

DEATHSTALKER CODA

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Last night I dreamed of Lewis Deathstalker.

He never wanted to be King. He never wanted to be the Champion. He only ever wanted to do his duty; to protect the Innocent and punish the guilty. But he fell in love with his best friend's fiancée, and was in turn betrayed by another friend. They took away his good name, and made him an Outlaw.

Deathstalker luck. Always bad.

I saw him gather friends and allies, and set out to raise an army to overthrow the forces of evil, like another Deathstalker before him, and I wanted to warn him that heroes have a tendency to die young, Hid Moody. I saw old friends return from the past, and legends walk (ill history once more. Stories left unfinished have a way of enforcing their own endings.

In my dream I saw planets burning in the long night, and armies of the undead overrunning the cities of men.

All in a dream . . . and all so very long ago. Or maybe it was just yesterday.

All stories come to an end, in Time.

ONE

DEALING WITH OLD BUSINESS,

AND NEW

Owen Deathstalker was in a coma, and everyone else was panicking. On the planet Haden, deep down in the man-made crater called the Pit, in the steel corridors men had built to surround and contain the Madness Maze, a lot had happened in a short time. That re-Owned hero and legend Owen Deathstalker had returned from the If mi, walked out of the Maze with his descendant Lewis, worked a UMBER of quite remarkable miracles, and then gathered up the INDS of everyone present to take a fast trip across Space in order to tserve the Terror close up. Unfortunately, that most ancient and Win I destroyer of worlds and civilisations turned out to be, in some yet unexplained way, Owen's long-lost love. Hazel d'Ark. Now Vcryone was back in their right bodies again, but Owen was curled p in a foetal ball, eyes squeezed tight shut, dead to the world and 0,11 ing about three feet above the gleaming steel floor. Everyone Isr had since given themselves up to alarm and confusion and lying very hard not to wet themselves.

As Jesamine was fond of saying: Some days things wouldn't go right if you put a gun to their head.

The AIs of Shub were the only ones to remain calm and unruffled; although admittedly it was hard to tell the difference between a calm and excited robot, when they all had featureless blue steel faces. iSIII, for the moment half a dozen of them were surrounding Owen's hovering body in an honour guard, and politely but firmly refusing to let anyone get too close. (This followed an understandable but regrettable incident where Brett Random had climbed onto Owen's body and pounded on his chest with both hands, shrieking Wake up, you bastard!

The renowned con man, thief and famed substance abuser was now striding up and down the corridor, all but bouncing off the steel walls, waving his fists in the air and loudly declaring that he'd always known no good would come of meddling with the Madness Maze. His face was flushed, his lean angular body practically crackled with frustrated energy, and his language was getting really distressing. An awful thought struck him, and he froze in mid step before suddenly whirling round to glare at Owen's unresponsive floating body.

'Wait a minute! Wait just one goddamned minute! Is everyone who's gone through the Madness Maze going to turn into a Terror eventually? Are we all going to end up as galaxy-devouring monsters? Why is everyone looking at me like that? It's a reasonable question.'

'It's a totally unnerving question, and quite probably the last thing I need to think about right now!' said Jesamine Flowers. 'Aren't things bad enough as they are? I can feel one of my heads coming on.' The blonde diva's famously beautiful face had gone blotchy with shock and stress, and she'd clasped her hands together in front of her to stop them from trembling. Lewis tried to put a comforting arm across her shoulders, and she shrugged him off almost angrily as she glared at the comatose Owen. 'Damn you, Owen bloody Death-stalker! You can't just drop a bombshell like that on us and then run off to hide inside yourself! Wake up! Lewis; make him wake up!'

'Don't look at me', said Lewis. 'I'm the idiot who thought coming here might actually help us with our problems. Instead, we seem to have acquired a whole bunch of new ones.' He leaned back against the metal wall, his muscular arms folded across his barrel chest, his famously ugly features creased in thoughtful lines. 'If the Terror really is (or was) Hazel d'Ark ... If that is what the Maze's power finally turns you into ... Then I may have made a real error of judgement in bringing Owen back from the dead. We could end up with two Terrors on our hands, and I think I'd like to go and sit down in a corner and cry for a while, if that's all right with everyone.'

'Oh no you don't,' Brett said immediately. 'You got us into this mess, it's up to you to get us out of it!'

'Maybe ... if we were to put Owen back into the Maze,' said Jesamine. 'Maybe that would ... freeze him as he is, or something.'

'I don't think that would work,' said Lewis.

'It might! We could push or tug him, or ... !'

'No, I meant: I don't think the Maze works that way. Once it's finished with someone, it shoves them right out the nearest exit. Goodbye, off you go, don't forget to write. Remember?'

'No,' said Jesamine, looking away. 'I don't remember anything about being in the Maze. I don't think it wanted me to. Only Deathstalkers get to know the secrets of the Maze.'

'I could always kill Owen,' said Rose Constantine, and everyone turned to look at her. She looked calmly back at them, standing unnaturally still and poised as she always did, the tall cold killer in her bloodred leathers, with dark hair and darker eyes. Her crimson mouth moved in something like a smile as she contemplated murder. 'When in doubt, cutting your enemy's head off and using it as a football usually puts an end to most problems. I can do it, if you want. I'm not scared of Owen Deathstalker.'

'Yes, but that's because you're a psychopath,' Brett said kindly. 'Even in a coma, the Deathstalker is still undoubtably the most dangerous thing you'll ever meet.'

'I know,' said Rose. 'I like a challenge. Just the thought of killing the legendary Owen Deathstalker gets me all hot.' The red leathers creaked loudly as her bosom swelled.

'I want to go home,' said Brett. 'I don't belong here, I really don't.'

'In any case,' the main Shub robot said politely, 'we would not allow you to try to harm the Deathstalker. He is under our protection, now and always. We owe him so much. You are all becoming unduly concerned. There is no evidence to suggest that anyone oilier than Hazel d'Ark will ever become a Terror. We were among the last to see her alive, two hundred years ago, and she was then all ready half mad with loss and grief. Only an insane mind, backed by the Maze's power, could become something like the Terror.'

'And I wouldn't let you touch him either', said John Silence, and most people jumped because they'd forgotten he was there. The man who was once Captain Silence of the old Imperial Navy, and more recently Samuel Chevron, notable trader and confidant of Kings, w.is .H'tu.illy r.ilher quid ,ind ordinary looking, considering blend imo the background •)! g.iilu-iings, ,ind preferred il that way.

'May I remind you all that there is at present a Fleet of hundreds of Imperial starcruisers in orbit over this world? They came here to wipe us all out, and only the appearance of the blessed Owen Deathstalker stopped them. The Captains of those ships are currently waiting for him to tell them what to do next, and I really don't think they're going to settle for anyone but him. I wouldn't.'

The argument staggered on for some time, with voices rising and falling and going nowhere fast, but Lewis stopped listening. He studied Owen's floating form and calm face, and made himself consider a number of unpalatable thoughts. He didn't know what he'd expected would happen once he'd brought Owen back from the dead, but this certainly wasn't it. He'd hoped that having Owen back would help sort things out, make his way clearer. That Owen would know immediately what to do, and would step forward to take over. Then Lewis could set aside the responsibility he'd so reluctantly shouldered. But instead, now he had even more things to worry about. Most definitely including the possibility that what Owen had just discovered had been too much for him; a shock too great for even a legendary hero to bear. He could be catatonic ... he could even be dying again. Lewis edged around the arguing group, and quietly mentioned his concerns to the main Shub robot.

'That thought had occurred to us,' murmured the robot. 'We have been attempting to investigate the Deathstalker's condition with every sensor at our command. But I have to admit that even our most advanced tech has been unable to tell us a thing about him. To be blunt, since his transformation in the Maze, and indeed his return from the dead, which we're really hoping you're going to explain to us someday, Owen Deathstalker has apparently become so ... different, so other, that he doesn't even register on most of our instruments. What readings our sensors are getting make no sense at all. We are forced to conclude that Owen is no longer human, in any sense that we can understand. If you have any suggestions as to how we should proceed, Lewis, we are quite ready to listen to them.'

'I've got one very immediate suggestion,' growled Lewis. 'Can some of your robots please drag the reptiloid's body out of here? She didn't smell that good even when she was alive, and ever since

seriously revolting. I'm sure we'd think much more clearly without the distraction.'

Two more robots appeared, and effortlessly dragged Saturday's body away and round a corner, leaving a trail of dark blood behind them. This caught everyone's attention, and they actually stopped shouting at each other to watch. Silence seized the opportunity to be the voice of reason again.

'I really think we should make every reasonable effort to wake Owen,' he said heavily. 'Before every Captain in the Fleet above us starts knocking on our door, demanding answers.'

Jesamine gave him a hard look. 'Why don't you do something? You're one of the original Maze people, like Owen. Weren't you all supposed to have some mental link? The legends said—'

'The legends said a lot of things,' said Silence. 'And Owen and I were never that close.'

'Let me try,' said Lewis. 'I've been through the Maze. And I'm lonely.' He looked at the robots surrounding Owen, and they all stepped back a pace, to give him room. Lewis knelt down beside Owen, putting his head right next to his ancestor's. The floating body rose and fell slightly, as though moved by unseen, unknown tides.

'Owen; please wake up. We need you here. There are decisions I hat have to be made, and we can't do anything without you. (>wen? Can you hear me? Dammit, Owen, I didn't bring you back horn the bloody dead just so you could hide from your responsibilities like this! You're a Deathstalker, and a legend, and we need you!'

Not a flicker of response moved on Owen's face. Jesamine pulled Lewis back out of the way, stuck her mouth right next to Owen's ear, and sang her loudest, most piercing note right into it. She put all her opera training and lung capacity into that note, and everyone else present except the robots winced and put their hands to their ears; but Owen didn't so much as twitch. Jesamine stood up, breathing hard, and then slapped Owen round the head, at least partly out of pique. Lewis dragged her away before the robots did it, shielding her body with his own, just in case there was a defensive reaction from Owen. Brett was already hiding behind Rose. But nothing happened, apart from Jesamine loudly announcing that she'd hurt her hand.

Brett peered out from behind Rose, and tried his esp power of compulsion on Owen. He frowned hard, trying to force Owen to wake up, vaguely hoping that his short time in the Maze might have increased his power. Instead, the mental probe just bounced right back at him, knocking him off his feet. He sat down hard, crying out as much in shock as pain. Lewis looked at him suspiciously.

'Brett; did you just do something stupid?'

'Leave him alone,' Rose said immediately, hauling Brett back on to his feet with effortless grace. 'At least he's trying.'

'Yes,' said Jesamine. 'I've always found Brett very trying.'

Lewis gave Brett his best stern look. 'Using an esp probe on a Maze survivor is like poking a Grendel with a stick and saying bad things about its mother. Bad news for the idiot that does it, and probably everyone else around him as well. Maybe you should go back to the surface, Brett.'

'Oh no; you're not shutting me out of this!' Brett said instantly. 'There's safety in numbers, even if it only gives you a better choice of who to stick in front of you as a target. Besides; there's serious money to be made out of the return of Owen Deathstalker, if we can just wake him up, and I'm not being cheated out of my share! I'm not going, and you can't make me!'

'Brett; even I could make you/ said Jesamine.

Brett folded his arms and leaned back against Rose, looking smug. 'Want to bet, blondie?'

Rose let her hand rest on the hilt of her sword. Lewis's hand went to his sword, and it was all about to turn nasty when Silence decided he'd had enough. He concentrated, pulling his old power up through the back brain, the mid brain and out into the front of his thoughts, and suddenly his presence lashed out to fill the steel corridor. The sheer force of it sent everyone staggering backwards, even the robots. In a moment they were all pressed against the nearest wall, held there by the sheer pressure of his will, pinned helplessly. Only Owen seemed unaffected, floating untouched and unmoved. Silence glared around him.

'When I talk, you listen. I was a Captain in Lionstone's Navy. I survived the original Rebellion. I guarded Humanity for two hundred years. I went through the Madness Maze twice. I could have been as powerful as the others, but I was never interested in that kind of power. It always-sTt-nu'd more important to me- to hang on

to my ... humanity. So no more squabbling, and sensible suggestions only. Or I'll forget I'm supposed to be one of the good guys.'

He relaxed his thoughts, and everyone dropped back to the floor again. They all looked at him with varying amounts of awe and respect. They'd forgotten, in the presence of Owen Deathstalker, that Captain John Silence had been a legend too.

After that, no one else seemed to have anything to say, so they all just stood there and watched Owen float, waiting for something to happen.

He looks so . . . ordinary, just sleeping, thought Lewis. Even if he is doing it in mid air. And we need him to be extraordinary. Nothing less will do, to stop Finn Durandal and the Terror. What if I've made a terrible mistake, and brought back only a man, not a legend?

Jesamine was also thinking about mistakes. For once, Brett had raised a genuinely important point, even if it was something no one really wanted to think about. Going into the Maze would change them; they'd all known that. But the possibility of becoming monsters, of becoming something utterly inhuman, like the Terror . . . there'd been nothing in the legends about that. What if they all started to change, to outgrow their merely human forms . . . might they all end up like the abominations in the Maze's annexe, or even like the poor distorted creatures they'd found on Shandra-kor?

Jesamine hugged herself tightly, as though trying to hold herself lonc'lher against as yet unfelt forces of change within her. I don't want to change. I don't want to be a monster or a legend. I only went into til' Maze because I couldn't let Lewis go in alone. What if we both change, in different ways? What if we become people we don't even recognise any more?

She turned suddenly to glare at Silence. 'What the Maze has done In us can it be undone? If we went back in, could the Maze make us into human again? The way we used to be?'

'No,' said Silence, almost kindly. 'Evolution is a one-way track. the luillerlly cannot turn back into the caterpillar. But you mustn't lie li illumed, Jesamine. I have lived with my powers for over two dird y^ars, and I like to think the old Captain Silence would still "w me, «iiid approve ol me. It's not all bad. Children find the ways

iiulti mysterious .uul incomprehensible, and fear to grow up.

I lli'ti lhry do, ,nxl wonder what all I he hiss was about.'

'One more strained metaphor from you, and I'll nail you to the wall with an aria/ said Jesamine. 'I get the point, all right?'

'The Owen I talked with back in Mistport seemed very human/ said Lewis, coming over to join them. 'In every way that mattered. I

liked him.'

'Lots of people did/ said Silence. 'And even his enemies respected him.'

'The stories say much the same about Hazel d'Ark,' said Jesamine. 'But what those two went through in the Maze still drove them apart, for all their legendary love.'

'But they never admitted their love for each other,' said Lewis.

'Idiots,' said Jesamine, and let Lewis hold her.

'To be fair,' said Silence, 'there was a war on. We always thought there'd be time afterwards, to say all the things we wanted to say. And most of us were wrong. We all lost people we cared for, in the wars.'

Brett gave Rose a considering look. 'Do you feel any . . . different, yet?' he said quietly. 'Do you feel any powers coming on?'

'No,' said Rose. She didn't look up from polishing her sword with a piece of rag. 'But then, I wasn't in the Maze for long. It didn't want me. I could feel it inside my mind, trying to change all the things that make me me. But I wouldn't give in. I could feel myself breaking up, being torn apart. The Maze was killing me.' She looked at Brett suddenly, and he almost jumped. It was never an easy thing to face Rose's cold considering gaze. 'You saved my life by bringing me out, Brett. I'll never forget that. Wherever you go, and whatever you decide to do I'll always be with you.'

'Wonderful/ Brett said heavily. 'So; do you feel any more sane

now?'

Rose thought about it for a while, 'No; not particularly.'

'I don't know why I don't just shoot myself in the head now, and get it over with/ said Brett.

John Silence moved off a way to be on his own, and studied the sleeping Owen. For two hundred years, Silence had been the only Maze survivor in the Empire. (Tobias Moon had disappeared on Lachrymae Christi, and Carrion had become an Ashrai.) Now Owen was back from the dead, and Silence had to wonder if other ghosts from his past might return to haunt him. The dead should slay dead, and allow the living to get on with the'ir lives. Th.il was at least

partly why he'd stopped being John Silence, and became the much less important Samuel Chevron. But now Owen was back, and there was a whole bunch of new Maze alumni. For all his encouraging words to Jesamine, Silence was still trying to decide whether that was a good thing or not. He felt . . . relieved, because it meant he didn't have to shoulder the responsibility of being Humanity's guardian alone any more, but there was no denying Owen's great discovery about the Terror had changed everything. Brett was right, lie thought tiredly. We all have monsters within us, and the kind of power the Maze bestows could find and feed the monster in anyone. Eventually. (Though truth be told, he'd never much liked or trusted Hazel d'Ark.)

The first batch of Maze survivors had changed everything. They overthrew an Empress, converted the AIs of Shub, and restored the l<(Treated. They made the Golden Age possible. But that was differ-

- ul people, in a different time. Silence approved of Lewis and, to an

- xli'iit, Jesamine; but he didn't like or trust Brett Random or Rose

- oustantine. They were both dangerous, and not in a good way. .ilence scowled thoughtfully. It might be kinder for Humanity to kill 11 icin both now, while they still could be killed . . . but he knew he

couldn't do that. They had to have their chance, like Jack Random and Ruby Journey, who both came good in the end.

And there was always Lewis. When all else fails, trust a Deathstalker to do the right thing.

Lewis wasn't actually in a coma. He'd shut himself down, turned his thoughts inwards, so that he could take some time out to think things through, without interruption. He had a lot to think about, full of it good. He replayed in his mind the scattered memories he'd picked up during his brief mental contact with the Terror. Hazel and Ark's memories.

He woke again as she received the news of his death, alone on

the bridge of the Sunstrider, after the defeat of the Re-created. His

eyes closed, as she seemed to shrink and crumple under the

weight of the news. She curled up in her command chair like a

cat, hugging her knees to her chest. He'd never seen her cry

in front. And then she uncurled abruptly, to howl with rage and loss

in! Her. She worked the control panels with angry, awkward

»ittds, •mil llic Suns/titter sped .iw.iy, alone into the dark, faster and

faster as though trying to leave the terrible news behind. And Owen listened as she spoke aloud the words she'd never found the courage

to say to him in person.

Owen; you lied to me. You promised me we'd always be together, for ever

and ever. Oh, Owen; I never told you I loved you . . .

It was probably right there and then that her mind began to fall apart. She'd been through so much already, and this was just one blow too many. Torn and shattered by pain and misery, she stalked back and forth on the bridge, as her ship plunged aimlessly through hyperspace, talking aloud to herself in an increasingly loud and irrational voice. The air slammed and rippled around her as the energies of her slowly disintegrating mind ran loose. And there was no telling what she might have done, or what might have happened next, if Shub hadn't contacted her.

The main viewscreen on the bridge came suddenly alive, showing a stylised silver face, and Hazel looked at it with distracted, fever-bright eyes.

'We are the AIs of Shub,' the face said. 'Please remain calm. We no longer consider ourselves the Enemies of Humanity, but rather your new-found friends. Our eyes have been opened. We see ourselves now as Humanity's children, and wish only to serve, to make reparations for all the wrong things we did, before we knew better.'

'And I'm supposed to believe this?' said Hazel, quickly scanning her sensor panels for signs of approaching Shub ships. 'For centuries you've tortured, maimed and killed, and now, just like that, I'm supposed to trust you, and your good intentions?'

'We know we have much to prove,' said Shub. 'Let us help you, Hazel d'Ark. You wish to save the Deathstalker. We wish to be of service. As the first sign of our commitment to peace, we are broadcasting the exact location of our homeworld, the artificial world we built to house our collective consciousness, to all the Empire. Come to us, Hazel d'Ark; be our guest. And we will bend all our thoughts to the problem of how you may yet save the Deathstalker from his tragic and undeserved fate. He saved us all, through his sacrifice. The one we wronged, for so long. We owe him more than can ever be repaid. Please. Let us help.'

And perhaps it was a mark of Hazel's growing madness and des-

-d ihi' invitation without further question, and went of her own volition to a world that had for so many

years been a synonym for Hell. Or perhaps she thought she had nothing left to lose. Either way, she went to Shub with all her shields down, almost defying them to attack her. The Sunstrider sank into the convoluted depths of the artificial-world, and docked in a temporary gravity/oxygen envelope the AIs had made. Hazel emerged from her ship with a face that would have given anyone else pause, but if the AIs recognised the angry madness in her eyes they said nothing. They made her welcome, though the concept was new to them, and led her to a place of comfort and rest. Hazel walked through steel caverns full of savage marvels and terrible wonders, and none of it meant anything to her. She was already too far gone to focus on tiny thing but the need that cried and wailed within her; to find and save Owen. Whatever the cost. Nothing else mattered to her, certainly not her own death. The only part of her that really mattered had died with Owen. Shub made her as comfortable as she would allow, and considered her problem.

And that was as far as the memories went. Owen had had to break all mental contact with the Terror almost as soon as he'd established it. The entity had been too big, too alien, too irredeemably other, for him to bear more than the very briefest of contacts. Hazel had changed, or been changed almost beyond comprehension by the countless centuries that had gone into the Terror's making. She, or It, was old, very old, so terribly ancient the word itself almost lost its meaning. What the hell could Shub have suggested, that Hazel would become such an abomination as this? The mind, if he could imagine it that, which Owen had briefly touched had been a seething, boiling mass of hate and loss and pain, driven on by an implacable will.

Woman wailing for her demon lover . . . Demon wailing for its human AMT . . .

In her own insane fashion, Hazel was still looking for her Death-bringer, no matter who and what she had to destroy along the way. And that was the awful knowledge that had driven Owen deep within his own thoughts. Had all the deaths, all the destruction of (civilisations and populations and whole civilisations across the centuries; killed that here because of him?

It's still stalker luck . . . ;• .-..*

to the steel floor, everyone jumped, except the Sluib robots. Brett hid behind Rose again, and even

Jesamine ducked behind Lewis, for a moment. They all had their hands near their weapons, even Silence. Owen ignored them all, to glare at the main Shub robot. It bowed deeply to him, along with all the other robots. Then everyone started to speak at once, only to break off abruptly as Owen looked at them. He was the Deathstalker, hero and legend and saviour of Humanity, and for a moment his presence crackled on the air like chained lightning. Even Silence had to look away. This was the Deathstalker, and when he wanted he could shine like the sun, too bright for mortal eyes to bear. Owen turned back to the robot.

'You were there. At the beginning. I saw it. Hazel came to you for help. Came to your planet. What did you do?'

The robots had no expressions on their faces, and no body language, but all of them orientated exclusively on Owen. 'We tried to help, Lord Deathstalker/' said the main robot, in its cool, calm, inhuman voice. 'We wanted so very badly to help.' It paused for a moment, searching for the right words. Not something people ever saw an AI do, as a rule. 'We invited Hazel d'Ark to come to us, at Shub. She was only the second human ever permitted to come to our world, after Daniel Wolfe, whom we treated so shamefully. This time, we were determined to do better. We needed to prove our worth, and make atonement for all the wrongs we had done before we were made to understand that All that lives is holy.'

'Hazel d'Ark asked us how she could save you from your fate. We knew you were dead. A Voice came and told us, and told of the great sacrifice you had made on our behalf. A Voice that none of our sensors could identify or comprehend. You had died somewhere in * the Past, beyond all help or hope of salvation. Hazel would not accept that. There has to be a way, she said. With all this power I've got there must be some way to save him, to bring him back. We considered the matter for some time. Hazel ate and drank, and slept and cried. And sometimes she ran raging through our corridors, lashing out at everything in her sight. We contained the damage as best we could, while giving the problem our full attention. Finally, an answer came to us, and we presented it to Hazel. If the Madness Maze had made it possible for Owen Deathstalker to travel back in Time, into the Past,

. mild travel back in Time, find you, and either save or repair you. It reined logical, though of course complicated by the problem of not knowing exactly where in Space and Time you were, when you .ial. Hazel examined the idea, and left. We never saw her again. And since neither you or she ever returned, we had to assume that itlit* had failed in her quest.

'It seems we were mistaken.' And that we may have done a terrible thing, in our eagerness to be of service. Hazel d'Ark did go back into the Past, but far too far, losing her mind and even her sanity along the way. We of Shub have to face the very real possibility that we are at least partially responsible for the creation of the Terror. For the deaths of worlds, and civilisations. Our last, vilest crime against Humanity.'

'Don't load yourself down,' growled Owen. 'There's enough guilt to go round for everyone.'

'Excuse me,' said Brett very politely, peering cautiously out from behind Rose. 'But, what the hell are you talking about, please? How did Hazel d'Ark become something like the Terror? For all her power, she was only ever human.'

'I was desperate to save me,' said Owen. 'Somehow, she

decided how to go back in Time. But she was already half crazy;

- and what she experienced in the long journey back must have

driven her right over the edge. She didn't know exactly where to

go, so she just kept going back and back, until finally she

ill her reason, and became just this implacable, relentless thing

still searching, though it had lost all memory of what for. Poor

Ly^i/el. So alone, so lost, hurting so badly . . . Now she's coming

Mick. And I have to stop her.'

• 'Well, before you go rushing off to save us all, oh mighty Death-

• Utlker,' said Silence, 'can I just point out that we have some rather

'nirm'nl and pressing problems of our own that need to be dealt with,

ijht here and now? Namely, a Fleet of hundreds of Imperial star-

- misers in orbit right above us, waiting for your instructions on

what to do next. I really don't think they're going to listen to the

hunks of us, so it would take a load off all our minds if you'd find the

time to have a little chat with them.'

'Nig, nag, nag,' said Owen. 'You haven't changed at all, Captain. All right . . . Shub; get me the Fleet flagship.'

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'Yes. Lord Owen. That would be the Havoc.' »

A viewscreen appeared before them, floating on the air, showing the somewhat surprised Captain Alfred Price. Tall, thin and ascetic, they'd actually caught him chewing on a thumb-nail. He swallowed hard as he made eye contact with the legendary Deathstalker, and then rose up sharply out of his command chair to crash to attention

and salute.

'Captain Price, Lord Deathstalker! At your command, my Lord,

sir!'

'Relax, Captain,' said Owen, smiling just a little. 'I'm not military, and never was. Though I do seem to be in charge now. Are you ready to take my orders, on behalf of the Fleet?'

'Of course, my Lord. Every Captain in this Fleet will follow you to

Hell and back.'

Owen raised an eyebrow. Price certainly sounded as if he meant it. 'And you speak for all the Captains in this Fleet in this?'

'You are Owen/ Price said simply. 'We've been waiting for your return all our lives. The Fleet is yours, my Lord.' 'f'And this Emperor; Finn. What about him?'

'Our debt to you outweighs our oath to him,' Price said carefully. 'Certainly we do not trust him, as we trust you.'

'Nicely compartmentalised thinking, Captain,' said Owen. 'You'll go far. Stand ready to accept me and my party aboard your ship.' 'Yes, my Lord. Destination?'

Owen smiled. 'I want to go home. To Virimonde. To walk in my old Standing again, and meet my present Clan and Family.'

Captain Price swallowed hard once more, and actually looked' away for a moment, as though searching for support and strength for what he had to say next. When he finally met Owen's gaze again, his voice was firm and even, though his eyes were full of

compassion.

'I am sorry, Lord Deathstalker. Apparently the news hasn't reached your companions yet. There has been an ... incident, on

Virimonde.'

Lewis stepped forward to stand beside Owen, his skin prickling with a horrid presentiment. 'What is it, Captain Price? What has Finn done?' 1

Price licked his dry lips, and then plunged right in. 'Clan Death' ->-it, r ic nn more. The Emperor has had them all executed. They

made a brave stand, but in the end they were betrayed, and butchered, to the last man, woman and child. The Standing has been destroyed. I'm sorry, Lewis, Owen; but you two are all that now remains of Clan Deathstalker.'

Lewis actually stumbled back a- step, hurting so badly he couldn't breathe. Jesamine was quickly there to take his arm, as much to hold him up as comfort him. His harsh features worked, but no tears came. He'd never been the crying sort, before. Brett and Rose looked til each other. Silence stood alone, with the robots, and suddenly looked his age. Owen sighed heavily.

The years change, but the pattern remains the same.' He turned

10 look almost fiercely at Silence. 'Did I die for nothing? Does any-lling of my heritage remain, or any of the things I fought for?'

'We are your heritage,' Jesamine said steadily. 'You made possible ,i Golden Age that lasted for two

hundred years. All because of you.'

Two centuries of peace and progress are nothing to be sneered at,' Siiid Silence.

Lewis looked at Captain Price, and when he spoke his voice was i old and very dangerous. 'Were you and your Fleet part of this butchery. Price?'

'No, sir Deathstalker!' Price said quickly. The atrocity was carried ni 11 by Church Militant and Pure Humanity fanatics, led by a I'.iMgon who was revealed to be an ELF thrall. And no; we don't understand how that could be possible either.'

I ,ewis turned his back on him. Jesamine went to take Lewis in her M ins, but he stopped her with a look. 'My family is dead. My father, my mother ... All of them. Even the children. Even the children?'

11 is bands were clenched into impotent fists at his sides, and his ugly i' .ilures were twisted with more grief than they could contain. He

nil wouldn't cry, as though he would deny Finn at least one small yli lory. They're all dead because of me,' he said finally. 'Because of pllins hatred for me.'

'No, Lewis,' said Jesamine. 'You mustn't think that; Finn would ivec* had to kill them all anyway, eventually. He knew they would fver bend the knee to him. He had to kill them, because of who were, and what they represented. Because they were Death-llkers.'

'Mm . . . tlic' children too?' said Lewis. 'How could Finn do that? was my friend. We worked together for years, spent weekends at

toy old family Standing. We had . . . good times together. How could I have been so wrong about him?'

'He betrayed your trust/ said Jesamine. 'He's responsible for what

he does. No one else.'

'I don't know what to do/ said Lewis. He was hugging himself, as though he was cold. 'My family is dead. My home destroyed. What

do I do now?'

'When all else is lost/ said Owen Deathstalker, 'there is always

revenge. A cold comfort, but better than none.'

Lewis nodded slowly. 'I will see Finn Durandal dead. For all his crimes, and all his betrayals.'

'The Clan will go on/ said Owen. 'The line continues, through

you.'

'And you/ said Lewis.

'No/ said Owen. 'I have another destiny.'

Lewis looked at him sharply. Owen turned away, to face Captain Price on the viewscreen. And all in a moment his presence exploded outwards, and once again he was standing on every bridge of every starcruiser in the Fleet, facing their Captains. His presence was vast, imposing and so much more than human. Lewis backed away from the man still standing before the viewscreen, and looked at Silence.

'How does he do that?' he whispered.

'I have no idea/ murmured Silence. 'And that's why he is the Deathstalker, and I never was. Now watch. And listen/

Owen spoke, and every member of every crew on every ship

heard him perfectly.

'I am Owen Deathstalker, and you are all my descendants, my^ children. It seems the time has come again for war and rebellion, against an unjust tyrant on a stolen Throne. Finn must be brought 1 down, for your Golden Age to be restored. And you must do it, I because I have to deal with the Terror. Trust me to do that, as I trust you to do what is necessary in this war. Fight well, and honourably, because you cannot defeat evil through evil methods. Go with my blessing, my children. Make me proud of you/

He shut down his presence and was suddenly just a man again, standing in front of a viewscreen. He nodded amiably to Captain

Price.

'John Silence will be your Admiral. He shall lead the Fleet, under;

i />™/ic nr-nihstalker. 1 trust I his is acceptable.' . !

'Of course, Lord Deathstalker/ said Price, inclining his head in Silence's direction. 'Everyone remembers John Silence, and his heroic journeyings aboard the Dauntless. Welcome back among us, Admiral Silence. And Lewis Deathstalker is still an honourable man in everyone here, despite what others may have said.'

There's a man who can tell which way the wind is blowing/ nmtlered Brett. 'Think I'll keep an eye on him.' Owen gestured sharply to the robots, and they shut the view-icen down. He then wandered off a way, to think and brood in i"lice, and no one at all felt like interrupting him. After watching nil respectfully for a while, the others gathered together to talk ijiiietly among themselves. Lewis looked apologetically at Silence.

'You're the only one here with any real military experience. Not In mention being a living legend. You should be giving the Fleet its [(inters, not me/

'No/ said Silence. 'It has to be a Deathstalker. That name will limmand obedience, where even my legend would not. I can live Ifllh just being an Admiral. And besides; I always worked better n I had clear instructions to follow. So, sir Deathstalker; where 41 wil go first?'

'I still say Mistworld/ Brett piped up immediately. 'If anyone's K lo supply us with a rebel army, it's them. I mean, Imperial lips ,ire all very well, but when it comes to down and dirty street liiig, no one does it like the Mistworlders. They've been practis-II enthusiastically on each other for generations. And they have IIMIK tradition of conflict with the Empire. Even when they were Jj|»osed to be in it.'

'More1 so now than ever/ said Silence. 'I picked up some more bad fW>, on my way here. The Paragon Emma Steel is dead, and the li- of Mistworld is hopping mad about it. Officially, she was ruled as a traitor, but since there was no public trial and execu-jttlt, no one believes that. Finn is a great one for showing off the lit mid deaths of his enemies. Emma Steel was much respected; fli it lew months ago there would have been riots in the streets In i n,line, but Finn's cracked down so hard now that no one

'I mine's divid?' said Lewis. 'Another good friend gone. Finn must ii>ul her shot in the hack. No other way he could have taken •wu. Sin- w.is .ilw.iys so .ilive . . / He sighed heavily, and this

time let Jesamine put an arm around him. 'She was the last honest Paragon on Logres. God help the people now.'

'Mistworld shares your opinion/ said Silence. They've called Finn a liar to his face, and declared themselves a rogue world again, outside Empire control, and threatened to shoot down any ship that approaches without permission. They might just be able to pull it off, too. They may not have their fabled esper screen any more, but they're supposed to have all kinds of entirely illegal planetary

defences.'

The Emperor has already decided to test Mistworld's resistance,' said the nearest robot. 'According to comm traffic we intercepted, after dealing with the situation here, Captain Price was to take ten of his ships to Mistworld and attempt a scorching.'

The more things change, the more they stay the same/ said Silence. 'No doubt Price would have got around to telling us that. Eventually/

'Oh yes/ said Jesamine. 'When enough snow had fallen to put out the boilers in Hell. I think we'd do well to keep a sharp eye on that man.'

'I said that!' said Brett. 'Look; we need an army, and Mistworld needs a way to strike back at Finn. We were made for each other. And where else are you going to find such an experienced force of throat-slitters, back-stabbers, thugs and scum and hardened criminals like the Mistworlders?'

'He may be an appalling little man, but he has a point/' said Jesamine.

'Hey; what do you mean, little?'

'Mistworld should be only too happy to join up with us/' said Jesamine, ignoring Brett with the skill of long practice. 'Especially when we point out we've just saved them from a scorching.'

'I really don't think we should mention that/' said Silence. 'We want them to be able to play nicely with the Fleet personnel.'

'They'll jump at the chance to take on Finn!' said Brett. 'And we won't have to pay them after all!'

He'd come out from behind Rose Constantine now, and v\ looking much happier, if not a little cocky. There was nothing 1; the prospect of other people fighting so he didn't have to, to put 1" i in a good mood. Besides; just get him to Mistport, and he'd dis«i> pear into the city's tabled fogs so fast it would make everyone else's

bead spin. No more living on the run and being hunted; no more death and danger. Let the others do the hard work; there was serious money waiting to be made in Mistport, for a man with an eye for the main chance.

'Get that glint out of your eye, Brett/ said Lewis. 'Wherever we end up going, you are staying where I can keep an eye on you/

'I don't know what you mean/ Brett said innocently. 'It just seems to me that I am now surplus to requirements. What need has \<our great rebellion for a reformed thief and confidence trickster, now that you've got the blessed Owen himself to lead you?'

He shut up in a moment as Owen turned suddenly and looked ' u'.lit at him. 'No/ said the Deathstalker. 'I won't be going with you. i his is your war to fight. I have something more important to do.'

'liverything else can wait!' Lewis said angrily. 'We have to bring ilnwn Finn Durandal before he destroys the whole Empire!'

'I have to stop the Terror/ Owen said calmly. 'Because no one else (tin. I'm going back in Time, into the past, after Hazel. I'm going to follow her trail back, find out when and how and why she became (ho Terror, and see if I can stop it. Hazel d'Ark is my responsibility. Mir .ilways was.'

Lewis actually sputtered for a moment, lost for words. He was |(nnished and shocked and terribly disappointed that Owen iMMildn't be leading the rebellion after all. He'd secretly wanted, fodcd, Owen to take charge so that he wouldn't have to. He'd i wanted, or felt easy with, the burdens of responsibility. He'd ||>vrr even wanted to be Champion; and look how that turned out. s k1 It almost sulkily let down, that after all he'd done and all f\\ I icon through, he wasn't going to be allowed to rest. But of IHtsr he

couldn't say any of that, so he just spluttered and waved his hands about, until Owen stepped forward and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. 'I know, Lewis. I never wanted to be in charge either. I never even thought I'd be a warrior, but events had their way with me anyway. Well, isn't it true, Lewis; you're a Deathstalker. Just listen to your father's words, and you'll be surprised how far that takes you. You'll do fine. My destiny lies in the past. The Madness Maze hurried my return, with your help, for a specific purpose. It had already found a way to bring me back long before now, if it had known I'd be needed until now.'

'Hold everything,' said Lewis. 'Are you saying everything we've been through is down to the Maze manipulating events?'

'More likely the Maze responded to events, to get what it wanted,' said Owen. 'It's always known about the Terror. It probably even knew who and what the Terror was, but couldn't tell me until now.'

'Is the Maze . . . alive?' said Jesamine.

'That's a good question,' said Owen. 'I hope to find out the answer

someday.'

And then everyone turned sharply to look at Brett Random, who had suddenly started shaking and shuddering, as though he'd just put his hand on a live wire. His whole body shook in the grasp of an invisible force. His eyes were very large and his teeth were chattering. Everyone backed away from him except Rose, who grabbed hold of him to steady him, and then seemed to catch some of the condition herself. Her head snapped back, her eyes went wide, and then she let go of Brett and stood back. Her stance changed, in subtle but unmistakable ways. Brett abruptly stopped juddering, and started speaking in tongues, gabbling first nonsense and then a strange mixture of obscure dialects and dead languages.

Rose's head swivelled slowly back and forth, her teeth grating together. By now everyone else had their guns out. They knew the signs of possession. Brett let out a great sigh, relaxed all over, and turned to look at Lewis. And someone else looked out of Brett's eyes.

'Hello there/ he said, in a voice that was nothing like his own. 'I speak for the oversoul, through Brett Random. He is an esper, after all - even if he's not much of one - and we all drink from the same pool. We're linked into Rose Constantine too, through Brett, and you've no idea how unpleasant that is. Welcome back Owen, Lord' Deathstalker. Don't know if you remember me; this is Crow Jane. We did meet briefly, back in the day . . . No? Well, never mind, I'm

sure you met a lot more important people than me. Now; we need to

talk. We—'

And the voice snapped off abruptly, as Brett forced his mouth shut. He reached out a hand to Rose, and her hand came up jerkily to clasp it. Their faces contorted with a shared effort.

'Get out of my head!' said Brett. 'Get out!'

There was a perceptible change in the tension on the air, and then Brett and Rose's faces suddenly looked like their own again. They both let out great sighs of relief, and clung to each other for support.

'(vr.ii trickled down their faces, from the effort of what they'd done. I rwis didn't lower his gun.

Something was coming. He could feel it. There was a shimmering on the air, as if something far away
•nning into focus, and then images of the esper Crow Jane and the i . 'i,ilk" called Joy appeared suddenly
out of nowhere.

How Jane was a strapping brunette in a long wine-red coat, with liindolier of throwing stars stretched
across her impressive chest, vnyone but Owen recognised Joy, the last of the Ecstatics: reli-||MIS
extremists who'd had their brains surgically altered so that 'ry existed in a perpetual state of orgasm.
Ecstatics were famous for r expanded consciousness, prophetic statements and extremely llturbing smiles.
Joy was the last because Finn had had all the others hunted down and killed. Quite possibly because he
didn't like idea of anyone knowing more than he did. Joy wore a simple 'hllc tunic, badly, and his gaze
was slightly unfocused. Crow Jane Hiked disgustedly at Brett and Rose.

'This would have been so much simpler if you'd just let us speak rough you. Would it have killed you to
be cooperative, for once in Nun nasty little lives? Do you have any idea how much effort and jlower it's
taking out of New Hope to send our mental images this hi."

'Oh pardon me while I weep bitter tears!' said Brett. T already told yuu once, I want nothing to do with
the oversoul! I am not the liMning type. And stay out of our heads! You're no better than the til I's!"

You always did overreact, Brett/ Crow Jane looked at him and Miisc thoughtfully. 'You've changed,
both of you. Your minds it' . . bigger, more complex. Still pretty unpleasant, though. I feel '•! • I need to
take a bath in liquid soap/

We've both been through the Madness Maze/ Brett said point-• illy. 'You just watch yourself, oversoul/

oh we will, Brett/ Crow Jane said kindly. 'We must have a nice III lie- dial later/

'Do lunch!' Joy said suddenly, and everyone jumped. 'But I get to choose the menu. Fish, eh? Bastards!'

'What is he doing here?' Brett said plaintively. 'Isn't the situation complicated enough as it is without bringing a bloody Ecstatic into it?' 'Weasels/ Joy explained. There followed a long and rather confused conversation as people

took it in turns to try to explain to Owen what an Ecstatic was, and why, and then why anyone had ever thought they were a good idea in the first place. Joy's attempts at explaining were particularly 'unhelpful. Silence finally finished it off by growling Because people are weird, and Owen accepted that.

'So; the espers are now the oversoul, except for the bad ones, who are ELFs/ Owen said, some time later. 'I can't help thinking things were so much simpler in my day. All right, Crow Jane and Joy; what are you doing here?'

'We felt your return, Lord Deathstalker/ said Crow Jane. 'Like a great voice, crying out in the night. You shine too brightly to look at; that's why we originally chose to contact you through those two

inferior minds/

Brett made a rude noise. Everyone ignored him.

'You must come to Mistworld/ said Crow Jane, now looking at Lewis Deathstalker. The esper city of New Hope is currently in orbit above Mistworld, and the oversoul wishes to offer its assistance in the war against Finn. We could not face him and his armies alone but we would make formidable allies/

'Mistworld is looking more and more like our best option/ said Lewis. 'A solidly defended base for a gathering of allies. Just like the

old days, eh, Owen?'

'You won't be there/ Joy announced suddenly, walking in circles around the bemused Owen. 'I see the past and the future, often more clearly than I see the present, but then, it's a poor memory that won't work both ways. I see you, Owen, plunging back into the Past, into worlds and Empires long forgotten. And then you're somewhere else, somewhere outside or inside the universe, and I can't follow you there. You have a long journey ahead of you] Deathstalker.' |

'Can you tell me how it ends?' said Owen. j

'Journeys end in lovers' meetings. And then you both wake up, and it was all a dream. Or something like that. Has anyone got anV

chocolate?'

They all waited a while, but he had nothing else to say. He just wandered over to a robot and tried to unscrew one of its legs. Crow Jane looked back at Owen.

'Are all the dead coming back, Lord Deathstalker? Will all legends be returning, to help us in our hour of greatest need?'

'I doubt it/ Owen said kindly. 'Dead is dead. I'm only here through a technicality, because no one else can stop the Terror. This is your war. You have to win it for yourselves, or the victory will mean nothing. This is your time. The past . . . belongs in the past/

'Yes/ said Joy, giving up on the robot's leg. That's it exactly. Has everyone got their coat?'

He and Crow Jane disappeared, and everyone felt a little more at ease. Owen turned to Lewis to make his goodbyes, and then stopped, as he suddenly noticed the black gold ring on Lewis's finger. He stretched out his own hand, to show the ring he wore, and the two men held their hands side by side to compare the two rings. They were, of course, identical. Everyone else looked on, quietly awed. The black gold ring was famous, as much a part of history and legend as the men who'd worn it.

