now had fully materialised and was sitting on the rock, purring loudly and grinning fit to burst. "Give the man a chance, Jim" it said through clenched teeth "It is his first day, and we are way in front of schedule."

"But the guy's not going to be a regular. He doesn't know what he's doing here! Ask him!" And the Carpenter glared at Steve.

"Is that so?" asked the Cat of Steve, who was feeling the ends of his elongated tusks with long spiny flippers.

"Yes. I mean, I remember all this, but I'm just dreaming. I've never done it before and I expect I'll wake up in a minute."

"You don't have a contract?" questioned the Cat.

"Not with you, no." said Steve. "This all started at the dentist's, when he pulled a tooth and it went wrong."

The change in the Cheshire Cat on the word 'Dentist' was remarkable. He sprang up, his back

arched and his tail stuck out. He was not grinning now; a rictal smile which had no humour in it replaced the congenial smirk.

"Dentists pull teeth, and a Cheshire Cat with no teeth can't grin. And a Cat that can't grin loses its novelty value; a grin without a Cat is amazing, a grin without teeth is a bit of a flop. It gets written out. I get written out. Ssssss...."

"Calm down, Clive" said the Carpenter, pleased now that the Cat was against Steve. "He didn't say he was a dentist, just that he'd been to one who'd landed him in this scrape. Can't you just get rid of him? I've been meaning to ask you about those oysters too, wouldn't doughnuts scan just as well?"

The Cat lowered its hackles. "Well, he can't stay. I'll have words with the Reverend" And it disappeared in a trice, not bothering to fade or anything.

"I'm sorry, but we have a show to prepare. Perhaps when you've had a bit more dream experience, you can start as a Flamingo." said the Carpenter.

"I don't know" said Steve. "I just want to wake up."

"You can't?"

"No. I've tried."

"That's very odd. Something isn't quite right here... I'd see the Egg, if you've got time" said the Carpenter with a frown. "Come to think of it, where did you come from?"

"I was in a grey place, with grass and lots of stones and an orange fire. Then I fell down a hole to here."

The Carpenter's frown deepened "That sounds like Limbo - a very strange place to start dreaming."

The Cat appeared, again all of a sudden. "He's off, Jim. I'm terribly sorry, er, whatever your name is," "Steve" "Right, Steve, but you have to go. Union agreements and all that. But we're always keen to see new talent, perhaps when you've had a few millennia under your belt you could try again?"

"Clive..." and the Carpenter motioned to the Cat, who walked over and sat down by his side. The Carpenter whispered into its ear.

"Limbo? Yes... I'll see if I can get him." The Cat stood up. "Come on, Steve, jump on my back and we'll sort this out".

Steve thought this was a wonderful idea, and waddled over. He leaped up, but, being the Walrus, couldn't get a hold on the Cat's fur and fell off the other side making a sizable dent in the sand.

"Oh. We need the Walrus back anyway for someone else, especially since we need to clean off that colour. I'll get you a new body from the store. Right - that's done. Try again." Steve jumped again, and this time found human hands at his command to grasp the scruff of the Cat's neck. On closer inspection, he seemed to be one of the Tweedle twins, but still (he was resigned to the fact by now) blue.

"Hey, how did I change body?"

"More to the point, why didn't you change colour?" said the Cat. "We'd better get over to the Egg

and see what he's got to say." And with a bound, the Cheshire Cat sprang into the air, floating skywards with Steve on its back.

"Hold on" the Carpenter called after them "What about me eating the oysters? I can't do it any more! I'm a veggie - it's really screwing me up."

"Try some Thousand Islands Dressing!" yelled the Cat with its customary grin now firmly back in place. "He's a bit of a moaner, is Jim" it remarked to Steve, "but he does his job."

"What is his job?" asked Steve "I mean, this is all Alice, isn't it?"

"Yes... we're very lucky to be on it. Most of the time, being a character in a book is no fun. There are some really nasty books too.

While the Cat was talking, the countryside was slipping away below, all chequered patterns and trees.

"I thought books were just writing," said Steve, gripping tighter as the Cat swerved past a small but unfriendly cloud. "I didn't realise they had real people in. Cats, I mean" he amended hastily.

"Well, not what you'd call real. But like dreams, it's real enough if you're there at the time. And here we are." The Cat came to rest on a grassy knoll by a stone wall.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 8 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

"The Egg will be along momentarily" it said "Got to dash, things to do". This time it faded out without undue haste, leaving the smile, as it should, until last.

"There's a fine thing" thought Steve. "I'm even starting to think like them. I wonder how long before I wake up?"

"You must be the galling wag, on whose behalf I've got to worry."

And from behind the wall appeared, bit by bit, Humpty Dumpty. Puffing and blowing, he eased himself over until he sat, feet dangling, on the top.

"I don't think I'm a galling anything" said Steve "I was the Walrus, until recently..."

"Galling wag" said Humpty Dumpty sternly "Wagon in Old Gaulish is Carpentum. Hence Carpenter. Hence Galling. Good God, man, can you not recognise a pun when you hear one? Never mind. You have an odd manner of introduction about you, Sir; you were the Walrus. I am the Egg, man. Pray tell me who you might be now, since that is the normal mode of introducing oneself. Unless I have fallen behind the times, instead of falling off the Wall St. Journal."

Steve was finding this dense cloud of words a little difficult to follow, so gave up and started from the beginning.

"Everyone said that you should be able to help me. I fell here from what the Carpenter said was Limbo and can't wake up. I'm called Steve, er, normally."

"Steve Er Normally. No matter. What, my good fellow, were you doing in Limbo? Nobody should be there, Normally - the rules are quite specific on that point. The problems of getting characters their wages in a place where the normal rules of space, time and literature no longer apply are quite insurmountable. It would give the Management so many excuses not to pay up, as if they need any more." And the Egg looked sad.

"I don't know. The first time I saw the place was when I was having a tooth removed, under gas at Dr Sells the Dentist. Back in the real world."

"Real it might have been, but there's no way there to here, nor here to there. If you're a Reader, then you might look and if you're a Writer then you might command, but only the mad ever leave those real worlds of yours for these real worlds of ours. Have you considered that you might be insane?"

"Not you too. All I want to do is wake up. That's not mad." snapped Steve, who by now was getting tired of having his sanity impugned by doctors, books and eggs. Although any accusation of insanity made by an egg had to have some plausibility....

"Madness is the only way; madness or diabolic forces. But you've given up on the devil side of things in your world, haven't you? Then madness it must be. You're devilled by it. Don't ask me to help you, I'm not a Freud Egg. They're all sorting out another nutter, which was a mistake. Never put all your Eggs on one basket case."

"Devilled egg might be a better idea" Steve retorted. "You're supposed to get me out of here, not make feeble jokes."

The Egg looked sadder. "I have to make feeble jokes. I have too keen a sense of humour to dare

to make good ones."

"Why does having a sense of humour stop you joking?" asked Steve, intrigued in spite of himself.

"Because I might start to smile, and then it's just a short step to breaking into a grin or cracking up altogether."

"Oh" said Steve. "More of a problem for eggs, I suppose. But not as much a problem as you'll have if you don't sort me out. Why am I always blue, for example"

The Egg regarded him gravely. "That is a good question. But one for your own world; the real questions are how you got here at all and what can you remember about going to sleep. Doze are the questions we should be asking."

"I was reading a book, dead boring it was too. I was hoping that what it said about lucid dreams would be true, but I can't change anything"

"As if lucid were to matter to one" said the Egg, lapsing into fake upper- class English in a most alarming way "The thing is for one to get up in the morning, and thence to progress to one's place of work. One assumes that you have an alarm clock, but knowing you lower classes you might have trained some canary to sing with extra vigour."

"Clock radio. It plays music."

"Music. I doubt that it produces anything of the sort, but it will have to suffice. What sort of music flows forth from this clock radio?"

"Probably something from the charts."

"How avant-garde. Making music from maps, ah well. Humans, who can understand them. Well, wait here and when you hear this chart music you can go home. Perhaps a melodic snatch of coastline, a twiddly bit from a Norwegian fjord, something grand from a glacier." And the Egg let himself down from the top of the wall, humming a small patch of sea just off New Zealand, until he was quite out of sight behind it.

Steve sat down, and waited. Presently, he nodded off.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 9 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

"We'll always be together..." the song faded out. "Phil Oakey there, and next after the break, the new dance craze from Hostile Implant - the Wobble and Stump."

Steve woke up in a strange place. Or rather, it was his bedroom. He'd been expecting to see Looking Glass, but instead the ceiling, curtains, and radio commercials were all the same as before. He was out of that one... He stared upwards, thinking about the dream. It was so clear. It would be a good idea to see that shrink, and as soon as possible.

He 'phoned in sick, and looked for the piece of paper with the guy's name on it. Rummaging through his coat pockets, he found the filled-in library ticket form. He stuffed it back in, meaning to call back at the library when he'd seen the doctor. It wasn't until he was leaving that he noticed the other form, still marking the place in the mind book where Emily had left it...

The doctor's place was out at Roborough, almost on the moors. It was a huge granite Victorian effort, some distance from the main road on a gravel driveway. He walked past the brass plate, which was devoid of the usual string of letters and merely proclaimed "Dr Mike Jacobsen", through an ivy encrusted arch and into the main hall. A polished wood staircase wound up to the first floor, and along one wall stood an equally polished, equally wooden desk. The receptionist was polished too, but far from wooden.

"Steve Trevathen?" she asked? "Mike's waiting for you in the consulting room. Go straight through."

The room was filled with books, top to bottom of four walls and some of the floor as well. In one corner, a grimy Apple II computer was buried under a mound of papers, its monitor filled with text. There was an alcove with a tall window facing onto a long lawn, just in front of that were a couple of armchairs next to a coffee table. In one of the chairs was, Steve assumed, Dr Jacobsen, although the bearded man wouldn't have looked out of place at the hippy midsummer gathering at Stonehenge. Dr Jacobsen got up, and walked towards Steve with hand outstretched. "Mr Trevathen - or can I call you Steve? I'm Mike Jacobsen. Please sit down."

They sat in the armchairs. Dr Jacobsen continued: "Sorry about the mess; this is a lovely house but I'm left alone in this room to get on with things, I never seem to have time to tidy up. I hear that Mark Chapman thought I could help out. He's usually spot-on with diagnoses, so I'm always glad to go along. I'm supposed to say 'what seems to be the problem', but my bedside manner is appalling - why don't you start?"

Steve started to tell the doctor about his experiences, first in the dentists and then at home. He left out the bit where he tried to look up dreaming at the library, anything about the mind book and the conversations he had in his dreams. Mike sat there, asking a question or two about the duration of the dreams, or whether such and such was familiar from Steve's waking life. At length, Steve finished. He mentioned the two library ticket forms.

"Did you bring them?" asked Mike

"Er, yes. Thinking about it, I must have got two forms by mistake, filled in one and forgotten all about it. These dreams have really messed up my memory" said Steve.

"No. Don't rationalise it away. Can I have a look at them?"

Steve produced the forms from his pocket and handed them over.

"Well, there's something odd here" Now there's a familiar understatement, thought Steve. "Look at this. These forms have serial numbers, here, at the top. The numbers are the same. Either you got two forms by mistake, filled in one and forgot, and the library misprinted the things, or someone's playing an elaborate prank on you. Not that that explains the dreams, but it's a start; it makes slightly more sense that way."

Steve looked at the two forms; they were indeed identical except for his name and address handwritten on one. "But Emily gave me one of these forms" -he'd mentioned Emily earlier - "and I dreamed that I'd picked the other up from the counter. I can't see how she could have slipped me two identical ones; how could she have got them and why the hell would she want to?"

"I don't know. But there has to be an explanation somewhere. Let's leave that for the moment. Look, bearing in mind that anything you tell me is completely confidential, you don't look like the sort of person who drinks enough to get the DTs, but do you, or have you ever used drugs?"

"Drugs? Like what?"

"Oh, marijuana, amphetamines, cocaine, LSD..."

"No" Steve laughed "You must be joking. I wouldn't touch that sort of stuff. A couple of times at parties years ago I tried to smoke a joint but it just made me sick. I don't smoke, you see. As for cocaine - this is Plymouth, not Miami."

"Yeah, no vice capital, is it? Any parties recently where someone could have spiked the punch, or slipped you a drink that had been tampered with?"

"No, not for months. The last party I was at was the office Christmas do, and nothing happens there."

"Any new medications from the doctor, before the problem with the tooth, that is?"

"No... oh, well, Emily gave me something for a touch of flu. But that was just aspirin or something."

"Don't you know?"

"No, I couldn't read the label. But it was an ordinary bottle, and they seemed to work."

"Ummm... well, it could be a very strange reaction to the gas, but that's not anything I've heard of before. It could be something in those pills - do you have any left?"

"No," said Steve, "I've got the bottle though, and there might be a few bits, powder or something, in it."

"Could you send it to me? Thanks. Now, is there anything about any of the dreams that particularly strikes you or worries you?"

"Well, whatever happens I'm always blue. And, each dream that happens, I get bluer. Not depressed - the colour blue, like I've been swimming in ink".

"That's interesting. Do you know anything about the early history of dentists?"

"No, nothing." Steve couldn't even remember dentistry being mentioned at school, let alone name ten famous dentists.

"Dentists were among the first people to use gas anesthetics. Before they were invented, the most popular medicinal knock-out was two bottles of whisky, one for the patient and one for the surgeon" Steve smiled, more out of politeness, and the doctor continued "but then a guy called Priestly discovered nitrous oxide. Laughing gas. He also discovered oxygen, so he knew what he was doing. N₂O" he pronounced it en-two-oh "is quite a potent drug, and knocks people out. Dentists used it to put people under, although nowadays different mixtures are used, but before they really realised what they were playing with they managed to cripple a patient or two."

Steve must have looked worried. "They know a bit more nowadays, although mistakes still happen there's no sign of that in your case. But back in the last century, when anesthesia was new and wonderful, dentists gave their patients nitrous oxide to the exclusion of anything else, including oxygen. They didn't stop until the skin of the poor victim was a colour called Philadelphia Blue, which was actually a sign of acute oxygen starvation. Caused no end of brain damage, but as that was to the patient it took a while to stop the practice."

"That's interesting, doctor," said Steve "but I didn't know this, so I can't see why I should dream that it's happening."

"Me neither. Perhaps you saw a TV programme about it one day when you were a kid, or someone told you. You might have thought you'd forgotten, but somewhere in here" and he tapped the side of his head "you had taken a mental note. First time you were under the knife, sorry, drill, the old ideas came out again. Or it's a visual pun, they're not uncommon in dreams. You get more unhappy with each dream, so your mind colours you blue."

"Yeah. But what can I do about it? It's true - these dreams are bothering me, especially the last one where I knew what was happening but couldn't wake up. It seemed so real."

"That's the real puzzler. Normally, half the struggle is getting you to realise that the nightmares are just a dream while they're happening, thereafter you can take control and play around with some fantasies of your own. The blueness can actually be useful there; if you spot it, you can remind yourself that you're dreaming and imagine yourself in a three-piece suit instead."

"But I don't wear a suit in bed!" laughed Steve.

"Pyjamas, then. Doesn't matter, but it is up to you to sort these things out. There's not a lot else I can say, for now."

"So you can't help me?"

"I wouldn't say that. But this is so different from the stuff I normally come across that I reckon you'll have to bear with me until I work out what's happening. Remember, though, that dreams are just dreams - nowhere near as mysterious as people assume. You seem an intelligent person, and anyone who goes to the library can't be averse to a book or two, no?"

"You should tell the school that. When I left I don't know which of us was the more relieved," said Steve with a grin.

"So you're a late developer. Lots of us are. I've got a couple of books here, if you could go through them I'd be really keen to see if they make sense to you at all. Do you mind?"

"No, not if you think it will help."

"I'm not sure. It depends how ready you are for a few new ideas."

"If they come from a book, I can handle them" said Steve. "It's when I'm dreaming them and they won't stop that I get worried."

"Fine... hold on a second..."

Dr Jacobsen got up, and scanned the shelves for a moment. The place might have looked messy, but there was some sort of system in operation because it only took him a few seconds to extract two paperbacks.

"These are good, but you might find them heavy going."

With titles like 'Manifestoes of Surrealism' and 'Consciousness and Causality', Steve had no doubt that the doctor was telling the truth.

He made an appointment for a week's time, and promised to send the empty medicine bottle to the doctor as soon as he got home.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 10 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

It was still lunchtime, and it seemed a shame to waste a day off, so Steve stopped of in the city centre and walked down to the Barbican where the sea met the town. The tide was down, and the dumpy fishing boats wallowed in the mud, little rivulets of water carving tiny valleys past them.

He sat on the edge of the wall, just past the Mayflower Steps. The inscription, once new and shiny but now suffering from the attention of seagulls with a good aim but no sense of history, informed him that this was the last point in Britain that the Mayflower had moored at before taking the Pilgrim Fathers to the New World. He sat there for a while, listening to the gulls mewling.

"So. We meet again, Meester Bond."

The familiar voice made him turn around, leaning on the pavement leading up to the wall. "Emily! What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing. I thought you were supposed to be off sick - Stewpot would do his nut if he saw you."

"I've just come back from the doctors" no sense in telling her what sort of doctor "and I thought I'd get some fresh air and solitude before going back home."

"It is a nice day, very... salubrious."

"What? I've had enough long words for a lifetime these past three days."

"Health-giving. Salubrious. A very Victorian word. Something you might find in Alice in Wonderland."

"That's odd, I" he was going to say that he'd been there last night, but thought better of it "saw a programme about that last night on TV."

"Really? How's the tooth these days?"

"Not so bad... that wasn't why I was at the doctor's, anyway." Ooops.

"Oh? Why then - still got that flu hanging on?" Emily had been worried when Steve hadn't turned up that morning; she'd been looking forwards to finding out how he'd been coping with the events of the night.

"Well, I've been having these dreams since it all went wrong at the dentist. So I thought I'd see a specialist and get it all sorted out."

"For a couple of bad dreams? That seems a bit strong."

"It's not just the dreams... look, do you mind sitting down for a moment? It'd be nice to tell someone about it."

She sat down next to him, dropping her handbag onto the pavement. "Sure, I've still got most of the lunch hour left, anyway."

"Yeah? Oh good, it's a nice day to not be in the office."

"Sure is. Now then, what's the matter?" asked Emily.

"Like I said, it's not the dreams. They're one thing - I've never had them before, but Dr Sells, the

dentist, did say that people were affected that way sometimes by the gas and it wears off. But, oh, I don't know how to describe it; I've started to think strange thoughts. All sorts of things that I didn't notice before, or care about, they've become important somehow. Other things annoy me - the newspaper, the radio, even the job at Saunders. Do you know what I mean?"

"It sounds to me like you spent lunchtime in the Navy.", and she nodded in the direction of the Barbican pub which squatted a hundred yards or so away from the steps.

"No; I had a glass of wine last night, but I think that's worn off by now. Since then, breakfast coffee and nothing. Anyway, I've never felt more sober."

"Don't worry about it. You had a dream and woke up covered in blood. It'd mess me up too. What you need is a good distraction. Something to take your mind off things, a little unreality in your life."

"Taking my mind off things would be nice" Steve sighed. "But, like I said, the paper's no good any more. Who the hell cares about some bimbo in London walking out on a pop star who can't sing and can barely shave?"

"It does seem a bit strange" said Emily, who normally saw this sort of distraction as proof positive of the human race's tendency to fiddle with the graphic equaliser while the car rolled towards the cliff. "Read any good works of fiction lately?"

Steve, still thinking about his problems with the papers, wasn't prepared for this twist in the conversation.

"Eh?"

"That's what you need. Some good, get away from it all, fiction."

"Like what?"

"Here." And Emily picked up her handbag, fished around in it for a moment and produced a thin, tattered paperback. "Take this once before bed, and come back for a repeat prescription."

The book's cover was adorned with a spaceship that bore a strong resemblance to an armoured whale. Behind it, an ominous (if unlikely) planet seemed to be on fire. "Riding The Beam" was picked out in curlicued letters on the front, as was the author's name, Sir Ron Rharhay.

"Sir who?"

"Ron Rharhay. A strange guy, who got his knighthood - yes, that Sir is real enough - for single-handedly saving the UK television manufacturing industry in the 70's. He's retired now, and lives in some amazing castle in Wales writing science fiction."

"But I don't like science fiction..."

"You liked Star Wars?"

"Yes, but that was a film."

"You can't read?" Emily smiled sharp mischief.

"No, I don't read many books. Or rather, I didn't, but all this dreaming seems to make my head itch. Reading seems to scratch that itch a little."

"That's almost poetic" said Emily, "but not that almost. Try this book, it's all good stuff, and if

you don't like it then nothing's lost."

"Well, OK. I don't know about tonight though - the doctor gave me a couple of books as well and they look like they're going to take a while to read."

"Oh, can I have a look?"

"Sure - I think I'd prefer 'Riding the Beam' though", Steve replied with a sigh.

Emily frowned when she saw the titles, and flicked through 'Manifestoes of Surrealism' at a page a second. Steve imagined that she was looking for pictures or something; in fact, Emily was reading the text at a diabolic rate.

"He gave you these? What on earth for?"

"I'm not sure. He just said they might be helpful."

If he understands them, thought Emily, then he's going to become a bit of a handful. While the old Steve would probably have thought Manny Festo was some pop singer, her tamperings with his intelligence gave him a fighting chance of realising that the dreams weren't all they seemed. It was time, she thought, to finish him off. Her materialisation of the pills seemed to have gone unnoticed in the Other World, perhaps one final magical malevolence would be safe. For her.

"What a strange doctor. Why they can't be content to farm out medicines I don't know" said Emily. "Could I borrow these? I'd like to see what's in them that the Good Doctor thought would be so useful." Like to see whatever it is as far away from your consciousness as possible, in fact.

Steve's natural instinct was to say yes, he wasn't looking forward to straining his brains over the books and any excuse to put them off for a few days would be welcome. Also, he still had high hopes of Emily and him, well, you don't say no to harmless requests when you're trying to make a good impression, do you?

"No, I'd rather read them as soon as possible" he said, as much to his surprise as hers. "But I'm sure that you can borrow them after me, Dr Jacobsen won't mind." Why had he said that? It must be worry over those dreams, he thought.

"That's fine," no it isn't "thanks Steve. Do try and read the thing I gave you, though. It'll take your mind off things."