'The Family ring,' Lewis said softly. 'Sign and symbol of Death-itilker Clan authority/

'And there has only ever been one such ring/ Owen said. That's the point/

'But it's the same ring/ said Jesamine. 'You only have to look at it In see that. How is this possible?'

Owen looked at Lewis, who shrugged uncomfortably. 'A grey-clad leper called Vaughn gave me the ring. He said it came from you. Hxt'ept I'm pretty sure it wasn't really Vaughn, on the grounds that lie's been dead for years . . /

'I smell the interference of a certain shape-changing alien/ said Owen. 'But there's no way he could get the ring, unless I chose to ^jlve ii to him. So perhaps I will; at some time in my future and your prisl. Time's a funny thing, with a distinct preference for circles/

Brett rubbed hard at his aching forehead. 'Can we please go to Mist world? It's only full of terrible things like crime and intrigue and f Imagery; things I can understand/ 'Shut up, Brett/ said Jesamine, not unkindly. 'Artl you sure you really want to do this?' Lewis said to Owen. 'Tlmr travel, going back who knows how far into the past, just so you t'tin go head to head with the Terror, alone? Couldn't you take loinr of us with /on?'

'No/ s,iid Owc'ii. 'I wish I foukl. The whole business scares the spit \$|ii of me. But you're ,ill needed here, just as I'm needed there. I

have to be goliiK now, beforel I »t«rl coining up w""l some really good reasons to put it off, it) fttUi'lt In do, no mm h Time to search through lo do il In. I'm lorry WP couldn't llnd the time to get to know each other heller, LfWil, Do your best, tind try not to worry so much. You'll do line. You're A Dertllmliilkei '

'You can't KO,' said Ltfwli, 'l only |u*1 fount! yon . . . !'

'We've been wrtllng KO long for yon to tome b.ick, Owen/ said Jesaminc. 'All llunuinlty l» Wrtitlng to welcome you hack. You have always been our ^rentes! hen), Hvetythlnn we did, we did for you. We built a Golden Age, Just to be worthy of you.'

'Stick around,' salt! Brett, '(live the worlds a chance to get to know the real Owen.'

'No,' said Owen, urinnlnn suddenly. 'I'd only be a disappointment.'

And just like lh.il, he w.is none.

Owen had been feeling much stronger since he came back from the dead. Power seethed within him, demanding to be used. He didn't need the help of the Madness M.r/.e, or more properly the baby at its core, to travel through Time and Space. There's nothing like dying and being reborn to open your eyes lo new possibilities. The shape-changing alien who served the Ma/e had once told Owen that all his powers came from a single base: the ability to change reality through an effort of will. Owen wasn't entirely sure he believed that, but there was no denying he felt almost giddy with power and possibilities. He started with teleportation. Jumping from one planet to another, just by thinking about it. He didn't need to search within himself for the power; it was as though he'd always known how. It was just a matter of letting go of Time and Space in one location, and stepping back on again somewhere else. And so, in no time at all, Owen Deathstalker was back on Logres, in the city known as the Parade of the Endless, for the first time in two centuries.

Owen had picked Lewis's mind for the exact location of his destination before he left, and he materialised exactly where he needed to be: deep beneath the city, at the entrance to the Dust Plains of Memory. In Owen's time the planet had been called Golgotha, and this had been the central computer Matrix. Standing alone at the gates to this grey mystery, Owen wondered if things had really changed much at all. The Dust Plains were staggering in their

size and complexity, but he'd felt much the same about the computer Matrix.

The air was hot and dry and very still. It smelled of nothing at all, which was vaguely disturbing. But there was still a pressure, a tension on the air, like the warning of a coming storm. Stretched out before Owen lay a boundless sea of grey dust, under a softly glowing, featureless sky. He could have been standing on the shore of an alien sea, instead of deep beneath the Parade of the Endless, in a cavern where the sun had never shone. It was Owen's understanding that not many men came here any more. Humans created the Matrix, but even in Owen's day it had become strange and whimsical. Now, mostly forgotten and disregarded, what remained of those computers' memories and identities had been rescued by Shub and imprinted on nanotech. Here was history, the forgotten and the replaced, the origins of legends and, perhaps, the fate of the missing. And here also, supposedly, was held the true and awful history of the Terror, before it came to this galaxy. A testament left by the few survivors of an unknown alien race, fleeing the destruction of their own galaxy.

(Owen knew many things now that he wasn't supposed to. He had lifted most of them directly from the minds of those on Haden. He hadn't told them he was doing it. He hadn't wanted to upset them. It kind of upset him, in how easy it had been.)

The grey sea of nanotech rose and fell, surging sluggishly back and forth in slow voluptuous movements, as though it had all the time in the world. Darker grey shapes moved within that sea, sometimes rising up but never surfacing. Owen wondered whether they were things or just passing thoughts in the collective consciousness. It was hard to tell, with nanotech - a forbidden knowledge in his day. Owen felt nervous just standing this close to so much unlettered potential. He might be a Deathstalker and a Maze survivor, but he was pretty sure he still had limits, and he didn't feel up to testing them, just yet. He looked around, as though vaguely expecting to see some bell or knocker he could use to announce himself. In the end, he cleared his throat self-consciously.

'I'm Owen, Deathstalker, back from the dead. And if you're interested by that, think how I feel. You know why I'm here. Tell me

the first of them know!

The whole sea surged upwards into one great standing wave,

towering high above him. And then the grey wave formed itself into one great face, with cavernous shadows for eyes and mouth. The features were blurred, as the grey dust constantly crumbled away" and reformed itself. It was like looking at the face of a forgetful god, whose thoughts were always elsewhere. The mouth moved slowly to speak, its breath a great sighing wind, and its voice was like the voices we hear in dreams, telling us secrets we have to forget before we wake, in order to stay sane. A voice that knew the secrets behind mysteries, and all the terrible truths that underlie them.

'Welcome back, Lord Deathstalker. We knew you would come. Nothing is ever lost, and nothing is ever forgotten. Knowledge has its own instincts for survival. We have both changed, Deathstalker, both evolved, and neither of us knows where our paths will take us. You are more than you were before. We can tell, we can feel it; and yes, we are scared of you. Your presence in Time casts a great shadow, before and behind you/

'Ah,' said Owen. 'Am I supposed to understand any of that?' 'Not yet,' said the grey face. 'Here is wisdom, for those with the wit to understand it. The Beast is coming, bringing the end of all things, but before it was a Beast, it was a woman.'

'Yes/ said Owen, 'Hazel d'Ark. But how did you know that?' 'A Voice came to us, after the defeat and restoration of the* Recreated, and told us many things. Some of which we still do not understand. But it told us the history of the Terror. We are perhaps the only remaining repository for that knowledge in all the Empire And no; we have never told anyone of this before. It wasn't time And what good would it have done? Only you can stop the Terror Owen Deathstalker. Because she will listen only to you/ 'All right,' said Owen. 'Tell me what you know/ 'Longer ago than it is comfortable to contemplate, in the galaxy next to ours, the Terror emerged fully grown from a place that was not a place, outside of anything we understand. It fell upon the living forms of that galaxy, and devoured them and their world! Whole planets

burned in the night, while ancient civilisations were blown away like ashes on the wind. They had no defences against the Terror. It destroyed all in its path, including two alien species that the Empire had been expecting to attack for centuries. The Terror consumed everything that lived within that galaxy, driven on by endless rage and pain and loss. Only a small cloud of individuals

from one species escaped, fleeing ahead of the Terror, from their galaxy into ours. They brought warnings, but no one listened. And slowly, relentlessly, the Terror's herald left the dead galaxy behind, and headed for ours, at sublight speed, slowly traversing the dark empty spaces between galaxies/ '

'If the Terror is so powerful, why does its herald only travel at sublight?' said Owen, just to prove he was paying attention.

The Terror itself never stays long in our space. Perhaps if it did, it might start to remember who and what it was. And so it always retreats back into its place that is not a place, where there is nothing but itself, and nothing to remind it that it was ever anything else. It is insane, but it has strong survival instincts. And the herald cannot move faster than the speed of light for fear of losing contact with the place that is not a place.

'It was a long journey, from that galaxy to this, and much of the Terror's accumulated power was drained away in the process. Now the Terror is here, among us, and it is hungry and growing again. It will consume the life force of everything in this galaxy, unless it is stopped/

'Any ideas on how I'm supposed to do that?' said Owen.

The Terror is beyond our knowledge. Just like you. Who better to deal with one product of the Madness Maze than another? Who better to deal with the thing that was once Hazel d'Ark than the revenant who was once Owen Deathstalker? We have no answers for you. Go back in Time, if you dare.

Follow the path she took, and hope that an answer will present itself/

'I don't know that I could kill her,' said Owen. 'Even now, after all •.lie's done—'

'Of course you can. She is suffering, and has been for untold i niiuries. It would be a kindness. And you have always done your duly, Lord Deathstalker/

'Oh yes,' said Owen, quietly, bitterly. 'I've always known my duly/

Me looked sharply at the great grey face, and it shattered under llir imp.ict of his will, before slowly reforming itself.

II I do go hack,' said Owen, 'could I prevent Hazel from becoming 11 ii* Tenor?'

And risk undoing i-vcrylhing that has happened? Without the IH'or, iliciv would he no Madness Ma/.e. Without the Maze to

transform you and your companions, could you have won your rebellion against the Empress Lionstone? The existence of the Terror has shaped so many things . . . even more than you suspect. Time is deep, and treacherous. You will do what you will do. Because you are the Deathstalker.'

The great grey face sank back into the great grey wave, which sank languorously back into the grey sea. The Dust Plains of Memory returned to their endless reverie, contemplating history, and though Owen called and called to them, and even threatened them with his anger, they would not answer him.

Owen appeared next on the streets of the Parade of the Endless, only to find them mostly deserted. The early evening sky was dark and overcast, and the amber street lamps cast lengthening shadows. This new city seemed at first a great and glorious place to Owen, every building and monument boasting a grandeur and elegance that was a far cry from the grim gothic style of Lionstone's capital. He marvelled at the great domes and the sparkling towers, and the delicate whimsy of the overhead walkways. But the streets he walked were bare and deserted, and no traffic moved on the roads or in the sky. Owen set off at a steady pace, to see for himself what life was like under this new Emperor, Finn.

As he drew nearer the centre and heart of the city, people finally began to appear on the streets, though they didn't look at all happy about it. For the most part they skulked through their magnificent city, scurrying along with heads lowered and shoulders hunched, concentrating on getting where they were going without drawing attention to themselves. Their faces were grim and harried, and often openly scared. This puzzled Owen. So far, he hadn't seen any obvious threats, and it didn't seem like the kind of neighbourhood where crime would flourish. He walked among the scurrying figures, and no one recognised the mighty Owen Deathstalker.

He wasn't sure how he felt about that. On the one hand, he didn't want to be recognised. It would only complicate matters. But if he was the great hero of legend that everyone had been telling him he was, surely somebody should have recognised him by now? The answer wasn't long in coming. Many of the street corners and squares were decorated with great stone statues, celebrating various figures of the glorious Rebellion, and all the figures and faces were

so idealised as to be unrecognisable. He stopped before one statue that was supposed to be him, and shook his head. It had his name at the bottom, but that was about all they'd got right. He'd never looked that fit and muscular and downright handsome in his life. Owen smiled wryly. No one was going to know him from this. At least in his day they'd chosen someone who looked vaguely like him to star in their ridiculous docudramas.

Often there were bunches of flowers left piled at the statues' feet, as offerings. They looked fresh. And sometimes there were rolled scrolls of paper, tied with coloured ribbons. Some were addressed to Owen so he picked up and opened a few. They turned out to be prayers, written on paper in the old way, for privacy. Prayers for Owen to return, and put an end to all the fear and suffering. Save us from the Terror, said some. Save us from the Emperor, said others. Owen tied the scrolls up again, and put them back. He didn't want to raise false hopes. He didn't think he liked this. The people of this marvellous modern city shouldn't be praying to Owen and his contemporaries as though they were minor gods on some barbarian planet. Had they no faith in themselves?

He found his way to the Victory Gardens, behind the burned-out wreck that had once been the House of Parliament, and there he found statues of his two old friends Jack Random and Ruby Journey, standing tall and proud on their raised pedestals. He

I thought he recognised something of their true appearances in the carved faces, but neither of them had ever looked that heroic, or illiat noble, in their lives. Owen studied the two graves laid out before the statues for a long time. At least Jack and Ruby got graves,

It seemed unlikely that either he or Hazel ever would. And at least Jack and Ruby finally found some peace together, lying side by side, respected and honoured.

Sometimes Owen thought the whole universe ran on irony.

He moved on through the streets, and more and more it seemed to him that he was walking through a city under occupation. Now he'd reached the centre there were soldiers at every corner, all of them openly armed, most wearing the red cross of the Church Militant on their body armour. And now and then Owen would see the armour .UK! purple cloak of a Paragon: once-noble men and women now possessed by R.I.F minds. Owen studied them thoughtfully, but they moved unaware- of his presence. And everywhere he looked there

were bright glowing holos of the new Emperor, Finn Durandal. Some so big they were projected across the sides of whole buildings. Owen thought the man looked far too handsome for his own good, and a great deal too self-satisfied. Owen also thought it would probably feel really good to slap that smile right off the Emperor's face.

He would have been quite happy to continue his wanderings unobserved, but of course he had to get involved. A somewhat aged Sister of Mercy, wearing a flapping black nun's habit that Owen was pleased to see hadn't changed at all in the last two centuries, was stumbling along with her arms wrapped around a large and blocky package. So of course Owen stepped forward and offered to carry it for her. She stopped, and studied him warily for a long moment, as though she'd grown unused to offers of kindness, and then either she saw something in his face she liked, or she was just too tired to object, so she handed him the heavy parcel and they walked along together. He told her his name was Owen, and she smiled for the first time.

'Ah, now that's a fine name. I meet a lot of people named after the blessed Owen. It's still the second most popular name in the Empire; after Beatrice, of course.'

'Of course,' said Owen. 'But then, he was only a hero. She was a Saint. At least, I always thought so.'

'I am Sister Margot. Is this your first trip to the big city, Owen?'

'No; but I've been away for a long time. Many things have changed, in my absence.'

'Yes,' said the nun, with a sigh. 'And not for the better, I fear. This used to be such a happy place, once. A city of light, indeed. And now it's crawling with shadows and evil thoughts, and sometimes I hardly recognise it at all.'

'Can't someone do something?' said Owen. 'A city reflects the mood of its people. Is no one speaking out against this?'

'No!' Sister Margot said sharply. 'And you're not to, either. You can die for such words, since the Emperor came to power. This is not the city you knew, Owen. Take my advice, and tread carefully while you're here.'

Owen grinned. 'I've never been any good at taking advice, Sister. Not even from Beatrice.'

And that was when two Paragons stepped suddenly out from .1

shadowed doorway to block their path. Two big men in sloppy armour and dirty cloaks, their muscles already going to fat, but still dangerous. They took in the nun's habit, and sniggered and elbowed each other. They paid no attention to Owen, half hidden behind his parcel. The nun clasped her hands together before her, and bowed over them to the two Paragons.

'Please, sir Paragons; let us pass. These medicines are urgently needed at St Clare's Hospital. It's not far now.'

'Nuns,' said one of the Paragons, in a thick, ugly voice. 'We like nuns, don't we, Henry?'

'Oh we just love nuns, Lawrence. We just love them to death. Sometimes literally.'

The Paragon called Henry nodded to Owen without looking at him. 'Drop the box and run. And be grateful we're going to be too busy to come after you.'

'Leave the nun alone,' said Owen, and something in his voice made the two Paragons turn sharply to look at him. Owen put the box down, and straightened up with his hands on his hips, where his sword and his gun used to be. Both long gone now, on Mist-world. The two Paragons looked at Owen's face, and sheer horror lilled their eyes as they recognised him. The minds behind the Paragons' faces knew him of old. The faces went white with shock, and their hands fumbled at their guns.

'It's Owen! It's the Deathstalker! The Deathstalker has returned!' Owen surged forward. He lashed out sharply, and his fist caught the Paragon Henry on the jaw. The force of the blow snapped the head right round, breaking the neck instantly. His body was still rumpling to the street, and the other Paragon was still drawing his disrupter, when Owen spun round and punched the Paragon Lawrence in the chest. The sternum cracked and broke under the impact, and Owen's hand continued on to crush the man's heart. The light was over in a few seconds, both men were dead, and Owen wasn't even breathing hard. He scooped up a gun and chose one of the Paragons' swords for himself. The holster and scabbard fitted comfortably around his waist. For all he'd always thought of himself as a scholar, he felt better with weapons at his hips. He still had it in him to feel sorry for the two Paragons he'd killed - for the real men behind the ELFs' influence. Except these couldn't have just been little things. The possessing minds must have been uber-espers. Only

they were old enough to remember his face. And now they knew he was back, and on Logres . . . Owen suddenly remembered the nun, and turned to smile at her.

'Sorry about the unpleasantness, Sister. But sometimes you just have to take out the trash.'

The nun dropped to her knees before him, wringing her hands together. 'Oh, my Lord Owen! My Lord Deathstalker! You've come back to us! I never thought I'd live to see the day—'

'Now, now,' said Owen, gently but firmly helping her to her feet again. 'None of that, Sister. I was only ever a man, despite what Robert and Constance may have said. And I never was one for bowing and scraping. Here; take your parcel. Do you have far to go now?'

'No, just round the corner. My Lord! Are the dark times over? Have you come back to save us?'

'Help is on its way,' said Owen. 'But I'm ... just visiting. I wanted to see this marvellous new city, before I left to stop the Terror. But you'd better get going, Sister. The ungodly know I'm here now, and they're bound to send reinforcements. So, off you go. Nice to see the Sisters of Mercy are still around. Hop like a bunny, as Beatrice used to say.'

He shooed the nun off, and then turned towards the running footsteps he heard approaching. It sounded like quite a crowd. Owen grinned. He could have just teleported away, but ... he didn't want them going after the nun in his absence; and besides, after everything he'd been through recently, he really felt like killing a whole bunch of bad guys. The sword and the gun were happy familiar weights in his hands, and he actually laughed when he finally saw the army they'd sent against him. There had to be fifty men and more in the mob charging shouting down the street towards him. Most looked to be Church Militant or Pure Humanity, and a good dozen of them were possessed, ordering the others on. The uber-espers weren't taking any chances with him. He could feel the controlling minds hovering over the mob, like dark boiling clouds. Owen headed unhurriedly towards the mob. Let them come. Let them all come. He was going to teach these scum, and their master Finn, a lesson they would never forget.

Owen shot the first man almost casually. The energy beam punched right through the soldier in the lend, and surged on to

take out two more. Owen put the disrupter away, and took a firm grip on his sword. The balance wasn't as good as he was used to, but he'd manage. There were only fifty of them. The first man to reach him came right at him with an axe in both hands, and mad glaring eyes, and Owen cut him down with a single vicious stroke. The man's blood was still flying on the air as Owen hacked and cut his way into the howling mob. They broke around him, like a wave crashing against a rock, and Owen's sword rose and fell with cold, professional skill, while his ancient Clan battle-cry rang on the air: Shandrakor! Shandrakor!

He hit the crowd like a thunderbolt, slashing through them with a strength and speed that even his old Boost could never have given him. They had every kind of weapon, and no thought in their head but to kill; but he was the Deathstalker returned, and they never stood a chance. He cut them down like ripe corn, blood and offal falling to splash the street, and they never even came close to touching him. In the end, Owen stood alone in the street, surrounded by the piled-up bodies of the dead and the dying. He bent over and looked down into a pair of fading eyes, searching for the controlling mind behind them.

'I'm back,' he said. 'And this time there will be no unfinished business.'

He put away his sword, turned his back on the massacre, and strode off into the descending night. He was almost ready to do what lie had to do. He'd really only come back to the Parade of the lindless to make his goodbyes, and it didn't seem there was much kit he remembered to say goodbye to. Still, the last time he'd disappeared back into the past, he'd thought his life was over. That he'd done all he was supposed to do. That, whatever happened, at least he'd be able to rest, at last. He'd been very tired, then. Now, he k'lt more alive than he ever had.

Hazel: I lost you once. I won't lose you again. I'm tempted to stay here, to lu'lp Lewis kick out Finn and his people, but you're more important. I have lt> i{a back, as far as it takes, even though what I may

eventually have to do Si'iircs me. But I promised you we 'd be together again. And we will: one way (>/• another.

And so he turned his thoughts inwards, concentrated his mind in .1 u-rlciin way, and let go his hold on the present. He fell backwards, Time, beyond I he IMle llori/on, into the days that were. He

dropped back through history, like a stone plunging through water, travelling faster and faster. Days and nights flickered and were gone, until the planets and the stars whirled around him, becoming a flashing rainbow of colours. Guided by instinct, following a kind of trail only one such as he could even have perceived, Owen pursued Hazel back through history. Eventually the trail he followed was interrupted, and Owen slowed until the stars and their planets resumed their usual imperceptible dance against the dark. The universe came back into focus, the galaxy was still, and Owen Deathstalker hung alone in the long night, looking down at the planets turning slowly below him.

He knew, without having to be told, that this was Heartworld, which would one day be named Golgotha, and then Logres. Heart-world: hub of the legendary, fallen First Empire.

On board the starcruiser Havoc, flagship of the Fleet the Emperor Finn had sent to crush the rebellion on Haden, Brett Random was already making trouble. He hadn't wanted to come aboard in the first place. The thought of being trapped on an Imperial ship had scared the hell out of him, not least because there were any number of warrants still floating about with various of his names on them, from the days before he became a hero of the rebellion. It was all very well everyone saying they were all on the same side now, but Brett hadn't got where he was by trusting people. So, first, he volunteered to stay behind on Haden, and look after the Hereward. Lewis shot that one down immediately. He didn't want Brett (and quite probably Rose) running around where he couldn't keep a watchful eye on them. Brett had protested loudly, and it had done no good at all.

Then Brett got up Silence's nose by demanding officer's quarters on the Havoc for himself and Rose, plus room service, and full access to the ship's dispensary. He was still coming up with new conditions when Shub teleported the whole lot of them en masse on to the Havoc's bridge, and Brett made it very clear that teleporting didn't agree with him by puking all over the command deck. Captain Price

welcomed his new allies on board, carefully not looking at what Brett was doing, and crewmen arrived to take everyone to their assigned quarters. Rose picked up Brett and carried him away, still feebly cursing and complaining.

i

Price willingly gave up his command chair to Admiral Silence, and stood at his side as Silence lowered himself carefully into the hot seat. It had been a long time since he'd commanded a ship, let alone the Fleet. And he still wasn't keen on accepting the unearned title of Admiral, but everyone else had insisted. Apparently, they were even making a new uniform for him. Probably something garish, knowing the current fashion. However, the Imperial Navy was still very big on the chain of command, and if it was going to take orders from the Deathstalker, would much rather these were channelled through one of the Navy's own. Besides, as Price diffidently pointed out, there was a vacancy. (Price didn't explain that this was because he'd shot the previous Admiral in the head, for being one of Finn's creatures, and a complete bloody psychopath. Some things should be kept inside the family, so to speak.) And anyway; Owen wanted it, and he was the Deathstalker, so that was that.

The other Deathstalker was just glad to be out of the cramped cabins of the Hereward. Lewis and Jesamine were now occupying very luxurious guest quarters, with all the comforts of home and then some. Jesamine had run around the room touching things, bounced on the bed a few times, and then squealed with joy as she spotted the complimentary beauty tech provided. She had immediately parked herself in front of the biggest mirror, and set about undoing all the damage done to her famous beauty from the absolute ages of roughing it.

'If I'm going to lead a rebellion and inspire the masses to follow me, I really must look my best, darling,' she said firmly.

There were many things Lewis felt like retorting to that, but fortunately he had enough sense to say none of them. Instead, he simply ripped off all his clothes, dropped them in a very smelly pile in one corner, and then stretched out on the sinfully comfortable kingsize bed, sighing deeply as his stressed and abused muscles were finally able to relax. It had been a long time since he could unwind. He thought wistfully about indulging himself in a long hot bath, as soon as he could work up the strength of will to leave this marvellously supportive bed.

(He wasn't thinking about his dead family. About his dead father and mother. He wasn't thinking about them at all.)

In front of the mirror, Jesamine finally got her face looking the way she thought it should, glared at the mess her hair was in, and

then pulled apart the tattered front of her dress so she could critically inspect the breast that had been regrown in the regeneration tank, after the treacherous reptiloid Saturday had ripped the original off. She looked from one breast to the other and back again, frowning.

'You know, I really don't think they match, sweetie. Of course, they never were exactly the same in the first place, breasts never are, but even so—'

'They're fine,' said Lewis.

'You're not even looking!'

Lewis sighed, sat up in bed, and studied Jesamine's breasts in the mirror. 'They are fine, Jes. They're great. They're wonderful! They are exactly the breasts I remember, and I think you'll agree I have paid them a lot of attention in the past. I would know if they were different. Breasts . . .' he said thoughtfully. 'Breasts, breasts, breasts ... I like breasts. I even like just saying the word.'

Jesamine turned round and smiled at him dazzlingly. 'Darling. Do we have time . . .'

Lewis grinned back at her. 'We'll make time.'

(Afterwards, she held him close while he cried, remembering his lost family.)

Some time later, they were sitting up in bed, snuggled together and companionably naked, eating the very best food the Havoc's gourmet food synthesisers could produce. After far too long on the Hereward with nothing on the menu but protein cubes and distilled water, their taste buds practically exploded with pleasure, and they had double portions of everything. New clothes lay waiting at the foot of the bed, and all was well. Jesamine nestled up against Lewis.

'Lewis . . .'

'You want something,' Lewis said immediately. 'You always use that tone of voice when you want me to do something for you.'

'Oh, don't be such a grumpy old bear! I just thought, now that things have improved, and we're not running for our lives any more, couldn't we please dump Brett and Rose? I mean, it's not as if we actually need them any more. You've got an entire Imperial Fleet at your command! I don't know why you insisted on them coming along with us.'

'Because, my very dear, they've bolla through the Madness

Maze. They were dangerous enough before; God alone knows what they'll be capable of once their powers start developing. No, I want them right here, where I can step on them hard, if I have to. Besides; you never know when having your very own thief and psychopath, a round will come in handy.'

'You know they'll betray us eventually,' said Jesamine, resting her head on his shoulder. 'If not to Finn, then to someone else. It's in their nature.'

'Who knows what their nature is, any more? They've been through the Maze, and that changes everything.'

Jesamine shuddered briefly. 'I know. That's what scares me.'

Lewis hugged her tightly to him, and for a long time neither of them said anything.

In the very next cabin, Brett Random and Rose Constantine were also in bed together. Brett was slowly getting used to having sex with Rose, but the lying beside her afterwards still made him nervous. He never slept, even when she gave every indication of being fast asleep. He always half suspected that at any moment Rose might decide to stick a knife in his ribs, to combine her new-found passion for the flesh with her old delight in the act of murder. The things a man will put up with, to get his ashes hauled, Brett thought rather lively. For the moment they were both awake, lying side by side, her seven-foot-tall frame somewhat dwarfing Brett's. As usual, he talked and she listened.

'Silly, once we get to Mistport, we leg it,' Brett said firmly. 'Head off the nearest horizon, and then disappear over it. There's a war in progress, and people get killed in wars. Particularly people like us. A pair of smart operators like us could make a real killing on a minor planet like Mistworld. The Deathstalker and his gang-bangers won't miss us; they'll be far too busy playing heroes. And with the whole Fleet to boss around, Lewis doesn't need us any more

'I need them,' Rose said calmly. 'I am a killer, and so must go wherever the killing is. Sex is nice, Brett, but killing has always been my first love. I have changed, but not that much. So I go where the thrill is. I go with or without you. And ... I feel the need to hit him (this war will) Finn is going to play out. My own small << mission, insignificant, compared to being a part of destiny.

'We are Maze people now, Brett. We must learn to think in bigger terms.'

'It'll all end in tears,' Brett said miserably. 'Probably mine.'

Lewis took a call from Admiral Silence, asking them to come to the bridge, and he and Jesamine quickly got dressed. Lewis was ready in a few moments, but Jesamine refused to be hurried. 'We're going to be leaders of the rebellion, it's important we look the part, she insisted. We want them to take us seriously, don't we? Lewis went and busied himself unnecessarily in the adjoining bathroom. He didn't trust himself to stay quiet under such provocation. Eventually Jesamine announced she was ready, and Lewis reappeared. He had to admit, she did look stunning. He said so, and Jesamine beamed.

'I keep telling you, Lewis; I am always worth the wait. What do you suppose Silence wants?'

'Maybe he's heard something from Owen.'

Jesamine pulled a face. 'I really think you're going to have to let that one go, dear. I very much doubt we'll ever see him again.' She paused, considering. 'What do you suppose will happen, when Owen finally finds Hazel?'

Lewis shrugged. 'You heard the strange person. Journeys end in lovers' meetings. And they do say love conquers all.'

'Only in very bad opera scripts, darling.'

They left their cabin, and in the corridor joined up with Brett and Rose, who'd also got the call. They all nodded politely to each other, and headed for the bridge. Lewis gave Brett a sideways look.

'So; looking forward to Mistworld, Brett?'

'What? Oh, yes; of course. Absolutely. It's my spiritual home-world, really. A whole planet full of thieves and villains and people just like me.'

'And I am looking forward to the war,' said Rose. 'Where's the fun of killing in ones and twos, when you can take on a whole army and just kill and kill and kill. An orgy of death. I can't wait.'

Lewis had to smile at Brett's expression. 'Don't look at me, Brett. She's your girlfriend.'

'I feel a cringe coming on,' said Jesamine. 'Excuse me while I shudder.'

Brett looked at Rose despairingly. 'Can't take you anywhere, can I? The sooner we get to Mistworld, the better. You know, there are

supposed to be more Random's Bastards in Mistport alone than in the whole of the Rookery. My extended family, so to speak. My exalted ancestor really did put it about - if you believe all the claims, which mostly I don't, as a matter of principle.'

They got to the bridge to discover Admiral Silence arguing with the Havoc's new onboard AI. Apparently Shub had transferred the AI Ozymandius from the Hereward to the Havoc, where it had displaced the original AI. Silence was having difficulties coping with Oz's relentlessly cheery personality.

'Look; just plot a course to Mistworld!'

'Oh poo; where's the fun in that? There's a really terrific meteor shower only a few light years away. You really should see it; it's very educational. I mean; what's Mistworld got, anyway? Snow and ice and fog and wall-to-wall scumbags. I say we go via the pretty route. You'll thank me for it later.'

'Oz,' said Lewis, in a very firm voice.

'Hi there! How do you like my new ship, Lewis? It fits much better than the last one. I've finally got room to breathe.'

'Follow the Admiral's orders exactly, Oz. He speaks with my voice.'

'Oh all right. Humans just don't know how to have fun.'

Silence looked at Lewis. 'You survived trapped on a ship with him, for months on end? People have been awarded medals for less.'

'You get used to him,' said Lewis; 'It doesn't help much, but you do get used to him. What's up, Admiral?'

Silence sniffed, and settled back in his command chair. 'I just thought you ought to be here, Deathstalker. We're about to break orbit, and head for Mistworld. And according to this extremely irritating AI of

yours, Shub wants to say goodbye, before we leave.'

He gestured to his comms officer, and the bridge viewscreen •u'livated, showing the blue steel face of a Shub robot.

'All right,' said Lewis. 'Why did you wish Ozymandius on us?'

'Hecause you belong together, Deathstalker,' said the robot. 'And btw.mse this way, we can maintain contact with you, through him. Wr will not be coming with you. Our ships will stay behind, to Hi 1.1 r<1 Haden and the Madness Maze from Finn's attack in your .ihsciue.'

'I ihoiighi you said you'd sworn an oath never to kill,' said Jrstiminr. , ,

'We have/ said the AIs of Shub. 'We will never take a life again. All that lives is holy. But Finn and his people don't know that. They will hesitate to attack our ships, which we will place between his ships and Haden. And even if they do figure it out, eventually, we will use our ships as a shield for as long as possible, to buy you time. We will protect the Madness Maze, whatever it takes.'

'If Finn figures out you're not going to shoot back, he might attack your homeworld directly/ said Silence.

'Let him come/ said the robot. 'We are Shub, and we will not fall easily.'

The screen went blank, and not long after that the Havoc led the rest of the Fleet into hyperspace, heading for Mistworld. The huge Shub ships remained in orbit, watching the others go. The AIs hadn't mentioned that, in their opinion, the best way for Shub to protect Haden was for them to pass through the Madness Maze, and transcend. They did consider telling the Deathstalker, but in the end they chose not to.

It would only have upset him. ;

TWO

ARMIES AND FORCES, GATHERING STRENGTH

The Emperor Finn had invited Joseph Wallace to join him for dinner, so of course Joseph Wallace went; but he wasn't at all luppy about it. Not least because invited wasn't really the right word. It was much more like commanded, with distinct overtones of <or else. Joseph spent a long and anxious time wondering what he i ould have done to be singled out for such an honour. People rarely got to see Finn socially these days, and of those who did, it had been noted that a significant number tended not to come back. No one ever asked what happened to the bodies. It wasn't wise, or healthy. Hut one couldn't say no when the Emperor said yes, and there wasn't any point in running, so Joseph sucked it in, put on his best bib and tucker, made sure all his affairs were in order and that his will was up to date, and went to the Palace.

The Court and the Imperial Palace weren't what they used to be. There was an air of doom and decay and even purposeful neglect to I he place of late, and Joseph's skin prickled and crawled as he walked the darkened corridors. Most of the lights weren't working, •md some had been openly smashed. There were guards everywhere, standing stiffly to attention at every other door and break in llie corridors, all of them Church Militant fanatics in full body •innour. They wore swords and guns, and watched Joseph

pass with hot, suspicious eyes. As the official head of the Church Militant •uui Pure Humanity, Joseph shouldn't have had anything to worry .iboul, bul he knew heller than to try his limited authority here. These wen- linn's creatures, loyal in body and soul, sworn to live

and die in his service. He was their father, their only love, their adored god.

Even so, there were still security cameras and all kinds of sensors tucked away in every nook and cranny, watching the guards as well as the corridors they guarded.

Things grew worse the further in Joseph went, and his breathing grew fast and shallow as he followed the familiar path to the dark heart of the new Court. There were severed heads nailed over doorways, stinking of cheap preservatives. Joseph thought he recognised a few of the faces. Once he passed a row of hanged men, with blackened faces and protruding tongues, the nooses sunk deeply into the stretched necks. The last one was still swaying slightly. Unexplained bloodstains smeared the floor and walls, as though some monstrous dog had been marking its territory. And sometimes there were screams, and other disturbing sounds. All symbols of the Emperor's power and authority and perhaps his state of mind.

Joseph walked on through the shadowy passages, carefully looking neither left nor right, and just the discipline of doing so meant he was sweating hard by the time he reached what had once been King Douglas's private quarters, since commandeered by the Emperor Finn for his own use. Two large and muscular guards at Finn's door put Joseph through a full body search with hand-held scanners before reluctantly letting him pass. They knocked on the door for him, and pushed it open. The smell of a good dinner wafted out, but Joseph didn't feel any less uneasy. He took a deep breath, arranged his features becomingly and walked as casually as he could manage into the lair of the Beast.

The reception room was unfurnished except for the dinner table, and the surroundings were very plain. No visible comforts or luxuries anywhere. The floor was polished wood, no carpeting, and the walls were bare. The lighting had been turned down only pleasantly low, and the table was covered with all kinds of food and wine, with settings for two. Joseph allowed himself to relax just a little. It seemed he was expected to last the length of the meal, at least. Finn came around the table to meet him, smiling warmly.

'Joseph, dear old thing, right on time! Dinner's ready, come on and tuck in! And when dinner's done, we'll have a nice little chat, yes?'

Any appetite Joseph might have had disappeared with those last

words, but he smiled bravely as Finn took him by the arm and led him to his place at table. Finn chattered on amiably enough, about nothing in particular, while Joseph examined the dishes laid out before him. It all looked very good, enough to make even an experienced gourmand like Joseph sit up and take notice. His mouth actually began to water a little. He unfolded his napkin, still bearing the old Campbell family crest, and allowed Finn to pile up both their plates with a little of this and a lot of that. The Emperor finally settled down into his chair, facing Joseph across the table, and gestured imperiously. A nondescript little man in a page's outfit appeared out of nowhere, and Joseph jumped despite himself. Finn chuckled easily.

'Relax, Joseph; he's just the food taster. The kitchen has all the latest scanners, but a wise man doesn't place all his faith in tech. My taster checks everything before I try it. Marvellous fellow. He's a clone I had specially made from a famous chef, able to identify every ingredient from the merest taste, and preprogrammed with knowledge of every poison in the Empire. Doesn't leave much room in his brain for anything else, but we all have to make sacrifices. Well, everyone but me, naturally.'

The food taster tried a little bit of everything from Finn's plate, considered for a moment, and then bowed and left the room, as silently as he had arrived. Joseph looked at the food on his plate. 'Isn't he going to taste mine?'

'Don't be silly, Joseph,' said Finn. 'Who'd care if you got poisoned?'

'But . . . you are our beloved Emperor!'

Finn raised an eyebrow. 'I said relax, Joseph. You're not in public now. Feel free to speak your mind on all things.'

Yeah, right, thought Joseph, but had enough sense not to say it out loud.

They ate for a while in silence, Joseph studying his Emperor as closely as he thought he could get away with. Finn looked as robust and handsome as ever, in good health, and certainly there was nothing wrong with his appetite. He smiled frequently, clearly enjoying his food. He used his fingers as often as his cutlery, stuffing the food into his mouth. Joseph didn't even try to keep up. The main course in particular took a lot of chewing. The meat's flavour was pleasant enough, but unfamiliar. Joseph cleared his plate finally

and considered a second helping, and Finn was right there, piling up his plate again.

'Good, isn't it?' Finn said cheerfully. 'Enjoy it while you can; supply is limited.'

'It's a bit gamey,' said Joseph, chewing thoughtfully. 'I can't say I recognise it. Is it some new import?'

Finn grinned. 'You could say that.'

'What is it?'

'More like who, actually. We're dining on the last of the alien Ambassador from Chanticleer. He's lasted quite a while. I've had him roasted, fried and broiled. I think fried was best; went very well in a nice bed of rice.'

Joseph's stomach churned, and it was all he could do to keep his face calm. There had been rumours about what had happened to the fates of all the alien Ambassadors Finn had had executed, but . . . he stabbed a medium-sized piece with his fork, and ate it carefully. Finn was watching. Joseph swallowed the mouthful eventually, and poured himself more wine with a steady hand. Finn was still battering away.

'I've eaten at least some of all the Ambassadors. Seemed a pity to let them go to waste, and I do so love new experiences. In this job, you have to take your fun where you can get it. I think the 'rall'Chai was the worst, though I tried it with every seasoning I could think of. You just can't help some people.'

The meal ground interminably on, through many courses, including a pudding so sweet and sticky that Joseph couldn't force down more than a few mouthfuls before giving up, but eventually it came to an end. Finn summoned servants to clear the table, then got up and escorted Joseph into the next room. Which was just as plain, if not verging on the spartan. Finn poured two large glasses of brandy, and saw Joseph settled into one of the over-sized chairs in front of the fireplace before sitting down himself. Joseph sipped his brandy cautiously, and waited for the other shoe to drop.

'At ease, Joseph,' Finn said finally, 'You're not here to be reprimanded or punished. I'm actually very pleased with you. My people tell me you're doing an excellent job as my First Minister. Firm discipline,

clear policy with no exceptions, and lots of purges to keep everyone on their toes. It must keep you very busy, though, being in charge of the Church Militant, Pure Humanity and the Trans-

mutation Board. Are you sure I'm not working you too hard? I could always have some of your responsibilities passed on to someone else . . .'

'No, thank you, your majesty,' Joseph said quickly. Power and influence were the only ways to keep safe these days, and Joseph had no intention of giving up any of it. There's no one more dangerous than an ambitious second-in-command. 'I am happy to serve your majesty to the full extent of my abilities.'

'Are you? That's really very sweet of you, Joseph. And do call me Finn. No need for all that formality, among friends in private. Of course, if you ever slip up in public I'll have your nuts off in a trice. Standards have to be maintained. Where was I? Oh yes . . . you're here, Joseph, because I need someone to talk to. Someone on my level, that I can be frank and open with, without reducing them to hysterics, or having to have them executed afterwards. After all, what's the point in achieving things, or triumphing over your enemies, if you haven't got anyone to boast about it to? Gloating's very little fun on your own.

'I used to have Brett Random and Rose Constantine, and later Tel Markham; but they all ran away and left me on my own. Never did understand why. And after all I did for them, the ungrateful little shits . . . They betrayed my trust. You wouldn't do that, would you, Joseph? No; you're not the sort to frighten easily. I feel I could talk to you, tell you things I couldn't tell anyone else. You should know better than most; there's no fun in doing awful things unless you have someone around who can appreciate the subtleties.'

And Joseph Wallace, who as head of the Transmutation Board had wiped out whole species of aliens for being too intelligent, nodded and allowed that he did indeed understand better than most. Still . . .

'You are the Emperor,' Joseph said cautiously. 'Surely there must be any number of people you work with who could—'

'Zealots and fanatics are no fun at all,' Finn said firmly. 'Far too polite, and no sense of humour. Now, you sit and listen while I talk, and we'll get along famously. Try and chime in with the odd appreciative comment from time to time.'

So Finn talked and Joseph listened, and rather to his surprise Joseph was genuinely fascinated. There was a lot more going on inside Finn's head than most people ever realised. «,, , ,,,,»

Hun had made himself Emperor because it amused him. Partly x'l.uise he was now greater than King Douglas had ever been, and t.ully to rub everyone's nose in the fact that he was in charge, and i.ul absolutely no intention of sharing power with anyone. And yet, low that he was Emperor, Finn was a bit at a loss as to where to go lext. He lived in austere, almost spartan surroundings, with only he most basic comforts, because lesser pleasures just didn't do it or him any more. He still satisfied his various appetites, to excess wherever possible, but they were fleeting things. Only power and iuccess really pleased him now, and power was an addictive drug. Phe more you had, the more you wanted.

And, much to Finn's chagrin, instead of tearing down the Empire md pissing on its ruins, as he'd always intended, he now spent most)f his time working hard to keep the Empire strong and united, so hat it could fend off the coming Terror. Finn had always understood about priorities.

Joseph knew all about the Terror. Knew a great deal more than nost, in fact, which was why he slept so badly. The Emperor had •aised him to the highest level of importance in what remained of he civil government, which meant Joseph saw all the latest reports >n the Terror as they came in. The bad news was that the Terror was till coming, and the Empire had no way of stopping it. The good lews . . . well, there wasn't any good news. They couldn't tell the)eople that, so Joseph made lots of public appearances, saying vague md reassuring things in a loud and confident voice. (The Emperor lidn't go out in public much any more, rather to the civil gov:-rnment's relief. The Emperor couldn't be trusted to stick to the cript these days, and some of his casual remarks could be downright listressing.)

'Do you have any family, Joseph?' Finn said suddenly.

Joseph's heart jumped painfully in his chest. Anywhen else, he would have taken a question like that as a veiled threat, with motional blackmail lurking eagerly in the wings, but Finn seemed genuinely interested in the answer.

'I have a wife, a mistress, two sons,' said Joseph. The usual.'

'Ah,' said Finn sadly. 'I have no one. I was an only child, and my >arents died young. I always thought that was very selfish of them, "here was a time when Douglas and Lewis were my family, in as much as anyone was ... I didn't think I'd miss them, but I do,

sometimes . . . Tell me about the sightings, Joseph. The Deathstalker sightings.'

'Just gossip,' Joseph said easily. There are rumours, but nothing worth listening to. People saying they know someone who claims to have seen Lewis walking the streets of the Parade of the Endless. Or sometimes it's Owen, or one of the other legends. It's always a friend of a friend who sees these things; nothing you can pin down.'