"I will. Thanks - you're being very good to me. I really feel that I should repay you somehow."

"Really, there's no need for that." said Emily, meaning every word.

"I'd like to. How about the fair tomorrow night? My treat."

Emily thought, and a plan became clear. She was enjoying this, and it would be a shame to finish it so soon - however, it couldn't be allowed to go wrong.

"That does sound nice. I'd love to come - I don't think I've been to one before."

Steve was surprised and pleased. "Haven't you? Not even when you were a little girl?"

Emily, never really having been a little girl and being half as old again as the Universe, could once again be more honest than usual.

"No, they never seemed to happen when I was young. Fancy walking back to the City Centre?"

Steve, getting used to Emily's sudden changes of subject and feeling far less morose than before,

agreed and they got up, and started to walk back through the narrow cobbled streets. Overhead, clouds obscured the sun. It looked likely to rain, probably within the hour.

Steve spent the rest of the day at home reading. He started on the books from the doctor, but three paragraphs into 'Consciousness and Causality', Steve decided that 'Riding the Beam' could be no worse. Indeed it wasn't, and he was surprised when, looking up, he realised that he had to switch the room lights on and he'd been reading it for two hours.

It was a simple tale. A young boy living on a planet in the far future lost his parents in a pirate raid, went through various disgusting experiences (losing an arm but gaining an intelligent falsie in its place) and finally captained a gigantic space fleet (which was nevertheless mostly manned by his close friends and aliens). This flew against the pirate stronghold, good triumphed and the Emperor of the Galaxy appointed the hero Chief Praetor Of The Spheres. Balls, thought Steve, wouldn't have sounded quite so grand.

The beam of the title was some vague interplanetary weapon that the hero used to escape from a prison planet (on a surfboard yet). But the flashing lasers, gaping, ragged holes in ship's hulls through which the stars shone and soldiers got sucked, and the interstellar intrigue were fast enough to keep Steve reading until the end, when he noticed it was almost ten o'clock and he'd missed a meal. His tooth was hurting, too.

Sandwich, tea and bedtime. Half-curious, half-afraid of what the night would bring, Steve still remembered to get a blank C90 cassette and slot it into his clock-radio. He pulled the duvet over him, and switched off the light.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 11 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

It was as if his dream couldn't wait to get going. At first, the darkness was just that of his room, but slowly he started to make out points of light on the ceiling.

"Tango."

A voice in his ear, faint but distinct.

"Tango. Report."

He said "Clear", and the voice went quiet.

Suddenly, two thin red lines appeared, a crosshair with the centre down and to his right. At the intersection, a faint dot of light, which was moving upwards, the lines tracking it. Another voice: "Type 7, distance 3 point 5, delta dee 0 point 03, velocity 0 point 9, delta vee 0, no threat". Then, slightly behind the crosshair, a red box enclosing three, maybe four dots. "Potential threat. Type 32. Distance 4 point 0, delta dee 0 point 4, velocity 1 point 3, delta vee 0. Closing target 1."

A type 32 was more of a fleet than a single battleship; a set of intelligent units that could tight-dock for long-distance travelling, or split up into a cloud of individual drones that attacked a larger ship like a pack of hyenas pulling down a lion. According to the highscan, the ship was in three large parts with a couple of units outside the main pack. A typical attack formation - spacing some sensors as outriders gave the ship's computer a much higher resolution for ESW - electromagnetic sensing and warfare.

His ship was no match for a Type 32, but he knew that the pirate was unaware of his presence. He was in darkmode, radiating almost nothing above normal background levels, and he had no official business in this sector anyway. Perhaps he could save the target ship by blocking the 32's interunit comms; his main ESW computer had already cracked frequency allocation and data packet types. One of the benefits of being a policeman - you might not get the big guns, but your ship is fast and very, very clever.

Ah. A panel lit up. The computer had got the 32's code - it was a pirate, and not a very smart one, either. The ship was listed missing from a planetary survey team - the pirates had reprogrammed the encryption system but left everything else alone. It even had its old ident still active: 'Beaver Club 5'.

He didn't want to drop darkmode and then fluff it, so he went by the book. There were still a couple of minutes before the Type 7 was in serious danger, no reason to hurry. His computer retrieved the 32 schema, and all the modifications that the Beaver Club had made to it. There were a couple of options; perhaps the most alluring was to convince the pirate ship it was a slave in fleet mode. Then, believing that all of its units were part of a larger group and under the control of some central command, they would obediently follow orders and he could tell the 32 not only to break off the attack, but fly to the nearest station with its guns jettisoned. Arrest by proxy. Pat on the back.

But he had to reconfigure some of his comms to make his ship look like a fleet queen and hope he could bypass the security on the pirate so that its controller would accept his status. This shouldn't be possible, the 32 schema insisted, but he was quite sure that the modified operating systems onboard hadn't been given a full security audit. Not for a planetary survey, and definitely not by the pirates.

A soft chime, and the computer gave a 95% confidence reading that it could take control of the pirate vessel. Just in time. As the box on the main screen touched the intersection of the tracking lines, he gave the command.

There was nothing he could do but watch. His main transmitter directed a tight beam of microwaves at the three main units of the type 32, while his propulsors fired and started to twist his own ship into a jitter path. Just in case. In rapid succession, his computer told the 32's controller to turn off its transmitters, accept new orders, reestablish contact with the separate units and take off.

Immediately, the pirate ship responded. The outriders clustered in towards the three central parts, and they coalesced into cruise formation. The attack broken off, the computer reported that complete control had been established. Shortly afterwards, there were seven explosions around the hull of the ship, and the main armaments of the pirates were spiked.

Good enough, he thought, and sent the standard arrest message. Now he was out of darkmode, he could find out a bit more about that type 7 - if he was lucky, there might be a reward in it for him. The scan showed the target ship on its old course; he opened an auxiliary comm channel and identified himself. Strange, the other ship's automatic transponder wasn't working; his computers could get no ident out of it. "Threat! Evading" said his computer, but it had been as surprised as he was by the thin laser thread from the type 7 aimed precisely at his main comms antenna array.

It was over in a very visual flash of vapourising metal. Mostly blind and deaf, his ship continued jittering until the main computer decided that, without most of the scans active, it was too dangerous to fly randomly. As soon as the ship steadied, three more lasers surgically removed what remained of his communications and ESW sensors. The type 7 must have had a powerful transmitter itself, as it established comms through the melted stub of his main array.

"That was a clever takeover, Mr Policeman. I needed a new ship, and a 32 will do nicely. Hope you don't mind me stepping in and taking over in turn."

There was another, final, laser, this time directed at his propulsors. Alarms went off, but only briefly; then his drives sub-novaed. An instant of bright light: an infinity of blackness.

Infinites aren't supposed to end, but this one did; at least, it got put on hold. A hand on his shoulder, a weight off his head and he realised that he was breathing, his hands were locked, spasm-tight, onto the armrests of a chair and he was very, very tired. And alive.

"Careless, Stee, but you won't make that mistake again. This is the first time you've simdied, I think. Quite an experience, isn't it?"

His instructor was holding the simulator headpiece, and he was at the Academy, of course. Worse than the psychic shock of simulated death - which, rumour had it, was at least as nasty as the real thing - was the realisation that he'd made his first major mistake in six months of training. Such a basic error, too.

His hands were still tight in a deathgrip, and the pain of unclenching them took his mind off things. All over his body, muscles were cramping and popping, and it was a while before he could talk without grimacing.

"People do that for kicks?"

"You can go much further than that with a simulator, if you've got a mind to. Many people don't have; those that do find it difficult to hold onto."

"I don't know how I made such a mistake. But why didn't the computer recognise the Type 7 as a threat before it fired?"

"Could be lots of reasons; ships aren't always what they appear, even to computers. But it's unlikely that your computer will be so effectively fooled. Even so, perhaps you'll not trust the thing quite so much. If it's any consolation, which it isn't of course, not to our star pupil, nobody expected you to survive that one."

"I thought no-wins weren't on the syllabus?"

"Perhaps it wasn't a no-win. But you've got two things now - you know that smart computers aren't infallible and, even more important, you know that you're just the same."

"Do I get a runthrough?", Stee asked, who knew perfectly well that computers were never 100% reliable but was annoyed at himself for trusting them anyway.

"Not now. We'd rather keep that one for later. Think about it anyway - I expect the usual report by 1300."

Which was only two hours away, barely time to write a thousand word analysis of the situation. No reason to waste time going back to his quarters, he just swivelled the chair around to a terminal position and started inputting.

It was much easier than normal, perversely; perhaps the shock had helped him memorise the events with greater clarity than usual.

He finished with quarter of an hour to go, and wandered off to get some refreshment before the afternoon's class session in the xenobiology labs. Xeno - studying alien life - was quite interesting, but not what he'd gone into the Police Service for...

"Hey, Blue!" Great, a couple of people he didn't want to see just at the moment.

"Hey, Blue!" That was Chis, a tall, lanky youth with no hair and very green eyes. "Heard you blew the sim this morning. Sat there while the baddies lazed your ears off. We think you're losing your touch, starboy."

"Your sympathy is touching, Chis. But despite your adoration of my god-like status, I would like to remind you that I am human."

"Human? With that skin? Lookatya, Blue, the only humans that colour are those that jack up with Jex squid ink. Unless you've got a habit you're hiding - you a Jex freak, Squiddie?" Chis' friend, Gella, was also envious of what she regarded as the preferential treatment that Stee got from the course supervisors. She was probably the best pilot in the place, from any year, but didn't have the tactical nous to back it up. She didn't think so, though, and more than once complained bitterly that the others had fixed the simulators to hold her back.

"That's it, Gella. I spend my evenings high as a kite by injecting some alien fish juice into me. Wonder why nobody's spotted it before - you must be exceptionally perceptive today". The effects of simdeath were still there, unlike Stee's normal patience and good humour.

"Whoooo - touchy. You're losing it, Blue, and your pretty pretty skin won't help you when you get jetted for incompetence." Gella was, however, good at tactical teasing.

"We'll see. I can't stand here all day in pleasant conversation, you two, I've got to go and crash a few more spaceships."

"You seem to be getting good at that." Chis got back into the needling "Just try and pick up the pieces for the xeno this afternoon. We need an interesting specimen, Gel and I are a little bored with worms."

"Well, this little one seems bored with us" said Gella, and they walked off, loudly discussing the breeding habits of the blue-ringed Sirian skyworm.

Stee wondered how they knew the details of his morning session on the sim. Although the general trend of everyone's progress was no big secret, what happened in the sim was supposed to be confidential between himself, his instructor and the main computer who planned the course and - hopefully - qualified the students. He was sure that his instructor wouldn't gossip about the incident, which meant that someone was rather too familiar with the computer. But cracking the Academy computer was, almost without exception, a jetting offence, and he didn't want to accuse anyone, even Chis and Gella, before he had some evidence. He forgot about the coffee and sandwiches, and went back to his room to make a few private calls.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 12 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

"Nic?"

"Hello Stee - what can I do for you?" The system manager was a good friend of Stee's, and they occasionally played some interesting if unorthodox computerised practical jokes on each other. He was also the hottest computer jockey on the network, and why he was working for some grotty Police training academy was never entirely clear. There were rumours that he'd been caught in some undefined but fantastically complex compfraud, but had so impressed the investigating firemen that he'd been given a job as a Monitor. But, of course, none of this was on file and a Monitor was as likely to admit to his occupation as a corrupt politician. Sysman for the Academy was as good a place as any to hide.

"Unofficial for the moment - but someone's been at my simulator trails. A couple of students knew more than they should about me screwing up this morning's run."

"Have you told your instructor?"

"No, I'd like to keep it quiet for the time being. Just nose around, as much as possible, and get some evidence."

"Um... are these students pals of yours or something? It's a serious matter."

"I wouldn't call them friends, but I wouldn't want them to get into too much trouble if they're just being mischievous."

"Very gallant. Hold on a second, I'll see if I can spot anything from here. What simulator were you using this morning?"

"Deep Space Encounter PolShip 5."

"Right, that's dev44 on the training real-time node..." and Nic vanished from Stee's phone while he reached for his terminal.

"Here we are..." Nic's voice came through while the phone's camera stared steadfastly on the computer posters in an argon-filled case adorning the back of his room. They were all genuine wood-pulp paper - he had quite a collection with some real antiques; huge, improbable spaceships lumbering across a starry background.

"There's no evidence of tampering; all the security levels are OK. Hold on, I'll check for aliases..."

Aliases were secondary accounts that could be piggybacked onto anyone's main account with the computer, and a favourite tool of pranksters. They could sometimes acquire security privileges far in excess of their instigator's rightful clearance.

"... no, nothing. It must be something they only do when the sim is active. I could put a phantom on it; it'll monitor all accesses and when somebody unexpected takes a peek at the sim traces it'll switch the interface into diagnostic mode. If you can manage that?" Nic popped back onto screen with a grin several shades of evilness past pleasant.

"Thank you so much" and Stee grinned back. "I think I might be able to cope with it. I've got to go to xeno now, but I'll book that sim for this evening. If you can manage to write the phantom by then?" And sent back a broad smile.

"Oh, I hope so. If I'm around, I might hook in and watch the fun..."

"Goodbye, you unscrupulous voyeur, you." Steve hung up.

Xeno was more interesting than usual, as it covered a species of parasites that could, strangely, adapt to different host biologies. Indeed, there was a theory that the parasites were a genetically-engineered weapon from one of the many minor conflicts that constantly sputtered around the edge of Controlled Space, and that had got out of hand. Whatever their origins, Brinniali 7.5 Balasti were quite a problem at the moment, as they were ideally suited to spreading amongst space-going races. The effects of this parasite were unusually horrific; a video showed a small dog turn into a mass of writhing flatworms in under fifty seconds from initial infection. The forcejars with live specimens in were passed around and treated with considerable care - for once, the jokers of the class were subdued.

"All ships scanners are, of course, sensitive to this particular beastly" said the doctor in charge. "but they can miss the egg, immature or mature animal, if it's kept in a screened compartment. If you're unlucky enough to be in a situation where infection by Brinniali is possible, then remember to keep all body orifices filtered. Eggs contacting skin are not, usually, dangerous, but breath some in or get some into a wound and you will be dead in minutes. The animal itself is, as you've seen, a ferocious burrower but can't reproduce for at least a minute if it's in a novel biological environment. The film was a laboratory infection via a single worm that was already adapted for canines; in such cases the thing is breeding almost the moment it's in."

Several of the less hardened students were glancing at the forcejars.

"So, depending on circumstance, you can survive contact with our friend Brinniali. But it's far safer not to risk it."

The class over, Stee made a point of mentioning to Chis that he'd be in the simulator later that evening. He checked to see if his report had been read - it had, but the instructor hadn't posted any comments yet - and went for the afternoon meal. He noticed that a number of students didn't seem that hungry; a bad move, as he was sure that the Academy monitored for excessive squeamishness and that the xeno lesson was just as much concerned with human psychology as alien physiology.

He made a point of ordering pasta in tomato sauce; the picture on the menu made it look astonishingly similar to Brinniali having a meal. Coincidence? He couldn't tell, but the look of horror on some faces made it a good joke whatever the motives.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 13 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

It was excellent pasta.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 14 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Although unsupervised sim training was officially forbidden, the better pupils were allowed to spend some time on their own, providing no instructor actually saw any frivolous acrobatics or interstellar warfare. It wasn't unusual for Stee to fill an evening going through manoeuvres or some esoteric traffic management, but this time he felt apprehensive as he put on the headset. The simdeath had had far deeper effects on him than he'd expected, and as the familiar screens and scanners appeared he shivered.

He realised just how powerful direct neural access was - piping pictures and feelings directly into the nervous system seemed like a particularly good way of interfacing to the computers, but there was no barrier, no way to close your eyes, if something went wrong. Of course, there were safeguards built into the computer. But if Nic's special program was in place, the pranksters trying to get access would switch the sim into diagnostics, where the computer stopped showing a deep-space simulation and gave him direct neural access to its internal workings. This was a mode designed for experienced compengineers, and not something that a cadet should use. He had, er, stumbled across it before, and Nic knew it - otherwise he wouldn't have let Stee get into anything so powerful and potentially dangerous.

The session started well enough. Stee decided to try a famously difficult rescue, the Calamus Major incident, picking up a stranded spaceman from within a ring system full of very dense, metallic rock. To add to the problems, the planet around which the rings orbited wasn't as placid as Saturn, instead it emitted fearsome amounts of magnetic and hard radiation. It was a good 'un.

Halfway into the scenario, the space around him faded to black. Instead of thousands of rainbow points of light and buzzing radiation monitors, a control panel appeared in front of his computer-simulated hands and, apparently two feet away from his face, a metre-wide cube containing spheres of many different colours. Filespace. He lifted a hand, and pushed it into the cube, feeling different textures in the spheres. Each sphere was a subunit of filespace, and as he watched, they grew, shrank, combined or split - he was sensing the overall structure of the Academy computer. Which must have meant that Nic had given him an override privilege.

"Thanks..." he muttered, as he looked around for whatever had triggered diagnostic mode. He wondered where the current filespace for the sim was, and the cube exploded around him. He was drawn inwards at an impossible speed, until he and his control panel was floating in front of a football-sized sphere. He looked at the panel, which was (thoughtfully) set to Novice. As he wondered how to do something, the information was seemingly recalled from his own memory, although he knew that the computer was merely pretending. So, to inspect file linkage, he knew that he had to set `InterFileCommPipeDisplay` - he was already thinking of it as `IFCPD` - and a network of lines gently faded into the sphere. Another thought, and the internal structure of the simulator's filespace became visible.

By now, the world about him was a gaudily-coloured mess of shapes, which he found distracting. He tried to find any evidence that Nic was online, but there was no sign of any system monitoring. But then there wouldn't be - he was sure that Nic would have made anything that was too interesting quite invisible. To business, and finding out what had triggered the diagnostics.

He checked all the file linkage - there was nothing amiss there. As he cleared each glowing feature

of the insides of the computer, he turned off its diagnostic display. Slowly, the picture simplified. He was left with the simulator file space, and not a lot else. There was nothing visible which could account for someone sneaking a look at his data. A different approach was needed. He asked the computer to find any duplicates. Even for the Academy computer, this was a major request. For the first time, a feeling of patience came over Stee, which meant that the command would take some time. The display came alive, as flickering lines spread out, probing through the entire file space.

Success! The computer had matched a file. It was in another simulator, currently logged to... Gella. Gotcha! But how did she come to have a copy of his simulator traces when there was no filelink? The only way was if she had a system-level link in place, something that he couldn't check because he didn't have enough privileges. But for her to have that sort of power would mean that she could access almost anything on the system. That was a serious matter. He had better make a record of what he'd found, and get back to Nic as soon as possible.

He went to the control unit, and requested that a copy of the trace from this diagnostic session be sent to the system manager. As he did so, the false world of colour and space shimmered and faded to black. He gave the command to leave diagnostic mode, to return to the standard sim. Nothing. Emergency abort - quit now. Nothing.

And then a chilling voice: "*Sorry Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that.*" A standard joke among compengineer students, that line from the dawn of computer time was often used to boobytrap a terminal so that any reasonable request was met by an apparently schizophrenic computer. But here, in the blackness of an uncontrolled sim, it was as frightening to Stee as it was in the film to the spaceman who first heard it.

"Gella?" he shouted. "Gella? A joke's a joke, but meddling with sims is dangerous."

"For whom, starboy?" the voice came back. "You know that you shouldn't be playing with diagnostics. You're not trained. Anything could happen. Or worse, you could be a neural access freak, sneaking off to an illicit sim session. They drag corpses out of sims all the time - sometimes they're smiling, and sometimes they're not..."

He was falling, gripped by vertigo, through the space that he'd been playing the simulation in. Again, he tried to command the sim to return him to normality, but the controls were dead. He couldn't get out, but the circuits into his brain were still very much alive. Even as he tried to orientate himself, the falling feeling was familiar somehow... but he put that down to the malfunctioning computer.

Around him the rocks of the ring system glittered and span. His suit appeared, followed by jetpack controls and intercom, as Gella added more detail to the sim. The radio spoke: "You were doing so well in the Calamus sim, I know you'll appreciate a real challenge. After all, nobody's ever been the spaceman before. Have fun now. Oh, one last thing before you go..." and went dead.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 15 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Soon after dark, Emily cried. She'd been monitoring Steve's dream from her bedsit and playing her part in it - telepathy was a minor bit of magic and not one that was particularly dangerous. But she detected a Force nearby, alive, awake and very hungry. There was always a chance that something like this would come around - she doubted that it knew anything about her and normally it would wander off again on its eternal quest for soulstuff. But while it was in her area she could do nothing out of the ordinary - she withdrew her mindprobe delicately and started to prepare defences. Just in case.

Damn. She'd been waiting to push Steve towards the edge - the simulated death in training was just the first of many disorienting and destabilising tricks she had planned. But now he'd have to finish alone, if he could.

Damn again. She had drawn him into the dream fast and hard, submerging his normal awareness deep beneath the artificial dreamworld that his chemically altered brain had constructed for him from the book. There was a good chance that he wouldn't be able to get out unaided. She risked a quick telepathic glance around, and gasped at the glittering blackness that was prowling so close... Steve was on his own - and so, she reflected, was she.

A feeling of frozen steel spikes glided silkily through her mind, and suddenly she knew she wasn't.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 16 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

"Gella? Gella!" Nothing. Perhaps she was just being cruel, but he wondered if something was wrong at her end. That was the least of his problems. All he could do was believe the simulation. If he couldn't abort - he gave the command once more, but Gella had linked the quit sequence to a recording from a child's training computer "Sorry, but that is an incorrect answer. Try again." - ultimately he had to play the game.

He tried to fire the jetpack. Nothing from the main thrusters, but the manoeuvring units were functioning. Almost full, too. The suit showed no ships nearby, but the intense electronic noise from the nearby planet made it unlikely that comms would work over any distance. He stopped himself from spinning, and tried to make sense of the suit's computer. It was a very old unit, the Calamus incident had happened more than a hundred years ago and the design of the castaway's suit - what was the woman's name? Esseka? - was out of date by then anyway. She had been a prospector running with outmoded gear, all she could afford, her ship's radar had failed and she'd hit something.