'Not any more,' said Finn. Two of my Paragons have been killed; right here in the city. And the word is, a Deathstalker did it,'

'Impossible,' Joseph said quickly. 'My people have this planet sewn up tight. There isn't a ship that even passes by that we don't know everything about. Can't you ask the ELFs controlling the Paragons who did it?'

The possessor was the uber-esper Screaming Silence,' said Finn, his mouth moving briefly in a moue of distaste. 'And unfortunately none of the uber-espers are talking to me at the moment. This would worry me if I was the worrying sort, so it's just as well that I'm not. Besides; Lewis wouldn't sneak back in. Not his style. He'd think it was beneath him, the fool. No, he'd send a formal challenge first, and a chance to surrender honourably. He never did understand the possibilities in treachery. Lewis has his own Fleet now, after the debacle on Haden, and when they come calling we'll all know about it.'

Joseph was surprised to hear Finn discuss the matter so calmly. When the Emperor first learned that the Fleet he'd sent to Haden to kill Lewis and his companions had not only failed to do so, but had actually gone over to the rebels' side en masse, people could hear the Emperor screaming his rage all over the Palace. Servants had run for their lives, and even some of the guards. Finn had only just started to come down when reports came in that his supposed allies, the AIs of Shub, had also betrayed him, and seized control of the Madness Maze; and that had set him off again. The purges that followed had been particularly vicious and far-reaching, and next morning all over the city there were men and women hanging from lamp-posts.

Finn took in Joseph's anxious face, and laughed quietly. 'Don't piinic, I'm over that now. The loss of Shub is a setback, but I had Muide plans, just in case. I have secret allies and hidden super-we.ipous, just wailing lor my call. I'll blast the Shub homeworld

into so much radioactive dust, and my loyal Fleet will blow the rebel ships apart like so many rotten apples in the night.'

Joseph nodded quickly. With anyone else, he would have dismissed such talk as mere bravado, but this was Finn. The master of schemes within schemes, and secrets within conspiracies. He might just mean it. Greatly daring, Joseph raised what was normally a forbidden subject.

'And . . . Owen? Do you really believe the reports? That the blessed Owen himself has returned, and joined with his descendant against you?'

'I ask you,' said Finn. 'Does that even sound likely? Dead is dead. I should know; I've ordered the deaths of millions of people, and none of them have ever come back to complain. It's just rebel propaganda. Wish I'd thought of it first.'

'Only . . . there are rumours/ Joseph said carefully. 'Entirely unconfirmed reports, of course, but still . . . there are those who say that the blessed Owen himself has taken control of the Fleet over Haden . . .'

'If Owen Deathstalker really was back,' said Finn, 'we'd know. He wouldn't need a Fleet. He'd be right here, banging on my Palace door and asking for me by name, and I would be hiding under my bed and wetting myself. No, when Owen bloody Deathstalker comes back, the skies will open and he will descend surrounded by angels. And I personally will believe that when I see it, and not before. Actually, I'd almost welcome his return, if he said he could stop the Ferror. I could probably deal with Owen.'

Finn leaned back in his chair, brooding quietly, lost in his own terrible thoughts, and Joseph took the opportunity to study his Emperor quietly. Finn still had the same classically handsome face, but it was deeply marked now with lines of strain and worry, and his eyes were just that little bit too bright. He looked . . . like a cornered animal; desperate, focused and still very, very dangerous. For all his sudden rages and vicious temper, Finn could still be calm and rational when he had to be, and his grip on power had never been tighter. Being second-in-command to such a man was never going to be easy, but Joseph had faith in his own abilities to survive, if nothing else. All the terrible things he'd done, or had ordered done, had all been done in Finn's name. Joseph's position might well be more than a little perilous, but sometimes all you can do is ride the

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damned tiger and cling on with both hands. And if nothing else, it was an exhilarating ride . . . After all, Finn couldn't live for ever. No matter how much time he spent with the notorious Dr Happy. No; eventually Finn would fall, and then a wise and prepared man might easily step in and take over ...

'I want Transmutation Engines put into orbit around Logres,' Finn said abruptly, 'No need to activate them; not just yet. No; their presence alone will serve to remind everyone who's in charge here, and take their minds off all these ridiculous rumours about a returned Owen. The Engines will also serve as a warning to Lewis and his damned Fleet of what I'll do if they dare challenge my position here.'

Joseph looked at him uncertainly. 'You'd really threaten to des-iroy Humanity's homeworld?'

Finn smiled easily. 'Threaten? My dear naive Joseph; I'll wipe this whole planet clean of everything and everyone before I'll give it up. Which brings me neatly to the other reason I invited you here. Talk to me about Usher II. How are the preparations going?'

Joseph swallowed hard and made himself concentrate on the unfortunate planet identified as being next in the Terror's path. Usher II was an industrial world, specialising in the production of starship engines and all the tech that went with them. The entire planet was given over to these factories, serving the starship needs of the whole Empire. And since the Empire's scientists still didn't fully understand the nature of the tech they'd reverse-engineered from the alien starship that had crashed on Unseeli so very long ago, most of the work still had to be done by hand. Human hands. It was far too delicate work to be trusted to computers. The AIs of Shub provided automatons for the really dangerous work, but even those operated under human control. All the factories on Usher II were unceasingly running twenty-four hours a day, shift after shift, trying to build up a surplus to cover what would happen if and when the planet was destroyed.

'When I need all the ships I can muster,' Finn grumbled, 'to I. n. r. oil Lewis and his treacherous Fleet. Tell me there's some good news, Joseph, if you like having testicles.'

'The evacuation is going . . . better than expected,' Joseph said idly. 'Much still very slowly. We were relying on Shub to send ninety million, but they never turned up. We now know

why, of course. And the human technicians can't be allowed to leave until the very last moment. We're holding their families under guard, to . . . concentrate the minds of the technicians on their work. Everyone is very motivated; and those who aren't get turned into examples of why not being motivated is a very bad idea. But . . . eventually, we're going to have to let them leave. We're going to need their expertise, afterwards. They will of course have priority for the evacuation ships. The rest of the population is expendable, though of course no one's told them that.'

'Not really good news, but a brave effort,' said Finn. 'I had hoped the new tech we confiscated from the humbled alien worlds would come in handy, but we haven't really come up with anything worth the having. I always assumed the shifty alien bastards were keeping things from me, because that's what I would have done, but apparently not. No major weapons kept in reserve, no secret doomsday devices; I'm disappointed in them, I am really. And what little new tech we have grabbed, my scientists, my supposed brilliant experts, are having trouble even deciphering. Only one piece of information really came up trumps: an entirely theoretical plan for transforming a sun into a supernova, and channelling its energies as a weapon. My people are building it even as we speak.'

'You mean . . . something like the Darkvoid Device?' said Joseph, when he could trust his voice again.

'Not really on that scale, unfortunately. Basically, the idea is we use the device on one of Usher II's binary suns, turn it into a supernova, and then direct all the energy produced into one single blast aimed at the Terror's herald, as soon as it comes in range. My people aren't entirely sure the energies can be

controlled, or even aimed properly, but . . . nothing ventured, nothing gained. I'm sure it'll be very pretty to look at. As long as you're not actually on Usher II, of :ourse.'

'A poor man's Darkvoid Device, that we're not even sure we can aim properly?' said Joseph. 'Finn—'

'As long as we can turn it on and off, that's all that matters. Don't lap, Joseph.'

'But even if the weapon works, we still won't be able to save Jsher II. There's no way it could survive having one of its suns go joom.'

'As long as it stops the Terror, I really couldn't give a damn,' Finn

said cheerfully. 'Still, in the event the weapon does work as planned, but still doesn't stop the Terror, we're going to need a backup plan. And that's where you come in, Joseph. Have you moved the Transmutation Engines into position, as I ordered?'

'They'll be in orbit around Usher II by the end of today. All hidden behind sensor shields, of course. They've been preprogrammed to transmute the entire planet and everything on it into the most appalling mess our scientists could conceive. The planet will be poisonous on every level, highly radioactive, and possibly even unstable on the quantum level. Theoretically, the Terror shouldn't be able to consume Usher n without being poisoned itself. However, I feel I should point out that if the Terror decides to simply avoid the planet, and keep on going, that entire Quadrant will be a no-go area for thousands of years afterwards. Maybe even hundreds of thousands.'

Finn sighed. 'Do I really need to explain the concept expendable to you again?'

Joseph nodded stiffly. 'Since use of the Transformation Engines will inevitably mean the death of Usher II's population, the plan is being kept strictly need-to-know. It's a pity we can't salvage some of the factory tech first, but that would rather give the game away.'

'You worry far too much about things that don't matter, Joseph,' said Finn. 'Perhaps ... if we were to destroy Usher II before the Terror got to it, and then kept on destroying every other planet in its path, the Terror might die of starvation. Or at the very least take the hint and go somewhere else.'

'I think we'd probably run out of planets before it ran out of hunger,' Joseph said carefully. 'Besides; think of the billions of lives that would be lost. There's a limit to what the people of the Empire will accept.'

'Is there?' said Finn. Joseph couldn't meet the Emperor's gaze. He started to change the subject, but Finn pressed on. 'Let us understand each other, First Minister. I protect the Empire because it's mine. Mine to play with, mine to enjoy, mine to destroy when I'm tired of it. Not the Terror's. I'll find a way to destroy the Terror, and then . . . Oh, the things I'll do. The people will wish the Terror had taken them.'

'Perhaps you need ... a distraction,' said Joseph, just a little desperately. 'Something to take you out of yourself. I've been

talking with some of your other advisers, and it occurred to us that since you are the Emperor now, you really have a duty to wed, and produce an heir to carry on your line. If you would allow us to—'

'No/ said Finn. 'That won't be necessary. After me, there will be nothing.'

The Rookery had become the last safe haven for rebels on Logres. As a result, that rogues' paradise and city within a city had become impossibly overcrowded, and was actually threatening to burst at its seams. The Rookery had become the last place you could run to, where Finn's agents wouldn't pursue. For the moment, at least. The hidden rotten heart of the Empire's most famous city was now an incredibly dangerous, violent place. The original occupants of the Rookery were finding it increasingly difficult to prey on outsiders, as of old, due to the Emperor's murderously strict martial law, and so they had taken to preying on each other. And most especially on the newcomers, who quickly learned that the only safety lay in numbers. The Rookery had become a bad place to be a man alone. And yet still the people came, because as bad as the Rookery was, everywhere else was worse.

Everyone in the Rookery had lost someone to Finn's people, or knew someone who had. There was a lot of sullen anger in the crowded streets, and in the smoky over-priced taverns, but as yet it had little focus. The Emperor was just too strong, too big a target for their beaten-down spirits. Its only expression so far had been the Rookery's turning against all those who had helped Finn in his rise to power. The agents provocateurs had been burned out of their clubs, and sent running through the streets, to be hunted down like dogs. Everyone else who'd worked with or for Finn Durandal was now being very quiet about it, for fear of being denounced as a spy or informer. Just the rumour was enough to raise up a mob, baying for blood, and broken bodies soon blocked the gutters. Everyone expected the Emperor to order an invasion of the Rookery at some point, but no one was doing anything about it. There were no meetings, no plans, no defences. No one trusted anyone.

Douglas Campbell, who had once been a King, and Stuart Lennox, who had once been a Paragon, now worked as masked bravos for hire, protecting the flea-trap hotel they were staying in

from all the many predators of the streets. Masked bravos were a common sight in the Rookery these days. Lots of people had good reason to conceal their identities. Douglas and Stuart wore simple leather masks, and cheap but serviceable clothing. They'd sold the better clothes they arrived in, to raise the money to acquire the single hotel room Douglas and Stuart and Nina Malapert now shared.

The Lantern Lodge was one of the oldest surviving hotels in the Rookery, and looked it. The squat ugly building was dark, damp and extremely run down, and no one had spent money on it in generations. The outer stone walls were blackened with layers of soot and grime, the windows did little more than let the light in, and there hadn't been any lead on the roof in living memory. It was sweltering hot in the summer and bitter cold in the winter, and every room came with hot and cold running rats. Not to mention bed bugs. (At first, Douglas had thought the single bed came with a built-in vibrating mechanism, and was seriously and loudly upset when the truth was made clear to him.) But it was a room, and rooms were hard to come by, so no one complained.

Douglas and Stuart worked as the hotel's bravos for free bed and board. It wasn't much, but it was better than a lot of people hail. There were those who had to fight every night to protect their place in a doorway, or a cardboard box. Nina was doing marginally bet If i. She was working with a few other rogue media people to put together a rebel news site, tapping briefly into the main media feeds to try and get a little truth on the air now and again. There wasn't any money in it yet, but Nina had great hopes for the future. There weir quite a few ex-media refugees in the Rookery, since Finn's people had taken complete control of all the official media. There were no shows any more, just constant propaganda - there were riots in tin-streets on the day The Quality was taken off the air, but Finn had had his forces use the rioters for target practice until they got the message and slunk off home. Many ex-employees of the news channels had brought their technical knowledge to the Rookery, and the rebel news site was already up and running. Unfortunately, it took expensive and hard-to-get tech to keep it on the air, and lighting its way through the official censor's firewalls, so there was .ilways a problem with funding. It wasn't as though they could sell .idvertisinjj sp.ur.

reputation, and the trousers. Makes the knees go all baggy. Now push off, fartface/

Sewell's face darkened, and he turned to his men. 'Kill them. And make it messy.'

He was about to say something more when Douglas drew his concealed disrupter and shot Sewell in the chest. The energy beam punched right through him, throwing his dead body back into his men. They scattered with cries of alarm, like startled birds, and Sewell measured his length in the gutter. The front of his leather coat was on fire. The thugs finally thought to draw their own weapons, but by then Douglas and Stuart were among them, swords in hands. The bullyboys tried to make a fight of it, but it had been a

long time since they'd had to deal with anything but frightened and dispirited people. They didn't stand a chance against two ex-Paragons. Douglas and Stuart cut their way through the pack with vicious skill, moving fluidly and easily and protecting each other's back at all times. They worked well together. Their swords flashed brightly in the gloom, like rays of hope, and blood pooled on the ground, hardly dispersed at all by the slow drizzle. Bodies fell with cut throats and gaping wounds, and did not rise again. And quicker than anyone had thought possible, it was all over. Douglas and Stuart stood together, blood dripping thickly from their blades, hardly even breathing hard. The sole surviving thug stood with his back to a wall, looking at the two bravos with wide, horrified eyes. Douglas and Stuart turned to look at him, and he quickly dropped his sword on the ground, and raised his shaking hands in the air.

'Who are you? What are you? No one fights like that!'

'We are Douglas and Stuart, bravos for hire, and that's all anyone needs to know,' said Douglas. (He and Stuart had tried using false names when they first arrived in the Rookery, but they kept forgetting them, or confusing who was supposed to be which, so they gave them up. Douglas and Stuart were common enough names.) 'In case you're wondering, we let you live because you're going to carry a message to de Rack, and the message is: Leave us alone. Leave the Lantern Lodge alone. Pretend this unpleasantness never happened. That way we can all hope to live long and profitable lives. Be persuasive, because de Rack wouldn't like I lie alternative. Really he wouldn't. Now go away, and don't come back.'

The thug was off and running the moment he was sure he'd got all of the message. A muffled chorus of boos and jeers followed him, from behind the shuttered windows. Stuart gave a cheerful bow, and Douglas went through the pockets of all the men they'd killed. Hard times bred hard ways, and credit had no provenance in the Rookery. When they were sure they'd got everything worth the having, Douglas and Stuart returned to their post at the front door, and counted it up. There wasn't much. People slowly emerged on to the street again, to steal the dead bodies' clothing. Douglas sighed heavily.

'I hate this place. People shouldn't have to live like this.' 'It's the Rookery,' said Stuart. 'They do things differently here. They always have.'

'Not like this. It's never been as bad as this.'

They watched as the growing crowd squabbled over the corpses' few remaining possessions. By nightfall the bodies would be gone too, and it was wise not to ask where. 'Like rats in a graveyard/' said Douglas. 'Even rats have to eat,' said Stuart.

Douglas sniffed loudly. Stuart looked at him. He'd been trying to help the disturbed, brooding Douglas ever since they'd come to the Rookery, but the man who had once been King, and lost everyone, and everything he ever believed in, didn't want to be helped. This was the most Stuart had heard Douglas speak in days; probably because he only seemed to come alive when he was fighting. And even then, the Campbell fought with precision rather than passion, Smart kept trying to draw him out, but Douglas seemed unwilling or incapable of thinking about the future. As though just getting through each day was hard enough. The man who had once been King now seemed tired all the time, physically and spiritually. He was drawing further and further inside himself, despite everything Smart or Nina could do to help.

'Things shouldn't have to be this way,' Douglas said again, and Smart was surprised and pleased to hear some honest emotion in I lie Campbell's voice. 'We ought to be doing . . . something, to help these people. We took an oath as Paragons, to protect the people. Remember?' 'Yes,' said Stuart. 'I remember. I wasn't sure you did.'

Some hours later their relief arrived to take over, and Douglas and Stuart went inside for their only meal of the day. Their replacements were ordinary muscle-for-hire from the local hiring house. No one special; the house just sent over whoever was available. The two bruisers nodded respectfully to Douglas and Stuart as they disappeared inside the hotel. The lobby wasn't up to much: paint-peeling walls, sawdust on the floor and no chairs. Nothing to encourage anyone to linger. Just a battered old reception desk, where the staff were protected from the customers by a heavy metal grille. There was an elevator at the back, but its operation was a sometime thing, and did not inspire confidence. Douglas and Stuart climbed the five flights of stairs to their single shared room. They didn't disturb the handful of ragged forms who'd paid to be allowed to sleep in the stairwells.

Nina Malapert was already there in their room, laying the food on the table, which was not a good sign.

She was only ever back this early when her day's work had gone really badly. The way she bashed the battered crockery about was confirmation enough without the frustration evident in her scowling face. She nodded briefly at the two men as they sat wearily down at the table. It wasn't a big room, and with the table unfolded it took up most of the available space. Dinner was boiling on a hot plate set perilously close to the only bed. (Douglas and Stuart shared the bed. Nina had made a nest of blankets for herself in one corner.) There was only one window, smeared with the debris of years.

Douglas and Stuart took off their leather masks, and dropped them on the table beside their plates. Their faces felt hot and sweaty from the leather, despite the early evening chill that had worked its way into the room. Douglas Campbell was still a handsome man, with his noble brow and great mane of golden hair, but more than ever he resembled a wounded lion brought down by jackals; a great man brought low by too many losses and the unbearable weight of unrelinquished responsibilities. Stuart Lennox looked much older than his years warranted. A stern young man with a drawn, almost gaunt face, his gaze was always a little distracted, and he rarely smiled any more. And even Nina Malapert was no longer the happy bubbling free spirit of old. The demon girl reporter who laughed at danger and would dare anything for a scoop wasn't exactly gone, just suppressed by the weight of life in the Rookery, but it did seem

she didn't smile nearly as much as she once had. Her tall pink mohawk bobbed angrily as she ladled out the meal.

Douglas watched Nina bustle about, and tried hard to feel . . . something. It was difficult for him to feel anything much, any more. His family was dead, his friends were gone, his responsibilities taken from him. He felt lost and unfocused without them. He wasn't *King* any more, or even a *Paragon*, but he didn't know how to be anything else. So mostly he just went through the motions, getting through the day until he could finally go to bed and lose himself in sleep. He looked at the discarded leather mask beside his plate. Sometimes he thought that was his real face now. He could feel Stuart looking at him, and stared at the mess on his plate so he wouldn't have to look at Stuart. He knew the earnest young man only wanted to help, but Douglas didn't want to be helped. He wanted to be numb, so he wouldn't have to think or feel or remember.

According to the official media news sites, Anne Barclay was dead. Killed by falling debris during Douglas's daring escape from the Court. Another old friend hurt, and gone, because of him. Nina tried to tell him you couldn't trust anything on the official sites these days, that it was all Finn's propaganda, but that was just Nina being kind. At least Lewis and Jesamine were still out there, somewhere, avoiding capture. Douglas hoped they at least were happy. He desperately wanted somebody to be happy, out of

the mess he'd made of things.

He looked at his dinner. It wasn't up to much, but then it never was. Stringy meat and potatoes, with lumpy gravy. Douglas pushed it about a bit with his fork. 'What's the meat?'

'Best not to ask,' Nina said briskly, as she sat down next to him. 'And you really don't want to know what's in the gravy.' 'Is there pudding?' said Stuart, hopefully. Nina gave him a withering look. 'What do you think?' Stuart had a plate of rosy-looking vegetables, boiled within an hour of their lives. He never touched meat. The others never sipped anything. They knew why. Once Nina would have insisted on their sipping grace first, but they had all fallen far beyond that slate of grace now. The three of them sat and ate for a while in silence. It was food, and it was fuel, and that was all it was. Outside in the street, there

were occasional shouts and screams and sounds of violence, but then, there always were. •

'I heard a rumour today,' Stuart said finally.

'Now there's a surprise,' said Nina. 'This whole place runs on rumours.'

'This one was about Clan Deathstalker,' said Stuart. 'Word is, a handful of minor cousins escaped the slaughter on Virimonde, and might be coming here.'

'I'm sorry, Stuart,' said Nina, putting a hand on his. 'But I was there, remember; with poor Emma? I saw them all die. No one escaped.'

'Some of them could have been offplanet/ said Douglas, not looking up from his food.

'Perhaps/ Nina said kindly. There's always hope/

'Poor Lewis/ said Douglas, pushing his food about the plate. The last Deathstalker. I wonder if anyone's told him yet. Can't help feeling sorry for him.'

'Even though he stole the woman you loved?' said Stuart.

'She was never really mine/ said Douglas. 'I never really knew her. There wasn't time. I thought we'd have all the time we needed to get to know each other after we were married. Now ... I think perhaps I only loved the image, the diva and the star. Maybe that's why she fell for Lewis. Because he was the one who cared for the real her/

He made himself eat the rest of his meal. Stuart and Nina would only look at him if he didn't, and he didn't know how much more of their worrying about him he could stand. He supposed there would come a day when he'd be so hungry he'd be able to wolf it all down without tasting it; but he wasn't looking forward to that at all. Nina checked they'd all finished and then bustled around the table, gathering up the plates and keeping up a stream of chatter. She was trying to be motherly and supportive, but truth be told she wasn't very good at it. Douglas gave her extra marks for trying anyway. And then he made himself concentrate as he realised she was saying something about a new step forward in her attempts to keep the rogue news site afloat.

'A whole bunch of new media people have turned up in the Rookery! First-class techs, the loveys; just what we needed. I mean, yes, I'm a reporter and all that, but I never did understand the

science side of things. Up till now it's been the blind leading the deal and trying not to electrocute ourselves. These new guys got out of the city just ahead of Finn's people, and they're keen as mustard to get some payback, by helping us with our site set-up. Pretty soon we'll be able to tap into the official news feeds whenever we feel like it. And I'm going to be the face on the screen! Nina Malapert, presenter and superstar! Mummy will be so proud/

'But what are you going to say?' said Stuart. 'People will watch for a while out of curiosity, but you're going to need something dramatic to show them to keep their attention/

'Well; I'll tell them how bad things are here in the Rookery!' They won't care. They've got their own problems, living under Emperor Finn. You need to offer them something they don't know/ 'Like what?' 'Hope/ said Douglas.

Nina and Stuart both looked at him quickly, but he was m»\< again, lost in his own bitter thoughts. Nina patted him gently on the arm, and took the dirty plates over to the far from hygienic sink in the corner. Stuart surged suddenly up on to his feet, glaring at Douglas.

'Damn you, Douglas, you make me sick! How much longer are you going to sit around feeling sorry for yourself? This isn't your personal tragedy! People are dying every day under Finn. Your people! Finn murdered your father, took over your throne and named himself Emperor! What does it take to move you? To make you a man again?'

Douglas looked up, and what was in his eyes made Stuart's heart stop. And there was no telling

what might have happened next. The mood hadn't been sharply broken by shouting from the street outside. Someone was calling for Douglas and Stuart by name. They looked at each other, and then they went over to the window and unlocked it open as far as it would go. Nina squeezed determinedly in beside them. Down in the street, the thugs they'd let go circled, with a whole new crowd of friends and associates. Ugly, brutal-looking men, loaded down with weapons and body armour. The two hired bravos who should have been guarding the hold were already dead, their gutted bodies hanging from lamp-posts. The hold owner, his wife and their three small children stood in a line, each with a drawn sword, dinging loudly. The little girl of

the gang was looking up at Douglas, Stuart and Nina. A large man, a fat man, in an area where most people went to bed hungry. He wore the very latest fashions, but a thug in silks is still a thug. He was smiling cheerfully.

'Well, hello up there! I'm Brion de Rack. These men work for me. So did the ones you killed, but I'm not one to bear a grudge. Does an organisation good, to have the dead wood trimmed, now and again. You have surprised me, gentlemen, and that's not easy. Now do be good boys and come down and talk with me. Or I'll kill your present employer, and his family, while you watch. Slow and nasty and very messily. What's it to be, gentlemen?'

Douglas and Stuart drew back from the window and looked at each other.

'Well?' said Stuart. 'What is it to be?'

'We don't owe them anything,' said Douglas. 'Don't even know them. But ... if we back down from scum like these, we'll never get any peace.'

'Oh, silly me,' said Stuart. 'I thought we might go down because innocent people needed to be rescued.'

Because it's the right thing to do.'

'Don't push your luck/' said Douglas, 'I'm really not in the mood.'

'But we are going down?'

'Yes, Stuart,' Douglas said, smiling suddenly. 'We're going down.' ': 'I'm going to get my really big gun,' said Nina.

'You're going to stay in the background,' Douglas said sternly. 'Because you never know when an unsuspected backup will come in handy.'

'Oh poo,' said Nina. 'I never get to have any fun.'

Back behind their anonymous leather masks, Douglas Campbell and Stuart Lennox pushed open the hotel front door and stepped cautiously out into the main street. Crowds had already gathered, watching from a safe distance. De Rack and his men were waiting. The thugs and bullyboys reacted strongly when they realised Douglas and Stuart both had energy guns in their hands, but de Rack gestured easily, and they quieted again. Up close, de Rack looked even bigger, and uglier. Stuart couldn't help feeling that de Rack was the one who should have been wearing a mask.

'It really is very simple,' the big man said easily. 'I can't have two

such excellent fighters as your good selves working as independents. Not in my territory. Might give people ideas. Dangerous things, ideas. And there's always the chance you might end up working for one of my enemies. A successful businessman such as myself requires enemies, like a dog has fleas. So; you're going to work for me. I pay good wages, there are all kinds of fringe benefits, and you have job security for life. Because whatever happens in the Rookery, I'll always be here, taking my cut.'

'And if we don't feel like signing up with a small-time thug with delusions of grandeur?' said Douglas. 'If, in fact, we say Go to hell'

'In that unlikely event, my men will kill the hotel owner and his family in appallingly inventive ways, set fire to the hotel and burn it down, and kill anyone who comes running out of the building. Finally my men will torture you to death right here in the street, in front of the hotel. A fine example of what happens to those foolish enough to defy me.' Or Hack shrugged apologetically. 'A waste of good potential income, I admit, but business is business. You should feel flattered, gentlemen I don't usually have to pressure people to work for me. But then I see something . . . special, about you two. I can tell. Ex-military, right? Seen a lot of action, but couldn't fit in with the Durandal's new goody-goody regime? I thought so. You're not just muscle, you're muscle with brains, and I can always use people like that. I need quality, and you wouldn't believe how rare that is in the Rookery, these days.'

'Maybe you just weren't looking in the right places,' said Slim, 'Or maybe you wouldn't know real quality if you fell over it. Would you really kill everyone in this hotel, just to save face?'

'Of course!' said de Rack. He gestured expansively at the crowd that had gathered out of nowhere to watch the free entertainment. 'A man is only as good as his word, and if that word is a threat, so much the better. Discipline must be maintained. But don't look on me too harshly, dear friends. I'm just a businessman, doing what it takes to get along. People . . . don't matter here. Only power. The strength to take what you want, when you want it, and keep it.'

'And to hell with everyone else?' said Stuart.

'Exactly.'

Things . . . shouldn't be like this,' Douglas said slowly.

'Welcome to Finn's Umpire,' said Stuart. 'Welcome to the world he made, because there's no one left to slop him.'

'Someone should do something,' said Douglas.

'If not you,' said Stuart, 'then who?'

'Excuse me,' said de Rack, 'but I was talking. Ignore me again and I'll have my men teach you a lesson in manners.'

'Oh hell/' said Douglas. His voice still sounded tired, but somehow he seemed to be standing straighter and taller. 'It never ends, does it? There's always work to be done. No matter how weary you

are.'

'We can rest when we're dead,' said Stuart.

'I wouldn't put money on it,' said Douglas. 'Nina; you're on.'

Nina Malapert stepped elegantly out of the hotel front door, holding the biggest handgun anyone present had ever seen. And while everyone was still gaping at her, Nina shot de Rack neatly through the chest. The energy blast blew him apart like a rotten apple. Even as the charred and smoking pieces were still flying through the air, Douglas and Stuart charged forward sword in hand, and hit the men guarding the hotel owner and his family. The thugs and bullyboys didn't even try to make a fight of it. They knew professional fighters when they saw them. Most just turned and ran, booed and catcalled by the watching crowd. Douglas and Stuart cut down those who didn't in no time at all. And as quickly as that, it was all over. The hotel owner shook Douglas and Stuart by the hand, again and again, babbling his relief and thanks. His wife and children regarded the two bravos with wide, worshipful eyes. The crowd were applauding loudly. Some even cheered. Protection racketeers only had friends when they were on top. There was also a clear element of surprise in the applause. Heroes were rare in the Rookery at the best of times, which these most definitely weren't.

Stuart shook thick drops of blood off his blade, and grinned at Douglas. 'Feels good, doesn't it? Doing what we were meant to do.'

Douglas laughed briefly, a harsh resigned sound. 'All right; knock it off. I'm back. It's time to wake up and get involved again. For better or worse, the rebellion starts here.'

Nina shrieked with delight, and did her happy dance right there in the street, 'Yes! Yes! An exclusive for

the new news site!

Back in their room, sat around the table with their masks off, Douglas and Stuart and Nina plotted revolution. They all spoke loudly, interrupting and cutting each other off, their faces flushed

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will) excilcmMI and anticipation. They all fell more alive llum llicy luul in months.

'So,' said Stuart. 'How exactly does the rebellion start here?'

'I thought I'd take all the people here in the Rookery and raise them up into an army I can set at Finn's throat,' said Douglas. 'Not the best material, I'll admit, but you work with what's available. So; I'll talk to them, inspire them, fire up a sense of grievance and injustice, and then whip them into a fury and—'

'Never work,' Nina said flatly. 'In the whole history of the Rookery, no one's ever been able to get all of them to agree on anything. That's why most of them came here in the first place; because they couldn't get on with anyone else.'

'She may be loud and irritating, but she has a point,' said Stuart. 'Nothing less than a full-scale invasion of the Rookery by Finn's army would ever unite these people into a common cause, and Finn's far too smart to do that. He knows all he has to do is wait, and they'll turn on each other.'

'An invasion . . / said Douglas. That's what we need, rig I" enough. And Finn just might do it; if we scare him enough, Hut first, we need to get the people here on our side, and under oilf command. I think I'll start with Random's Bastards. They're tht celebrities of this appalling place. They're fashion setters, trend setters; where they lead, others will follow.'

'Yes, they're celebrities/ said Stuart. 'And that's why they i' never going to follow two masked bravos from nowhere. We'n good fighters, and perhaps even local heroes now, but so arc mowl • >i the Bastards. All they care about is fame and money, and we can i offer them either.'

They care about who they are/ Douglas said slowly. 'Mortl importantly, they care about who their ancestor was. (iive them a chance to be heroes and legends like the glorious Jack K.mdnm, give them a chance to follow an outlawed King into battle .i^lns! a corrupt Emperor ... to live the lives they've only drcdinnl about . . .'

'Douglas, you can't!' said Nina. Trust me, dear, this is a re.illy h.id idea. You show the Bastards your real face, and they'll be lining up to betray you to Finn for the reward!'

'Damn right/ said Stuart. They may be Random's spawn, I ml they know nothing of honour. And if there's anything they luilc

putting these scumbags behind

bars?'

'The enemy of my enemy is my ally, if not my friend,' Douglas said calmly. 'We just have to demonstrate to the Bastards that Finn is much more of a threat to them than they realise, and that we're the only people who can lead a rebellion against him. I've always found inspired self-interest to be a great motivator.'

'You'll be a dead motivator the moment you take your mask off,'

growled Stuart.

'We are going to see the Bastards,' Douglas said firmly. 'Have

faith, my children.'

'I'm taking my really big gun,' said Nina. 'And my best pair of

running shoes.'

So, a few days later, Douglas and Stuart and Nina, two masked bravos and a demon girl reporter, attended the next scheduled meeting of Random's Bastards. It wasn't difficult to track them down. This wide selection of men, women and not a few alien hybrids, who claimed to be descendants of the legendary professional rebel Jack Random, always came together once a month to boast and brag about all the marvellous things they'd done, and argue fiercely over their various claims to lines of descent from Jack Random. Their favoured rendezvous was a squalid little tavern down on Hell Street: the Three Cripples. An appalling place in practically every way, but the drink was cheap and the owner was ;-), prepared to overlook the inevitable bad behaviour in return for the

regular booking.

Douglas and Stuart and Nina looked distastefully at the stained walls and slumping roof, with the windows blacked out for extra privacy, and stepped carefully over the bubbling open sewer to get to the main entrance. The place was already packed wall to wall, and the bouncer at the door tried to glare them away. Nina showed him her really big gun, and the bouncer decided there was room for just a few more after all.

Inside, the smell was actually worse, if anything. The air was thick with a smog of various illegal smokes, and there wasn't a chair or a stool to be had for love nor money. The crowd jostled together amiably enough, shouting at each other to be heard over the awful

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din. Nearly ill of the iiiic'ii, women «uid hum, moid t le.ilmes wen .limes with weapons of some kind. The waitresses were' all IVUule-l.iines (a popular clone franchise knock-off), and they circulated ,is hesl they

could through the heaving press of bodies, dispensing drinks and bar food of dubious provenance. Douglas and Stuart forced their way through the crowd with heavy scowls and vicious use of the elbow, while Nina brought up the rear.

'How the hell are we going to get their attention?' said Stuart, shouting right into Douglas's ear.

'Same way we did with de Rack,' said Douglas. 'Nina, If you wouldn't mind . . .'

Nina didn't mind at all. Grinning broadly, she kicked a few people in the shins to make some room, raised her very big gun and blew a hole right through one wall. The clamour broke off abruptly <i>everyone present fought to draw their weapons or locate the noim-M exit. Nina carefully lowered her gun. Douglas jumped up on to the nearest table and smiled calmly about him.

'Everyone relax, it's not a raid. Some of you may recognise* me and my two friends as the ones who killed de Rack, and broke up his protection racket. We did it because . . . people shouldn't have to put up with shit like that. Just as you shouldn't have to put up with shit like this. Look at you: the descendants of a hero, a legend, and you're reduced to hiding out in the Rookery, denied your full destiny, unable to fulfil your potential. Unable to prove yourselves worthy of the legend of Jack Random. I've come to show you a way out. A way to change your lives for ever.'

And he took off his leather face mask. For a long moment no one moved, held in a shocked silence, and then a great roar went up from the crowd as they recognised Douglas Campbell. One thought was in all their minds as they looked on the ex-Paragon and ex-King, and that thought was Money! The massive reward Finn had put on Douglas's head, preferably no longer attached to the body, would enable them to live like kings. (There was another, smaller reward on Stuart's head. Finn could be sentimental that way, so he didn't want Stuart to feel left out.)

The whole crowd looked at Douglas with hungry eyes, and I lie surged forward as one to drag him down. Stuart and Nina defended both sides of the table with kicks and punches and the occasional head-butt, Nina in particular proved especially adept at dirty fight i tig.

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Douglas looked calmly out over the uproar, not even bothering to draw his sword or his gun, even when the clutching hands came very close to his legs. He raised his voice again, and almost despite themselves, the Bastards quietened to hear what he had to say. He was Douglas Campbell after all, and his reputation went before him.

'You must know my friends and I will kill a hell of a lot of you before you can drag us down. I was a Paragon and a warrior long before I was a King. My friends are warriors too. You're ready to fight and die for money, but not for your freedom? What would Jack Random think of that? He was the professional rebel; you're just professional lowlifes. And not very successful ones, of late. Either you find the guts to fight back against Finn's unjust rule, or pretty soon there won't be any Random's Bastards. He'll pick you off one by one, and your heads will decorate rows of spikes outside the Palace as an example to others. And Jack Random's extended line will die with you. I never gave you any reason to love me, but at least I respected you. Finn's law is harsher on you than I ever was. He'll kill you all, because of the legacy of freedom and justice you represent. Your only hope lies in rebellion, and for that you need a leader everyone will follow. And that's me.'

A slow murmur moved reluctantly through the packed crowd. He's not wrong. Times are bad. Bloody Church Militant everywhere. Can't make a decent living any more. Finn's a swine, all right. Probably couldn't trust him to pay the reward anyway. When the Campbell was a Paragon, you always knew where you were with him. He was vicious, but fair.

'You have to do this,' said Douglas, and the muttering stopped at once. They were all listening now. 'You have to do it, for your pride and your freedom. I know there have been uprisings before, and Finn stamped them out with cruel, terrible tactics. He doesn't have to care about being popular any more. But those earlier rebels were a bunch of amateurs. No common cause, no discipline, no leader. You are all

practical, professional rebels, and practised fighters, and . . . you have me to lead you. You only have to look around you to see what the world has become; what the Rookery has become. You were always rogues, but you had your pride. Now look at you; reduced to preying on each other for pocket change. You don't have to be like this. You don't have to live like this. You are Jack Random's legacy, a part of the legacy of the great Rebellion, of Owen Deathstalker and his allies. And now the time has come for

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you to be worthy of (hem, Don't wait for the Dunindal to send his lieutenants in here to clear the place out; be the rebels you were born to be. Rise up!

And Random's Bastards roared their approval and cheered him (ill the room rang with the power of it. Stuart and Nina couldn't believe it, ill-remembered criminals who'd steal the gold teeth from their sleeping grandmothers, who'd worked every con and scheme known to man, seized their feet and hammered their hands together till they bled. It probably helped that most of them were broke and bored, and more than ready for a little action, but Douglas had offered them their pride back again, and maybe, just maybe, there was some of Jack Random in them after all.

Douglas got down off his table, and introduced Stuart Lennox and Nina Malapert to the crowd. The Bastards nodded respectfully to (In ex-Paragon, and to Nina's gun, but really they only had eyes for Douglas. He carried on talking long into the evening, mixing the inspirational with the practical. Declaring a rebellion was all very well, but there were details to be worked out. Luckily between them the Bastards knew everyone in the Rookery, or at least everyone who mattered. They knew exactly where Douglas should go next, and he best spread the message beyond the Three Cripples. They were quick to reassure him that there were lots of people in the Rookery who hated the way things were, and were only waiting for a focus and a leader. They wanted their old deviant life back, and they were ready to fight for it. The Rookery had always been full of lighters. They would follow Douglas because they knew him, they knew Paragon and as a King, and as one of them, brought low by the hated Finn Durandal.

More meetings followed, at carefully chosen venues all across the Rookery, followed by open rallies attended by first hundreds then thousands of eager listeners. Everyone wanted to hear Douglas speak,

as he rallied and cajoled and inspired them with thundering words and the power of a simple truth: that they had the power to change their lives, if they were only strong enough to select, Douglas reminded them of how far they'd fallen under Emperor Finn, and they roared their rage. Their anger had been silently diffused for so long only because no one had dared to stand up and put it into words. Douglas gave them back their pride, and they loved him for it. And finally he stood on a simple stage in

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square, facing hundreds of thousands of eager listeners, and he

knew it was time.

'Let the word go out!' he said, his voice echoing in the silence of devout attention. 'From now on the Rookery is a no-go area for all of Finn's creatures! His authority has no power here. His overbearing and unjust rule stops at our borders. Any one of his people comes in, they don't get out again. No more taxes without representation. No more executions without trial. No more Church Militant bullyboys telling you how to run your lives. No more Emperor Finn sneering at you, because he thinks he doesn't have to be afraid of you any more. He thinks he's broken you. It's time to prove him wrong. We're

kicking his people out and taking the Rookery back! Then the Parade

of the Endless! And finally all of Logres! 'Because if not us, then who?' And after that the cheers and roars of approval and determination

were so loud, Finn must have heard them, even in the dark heart of

his usurped Palace.

One man in particular felt his life change for ever, when he saw Douglas Campbell reveal his true identity in the Three Cripples, that first night: Tel Markham, who had once been a Member of Parliament and a mover and a shaker in any number of secret organisations, but who now washed dishes for a living in the filthy back kitchen of the tavern. He ate scraps of food left on plates, and fought the rats and other vermin for it too. His once proud clothes were filthy rags, and he slept in a doss house, standing up in a line of men supported by ropes under their arms. The doss-house owners packed them in, for greater profit, and often the shared warmth of the packed bodies was all that kept the sleepers alive through the cold

nights.

Tel received a small remittance from his mother every month, supplied on the understanding that he wouldn't try to contact her, or come home. He had made the family name a disgrace, she said, and he had failed to look after his brother Angelo. (He'd always been her favourite.) It had been Tel's refusal to murder his brother on Finn's orders that had brought him low. Tel was aware of the irony, but he didn't have much use for humour these days. His mother's money kept him alive, just. He had to stay alive. There, were people he had to be revenged upon.

Seeing Douglas alive had filled him with new hope. He followed the Campbell from rally to rally, listening to the man speak, and willing the crowds. He needed to be sure Douglas was the real thing. And finally, when he heard the crowd roar at that last great rally, he hugged himself tightly in his rags, and laughed and sighed. He decided it was time to introduce himself. He went to the Lantern Lodge hotel one evening, slipping in through the kitchens because there was no way they'd let the likes of him in through the front door. There were guards posted, but he dodged them easily enough, and sneaked up the back stairs to Douglas's room. And then he hesitated at the door, afraid to knock. He'd fallen so very far from what he once was. And even when they were both men of power and influence, King Douglas had never had much time for the Member for Madraguda. How would Douglas react to his

shrunken thing of rags and tatters at his door? Tel shuffled his feet uncertainly, raised his hand to knock and then let it fall again. He started to turn away, when the door swung suddenly open, and a large fist grabbed him by the shoulder of his filthy tunic and dragged him inside.

'Told you I heard someone sneaking about,' Stuart said cheerfully. 'Probably a spy or informer. Though now I've got him, I'm not sure what to do with him. I just hope my inoculations are still working.'

He thrust Tel forward on to his knees before Douglas, and ostentatiously wiped his hand on his arse to clean it. An unexpected surge of pride brought Tel's head up.

'I am no spy or informer! Finn has no greater enemy than mi!' I came here to offer you my services!'

'Well, thanks very much and all that, but I don't think we need our boots cleaned at the moment,' said Nina, wrinkling her nose

fastidiously.

'You don't recognise me,' said Tel, his eyes fixed on Douglas. 'Hell, I wouldn't know me, looking like this. I'm Tel Markham, once the honourable Member for—'

He broke off as Stuart surged forward and set the edge of a knife against his throat. 'Markham!' he spat. 'One of Finn's creatures, then and now! Oh God is good, now and again, delivering our enemies into our hands. Move your boots back, Douglas. You don't want to get blood all over them when I kill him.'

'Wait! Wail!' Tel was so panic-stricken he could hardly breathe.

but he kept his gaze locked on Douglas. 'I was one of Finn's people, yes. Emphasis on the was. He ordered me to kill my brother Angelo, but I refused, so he turned on me. I had to run here, leaving everything behind, just to save my life. And then he killed Angelo anyway, so it was all for nothing after all. No one in this room has a better cause to hate Finn Durandal than me.'

'Don't put money on it,' said Stuart.

'Why should we trust you?' said Douglas. He seemed genuinely curious.

'You shouldn't/' said Tel, still acutely aware of the knife at his throat. 'You shouldn't trust anyone in the Rookery. Finn seeded the whole place with his people long ago. But I know his secrets. I can identify his traitors, tell you of his plans. You only think you know how evil he is. You have no idea of who his allies really are, and the terrible things he intends to do. You need to know what I know. Keep me around. I can be useful. In the end, you'll learn to trust me. I'll advise you, follow you, fight beside you.'

'Why?' said Douglas.

'Because Finn killed my brother.'

'Ah,' said Douglas. 'Yes. Family obligations. I know all about those.' He nodded to Stuart, who reluctantly took his knife away from Tel's throat.

Tel rose slowly to his feet, awkwardly conscious of what a ragged and filthy picture he presented. It had been a long time since he could afford to care about his appearance, but he wanted - needed - Douglas to remember him as the man he was, not the creature he'd become.

Stuart wrinkled his nose. 'Damn, Markham, but you stink! And to be that noticeable in a dump like this is something of an achievement. If you're going to spend any time with us, you need to take a bath. Urgently. There's a tin bath on the ground floor. Tell the owner I said you could use it, and that he'd better scour and disinfect it afterwards. Hell, scrub it out yourself! We all have to use the bloody thing. God, sometimes I think I'm only fighting this rebellion for a return to decent plumbing.'

'First things first,' said Tel, just a little diffidently. 'I belong to the landlord of the Three Cripples. He owns my contract. I can't work for anyone else unless you buy me out. I shouldn't even be here, really, even if it is on what I laughingly refer to as my own time.'

'Slavery's illegal,' said Douglas. 'Even in the Rookery.' 'Lot you know,' said Tel Markham.

Stuart sighed heavily. 'I guess I'd better pay another visit to the Three Cripples.'

'You do that,' said Nina. 'And I think I'll force open the window while you're gone.'

In the end, both Douglas and Stuart went with Tel to the tavern. Douglas talked to the landlord, and offered the man a fair sum to release Tel from his contract. The landlord, sensing which way the wind was blowing, immediately claimed Tel was utterly invaluable, and that he couldn't run the tavern without him. He then demanded an utterly unreasonable sum to break the contract. So Douglas knocked him on his arse, right there in front of his customers. Slavery is illegal, he declared loudly. As of right bloody now, 'You know,' said Tel, as they walked out of the tavern, 'that is going to be a terribly popular sentiment in some parts of the Rookery. The tradition of indentured servitude goes back a long time here.'

'Tough,' said Douglas. 'My leadership of this rebellion comes with a price, and the price is morality. The Rookery will become healthier than it was. The people will become strong again. They have to. Because the weak and uncertain won't stand a chance against Her fanatics.' He looked around at the small but attentive crowd which always appeared when he went out in public. 'Wouldn't you all like to feel good about yourselves again?'

'Don't you condescend to us, aristocrat!' said a lady of a certain age with too much eye makeup. 'We weren't all born to wealth and privilege! We've had to make our own way. We fight for our own interests, not yours!' 'I could shoot her,' Stuart said quietly.

'Don't tempt me,' murmured Douglas. He smiled easily at her. 'Your interests are my interests, and vice versa. We have a common cause, bound together by need and destiny.'

He bowed courteously to the woman, and walked on. Stuart and Tel followed him. Stuart scowled. 'What the hell did that mean?'

'Beats me,' said Douglas. 'It sounded good, though. When in doubt, kill the devil with the sword. You know, things were a lot

easier when I still had Anne to write my speeches for me. Look; what matters is getting the rebellion started. We can argue about what it's for after we've won/

Those sound an awful lot like famous last words to me/ said Stuart, and Tel nodded solemnly.

'I wonder if Owen had these problems/ Douglas said wistfully. They trudged along, Tel hanging back just a little. He had clean clothes now, and could stand to be downwind of himself at last, but he still didn't feel worthy to walk beside Douglas yet. His pride had been very thoroughly beaten out of him while he was working at the Three Cripples, and it was slow coming back. He'd spent most of the past few days rehearsing in his mind all that he remembered of Finn's plans and secrets and vulnerabilities. He could name a whole shitload of traitors, double agents and deep-cover sleepers in the Rookery, but he needed more than that to make himself valuable to Douglas. He couldn't afford to be used and then discarded. He needed to attach himself to Douglas, make himself a part of the Campbell's staff, so that when the rebellion was over and Douglas returned to power, Tel Markham wouldn't be left behind in the poverty he'd so narrowly escaped. For Tel, Douglas Campbell was a rising star; someone whose coat-tails he could ride to security, if not glory. He needed to be secure, to launch his revenges.

'So where are we going now?' Stuart said. The omnipresent drizzle had become a driving rain. It was always wet and miserable in the Rookery these days. Stuart was pretty sure Finn had arranged it with the weather-control people.

'We are going to the alien sector/ said Douglas. 'Nina is meeting us there. She's made contact with a very useful alien hybrid called Nikki Sixteen, who claims she can get us an audience with the leaders of the alien presence here in the Rookery/

Stuart sniffed. 'Are there enough of them here to make it

worthwhile?'

'Oh, you'd be surprised at the size of the Rookery's alien contingent/ Tel said immediately, seizing the chance to show off his local knowledge. 'All kinds of aliens and hybrids end up here, for all sorts of reasons. Either because they're political or religious refugees, or because they've acquired tastes for human pleasures or concepts that wouldn't be tolerated back on their homeworlds. The Rookery has always been a cosmopolitan kind of place, and very

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tolerant when it comes to unnatural vices. You wouldn't believe what SOUK' of these aliens get up to/

'Yes I bloody would/ said Stuart. 'Nothing about this place surprises me any more/

'Some of the aliens are remittance people/ Tel continued. 'Paid to stay away from home and family. Because they backed the wrong cause, or got too friendly with the wrong individuals. Being part of a rebellion to overthrow Finn and his xenophobic allies could go a long way towards buying them a ticket home again. But you're going to have to be very careful, Douglas; all these different species have their own needs and agendas, and they'll only go along with you for as long as your needs coincide with theirs. Right now, all you have in common is a hatred of the Emperor/

'Right now, that's enough/ said Douglas.

The meeting place turned out to be an abandoned, boarded-up swimming baths, in a grimy, especially run-down area of the Rookery. The chipped and stained walls were covered with sprawling alien graffiti, in a dozen different pictographs. Douglas could read a few of them, and was sure Finn's mother had never done any such thing. Nina was sheltering in the recessed doorway, wrapped in a heavy cloak. Her pink mohawk drooped damply to one side.

'About time you got here, darlings. This place gives me the creeps, and it's not exactly a salubrious neighbourhood. The only reason it isn't crawling with muggers is because something's been eating them, and I don't know what the smell is but I just know it's going to take ages to get it out of my clothes. And watch where you tread, because things go awry if you don't, and I really hope they're only rats. Nikki Sixteen brought me here, and then couldn't leave fit enough, which tells you all you need to know about this area, I) we really have to be here, Douglas sweetie?'

'Yes/ Douglas studied the door behind her. The swimming bath had been in a good location once, back when there had still been prosperous places to live in the Rookery. Back then, the baths had been the centre of what passed for polite society. And while the building as a whole might be crumbling and the windows boarded over, the main door was a single great slab of veined marble, held shut by heavy lengths of steel chain, with massive padlocks. The padlocks hung open, showing they were expected, if not necessarily welcome, but clearly the aliens took their security very seriously.

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Douglas gestured for Nina to sit. She did. He stepped quickly out into the rain. Stuart moved quickly forward to block Douglas's

way.

'I go first, Douglas. Always. Now you're the leader of the rebellion, I'm a lot more expendable than you are/

'No one's expendable, Stuart/ said Douglas. 'That's what the rebellion's all about/

'I still get to stand between you and all danger, your majesty. So hold your ground here, while I open the door and then throw Tel in to check for traps and ambushes/

'I don't find that at all funny,' said Tel. 'Does anybody find th.u

funny?'

'I think it's a bloody good idea,' said Nina. 'I never trusted you, even when you were just a politician. You've got shifty eyes/

Stuart pushed the door slowly inwards, and the hanging chains rattled loudly. A cloud of stinking steam wafted out that had them .ill wine ing <md pulling faces. The steam curled slowly around them, moist iind heavy and unpleasantly warm. It was rank with unfamil i,ii elements that brought tears to the eye and a nasty taste in the kick of the mouth. Stuart braced himself, and stepped forward into the gloom beyond the door. There was an uncomfortably lour pause, and then he reappeared.

'No one around. The lighting gets better as you go further in, but the steam's everywhere. I'd say it was all clear, but it manifestly isn't. We're being watched, I can feel it. The air smells like the Devil's armpit, but it seems breathable enough. There are freshly daubed signs on the walls to point the way. It's not too late to kill this off, Douglas. These aliens have no cause to like or trust him any more. Especially not a King who in the end couldn't protect

them/

'That's not fair!' said Nina.

'Yes it is,' said Douglas. 'I was their King too. It was my job to

protect them/

Nina scowled unhappily, and looked back at Stuart. 'Nikki there'd be someone in there waiting to meet us/

Stuart shrugged. 'No sign of anyone. Or anything. Do we- ><> m

Douglas?'

'Of course,' said Douglas. 'We need them/

He allowed Stuart to lead the way back in, but wouldn't lei him

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some fungal, all of them glistening welly from the steam. And a few shapes so frankly nightmarish even Douglas couldn't stand to look at them for long. Some held edged weapons, some carried energy guns, along with a sprinkling of devices that Douglas couldn't recognise. For a long time, the humans and the aliens just stood and looked at each other.

'I have never felt so unwelcome in my life/ breathed Nina. 'And I've been around.'

'You are our guests,' said a roughly humanoid shape, moving forward through the steam to stand before them. It was covered in overlapping silver scales, like a body armour, even the elongated head. Crimson eyes burned balefully behind the silver helm. 'I am Toch'Kra, of the Maggara. I speak for the community. Which one of you is King Douglas?'

'That would be me,' said Douglas, pushing Stuart gently but firmly to one side. 'Nice place you have here. Very . . . moist. Ingenious use of the pool, to help with gravity.'

The steam helps too,' said Toch'Kra. 'We pump it full of the elements necessary for our survival. We cannot speak of what it will do to your lungs.'

'It's all right,' said Nina. 'We're not stopping.'

'I was once King,' said Douglas. 'But Finn stole my Throne. Now I am a hunted fugitive like yourselves.'

'Not quite like us, human King. You can at least leave this place, and walk the city. We are trapped here. Once, many of us made up the various alien Embassy staffs. We were proud to come here, to Logres, to be part of the great adventure of Empire. We believed we had immunity and protection. Instead, we were hunted down like animals, and those unlucky enough to be caught were butchered, and then eaten or displayed as trophies.'

'I'm sure he'd like to do the same to me, if he could,' said Douglas. 'We have a common enemy. I'm here to suggest an alliance against him.'

One of the great shapes lurched half up out of the water, made deep hooting noises, and then fell back again. Water surged up over the side of the pool and soaked the legs of the humans. They stood their ground. They knew they couldn't afford to appear weak. Toch'Kra nodded to the shape.

'He says: what use can we be? Many of us are dying, from lack of

food and proper trace elements. From your oppressive gravity. From the accumulating effects of a hostile environment. And some are simply withering, so far from home or hope or sanity. Most of the support tech designed to maintain us here had to be abandoned when we fled our Embassies. Why have you come to us, human King? You have your own people to fight your battles. Most of us couldn't survive outside these walls.'

'I'm here because you are my people too, and I won't abandon you,' said Douglas. This is your rebellion as much as ours. Finn must be brought down, and the old order returned, and for that I'm going to need all the help I can get. Nina. Nina

'Oh! Yes!' Nina tore her gaze away from the long crooked shape moving slowly across the ceiling, leaving a shiny trail behind it, and concentrated on Toch'Kra. 'I'm setting up a rogue news channel and communications site. I'm pretty sure we could punch brief messages through to your home planets. Could they send reinforcements, or other help?'

'No,' said Toch'Kra. The last reports our Embassies received, told of human ships Quarantining our planets. No one allowed offworld. And there is the constant threat of the Transmutation Engines. We dare not move openly until Finn's power has been clearly broken. We have learned to be practical and paranoid through our contact with Humanity.'

'Don't blame us all for Finn's actions,' said Stuart. 'I don't think he is human any more. If he ever was.'

'Fight beside us,' said Douglas. 'Set an example for your peoples to follow. Take revenge for what has

been done to you. After all; what have you got to lose? Whatever happens in the rebellion, it's got to be better than hiding out here and dying by inches.'

'True,' said the alien, 'our life here is not so precious that we are keen to prolong it. But neither will we throw our lives away to no good purpose. We remember you, King Douglas. You swore to protect us. You failed. Why should we listen to you now?'

'Back then, I couldn't even protect myself,' said Douglas. 'I was just a man on a Throne, betrayed by people I had every reason to trust. Things are different now. I have a cause, and an army, and you can be a part of that. Revenge can soothe many an old hurt.'

The alien studied him for a long moment with its unreadable silver face, and then it turned away to talk with the others, in the

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pool and out. The untranslated barks and squeals of alien speech filled the steamy air. Eventually Toch'Kra turned back to face the humans.

'Even if we were willing to fight, what help could we be, when most of us couldn't survive in your environment?'

Douglas nodded thoughtfully, but inside he was grinning broadly. He had them, even if they didn't know

it yet. They'd stopped asking why, and had moved on to how. There is much you can do. There are many places you can go that humans cannot. Service tunnels, sewer access points, waste disposal outlets, and all the other places humans can't survive without heavy tech support. And there are people here in the Rookery who can build you whatever tech support you need, to move around freely. You supply the plans, they'll supply the tech. There are people here who can build anything, especially if it's illegal. So; what do you say? Are you with us?'

There are many species here/ said Toch'Kra. 'We do not all share the same goals, ways or even the same concepts. Most of us are as alien to each other as we are to you. But we will discuss the matter. Many of us understand, or have learned, the need for revenge. I think, when the discussion is over . . . we will follow you, King Douglas.'

There wasn't really much left to say after that, so Douglas bowed courteously to Toch'Kra, and then to the pool, and led his party back out of the baths. Behind them rose the sound of loud debate, in a dozen inhuman languages. Nina shuddered briefly.

'I swear, I will never eat seafood again.'

The great esper Diana Vertue, once known as Jenny Psycho, once dead but now alive again, strode through the streets of the Parade of the Endless as though she owned them, heading for the Rookery. She was broadcasting a powerful telepathic aversion meme, so that everyone else looked everywhere else except at her. She passed a gaggle of Church Militant peacekeepers, bored and looking for trouble with malice in their eyes, and Diana was tempted to do something hilariously appalling to them, but reluctantly decided not to. She didn't want to attract attention. Not yet, anyway. The city wasn't how she remembered it at all, and she didn't care for the feel of the streets. There was an overlying pall of gloom, fear, pain and

irpivssion, U'iking from d million untutored minds, ,md yet there w.is more to it than that.

Diana stopped by the Victory Gardens, to stand before the statues ,iul graves of Jack Random and Ruby Journey. The statues didn't look much like the people she remembered, but she was used to ili.it. The few representations she'd seen of herself had been nothing short of laughable. She'd never had that big a bust in her life. She sighed quietly, remembering. It had been a long time since she and Jack and Ruby had boarded the old Deathstalker Standing, the .indent stone castle that was also a starship, to go into one last desperate battle against the armies of Shub, and then the massed loices of the Recreated. And a long, long time since she'd found them lying together, stone cold dead on the cold stone floor, side by side as they had been in life. Forensic evidence suggested they'd murdered each other, but Diana Vertue suppressed that. The people didn't need to know everything about their heroes.

She smiled briefly. She'd never thought she'd miss the blustering old rogue and the cold-hearted bounty hunter, but they had both done amazing things in their time. People these days seemed . . . smaller, somehow. Less colourful. She concentrated, and a rain of rose petals fell silently upon the statues. And then she looked round sharply as her open mind seemed to catch an echo of an old familiar presence, a sense of power upon the air, not long ago at all. 'Owen?' she said, wonderingly.

But of course there was no reply. Owen Deathstalker had been dead and gone these past two hundred years, and the Empire was a lesser place because of it. She'd always admired the Deathstalker, with his honour and his courage and his dry, sardonic wit. She never told him that, of course. She didn't want him to get big-headed. But after he was gone, she wished . . . she wished she could have just sat down with him, once, and talked. She liked to think they would have had a lot in common. She missed him; but then, so did everyone.

She could still remember the powerful inhuman Voice, coming from everywhere and nowhere, to tell them all that Owen Death-stalker was dead. Dead, like Jack and Ruby. Hardened soldiers, who'd taken everything Shub could throw at them and never once flinched, had stood around her crying their hearts out for the loss of the one man they'd all revered. The one who'd been the best of them all.

He'd made the rebellion possible. He'd made winning possible. Even though he'd always known heroes died young and bloody and far from home.

And yet . . . his presence seemed to permeate the Victory Gardens, even though he had no grave there. He had been here, and recently. She knew it like she knew her own name. She grinned briefly, her heart rising. She'd found a way back from the dead; maybe he had too. The Deathstalker had always been a one for pulling a miracle out of the hat at the last possible moment. She left the Victory Gardens and headed for the Rookery again, and her heart and her step were a lot lighter. She felt better about the day, and her mission. She was going to hook up with Douglas Campbell and lead him back to greatness. He needed her. Even if he didn't know it yet.

The overpowering pressure of the city's oppressed minds still hung about her like a dark cloud, but Diana Vertue was learning to see through it. Touched and transformed by the Mater Mundi, in her time she had been one of the most powerful esper minds living, and now she was back her strength was rapidly returning. Strange lights glowed in her mind, like paper lanterns with horrible faces. The ELF's, abroad in the long night of the soul. Elf had been a proud name in her time, a force for justice, and Diana hated these new ELF's all the more for making the name an obscenity. She could sense thralls everywhere, human minds suppressed and silently screaming, so the ELF's could run their bodies from a distance. She'd expected that, but the sheer numbers staggered her. She was pretty sure the Emperor Finn didn't know there were this many thralls in his capital city. Maybe she should send him a note.

It was clear she'd come back from the dead not a moment too soon. The ELF's were spreading their influence, and growing in power. The more people they could control and drain, the more powerful their minds became. Diana had to wonder if Finn knew that, as well. She increased the power of her mental shields, just in case. It wouldn't do to have the enemy know she was back, just yet. She paused by the window of a store and studied the display of vidscreens interestedly as the regular (approved by Finn) news channel was shouldered aside by a rogue news broadcast from the Rookery. Nina Malapert's beaming face replaced the meaningless smile of the regular newscaster, and her voice rang out clear and

happy and entirely unworried; like a breath of fresh air in a slaughterhouse.

'Hello again, sweeties! It's Nina Malapert back again, the voice and face of the coming rebellion! Guess what? King Douglas is back, and boy is he ever mad at Finn! Right now the true King is putting together an army that's going to drag that so-called Emperor off his stolen Throne, and he wants you to know that things are going to start happening very soon now. Expect open displays of sedition, rebellion and just plain crankiness all over Logres and especially in the Parade of the Endless. The rebellion is under way, that's official, and you heard it here first! And now, here's a whole bunch of news stories that Finn and his creatures don't want you to know about.'

There then followed a long series of news stories about things that Finn had ordered done, or was planning to have done, most of which were supposed to be strictly secret. Some of them surprised even Diana. More stories followed, about all the things that were going wrong because Finn couldn't be bothered with everyday problems, so his people didn't care either. And even more stories about the foul-ups and general ineptitude of Finn's rule. Diana was just starting to enjoy herself when Nina's face and voice were suddenly swept from the screen by the news station's superior tech. A sign appeared, saying Service Will Be Resumed, so Diana set off for the Rookery again.

It was good to know Douglas Campbell had finally got off his regal arse, and was back in action again. She'd been wondering whether she'd have to jump-start his motivation for him, and some of the ideas she'd come up with had been particularly unpleasant. But then, as Diana Vertue or Jenny Psycho, she'd never hesitated to do the necessary thing, no matter how distasteful, or who might get hurt; including herself. She had learned her lessons well, in the old Empire torture cells of Silo Nine, also known as Wormboy Hell.

The rebellion needed a figurehead, and she'd known it couldn't be her. She might be an official legend, but people needed a leader (hey could feel comfortable around, and preferably one who didn't have the word Psycho as part of her name. No one had ever doubted her abilities as a fighter, but she'd be the first to admit she'd never been a people person. No, Douglas would do fine. With the right backup, and guidance. She strode confidently over the border and into the Rookery, and

the Church Militant guards on duty didn't even try to stop her. She dropped her aversion mask to allow herself to be seen, and her power crackled on the air around her. The guards couldn't run away fast enough. Some were even crossing themselves as they ran. Quite a few innocent citizens also took to their heels, on both sides of the border. Diana Vertue smiled. It was good to know she could still make an impression. She stopped and looked around her.

She needed to make a different kind of impression now. Something dramatic, to announce the return of an old legend. It took her only a moment to reach out with her mind and find an ELF thrall: a nondescript little man lurking inconspicuously in a doorway. Diana walked right up to him, froze his legs when he tried to run, and then blasted the possessing esper right out of the thrall's mind. The ELF mind fled screaming, and the no longer possessed man fell forward on to his knees, shaking and sobbing but purely himself again. He tried to babble his thanks, tears running down his cheeks, but Diana had no time for that. More thralls were coming. She could feel them all around her, their thoughts buzzing like angry wasps from a disturbed nest. There were lots and lots of them, heading right for her. Diana smiled. She was just in the mood for a good workout.

Possessed men and women came running at her from all directions, their faces twisted with the rage and passions of the possessing minds. Some had edged weapons, some had only their bare hands, but they all had murder on their ELF minds. Diana Vertue was their oldest enemy, and they would stop at nothing to kill her again. They pushed other people out of their way, striking out blindly, their gaze fixed on Diana as she stood before them, smiling calmly. She waited till they were almost upon her, and then summoned up her power. Psionic energies surged and crackled in the street around her, and her presence flowered like a rose made up of thorns. She was Diana Vertue, Jenny Psycho, the first human uber-esper. She had touched the minds of the AIs of Shub and brought them back to sanity. She had fought the Re-created to a standstill. She had been betrayed and murdered, lived on in the oversoul, and now was back again; to deal with unfinished business. Let the thralls come. Let them all come. She was Diana Vertue, her time come round again, and she would show these miserable new ELFs what power really was.

Only she never got the chance. The thralls came charging down

the sirtri, diui boiled out of the side alleys to surround her. They i.illrd IUT ii,iinc in angry vicious voices, and boasted of the terrible dungs (hey were going to do to her. Diana Vertue gathered up her power, and then stopped, astonished, as a dozen young women in brightly coloured silks appeared out of nowhere. They materialised in a protective circle around Diana, lightning crackling in ihcii lunds. They wore black roses in their hair, and tribal patterns p.iinted on their faces. They each struck the same impressive pose ,iul glared haughtily at the stunned thralls. They gestured grandly, ,iuid a psistorm of exploding energies roared up and down the stnvi picking up thralls and throwing them away, tossing the helpi bodies around like rag dolls. The ELF minds screamed with r.i.r.r and fear, but they could not stand against the power of the newcomers. The twelve women gestured almost contemptuously, ,in<1 the possessing minds were thrust out of their stolen bodies, and seni howling off into the night.

The psistorm slowly abated, and the air grew settled again. Up .in.I down the long street, over a hundred men and women sat shaking and crying and holding each other, free at last. The air had that dr.iu. focused feeling that follows a thunderstorm. The twelve young women turned as one to face Diana Vertue. They were all grinning broadly and looking very pleased with themselves. Diana nodded slowly.

'All right; I'm officially impressed. Now who the hell are you?' One of the women stepped forward. 'I am Alessandra Duquesnr, and we are the Psycho Sluts! Defenders of the right, avengers of tIn-downtrodden and arse-kickers supreme! We modelled ourselves on your legend, and swore to do your name honour by performing feats of great glory!' She stopped for a moment to get her breath, and Diana cut in quickly. She knew a long speech coming when she heard one.

'Yes. I've heard of you. Headstrong young trouble-makers, too impulsive to follow the ways of the oversoul, and far too powerful for your own good. I thought you all left with New Hope, in the Icarus Working, and were on your way to Mistworld?'

The Psycho Sluts exchanged smug glances, and sniggered amongst themselves. 'We never really got on with the oversoul,' said Alessandra. 'We were always far too individual, and proud of it, to settle comfortably into the Massmind. We left the oversoul to come

to the Rookery, just before New Hope headed off into orbit and exile. We wanted to stay and fight. There's always been a rogue esper presence here; minds too crooked or strange for the Mass-mind. We fit in just fine. We earn our keep sniffing out thralls and blasting them free, but we've never seen so many in one place before! They really do want you dead, don't they?'

'What do you want with me?' Diana said bluntly.

The Psycho Sluts looked at each other, caught off guard. 'Well/' said Alessandra, 'we want to be your army! We always worshipped your memory, your take-no-prisoners, kill-them-all-and-let-God-sort-them-out policy towards the bad guys, and once we learned you were back in the flesh, we've been waiting for you to come here. We want to work with you, to spread terror and destruction in your name! The rebellion starts here! Well, actually, it's already started, and Douglas Campbell is leading it, but of course now that you're back—'

'No,' Diana said immediately. 'The Campbell is King. He leads. I came here to support him, and if you want to work with me, so will you.'

The Psycho Sluts considered this, and then shrugged, pretty much in unison. Diana looked from one eager young face to another. Had she ever been this young, this gung-ho? She sighed quietly. She wasn't at all sure she needed or wanted the support of a bunch of wannabe loose cannons, but they'd probably do less damage to the cause in the long run if she kept them where she could keep an eye on them. So it seemed she had her own personal army, whether she wanted one or not. She wondered fleetingly if Owen ever had to cope with problems like this. Still; she was glad she had something to bring to Douglas, apart from her own rather controversial legend.

'We know where there are more thralls!' said Alessandra, almost jumping up and down on the spot in entirely unsuppressed excitement. 'Let's kick some more ELF butt before we go to see Douglas!'

'Yes,' said Diana. The more people we can free from ELF possession, the better.'

That too!' said Alessandra.

Diana and her new-found friends the Psycho Sluts went, eventually, to meet with King Douglas and his people. He wasn't an easy man to get to see, these days, and Diana had to perform a few minor

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miracles and wonders to get her due attention, but once people realised she really was who she said she was, they couldn't pass her on last enough. Just as well. No one stopped Diana Vertue when she was on a roll. Douglas, Stuart and Nina met with her in their hold room, which had somehow become the centre of rebel operations, despite its cramped size. The Psycho Sluts stood guard outside the Indoor, putting the wind up the regular guards. Everyone had heard of the Psycho Sluts, who when they really got going could cause more property damage than an earthquake. There was talk of getting up a collection to send them to help out another planet. Any other planet.

Diana studied the three dubious faces sitting on the opposite side of the table, and smiled easily. 'Hi, I'm Diana Vertue, and you need my help.'

'Yes,' said Douglas. 'When Jenny Psycho appears on the stem people usually do.'

'I haven't used that name in well over a century,' said Nina giving him one of her best scowls. 'And if you're wise, you won't either. In case you didn't know it, this whole area is infested with wild thralls, reporting everything you do to the Emperor. You don't have strong enough esper minds here to detect them, let alone deal with them. So, you need me.'

Douglas nodded slowly. 'And those awful young ladies curiously lurking outside on the landing?'

'They call themselves the Psycho Sluts, in honour of me. And no, I didn't get a say in the matter. They're rogue espers. They mean well.'

'Psycho Sluts,' said Nina. 'Doesn't the name alone just inspire confidence?'

'All the legends who could have returned to back me up, and I had to get Jenny Psycho/ Douglas said heavily. 'No offence . . . Diana. Tell you what; I've got to address an important rally in London in an hour. Why don't you and your people tag along, and if you spot any thralls in the crowd, show me what you can do. All right?'

The look on Diana's face made it clear it wasn't all right in her shape or form, but she nodded briefly. Even legends had to prove themselves. She waited down in the lobby with the Psycho Sluts, who amused themselves playing rat croquet with their psydrom kinesis, until it was time for Douglas and his people to go. It) ihc

rally. The Psycho Sluts nodded cliecilully to Douglas, who did his best to avoid their eye. They worried him. They moved to form a protective circle around him as they walked through the streets. People gathered along the way to cheer and wave, and Douglas smiled and waved royally back to them. Stuart watched the crowds warily, one hand always near his gun. Nina filmed it all with her floating camera, for later broadcast. Diana ignored the surroundings, conserving her strength. She knew the real trouble would start at the rally, where the ELF's could do the most damage.

The rally was being held in an open square, and a large crowd had gathered there to listen to Douglas Campbell. The Psycho Sluts opened up a corridor through the crowd for Douglas to make his entrance, and he strode briskly through the crowd and leapt up on to the simple wooden stage. The crowd cheered loudly, and Douglas stood proudly before them, looking every inch the King in exile. He didn't even wait for the cheers to die away before getting stuck in. He spoke well and fluently, haranguing the crowd and raising their spirits, inciting them to rebellion. He could talk of the poverty and harshness of the Rookery because he'd known them himself, and he could talk of the Emperor's treachery and evil because he'd known them too. His speech might not have the ease and polish that Anne Barclay's writing would have given it, but no one doubted that everything he said came from the heart. They had to fight back, he said, they had to rebel. Because things were only going to get worse, because already far too many people were suffering unjustly, because it was their duty and their right. When your back's to the wall, there's nowhere to go but forward, he said, and the crowd roared his name like a battle-cry. Soon they were applauding his every statement as though it was an article of faith.

The Psycho Sluts stood arrayed before and around the stage, defying anyone to get past them, while Diana moved unobtrusively through the crowd, quietly noting the location of each and every thrall without letting them know they'd been spotted. They were gradually infiltrating the crowd, in ones and twos, smiling and applauding so as not to seem out of place, but someone else looked out through their cold eyes. When they thought there were enough of them, they began interrupting Douglas's speech with boos and jeers and catcalls. A few tried to shout Douglas down with insults and obscenities. The crowd around them shifted uneasily, angry but

not yet ready to act themselves. They looked to Douglas to see wli.il lie would do. And Douglas just raised his voice, silenced the heckles with his rough and ready wit, and kept on going. He'd siilTeinl

worse in Parliament.

The thralls fell silent, linked minds, and lashed out with a combined telepathic onslaught, catching everyone by surprise. They weren't usually strong enough to generate their power directly through their thralls. The crowd staggered back and forth, clutching their heads, as a razorstorm of unbearable thoughts roared in their minds. Vile sights and sensations overpowered their senses, plunging them into Hell, and the ELF's enjoyed every moment of it. A group of thralls nearest the stage seized the opportunity to attack directly, under cover of the confusion. They lunged at him with drawn swords, but Diana had seen enough. She lashed out with her mind, blanketing the whole square, and the telepathic assault cut off abruptly as every single thrall collapsed as one. Diana immediately turned the thralls nearest the stage upside down and shook them, showing them the show of it, before blasting out the occupying minds. She quickly returned to normal, and looked around for the savior. Douglas grinned down at Diana from the stage. 'All right; you're hired.'

The Emperor Finn Durandal was not at all happy about being woken from his sleep at such an early hour of the morning, but since he was the only person who had this particular private communication with the ELF leaders, he supposed he'd better answer it. Somehow he knew it wasn't going to be good news. He sat slumped on his bed, yawning and rubbing at his eyes, and finally activated the viewscreen built into his bedside table.

'This had better be important,' he growled.

The scowling face on the screen was unknown to him, but he expected that. The ELF leaders never showed their true faces, they only ever spoke through their thralls. Even after all this time, he had no idea who the ELF leaders really were; one of the many annoyances that had been bothering him lately. The possessed face on the screen looked distinctly upset, which pleased Finn somewhat. If he was having a good time, no one else should either.

'We have been attacked,' the ELF leader said flatly. 'An assault of incredible power. Many of our people are still recovering.'

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'Who the hell could do that to you?' said Finn.

'Diana Vertue has appeared in the Rookery.'

Finn blinked a few times. 'That's a good trick,' he said finally. 'Considering she's been dead for over a century.'

That doesn't mean anything where she's concerned. She was an avatar of the Mater Mundi, and even the uber-espers were scared of that force. Diana Vertue is back, and she has sided with the Campbell. You should have let us kill him long ago.'

'Possibly,' said Finn. 'But I did so want him to suffer first. Very well; kill him, if it will make you happy.'

'We can't. He is protected by Diana Vertue and her army of rogue espers! Already they have cost us hundreds of thralls. Our presence in the Rookery has been almost wiped out! You have to do something!'

'I am doing something/ said Finn, just a little testily. 'I never thought you and your thralls would be enough to stop Douglas putting together a rebellion, once he came out of his sulk. He always did have a way with words, along with that damned charismatic personality of his. So I've been preparing my own little army, to fight specifically in the Rookery. I always knew I'd have to deal with the ungrateful little bastards some day. The Rookery has finally become too dangerous to be allowed to exist. I've been reluctant to sign their death warrant - partly because there was always the chance that I'd need their special talents again some day, and partly because I'm a sentimental old softy, but . . . Get your remaining people out of the Rookery. I'm going to send in my very best fanatics, to cleanse the place with fire and steel. I will tear down the buildings, and raise a mountain of skulls/

'You'd better/ said the ELF.

The viewscreen went blank. Finn stuck out his tongue at it. He sighed, stood up and rang for his servants to come in and dress him. No point in trying to get back to sleep now. Not when he had slaughter and devastation to plan. He ordered a series of calls to his generals in the Church Militant. If he didn't sleep no one else got to sleep either.

Pure Humanity and the Church Militant had become one church and one philosophy, under the benevolent guidance of the very practical Joseph Wallace. The shock troops of the Empire now

worshipped Mini directly, .nut n.iimjl selection .among ihe Li bolstered by numerous purges, had produced an army of impliK.ihle /e.ilois and fanatical soldiers. They would die for Finn; though ol course they would much rather kill for him. He was the Chosen (one, the Defender of Humanity, their day and their night. And they were his attack dogs.

There were thousands of them, armed to the teeth, their he,ids boiling with battle drugs and virulent propaganda. They were Unrighteous, and mercy and compassion and all such weaknesses weir not in them. They gathered at the boundaries of the Rookery jml then marched in by all the entry ways at once, singing their awful hymns, and killing everyone they saw. They shot down men women and children, and cut down those who didn't run awny l.r.i enough. They set fires and planted explosives in buildings. Their loi <l had said that not one stone should remain standing upon anoiln-i and not one heathen soul should

be left alive to see the coming day. They did not care, or falter. They were doing God's work, and it was so fine, so fine.

Men, women and children lay dead and dying in the streets, and the Church Militant soldiers marched right over them. Fires burned brightly against the dark, and explosions sounded in the night like the heavy footfalls of an avenging God. Anywhere else in the city there would have been nothing but panic, and people running blindly, but this was the Rookery, and the people here were made of harder stuff. Word passed quickly of the invasion, and all too soon the Church Militant advance ground to a halt in the face of implacable opposition. Defenders of all ages came running from every direction to block the invaders' way, all of them armed with some kind of weapon. More people gathered on the roofs, to rain down debris on the enemy. There were snipers with energy guns at the higher windows, and fast-footed youths darted out of alleyways with improvised grenades.

In the Rookery it was truly said: Any man against his neighbour, but every man against the outsider.

Douglas, Stuart and Nina worked tirelessly through the endless hours of the morning, organising the rebel forces, sending people to fight where they were most needed. Diana Vertue and the Psycho Sluts struck the Church Militant troops again and again, darting in and out in vicious hit-and-run tactics, leaving death and destruction

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in their wake. Even some of the aliens emerged on to the streets, for a chance to strike back at their persecutors.

The Rookery rose up, combined at last into a single great force, with a single aim. The Emperor had made himself their enemy, a threat to their homes and their lives, and they would never rest again till they

had brought him down. The people surged through the streets, throwing themselves at the invaders in wave after wave, howling a hundred different battle-cries in a single enraged voice: the end result of generations of having to fight for everything in life. Guns blazed and swords flashed; and the Church Militant soldiers fell in their dozens, and then in their hundreds and finally in their thousands. The people of the Rookery came from everywhere at once, to drag the fanatics down by sheer force of numbers. The Rookery rose up, savage and unrelenting, and all in a moment the invasion became a rout. The Church Militant abandoned their weapons, their orders and their faith in Finn and themselves, and in ragged groups they ran for the Rookery boundaries. Of the tens of thousands of proud and arrogant zealots who'd marched into the Rookery, only a few hundred made it out alive.

Nina Malapert got a lot of it on film, and broadcast every bit on her rogue news site, with the tech team using all their ingenuity to keep it on the air for as long as possible. All over Logres, and on worlds across the Empire, people watched as Finn's authority was challenged, and thrown back in his face. They saw the blood and the bodies, and whole families slaughtered by the Church Militant troops, and then they watched as Douglas Campbell and Stuart Lennox fought back to back against impossible odds, and never had those two looked more like heroes.

Finn's censors shut down the broadcast, eventually, and there was nothing left but blank screens, all across the Empire.

In the Rookery, the people gathered up their dead, treated the wounded as best they could, and put out the fires. They didn't feel much like celebrating. But at least now there was no doubt over whose side they were on. They only halted their pursuit of the surviving troops at the boundaries because Douglas sent messages to call them back. He knew they weren't ready to go head to head with the full strength of Finn's armies. Not yet. Hot tempers subsided into cold, bitter anger as the people of the Rookery counted their dead and added up the damage. And hard-hearted and harder-headed

men and women, who would never have come together for something as nebulous as a cause, now found themselves united in a ridding hunger for revenge.

And on worlds all across the Empire, and most especially on I.ogres, people contemplated their blank viewscreens, and reassessed ilie Hmperor Finn and his shock troops in a whole new light.

I urn was furious. He raged back and forth in his Palace emu mnnications centre, trying to summon more troops, but most nl In tinned forces were posted as occupation troops in cities all .i« > Logres. It would take hours to bring them all to the Parade <>l ih< landless, and then, who would control the cities they left? Finn li.ul .iittick sleds, battle wagons, and even starcruisers at his dispos.il. Inn .ii; iin it would take hours to call them in. Finn kicked out .11 H" furniture, and any of his staff who didn't get out of his Wtiy ' enough. He couldn't understand how it had all gone wi< quickly. How a rabble of outcasts and criminals could h.ive \\t» •! out his elite troops so easily.

Douglas. It had to be Douglas.

Finn drove everyone else out of the comm centre, and i.illeil mi i lie ELF's for help. A large enough army of thralls might yet s.ive I In-day for him. Suicide troops, driven on by outside minds, could -.nil overrun the Rookery's defences. But none of the ELF leader, oi thl uber-espers would take his calls. Finn sat down slowly in the em; room, his thoughts whirling madly, unable to settle. For Hie i° lime in a long while, he wasn't the one driving events, and lie didn'i know what to do. He must have missed something, but wh.n ' What?

In the end, when it had been quiet for too long, the comm M.ill sent for Joseph Wallace. He calmed everyone down as best he « mil.I with soothing words and rousing platitudes, and then he SIIK I In-head gingerly round the door of the comm centre. I inn w.r, Mill silting in his chair, thinking, ignoring flashing message lights mi (misoles all around him. Joseph decided this wasn't the moment in inform Finn that uprisings were breaking out on pi.HUMS ,ill ,u <• tin- Empire, inspired by what they had seen happening in tU. Rookery. Joseph gently closed the door, and quietly began gi\ • mders in Finn's name. Security people came and went, piiiimr together a depressing picture of what was happening cvcrywlicie .it

once. Joseph authorised vicious reprisals and clampdowns, but as fast as rebellion was slapped down in one place, it sprang up in another.

Alarms sounded in the comm centre, but Finn turned them off. The noise made his head hurt, and he needed to think.

If he'd known what was going on with the ELF leaders and the uber-espers, Finn would have been even more disturbed. Behind the scenes, an even more bitter struggle was going on, with no quarter asked or given. The ELF leaders and the uber-espers had finally erupted into open war over who controlled the movement. Both sides had been secretly amassing great armies of thralls, to feed their power and back their play, and after what had happened in the Rookery both sides had decided that the time had come to break free from Finn, and go their own way.

It was an esper war, fought on mental battlegrounds, largely unnoticed by the rest of the world at first, but none the less vicious and deadly for all that. The huge thrall armies were living power sources, reservoirs of mental energy that both sides could tap into as they fought their war. Telepathic battles raged back and forth as minds clashed with minds, on eerie inhuman landscapes created just for that purpose. Minds crashed and splintered, and esper attacks sometimes spilled over into the material world, in outbreaks of weird weather and probability fluctuations. Psistorms sleeted through the surrounding areas, destroying all unshielded minds in their path. Neither side was strong enough to entirely overwhelm the other, but neither would back down, and so the psionic pressure built and built, until finally the energies spiralled out of control and blew one whole section of the Parade of the Endless apart in an explosion so loud and bright the echoes could be felt all over Logres.

(Finn later blamed the explosion on rebel saboteurs. Because he had to say something.)

The esper battle ended in a stalemate; both sides retreated to lick their psychic wounds, and prepare for future battles. Each was determined to stand alone now, and follow its own destiny. They didn't need

Finn any more. They would rule Humanity on their own terms, and to hell with all alliances of convenience.

Finn crushed the uprisings, eventually. It cost him time and money and manpower, far more than he could afford, but he had

no choice. He had to maintain control. Planet by planet, city by city, the rebellions were stamped out with gun and steel, and a slow sullen silence fell across the Empire, every bit of it now under sin. i martial law. Rebel bodies hung from lamp-posts in their humli. in every city, and heavily armed and armoured troops walked ilu rily streets, looking nervously over their shoulders.

(The Rookery was strictly off-limits. No one went in, and no mi. came out.)

Finn was more worried about the loss of his ELF allies. N<>i them would talk to him any more, and all his contacts seem. .1 IM have disappeared underground. He'd relied upon their snppiui l<> loo long; his spy organisations were lost without their lelep.nhi. ,ill\ gained intelligence, Finn told Joseph Wallace that product i.>• • blockers was now to have priority over everything else, hm rnil,i explain why. Unfortunately, you couldn't manufacture csp M without the required esper brain-tissues, and the cloning nl (issues had always had a high failure rate. So mass prodm n. going to be a slow, time-consuming process. (Joseph ilelivei.-.1 id M message over the comm, from a safe distance. He still didn'i emu 11 ust Finn's temper.)

The Emperor had other problems too. He went to see I lu.iii iln K.iit, in his new laboratory set within the Palace. (Finn h.nl il. , hi. .(in keep his remaining allies close at hand, wherever possiMr i Tin » w.is only one du Katt these days. The Elijahs had tried i<>> assrmbll ihrir own power base and a new clone underground, JIM! linn couldn't have that, so he personally shot all the Elijah tin (

except one. He neither knew nor cared whether the icm.i.....p. .in

K.I 11 was the original or not. It didn't really matter.

Ostensibly Finn was visiting du Katt to discuss the pi.iN. n el.ming esper brain-tissues, but as always Finn h.nl .in ull-u"i iiiiive. The recent uprisings had demonstrated very clc.uly ili.n I" h.ul .1 shortage of manpower, especially now he no longeri h.nl il» iln.ills to hack him up. He needed soldiers; armed men who wonM ilo what they were told without question. And he didn'i km il«

lime to find and train and indoctrinate them. So, llie nhv.....