He couldn't remember any more details - he tried to call up the history library but, like any link into the main Academy computer, that was diverted to another of Gella's pranks. "All lines are engaged. Please try later". He couldn't place that message, but when he got out he intended to find it and replay it to the lady in question at slightly over the pain threshold for slightly longer than 48 hours.

A lot depended on him recalling how the original rescue ship was flagged down - he didn't want to go through simdeath again. Or whatever it was that Gella had plumbed in instead, he realised.

An alarm went off. Flashing red light - how quaint - and the legend underneath said 'DOSIMETER SHORT TERM'. A dosimeter was an old-style radiation measuring device, which meant that he'd better find some shelter before the sim decided to give him radiation sickness. There were altogether too many candidates for a convenient shield, as the space around him was filled with rocks big enough to crush, or at least maim.

He picked a large lump of space debris, an asteroid that wasn't rotating and thus had one side permanently away from the virulent planet, and steered towards it. Gently setting down on the far side - if he landed too hard or off-centre, it could start the rock spinning - he clung on while he looked for fastening systems on the outside of his suit. As she had been - and he was, he had to make himself think that way - a prospector, there were sets of active crampons and miles of monofiber rope in pouches.

The active crampons were spikes of metal with a small explosive charge - he placed one on the surface of the rock and watched it fire. One section flew off at high speed into space, forcing the other deep into the asteroid. He got a loop of monofiber, a single carbon/steel composite molecule spun into a long and incredibly strong thread, and hooked it up. There was still a chance that something would hit him, but not before his oxygen ran out.

Freed from worrying about a collision, and no longer so endangered by an immediate roasting from radiation, Stee could start to think about getting rescued. First thing - send a mayday. But the small suit-to-ship radio, while it covered the emergency band (and all others), was low-power. He could override the power limit and send perhaps one or two calls before the amplifier burned out, but that seemed overly risky.

He turned on the suit radar. It worked surprisingly well in the electronically noisy surroundings, and he turned the discriminator circuits on to filter out the debris around him. Nothing else. He turned the radar transmitter off to save power, but left the receiver part on. If a ship was in the vicinity, then its transmitter would trigger his radar alarm long before his feeble transmitter would detect it.

Stee couldn't think of anything else to do. Oxygen was good for ten hours, there was no food but sufficient water, and the radiation monitor had calmed down. He supposed that it might be worth trying to fix the main jetpack, but as he couldn't find any way to reach it, he gave that up as a bad job. He looked at the rock - it seemed familiar, a sort of granite with speckles of mica and darker quartz but with odd, long white crystals that were out of place. Still, the geology of a strange planetary system had many surprises.

He was investigating all of the rerouted links to the main Academy computer, in the hope that Gella would have missed one, when his alarm went off. A ship was nearby. He checked its course, it would be in his vicinity for no more than three minutes on its current course. At no time would it come within range of his radio, boosted or not.

Perhaps he could boost the radio further. But he was unfamiliar with its electronics, and in any case it was in the main jetpack housing. He couldn't reach it. What else? More power? No, the power unit was reachable but extra voltage would probably just blow up the radio and all his life support. The aerial? If he could fashion a longer aerial, he could perhaps get to the ship, but there was little spare metal. Perhaps the asteroid would conduct electricity and thus help, but any aerial would have to be carefully tuned and he couldn't cut the rock to length.

The monofiber. That conducted (all too well, he remembered: people had been fried when a line touched a power cable), and he could spool out the precise length that would make a good aerial. Quickly, he tied one end of a spool to a crampon, and set the right length on the spool control. He fired the crampon, and the part that flew off dragged the line behind it. Then he looped the other end, spool canister and all, around his suit aerial.

He set the transmitter to emergency override power, and, as soon as the line became taut, pressed the MAYDAY button. The TX light flashed green four times as the signal was broadcast before going to a steady red - the radio had burned out. He watched the blip on the radar screen. It continued on its course... and changed. It headed straight for him. He was going to be rescued.

He had to be the other side of the rock when it arrived, otherwise it might miss him. He unhooked his suit from the rock, and untangled the makeshift aerial, steering well clear of the almost-invisible line as he moved around the rock. Any second now, and the ship would be in sight.

Here it came, but something was wrong. As it drew nearer, he could see asteroids and stars through it - it was just a skeleton. Unfilled wireframe. "Nobody's ever been the spaceman before", and nobody had debugged the sim from this angle. Suddenly he was very scared. People died, really died, in undebugged sims; even with all the debugging aids and the programming team locked in about them. Writing a game was generally considered the most dangerous job going. The computer could wipe a brain in microseconds. This sim was falling apart around him, with no program protection, no backup team monitoring, nobody to pull the plug.

He tried the emergency abort again. The childish message started - then gibberish. Nothing. The planet froze, a spurt of incandescent gas stopping in mid-spout, and as he watched the colour bled out like a rainbow with a puncture. He checked his suit - that was still running. But the

large rock behind him grew, and he fell towards it as it picked up gravity from somewhere. He could hear birdsong, smell fresh-cut grass, float on a river for ever and ever... The whole simulated universe was in trouble, and, with its direct line into his brain, so was he.

All he could do was try and break the connection. Give the computer as little chance as possible. He curled up into a ball, eyes shut, holding his breath as long as possible, trying to shut out the bombardment of images. It didn't work, as the simulator routines to detect his actions were running amok. He couldn't tell if his eyes were open or not, whether his heart was beating, he was falling towards the rock but time was stretching out and his fall was taking forever. He'd been falling forever. An infinity.

Infinites aren't supposed to end, but this one did - at least, it got put on hold. A hand on his shoulder, a weight off his head and he realised that he was breathing, his hands were locked, spasm-tight, onto the armrests of a chair and he was very, very tired. And alive.

"Stee... wake up... Wake up, Stee..."

It was Nic, and his instructor. He looked at them, unable to move, speak, think. They were in his vision, but he couldn't move his eyes. Can't move at all. Like a phone camera, fixed, stare at the wall.

"The whole system's down, Stee. Can you hear us? Stee, wake up..."

The picture faded, and with it, his mind.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 17 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

He hit the rock with a thump. Quiet. Nothing. His eyes were closed, all he could feel was a cold mass beneath him and his heart beating. At least he was breathing steadily.

Opening his eyes, to a familiar grey sky fringed with the grass around his head, lying on the plain, in Limbo: he was colder than he'd ever been before. The memories of his life in the Academy faded away in a second, and, like riding a swell in a mental ocean, he was lifted up and into his old persona. But it was still cold. His skin was cold, his flesh colder and he could feel his bones as sticks of ice. He sat up, rubbing his arms together (yes, dark blue and hairy), but without succeeding in getting any warmer. For once, he realised what 'chilled to the bone' really meant, how cold...

If here was here again, then perhaps he could get to the fire. He got up - so stiff - and looked for the mountains. Perhaps the omnipresent mist was lower this time, or maybe he was too far from the slopes to see them, but all he could see was the dark green plain fading to grey in every direction. The stones were smaller, too; none of them came up further than his (amazingly knobbly), blue knees. He had no idea where the mountains were, but as they had the only way out of this place that he knew, he felt he should make the effort.

He warmed up as he walked, but grew steadily weaker. He looked to see if the size of the rocks was changing, since those near the mountains were much bigger. That might be a way to steer in the right direction. But, if anything, the rocks got smaller no matter where he walked. So he picked a direction and strode off, determined not to stop until he dropped.

Hours later, he dropped. Or so it felt, but he was thirsty, hot and very hungry. Sitting down on the grass, he could tell no difference between the scenery now about him and that in which he'd landed earlier. Hope ebbed away. The mental swell had turned into a breaker and dashed him onto a beach of despair, little rivulets of memory carving tiny valleys of emptiness around him. For the first time, he could think of nothing to do. Lay down and wait to wake up, or wait to die. He couldn't care.

"The Carpenter said you'd be back for payday. That's not a problem, but you could at least have tried to make it to Looking Glass. I told you how difficult it was to sort out wages here."

He spun around, and there, puffing slightly and leaning on a knarled walking stick, was The Egg.

"I've been following you for several miles, you know. Some of us don't have werewolf legs, or perhaps that should be werewalrus. You've still got that problem with personal colouration, you know. Still, here's your pay. You might have been on the set through irregular circumstances, but there's no reason why you shouldn't get the going rate." The Egg backed his words by reaching for his belt, unhooking a small bag - apparently made from potato sacking - and threw it at Steve's feet. It made a faint clinking noise when it landed, and the Egg turned as if to leave.

"Humpty! I was trying to get back to the hole in the mountain, I've been dumped here after a computer failure... I think. It was just a dream."

The Egg turned back.

"A dream, perhaps, but hardly just. I tried to find out who you were, and nobody's heard of you. You'll be pleased to hear that you're not mad either, the Central Possession Office denies your existence as well."

"So what was I doing?"

"Seems like some uncontrolled devil has been at you. I've filed a report - when it reaches the proper Authority I expect that sparks will fly. Expect a Visitation, some time within the next, oh, thousand years. If not before."

Steve could hear the capital letters in the Egg's words, and shuddered. He wasn't at all happy with the idea that whatever strange forces were in charge of this place should take an interest, least of all after a thousand years. He just wanted to wake up.

"I just want to wake up."

"Ah, this waking fixation. Won't that musical mapwork pull you out of it again? It seemed to work last time."

"I don't know. This last dream has been very strong; it wasn't at all dreamlike. I never felt strange, never remembered it was a dream. It was all so natural, until I... well, I think I died."

"Hmmm...." And the Egg twisted his stick, which turned out to be a shooting stick with a small seat on one end, and sat down on it in silence.

Five minutes or so passed. Steve could bear it no longer, and said "Well? Any ideas?"

"Ideas? Thousands. How you can claim to have a mind worth saving without having ideas is beyond me. But, unfortunately, none seem to be directly relevant to your situation. It's a good thing I've paid everyone today, I can spare you a little time. Perhaps one of the ideas will prove to be of use. I must think on this further." And the Egg fell silent again.

Presently, Steve picked up the small bag which had been thrown his way. It was heavy, and he tugged at the drawstring that held one end closed. Inside were five small, dull grey coins. He picked one out; it was inscribed with an ornate design on one side and *PaPu.99.999* on the other.

He didn't want to interrupt the Egg, but as that august ovoid was apparently engaged in an unproductive stare into space and Steve was very hungry, he decided that there was nothing to be lost.

"Excuse me?"

"Egg screws what?"

"No, pardon me."

"What have you done?"

"Interrupted you, I suppose. I'm sorry."

"Pardoned. But please don't do it again, there's a good chap."

And the Egg went back to a reverie.

"No, I'd like to ask a question."

"Don't learn very fast, do you? Oh well, what is it? If it's about waking, then I haven't come up with anything yet."

"It isn't. I was just wondering why the coins weren't shiny, gold or copper or anything. What do the inscriptions mean?"

"That is really two questions, but were I to answer just one I expect you'd interrupt once more. So it would be best for me were I to politely ignore your impoliteness and answer both." Steve waited, but the Egg had apparently said all he was going to. The far-away look came back into his eyes.

"And?"

"Ah. I can see that me being polite doesn't help, since you are determined to interrupt me once more anyway."

"But you didn't answer my questions."

"And complain at my responsiveness. Such lack of manners."

Another pause.

"Well?"