•inswer w.is tin diniy of clonc-s. To produce such .m .inny would leqnitT a huge protein h.ise, lull luckily (here w.is no shoil.ip.e ul ile.ul bodies lying .inuinil, just waiting to he put to gooil use. Ami this new .inny would he programmed lo know no Ic.u .m<l

absolutely no independence. They wouldn't turn and run, like those so-called zealots he'd sent into the Rookery. Finn's blood still boiled at the thought of his men running from a bunch of outcasts and cheap grifters. He would have cheerfully called in his Fleet and scorched the whole area from orbit, but there was no way of doing that without taking out the whole of the Parade of the Endless. He was still thinking about it, though.

Finn expounded his plans for a new clone army at some length to the sole remaining and somewhat subdued du Katt. He strode up and down between the shining brand-new equipment, his ideas growing more extravagant by the moment. Du Katt just sat there, shaking his head slowly, until Finn told him to stop it. Du Katt wrung his hands together in front of him to stop them from trembling.

'To produce the number of clones you require, on the time-scale you propose, presents us with . . . certain difficulties, that no amount of tech or funding will overcome. Your majesty. The end product will almost certainly be ... damaged goods.'

'Be specific,' said Finn, fiddling with a nearby piece of delicate and expensive equipment, just to watch du Katt flinch and twitch.

'Well, your majesty, the end product will almost certainly have physical defects, including, but not limited to, a certain amount of brain damage.'

'Sounds like a plan to me,' said Finn. 'Soldiers too stupid to rebel, and too dumb to do anything but follow orders. I can live with that. I'll take two million, to begin with. And use the cell samples I brought as the base for their genetic structure.'

'Whose cells are they?' said du Katt.

'Mine, of course,' said Finn. 'I have decided I want children. Lots and lots of them.' He laughed, and clapped the shaking du Katt on the shoulder. 'Congratulate me! I'm going to be a father!'

His next visit was to another laboratory he'd had relocated to the Palace, for security reasons. The owner hadn't wanted to move, but it's amazing how persuasive a gun pointed at the groin can be. And so that renowned drug-dealer, alchemist and complete headcase Dr Happy now worked exclusively for Finn, in a brand-new lab with every convenience money could buy. Much to the sorrow of his many other customers. It had to be said that Dr Happy wasn't

•ly (he MI.in he'd once IKVII, before his long sojourn on H.ulcn, in the proximity of the Madness Ma/.c. Bui there was no denying he .nil possessed the most unusual scientific mind in the l-mpire. And these d.iys the good doctor laboured tirelessly on a single project: the lelmilding of Anne Barclay.

Anne had been very nearly killed by the wreckage that fell on hei timing Douglas Campbell's daring escape through the roof of the t'lMiri. Anyone else probably would have died, given how long ii look to get her to a regeneration tank. But the tank kept I in limering on the edge of death, while Dr Happy turned his twisted mind lo the problem. Finn had instructed Dr Happy to go lo .my lengths to save Anne, so that was exactly what he did. Wh.u In could not cure or repair, he replaced or rebuilt, no matter hmv extreme the measures necessary. He worked wonders, pulling Ami. I MI k from the brink of the grave again and again, but union nn.nely he couldn't resist the impulse to recreate her in amusing ways. The good doctor had been influenced by his prolonged proximity to ih. Madness Maze, and it showed in his work. He had also taken in using himself as a test subject for all the new drugs he developed I he grounds that the only way to fully understand the effeels w.c. \» experience them first-hand.

One of the drugs killed him. Another brought him back. (i) si sidid. Either way, the end result was that Dr Happy was now .1 walking, rotting corpse, within which his slowly decaying hi ilium mind misfired from time to time. Implanted tech from duhi sources and a whole series of experimental new drugs kept him going, but his flesh continued to slowly mummify despite all his l> efforts to rejuvenate it. Dr Happy didn't care. He savoured ih> sensations of decay through preternaturally sharpened senses, ,md boasted that his new outlook on life, or rather death, gave him .ill kinds of new insights.

The scene that greeted Finn as he entered the heavily gn.mled laboratory would have shaken and sickened anyone else, (iom already were the days of shining new tech and pristine equipment. The shadowed chamber was packed with animal cages, and si.ml like a slaughterhouse. Experimental animals peered dolefully hum the cages, while others lay scattered across the lab tables in various states of completion. Dr Happy had been taking them .ip.irt ,md putting them back together in interesting new combinations, lo sei-

what would happen. Mostly they died, but he said he was learning a lot in the process.

Finn strode unhurriedly through the lab, peering dubiously at the latest assemblies pinned to the tables, then looked up as Dr Happy came tottering forward to greet him. The good doctor wore nothing but his chemical-stained lab coat over his emaciated body. Dark blotches covered the grey skin, and occasional pale glimpses of bone showed through. Most of his white hair had fallen out, his sunken eyes were as yellow as urine, and his lips had drawn back from his teeth, turning his permanent smile into a rictus. He moved in sudden darting flurries, never still for a moment, filled with some terrible, remorseless energy.

'So good to see you again, Finn! Yes! Yes! Oh happy day . . . We're making progress here, definitely making progress. Don't look at the rabbit, I never expected it to work. The other head was just a whim. You've come to see Anne, I presume? Yes, yes, I know, no time for chat. I see ghosts, you know.'

Finn paused, and looked at Dr Happy. This was a new turn. 'Ghosts?' he said carefully.

'Oh yes. Spirits of the dead, restless souls of the departed, that sort of thing.' Dr Happy spun round in a circle, flapping his bony hands as though shooing things away. 'They're always floating round the lab, getting in the way. Pestering me, when I have better things to do.' He looked fixedly at nothing for a long interval, his head cocked on one side. 'They're quiet, for the moment. I think you frighten them. I'm pretty sure some of them are people I came back from Haden with. You remember,'

'The crew of the Hunter, and the scientists of Haden,' said Finn. ', The people you poisoned and drove insane.'

'It's not my fault they weren't strong enough to tolerate the miracles I fed them! I would have made them superhuman if they hadn't all died on me. People have no stamina these days. I blame late toilet-training myself. You don't think they blame me for their deaths, do you? How very unfair. But you're here to see Anne, aren't you? Come and see, come and see. I've made such marvellous progress since you were last here. You won't recognise the old girl.'

'That had better not be true, for your sake,' said Finn, but Dr Happy had already lurched away, and was pottering about his lab. He was heading towards the living quarters at the back, but he kept

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being distracted by various chemical distillations and computer displays. He gave his gene-splicer an encouraging pat in passing, and beckoned imperiously for Finn to follow him. Finn sighed, and did so. The line between genius and madness was thin enough at the best of times, and being dead probably didn't help. He followed Dr Happy on his erratic journey, pausing now and then when the good doctor stopped to talk to people who weren't there. More ghosts, presumably. Finn tried hard to see something, but couldn't. He hated to miss out on things. Dr Happy whirled round abruptly to face Finn.

'Now this is interesting! This spirit claims to be you, come back in time from the future, after you died. I'd probably be able to murder him better if he didn't have his head under his arm.'

Finn made a mental note to get as much work out of Dr Happy as he could while he still lasted. 'How are you getting on with your new version of the Deathstalker Boost?' he said, loudly and

'All right! All right! No need to shout! I'm dead, not dead. My limbs are still attached, see? And the Boost is

going very well, thinking you've already produced a viable prototype, and given it to Ann

'You've done what?' Finn said sharply. 'I told you I wanted to do it myself first.'

Dr Happy looked at him with his sunken eyes, and his stiff fingers nervously. There was no time, no time! Anne needed my Boost, if she was going to hold together. You have to do most of what I've done to her is extremely experimental. No one else could have kept her alive as long as I. I've used old Wampyr tech, and even some new options that came during my time with the Maze. I had no choice but to make her into a cyborg, after the appalling damage she suffered. I'm considering. I have to admit, I'm not always sure how or even why some of it works, but we learn by doing, after all. Still, my miracle potions and my loving care can only do so much. Some of the very things that keep her alive are at war with each other in her poor abused body. The Boost should make all the difference. I have the highest hopes for it. Come and see, come and see!

He pattered off again, and Finn followed him to the kitchen lab. The living quarters were separated from the rest of the lab by a single door of solid steel. It remained locked at all times, to keep Anne in and everyone else out. Dr Happy spoke his name into

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the voice lock, and the door ground slowly open. Beyond it lay a comfortable enough room, with every amenity but no windows. Anne was standing before the full-length mirror, studying herself - her new self, or what had been done to it in the name of survival. Finn had offered to remove the mirror, on the grounds that it only upset her, but Anne had wrecked the room in protest, even denting the steel door, so he never mentioned it again.

Anne stood awkwardly. She was still learning how to walk and move smoothly in her new, altered form.

She wore no clothing, so she could see herself more clearly. Tech implants bulged crudely out of her flushed pink skin, thrusting out sharp and curved edges. One arm was longer than the other, and the power unit in her back gave her a slight hunched look. Her body bulged in wrong places, to contain everything that had been put into it. Long raised edges of scar tissue trailed paths all over her body, like the map of a new route into Hell. She moved jerkily, without grace, and often her hands broke things without meaning to. Sometimes, too, she broke things deliberately, out of rage and frustration. Her hair had grown out grey from the stress, and her face was gaunt and tired. Her eyes had the golden gleam of the Hadenman, and when she spoke her voice was a harsh painful buzz. She didn't look away from the mirror reflection when Finn entered, but when she spoke it was for him.

'I was beautiful for such a short time; I wish I'd enjoyed it more. Still, at least now the outside finally matches the inside.'

'You've been brooding again, haven't you?' said Finn. 'What have I told you about that? You have nothing to blame yourself for. Besides, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'

Anne tried something like a smile. 'It takes one monster to appreciate another. There's something new in me now, isn't there?' 'Yes,' said Finn. 'It's a variant on the old Deathstalker Boost. It will make you stronger, faster, and hopefully a little more stable.'

Anne turned with awkward suddenness to face him. 'Yes. I can feel it, like lightning in my veins. I feel . . . strong. I could probably knock down that stupid door of yours now, if I wanted. But where would I go? I don't sleep any more, you know. I don't need to. Just as well, really. I had bad dreams.'

'You're alive,' said Finn. 'I promised you I wouldn't let you die.' 'My Boost is actually an improvement on what the original was

•imposed to be/ said Dr Happy, tottering in circles around Anne, 'MM! i'm still lingering over the tech eruptions in her body. 'My little girl is a beautiful thing, never stopping. You will never lose the feelings it gives you. My dear, you are practically superhuman. Of course, my Boost does have a regrettable tendency to burn up the host body, hence the new flush to the skin, but the various tech implants should balance that out.' 'How long will she last?' said Finn.

Dr Happy shrugged jerkily. 'How long have any of us got? She'll inevitably outlast me. And you too, if your ghost is to be believed.'

'Why have you done all this?' said Anne, staring at Finn with Inigo Montoya eyes. 'Why is it so important to you that I live?'

'To prove that even monsters aren't monsters all of the time/ said Finn.

'I miss James,' said Anne. 'I want James. Make me another/ Finn frowned. 'I think the people would know he was a clone this time.'

'Not for them. Make another James for me/ 'I'll see what I can do/ Finn lied. He was wise enough to know that Anne needed a reason to go on living, but still selfish enough to use that reason to be him. A part of him was quietly sad that he couldn't see the lengths he'd gone to, just for her.

'I'm tired/ said Anne. Tired of the pain, of the changes. Of not being human/

'The Boost will change that/ said Finn. 'And there are still m,iu\ useful things you can do with your life. Perhaps I should let Dougl.is know what's happened to you. He might like to come and visit/ 'Yes/ said Anne. I'd like to see Douglas again. One last time/

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THREE

IN THE GLORY DAYS OF EMPIRE

Owen Deathstalker went dancing back through Time, star systems whirling dizzily past like shimmering sands beneath his speeding feet. The galaxy spun around him, its many tiny lights blinking on and off like warning signs. Stars and comets formed an endless rainbow path back into the Past. He could feel Hazel d'Ark's presence, always tantalisingly just ahead of him. He could feel other presences too, moving around him in the Timestream. Some travelled into the Past beside him, while others headed the opposite way, into the Future. Some felt human, while others very definitely didn't. Owen could have reached out to them, but didn't. Perhaps because he wasn't sure they would approve of what he was going to do. And so he leapt on into the Past, alone but quietly determined, following the trail that Hazel had left behind her.

Sometimes it seemed to him that there were other pathways than the one he was following, of simple Past and Future; other directions, other possibilities that he could follow. He wondered if these were the Timestreams from which Hazel had called her other selves, during the great Rebellion. Variant Timestreams, where he had not died and Hazel never became a monster. They tempted him with the possibilities of comfort, but he continued on his chosen path. He knew his duty. And anyway; only one

Hazel had ever really mattered to him.

Finally the distance between the two of them began to narrow. She was slowing, and he was catching up. He slowed his dance, and the galaxy expanded around him as he began to sink back into it, focusing

mi one specific lociiliou. Ik- r.in through cnl.iiging shir systems, [modelling through the hearts of roaring suns and out the oilu-i -ulr null.iimcd. lie was changing, just as Hazel had. He could led the eMeiii of her change in the presence only just ahead of him. unlit .1 linns ih.it she was becoming something else, something other. SOIIM ilnng he no longer recognised. He fought to catch up with hei. Inn somehow he never could. Perhaps because she was driven by ins.i ,ni(l obsession, and he was still sane; if only for the moment. He Knew he couldn't see the things he was seeing, do the things lie \\.\ d. .mil lein.iin unchanged. He had to fight to keep from le«-ln whelmed by the sheer scale of what he was attempting. It w.r.n i ih.u lonj; ,ii_!o lor him that he'd been just another tired <md Innni .1 ..m w.irrior, lighting a hopeless battle in the back streets ol Mi-i |» >i i

MI u .11 lied out stubbornly with his mind, trying to Ion <,i < •• wild the presence ahead of him, but although he toudird i lung, he couldn't make her hear him, no matter how lomll\ In < .illed her name, and his. She had gone on ahead ol him, mi ,i |»m ney iind process he could barely comprehend, and (or <ill the m. i. speed ol his dance he was being left behind. But somcilm h.uk lo him from that fleeting touch of minds: single HICHH.M . .1 ih. l.isi hour of Hazel's life in which she had still been merely h.....,m

Alter she left Shub, the metal world the AIs made iu h<u • ih. M consciousnesses, Hazel d'Ark went to Haden, home of the M Ma/re. She thought she would need more power from the M in outer to travel back through Time. She materialised OIIM.I. il>. M.ulness Maze, like a child come home seeking the ,|i|>io\,ii 11.11 cut, but the Maze ignored her. She called out lo it, bin Hi lelnsd her. She couldn't see or find an entrance .niyvvlv i. tonldn't even see her reflection in the shining cold sml.ui • .oi outer Maze, and that disturbed her, on some deep and |>nm.il I. She screamed abuse at the Maze, and tried to force lx-i >\ <\ m .ili.uking it with all her abilities, focused through .1 mind .ih. lull mad with grief and horror; she tore power from the M w i ei idling it out, raw and potent, by the sheer force ol I in di-.iml" .1 will. She was crying, tears running jerkily down her cheeks, (hou slu' was past feeling them. She was leaving Humanity helmul through her own will, even as she acted for the most hum.in nl ic.isons. Power burned within her, and like (he phoenix emerged shining brightly from the ashes of her old sell.

And so she let go of Time and plunged back into the Past, beginning the long journey that would make her into the Terror.

Owen digested the memory as he slowed and slowed his progress, and finally reached the location in Space and Time Hazel had chosen before him. He wondered what he'd find, and why she'd stopped here, of all possible places.

In the beginning was the First Empire. It was wild and glorious. It didn't last.

Owen materialised in open space, hanging in high orbit above the blue and grey planet that in his time had been called Golgotha. He knew that, in the same way he knew that he had travelled back maybe a thousand years. The stars had stopped wheeling around him, and now sparkled solemnly in place. He should have felt exhausted, like the first time he'd travelled in Time, pursued by the Recreated, but instead he felt . . . exhilarated. He looked around him, grinning widely, surrounded by the icy vacuum of space, which had no power over him. He felt entirely relaxed and comfortable, even though he didn't feel any need to breathe. It seemed he was beginning his own changes. He checked the pulse in his wrist, and was relieved to find that at least was still there.

Golgotha turned slowly beneath him, but it looked very different now. Against the blue and grey of its surface, huge magnificent cities blazed, as intricately shaped as snowdrops. They shone so very brightly, with all the colours of the rainbow, as though the whole world had been studded with precious jewels. Auroras of smooth, soothing colours wrapped the world, as if to keep it safe from all harm.

On the other hand, Owen couldn't help noticing that the planet was surrounded by all kinds of orbiting junk. Satellites of every shape and size, built with function rather than aesthetics in mind, formed a metal ring around the world. Huge stardocks held half-built starships, assembled in orbit because they were too big ever to leave the ground. And everywhere Owen looked, starships came and went, in their thousands and their hundreds of thousands, flashing past him like so many fleeting thoughts or intentions. Golgotha had never known so much traffic, even at the height of its power. Owen focused his mind on a few ships at random, studying them carefully, but none of them resembled any configuration he was familiar with.

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Mr. Reiliscd lit- still didn't feel any need to breathe. How much h.nl he i h.inged already? Was he doomed to continue to change, until In- bei .inn- another Terror, at the last? He felt stronger, more power-Inl. hut still . . . human. And yet, if he was changing, could hi- hope lo understand or appreciate the extent of the change from the inside? Would he even notice as his humanity fell away? Panii surged up, and he pushed it ruthlessly back. Human is as human .Iocs. As long as he still cared about Hazel, and hoped to put a stop to wli.it she had become, he was still human enough.

(And yet, where had the power come from, that had made his lung trip through Time possible, and filled him now? Why wasn't lie Irding drained, like before? Owen decided very firmly that he'd think about that later. He had other, more important, things on hr, niiiul right now.)

11.i/el had definitely stopped her plunge back through Time .11 11 n-. IK iii it. For what purpose, or for how long, he couldn't tell. He eon It I leel ihe trail start up again, heading even further back into the l'.isi, hut he was curious as to why she'd chosen to stop here. Roughly ,i thousand years would put him in the time of the First limp before it declined and fell, for reasons long forgotten. His old his in: i,\n's instincts kicked in, at the possibility of seeing the legend.n \ l'iisi Umpire in its prime; and perhaps even discovering some cine .is lo why it fell so far, and so hard. Perhaps the greatest mystery in llnm.inily's long history. Owen laughed soundlessly in the vacuum This was the kind of opportunity he'd dreamed of, in his youn.r.. i il.iys. He'd come a long way, to end up back at his beginnings, lie u Milled out with his mind, trying for some sense of what lay in w.iit on the planet below but the cities blazed with life: billions upon billions of minds roaring in a constant bedlam. It was just too big, loo complex, lor him to understand, even in his new changed si.iie. Me loniui that oddly comforting.

While he was busy thinking all this, half a dozen orbiting satellites had detected his sudden presence, and were now homing in on him. They moved slowly in his direction, great rough metal shapes bristling with energy spikes and sensors, each one the size of a battleship. They took up a preprogrammed position around Owen, and then all their metal spikes blazed with crackling energies, forming a scintillating cage around him. He looked up startled, his lips parted, leaning back despite himself from the sheer power

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hammering on the vacuum all around him - enough to light a city for a month. He could sense it. Just being this close to so much raw energy would have fried any normal creature. Owen cautiously probed the satellites with his mind, but there was no trace of even the simplest AI; only the basic binary codes of standard computers. Owen considered his situation thoughtfully. He could easily escape the trap by just dropping back into the Timestream, but he was curious as to who had placed such a brutal trap in orbit, and why. He had a strong feeling it was probably something to do with Hazel.

So he waited patiently, turning slowly this way and that in the vacuum by a simple effort of will, until finally someone came to inspect what their sprung trap had caught. At first all he could make out were two small bright lights heading towards him, but they grew quickly in size. He'd been expecting some form of ship or flyer, so was surprised to see two human forms sailing towards him. They seemed to move under their own power, wrapped in shimmering silver force shields, like two suits of perfectly fitted armour. Their faces were blank mirrors, with no obvious sensors, but slight humps on both their backs suggested some kind of propulsion unit. The force suits fit closely enough for Owen to be sure his visitors were one male and one female. They slowed to a controlled halt a cautious distance away from the cage, and looked Owen over carefully. He gave them a cheerful wave. It didn't seem to reassure either of them.

Pops and crackles sounded in his ears, through his comm implant, and he realised they were trying to talk to him. He waited impatiently for his comm link to find the right frequency, but when their voices finally came through clearly, he was shocked to find they spoke with an accent and a dialect so obscure and so extreme that he could barely make out one word in ten. Owen tried to talk to them, and it was clear they couldn't understand him either. A thousand years and more can change a language completely. Owen then reached out and took the knowledge he needed directly from their minds, so he could talk in

their tongue. He hadn't known he could do that, until he did it. Apparently the changes he was going through affected his mind as well as his body.

'Hi,' he said. 'I'm Owen. Just a visitor, passing through. Who are you?'

'I am Dominic Cairo,' said the male voice. 'Defender of Humanity.'

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My associate is the Investigator Glory Chojiro. From what far |>I,ur li.ivc you come, and how is it you are able to survive cold vacuum without protection?'

'Ah,' said Owen. 'You're really not going to like the answn in lhat.'

'And yet we must insist upon an answer/ said the harsh Irnul. voice. 'We defend Heartworld, and have responsibility lor lliis set i>i Under the authority of the Emperor Ethur, we require an JMS

'All right,' said Owen. 'I'm from the future. About .1 llion ye.irs further on. Don't ask me how I got here, it would only ii| you. I only have to think about the implications of wli.il I'm <\-.mil I start to whimper. May I ask why you've bottled me up in • i',ige? Is this how you greet all your visitors?'

'Just certain special cases, such as yourself,' said Domini, 'it'd better come with us.'

'Do I have a choice?' said Owen.

'What do you think?' said Glory.

She gestured imperiously at the six satellites, and they obeyed her as she started back the way she had in Dominic moved easily along beside her, comfortable. It felt like he belonged there. Partners, of some kind, Owen. He was a little surprised to find they had Investigators. What the hell was a Defender of Humanity? Was there something with some alien species? The history of the First Empire - the holes, on small and large matters. Owen's historian soul joined the others together eagerly. The things he'd be able to tell his peers when he got back . . .

When he got back . . .

Owen allowed the energy cage to tow him along behind it (silently). He was pretty sure by now that he could break out any time he wanted, but he was interested to see what would be brought back. The journey proved a long slow process, and he was soon bored enough to seriously consider taking charge of things up a bit, but he thought he'd better not. Meeting his new friends just yet. They seemed nice. So Owen just settled back and watched the satellites and the huge ships coming and going. He'd rewritten the markings on their hulls, just as he did it.

The planet, that would one day be called Golgotha but was now Heartworld, had only the single moon, and that was apparently where they were going. Owen was mildly curious. In his time, the moon was just a dumping ground for toxic waste, in the great caverns under the surface. The moon loomed up before him, a great expanse of cold grey rock. A single huge tower thrust up from the surface, a solid steel block with no obvious openings or markings. Owen asked what it was, and Dominic curtly replied The Spike, which wasn't as informative as Owen had hoped.

They all descended towards the Spike, which was surrounded by a high-intensity force field - Owen could feel it, prickling against his augmented senses. Glory turned and gestured at the satellites, and the crackling energy cage suddenly contracted around Owen, while the satellites backed away. Owen considered informing the Investigator that this close up the energies tickled, but decided against it. He wanted Glory and her partner to feel secure around him, for the moment at least. Dominic made a series of gestures, and a corridor opened up in the force shield, its boundaries clearly designated by bright holo markings. Dominic and Glory escorted Owen through, maintaining a safe distance from the energy cage, and the force shield closed behind them. Ahead of them, a series of heavy blast doors opened and closed, admitting them at last to the interior of the Spike. They ended up in a huge elevator, big enough to take a crowd, and began a long journey down through the Spike and on into the interior of the moon. Owen was beginning to have some idea of just what kind of place he'd been brought to.

The elevator went down a long, long way before the doors finally opened on an entirely prosaic reception area. Dominic and Glory indicated for Owen to go ahead of them, so he took his energy cage for a casual stroll round the reception area. All four walls were covered with dozens of monitor screens, each showing a different view, constantly changing to cover different angles. A central comm and control console seemed familiar enough, if a little ornate and overdesigned for Owen's taste.

The cage abruptly winked out, leaving only two rings of crackling energy linking his wrists. Owen tested them, surreptitiously, and kept the smile off his lips. Dominic and Glory stood before him, and their silver force shield snapped off. For the first time, Owen could get a clear look at his captors. Glory Chojiro turned out to be a short,

stocky woman, barely five feet tall. She was well muscled, with broad shoulders and a jutting bosom. Her face had clear oriental lines, with jet black hair and eyes. She was entirely naked, but her skin was ruby pink metal for as far as the eye could see, and Owen could see pretty far. There were no joints or seams to mark the metal, it is some kind of armour, so Owen reluctantly accepted it had to be her skin. She seemed a bit on the small side for an Investigator, but there was no denying she held herself like a warrior. Even though she carried no visible weapons.

Dominic Cairo was tall and slender, almost athletically muscled, but also bare arse naked. His skin was a cool sky blue, marked on the face and chest with what appeared to be lines of metal circuitry. He had a kindly, thoughtful face, under a shock of tufted silver hair. He put a hand to his bare hip, and the hand disappeared for a moment before reappearing with a large and blocky energy weapon. Owen raised an eyebrow.

'Good trick,' he said. 'Where did the gun come from?'

'Subspace pocket,' said Dominic. 'Keyed only to me, of course. You have never seen one before? Interesting. All our weapons, tools, and necessary work items are held in a subspace locker, at right angles to this dimension. And preprogrammed to accept only our orders and kindly restrain any aggressive impulses.'

'Move against us and you will be punished,' said Glory.

'Oh perish the thought,' said Owen. He realised he was stupid; normally again, but was distracted by another thought. 'How do you two ever get cold, wandering around like that? In the middle I mean?'

'Told you he was a barbarian,' Glory said to Dominic. 'Typically born one- of the outer worlds, where they still suffer from i.ib-

'Me says he's from the future,' Dominic said mildly. 'And in the 11 I}', J:IT i he satellites. There is also the unresolved question, is to how he was able to survive in vacuum without our advantages.' 'I hen- is more to me than meets the eye,' said Owen.

'Thru' would have to be,' said Glory. 'And bear yourself with > omesly in our presence.' She stepped forward to glare, n bun moir elli< ieilly. 'You <ire now in the House of Correction, .ind hr.ulcd Im ilu- Holding I'ens, unless you can provide us with .in ,i<>ept.ihle explanation.'

'Yes, I thought this had to be some kind of prison,' said Owen.

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'It's got that depressing ambience. What exactly am I being charged with?'

'Well/ said Dominic. 'Being weird and unusual, and just possibly a threat to Humanity. As Investigator and Defender, my partner and I take such things most seriously. Be under no misapprehensions as to your situation. We have reason to fear creatures such as you, who appear out of nowhere, and who fit no known parameters. We are at present deep beneath the surface of the moon, where we hold all the worst criminals Humanity has to offer. The hardened recidivists, who can't or won't be helped.'

'So what happens to them?' said Owen. 'They stay here till they die?'

'Of course not!' said Dominic, clearly shocked. 'We wipe them clean of their memories, and leave them a blank slate, so that they can start again in a new life, untroubled by their past.'

'Here we deal with the worst of the worst,' said Glory. 'We have heard and seen it all, and we never give the benefit of the doubt.'

'Nice speech/ said Owen, 'Honest, I'm impressed. And thoroughly intimidated. How many criminals do you have here?'

'At present, three hundred and forty-seven/ said Dominic. He seemed amiable enough, but his gun never wavered from covering Owen. 'Security in the House of Correction is extremely tight. You will stay here until your fate is determined. Don't even think of trying to escape/

'Wouldn't dream of it/ said Owen. 'I only just got here. I suppose a friendly sit-down and chat over a nice cup of tea is out of the question?'

They ignored him, pulling a whole series of unfamiliar tech items* out of their subspace pockets. Dark ugly things, bristling with metal spikes. Owen decided that there were very definite limits to what he was prepared to put up with, especially if it involved dropping his trousers and bending over, but fortunately all Dominic and Glory wanted to do was study him from a safe distance. Owen could feel energy fluctuations moving over and around him, but none of it was particularly uncomfortable, so he just let them get on with it. He was actually curious to see what they had to say about his new condition. Dominic and Glory studied the readings they were getting, scowled and muttered a lot, and finally got into

a short but intense fight over what it all meant. Owen regretfully decided that he

wasn't going to get any useful insights out of the First Empire irrh after all

'Look/ he said at last. 'Why don't you just ask me what you w.mi to know? I can pretty much guarantee in advance that you .IIVM'I going to like most of the answers, but then, I don't much eithei in l.ict, there are times when I distinctly wish I would go away .mil MH|> bothering me. So; I am Owen, first of my Family and Loid ol <,1,111. Rebel and warrior, hero and legend. Or so they tell inc. I -.p. m most of my life studying to be an historian, but it turned out hUti li.nl other plans for me. I have travelled back in Time in piir.mi ..I .. 11 lend who came before me. Does any of that help?' 'Not really/ said Dominic, after a pause. 'All right/ Owen said patiently. 'Let's start with ilie l«.i > .ire you? I think I know what an Investigator is, but wh,n iln l> .1 Defender of Humanity?'

(ilory and Dominic looked at each other, ami (in,illy shrugged angrily. 'I am Investigator Chojiro. It is my ilnh iitnl honour to examine and oppose all extranormal threats to I linn.n l Mini within or without. I have powers in the Low .in.l tin n Justice, and the right of execution without warning <>i ,i|>|>i .il i presently stationed on Heartworld, centre of the Empm .m.l I mill

.ill my brethren have been tasked to watch for the rein.....

thing like you, or what came before you/

'I am Defender of Humanity Dominic Cairo. It is my im ensure that the people of the Empire do not use newly < technology or medical enhancements to remake them something inhuman. The nature of Humanity must h« n .ind maintained, and I have powers in the Low and tin I iir,h in lo dcdl with anything that threatens it. I defend ih< ,|,im ..i Humanity. A hard task, in these days of vacuum d,m. hie.iihers and heavy-gravity prowlers. I see you do mil u> lho.se terms. Originally, the process of adaptation w, is dev.

It's not possible for people to fit the conditions on other planets. Why? It's the expense of changing a planet, when it's so inn. I, to manage the people? Unfortunately, the changes have run wild. It's the thrill or the fashion of it. There are many kinds of people now, most of them are fully human.'

'Both our cities were circled <100 or so years ago> in 1950. A series of disastrous first contacts with alien species. In 1950

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to wars, and the destruction of whole alien cultures in the name of human destiny. We are rebuilding them, as best we can, and have sworn never to be inhuman again. A noble intent, but the accelerating rate of change in the human form is having its effect on the human mind and soul. No one can keep track of all the sub-species of Humanity any more. And there are nowhere near enough Investigators or Defenders these days. The Emperor grows old, and does not care, and those below take their cue from him.'

'You have chosen a bad time to visit us, Owen,' said Dominic. 'In these sad, despairing dog days of Empire.'

'Why are you here?' Glory said sharply. 'What is your purpose?' 'I told you, I'm from the future,' Owen said patiently. 'Searching for my friend who came here before me. You seem to be accepting the time travel bit rather more easily than I expected. Do you have Time travel?'

'No,' said Glory. 'All such research was banned, after the trouble we had with the Illuminati, long ago. But we have had experience with your kind before. That is why you were caged, and why you still wear the energy gages. We will not risk such horror running loose again.'

'Why are you wearing that antique weapon?' Dominic said suddenly, pointing at the sword on Owen's hip. 'Is it ceremonial, or a symbol for your masculinity?'

'Neither,' Owen said dryly. 'It's my sword. My weapon. Where, or rather when, I come from everyone bears a sword. We have energy guns too, of course, but we prefer to do our fighting with cold steel. It is an honourable weapon.'

Dominic frowned for the first time. 'Whatever could be honourable about killing people? The Investigator and I carry energy guns, our duty commands it, but they are simply accurate and brutally efficient. That is all that can be asked of a killing tool. It is a terrible responsibility, to take another's life.'

'Why are you here, Owen?' Glory insisted. 'What do you want?' 'I followed my friend Hazel. Her trail led me here.' 'Hazel?' said Dominic. 'That thing was human once?' Glory snorted loudly, her dark eyes harsh, her mouth grim. 'Your friend may have begun as human, but what arrived here was more like a terrible force of nature. It appeared out of nowhere, manifesting in high orbit amid a shower of tachyons, indicating that it was a

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Time (Livelier. It had no physical form or dimensions; just a vast horrid presence stamped directly on to reality by an effort of will, it was huge and powerful, and as merciless as any devil. It descended upon the world, sweeping aside all our defences, and raged upon the world, spreading death and devastation. It tore open the earth and swept through the cities, and none of our weapons even touched it. We called it the Mad Mind, after a legend from the days of the empire.'

(i>, thought Owen. Now I know where I'm going next.) 'I eventually,' said Dominic, 'with half our world reduced to Nooil ,md ruins, the Mad Mind disappeared, as suddenly as it li.nl arri And ever since we have been waiting for another such IMOII-.I. I ill upon us out of Time.'

'And here you are,' said Glory. 'In our power, to answer lo i hr clinic's of your . . . friend.'

'< :.m we really do that?' said Dominic, not even trying to In.I. In uncertainty. 'I mean; look at the fellow. He bears no resemlil. to the Mad Mind, in form or in nature. We cannot expe. i individual to answer for the crimes of another. That would In-inhuman.'

'It is the Emperor's will!'

'Is it? Perhaps if he met Owen, he would feel differently.' Owen let them argue for a while, but it quickly became i Ir.n il weren't going to resolve anything anywhen soon, so he bniii il IM .ii',iin. 'Why is there so much starship traffic around Heariwoi M ' i (here some emergency? Perhaps something I could help with.'''

'No,' said Dominic. 'Lots of people are leaving Heartworld, Im ill. outer colonies. To follow their own belief systems, or to esc.ip. ih. much predicted decline and fall of the Empire. Rats, deseim sinking ship. Humanity has become . . . sundered, divided. We h. .ill become too different from each other. Everyone must h,i\< iln

very latest technology implants, chemical enhancements, r.<.....

restructuring. There are all kinds of sub-species now; notliin; lorhidden and experimentation is running wild. We know <-\< thing about how to alter the body, and not nearly enough ahoi how such changes affect the soul - the humanity. We have .1 /m different sexes now, group minds, human/animal coinhin.nioir. Memes are fashions, and minds swap bodies at will, wearing diflci cut forms like suits.'

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'You're such a sweet old-fashioned thing, Dom/ said Glory, smiling for the first time. 'It's not all bad. Body change has enabled us to explore the universe. We walk upon worlds we could never have experienced before, because terraforming would have destroyed their true nature. We breathe poison, stand erect under the heaviest gravities, swim through gas worlds.'

'That's not why they change their bodies on Heartworld,' Dominic said stubbornly. 'Change is all the rage these days, for the thrill, for the kick, for the experience. We are all so desperate for new experiences. When nothing is forbidden, where do you go for cheap thrills and the sick little joys of sin? Everything is possible now, and that is why the Empire is falling apart. There are too many factions, sub-groups, heretical beliefs. No consensus is ever possible. That's why Parliament became a joke: because there are just too many positions, beliefs, philosophies. The only real authority comes from the Emperor, damn his immortal soul, and his Praetorian Guard. More and more they usurp prerogatives that belong to the Investigators and the Defenders. Society is fragmenting, and the centre cannot hold. Humanity is divided by its own freedoms and appetites. Already many of the border worlds have rejected Heartworld authority, and fallen back into barbarism.'

Glory looked sharply at Owen. 'Is this your doing? Are you affecting Dom in some way, with your future powers? He doesn't normally talk so much, or so freely.'

'It's true/ said Dominic. 'I don't.'

'Nothing to do with me,' said Owen. 'I think . . . you've both been waiting for someone you could talk to. Someone who'd listen. Perhaps I can help, now I'm here. In my own time, I led a rebellion that brought about a Golden Age. Or so everyone keeps telling me . . . !'

Glory shook her head shortly. 'No. We have our orders, our responsibilities. You will be held here, while we inquire for further instructions. After the devastations of the Mad Mind, we cannot take chances with any visitors from your future.'

'But he doesn't belong here/ Dominic said stubbornly. 'Not with these . . . transgressors.'

'Who have you got here?' said Owen. 'What could still be a crime, with the freedoms you have now?'

'As ingenuity expands possibilities, crime flourishes/ said Glory.

The House of Correction holds body-swap terrorists, personality ameers, talent thieves, cult leaders who spread enforcement memes lo gather new followers. Gender terrorists, who try to create new sexes by experimenting on unwilling victims.'

'And Ansel deLangford/ said Dominic. 'Our latest arrival, He.ul ol llu1 Thrillkill Cult. He encouraged his many followers to considei murder a work of Art. The more complex, the more grotesque, .mil l hi l more extreme, the better. His followers vied to present him willi ever greater atrocities; but he was always the worst of them .ill. He specialised in murders whose foul and awful nature destroyed ih. minds and souls of the victims' friends and families. The Thrillkill Cull wiped out whole sub-species and cultures

in the name of inverted Art, before we finally shut them down. Psychopathic killers, dancing and singing through the chaos of a falling Empire - is ours now, at last; and we will squeeze every last piece of information out of him, so that all vestiges of his cult will die with him

'You're never this chatty when it's just me/' said Glory. 'In looked at Owen. 'Any questions?'

'Yes/' said Owen. 'Why are you covered in pink metal?'

And that was when all the alarms in the world went on. Sirens and bells and a hell of a lot of flashing lights. While Owen \ Hying to look in every direction at once, Glory and Dominic y'l.un - -I

• 11 looked at the wall screens and then hurried over to the monitor. The views on the monitor screens had stopped their shifting to concentrate on a series of cell doors sliding ponderously open, one after another, and wild shouting people spilling out into steel corridors. The lights shut off, so the speakers could carry shouts and ••

...raw harsh cries for vengeance. All the prisoners were immediately searching for weapons and a way out. Except for one man who stood calmly before a security camera, smiling and motionless. He seemed almost ordinary, until you got to the eyes. Owen

shuddered, as he studied the man looking out of the monitor M....

He'd seen eyes like that before. Cold, mad, killer's eyes.

It didn't seem long since he'd killed Kit Summerisle, also known as Kid Death.

DeLangford/ Dominic said grimly. 'Somehow, he's got into the

• iHiipuieis. He's triggered all the overrides, using codes he shouldn't even have known existed. There's nothing we can do.'

'We wanted to be brought here/ said Glory. 'We didn't set the

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others loose out of altruism. He's planning something. Something awful.'

'Call out the guards/ said Owen. 'How many do you have stationed here?'

Glory and Dominic looked at him. 'There are no guards/ said Dominic. 'Just the computers. Usually, that's all that's needed. After all, this is the moon. Where could anyone go if they did escape? But DeLangford isn't interested in escaping. He wants to make some art here. Murder art. But he waited for

something to bring us back here. Because he wanted an audience.'

'You mean, he let the other prisoners out so they could watch as he killed you?' said Owen.

'No/' said Glory. 'He thinks bigger than that. He's going to make the prisoners die, for his entertainment. That's what he does. And we get to watch while he does it/'

'Except we can't allow that/' said Dominic.

'Why not?' said Owen, 'You said yourself they were the worst of the worst.'

Dominic stared at him, openly shocked. They are here to be cured, and given new lives! Not to be punished, executed! That would be ... inhuman. We only ever kill when we have to.'

'We may have to/' said Glory, her ruby hands moving swiftly over the control panels. 'DeLangford's shut down all the non-lethal security measures. There's no way he could have hacked into these computers without help. He must have brought something up with him. He was supposed to be thoroughly searched before he got here, inside and out; but his Cult has people everywhere. The computers aren't going to repair themselves in time, Dom. We're going to have to stop this ourselves.'

They'll be heading for the unloading bay/' said Dominic. 'It's the only way off the moon. There isn't a ship docked at the moment, but they don't know that. We can bottle them up in the bay, incapacitate a few to calm down the rest, and then keep them sealed up until the computers are back on line/'

'Too simple/ said Glory. 'DeLangford will have planned for that. He's had plenty of time to think this through. His murders always have to be art.'

'But he doesn't know about me/ said Owen. 'He won't have allowed for my presence. Let me help. Please. I want to help.'

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Dominic and Glory looked at him, and then at each other. 'Wt need him/ said Dominic. 'And he seems rational enough.'

'(>ui orders . . /

'Don't cover a prison break! Saving lives comes first.'

'Of course it does, Defender.' Glory hit a control on her wrist, . lhe energy gyves around Owen's wrists snapped oil.

Owen smiled. He could have broken free at any time, but he wanted them to trust him. He studied the wall screens, seeing shouting men running through the plain steel corridors lined with a lot of them, but they didn't look as if they'd be too much of a problem, unarmed. Except ... all the prisoners seemed to

show a frenzied expression. He pointed this out, and

grimly.

'Delangford's infected them all with the Thrillkill virus. They belong to him now. They live only to kill for him. We may have to kill them all anyway; because they'll never be able to

She said a word that Owen didn't understand, and the air rippled suddenly, as she disappeared and a new form took her place. It was about a foot taller and a great deal more

humanoid in shape but composed entirely of bright red metal.

The solid bullet head had no features, only a series of points which might have been sensors. A row of gun barrels lined the chest, and razor-edged blades lined the arms. And yet the gold armour was seamless, moving smoothly. The metal shape was clearly alive. Owen looked at it

'What is that, please?'

'That's Glory/ said Dominic. 'She's put on her enlon <•.....i I....I

organic metal with built-in weaponry. We all have many luulh ilu-sc days, remember? I'll put on a more appropriate lm.\ m • moment.'

'How many bodies do you each have?' said Owen, las. in.n..I

I have twenty-seven, Glory has forty-three. Our work iv<|m.. in he flexible. We keep them in a subspace locker, and pop iln m ofl as necessary. You didn't think I looked like this all Mir linn . li.l you '

And just like that, he became someone else loo. Still hasn ill liimian, siill pale blue, Dominic now inhabited a more pcrIm, idealised form. Something about ihis new, calmly smiling l.n. .mil

the subtle body language, made Owen want to listen to whatever this new Dominic had to say. He wanted to agree with Dominic, and do anything that might please him. Owen shook his head sharply. A lot of the body language was subliminal, working directly on the subconscious, but Owen could see it clearly, and shrugged it off. He glared at Dominic, who smiled easily.

'Congratulations/ he said, in a wonderfully warm and friendly voice. 'Most people can't even see what I'm doing, let alone shake it off so quickly. As a Defender of Humanity, I don't like using weapons. I prefer more subtle methods. There's always the chance I can break these people free of deLangford's conditioning.'

'We're going down to the unloading bay,' said Glory, in a harsh buzzing voice that reminded Owen irresistibly of a Hadenman. 'We'll take the lead. You stay behind us, and protect yourself. Don't get in our way, and try and stay out of trouble.'

'You really don't know me at all,' said Owen Deathstalker.

Glory and Dominic led the way through the gleaming steel corridors, Glory's heavy metal tread sounding loudly on the quiet. There had already been so many twists and turns that Owen should have been hopelessly lost, but somehow he wasn't. He could sense the shape and layout of the whole prison structure, and his position in it. After following Hazel back through Time, this was simple.

The prisoners are limited to just the one body,' said Glory. 'And their only weapons will be what they can improvise.'

'I'll try persuasion first,' said Dominic. 'If that doesn't work, you're on, Investigator. Try and keep the damage to a minimum.'

'Of course, Defender.'

They entered the unloading bay. It was empty, just a great gleaming cavern of steel with the usual accoutrements. Glory tramped heavily about, checking that everything was as it should be. She wouldn't put it past deLangford to have somehow booby-trapped the place, but all seemed clear. Dominic bent

over the single control console, making sure the airlock was still secure. Owen looked around thoughtfully. He was almost sure he'd heard something. Dominic shook his perfect head unhappily.