The Egg sighed in an aggrieved manner. "The coins are that colour because they are precious. Anyone can make shiny gold colours, or cupronickel; anyone but you humans who hold such things important. But paraplutonium is a little more inimitable. The number on the obverse is the purity. The design on the reverse is the seal of the Grand Elemental."

Steve was worried by this. "Paraplutonium? Is that like plutonium, the stuff we make bombs out of?"

"It is much the same, only stable and non-radioactive below paracritical mass. Above that, it's identical in behaviour to a much larger mass of your plutonium. Only nobody here much cares to make bombs. Which is why we make coins out of it - it discourages avarice and overcharging if you know that, should you be successful in your pecuniary greed, you will be no more than the centre of a very large crater. There are no millionaires around here."

"What's the paracritical mass?"

"Six coins."

"So if I got one more coin and put it in this bag, I would be blown up."

"Very quick. Also very dead."

"But every time I die, I wake up... perhaps."

"If you choose to take that option, you can. But it would only be fair on your fellow workers to give them a few minutes warning before attempting to escape as a cloud of radioactive, overheated, ionised gas."

"How can I get another coin, then?"

"I'm afraid that you can't, at least, not from us. You're lucky to get those, I argued that you deserved at least something for your inconvenience and since the standard wage is 5 coins and no less, it was the least we could give you. But now you know the rules, the only way you can get paid is by signing a contract and doing a good week's work."

"Can I?"

"You're not qualified. I believe we take apprentices on if they've had relevant experience, and I don't believe you've got that."

"So how can I get the experience?"

"My dear man" and the Egg took on the tone of an indulgent uncle explaining how the television controls work to a toddler for the fifth time "you get yourself a job. On-the-job work experience - it can't be beaten."

"But you won't give me the job without the experience?"

"Of course not. How can you expect to be able to do the work if you've got no idea of what's involved? This is the real world, not Alice in Wonderland."

Steve was silent. He was doing what his mother had always advised him to do (before she moved to North Dakota) - he was counting to ten.

"Perhaps I could sell you something," Steve said at length.

"That would indeed be a way of earning the extra coin you so desire. But I doubt that you have anything of value. You appear to be a naked, bedraggled, emancipated werewolf, er, walrus, and you are, by your own admission, stuck in Limbo which is composed of rocks, grass and not much else. I have no need of the services of one such as you - should I need rocks or grass I can turn up and take them away without charge from this very place without involving you in any way. Which would seem to cover all your options. I would likewise not advise you to ask for a loan - your prospects for repayment seem slight and since the purpose of the advance would be to remove yourself from the only place where I can prosecute repayment you would seem to be the very worst of bad risks."

This was a strong argument, and it was Steve's turn to fall silent. If only he wasn't so hungry, perhaps he could think better. Nothing to eat in Limbo, except grass and rocks. But of course...

"Tell me, Mr Egg."

"What, pray?"

"Do you enjoy chocolate ice cream?"

"Indeed I do. However, it is not common at the moment; were I to move jobs I could indulge my tastes in that direction further, but currently the supplies are irregular to invisible."

Steve was beginning to enjoy this, and began to imitate the Egg's precise mode of address. "So if I were to provide for you to have access to a large quantity of a fresh supply of that substance, you might consider it worth the cost of a coin."

"I certainly would. I can see no way in which you could offer such a service, though, and would be disinclined to pay in advance for something so unlikely."

"But if I provided you with a sample of the chocolate ice cream, and therewith the means to acquire more, you would pay me once those means were revealed."

"Most certainly, I would."

"And if that were to happen now, you would have the wherewithal to fulfil your side of the contract?"

"In cash, and immediately. But I still cannot see why this supposition is worth pursuing. It is a matter of purest fantasy."

"That's what we're paid for," said Steve, with the air of a traffic cop finding an out-of-date tax disk

on a Porsche which has just escaped a speed trap.

The Egg smiled, but, with an effort, repressed it and frowned instead. "You have a point. And, if I shall have the ice cream, you shall have the money."

"Then you need do nothing but observe." Steve stood up and went over to the nearest rock. It was quite small, and he picked it up without too much effort. Oh, he hoped that this would work... He walked over to another, larger rock, and with all the strength he had left dashed one against the other. There was a loud crack, but both remained apparently intact.

"I have heard of fire being brought forth from two rocks struck together" said the Egg with a deeper frown, "but never ice cream. Of any flavour. If you have nothing further to distract me with, I shall take my leave."

"Wait, please..." said Steve. He looked at the rock he was holding, and saw that the outer rock layer was cracked. But the tough, internal skin still seemed to be holding - perhaps one more hit...

He brought the rock down again, less hard but with as much determination as he could muster. It hit, waited for a moment and then splodged. Chocolate ice cream flew everywhere, a blob over Steve and a large mass landing just before the Egg.

"My goodness" said the Egg. "It would appear that you have indeed produced something which looks, prima face, to be chocolate ice cream. However, looks can be deceptive." But he was obviously very much surprised. He stood up, pulled his stick from underneath and poked it in the sludge in front of him. He sniffed at the end. "It smells much as I can remember it should." And extending a small pink tongue "it tastes as it should. I'm sure that this isn't as it should be. I shall have to make enquiries." He carefully wiped the end of the stick on the grass, and made, once more, to leave.

"Hey - hold on there. What about our bargain?" said Steve.

"What, even when it involves some dark magic that changes the whole structure of Limbo? I'm not at all sure you're being completely open with me, young er, Normally."

"But a deal's a deal. I haven't hidden anything from you - I discovered the contents of the rock on my first trip here. I don't know anything about it not being normal!"

The Egg sighed. "This is all most irregular. But then, you seem to promote irregularity. One coin is not such a price to pay if it removes you from my ever-lengthening list of problems. Mind that you don't place it in the bag for half-an-hour. I shall try and warn anyone likely to be inconvenienced that a small nuclear explosion is about to occur. Goodbye, but, hopefully, not 'au revoir'."

And so saying, he pulled a small, grey coin from his waistcoat pocket and threw it onto the ground before turning away and striding off.

Steve walked over and picked up the coin. "Thanks, but how..." he stopped in mid sentence as he looked around for the Egg, who had vanished. How was he going to know when half-an-hour was up? Oh well, there was always the ice cream.

It tasted foul. Perhaps it had been going off since he was last here, but the Egg had seemed satisfied with the flavour. If the Egg had ever tasted the stuff before, he'd have known that it was wrong. Perhaps he hadn't.

Steve waited for longer than he wanted, and then, with a good deal of trepidation, took the bag of coins in one hand and the single one in the other. It wasn't everyday that he deliberately set off an atomic bomb in his hands, and he wasn't sure how it would work. Would he have to just drop the coin in, or would he have to line them up, or hit them against a rock or something? Oh well, only one way to test a lavatory... He closed his eyes and put the sixth coin in the sackcloth bag.

Nothing happened. He looked inside, and there were the six coins, nestling together but showing no signs of nuclear fission. He took them out, one by one, and put them on a nearby flat rock. They were identical. He picked them up and arranged them like a tube of mints. Nothing. They didn't even get warm. But he did.

"You blasted Egg" he shouted (or words to that effect). "You've ripped me off and left me here to live." So yelling, he threw the coins in anger against the rock, and barely noticed the white oblivion that engulfed them, and it, and him.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 18 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

He woke up. His whole body hurt, as if he'd just run a three-mile race, sweat a cold sea around his skin. He was panting. His heart was beating fast - for one cold moment he thought that it was going to give up - the slow slowing of body and thoughts was a painful release. The clock radio was playing, for a moment the sounds swirled like dead leaves on a windy street, but then they slipped back into music and the world was right again. He lay in bed, not daring to move, just glad it was all over.

Some time later, he looked at the clock. It was getting late - although he'd woken up at around his normal time, the dream had taken some getting over. Trying to get up, he felt as if he'd been awake all night. No energy. Still, he'd gone to work with worse hangovers than this... he stood up, dressed, and left before the postman arrived. He wondered how well the post was working, and whether the pillbox he'd sent off earlier had arrived yet.

Someone else who looked the worse for wear that day in the office was Emily. Dull eyes and uncombed hair, she countered all enquiries into her health with a curt 'Couldn't sleep'. Which was true enough, but a little like Neil Armstrong telling his wife he'd 'been for a stroll'.

The moment she'd felt the Force brush against her soulstuff, she knew it was going to be a battle for survival. Even if she won, she thought as she ran through her training for encounters such as this, the shockwaves of the battle would bring the Guardians in hours. While there was nothing to stop her defending herself while in exile, they'd naturally want to know how it knew she was there. The evidence would be all too plain that she'd been meddling with a mortal.

Time enough to worry about that later, as the blackness seemed to fall in upon her thoughts, slowing every action as a fly struggles in honey. First step: become hungry. Empty. Feel nothing but an overpowering craving for substance. This had two advantages - firstly, the Force would become confused, unable to tell if it had engulfed her soul and already made it part of itself and its eternal hunger. Secondly, even if it could distinguish her as a thing apart, it would reconsider taking such an unattractive and painful morsel. The danger with this, apart from it not working, was that she in turn would not be able to tell if they had started to merge or whether the trick had worked.

She hung in a web of her own anguished, forceful desire, not daring to feel for the Other, until she could bear the waiting and the hurt no longer. She sensed around her - nothing... had it gone, wait, what was...

With a psychic roar of triumph, it smothered her and started to feed. ©57One last, desperate effort. She took the tunnelling tendrils that wrapped so warmly around her thoughts, and with every ounce of power she had, forced them back into the scintillating, faceted darkness which hung over her. The pain as they wrenched away from her mind was too much, and she blacked out for the first time in three thousand years.

She woke up an instant later, and knew that, if she was awake, she had succeeded. Through the shattered glass of her mind, she felt... nothing. With a great effort, she scanned out as far and as fast as she could, and caught the rapidly expanding shell of daemonic disruption as it spread, like the shock from a bomb, from the centre. The Soulseeker, in its blind feeding frenzy, had started to devour itself and fallen through to another, far-distant dimension as it contracted past a point.

Soon, she knew, that ripple would be noticed and its origin in space and time plotted back by the Guardians. When that happened, they would turn up and find her. Against them she knew of no defence, so she had to sort her story out, and clean up the loose ends as soon as possible. She was sure she could convince them that this fight was, if not innocent, then just a mistake, but only if Steve was not around to provide annoying evidence to the contrary. They might not pick him up, but it was too great a risk. In any case, he was responsible for getting her involved in the fight in the first place. And so, she reasoned, he should be got rid of as soon as possible. Then the fatigue hit her, and she rested as best she could.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 19 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The next day, in the office, she spent planning. Steve, she was glad to see, was showing the effects of the dreams well - it would have been nice to play him along a just a little more but there really was no time.

He took advantage of an absence of Stewpot to try and read the books that the doctor had given him. Through great mists of words he began to see what the authors were so concerned about - if what they said was true there was no reality to cling to. What he said and did everyday was as much fiction propagated by his mind as what he dreamed, with the exception that there might be a little more truth in those things he did based on immediate experience. Drop a stone on your toe in real life, and you'll limp for days. Do the same in a dream, and you'll wake up with foot intact.

But what, the books asked, if you dream the stone falling and the next time you dream your foot is still busted? What then is the difference?

His head hurt. His tooth hurt. About the only part of him that wasn't hurting was his foot, and he wasn't too happy about hurling rocks at it to please some long-dead author who was looking for an excuse to stay in bed all day. Still, given his vivid, weird dreams, the ideas put forward were otherwise attractive. By and large, he preferred the reality with television and fast food; even if it did get a little boring he didn't seem to die so often.

It was just past lunchtime when a considerably happier Emily came up to him.

"I hope you haven't forgotten the funfair, Steve. I am looking forward to going."

He was surprised "I'm really not feeling so good, and since you were looking much the same I had sort of assumed that you didn't want to go. But if you're still keen..."

"Oh yes, just the thing to sort me out. Helterskelter, candyfloss, dodgems. It all sounds like great fun" and so many chances for an accident. Dangerous places, funfairs.

"Fine - do you want me to pick you up at half-past seven?"

"Half seven it is. See you then." And she almost skipped away. Sue, who'd been watching this, said "No wonder you two looked so knackered this morning. What have you been getting up to after dark, then?"

Steve smiled. "I wouldn't dream of getting up to anything with Emily."

A little later, the phone rang. "Steve? It's Mike, Dr Jacobsen. I got your pill bottle this morning, and took it to a friend over at the police labs who shoved it through analysis. Have you any idea where it came from?"

"No, like I said, Emily gave it to me. Why, what was in it?"

"He doesn't know. Whatever it was, it seems to have broken down fairly recently, but the mix of chemicals in the powder that was left is astonishing. Not to say lethal. That's just the twenty percent he can recognise."

"You're saying that it's poisonous?"

"We can't tell what it was like when you took those tablets; obviously it wasn't a simple toxin."

But the number and potency of compounds we've found mean that it could've done almost anything. I think you ought to go for a full checkup as soon as possible, if not this afternoon then tomorrow morning. And find out where that friend of yours got the tablets; they've got us very puzzled and they shouldn't be riding around in someone's handbag."

"Well, I'll ask. Do you want to see me again soon?"

"Depends on what comes out of the checkup. Give Dr Wharmby at Freedom Fields a call on 342134 as soon as you can, and let me know afterwards. Did you get that number?"

Steve grabbed a pencil and turned another Stewpot memo over. He scribbled down the details. "342134. Gottit, thanks. Oh, by the way, those books were interesting, but I don't think I understood the half of it."

"Good, that's something else to talk about when we meet next. Have you had any more dreams?"

"Yes - another one last night. It was a bad one, I remember I died three times. If this was a video game, it'd be over by now."

"Thanks, and try not to be so morbid." Dr Jacobsen chuckled. "See you soon, and please try and find out about those tablets."

"I'll try. Bye."

He rang up the hospital; Dr Jacobsen had been in touch and told Dr Wharmby about his case - could he make it this evening at five?

That sorted out, he went in search of Emily. She was in the postroom, chatting to Sue.

"Emily, I'm going to have to cancel tonight, I'm afraid."

"Oh dear. Why?"

"I've just been on the phone to Dr Jacobsen, he'd like me to have a full checkup as soon as possible and I'm in for 5 o'clock. It was those pills you gave me that are worrying them - where on earth did you get them? It sounds like they gave the machines at the police forensic labs indigestion and the chemists there apoplexy."

"What the devil did you send them to the police for? I thought you said you'd taken them." Emily realised, just a little too late, that anger was not going to be helpful. Sue, sensing a row, slipped out of the room but stayed just the other side of the door.

"Er, well, I took the tablets, but I had the bottle left, with some powder in the bottom. The doctor wanted to see it, so I couldn't see anything wrong with sending it to him. You do know what was in them, don't you? According to the doctor there are all sorts of nasty things, and he's got no idea where you got them from."

"I'm sorry, but I really can't remember. It might even have been abroad, I was in Madrid on holiday last year and got flu then. I suppose I bought them there, I must have just gone into a drug store and asked for something. I'm not a walking laboratory, you know."

"Sorry, but they sound quite worried. Can you remember the name of the place, the street or anything?"

"No I can't. Look, it was last year, I had flu and I'm not even sure that was where I got them. Perhaps if you can get the bottle back I'll be able to remember a bit more. When I see it, you

understand?"

"I'll ask, but I don't know where it is now."

"Oh well, do the best you can. So what do they think it's done to you?"

"Dr Jacobsen didn't say. But it didn't sound nice."

"They've probably got their samples mixed up. I knew a chemist who worked for the police once, he was as likely to declare tap water as aluminium sulphate as get it right" and if the samples weren't mixed up, they soon would be, she decided. To Hell with careful planning - once the shock wave from last night's little tussle reached the Guardians, they weren't going to be worried about a few traces of telekinesis.

"That seems the sanest thing anyone's said all day..." said Steve, hopefully.

"So are you going to leave that bothersome hospital appointment and come to the fair?"

"No, I don't think I should. They cancelled all sorts of things to fit me in, and if Dr Jacobsen thinks it's important then I really should do it."

"It'll be really embarrassing when they find nothing wrong with you, you know."

"That'll be the doctor's fault, anyway. If it means they'll stop these dreams, it has to be worth it."

"Can't persuade you, can I?"

"No, sorry. Tomorrow evening?"

"Why not. I'm sure we'll get there in the end..." She smiled again, which relieved Steve. He had been worried by her earlier burst of anger, but everything seemed normal again.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 20 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

He turned up at the hospital a few minutes early. After sitting in a rather draughty waiting room for rather longer, Dr Wharmby turned up. He was dressed in the customary open white coat and carrying the compulsory clipboard, but his shiny head, chubby demeanour and slightly greying moustache dispelled any impression of a junior practitioner.

"Mr Trevathen? I've just had the analysis of those tablets from the police labs, and they look an amazing mixture to be taking for 'flu. Do you know where they came from?"

"I'm afraid that the girl who gave them to me thinks she bought them last year in Spain, on holiday or something. If you've got the bottle, I could show it to her again; that might trigger her memory."

"That's a shame, and I think that the person at the forensic labs kept the container for more tests. One of the problems he had was that there wasn't very much to analyse. Still, to symptoms. Have you had any symptoms like flushing, sweating, tremors? Sleeplessness?"

"No, quite the opposite. I've been having no trouble sleeping, but I've been getting the strangest dreams. I wake up all sweaty, and the last one I ended up stiff as a post, but during the daytime there's been no problem."

"Yes, Dr Jacobsen mentioned that you'd been seeing him about disturbing dreams, but that's really his province. But he thought - and I agree with him, looking at this list - that there might have been some neurological damage. Something that cocktail of chemicals could have done to your brain. There's also the chance that there's a long-term hallucinogenic effect, but I'd have expected that to have faded by now. Still, there is something going on and perhaps I can help find it. Have you ever had an X-ray or scan done of your head, or treatment for any nerve problems?"

"Nothing, well, I did get hit on the head by a stone when I was about nine but I don't think they did anything more than put me to bed for a day. Certainly no X-rays."

The doctor pouted a somewhat blubbery lip. "They should have checked for a fracture, at least. There might have been something which went wrong then, and only recently got triggered. Have you had any bumps to the head lately, any shocks?"

Steve told him about the dentist, and that the first dream he had was while under the gas.

"Perhaps we're onto something here. Right, on with the show. First, I'm just going to run some standard checks on the obvious stuff, reactions and so on. Roll up your right trouser leg, will you, and sit down there."

From a pocket, the doctor produced a small steel and rubber mallet, which he brought down sharply on Steve's kneecap. His leg twitched to order.

"Seems OK, for starters. Right, if you could look over my shoulder?" The doctor pulled up a chair and sat in front of Steve, bare leg and all. He shone a pocket flashlight into Steve's eyes, one at a time, covering it up, moving it around and generally getting a good dazzle in.

"Watch the light now, please."

He swung it from left to right, and watched Steve's eyeballs swivel. It must be fun to be a doctor, thought Steve.

"Do you use a computer at all? Either one at home or at work?"

"There's one at work I use a couple of days a week, why, has it affected my eyes?"

"I'd be surprised, but does the screen flicker at all?"

"Not normally, but it was pretty bad this morning. I wondered about calling the company and getting the thing fixed, but someone else who uses it couldn't see anything wrong."

"That ties in with something these tests are showing. Your visual reactions are much, much faster than normal, and that's most unusual. Some people are like that, and they tend to be not only able to see things like the flicker on video screens and televisions, but aware to such an extent that they can't use them. Most people don't notice it, because the screens are designed to be faster than the normal persistence of vision. But you haven't noticed that before?"

"No, I've been using computers since school and never given them a second thought"

"Well, that's one thing that's changed. I can't think what could cause it, though, generally response time slows if anything goes wrong. Would you mind if I gave you a scan?"

"A what?"

"A scan. It's an electronic way of peeking at your brain without having to actually slice the top off and wade through the grey matter" oh great, thought Steve, another doctor who gets all chummy on you" but it's completely harmless, painless and rather relaxing."

"Can't see why not."

"Thought you wouldn't. We'll end up with a nice picture of various slices of your brain. The NMR scanner is usually tied up solidly, but this evening I've got it at five-thirty, and it's almost that now. I'm glad you made it. Come on, it's just down the corridor."

The doctor was warming up, getting more enthusiastic as, Steve supposed, his case was grabbing the guy's imagination. Steve rolled down his trouser leg and had to hop out of the room to catch up with the portly medico as he strode down the passageway.

"Here we are" through some swingdoors and into a room filled with large white boxes. There was what looked like a computer with a few displays, a large hole with some more boxes arranged around it and a couch worryingly near. At the computer sat a white-coated woman, who was tapping away at the keyboard.

"Problems, Sally?"

"No, I'm just recalibrating the thing. It should be ready in a moment."

"It's devilishly clever" expounded the doctor to Steve "Imagine all the water molecules in your body are like tiny magnets, which they are in a way."

That's silly, thought Steve, water isn't attracted to a magnet. But let the man get on with it.

"This box pumps an amazingly intense magnetic field into your brain, and makes all the water molecules twitch. It then turns its magnets off, but since the water carries on twitching it can scan through and find out how much water is where. Different sorts of brain tissue have different amounts of water, so we can, or rather the computer can, work out what bits are where. NMR stands for Nuclear Magnetic Resonance. Good, isn't it?"

"Sounds... fascinating. Won't all those magnetic fields and twitching water affect my brain?"

"No, not for longer than a few nanoseconds. But take your watch off, they don't tend to like the scanner much."

"Ready when you are - could I have the patient's name and details, please? Just so the computer can label the pictures" that was addressed to Steve, who was getting more worried by the moment.

"Right, if you could lie down, head towards the aperture, on the bench please. This will take a few minutes..."

Steve lay down, and the machine slowly pulled him in. Apart from various hums, whirrs and the clatter of the keyboard, he couldn't hear or see anything. The bench whirred, and he slid out again.

"Can I sit up now?"

"Yes, yes..." said Dr Wharmby, who promptly went back to discussing the screen in front of him with the operator.

"Are you sure? It looks like the machine's up the spout, that is not a possible result. Look at the thalamus, and the hippocampus. There's absolutely no sign of the corpus callosum. Can we have a look at the back... I mean, where's the resolution on the visual cortex? Your scanner isn't working properly."

"It is. It's calibrated, it's produced ten good scans today and it'll do twelve more tomorrow. Whatever's wrong, it isn't the machine. Look, the next patient is due in five minutes and I have to recalibrate again. You come back in half an hour and see what we get from this next scan. OK?"