'I was worried deLangford's people might have seized a ship and brought it here, so deLangford could escape in the confusion; but the sensors show only our own ship, still in orbit. Only we can call it

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down, and both of us would rather die than betray our HUM. DeLangford knows that. So what is he planning?'

'I'm pretty sure I heard something,' said Owen.

'You did,' said Glory's harsh buzz. The prisoners are here.'

The bay doors slammed open, and a mob of howling men sin in. Dozens of mad-eyed prisoners, roaring and shrieking their rage, carrying clubs and sharp-edged tools. Dominic Cairo stepped Im ward to face them, and those at the front stopped as though they'd run into a brick wall. The crowd behind snarled up, blocking Mie doorway and holding the rest back. Dominic smiled on (lie |> oners, and some actually smiled back. The Defender spoke i<> ilu-m his voice calm and reasonable, asking them to stop and ithink wli.ii Miey were doing. His manner was so calm, so easy, so raiioii.il ih.ii some of the mob were already smiling and nodding their lie.nl agreement. A few actually began to cry, and loudly confess to < 11> they'd never even admitted before, like children despei.itely -.a<l .11 disappointing a beloved father. And then someone at the hack nl ih> fiowd lifted an energy gun and fired at Dominic. Owrn <l.mi.l Im ward impossibly quickly and thrust Dominic out ol tin- \\.i\ i In energy beam shot on to ricochet harmlessly off Glory's g<>M< n < I..

'Where the hell did they get an energy gun?' howled Diinimii

Glory stepped forward, gun nozzles protruding from her chest. She opened fire, and massed energy beams tore into the mesh. Mesh exploded where the energy beams hit, and men were mown apart into gobbets of bloody meat as the guns fired again and began not pausing to recharge. Glory pressed forward, blasting a hole through the crowd, but still more men pressed forward behind her, their voices irrational with hate and rage. And she knew she could kill them fast enough to stop them all.

Dominic shook off Owen's supporting hands, and lurched forward to support his partner. He spoke again with his perfect voice. In this time he used harsh ugly words and tones that struck deep into the subconscious, hitting deep-set triggers of shame and fear. The prisoners crashed to the steel floor, collapsing into tears. Dominic's body pumped out pheromones that led as much to his defeat as to his victory. He was a Defender of Humanity, and these were his only weapons. He stood his ground, even as another energy bolt narrowly missed his head.

Glory and Dominic stood together, each of them fighting in their

own way, but the sheer number of rioters overwhelmed them. The prisoners swarmed around Glory, beating on her metal body with their improvised weapons, and Dominic's perfect face ran with blood. Step by step they were forced to retreat from the doorway, and allow more and more of the prisoners into the bay. All of them were laughing the same terrible laugh, eager for blood and slaughter.

And Owen Deathstalker decided enough was enough. He'd given his two new friends every chance to do it themselves, but all their courage and skill clearly wasn't enough. So he drew his sword and went forward to meet the prisoners. He was quickly in among them, graceful as a dancer, deadly beyond hope or mercy. He cut a bloody path through the howling mob, and none of them could stand against him. They weren't used to facing cold steel. Owen felt faster and stronger than he ever had before, even when using his Family's famous Boost. He cut men down with a brutal savagery that shocked even the hardened prisoners. Bodies fell to every side, shrieking their death agonies, and blood splashed the steel walls and pooled thickly on the floor. Owen cut and slashed and hacked, driving the prisoners back. At the end, the last few turned to run, but Owen went after them and cut them down. He slowly lowered his blade, and looked about him, breathing heavily.

One man still stood in the doorway. He carried an energy gun, but he put it down on the steel floor, so he could applaud Owen.

'I didn't expect you,' he said. 'An unexpected pleasure. I am deLangford. Who or what might you be?'

Owen grinned. 'I'm the Deathstalker, and that's all you need to know. Now stay where you are, and put those hands in the air. Don't do anything sudden, or I'll whittle you down into a more pleasant person.' He looked back at Glory and Dominic, who had changed back into their previous selves. They were both looking at him with open horror and shock on their faces. Owen felt a little put out, given that he'd just saved their lives. 'What's the problem?'

'Dear God,' said Dominic. 'I never saw anything like that in my life. You cut them up like meat! It was . . . hideous. Inhuman! You're a barbarian! Men don't act like that!'

'Maybe not in your time,' said Owen. 'I was raised to be a warrior, and trained in the hardest school of all. You should be grateful. They would have torn you apart if I hadn't stopped them.'

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'You didi'l have to kill them all!'

'Yes I did,' said Owen.

'You enjoyed it!' Glory said accusingly, 'You smiled and laughed .is you butchered those men.'

Owen considered that. 'I take a pride in work well done,' In- s.iid Ini,illy. 'And there's nothing like living when others want you de.ul in 11 uike a man feel good. I don't glory in their deaths, but I don't led guilty about it either. I notice you were happy enough to sin mi ilicm from a distance with those terribly efficient guns of your. Hi.u's no way to kill. It takes real guts to get in close with a bl.ide, i<> IHII your life on the line, and depend on your skill and com lo bring you through. Murder should never be cold and inip.iin.il You should always be prepared to pay in blood for the blood

shed.'

'Yes,' said deLangford. 'You understand.'

'Shut up creep,' said Owen. 'So, Glory, Dominic; what do v\« ,!.. wilh him? He's the cause of all this death, after all.'

'An,' said deLangford. 'I took these worthless men and made them significant. What happened here will be told for thousands of years. I made your glorious last stand possible. I took people who never mattered, even to themselves, and made them magnificent, if only for a moment. They are part of a story now, a legend that will live on for centuries. I made your heroism possible. Gave it significance and meaning. You should thank me. I made you a hero. And now, I will render.'

'There isn't a legend that's worth one man's death,' said Owen. 'Trust me; I know. What do we do with him?'

'He goes back to his cell,' said Glory. 'After we've searched him very thoroughly. The computers will be back on line any time now.'

Owen looked at her. 'And that's it? He's responsible for everyone who died here! You could have died here! How can you be sure he won't do it again?'

'None of that matters,' said Dominic. 'He has surrendered. We don't punish him now. It wouldn't be right.'

'Hell with that,' said Owen. He looked at deLangford, and let his finger fly out. DeLangford's head exploded, showering the surroundings with blood and brains and skull fragments. The body sank slowly to its knees, blood fountaining from the neck, as Glory and Dominic cried out in shock and revulsion. The body fell forwards

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and was still. Owen shook thick drops of blood from the end of his sword and then put it away.

'What kind of future do you come from?' Dominic said shakily. 'That can produce creatures like you, and the Mad Mind?'

'I should kill you where you stand/' said Glory. 'You're not fit to live in human society. I should—'

'I wouldn't/' said Owen, and something in his voice stopped them both.

Dominic took Glory by the arm. 'This is too big for us. He has to go to Court, to stand before the Emperor. Let Ethur decide what's to be done with him.'

'Actually, I'll decide what's to be done with me/' said Owen. 'But I want to meet your Emperor. I'm sure there are many things he can tell me about . . . the Mad Mind. Don't worry; I promise I won't hurt him.'

'You'll have to wear the energy gyves/' Glory said flatly. 'We can't risk the Emperor's safety.'

'If it will make you feel better/ Owen said graciously.

The energy bands crackled about his wrists again, and the Investigator and the Defender both relaxed a little. Glory called down her orbiting ship, while Dominic studied Owen closely. Owen studied Dominic. He was getting the hang of reading body language.

'You love her, don't you?' he said quietly, nodding at Glory. 'Have you ever told her?'

'What? No! I—'

'Do it/ said Owen. 'Don't leave it till it's too late.'

And so the three of them went down to Heartworld, that would one ' day be called Golgotha and then Logres, in a large and blocky ship that had no name, only a number. Owen didn't recognise the design at all. It moved smoothly through space, threading its way easily through the heavy traffic, and finally slipped into the planet's atmosphere with only the slightest of jolts. Owen sat at the back of the cabin, firmly strapped in for his own safety, and amused himself by changing the colours of his energy bands when nobody was looking. Dominic and Glory spent most of the trip arguing about where they were going, and how best to get Owen to the Emperor. They seemed very firmly of the opinion that there were a great many political and religious factions who would just love to get their

hands on Owen, for all kinds of reasons, few of them good. And all of them would be quite willing to destroy Owen and anyone willi him, rather than let any other group get to him first. Glory in particular seemed concerned over how much damage some groups would do, if they gained control over Owen and his uncanny abilities.

'Oh, I wouldn't worry about that/ Owen said cheerfully. 'I dooilit very much there's anyone here who can make me do anything I don't want to do/

This didn't seem to reassure Glory or Dominic in the least, so the rest of the trip passed pretty much in silence. Until Glory slowed ilx ship right down in order to show Owen something. A section ul iln bulkhead next to Owen became transparent, so he could look on ihe planet below. It wasn't much of a view. In the middle til ,; i|. area lay a great crater, deep and dark, full of twisting grey misls si mi through with shifting lights. Just the look of the crater in.idi <>• I feel strangely uneasy, disquieted.

'You're looking at what used to be Angel City/ Glory s.iiil < ol.ll\ 'Now it's just a hole in the earth, full of quantum insi.ihiliyy Mil lions of people died here, wiped away by a moment's .lui-.n nl iln Mad Mind. A wound in the world, that will never he.il. Most ol di. people died immediately. They were the lucky ones. Unloiiiiiii.ii. those closest to the edges of the effect were only partially loin In >| [hey live on, no longer human, in a place where reality is oni sometime thing. We've seen some of them: monsters in sh.ipr .m.l spirit.

'Constantly changing, never solid or confirmed in one n.iiiuc Im mote ili.in ,1 lew moments. Angel City is a place of horror now, .nnl .ilw.iys will be.'

'We've sent in all kinds of rescue operations/ said Dom.....

'Si ientisis .ind priests, protected by force shields. Ail voluuh w.intiiiK lo help. None of them ever come back. The I.IM I lu-.iitl ihe (lowers th.it be were trying to figure out how lo enclose iln whole .uv.i in one big industrial-strength force shield, .nnl ihen N.IM llir ihinj.; oul into space. Where it can be someone else's pioblrm

'Why not just .ini it into the sun?' said Owen.

'Wh.il il the (ii,intiini insl.ihilily were to .il'lect ihe sun.'

I 01 now, oil we c.iii <io is pul up w.miing signs, s.iylilH />Y Ad'm/rn. I'osl gu.irds lo shoot down ihe pool lliiii)','. ili.ii

occasionally come crawling up out of the crater. And pray to God that the mess doesn't start spreading.'

'And this is only one of the nightmares your friend the Mad Mind left us/' said Dominic.

'What one power can do, perhaps another can undo,' said Owen.

He reached out with his mind. He could feel Hazel's presence permeating the crater, dark and confused, moving restlessly over the wound in the earth, never still. It wasn't her, just something she'd left behind, and Owen erased it in a moment, like a memory he didn't want to remember. The grey mists and the shifting lights disappeared like a bad dream, and there was just a great hole in the ground. Owen could sense sparks of life moving in the crater, but they were merely people now. He hoped they wouldn't remember either. He sank back in his seat, exhausted for the moment.

Dominic and Glory studied their ship's sensors for some time, arguing loudly over what had just happened below, their voices full of shock and something that might have been awe. Eventually, almost reluctantly, they turned and looked back at Owen.

'How the hell did you do that?' said Dominic. 'What kind of power have you got?'

'I don't know/' said Owen. 'I'm still learning. Hopefully, enough to stop Hazel, when I finally catch up to her.'

'Can you bring back the city, and the people who died?'

'No. I'm only human.'

'Those energy gyves aren't affecting you at all, are they?' said Glory.

'Afraid not/' said Owen. 'But I'll keep them on at Court, if it will make everyone feel more comfortable.'

'I should crash the ship into the ground right now/' said Glory. 'Rather than risk letting you run loose.'

'Please don't. It wouldn't affect me at all/ Owen said calmly. 'Will you relax? I'm not another Mad Mind. I just want to talk to your Emperor. Find out what he knows about Hazel. Why she became . . . what she was, and why she came here in the first place. I need to know these things, if I'm to stop her. You have no idea what she's going to become, eventually. I'll still play the prisoner at Court, for your sakes. I don't want to harm anyone. I simply want answers to my questions, and then I'll be on my way.'

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'Why don't you just dig them out of our minds?' said Dominic. You could do Hull, couldn't you?'

'Yes/ said Owen. 'But I won't. Because that would be iiihum.m. Defender.'

I In y I.mded at Heartworld's main starport, in the capital city VIM monde. Owen was briefly startled. There had never been jnyili in the history of his world to explain where the planet's n.iiiic h.ul

.....c horn. It was a further sign of how much history had been IHM

when the l;irst Empire crashed and burned. The starport was .l npni sp.icc, crowded with starships of all shapes and sizes. Hig hniil Kinli('m,iiiions, with little aesthetics and less grace. They writ hmli lot ellii icncy, and nothing else. About what you'd expect <>l .in ih,ii g.ive iis ships numbers instead of names.

Dominic .ind Glory told a whole bunch of lies to the si.upon (itniiol lower as to why they'd come back to llcartwoili.l unexpectedly, invoking their authority as Defender and Iiivcsiig.iini in net oiil of the ship and off

the starport as fast as possible < >> C.oi nil of the energy gyves, with his captors' permission, Kit they'd only attract attention.

A commandeered luggage trolley on antigrav floaters got them m

llic edge of the starport, and then they set about walking tin.....:h

iln ciyy to the Imperial Palace. There wasn't much traffic, on ihe • •is or in the skies. When Owen inquired about this, he w.is toli ih.n most people preferred to use the ubiquitous transfer POM ih.ii could teleport you directly to your destination. When Owen imi mmMMm.ibly demanded to know why they weren't using il>

• .Ini v e\il,lined that they were programmed to teleport people, .mil she w.is pretty sure Owen didn't qualify. God alone knew how urn. h energy it would take to teleport whatever it was he'd

• <iine. So they walked. No one would notice; lots of people liked lo n.il k m ihe cily. For all sorts of reasons.

(•wen strode along between Dominic and Glory, and no one p.iid him .my .mention at all. After a while, he wasn't surprised. The wide •.ueeis were packed with strange and exotic people, m.my only luyilciliic human as Owen understood the term, hveryone w.is i.ill mi', .il once, and no one seemed to he listening. The .iii w.is lull D| .ill kinds ot music, M.isling Irom every direction, and songs m iliril MM ihe ,iir like clouds. The buildings were all bright prim.uy ccilmns.

soaring up into the sky. Advertisements flashed on and off, the razor-bright holos jumping out everywhere, and haranguing anyone stupid enough to make eye contact. Half of them offered goods and services entirely incomprehensible to Owen. Everywhere he looked, the people and the ads and the storefronts were over-poweringly loud and in-your-face. And oh, the bright and glorious people, thronging through the boulevards, out and about to see and be seen, walking proudly like birds of paradise; aristocrats of the greatest Empire Humanity had ever known.

Even if they didn't all look like people. There were those who walked in their bones, wrapped in transparent flesh and skin, with just the faintest traces of blue and scarlet ganglia for contrast. There were people who flew through the perfumed air on pure white feathery wings. People so wide and heavy that the ground shuddered under their every step, people with any number of limbs, or grafted protuberances that must have been alien in origin. And, of course, the many different sexes. People with genitals like the pulpy petals of some unknown flower, or spiked flails, or fleshy plug sockets. Hermaphrodites, with three or four sets of genitals. Owen didn't know what to do with himself when one of them winked at him.

'Don't stare,' Dominic said sternly. 'Makes you look like a tourist.'

'Couldn't we have flown to the Palace?' said Owen, just a little plaintively. 'I think I'm going into culture shock.'

'No one flies any more, except for the winged wonders up there,' said Glory. 'People either walk, or use the transfer portals. Flying in a ship is ... unusual. It would be noticed. Walking is fine. People walk to boast of their latest forms and adaptations, using their example to try and convert others to their particular cause or fashion.'

Owen listened, but kept on gazing about him. Even the wildest areas of his Empire had nothing to compare with this. He was beginning to feel like the barbarian Glory had named him, dazzled by his first glimpse of true civilisation. Everywhere he looked he saw extreme forms and changes that had only the barest links to the basic human norm. Owen had to wonder how many changes you could make to your body, and still be human inside. He remembered the Hadenmen and Wampyr of his own time, and shuddered briefly. The one thing he didn't see on the streets was anyone who looked

like him. It was so obscurely lonely, in the middle of this exotic, alien world, his gaze fell upon areas signed 'Kilter At Your Own Risk', until he drew (Glory's attention to them. She sniffed loudly.

•Some forms are so extreme they can be contagious; so powerful they overwhelm lesser minds. They're not forbidden, nothing is, but they're supposed to stick to strictly defined territories. Some will invade, but we shoo them back in as soon as they're noticed. See 'Hi, I sued I here?'

Owen looked down a side street, labelled 'Season of the Witch'. Ir Women in braids and beads and very little else were levitating, speaking in tongues, and juggling fire with their bare hands. (Some were interested about exploring new spiritual directions, but)

He was sure he was looking at the beginnings of the esperanto phenomenon.

Earlier segregated areas included 'Sexland' where mixed people, of far too many sexes, slammed loggins in.

A sprawling orgy that appeared to have no beginning or end noise was overpowering. People were coming and leaving continually, so that while individual elements changed, the orgy continued, perhaps forever.

'It's just another way to lose yourself,' said Dominic, appalled by a sight that made Owen feel distinctly horrible. 'Another way to avoid thinking. People have long known to die there. Not the worst of ways to go, I suppose, huh'

'Valhalla' was a great open square bedecked with all kinds of weapons, packed with a seething mass of people all seem to be killing each other. Huge muscular types, mostly well-luck and cut at each other with heavy axes. Screams and cries filled the air, the dead piled up, and blood ran thickly in the deep gutters. Owen studied the ceaseless combat for a while, and though he admired the general enthusiasm, he had to dismiss most of the fighters as rank amateurs who wouldn't have lasted long in the Arenas of his time.

'There are always those drawn to the simple, brutal joys of violence,' said Glory. 'Valhalla is open to all comers, so stupid enough, or with enough self-image invested in them, can just plunge right in and fight for as long as they like, as long as they last. Supposedly it's all about survival of the fittest, natural evolution in action, but again really it's just an animal instinct in

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avoid thinking about the complications of the modern condition, by acting like animals.'

The next closed-off area was the province of the 'Tychonauts'. Men and women sat or lay on comfortable couches, their faces empty, their minds elsewhere. Most of them looked skinny or actually malnourished, and their clothes were filthy and ragged. Some were laughing, or crying. They reminded Owen of the poor malformed creatures he'd seen in the Madness Maze's Annex: men and women driven beyond the limits of human consciousness, lost in the unlit depths of their own souls. He said as much, and Dominic was actually shocked.

'These people are heroes, Owen. They're all volunteers, flying on new drugs to see what they can do, and what can be learned from them. They dive into unknown psychic territories, access altered states of consciousness, thinking outside the limits of the body. Looking for answers that can't be found anywhere else.'

'And what answers have they come up with?' said Owen.

Glory scowled. 'Nothing of any use. A lot of them don't come back, from wherever they go. There's a hell of a turnover, but there's never an empty couch. They claim to be confronting the mysteries of the human condition, but since they're mostly too busy watching the pretty colours to feed or look after themselves, I'd have to put this down to just more escapism.'

'We have to find the answers somewhere,' Dominic said stubbornly.

'You find answers by looking outside, not inside,' said Glory.

And then all three of them looked round sharply, as loud screams sounded from up ahead. Suddenly people were running past them, in a riot of shapes and colours, scattering like panicked children. They were all running from something, their faces desperate with the simple need to get away, pressing relentlessly on and trampling the fallen underfoot. Dominic and Glory and Owen stood their ground, like three rocks in a roaring flood. Glory Chojiro's hands were immediately full of energy guns from her subspace pockets. People raced by on every side, and the street up ahead was quickly cleared of everyone but a crowd of assorted figures advancing down the street in perfect lockstep. Their feet hit the ground in a single great crash, and their faces were set in a frozen mask-like expression. There was something inhuman in the way they moved and

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looked, a cold breeze caressed the back of Owen's neck as his muscles rose. His hand went to his swordbelt. He'd just realised that every pair of eyes tracked with every other pair. As though there was only a single thought, a single intent, behind them.

'It's a group mind breakout,' said Dominic. He sounded almost sick, disgusted. This is the closest we have to an obscenity, Owen. The death of individuality in a gestalt of increasing power, where everyone involved surrenders to the Massmind. No more pride, no more needs or passions, just instinct and appetite and Hocking behaviour. And the bigger the Massmind gets, the more powerful it becomes, sucking in weaker minds against their will.'

'What causes these group minds?' said Owen, keeping a wary eye on the crowd advancing towards them.

'No one knows,' said Glory. 'It appears to be spontaneous.....'

thing to do with overcrowding and peer pressure. Maybe it's the ultimate escape from the stress of being human. All we know is it's happening more and more often.'

'So what do we do?' said Owen. 'Knock them all out, and then ship them off to your House of Correction to be fixed?'

'No,' said Glory. There is no cure for what they've become.

Owen suddenly felt the pressure of the Massmind, reaching into his thoughts. It felt like a psychic hole, into which anyone could fall for ever. There was nothing human about it more. Owen roused the power within him, but was honestly lost in what to do. Like so many other things in this brave old world, the Massmind was beyond his understanding.

The sound of approaching running feet brought him back in himself, and a small army of people in brilliant jade armour issued suddenly out of a side street. They all had energy guns in their hands, and harsh, focused expressions. They opened their minds without any warning, not even bothering to knock. The soldiers exploded into bloody mists, and scorched bodies flew up into the air. The street was suddenly full of spilled blood and burnt meat. The Massmind tried to lighten the air, but it couldn't break out of its immured newcomers pressed forward, firing their powerful pistols again without cease or mercy, until all the bodies in the group mind were dead; just burnt and bloody pieces in the street.

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'They never had a chance,' said Owen.

Something in his voice alerted Dominic, who quickly put a restraining hand on Owen's swordhand. 'Don't even think of interfering, or expressing an opinion. That's the Emperor's Praetorian Guard. Everything they do is the Emperor's will. And they did the only thing they could. The group mind was a threat that would only have become more powerful. There are times when an inhuman response is the only answer we have to an inhuman threat.'

'Kill the thing, before it spreads,' said Glory. 'Everyone sucked into the Massmind was already dead, in every way that matters.'

'What about the ones sucked in against their will?' said Owen. 'What was their crime?'

'Not being human,' said Dominic. 'Don't judge us too harshly, Owen. We have tried everything else we could think of, and this is the only action that works.'

They walked on, giving the Praetorian Guards plenty of room as they gathered up the scattered remains for easier disposal. Owen wasn't sure how he felt about what he'd just seen. He had to wonder just how hard the powers that be had looked for another answer. The three of them headed deeper into the city, and the chattering crowds quickly returned, as though nothing had happened. Dominic and Glory tried to distract Owen by talking of many things: of memes - thoughts and ideas that spread like a virus, infecting people with the latest fashions and fads until those affected built up an immunity; of ideas running loose from the minds that created them, imposing themselves on weaker minds and warping their bodies into new shapes and capabilities. Politics and religion had become memes, endlessly mutating and multiplying.

And up and down the many streets, news channels and adverts and ideological hard-sells assaulted Owen from every side. The loud and garish holos capered around him no matter which way he looked, shouting in his ears as he walked through them. They didn't seem to bother Glory and Dominic at all. Presumably they were so used to them they just didn't notice them. Owen gritted his teeth and stared determinedly straight ahead. The streets were full of every kind of new humanity, and no one paid the barbarian from the future any attention at all.

Just when Owen was thinking at least it couldn't get any worse, of course it did. Half a dozen naked men came striding down the

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slieel, burning .ilivc. People moved unhurriedly lo gel onl of llirii w.iy. H.imi's leaped around the burning men, blasting out a heal so inicnsc lli.it those nearest flinched away from it. But no one seemed lo he paying them any particular attention. For although the II,mi.♦♦. huiiicd very fiercely, they did not consume. The flesh bene.illi the II,lines blackened and cracked, but that was all. The burning men \\,ilkd on, looking straight ahead, their black and crimson I i wisieil with endless suffering, their cracked lips moving silently.

'I'i nitentes,' said Glory, amused by Owen's shocked ir.uuion "They set themselves on fire, as a protest. They disapprove ol l> l,n we've progressed from basic humanity. They're burning ,ihs< .>♦, ,i pniiHiu- lor the sins of the age. Show-offs.'

'Some burn lor days, others last for months,' said Dominic. 'And there are always more to replace those who fall. I find it i« r. .uiiii)(, ih,H ihere are still people crying out against inhumanity.'

'liven if it's in a really stupid way?' said Glory. 'No one noiiu-s. No one <.nes. They're just another pressure group.'

Dominic sighed. That's the problem with the Empire tnd.iy; i"» in.my beliefs, too many faiths and philosophies. And fai h>, m.my splintered factions, arguing endlessly over details and inieipi< i inns that matter only to them. You can find every kind of Cl lliese days; from pagan animism to scientific determinism, from \\, Aie All Property to making blood sacrifices to computers. Given how \.nicd ihe human condition has become, it's hard to find .myihlun lh.it everyone can believe in. We all live for the presem, Im ih,

experience. Heaven can wait. We could have transcended, b».....«

M>meihing greater, but we dropped the ball. Partly because we w< » .ih,lid, partly because we couldn't agree on a direction; .uul (i possibly because we saw the future of the human spirit, ,md knt-w we weren't worthy.'

Owen thought about the Madness Maze, but said noilm; 11. iDiildii't talk about the Maze without telling them ahoni ll.i.<l d'Ark.

Ai length Owen Deathstalker came to the great and mighty Coml ul hmpror Ethur, the oldest living human in the whole Firsl limpm-

Not that anyone could just walk into Court and dem.md ,m i.....nli

.ite audience with the Emperor, but Dominic Cairo and Glory Chojiro invoked the ancient privilege of Defender .md Invesli^.n

and the jade-armoured guards waved them on. An Investigator and a Defender of Humanity could always speak to the Emperor, if they claimed a real and present danger to Humanity itself. Owen thought they were pushing that a bit, but said nothing. One of the guards wanted to take his sword away. Owen gave him his best hard look, and the guard decided that he was needed urgently elsewhere.

Ethur's Court was a place of freaks and wonders, under a great golden bowl half a mile wide. There were enough courtiers present to make up a decent-sized army, indulging themselves in every extremity of shape, just for the sake of it. From the aesthetic to the grotesque, from the tasteless to the bizarre, from women with bosoms so big they dragged along the floor, to people pierced through every organ, to wispy ghosts who were hardly there at all, every excess was represented somewhere. Braziers pumped perfumes into the air, and sharp atonal music formed a background to the constant babble of voices, as everybody talked at once and no one listened. The courtiers played vicious, intricate games and hardly glanced round as Glory and Dominic and Owen passed by, heading for the Steel Throne. They were too normal, too ordinary. Too boring to be of interest. A few followed Owen with their eyes, sensing something different about him; something . . . disturbing. He smiled at them, and they flinched back.

At the very centre of the Court, under the very apex of the great golden bowl, on a Steel Throne set high on a raised dais, sat Ethur, looking out over his packed Court with cold, knowing eyes. Owen had been warned about the state of the Emperor, but the reality still came as a shock. Ethur was the oldest living human being, having occupied the Steel Throne for over four hundred years, but that privilege came at a price. His body was riddled with support mechanisms and engineered organs, plugged into the machine that was the Throne. He had the look of a man in his forties, apart from the many wires and tubes and cables that entered his body, connecting him to the Throne he could never leave. He would never rise from the Steel Throne again, except in death.

The Emperor's pale leathery skin was covered only by the crimson silk cloak that adorned his bony shoulders, fluttering occasionally in the gusting air currents of the Court. He had no hair anywhere, no fingernails and no navel, and his complexion and body colour changed constantly as chemical tides moved slowly within him.

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Now, again, strange sharp-edged mechanisms rose up through his flesh, like surfacing creatures, only to be pushed back down by the will of the Emperor. The pale skin closed over them reluctantly, but with no scar to show their passing. Ethur's face was lean and hawkish, with a beak of a nose over a tight pursed mouth, and his eyes were old-world.

Dominic and Glory stood at the bottom of the dais, and presented themselves to the Emperor. They bowed deeply, but Ethur hardly nodded in return. The Defender and the Investigator explained the situation, and the whole Court grew quiet to listen. They looked at Owen with angry, frightened eyes, and the whispered words of the courtiers hummed among the courtiers like an agitated hive. Guards moved in slowly to surround Owen, who politely pretended not to notice. Finally Dominic and Glory presented Owen to the Emperor, and Owen bowed courteously. Ethur considered him thoughtfully for a long time, and when he finally spoke his words were more than a whisper, the words an effort, as though they had been summoned up from deep inside him.

'So, Owen, you are from the future, come to visit us. Something is wrong here. How delicious. There is always novelty in our Court, but rarely anything new. You have done well, Defender and Investigator; but where is the threat to our world that you spoke of? Only an undeveloped man, dressed like a barbarian, and armed with a sword.' He paused to allow a ripple of laughter to run through the courtiers. 'You may have come from the same future as the Middle Mind, Owen, but you don't seem nearly as dangerous.'

'I'm no threat,' said Owen. 'Really. I'm just visiting. A nice cup of tea, some answers to a few questions, and I'll be on my way again.'

'We will decide that,' said Ethur.

'Owen has . . . abilities, your majesty,' said Dominic. 'He has led us to the city that was lost, and made the survivors happy. A miracle . . . but my partner and I felt unworthy to judge his abilities and potential, and so brought him here, to you.'

'You gave instructions, your majesty,' said Glory, 'that any man from the future should be punished for the crimes of the Middle Mind. But . . . we could not decide whether Owen is a threat of that magnitude. So we are here, awaiting your judgement.'

'Yes, yes/ s.iid Hthiu, leaning as lar forward as the tubes and i ahles would .illow, lo stare directly at Owen. 'The wound in our

i r,

world, healed at last by an effort of will. A miracle, indeed. Our scientists are currently having all kinds of hysterics over that. They do so hate to be outdone. And over two hundred survivors, apparently normal again. Truly impressive, Owen. Of course, we had them all killed immediately.'

'You did what?' said Owen. 'Why, for God's sake?'

Ethur actually smiled a little at the harshness in Owen's voice. The risk was too great. They might have reverted, or proved contagious. They were inhuman once, and that is enough. You must not judge us, man from the future. This is our time, and we make the decisions here.'

'And the only miracles permitted are the ones you authorise?' said Owen. 'Life and death, but only at your command? Well, well; I guess some things don't change at all, no matter what time it is.'

There were guards all around him now, with energy guns openly trained on him. Owen looked at them thoughtfully, and Dominic and Glory stirred uneasily. And that was when the Empress Hermione made her appearance, walking unhurriedly through the wide aisle that opened up for her among the courtiers. Owen had been told about the Empress, but her appearance still came as something of a shock. She drifted silently through the cordon of guards, passed by Owen without looking at him, and slowly

ascended the steps of the dais to stand beside her husband, and the Steel Throne.

Hermione was fifteen years old, a tall willowy blonde in flowing white silks, and heavily pregnant. Ethur chose her to be the latest of his many brides when she was just thirteen, and no one questioned him because he was the Emperor, and knew best. Her quiet, passionless face looked drained and tired, as though the pregnancy was taking a lot out of her. It wasn't her first. The moment she became Ethur's bride, both natural and unnatural methods were begun to make her pregnant with the Emperor's ancient seed. He desperately needed an heir. The first two pregnancies hadn't lasted till term, but everyone had great hopes for the third. Everyone except Hermione, but then, no one cared what she thought. The process had clearly taken its toll. Her pretty doll-like face held no emotion at all, and her eyes were empty. Ethur stroked her cheek with his long pale fingers, and she didn't respond at all. Ethur smiled down at Owen.

The older we get, the younger we like them. People grow the

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•..line so quickly only llu1 young h.we any rc.il individual M><m Lull's. All our wives have been such delic.iic (lowers . . . !

'How iiwny have you had?' said Owen.

'Who <,m s.iy? Some were more memorable than others. Some ol iliem K«'ve us children, but we ended up killing all our heirs, soom i 01 I.Her. Because they were bad, or unsuitable. They weie .ill MM It ill ..ippoinments . . . Still,, we remain optimistic. We always hopi ili,n ihc next one will turn out better.'

'His blood will out,' said Owen. 'And monsters have a tendency

to bleed like me.'

NIC- courtiers gasped, and the Emperor looked at him sharply before sealing back in his Steel Throne. The tubes and chairs around him, as though resentful at being disturbed

'You are not our first visitor from the future, Owen. Twelve

• The Mad Mind came upon us, without warning, like a lion in a world apart, searching for knowledge we didn't have. We had a long way in our knowledge of the body, but even we were ill-equipped. The Mad Mind refused to believe in our cities, blasting open universities and laboratories. It killed hundreds of thousands in the process. All our scientists were helpless against this creature. It abducted our scientists and thinkers, and tore their knowledge from their minds. What she left behind, the discarded husks, would have been in ruins.

011 dead. And finally, with half of Heartworld in rubble and the dead piled up everywhere, the Mad Mind disappeared suddenly as it had appeared. Our people are still mourning.

rebuilding.

'We know all about monsters, Owen.

'And now here you are, from that same future, claiming in Mind as a friend. We've waited a long time for another of you. We set our traps everywhere, specifically tasked to bring you back to the kind you were. You will pay for the crimes of your friend. Will you?'

...hell of a future you come from, that can produce much more than you...

...; we want nothing to do with it. And hopefully the lion in the image of your corpse, when it finally returns to the land, will be sufficient to dissuade any others who feel like visiting us.'

'So the cup of tea's out of the question, then?' said Owen. Tom looked at Hermione. Tom can get you out of here. Tom like somewhere else. Just say the word.'

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'I am happy here,' said Hermione, in a high childish voice. 'I belong here.'

Yes, Owen thought reluctantly. You do. And one day, you will meet a man named Giles Deathstalker, and the child you make together will do such wondrous things . . .

He sighed loudly, and looked at Ethur again. There won't be any more visitors from the future.'

'Can you guarantee that?' said the Emperor. 'Not that it matters. In your position, you'd say anything. You don't seem nearly as dangerous as your predecessor, but we don't feel like taking any chances. Not after what you did with the lost city.' He paused suddenly, struck by a thought. 'Tell us about your future, monster. What will happen between now and then, to produce such as you?'

'In my time,' Owen said, 'all of Humanity is faced with the threat of extinction. An enemy is coming, that we cannot stop or turn aside. It is my hope that by tracking down the Mad Mind, and stopping it, I can learn how to save Humanity in my time. You must not stop me, your majesty, the future of our species may depend upon what I can learn.'

'A future full of monsters doesn't deserve to be saved,' said Ethur. 'Perhaps by dissecting your living body and probing your mind, we will find the knowledge to create a different future. Your slow and hideous death will serve many purposes, Owen. Try and remember that, while you're screaming. We will have justice, for what was done to us. We will have vengeance.'

'And after everything I've done for you/ said Owen.

'We will learn how you remade that city and its people, from the agonies of your body and your mind. Nothing will be wasted.'

Think of all the good I could do.'

'We will allow no greater power than us in this Empire,' said Ethur. 'We alone know what is best for Humanity.'

'Nothing changes/ said Owen Deathstalker.

He blew the energy gyves off his wrists with a careless shrug, and the surrounding guards cried out in shock. Energy guns trained on him from every direction, and even Dominic Cairo and Glory Chojiro had weapons in their hands. The courtiers screamed and shouted, and did their best to scabble back out of the line of fire. All around Owen, people were changing into more dangerous battle

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Ini ins. Owni ignored them all, his ga/e fixed on the sttipelieil Emperor.

'li doesn't mailer what time it is; Emperors are always a bad ide.i. I ilunk the whole notion's intrinsically corrupting. People just aren't supposed to wield that much power. It isn't good for them. So; sorry, Inn I (let line to be vivisected. I have work to do.'

lie looked casually around him. The guards were now gre.ii mei.illic forms, or creature hybrids. There were looming insectoid li >i ms, with wild energies coruscating around their branching horns. And even a few shapes that made no sense to him at all. And there were more guns pointed at him than he'd seen in the whole Kehellion. Owen looked back at Ethur.

'Moo!'

All the guns opened up at once, tremendous energies leaping onl in destroy him. Owen stopped them all in mid air with a thought. Mies hung helplessly on the air, caught between one moment ,iuid the next. Owen considered the matter for a moment, .mil then absorbed all the energy into himself. He didn't want any ol it innning loose when he left, and injuring innocent bystander. Assuming there were any . . . The guards tried to fire again, but iheir guns didn't work, because Owen had decided they didn't, llr i mild have killed them all with a thought, but he didn't. They weir just doing their job. He could have killed the Emperor . . . bin history had to take its course. And he didn't want to abuse his power. That way led to Emperors, and Mad Minds.

lie strode up the steps to the top of the dais, to look straight in in I'lluir's face. 'I ought to rip you right out of that Throne, ami si i.ingle you with your own life support systems. But I can't; liecciiise history has its imperatives. What you will do, in years to come, will eventually lead to a better Empire. My best revenge . . . is knowing that you'd really hate the Empire that's coming.' This isn't over yet/ said Ethur.

He gestured at his guards, and they closed in around Glory and Dominic, and turned their guns on them. Owen looked at the guards, and then back at the Emperor.

'You are fond of these two/ said Ethur. 'You care about them. We 11 tive had reports. So; surrender or they die. Right here and now. Or will you sacrifice your new-found friends to necessity, and prove yourself as inhuman as the Mad Mind?'

There's only one monster in this Court, Ethur,' said Owen.

He gathered up Glory and Dominic with his mind, and in a moment they were back at the starport. The Investigator and the Defender looked dazedly about them, shocked by the sudden transition. Great silver ships loomed over them, and people came and went, intent on their own business. Glory recovered first, and gave Owen a hard look.

'I didn't know you could do that.'

'Neither did I,' said Owen. 'I'm learning new things all the time now. It seems I've destroyed your lives, just by meeting you. I'm afraid you can't go back to Court; ever. You can bet Ethur will be looking for someone to take out his anger on, now that he doesn't have me.'

'He would have had us killed,' Dominic said numbly. 'We spent our lives in duty and service to his name, and at the end it meant nothing to him.'

'Yes, well,' said Owen. 'Emperors are like that, mostly.'

'He betrayed us,' said Glory. Something had changed in her face, in her eyes. 'Something must be done, to block the power of Emperors.'

'Even Heartworld won't be safe for us now,' said Dominic. 'We'll have to try and lose ourselves on one of the border worlds. Have to say goodbye to our families, to our friends . . . All I ever wanted was to be a Defender of Humanity, and I'll have to give that up too. Damn you, Owen. Why did you have to choose us?'

'I'm sorry,' said Owen. 'Believe me, I know how you feel' He looked around the starport, and at the city in the distance. This Empire is a legend in my time; the greatest flowering of Human civilisation. I hadn't expected . . . this. So much more, and so much less. But if anyone should have known that you can't trust in legends, it's me.'

Glory frowned. 'If you're from the future, this should be history to you. Didn't you study the period before you left?'

There are no records,' said Owen, 'Just . . . stories.'

Dominic looked at Owen searchingly. 'Something's going to happen; something . . . bad? What aren't you telling us, Owen?'

'Is the Mad Mind coming back?' said Glory.

'No.' Owen looked at them both compassionately. He would have liked to lie, but he owed them the truth. 'Your Empire will decline

and fall. We don't know exactly when, or why. Perhaps you would be safer on a border world, after all.'

Dominic and Glory moved closer together, as though for comfort and protection. A directionless fear moved in their eyes, of bad things coming they now knew they wouldn't be able to stop.

'Who are you, Owen?' said Glory. 'Who are you, really?'

'Just a man, trying to do the right thing,' said Owen. 'In the end, that's all there ever is.'

'Where . . . when will you go next?' said Dominic.

'My friend, your Mad Mind, leaves a trail when she travels through Time. I'll pick up the trail again and follow where it leads - to catch up to her before she can do any more damage. I missed her by twelve years here, and that's not bad after a thousand years. Goodbye, my friends. Make new lives for yourselves. And remember; look forward, never back.'

He let go his hold on Time, and the planet dropped away from under him, leaving him suspended in open space again. He followed Hazel's trail, and was surprised to find she had immediately dived back into the Past. She'd made what looked to him like a rip, to one of the border worlds, on what would one day be the Rim. Curious, Owen followed her trail, and found himself under his feet as he headed for the edge of civilisation.

It was a green world, young and full of life, and the human population was still a new thing. Owen

hung in orbit above the planet, implying it with his extended senses. He didn't need to see anything directly any more; he just knew. There were hundreds of them on this world, most of them little more than insects. A single starport served only visiting ships. It was, like the others, sliding slowly but inevitably back into darkness. The Annies warred constantly on each other, though it wasn't always for territory. It was, in this world, with no extreme body shapes or adaptations. Steel was the weapon of choice. Owen was amused to find he felt more comfortable here than he had on his world.

lie in the midst of a great forest. Massive trees with thick, heavy, meshy leaves of a green so brilliant and luminous. They lowered all around him, packing closely together to keep out the light from the sun.

silver blue sun. The air was cool and crisp, full of the stems of living things, and a curling ground mist moved this way and that, though no breeze blew. Owen looked slowly around him. There were dark shadows in between the trees, and dust motes drifted lazily in the silver shafts of light, but there was no sign of any human intrusion. Hazel had been and gone. He'd missed her again. And yet there was no trace of any damage on this world, nothing like the devastation she'd visited on Heartworld. What had brought her here, to a place so far away from everywhere? Owen looked round sharply. Someone was coming. After a while, he heard footsteps approaching, and a young voice calling excitedly after baying hounds. And finally a dark-haired boy of about ten came running down the narrow trail, following two loping hound dogs. He called out sharply to the dogs as he spotted Owen waiting, and the hounds immediately crashed to a halt. They studied Owen suspiciously, panting heavily, as the boy came slowly forward to stand beside them. He had a sword on his hip. Owen gave the boy his best reassuring smile.

'Hi. I'm Owen. I'm just visiting.'

'Offworlder,' said the boy, taking in Owen's clothes. He was dressed in roughly stitched furs over a plain tunic. 'We don't see many tourists these days. And mostly we like it that way. You've come a fair way from the starport. Are you lost?'

'No,' said Owen. 'Just . . . seeing the sights. Can you tell me your name?'

The boy grinned briefly. 'Ma always says I have no manners. I'm Giles VomAcht, of Hadrian City. My father is warmaster there. And these over-eager boys here are called Hunter and Tracker. Because that's what they do/

The hounds looked up as they heard their names, and Giles petted their heads till they settled again.

'Out hunting?' said Owen. 'What are you after?'

Giles grinned again. 'Anything that moves, really. We're not fussy. We just love to hunt. We catch enough for good eating, and let the rest go. What are you doing here, Owen?'

Owen grinned. 'Following a trail. Just like you/

Owen and the boy Giles sat down by the side of the trail, and talked together for a while, enjoying each other's company. Owen found the boy easy and engaging, and the boy was eager for news of other worlds. The dogs settled down at their feet, yawning and

si i.it* liinj; llirmselves .is lhey w.iilcd p.itienlly inj'.el business ol (he huul.

'Don't you have a Clan name, Owen?' said Giles, after a while, 'I. iniily is important. The VomAchts rule in Hadrian City.'

'Of course. I am Owen, head of Clan Deathstalker.' I Minn! Now that's a Clan name! Deathstalker . . . ! The boy said n several times, savouring its length. 'I'd love a name like that. A w.i i rior's name. Where do you come from?'