"I know what I'll see. I'll see a nonsensical picture, just like this one."

"Well, wait and see. Meanwhile, here's your hardcopy."

"I'm sorry, Mr Trevathen, but there seems to be something wrong with the machinery" said the doctor, to a frigid stare from the operator. "If you don't mind waiting for a while, we'll go away and do some more tests, and then we'll come back here to see if we can salvage anything from the run."

But when they came back, the machine was working perfectly. The doctor called in another doctor, who called in another, and they huddled around the machine, conversing in whispers, pencils and fingers jabbing at the screen whereon Steve's odd mental apparatus was displayed.

"What is going on?" asked Steve, who was by now scared good and proper. "Is it the machine, or have I got something wrong with me?"

Dr Wharmby stood up, and walked over. The other two doctors looked at him, at Steve, and then went back to the screen.

"It doesn't look like the machine, I'm afraid. You've either got the oddest brain structure that's ever been seen in a normal person, or what looks like a viral infection that's affected parts of your neural tissue. But that's not possible either, you'd be on a life-support system if what we're seeing was true. We'd like to keep you in overnight, and take some long-term EEG readings."

"This is serious, isn't it?" said Steve, disbelieving it all. "Is it anything to do with the pills Emily gave me?"

"That's something else that doesn't make sense, those mysterious pills. We checked the bottle again, and all we found was aspirin. Oh my goodness.."

Steve felt the room move, tried to grab the table to steady himself and fell over. He never felt the floor, instead, he was falling... falling...

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 21 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Emily was watching from her bedsit. Something about the scanner had stopped her snooping on Steve's thoughts, which worried her. But she was terrified when she saw the pictures on the scanner screen, and knew that she was in too deep to let the game go on any further. With a blazing burst of telepathic power, she reached into his neurochemistry and took the controls, blacking him out and preparing to send his mind into a searing, fatal endless loop of false sensation. Three minutes, and he'd be dead, three minutes which would seem like an eternity of pain and confusion to the despicable human.

So intent was she on finishing the job, that her normally alert psychic detection systems were turned off. Ignored. But even if she'd been watching, there'd have been nothing she could have done as the Guardians swooped into Plymouth, intent on having words about various matters brought to their attention. What they found her doing made them set off alarm bells deep into the Underworld, and they took immediate action.

"Zelloripus, daemon of Chael, banished to this place for crimes and misdeeds of infinite evil, do you know what you are doing?"

Emily shrieked. She was hanging in a blazing whiteness, with three Guardians glaring at her from a high altar. There was one New Revisionist Daemon, a Shivalist and an Elemental. This was not going to be easy...

"We say again, and demand of you an answer: Zelloripus, daemon of..."

"OK, OK. I got it the first time. Do you really have to be so longwinded about it?"

"Answer the question, Zelloripus. Speak carefully, for your crime would seem to go beyond banishment. Every word you say will be weighed."

"I know what I was doing. I was trying to save the soul of a poor mortal, who had been grievously affected by a recent brush with a Soulseeker. You might have noticed the shockwave of my victory over that monster."

The New Revisionist Daemon, with culled horns and a silver tailsheath, stood up.

"Enough. We indeed noted the passing of the Soulseeker, and there is no blame attached to that. But to manipulate the affairs of men in any case is a dire crime; to do it mischievously and for pure delight is worse still, and to attempt to mislead the servants of Omnipotence is the highest possible sin. We have here reports from fields afar of the unwarranted intrusion of Steven Trevathen in several places, producing in one instance a complete rending of literary space."

"Are you aware" continued the Shivalist, bronze skin awash with purple vapour and vibrant with purple rage. "that the entire work of Sir Ron Rharhay, and indeed the man himself, has been removed from the world in which you were banished? Your Trevathen changed a plot in mid-stream, creating an irreconcilable discontinuity. As a result, the country called the United Kingdom no longer has a television industry, and all the gaps in the bookshelves caused by the man's disappearance replaced by those of a newly created anagram, Harry Harrison. This alone has kept an entire division of reality maintenance people, under the direct guidance of the Omniscient, busy for an eon."

"Solves unemployment" said Emily, who by now was looking for an escape route and wanted to

get the Guardians as rabid as possible. "If that's all you've got to say, I really should be getting back to my patient."

Even she was impressed by the thunderclap from the Shivalist, who seemed otherwise unable to comment. The Elemental took up the strain from within its circle of black light.

"I would be inclined, were it not obviously untrue, to consider you insane and unfit to continue to enjoy your person and personality. As it is, your feeble efforts to distract us will serve only to seal your fate even harder. And what do you have to say to the way in which the mortal, under severe pressure directly attributable to your tamperings, caused a small paranuclear explosion in Limbo, drowning an entire sect of rock-worshippers in molten, rancid chocolate ice cream?"

"If I'd known, I'd have made sure it was vanilla. Anyway, I thought I was supposed to be read the charges first, instead of having to listen to these admittedly interesting anecdotes."

The New Revisionist Daemon motioned to his livid colleagues to keep quiet.

"Then be still and listen, Zelloripus, daemon of Chael, to these the charges of gross temporal and literal manipulation with which you are currently accused.

One. That you did cause to melt one hundred and seventeen Giuseppe's Famous Italian Ice Cream cones, causing a cumulative seven point six units of distress to infant mortals.

Two. That you did cause to materialise twelve grams of magically potentiated material, with intent to render the mind of a mortal susceptible to ulterior influence.

Three. That you did cause a mortal to ingest the material of the second charge, under the impression that it was harmless medicine of mortal product.

Four..."

And the sonorous voice droned on. Emily, by now fully restored to her old self, was considering her choices. If she gave in, she would most likely be transformed into a rock upon the outskirts of the Universe, her spirit only released when the next Cycle started. Ugh. There were other options, including offering to be transmogrified into something insipid and good, but they all effectively involved the death of the being sometimes called Zelloripus.

"...Thirteen. That with evil intent, you did provide material of a dangerous nature to the mortal of the third charge while in the state precipitated by the fifth charge, in order to facilitate his ultimate mental demise..."

So she had to escape. There was no record of an escapee from the Guardians, but, she suspected, if it ever happened it wouldn't exactly make the front page. They had their PR sorted out, at least...

Hell, if she could escape from the Soulseeker she could get out of anything. And what worked once might well work again.

With renewed attentiveness, she listened to the New Revisionist Daemon.

"...And twenty-two, that you did attempt to mislead this ad-hoc judicial committee as to your involvement in charges one to twenty-one.

Zelloripus, daemon of Chael, have you heard and understood?"

This was her chance. Best scared voice.

"Yes, I hear and understand, Guardians of the Mortal Coil."

"So what have you to say to these most serious of charges? And be warned, our patience is at an end."

"Now I've heard the list of my heinous crimes, I realise what evil I have done and the punishments which rightly await me." (all true so far) "But, and I wish you to consider this most carefully, when I saw what desperate straits the mortal had been led to, where the finest medical men were baffled and he himself was in a state of some anguish, I was trying to put right as soon as possible my mistake." (also true, where my mistake was leaving the evidence alive) "If you had arrived some seconds later, you would have come across a far less serious situation." For me.

"Even if you are telling the truth, and it seems as if you are," said the Elemental with an element of puzzlement in its voice, "the control of mortal affairs is a terrible thing to contemplate. Your continued and direct influence on this mortal's mind, which we personally observed, was in itself a crime, no matter what the reason. However, repentance is a laudable state and we shall consider this."

Things were not going quite as planned, and Emily suddenly realised that she was arguing for her life.

"But can I not finish the job? Ten more seconds, and I can restore the mortal to a satisfactory state." Emily was getting earnest. "Otherwise, the medical men will probe his brain and kill him, revealing the way in which I sought to control his mind. The men of this place are no longer believers in daemonic possession, they have their science and they can understand many things. Not letting me repair the damage could be infinitely more dangerous than all of the things I have mistakenly done."

"No!" The Shivalist rumbled and thundered "It is written that none of this will be allowed. Even we are forbidden to exert the smallest influence, for the consequences are unforeseeable except to the Omniscient. You will leave the repercussions of your action to the reality maintainers."

"But the poor man will die!" Steady on, she thought, overdoing it won't help. "If you were ten seconds later, the damage would be undone. If I had decided to act ten seconds sooner, the damage would be undone. What are ten seconds in all Eternity? Let me take the ten seconds now, and then you can do with me what you will, but don't send me to a Cycle of punishment knowing that I was ten seconds from saving the victim of my misguided deeds."

"That is forbidden!"

"Hold on" The New Revisionist Daemon was, Emily decided, the stickler for the rulebook amongst the three. Rah for the rulebook, and rah rah for bureaucrats. "We have some discretion. Where we observe manipulation, if it is immediately obvious that a delayed action will improve the situation in a material way, we can hold off. Providing we send a message to that effect back to Base."

"But we have acted." This from the Elemental.

"We have not passed sentence. And it will not involve us tampering, there my friend is entirely correct in his interpretation of the rules. This discussion could indeed have taken place ten seconds later, where the only effect would be that the human would survive."

"Can we be sure of that?" asked the Elemental.

"No, of course. We have only the accused's word on this, and that is most undoubtedly not to

be trusted. But that does not alter the facts. If the accused lies, then it will be immediately obvious to us as soon as she starts to change things. We can then remove her, and leave events untouched. If, on the other hand, she is correct and truthful, then it is a small change and entirely beneficial. Either way, she cannot escape."

"It is forbidden!" But the Shivalist was less sure, and the cloud of smoke shrank slightly.

"I can see no flaws in that logic" said the Elemental "I agree to the accused's proposition."

"I too" said the New Revisionist Daemon "Which means we have a majority and can act. Do you wish to make it unanimous, friend?"

The Shivalist was quiet for a moment. "No. Let it stand that I do not consider the benefits to be gained equal to the risks of believing such a daemon."

"So it is" said the New Revisionist Daemon. "Zelloripus, you have ten seconds in which to do that of which you spoke. But we are watching, and any transgression will be instantly punished."

"Thank you" said Emily. And smiled.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Chapter 22 ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

In the hospital, the surgeons were scrubbing up while staring at the scans and some more recent X-rays.

"I can't say what we'll find when we go in" said one. "But if it is a new kind of tumour, I'm not happy that we'll be able to do much about it."

"It could still be a combination of an embolism and viral infection" said another, "but we can't wait for the samples to come back. We have to open him up."

"Whatever, it'll make a marvellous paper" said the third, and the other two agreed. "Ready? Right, let's go."

Emily felt her powers returned by her captors. She slipped away from the Guardians, and stealthily enmeshed her mind in Steve's. In so doing, she partially revived him. Now was no time for subtlety.

"Oh no" thought Steve. "Another dream."

"You evildoer!" thundered the New Revisionist Daemon. "You have lied - a new charge for the list, as well as such brazen tampering as has ever been seen. Return at once, or we shall remove you with no thought for your comfort."

"No..." said Emily. "Remove me and the mortal dies at once. That's meddling. And you can't do that - ask your smouldering Samurai, Have a nice day, now."

Ignoring the violet wave of anger, she shrank down past Steve's dreaming mind to consider her position and plan her escape. Perhaps she could take over his body, if she could take over his mind...

Steve, still unconscious, was wheeled into the operating theatre. The fight for his life was on.