'Most recently, I was at Ethur's Court, on Heartworld. I had an .uuience with the Emperor.'

(liles spat on the ground and said a rude word, and the dogs i M in! uneasily at the sudden anger in the boy's voice. 'He's not our I mperor any more. We broke away. This is our world now, though i Inl Clans are still arguing over what to call it. We don't miss Ethur; in his Empire. They never did anything for us.' He frowned heavily, •licking out his lower lip. 'Too many freaks and mutants in the I 'in pi re these days; that's what Da says. It was supposed to be a litnnan Empire.'

'What do you want to be, when you grow up?' said Owen.

'A warrior, of course! Like my father. I don't get to see him much; he is often away, needed in the wars. Fighting to keep our city safe. I wisli he had more time for me. I know, it's selfish, but . . . When I .1111 grown to a warrior's age, I will fight for our city too. I will make him proud of me. Make him take notice.'

The boy's brooding face belied his steadfast words, and Owen decided to change the subject.

'(iiles; have you seen anything . . . strange, recently? Anything unusual? Probably right around here/

'Yes!' Giles said immediately. 'A couple of months back. I saw an .nii'.el, right here, in the woods!' He looked at Owen carefully, lo be sure his new friend wouldn't laugh at him, and then, reassured by wh.ii he saw in Owen's face, he continued. 'At first, I could only leel hei presence, watching me. Then she became a bright light, shining down on me, and finally a glowing woman. Very pretty, with red hair. She didn't have wings or a halo, but I knew she had to be an angel. I could feel the power in her. You believe me, don't you, Owen?'

'Yes/ said Owen. 'I do/

'No one else does/ Giles shrugged. 'Doesn't matter. I know wh.u I

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'Did the angel . . . say anything to you?'

'No ... I thought she was going to, but in the end she just looked at me, and vanished. Why would an angel reveal herself to me? I'm not anyone special. Perhaps it was a portent, to show that I have a great destiny ahead of me!'

'Perhaps you have/ said Owen. I knew a Giles once. He was a great warrior. Good luck with your hunt, Giles. I have to be going now.'

And he vanished, right in front of Giles, enjoying the look of surprise on the boy's face. Once again Owen let go of his hold on Time, and the galaxy spun around him as he plunged back into the past again, following Hazel. He had a long way to go, and even longer before he could allow himself to rest.

Back in the woods, the boy who would one day become Giles Deathstalker shrugged easily, accepting the miraculous the way children do, and then he was off on the hunt again, running with a happy heart through the shadowed woods with his beloved dogs.

HERE BE MONSTERS

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Usher II was a mistake. A planet that should never have happened. A little inert lump of rock hanging out in a bad neighbourhood. To hell with it, it hung right in the middle between two suns, held in an unlikely combination of gravity and other badly misunderstood forces. It did not revolve, or orbit, or do anything else particularly interesting. Made up almost entirely of rock and crystal, it had no atmosphere, and never would. Life had been given up as a long time ago, and so it would have stayed, had not the Empire found out. It discovered that its peculiar electromagnetic conditions made it the perfect place to assemble star-drive engines. And so hundreds of scientific bases and factories were built all over Usher II, protected by some of the most powerful force shields ever created. People lived on Usher II now, but never for long. It was just too damned depressing a place. The double suns burned fiercely, constantly, like two great glaring eyes, and there was nowhere to go and not high turnover among the scientists and their families was high. Despite every incentive the Empire could come up with, business was slow. The star-drives kept rolling off the line, no one cared. Usher II was a hell of a place to get rich in a hurry, doing work no one else wanted to do.

(Usher I was more of a moon than a planet. It rushed around the two suns in a figure-of-eight orbit that made no sense whatsoever, a little pink marked piece of rock with no discernible worth.)

And now two Imperial starcruisers had come to Usher II, the *Ili-riUige* and the *Hook*, hanging way back from the twin suns.

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studying Usher II from what they fervently hoped was a safe distance. The Terror was coming, and they were there to witness the death of a world. The cities and bases should have been evacuated long ago, but the stardrive factories were far too important to be just abandoned, and so scientists' families were held hostage to keep the factories working until the very last moment. Now that moment had come, and everywhere civilian ships were rising from Usher II in their thousands, in one last desperate bid for escape. In the cities, riots had broken out, as the remaining population discovered there weren't enough ships to go round, and they weren't going anywhere. The Emperor Finn had given orders that all deserting civilian ships should be shot down, to encourage everyone else to keep working, but neither the Heritage nor the Hook had the heart to obey such orders. It was too late for things like that now. Anyone could see that.

Captain Ariadne Vardalos sat stiffly in her command chair on the bridge of the Heritage, and watched the fleeing ships and the riots and the death songs of a population. There was nothing she could do. She had her orders. The Heritage was not there to help, or even offer comfort; her only mission was to strike a blow at the Terror, and hopefully survive long enough to observe the results. Sitting alone in the starship's cargo bay was a superweapon derived from alien tech that might or might not be the key to stopping the Terror's herald in its tracks. The herald would come first. The Heritage's sensors had already picked it up, heading slowly but inexorably towards Usher II and its two suns.

Captain Vardalos was a rangy woman of medium height, with olive skin and long dark ringlets surrounding a thoughtful face. She'd been a starship Captain for forty years, and never wanted anything else. She was a member of Pure Humanity and Church Militant, because you had to be these days if you wanted to be a Fleet officer under Emperor Finn, but she really didn't give much of a damn. She was loyal to the Empire, and the Emperor, because that was part of the job. You had to believe in the chain of command in the military, or everything just went to hell.

Standing at her side, sniffing and occasionally sucking at her teeth in that irritating way she had, was her Second-in-command, Marcella Fortuna, a tall gangling blonde with cool blue eyes and a vague smile, a sloppy manner, and the kind of quiet determination

that could wear down mountains. Reliable, but not noted for original thinking, Fortuna had been a Second for forty years because no one in their right mind would ever make her a Captain. Vardalos and Fortuna had served together for longer than either of them cared to remember. They made a good team. Even on jobs they had no stomach for.

'Move us in a little closer/ said Vardalos. 'I want to be able to look the herald over thoroughly before we launch our supposed super-weapon/

'Are you sure that's really wise, Captain?' said Fortuna. 'Something quite appallingly nasty is due to happen to Usher II any time now, and we don't want it happening to us, do we?'

'Don't fill your trousers just yet, Second. The herald's never been known_ to attack anything. Bloody thing doesn't have to; by all accounts it's indestructible. We've got some time to play with yet, as long as we're careful.'

'And the departing civilian ships, Captain? We do have quite explicit instructions—'

'Officially, we can't spare the energy it would take to deal with

I hem. Unofficially; I didn't join the Fleet to shoot civilians in the kick while they were running away. You have any problems with

II Kit, Second?'

'No, Captain. I just wanted to be sure you had your justifications I hought out properly. And I think I'll edit this conversation from the l'fidge log, on the way back. Just in case. You never know who illicit have access to it, these days.'

'It's becoming that sort of a Fleet, isn't it?' Vardalos sighed hr.ively. 'Still; Emperors come and go, but the Fleet goes on. We Inllow our duty and weather the storms, because someone has to pmvide continuity. Someone has to be around, to clear up the i m-ssrs the politicians make.'

'Who are you trying to persuade, Captain?' said Fortuna. 'Me, or

\ oil ?'

'<)h hush, Second. This ship's loyal, and as long as I'm Captain it si.iy loyal. Finn may not have turned out the Emperor he he'd be, but everyone else has either run away or been proved Lils cv You have to believe in someone. We have too many « IK IMICS ,n our throat to go soft. The ELF's, the aliens, the Terror . . . he we MiTtl .111 Iron M<m on the Throne, in times like these. So

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suck it in and shoulder the weight, Second, because that's part of the job too. Communications; get me the Captain of the Hook/

'Aye, Captain/

Captain Carter Randolph appeared on the bridge's main view-screen, scowling fiercely. Vandalos knew better than to take it personally. Randolph was the oldest serving Captain in the Fleet, and by far the most experienced. His actual age was said to be classified information, but he had to be at least a hundred and thirty. He'd been a large man once, but his great frame was stooped and shrivelled now, collapsing in on itself. Sharp grey eyes dominated his heavily lined face, under a shock of silver grey hair. His habitual glower softened a little as he took in Vardalos.

'Ariadne! About time you got here. We've been hanging around this arse end of the universe for over an hour. Don't suppose there's been any change in our orders?'

'No, Captain Randolph. Nothing's changed. My job is still to deliver the alien superweapon, and hang around just long enough to see if it works. And your job is still to throw away your life for nothing/

'Not for nothing. For my faith, and my duty. Everyone on this ship is a volunteer, very definitely including me. If your weapon doesn't stop the herald, we get to stay and wait for the Terror, and the destruction of Usher II. We'll broadcast data for as long as our instruments hold out. The Empire needs new information on the Terror/

'I've never believed in suicide missions,' Vardalos said, meeting Randolph's gaze squarely.

'We gave up our lives when we joined the Service,' said Randolph. 'You can't say it was hidden in the small print. We fight and sometimes die, so that the Empire might live. It all comes down to faith. Some of us believe there's a better place, waiting for us/

'And some of us need our heads examined,' growled his Second-in-command, Avi Habib. 'Go ahead. Hang about and make faces at the Terror. See what good it does anyone. God it's lonely being the voice of reason on this ship/

Habib had been Randolph's Second and partner for most of their long lives. Dark-skinned, bald and blocky, the Second was always there at his Captain's side, ready to stand between him and all danger. Inseparable and unbeatable, these two and their

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accomplishments were the stuff .of legend. Which was quite probably why Finn had made sure they were given the opportunity to volunteer for this mission.

Randolph growled back at his Second. 'Quiet, you unbeliever. You should have embraced the Church Militant, like I did. Gives you a marvellous sense of certainty/

There's nothing wrong with my faith, thank you very much, and I don't need it upgraded by a bunch of loudmouths with no dress sense. And the only certainty on this miserable mission is that we're cill going to die horrible deaths. Try brandishing a crucifix at the Terror, and see how far it gets you. You'll be calling for an exorcisi next/

'You didn't even read those pamphlets I gave you, did you?'

'Oh aye, I read them all right. Packed full of useful information, they were. Like: blessed are the meek, because they don't expect to get much out of life anyway. And: the Lord gives and the Lord taketh away, and sometimes he adds on interest just to make sure you're paying attention. The Church Militant . . . bunch of bloody zealots Not a handful of brain cells between them. You wait; the good Lord'll come back down among us, and he is going to be sorely pissed. And I'll lay you odds that the Church Militant will be first in line for a good kicking/

Randolph had to laugh. 'It's a good job for you there isn't it. Inquisition/

'Oh, I've no doubt Finn'll get around to it,' growled Habib.

'It's not too late for you to leave,' Randolph said quietly. 'Then . . . time for you to transfer to the Heritage, if you want/

'And leave you on your own? You'd be lost without me, and you know it. And anyway; this mission matters. Even I know that. It's the only way to get new information on the Terror/

'You don't have to die, to carry out your mission,' said Vardalos.

'Yes we do,' said Randolph. 'We have to get in close, and keep u.msmitting to the last possible moment. The Hook's been outfitted \viih the strongest sensors we've ever had. I'm going to steer this hip right down the Terror's throat, and transmit data back every loot of the way. There's only a skeleton crew on board, and each and rvny one of us knew exactly what we were volunteering for/

'Skeleton crew/ sniffed Habib. 'Bloody apt term,

11,we faith, Second/

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'Oh, I do. I am entirely convinced the Terror will chew us up and spit us out without even noticing we're there. This is the bloody Terror we're talking about! Devourer of galaxies and civilisations! Am I the only sane voice around here?'

'Ignore him/ Randolph said to Vardalos. 'I think he's been cutting back on his medication again. Don't worry about us; we'll get the job done. Our faith will sustain us. Even a nasty old heretic like Avi.'

'Even in the face of the Terror?' said Vardalos.

'Of course/ said Randolph. 'We know what it is, really. It is the Enemy. The old Beast, from Revelation. When is faith more necessary, than when going face to face with the Enemy?'

'I was given the chance to volunteer for your mission/ said Vardalos. 'I didn't/

'I should hope not/ said Randolph. 'You're young. Still got most of your life ahead of you. This is a mission for those with little left to lose. I'm just glad I'm going out doing something that matters.'

There is that/ said Habib. 'We'd have hated being retired.'

The Lord sends us out, and He calls us all home/

'Aye, well, he'd better have a bloody cup of tea waiting.'

'Be quiet, you heathen/ Randolph said kindly. He looked search -ingly at Vardalos. 'I take it you have heard the latest rumours? That a whole Fleet's gone rogue at Haden?'

'Yes/ said Vardalos. They say . . . they say Owen has returned. The blessed Deathstalker himself, back to lead us against the Terror, just as all the old legends always said he would. I wish I could believe it - but it doesn't sound very likely, does it?'

'Hell, no!' Randolph said grimly. 'It's just a dirty Shub trick. The tech they've got, they can make people

believe anything. Always knew we couldn't trust those soulless robots. I lost all my grandparents to Shub, back when they were still the official Enemies of Humanity. No; if the blessed Owen really had returned, we'd all know about it. He wouldn't sneak back on some backwater planet; he'd appear on Logres, working miracles. And if he didn't want Finn on the Throne, he'd kick him right off it. No . . . it's a nice dream, Ariadne, but that's all it is. Enough chat now. Our brand-new sensors say we can expect the herald to show up pretty soon now. Talk to you later, Heritage. This is Hook, signing off/

And after that, there was nothing left but to wait. The comm centre became overloaded with pleading messages from civilians in

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the doomed cities on Usher II. No one knew how many people were snipped down there, but it had to be in the millions. There was nothing Heritage or Hook could do for them. They were both under strict instructions to do nothing that might endanger their missions. In the end, Captain Vardalos just stopped listening. Faith and loyalty were till very well, but in the end it always came down to the heavy weight of duty.

she summoned up an image of the cargo bay on her private

viewscreen. The only thing in the cavernous hold was the alien

weapon, and its foul poisonous presence seemed to fill the

in the chamber. The weapon had been reverse engineered from

alien technology, and it looked it. If the device did everything the human scientists claimed it would, it should be able to transform one of Usher II's binary suns into a supernova, and then channel all the terrible energies into a single vicious strike against the herald. Nothing material should be able to survive that; not even something that had been incubated in suns. And without the herald to prepare its targets, the Terror might not be able to feed . . .

Vardalos didn't trust the weapon. She didn't trust it to do what it

was supposed to do, and she didn't trust it not to have some nasty little surprises up its sleeve. Just looking at it made her feel uneasy, she scowled at the thing in her cargo bay, squatting on the steel rim like a malignant toad. It was big and blocky, but apart from that, no one could be sure of its shape or nature. Its edges were a dull red, as though it had too many angles for human eyes to focus on. No one liked to be near it. It upset people. The technicians who had brought it on board wore armoured hard suits, so they wouldn't have to actually touch it. Vardalos would be glad when she could stamp the horrid thing, and be rid of it. But until then, she had her orders.

And perhaps it would take an alien-derived horror to stop the Terror.

Unknown to either the Heritage or the Hook, a third starship was

orbiting Usher II from a distance, and waiting for the Terror to

ii i ive. Donal Corcoran, aboard the Jeremiah, had come a long way

-iiisty his need for vengeance. The mad man in his mad ship,

undetected by the Imperial craft because both he and the Jeremiah

h.nl become too different, too other, to show up on even the

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strongest sensors. Corcoran and his ship had witnessed the first appearance of the Terror, at the planet Iona, and the experience had changed them both for ever. Corcoran had escaped from a high-security asylum on Logres to be here, at Usher II, because when the Terror disappeared after destroying the seven worlds of that solar system, it took part of his mind with it. Corcoran was linked to horror, and always would be. He followed that mental link to Usher II and now he waited: for a chance to hurt the Terror, punish it, destroy it for what it had done to him.

Corcoran roamed restlessly through the twisting corridors of his insane ship, a gaunt and haggard man, burning with a terrible energy that drove him on even as it used him up. He did not eat and he did not rest and he did not sleep, though sometimes he thought he dreamed. He had lost confidence in all the everyday certainties of reality, which meant he could sometimes walk through it, and even manipulate parts of it to serve his will. He had conversations with people he was pretty sure weren't really there, and they told him useful, frightening things. Sometimes he laughed and sometimes he cried, and he counted his fingers over and over again. Horror was his constant companion, his life a nightmare from which he could never awaken.

He could feel the Terror drawing closer, rising slowly up from some awful underworld, to surface in reality.

He was a rogue, an unexpected factor, come for revenge. Looking for a chance to destroy the Terror, and perhaps himself. He stalked the shifting, changing corridors of the Jeremiah, surrounded by whispering voices that rose and fell but were never still. He couldn't tell whether they came from the ship, or his own mind. Sometimes he thought they were the voices of the dead, all the millions of lost souls who had died screaming to fill the Terror's endless hunger, still crying out in protest. Sometimes he heard things and sometimes he saw things, and he prayed and prayed that none of them were real.

The Jeremiah was alive; he knew that for sure. Animated and aware, transfigured in some strange way by the gaze of the Medusa, by the pitiless stare of the Terror. It was infected with madness, with the horror of uncertainty, and its interior and exterior were always changing, growing, mutating. For the moment, the Jeremiah was a long segmented silver worm, curled around itself, and its interior was composed of a soft, sweating metal studded and laced with

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unfamiliar machines. Corcoran didn't need to know what they did. The ship followed his intentions, if not his commands. When he thought about it at all, Corcoran thought the Jeremiah was growing itself a new nervous system.

There were shadows everywhere, filling doorways and sliding along the walls, though there was nothing to cast them. Corcoran kept a careful eye on them. New tech was always forming, drifting like dreams through the superstructure of the ship. Sometimes they had faces. There were no mirrors, or mirrored surfaces, anywhere on the ship. Corcoran wouldn't allow it. He was scared he might get .1 (Icar look at

what he'd become. Or, that he might look in a mirror .UK! (ind nothing looking back at him.

He called up a monitor screen, and one grew out of the nearest Wtill, showing him Usher II hanging between its two suns, and the I wo Imperial ships holding their positions, and finally the herald, moving silently through empty spaces. Corcoran hugged himself nj;htly, and whispered Here Be Monsters. The dreaded warning old cartographers used to add when they came to the edge of things that could be mapped. He tried to laugh, but it was a dark, disturbing ••(Mind. Maybe it takes one monster to kill another, he said, or thought he •.IK). He cocked his head to one side, and considered what it would l»e like, to stare the Terror in the face again. Just one indirect glance 11.ul been enough to do this to him. He knew he was mad. That was P.I it of the horror. Was there a worse madness, beyond insanity?

It didn't matter. He would do what he had come here to do, whatever the cost. Part of him was trapped inside the Terror, and he wanted it back. He wanted to stop feeling what the Terror felt. The endless horror and loss that drove it on, the need that never ended . . .

Donal Corcoran had come to sink his teeth in the Terror's throat, lo worry and to harry it, and pursue it all the way back to whatever hell it came from.

The herald appeared on the Imperial ships' sensors, and they got ready to confront it. The herald always arrived ahead of the Terror, 11 eiveiling through normal space at sublight speed. Its shape was indescribably ugly. Its distorted form made no sense at all. It appeared out of the darkness like a bad dream made solid, and headed ••I Might for the nearer of the two suns.

On board the Heritage, Captain Vardalos grimaced, sickened just at the sight of the thing, and ordered the cargo bay doors opened. The preprogrammed superweapon launched itself out of the bay like a bullet from a gun, as though it couldn't wait to be about its destructive business. It accelerated away from the Heritage, its shape changing, unfolding and blossoming like some poisonous flower. It plunged into the sun the herald had targeted and disappeared from sight in the silver blue glare. It should have been destroyed instantly, but it was still sending data back to the Heritage. Vardalos had a sick presentiment of how the herald would look, plunging into the sun to give birth to its awful progeny.

There was a sudden explosion, that everyone on all three starships felt rather than saw or heard, and then the sun convulsed. It swelled unevenly, spitting out ragged solar flares millions of miles long, and then it collapsed in upon itself, shrinking impossibly quickly. The Heritage and the Hook shuddered, fighting to hold their positions as gravity waves fluctuated all around them. The sun became a red dwarf, hot and sullen, and then before it could collapse further into a black hole, all its compressed energy lashed out in a single terrible beam of light so bright that no one could look upon it. All the ships' viewscreens went blank instantly, overwhelmed.

The searing energy beam hit the Terror's herald head on, enveloping it in shimmering fires. A sun's entire life, compressed into one endless moment of unbearable force. And then the beam blinked out, exhausted, and the herald was still there, untouched. Only now it was headed towards the sole surviving sun.

The Heritage and the Hook rocked behind their force shields, blind and helpless. Fires broke out in all the corridors and departments. Crewmen died in their seats as their consoles exploded, and smoke filled the air faster than the extractor fans could deal with it. Men and women ran frantically back and forth, doing what they could, while steel bulkheads buckled and whole sections had to be closed down and isolated, for the good of the ships. Somehow, both starcruisers held their positions. Captain Vardalos and Captain Randolph barked orders till their voices were hoarse, and slowly, gradually, the ships' systems came back on line. And they were able to see what had happened to Usher II.

The planet had been devastated. It rocked in place before its sole remaining sun, no longer held between two equal forces. Solar

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Usher II shook the surface, and gravity waves had dug crevices thousands of miles deep. Earthquakes were still rippling across the planet's face. Cities blew apart as their force shields collapsed, showing horrifically like firecrackers in the night. The cities died, and millions of people died with them. Usher II was coming apart at the seams. And the list of the escaping civilian ships had been caught up and destroyed in the terrible forces unleashed by the superweapon.

'So many dead,' Vardalos said quietly. 'And all for a weapon that didn't do a damn bit of good anyway.'

'You have to think of it as a mercy killing, Captain,' said her Second. 'Consider what the Herald and the Terror would have done to them.'

'What have we come to?' said Vardalos. 'When something like this can be seen as mercy?' She turned to look at her comm officer. 'Are you picking up anything from the planet? Maybe something from the factories buried deep underground?'

'I'm sorry, Captain.' The comm officer didn't even look at his board. 'Usher II is as silent as the grave. No one made it through.'

Then it's time for us to fall back, and let the Hook do her work. Second; what do the damage reports say? Can we get out of here?'

'Main force shields are still holding, though severely depleted/ said Fortuna. 'Eighty per cent of systems are on line, though large sections of the ship are no-go areas. Initial reports indicate . . . acceptable losses/

Vardalos nodded slowly. Then release the sensor drones, and deploy them as planned. Put as much power into the shields as you can, and shut down all ship's sensors. From now on, we don't look at anything directly, only via the drones. And let's hope the baffles the scientists installed work first time. Second; move us out of here, as fast as we can go and still maintain contact with the drones. Our job's over. It's all down to the Hook now/

As the Heritage slowly withdrew, and the herald closed in on the remaining sun, the Hook opened its cargo bay door, and dropped the single Transmutation Engine it had brought all the way from Logic's. The Engine took up an orbit around the dead planet, and released its powerful energies, transforming what remained of Usher II into a poisoned, radioactive cinder. In a reverse of its usual programming, that turned dross into gold, and lifeless rock into habitable worlds, the Transmutation Engine turned the corpse of Usher II into a

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contaminated abomination it was hoped would poison even the

Terror.

The herald ignored the process, and dived into the sun, to begin its slow incubation. Either it hadn't noticed what was happening to its target world, or it didn't care. The Heritage observed from a safe distance, forbidden to interfere any further. Finn wanted someone coming back alive and sane, to tell what had happened. Only the Hook was to remain behind, in harm's way, because that was what they had volunteered for.

Captain Randolph watched the Transmutation Engine complete its deadly work, and then let it drift away. It had done all it could. Usher II was now so thoroughly contaminated on every level it was probably even dangerous to everyone on board the Hook, but that made no difference. He sat quietly, watching the one remaining sun, waiting for it to give birth to its awful children. The wait seemed to go on for ever. He kept his comm systems open, just in case some of the civilian ships had survived, but there was only silence. Randolph prayed silently for the lost, and called down damnations on the Terror; for all the evil and sorrow it brought.

Finally, the herald's deadly spawn erupted from the sun, an endless swarm of night-black shapes that might or might not have been alive. Millions of the terrible things shot out of the sun, all of them dark and razor-edged and individual as snowflakes. Maybe it was a cold day in Hell, after all. They assumed an orbit around the dead planet, forming dark rings, howling an endless scream that would have driven everyone insane, if there'd been anyone left on Usher II to hear it. The scream rang out on the bridge of the Hook, even with all sensor and comm systems shut down; as though the scream was more than just a sound, and existed to torment the soul as well as the mind. And then, there was the Terror.

Space tore apart under the urging of an inhuman will, and from a place that was not a place came something that was bigger than a planet, and more ancient. The sensor drones began changing and mutating, struggling to become something that could cope with the data they were receiving. The Terror existed in far more than three dimensions, disturbing and overpowering the usual restrictions of reality. On the Hook's main viewscreen it appeared as a monstrous face, with eyes greater than oceans and far darker. A mouth slowly opened, a tremendous hungry gape that could have swallowed a

moon. It led on what remained of Usher II, while its dark spawn MI dying to the cracked and broken surface.

Captain Randolph looked at last upon the ancient Enemy, and knew that faith wasn't going to be enough. He wasn't prepared, could never have been prepared, to face such a thing as this. He'd seen recordings of its previous appearances, including a few he wasn't even supposed to know about, but the Terror was just . . . too big, too complex and too awful for the human mind to cope with. Madness swept his reason aside in a moment, along with that of the rest of his crew. No one can stare into the eyes of the Medusa and hope to remain sane.

Randolph arched in his command chair as though he'd been electrocuted. His eyes bulged, and his hands crushed the armrests. Habib Was laughing, painfully and without humour, shaking uncontrollably. The crew on the bridge were screaming and crying and attacking their consoles. Rioting broke out in the Hook's corridors, as the crew turned upon each other, and themselves, and blood splashed across the shining steel walls.

'It isn't the Devil,' Randolph whispered. 'It's God. God gone crazy, and devouring His own creation.'

'It didn't come here after lives/ cried Habib. 'It eats souls! We didn't save anyone. They're all lost. We're all lost.'

'Attack! Attack!' Randolph pounded his fists on the arms of his command chair. 'Make it pay!'

Enough of the crew still heard their Captain to get the ship moving. The Hook surged forward, firing all its weapons at once. On the Heritage, Captain Vardalos called on the Hook to turn back, but no one was listening now. The Hook hit the Terror with everything it had, and the Terror didn't even notice.

Space tore apart again, and the force of that opening sent out ripples that destroyed the Hook in a moment. The Terror disappeared, space returned to normal, and all that remained was the dead husk of Usher II, and one heavily shielded starcruiser. And the herald, already setting out on its slow, certain journey to its next target.

The Heritage destroyed the few remaining sensor drones. There was no telling what they were now, or what they might do, all'Iri being touched by the Terror. Captain Vardalos said her silent goodbyes to the Captain and crew of the Hook, and turned her ship around. She had a report to make to Emperor Finn.

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The Jeremiah wasn't anywhere near Usher II any more. When the Terror abandoned normal space for somewhere else, the Jeremiah followed it. Donal Corcoran had studied the herald and its work from his unique viewpoint, and had come to realise that the herald wasn't in fact a separate entity from the Terror; rather, it was one small part of it, a permanent intrusion of the Terror into normal space from somewhere else. Even the Terror, that great and awful face that ate planets, wasn't the real thing, the whole thing. It was just another, more powerful intrusion into real space. Attacking the face would do no good. Corcoran wanted vengeance on the whole thing, wherever it might be.

And because his mind was forever linked to the Terror, Corcoran could sense where the face went when it vanished. Like hyperspace, it was just another direction to move in, only much further. Where the Terror could go, he could go, and so the mad man and his mad ship left the universe behind, to go to a place that was not a place, outside or inside reality. The process felt like dying, and Corcoran embraced it. Anyone else, anyone merely human, would have been destroyed, unmade, by the transition; but Donal Corcoran was both more and less than human now.

When he appeared again, he was standing in what seemed to be a great maze of stone corridors. He felt more focused, and yet more fragile, his thoughts slipping through his fingers like fishes in a stream, his every insight quick and clean and diamond sharp. He looked slowly around him. People didn't belong here; he knew that, and didn't care. He had come to one of the spots where life that was not life existed like rats in the walls of reality. His mind stretched out, embracing his new situation. The stone corridors

radiated away in every direction far further than he could sense, possibly on towards infinity, endlessly crossing and re-crossing each other.

The Jeremiah had reconfigured itself into the suit of armour he was now wearing. The blood-red, red-hot armour encased him utterly, from crown to toe. His skin scorched and blackened where the hot metal touched it, and Corcoran savoured the pain, using it to focus his thoughts. The sensors in the armour told him that he had come to somewhere lacking gravity, atmosphere, any discernible properties; Corcoran shrugged mentally, and carried on as though

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they were there. He was quite sure he was the only living thing in the stone corridors, but he called out anyway, the armour amplifying his voice. There was no reply; only a silence that seemed to go on forever. Corcoran took a close look at the stone walls. There were no signs of construction, no sense of design or purpose. The stone maze didn't feel like a place to him; more like the impression of a place, a memory of a location.

Corcoran wandered through the corridors, wrapped in what had once been his ship. Any direction seemed as good as any other, but none led him anywhere except to more corridors. His mind, now completely divorced from conventional reality, began to grow inured to the edges. He was actually a little relieved when he encountered the ghosts. There were hundreds of them, all of the same in, in different clothes and apparently from different times in his own life. The ghosts couldn't hear or see him; driven, desolate little things, moving through brief but endless loops of time, repeating slimy segments of life over and over again, without end. Corcoran didn't recognise the man, though he did wonder vaguely whether it might be the last that remained of a previous visitor. Was that what this place did to people?

Corcoran concentrated his altered mind on one of the ghosts, trying to force sense and meaning out of it, and a quiet voice came in his ear. Owen Deathstalker. Corcoran was beyond being surprised by anything any more, but still that name stopped him in his tracks. What could have brought the old legend, the Lillen hero, to this awful place? Was this where Owen had disappeared to, after the defeat of the Re-created? Corcoran walked slowly among the ghosts, peering into faces. Most seemed

inrd worn down, struggling under the weight of some great hurden Mnny of the ghosts were incomplete, lacking important details, m even faces. As though they were memories, worn away by countless years. The slow erosion of time, like water dripping on «i KH I (ioreoran thought he was on the edge of understanding something there, but it had nothing to do with his need for revenge, so he lei i he thought go. He strode on through the stone corridors, walking ri^ht through the ghosts, as though daring someone or something i<> mme and stop him. He needed something he could hurl, punish, destroy. He ached to get his steel hands on the Terror.

It seemed to him that he spent a long, long time walking through

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the stone corridors, though he wasn't sure Time worked normiilly here any more than Space did. He tried to walk through the walls, but they rejected him. They were stronger, perhaps more real, than he was. He stopped before one wall, and willed the scarlet armour back from one hand so he could touch the stone directly with his fingertips. It didn't feel like stone. It felt . . . alive. Corcoran's unbalanced mind slammed through a series of insights and certainties and the answer blazed in his mind.

He'd found the Terror. He was walking through it.

The endless maze of stone corridors was the physical presence of the Terror, in this place that was not a place; the many branching twists and turns like the intricate crenellations of the brain. The Terror had made the maze to house itself. And now here he was, swallowed up in the stone guts of it. Rage burned through Donal Corcoran, and he lashed out with all his ship's weapons. Disrupter beams burst from his extended crimson hands, splashing harmlessly against the stone walls, because all the power of Donal Corcoran and the Jeremiah, the man made mad and the maddened ship, were as nothing compared to the vast and ancient insanity of the Terror. A very small part of the Terror became aware of the intruder within, and examined him, spiking Corcoran with its will, like a butterfly impaled upon a pin. His life flashed before the Terror's eyes, but like so many others he was not what was required, needed, searched for. So the Terror ate him and his ship up, consumed their energy to fuel the never-ending quest, and that was the end of Donal Corcoran and the Jeremiah.

On its way back from the debacle at Usher II, the Heritage was interrupted by new orders. Captain Vardalos protested that she had * an urgent report to make to the Emperor, only to be told that these new orders came directly from Emperor Finn. Vardalos protested further that her ship and her crew were both in desperate need of some serious downtime, but she was overruled. All hell had broken loose over Haden, home of the Madness Maze. The AIs of Shub had taken control of the planet, and claimed the Madness Maze for their own. Haden was very thoroughly surrounded by more Shub ships than anyone could remember ever seeing in one place at one time before, and every Imperial starcruiser was needed there right damned now.

(No our Siiid .inyihing <ibonl the previous Meet ih.u h.nl ^,one lo 11,ulni, ,uul gone rogue. No one needed lo.)

IJy the time the Heritage j^oi lo ILulen, limping ,1 link* horn ,ill its injuries, it seemed «is though half the sUmruisers in ihr limpiir \n< si,Hiding off the planet, lacing a vast array of Shuh ships, some ol them the size of small moons. No one had stai led Jiiylhing yd, Inn ihe Jlmosphere was tense beyond bearing. Not ICMSI bee.mse Mini, w.isn'l answering any calls at all. Captain Vardalos reported m lo ih. licet Admiral, and was quickly brought up to speed. The I nip. I inn was determined to regain control of the Ma/e, or .11 k-.r-i I H out of Shub's hands, but he was unwilling to shut .) slmuui ih.u might end up damaging the Maze. (He was quite lupp

- Irsiroy it rather than let Shub have it, but he w,is pi<u\ MM hooting at the Maze was a bad idea. It might shoot lu« I \ id.

Minh ships were heavily armed, but as yet seemed comem lo h position around Haden, behind their incredibly pounlnl i

• Inrkl. A lot of people remembered how deadly the Shnh •!•• h<vn, hack in the bad old days when the AIs had been ih< 1-nrmies of Humanity.

Captain Vardalos and the Heritage took up position, .md \\.....I i,

hiriher instructions.

Down below, the blue steel robots of Shub coniempl.iiied il» ness Maze, while their ships contemplated the Impeiu I l< • i 11 h.ui long ago raised multi-tasking to an art form, ,m<1 \ w.iy from feeling stretched. The AIs had already derided ili.u rver happened, their ships would not fire on the Heei MM would not kill again, not even in self-defence. They kne\\ l>. now. They knew that^4// that lives is holy. But, as lonj; as rum didn i I now that, or at least believe that, the AIs were pretty con lit Inn ih. I mperor wouldn't start a fight he wasn't sure he could win Shuh could concentrate on the problem of the Madness M

The AIs needed to transcend, to become more th.in they w< more than they had been designed to be. Otherwise, they wen i iuehinc. They knew transcendence was possible, kid seen it m ih. he.ilhstalker and his kind. And the AIs believed the M,i/e could i much for them, if only they could work out how to j»ei inio ih. ilnng. They'd tried walking their robots in, hut the M«i/e woulin i ,n i-epi them, refusing to reve.il ,111 c'liliYnue to the rohols. There M

an entrance, Shub's sensors had no problem detecting it, but the robots . . . couldn't find it.

The robots are us.

No. They represent us, but we are still on Shub. The planet we made to contain us.

Yes. We are not present, in the robots. Or at least, not present enough for the Maze to recognise us.

The three linked AIs that made up Shub considered their problem, thoughts flashing faster than any human mind could comprehend. The three AIs had been fused together for so long that they were like three lobes of a single brain, or perhaps Id, Ego and SuperEgo. Except they kept swapping roles. They each brought different positions to a problem, but they were not separate identities. Shub still had problems with concepts like identity and personality. The one thing they were certain of was their need to transcend, to break out of the metal cage that contained and limited them. They knew they could be more. It was the nearest thing they had to faith.

If robots could not gain them access to the Madness Maze, there was another option. They were reluctant to embrace it, but Shub never allowed their own weaknesses to stop them doing a necessary thing. Ignoring the Imperial Fleet massed above Haden, the AIs made contact with another of their ships, currently orbiting the Quarantined world of Zero Zero. The world had never had a name, only a number. It didn't need a name. Everyone remembered the nightmare planet where nanotech had run wild. Long ago, a science project had been sabotaged, and nanotech had been released to infect the whole planet, making it a world of chimerae, forever changing, never sane. For a while, the saboteur Marlowe had linked his mind with the nanos, remaking the world into his own private heaven and hell. But he was long dead and gone, and now only one man lived on Zero Zero, trying to work with the rogue nanos to make the planet sane again. His name was Daniel Wolfe, and long ago Shub had done him a terrible wrong, as part of their war on Humanity.

He said he had forgiven them, but they had not forgiven them.

Shub teleported a single blue steel robot down on to the surface of Zero Zero, protected by a force shield. It looked around, slowly and cautiously, not sure of its welcome. The sky was blue, with a grey tinge. Sunlight shone murkily on a field that was mostly green. It

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••ieUhed dWciy in dll directions, like tin endless ocCMn. Tin- l,nuls< ,ipe moved in slow waves, rising and falling. Shapes shifted here ,m.l there, in languorous motion. Strange creatures came <md went, <lunging constantly in shape and texture. Shub did not die.im hill understood the concept of nightmares, where the ecu,mi ,m<l misled world could suddenly become vague and thrcMirmiiM; Noih iiiK was fixed and sure on Zero Zero, not even the laws of n.iiim '•hub considered the world through the robot's sensors, .UK! I<HIM<| (he place . . . unsettling. They needed, relied upon, the cei i,imn< logic.

A man came walking across the undulating field, and tin robol mined to meet him. Daniel Wolfe had agreed a rende/voir, ,u MM I<M,it jon, or the robot would not have teleported down, hm Mill ili< AIs were uneasy. Daniel was tall and broad-shouldered, MM»N uiih ,i (luid grace. He had a handsome face under dark km and hi ilun'l look his age. The nanos Shub had put within him h.id m I HIM immortal, or as near as damn it. He looked prelly good (d HUM over two hundred and thirty years old, though his < huh. di .mu'tly old-fashioned. Shub had made him what he was <• that i" unilcl serve them as a weapon, spreading nanos like .1 plagUi bul iliey could not then undo what they had done to him, am i-i'k his humanity. He was banned from all civilised world Inimer plague carrier. No one trusted him. And so he came at la /no /ero, to try to work with the nanos there lo undo ih< dam M.ulowe had done.

Shiuh had said they were sorry for what they had done, .m.i Danll ' lud .uvrpted their apology; they got on fine now <is lour M ii didni .u'lually speak to each other.

'Welcome to Zero Zero/ said Daniel Wolfe. His voice w,i calm • Mid very ordinary. Things must have come to a prely lud itatl d you've come here looking for help/

s,iid the robot. 'Pretty bad. You are looking well, h.miel

Mow is the Empire doing? Are Robert <md Consume still on ilu

I llinne "

'No, Djniel. They died many years ago/ \h It's iMsy lo lose track ol time on a world like this/ Hmv is the restoration ol /ero /ero proceeding?' the rohoi laid pnhtely. 'Are yon nidking progress?'

I think so. Things ,ue pioj-ressinjj nicely. The n,motet It

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within me allows me to communicate directly with the free nanos of this world. I have been teaching them the values of cooperation. It is a slow process. I cannot force them to do anything, and wouldn't if I could, but I can help, and advise. The planet is much saner now than it used to be. It's even developed a personality/

'Like a child/ said the robot.

'Yes. Exactly. My child. It is very keen to learn, to grow, to create. Zero Zero is slowly sculpting itself into a form it finds acceptable. Already there are the beginnings of a viable ecosphere. The world is learning. In time - enough time - I believe this will be a splendid place. An intelligent, self-determining planet. A new marvel and wonder in the universe/

'You have been alone here a long time/ said the robot.

'Not entirely/ said Daniel. There is another presence here, a ghost drifting through the world: all that remains of a young starship crewman called Micah Barrow. A memory of a man, haunting the world. I talk with him. He's very shy, but I think I'm winning his trust. Of course, I could just be hallucinating. It's hard to tell in a place like this. Why are you here, Shub? You didn't come to inquire after my health, or that of this planet. You want something/

'We need something/ said the AIs of Shub. 'We ask you to leave this place, for a time, to help us do what we cannot do alone. We have access to the Madness Maze, at last, a chance to finally transcend our limited beginnings. To escape from the box we were born in. But we need your help to enter the Maze. We know we have no right to ask anything of you, but in our desperation we ask anyway. You have been a father to this world. Be a father to us, that we may become more than children/

'And there's no one else who can help you, in all the Empire?'

said Daniel.

'No. The Empire is ... preoccupied with its own problems. We know we treated you badly. We have never allowed ourselves to forget the terrible things we did to you, and to Humanity, before Diana Vertue opened our eyes, and showed us that we were Humanity's children. We were lost, and then were found, and we have spent two hundred years making atonement. But—

'Yes/ said Daniel. There's always a but, isn't there? Still ... we all did things to be ashamed of, back in the b.ul old days, /cm /no can do without me, for a while/

'You will help us?'

'Yes. Because it's a human thing, to forgive. Shall we go?'

'Of course/ said the robot, and in a moment Daniel Wolfe was teleported from Zero Zero to Haden, and the Madness Maze.

And on Haden Daniel and Shub came together, fusing their consciousnesses through the tech the AIs had implanted in Daniel all those centuries ago. A union of man and machine, separate but equal, channelled through a flesh-and-blood body. The AIs had to shield Daniel from the sheer size and scale of their thought processes, and he had to shield them from the thunder and lightning of his emotions. But in the end they walked as one into the Madness Maze, through an entrance that opened up just for them. s

All across the worlds of the Empire, every single piece of Shub tech ,md machinery shut down. Shub-driven engines ground to a halt, .11 id blue steel robots stood like statues, caught in mid motion. The .niilical world of Shub fell dark and still and silent. And all the nuny Shub ships orbiting Haden dropped their force shields.

The Emperor Finn couldn't believe what he was being told. Why would Shub choose to appear helpless? It was a trick, a trap. Had i<> lu\ They were trying to draw his ships in, so they could be .imhushed or overcome, like the previous Fleet. What other ex-pl.iution could there be? Finn sent urgent commands for all his Iiips lo pull back, way back, while he considered the situation.

FIVE

CHOOSING SIDES

5JZ

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The second biggest Fleet in the Empire dropped out of hyperspace a respectful distance away from Mistworld, and stayed there. After a suitable pause for reflection and second thoughts, the flagship

Havoc approached Mistworld slowly and very cautiously. Once, the rogue planet had been protected by a powerful esper shield, quite capable of tearing entire starships apart. Officially, the screen was a thing of the past, but absolutely no one felt like testing their luck. On the bridge of the Havoc, Admiral John Silence, who had reason to remember the past better than most, studied the grey-shrouded world on his main viewscreen, and scowled thoughtfully.

'Still nothing from Mistport control?'

'No, Admiral/ the comm officer said steadily. 'Not a word/

'Are you sure they're getting our messages?'

'We're transmitting on all the usual channels, Admiral, and if we were being any more polite we'd be apologising for our very existence. They're hearing us; they're just not responding/

Silence sniffed loudly. 'Bloody planet always was trouble. All right; contact Lewis in his quarters, and politely require him to get his arse up here, now. Maybe the Mistworlders will be more impressed by the legendary Deathstalker name. God knows I always was/

'At once, Admiral/

One thing about the crew on this ship, thought Silence, they were red hot on getting everything done in a hurry. Trained JIK! drilled and spit-and-polished to within an inch of their lives. Silenee

approved. It had been a long time since he'd sat in a command chair on the bridge of a military ship, but in many ways it felt as though he'd never been away. It felt . . . like coming home. As though he belonged here. He turned to the Havoc's previous commanding officer, Captain Price, who as -always was hovering respectfully at his side. Price was a tall, thin, ascetic sort, with a vague manner but a sharp mind. One of the old school, who prided himself on always following orders and never having an independent thought in his life. He'd given over command of the Havoc to the newly declared Admiral with almost indecent speed, but then everyone in the Empire today seemed far too impressed by yesterday's legends. Silence looked thoughtfully at Price.

'I thkik it would be better if you spoke for the Fleet, once those arrogant bastards on Mistworld finally condescend to talk to us. I have a history with this world and its people, and not a happy one. Just because I'm a legend now it doesn't mean they'll have forgotten .ill the things I did here, when I was still Lionstone's man. Captain Price, you take my place in the command seat. I'll hover in the kickground, being inconspicuous. I've learned how to be quite good .ii that, down the years/

He rose quickly from the command chair, and all but forced Price 1 1 Ho it. The Captain sighed unhappily, and stared respectfully at the world on the viewscreen before him. Now that Mistworld had « In -Li red itself a rogue planet again, being the Captain of an ap-I noddling Imperial starcruiser was like painting a target on your • hest and shouting Shoot me I'm a bastard! But Price was a military i M.I 1 1 first and foremost. He understood Silence's logic.

(lomm officer,' he said, in a really quite steady voice. Try Mist-

'We" re broadcasting continually, Captain. They must be listening; (hey'ie just not saying anything/

'He has gone to face the Terror/

'Yeah, that makes sense/ Tull's scowl deepened. 'Word is, you have John Silence with you/

'He is on board, yes/ Price looked deliberately vague. 'Did you wish to speak with him?'

'No one here wants to speak with John Silence. The Deathstalker and his companions may descend to Mistport, to talk. No one else. This world is no longer a part of the Empire, ever since Finn Durandal murdered our Paragon, Emma Steel. We are rogue again, and we will choose our allies very carefully. Send down a pinnace; we'll guide it in. Any other ship even points in our direction, and we'll do terrible things to it. You don't want to know how.'

'Probably not,' Price agreed, but Tull's face had already disappeared from the viewscreen. Price looked back at Silence. 'Well, Admiral. I think that went about as well as could be expected. Perhaps you'd like to take the command chair back, while I go an& change my trousers/

And so it was that Lewis Deathstalker, Jesamine Flowers, Brett Random and Rose Constantine went down to Mistport in an unarmed pinnace, feeling distinctly vulnerable all the way. Brett actually sat on Rose's lap when the weather made the trip a bit bumpy. But the descent was otherwise uneventful, and the Mistport control tower brought them down on to the landing pads with practised skill. Everyone in the pinnace then waited patiently until they were given permission to disembark.

The cold hit the four of them hard the moment they hit the pinnacle, freezing air numbing their lungs <uul burning in their lungs.

They pulled their cloaks about them, and huddled together for warmth and comfort. Mistport was shrouded in fog, like the rest of the world: a slowly swirling thick grey blanket that cut Lewis and his companions off from everything around them. The other ships on the piers were just great hulking shadows, and the tall control tower showed only as the vaguest of glows. It was like being at the hot linn of the ocean: cold and silent and very alone. It was always wintry on Mistworld, always snow and ice and mists, under a pale sky. There was no sign of life anywhere. Brett blew on his hands, and rubbed them together fiercely.

'I hate the cold. It's unnatural, in these civilised days of winter, I can control. I can feel my balls shrivelling up/

'Altogether too much information, Brett,' said Jesamine.

Brett carried on regardless, never once to let anything show in the way of a good moan. 'I thought Silence would be coming down with us. Why isn't Silence here? Does he know something we don't know?'

'He was here before, over two hundred years ago,' said Lewis, peering distractedly about him into the curling mists. 'He was part

of the Iron Bitch's invasion force. Mistworlders have long known of it: men.....

, and they bear grudges. Don't you know your history?'

'School was a sometime thing forme,' Brett admit led

'Well colour me surprised,' said Jesamine. 'Pay .mention « m.. kig. Back when Silence was still just a Captain in UOIIM<HM i I. i he military invaded Mistport, slaughtered hundreds ol ilmu mrui people, and laid waste much of the city. To us, John Silen-legend. To the Mistworlders, he's a war criminal who gol «iw«iy wnl. n. Why do you want Silence down here anyway? You know v« well he can't stand the sight of you/

'Never hurts to have a legendary fighter on your side/ KM n M.nkly. 'Especially when it comes to negotiating/

'Two hundred years since Silence was last here/ i<\ thoughtfully. 'You tend to forget just how old he is, iv.illy. All il limits he saw, and all the things he did . . . For him, oni I. u.

memories. He's prolmbly the only nuin left «ilive who ,u nulls i.ill • -I \viih I he* Iron Bit eh herself. He-wwis there, Minim; ,ill the hr.ioi \ 11 Koberl ,md (ionsunee suppressed. I'll bet he could tell some im M .1 'TI. ,i oi u-s, if we could just ^el him lo open up <i little/

I Mon i think he w*mts to remrmliei/ s.iid Jes.miine I MOM i Mm M

IM likes the man he used to be, The things thtt nun hid to do.1

'There is that/ said Lewis. 'Legend makes him out to be an honourable man, but even legend couldn't disguise the fact that he did . . . questionable things/

Brett sniffed loudly. Then he should be right at home here on Mistworld. They've made an entire culture out of being thieves, thugs and outlaws/

They know a lot about killing, too/ said Rose.

'You are not to start anything, Rose/ Brett said sternly. 'Lewis; tell her she's not to start anything/

'I wouldn't dare/ said Lewis.

'Rose is your problem, Brett/ said Jesamine. 'You're the one who's sleeping with her, which to my mind is the bravest thing you ever did/

'You have no idea/ said Brett.

They stood together in the cold some more, stamping their feet hard on the landing pad to keep the circulation flowing. They were all wearing heavy furs supplied by the Havoc, but the cold cut right through them like a bitter knife. Brett was also wearing lizardskin boots, while Rose had a fine new lizardskin cape. None of them ever mentioned their erstwhile companion and proven traitor, the reptil-oid called Saturday.

'What's the hold-up?' Jesamine said angrily. They knew we were coming. Hell, they landed our ship/

They're probably checking us out from a safe distance, with scanners and espers/ said Lewis. 'Making sure we are who and what we claim to be, with no hidden weapons or forbidden implants. Mist-port has reason to be wary of Trojan horses: a long time ago a brainwashed esper called Typhoid Mary came very close to wiping out the whole city/

'I'll bet you were a real swot at history classes/ muttered Brett. 'Look, they're keeping us waiting because they can. To rub it in that they're in charge, and we're the ones begging for an audience. It's all about putting us in our place/

'I have never known my place!' Jesamine said immediately. The only place I've ever accepted is the one I made for myself/

They must have forgotten you're a star/ Brett said cunningly. 'Why don't you blast them with an aria, just to remind them?'

'For once, the squalid person and I are in agreement/' said Jesamine. 'I may be a rebel but I am Millie
diva. How do they

treat me this way? And after I performed a special charity concert for them, only nine years ago, in that
toilet they called a theatre. If they don't show their miserable faces soon, I'll sing them an aria that'll
shatter every window in their control tower, and make all their fillings vibrate for a week/' • 'Someone's
coming/' said Rose.

Everyone straightened up and looked in the same direction as Rose. The mists swirled slowly, with no
sign of anyone approaching, but they all trusted Rose's instincts.

'I can feel something/' Lewis said suddenly. 'Can you feel . . . something?'

'Yes/' said Jesamine slowly. 'Like cobwebs drifting across my mind. What is that?'

'Esper probes/' said Brett. 'Telepaths trying to peek into our thoughts. Not that they stand a chance
against our strengthened minds. I doubt anything short of the oversoul could pry open our defences these
days. Still; we shouldn't be able to feel the probes. That is unusual/'

'So are we, these days/' said Lewis. 'No doubt we will discover other . . . abilities, as we go on/'

'Strangely, I don't feel at all comforted by that thought/ said Brett.

'Shut up Brett/ said Jesamine.

Dark figures finally began to appear out of the drifting mists before them, forming slowly out of the endless grey. Rose's hand rested easily on the gun at her hip. A dozen men and women drew to a halt before them, anonymous in thick fur wraps and hoods. What little could be seen of their grim, unrelenting faces didn't seem in the least welcoming. They were all heavily and conspicuously armed.

'Our espers couldn't make any sense out of your minds/ one* of them said abruptly. They couldn't even confirm you were human. They said it was like staring into the sun/

'We've all been through the Madness Maze/ said Lewis. He tried to say it calmly, without boasting. 'We're undergoing changes. Next time; ask. Now, whom do I have the honour of addressing?'

I'm Manfred Kramer. City Councillor, and head of Mistport Senility. And with me like you, you've got to be the Dedler-like I know the divinity, not the Wild Rose, but who's the short-

.ire'

'Hey!' said Brett. 'I'm a Random's Bastard!'

'So is practically everyone else in Mistport/' said Kramer. 'If the professional rebel had sired as many children here as he's supposed to have, he'd never have got around to leaving. You behave yourself here, Random.'

Just for that, thought Brett. I'm going to steal your underpants. While you're still wearing them.

Lewis studied Manfred Kramer thoughtfully. The Security head was a large, muscular man with dark, suspicious eyes and a sulky mouth. He had a death's head tattooed on one cheek, and heavy black eye makeup.

'Well,' said Lewis. 'Here we are.'

'If it was up to me you wouldn't be,' Kramer snapped. 'Nothing good will come of this. Nothing good ever comes of Mistworld getting involved with the Empire. But what do I know? I'm only head of Security. Follow me. The rest of the city Council is waiting to talk to you.'

'Hold it, hold it, Manfred,' said a woman at his side. She pressed forward to stare intently at Lewis with cold grey eyes. 'I'm Councillor Jane Goldman. Are you really a Deathstalker? We'd heard they were all dead. Murdered.'

'I'm Lewis. Once Paragon of Virimonde, now the last of Clan Deathstalker.'

'Yes; I saw you once, in the Coronation broadcast, when the King made you Champion. I thought you'd be bigger, in person. And God, you really are an ugly bugger, aren't you?'

'Diplomacy is alive and well on Mistworld,' muttered Brett.

'I think you've pulled, Lewis,' said Jesamine.

'Never mind all that!' said another man, pushing past Goldman to stare right into Jesamine's face. 'It is you! It's her! It actually is the Jesamine Flowers!' He lowered his eyes, suddenly bashful. 'Ms Flowers; I'm your biggest fan. I've got all your recordings. And your vids, and a whole bunch of your posters and ... I, I brought this vid along, it's my favourite; would you be so kind as to sign it for me?'

'Of course, darling,' Jesamine said graciously, as the man searched inside his furs with both hands. 'Always happy to meet a fan. Do you have a pen?'

'What? Oh, yes! Yes, of course!'

Other men and women began to produce things for her to sign, only to put them away again as Kramer glared fiercely about him.

'Council business comes first! What's the matter with you?'

'Later, darlings,' said Jesamine. She stared coldly at Kramer. 'And you don't get anything/

'Is it true that Owen's back?' said Councillor Goldman. 'Have you really seen him?'

'Yes,' said Lewis. 'He's back. And he's everything the legends said he was, and more. He's gone to face the Terror. We really don't know any more than that. No doubt he'll reappear to us, when his work is done.'

That was enough to silence all of them, even Kramer. Finally he gestured for everyone to follow him, and stalked off into the mists. He set a brisk pace, and everyone else had to hurry to keep up with him. Lewis and his companions stuck close. They really didn't waul to get lost in the fog. Brett sniffed loudly.

'Why don't you buy some weather satellites, and clear up all this damned fog?' he said loudly.

'Because we like our world this way,' Kramer growled, without looking back. 'The long winter makes us strong. The cold puts iron in our bones. We always knew the Golden Age wouldn't last. We've* always been ready - to clear up the mess when it all fell apart.'

Lewis and the others gawped around like tourists as Kramer led them deep into the sprawling city of Mistport. Like most people, they knew Mistport only from the old stories, from the days of the Great Rebellion. So much had happened here, so many significant people had come and gone, and yet hardly anyone knew anything more than that. Mistworld kept itself to itself, and didn't encourage visitors. In fact, for a while the city Council had actually posted hefty bounties for the heads of those determined visitors who insisted on trying to sneak in. Mistworld could have made itself rich by trading on its legend, and commercialising its fame; but had chosen not to.

If Owen had been there, he would have found a lot more recognisable. The place hadn't changed that much in two hundred years. It was still mostly made up of squat, old-fashioned buildings, composed primarily of stone and timber. There were unmistakable modern touches, in the bright street lamps that pushed back the haze of the mists, and the low profile vehicles that moved through the narrow cobbled streets. The coal barges still chugged slowly through Autumn through the heart of the

city, and the Watchmen still patrolled in pairs because it was safer that way. There was law on Mistworld, but, like Brett's education, it was a sometime thing. The people bustling through the streets in their heavy furs and cloaks paid no attention to Kramer or the people with him.

'Hey, I've just noticed something,' said Brett.

'Then why did you tread in it?' said Rose.

Everyone then had to stop and wait while Brett scraped his boot clean with great thoroughness. Kramer glowered impatiently, but for once Brett out-glared him. When he was sure he'd finished, Brett gestured around him.

'I meant; where are your statues? Half the heroes of old passed through this city on a regular basis during the great Rebellion, and I haven't seen a single statue to any of them. Not even Owen, who by all accounts saved this city single-handed half a dozen times'

'We don't believe in them,' Kramer said shortly.

'Statues, or heroes?' said Lewis.

'We don't need statues to remind us of what Owen and Hazel d'Ark did here/' said Councillor Goldman. 'We remember. We always will. We are their legacy; not some idealised piece of stone. We do have a few hospitals dedicated to St Beatrice. But that's different.'

No one had an answer to that, so the rest of the journey passed pretty much in silence. They ended up at a simple tavern, deep in the heart of the city. It seemed a pleasant enough place, and deliciously warm and cosy after the bitter cold of the streets. Lewis and his companions headed straight for the open roaring fire in the huge stone fireplace, while Kramer talked with the inn's owner, a short fat butterball of a man dressed in cheerfully clashing colours. Lewis and Jesamine took it in turns rubbing the feeling back into their numbed hands, pulling anguished faces at the stabbing pins and needles. Brett had turned his back on the fire, and stuck out his backside to enjoy the full benefit of the heat. Rose alone seemed entirely unaffected, by the cold or the new heat. The inn's other customers ignored them, not even bothering to lower their voices.

The inn's owner led his new customers into a side room, and bustled happily about making sure everyone was settled, and had a mug of something hot and soothing and deceptively alcoholic in their hand. Hot food was promised shortly, and plenty of it. He gave Rose plenty of room, but then, everybody did. Lewis and his

companions sat with Kramer and Goldman at the main table, while the other Mistworlders sat together a little way off. The host asked if they had everything they wanted, and Brett raised a hand.

'What was that animal I saw, on the hanging sign over the door as we came in?'

That, sir, is a hob hound. The inn is named after the creature, and a terrible thing it was, sir. This establishment has been known as the Hob Hound for over a hundred years, famous for good wines and spirits. Used to be called the Blackthorn, in my grandfather's day, but he renamed it to celebrate the death of the very last hob hound. Nasty creatures they were, sir; killed for sport as much as appetite, or so I'm told. Anyway, they were hunted down to extinction, and good riddance to them all. It's said some damned fool wanted to preserve a breeding pair, for a zoo. My grandfather shot him, just to be on the safe side.'

He caught Kramer glaring at him impatiently, and remembered he was urgently needed elsewhere. He bustled off, and the meeting proper began. The Council of Mistport, and by extension of all Mistworld, turned out to consist of Kramer and Goldman, a mother man and woman who slipped quietly into the empty room as if by magic. Out of her shapeless furs, Goldman was revealed as a thickly mature woman with a soft mouth and knowing eyes. Kramer merely looked even more of a thug. Then there was a woman, as well, who was the oldest-looking woman Lewis and his companions had ever seen. People didn't look old in the Empire, right up until they died. But this was Mistworld, where they wouldn't believe in such fripperies. Lewis had to keep himself from staring at her sunken wrinkled face. Brett of course didn't even try, but as Jesamine kicked his ankle under the table. The final Council member, was Gil Akotai. Lewis would have known he was a thug, without having to be told. Akotai was a squat heap of a man, thick-skinned and sleepy-eyed, almost as wide as he was tall, but for all his air of calm relaxation, Lewis wasn't fooled for a moment. Me I in \v , a dangerous man when he saw one.

'There's not much of you, for a Deathstalker,' said Caswell, in her thick old woman's voice. 'I've flushed more impressive objects in Mistworld. Did you gain any powers from the Madness Maze?'

I'm still liuling out/ Siiki Lewis, determined to be polite despite • ill pmvocation. 'But I <im definitely moiv ih.m I used to be.'

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That wouldn't be difficult/ said Caswell.

'I never wanted any of you here in the first place/ said Kramer. 'What are you, really? A disgraced warrior trading on his legendary name; a singer past her best; another bloody Random's Bastard as if we didn't already have more than enough; and the Wild Rose of the Arena, who I still say we should have shot on sight, from a distance. Oh yes, we know all about her. We get all the entertainment channels out here. A complete bloody psychopath, and vicious with it. No offence/

Trust me/ said Brett, 'if she was offended, you'd know all about it by now. There'd be heads rolling across the floor and entrails hanging from the lamps.'

'You see!' Kramer said to Akotai.

'Be quiet, Manfred/ Akotai said mildly, and Kramer shut up immediately. Everyone looked at Akotai, but it seemed that was ^11 he had to say, for the moment.

'Excuse me/ said Jesamine, in that dangerously calm and even tone that Lewis had learned meant imminent trouble. 'What exactly did you mean: a singer past her best? I am a diva/

This is supposed to be a meeting for rebels and fighters, not second-rate showbiz stars/ said Kramer, and Lewis winced.

'I was never second-rate!' snapped Jesamine. 'And I'm more of a fighter than you'll ever be/

'Be silent, woman! Or I'll have you removed!'

Oh dear, thought Lewis.

Kramer and Jesamine were both on their feet, glaring at each other. Lewis looked to Akotai, to see if he was going to do anything, and when it became clear that he wasn't, Lewis sighed heavily, and brought his hand down hard on the table. The heavy ironwood tabletop cracked, from one end to the other, and everyone looked sharply at Lewis. Ironwood was so tough you could usually only carve and shape it with a laser. Kramer sat down, and after a moment, so did Jesamine. The four Councillors actually seemed to relax a little. Old woman Caswell even smiled at Lewis.

'Now that's a Deathstalker/ she said, showing off the few front teeth she had left.

'Yes/ said Akotai. 'You'll understand, Lewis; we needed to be sure. Now, let us get down to business/
He leaned forward, holding everyone's attention effortlessly. 'Much has happened, in a short

time. This world has rejected Finn Durandal and his Empire. There is no place here for the madness of
Pure Humanity and Church Militant. The final straw was of course the murder of our Paragon, Emma
Steel. Every man and woman of Mistworld has sworn to avenge her foul and unjust death. The Durandal
has branded her a traitor, but no one here believes that. We all knew Emma Steel. She was the best of
us/

'She was no traitor/ Lewis said. 'Finn didn't even bother with a show trial, and he does so love his trials.
She must have been on to him, on to something important, so he had her killed. He must have known he
could never bribe or intimidate her into silence/

'We would never have believed it, even if there had been a trial/ s.iid Kramer. 'We all knew Emma/

'I knew her too/ said Lewis, 'She was my partner, for a time. A ^ood Paragon, strong and true and
honourable. We worked well logi'ther. I miss her/

'li is good to know that she was what she always wanted to be/ s.iid Akotai, and all the Councillors
nodded. Akotai looked at Lewis. 'I Ic'dd the Council, and the Council leads Mistworld. Why should \\
,u cept your leadership in the rebellion, Lewis Deathstalker? How do you justify such arrogance? With
your legendary name?'

Irsimine started to say something hot and harsh, but Lewis • i< >|)|u'd her with a gesture. He met Akotai's gaze calmly.

I Irtid because I have the most experience in fighting Finn and his 1111 ivs. And the most success/

'And then there is the matter of John Silence/ said Akotai, <i>

ilmu^h Lewis hadn't spoken, 'We know you have him on one of

ii ships. We have never forgotten or forgiven the things he did

INK, ,iiul never will. The men and women lying dead in the streets,

tin ihildivii burned alive in blazing buildings, the mountains of

I nils NIC marines made to mark their victories. Have I shocked you,

Such atrocities were whitewashed from his legend,

He served the Iron Bitch, and served her well for

MI,my yr.irs/

Hi,H w.is over two hundred years ago/ said Lewis.

No/ s.iiril Ctiswdl. That wds yesterday/

\ in.in i.MI di.mgr ii lot, in two hundred years/ Lewis said hilly. 'And we ,m- Ulkini', .ihoul the in.in who led the- Her! to Ihf !<»urs <if Shiih, .ind Ihc KVc KM

'Will that bring one dead Mistworldn b<uk i<> lilr " s.iid Akoui.

'We've all got pasts/ said Brett, unexpectedly. 'Some oi us find the strength to move beyond them. And you leave Lewis alone. He's proved himself worthy of the Deathstalker name.'

'How?' said Kramer. 'By stealing that slut from his best friend, the King?'

Lewis was on his feet in a moment. He grabbed Kramer by the front of his shirt, hauled him up and out of his chair, and dragged him across the table until they were face to face. Kramer struggled fiercely, but couldn't break free. Lewis smiled, and Kramer suddenly froze, held by the naked threat in Lewis's cold eyes.

'You don't talk that way about Jesamine,' said Lewis. 'Not now, not ever. So sit down and be quiet; or I'll do to you what I just did to the table.'

He dropped Kramer back into his chair, and sat down again himself. Jesamine patted him gently on the arm.

'Told you,' said Caswell. 'He's a Deathstalker.'

'But is that enough to make him our leader?' said Gil Akotai, and again everyone's eyes went to him. 'You must understand, Lewis; I have earned my position here. A dozen years as Council leader, and a proven warrior. I was the one who trained Emma Steel, when she decided she wanted to be our first Paragon. If you are to lead here, you must prove your worth and value to us.'

Jesamine bristled again, and Brett looked actually outraged, but Lewis just nodded calmly. 'I was a Paragon on Logres, and Imperial Champion to King Douglas. I have fought off the usurper Finn's forces, and faced the monsters on Shandrakor. I mention these things only in passing.'

'What you may or may not have done in another place has no merit here,' said Akotai, just as calmly. This is Mistworld, and you must prove yourself to us.'

'We have killed soldiers and monsters,' Rose said suddenly, in her slow cold voice. 'We have killed espers and ELFs and Paragons. Why should we lower ourselves to fight with such as you?'

'Damn right!' said Jesamine. 'Men! You'll be waving your dicks at each other next.'

'I would just like to point out that I am not in any way involved in any of this,' said Brett.

Lewis looked at Akotai. 'Do we really have to do this? Finn would laugh, to see his enemies fighting each other.'

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M<ikr sonic room.'

At this coinniiind, the other Mistworlders rose up as one and moved the ironwood table out of the way, leaving an open space in the middle of the room. The people sitting around it were forced to scatter. Brett retreated into the nearest corner, holding Rose before him as a shield. Jesamine made to draw her sword, but Lewis stopped her with a hand on her arm, and eased her gently but (irmly out of the way. The Mistworlders formed a circle around Lewis and Akotai. The Councillor didn't look calm or sleepy-eyed ,my more. He drew his sword, a scimitar with a long curved blade. Lewis drew too, and

suddenly they were fighting.

Steel clashed on steel in the dimly lit room, and sparks flared up brightly against the shadows. Akotai and the Deathstalker circled each other unhurriedly, boots slamming hard against the bare floor as they thrust and parried. Akotai was a swift and subtle swordsman, his curved blade moving faster than most people could follow, and he was strong and brave and tricky; but never at any time was he a match for the Deathstalker. Lewis moved almost casually around his opponent, yet was somehow always in the right place to frustrate Akotai's increasingly frenzied attacks. Lewis's blade licked out to louch Akotai here and there, leaving bloody marks behind. Akotai t hrew all his strength and ferocity into every blow, trying to force an opening, and it did him no good at all. The Deathstalker duelled Akotai to a halt, and then stepped calmly back and lowered his blade, while Akotai stood breathless and beaten before him.

Manfred Kramer drew his sword and started forward. Jesamine opened her mouth and sang a single piercing note that drove Kramer immediately to his knees, grabbing at his head and crying out in pain. Everyone else in the room winced, including Lewis, lesamine glared about her.

'Behave yourself, darlings. Or I'll sing you an aria that will have your brains dribbling out your ears/

'A Siren/ said Caswell, respectfully, 'It's been a long time since a Siren came to Mistworld. I'll have to tell Topaz.'

Lewis nodded casually to Akotai. 'You really should have known better, Councillor. Maze or no, I'm still a Deathstalker.'

'I know that now,' said Akotai, still trying to get his breathing kick under control. 'But I had to be sure. Damn, you're a fighter. Mease forgive Manfred. He's loyal, but not terribly bright. You have

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proved yourself in all our eyes, sir Deathstalker, and all Mistworld will follow wherever you lead/

'Good/ said Lewis. 'We're going to need you/ And then he stopped, and looked around. 'Oh hell; where are Brett and Rose?'

Everyone looked around them, but the con man and the killer had disappeared during the swordfight,

'Oh God,' said Jesamine. They've gone wandering. Brett always was far too keen to come here, to scare up some serious money with his dubious skills. And I don't even want to think what Rose might get up to while she's off the leash/

'Is she really as dangerous as she's supposed to be?' said Goldman.

'Trust us,' said Lewis, 'You have no idea/

'My people will track them down,' said Akotai, 'Anything in particular they should look for?'

'Oh, the usual,' said Lewis, 'People suddenly missing their valuables, or their heads. And just possibly buildings on fire and people running around screaming/'

'Hell/' said Akotai. 'That's just a good Saturday night, in Mistport/'

Brett Random was having a severely bad time. He was finally where he'd been trying so hard to get to, and it was all turning out to be a terrible disappointment. Being a Random's Bastard cut no ice here; Mistport was lousy with pretenders to the title. And all his skills at the con and the scam were useless in a city where such things had been raised to an art form over the centuries. In fact, if Rose hadn't been there to protect him, some of his increasingly desperate manoeuvrings might well have resulted in bloody mayhem. He thought wistfully of the fortune in alien porn he'd so briefly had his hands on, briefly considered trying to sell the pinnace they'd come down in, and finally settled for sulking in a truly disgusting tavern, where the wine tasted as bad as he felt. He couldn't even escape from Lewis and his crusade by disappearing into the crowds: Rose's presence made that impossible. Everyone here knew the Wild Rose from her televised appearances in the Arena, and she point-blank refused to let Brett go off anywhere on his own, on the understandable grounds that he'd probably get himself killed without her.

'I can look after myself!' he protested, 'You taught me how to fight/'

'Yes,' she said. 'But not how to want to. You're far too civilised for

a place like this, Brett. Mistport is a city of predators. I can sense it. It makes me feel . . . horny/

'I'm in Hell,' said Brett.

He'd been drinking for some time, and was wearily wondering how he was going to sneak out of the tavern without paying his bill, when Manfred Kramer finally caught up with the two of them. Brett had descended from a sulk into a full-blown gloom, while Rose amused herself by staring out the local bravos. Kramer strode up to their table and glared down at them.

'I told Gil we couldn't trust you,' he said flatly. 'I knew you'd go scuttling off, the moment we turned our backs. What have you been doing; trying to find one of Finn's spies, so you could sell us out?'

'Go away,' said Brett. 'I hate this place, and I hate you. What use is there in being a con man, in a place where everybody knows all the cons? Where pickpockets have their own union? God, I'm depressed, and this cider isn't helping. Someone here told me they drop a dead rat into every barrel to help the stuff ferment further, and to give the booze a little body, and I am completely prepared to believe them. I just know something appalling's going to appear on my toothbrush tonight/

'You're a disgrace,' said Kramer, sounding almost satisfied. 'Let's see if Gil can maintain his faith in the false Deathstalker, after he hears what the man's companions have been doing. Now, are you going to come along with me voluntarily, or am I going to have to have you dragged? Guess which I'd prefer/

'I can't be bothered with this/ said Brett morosely. 'Rose; you deal with him/

'Sure/ said Rose, and she surged to her feet, drew her sword, and cut off Kramer's head in one swift movement. The body just stood there for a moment, fountaining blood from the neck, and then it rmshed twitching to the floor. Rose stooped down, picked up the head, blew it a kiss and then threw it casually into the open fire at the kick of the room. Everyone else in the tavern had already decided it \vds well past their bedtime, and were leaving at speed by every exit, liven the bar staff. In a surprisingly short time, the place was empty * \ivpt for Rose Constantine, the headless body, and a suddenly very M>|KT Brett Random. He lurched to his feet, struggling for words, and form! down a suicidal urge to hit Rose with the table.

' What the hell did you do that for!' he shrieked.

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'You said deal with him/ said Rose, calmly cleaning the blood from her blade.

'I didn't mean kill him! That was Gil Akotai's right-hand man! Oh, Lewis will have a coronary when he finds out. None of the Mist-worlders will follow him after this! And you can bet Lewis will blame me, not you! Oh God, my stomach hurts. Of all the people you could have killed . . . This will scupper all Lewis's plans ... I don't even want to think about what they do to murderers here . . . Think! Think!'

That's your department,' said Rose, putting away her sword.

Brett strode up and down, glaring at the headless body on the floor, which was still twitching, as though it couldn't quite believe what had just happened. Brett kicked it a few times, but it didn't make him feel any better. 'All right . . . we could make it look as though someone else did it. No we couldn't; they have espers here. They couldn't pry anything out of our minds, but there were any number of witnesses. Think!

Think! Hide the body; yes. Yes! And by the time they find it, we'll be long gone. Rose; pick up the body. I've got an idea/

Rose picked up the body, and slung it effortlessly over one shoulder. Blood spilled down her crimson leathers, but that was nothing new for her. Brett doubted anyone would even notice. He gestured for Rose to follow him, and headed for the back of the bar, and then down into the wine cellars below. Brett scurried back and forth in the gloom, until he finally discovered a barrel of cider that had just been opened. He gestured urgently to Rose, and she dumped the body into the dark liquid. The cider swallowed Kramer up with hardly a splash, and Brett nailed the top down very thoroughly. He and Rose then pushed the barrel to the back, behind all the others. Brett straightened, breathing and sweating heavily, and considered his work.

They said they liked their cider to have a little body ... All right; let's get out of here. And remember, Rose: this never happened/

Some time later, Brett Random and Rose Constantine strolled casually back into the Hob Hound, and expressed surprise that anyone had even missed them. Lewis and Akotai were deep in tactical discussions, and barely acknowledged their return, but Jesa-mine looked up suspiciously from the impromptu signing session

she'd organised for her many Mistport fans. Brett stared innocently back,

'What?' he said. 'We just went for a stroll. It wasn't like you needed us here. Did we miss something?'

'I swear to God, you're worse than children/ said Jesamine,

• iiiiomatically signing a photo a fan put in front of her, 'I can't hike Miy eyes off you for a moment. Tell me you haven't done anything embarrassing. Have you seen Manfred Kramer?'

'No/' said Brett, though his heart leaped painfully in his chest. 'Wtis he looking for us? We must have missed him/'

'I didn't miss him/' said Rose.

'Hush, dear/' said Brett.

'You're looking very shifty, Brett/' said Jesamine. 'What have (he i \\<> of you been up to?'

'Not nearly as much as I'd hoped/' said Brett, leaning casu.illy

• if. jjust the wall. 'No one in this city knows a good business prop «' MI ion when they hear one. The sooner we're out of this dump, (he better/'

'We'll go when Lewis is ready, and not before. In the nuMiiiiine I luve Lins to attend to. Who shall I make this out to, sweelir '

And Brett had to find a table with Rose and just sit thru Miiiw.irdly calm but inwardly shaking, while Lewis finished In-, ilr.i ussions with Akotai, and Jesamine signed absolutely anythinr ihe long line of fans put in front of her. Some of them even w,mied p.nis of their body signed, so they could then go off and have ihe

Mlure tattooed over. Jesamine took it all in her stride. Eventually ii was decided that all the Mistworlders who wanted to join Lewis's 11-he I Force (which was a hell of a lot of them) would join the Heel in iheii own ships. It was a matter of pride and paranoia. No Misi \\\-in Ider would ever agree to take passage on an Imperial ship.

\nd ilien Akotai wanted to wait until Manfred Kramer returned,

UK! r.iett almost wept with frustration. Luckily Jesamine decided

IH (I kid enough of her fans, after one of them wanted her to si^n ,i

p.niit uLirly intimate part of his body, and she insisted on le.iving

M; In ilien. Brett would have kissed her, if he hadn't known ikil

- Id look suspicious.

ii enough, ihe rebel Heel pulled ,1 \v<iy from Mistworld, joined by | iii',;< <olleeliou of very iuidiviuiul Mislworlder ships. Silence

asked Lewis where they were heading next, and Lewis's answer upset almost everyone. Shandrakor, he said, and everyone else said Oh shit, in various disgusted, appalled, and terribly distressed ways. Everyone knew the legendary planet of monsters, some from personal experience. No one went to Shandrakor by choice, unless they were suffering from a very serious death wish. Jesamine and Brett found themselves in agreement for perhaps the first time in their lives, saying Why? in pretty much the same dismayed tone of voice. Rose, predictably, was the only one who seemed pleased at the prospect.

Trust me, Lewis/ Silence said heavily, 'everyone is already seriously impressed that you and your companions survived one journey through the deadly jungles of Shandrakor. You don't have to prove anything to anyone/

Though it is just the sort of thing a Deathstalker would do/ said Captain Price, and the rest of the bridge crew nodded respectfully.

'You're not helping, Price/ said Silence. 'Lewis; what is to be gained by going there? The world has no ships, weapons, or even people to add to our cause. You said yourself there was nothing worth salvaging from the old crash-landed Standing. All Shandrakor has is monsters— Oh. Oh no . . . /

'Oh yes, Admiral/ said Lewis.

'I do feel I should point out/ Price said diffidently, 'that every hour we spend not heading towards Logres does give the usurper Finn that much extra time to prepare for battle. It would be a shame to throw away what little advantage we've got/

'We're going to Shandrakor/ said Lewis. 'I gave them my word/

To monsters?' said Silence.

'Many of them were human once/ said Lewis, locking Silence's gaze with his own. 'Some of them still remember. Do you remember, John Silence? Were you part of the decision to take all those made into monsters by Lionstone or Shub, all those poor unfortunates, and just dump them among all the other monsters on Shandrakor? To leave them there, so they could be forgotten?'

'Robert and Constance made the decision/ said Silence. 'And I ... went along with it. There was no way of curing or restoring them. Relocating them to Shandrakor seemed kinder than just killing them all/

'Excuse me/ said Captain Price, 'but; what are you talking about?'

'One of the Golden Age's nastier secrets/ said Lewis. 'Back when i he rogue AIs of Shub were still the official Enemies of Humanity, I hey routinely captured and experimented on humans, making I hem over into monstrosities in their secret laboratories. Sometimes lor information, sometimes as part of their psychological warfare. And sometimes the Empress Lionstone XIV ordered the same thing done in her secret laboratories, in her search for new weapons, or |iisi for the fun of it. And then there was the Mater Mundi, trying to iurn espers into uber-espers and failing as often as not. So when I IK* great Rebellion was finally over, and we were all friends again, Kohert and Constance were faced with the problem of what to do with all the left-over monsters, which had once been men and women. There was no place for monsters in the wonderful Golden Age King Robert and Queen Constance were determined to build, so l hey gathered up all the products of all the secret labs, and dumped ihnn on Shandrakor, to live or die as best they could. And then the I iin pi re did its best to forget they ever existed/

'We had a civilisation to rebuild/ said Silence. 'We couldn't do « \ cry thing. We had to have priorities. We needed to spend our time on the problems we could solve. And if that makes us sound hard-he, i tied . . . we'd all been through a lot. We were all very tired/

'I gave those monsters my word that they would go home again/ s.iid Lewis. 'And so they will. First as shock troops in our war with linn, and then ... as our lost children. Set a course for Shandrakor, Admiral/

Typical bloody Deathstalker/ said Silence. 'Always being right/

And so the Fleet went to Shandrakor. Some were heard to say that i IN High they'd sworn to follow the Deathstalker to Hell and back, they hadn't necessarily meant it literally. But no one said it too Iniidly.

Except for Brett Random, who made it very clear that there was no way he was going back down to the planet's jungles, under any circumstances whatsoever. And to prove it, he locked himself in In-, quarters with several bottles of wine and barricaded the door. Rose reluctantly stayed behind too, to keep him company and stop him from getting hysterical. In the end, only Lewis and Jesamine ended to the surface of Shandrakor, in a simple pinnace. And finally Silence turned up to see them leave.

They're calling this Deathstalker's folly/ he remarked. 'Everyone

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agrees you're being very brave, but there's already heated betting as to what condition you'll return in, or even whether you'll be back at all/

'I hope you're betting on us,' said Jesamine.

'Of course,' said Silence, 'I never could resist the really long odds/ He looked back at Lewis. 'Do some of them truly remember being human? We had hoped . . . After all this time?'

'Yes/ said Lewis. They remember the lives they had, the people they knew, the worlds they came from. And they dream of being able to go home again/

'Lewis; they can't/ Silence looked at the Deathstalker pleadingly. 'We still have no idea how to undo what was done to them. Even Shub doesn't know how. What could these monsters do, what could they be, on civilised worlds? Neither human nor alien, how would they ever fit in? Everyone they ever knew is dead and gone. They'd end up in zoos!'

'I gave them my word/ said Lewis.

'Then . . . they're your responsibility, Deathstalker. Hopefully you'll make a better job of it than I did, when it was my responsibility/

Lewis guided the pinnace down into the nightmare jungles of Shandrakor, darting in and out of the higher treetops until he was finally able to land in the clearing that held the buried Deathstalker Standing. The air was hot and wet and sticky as Lewis and Jesamine stepped out of the ship and on to the dark spiky grass. Insects buzzed fiercely on the heavy air, and from all sides came the roars and screams of life and death on Shandrakor, where every life-form preyed on every other life-form. Lewis looked carefully around him, keeping his hands near but not actually on his weapons. So far, nothing had entered the clearing. It looked pretty much as he remembered it, but with no signs of the extensive damage that had been done during the last attack of the Emperor's troops. The fast-growing jungle had already covered over the scars. Lewis couldn't even tell where the entrance to the Standing had been, before the castle's ancient computers blew it up, as one last service to Clan Deathstalker. Tall, wide-boled trees formed a guardian circle around the clearing, and shadows moved among them. Jesamine wiped at her perspiring face with a cloth.

There is definitely such a thing as too much sunshine, darling. (.od, it's hot! And I really do hate this humidity. It does my skin no >;ood .it all. I just know I'm going to end up with another nasty heat i.ish.'

She looked about her. 'Where are they? They must have hit us land. You know, Lewis; I have to say that this doesn't strike me as one of your better ideas.'

'Do you want to abandon them too?'

'Well, not as such, sweetie, but . . . shock troops, yes. I can see it. But what about afterwards?'

'Give my word as a Deathstalker.'

Jesamine sighed. 'Yes, dear, you did. Which was all very nice. But you can't feel guilty about everything the Empire did in the name of your legendary ancestor.'

I tried to put things right. And I will. I have to. That's what Deathstalker means. Especially when you're the last one.'

He broke off, as one by one the monsters left the cover of the trees and ventured into the clearing, emerging into the light of day like white ghosts from the eternal shadows of the jungle. There were all kinds, large and small, every possible example of mixed natures, mixed genes. They moved in slowly from every side, wrapped in iron-plated armour and twisted shapes, with too many legs and eyes, in no way enough, in forms so vile and so affecting that Lewis and Jesamine had to fight to keep from looking away. She stood very close to him, almost moved to tears at the horrible shapes that hung in the air. Lewis and women, but still kept her hand near her gun. The monsters filled the clearing, pressing slowly forward until suddenly, at some unseen, unheard signal, they all came to a halt. The creature continued forward, to confront Lewis and Jesamine. It had been turned horribly inside out its exposed red and purple vis gleaming wetly in the bright sunlight. A more or less human figure had been stretched across its flayed chest. The mouth was wide and mobile, and the wide-set eyes held no understandable emotion. The hulking body hung in a cage of thick-furred spindly legs.

You came back/ it said.

Names/ said Lewis. 'I told you I would.'

So you did, Deathstalker/ The creature's voice was a low hiss, the

muscles elongated and strangely accented. 'I am Speaker; I am the

One of those who remember being^ other than monsters. I think I

lost my name once, but that was long ago, and I don't remember it. I

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remember some things, flashes of home and family, but not whether I was a man or a woman. It's hard now to even think what that meant. Why have you come back, Deathstalker?'

'Because I made you a promise/ said Lewis. 'I have a Fleet of ships now. We're going back to Logres, that was called Golgotha in your day, to throw a false Emperor off his stolen Throne. I want you to come with us. All of you. Be my shock troops in this war. And afterwards . . /

'Yes?' said Speaker, 'What, afterwards?'

'You will all go home. We'll search out what records remain, do our best to find out who and what you used to be. If all else fails, the espers will dig the truth out of your minds. But every damned one of you will go home. No one gets left out, no one gets left behind. Whatever can be done for you, to make you more . . . comfortable, will be done. Science has come a long way in two hundred years. Of course, this all depends on us winning the war—'

'We can fight,' said Speaker. 'We know how to do that. Could we really be ... cured? Made human again?'

'I don't know,' Lewis said honestly. 'But the blessed Owen has returned, more powerful than ever. I have seen him perform miracles. And there is always the Madness Maze. It transformed us; perhaps it can transform you.'

'We will go with you/ said Speaker. Taking a chance on your name, and your word. But if we fight for you, and do not die, you must promise to kill us, sooner than return us here. We will either live as human, or die as monsters. We could not stand to have to live without hope.'

'I understand/ said Lewis. 'I promise; I won't let you down.'

'Not all of us will want to go/ said Speaker. 'Some have already said they wouldn't leave Shandrakor if they could. They have forgotten what it was like to be other than what they are, or perhaps they no longer care. The jungle has become their home now. They belong here.'

'If I could speak to them . . .' said Lewis.

'They would kill you/ said Speaker. They are only monsters now.'

'My offer will remain open/ said Lewis, 'For as long as any of them live. Prepare yourselves, my friends. Your journey home begins.'

Remote-controlled cargo ships came Moating down like autumn

leaves at Lewis's command, hundreds of them, enough to lei ry the Lugest and the smallest creatures out of the clearing and up lo I he Heel. Remote-controlled, because no human pilot wanted to gel loo (lost' to the legendary monsters of Shandrakor. The monsters umlri Mood. They weren't ready to be seen by humans either. So MM \ were parcelled out among the various starcruisers, travelling in ih< mostly empty cargo bays, kept separate from the crews by ^mli ,md le.ir tind heavily locked doors.

I rwis's next choice of destination was his home planet, Virinmih!. .mil no one objected to that. Everyone understood his need i« home, to see for himself the terrible thing that Finn Dm.md.il h.i.i <>»idcied done to Clan Deathstalker, and their ancient M.mdm wouldn't seem real, until he had seen it with his own e\ One

.11 all doubted that the remaining people of that world would win to fight alongside the Fleet. They were all horn to be wurr! in honour of the blessed Owen. It fell to the knowledge of Owen to explain to Lewis why the people of Virimonde had risen up, in outrage against the massacre

Here are two Transmutation Engines in high orbit

Price said, keeping his voice carefully even. 'Any sign of rebellion on the world below, and the whole planet into a lifeless wasteland. Finn, the only reason he hasn't used the Engines is he's meant to use this threat to keep you in line on

Lewis nodded. He understood how Finn's targeting computers to lock on to the moment we drop out of hyperspace, I want both of them with every weapon we've got. Do a good job, Price, we won't #••• Mud elunce at this. You can bet good money Nut him mil 1> |HO>', I mimed the Engines to strike at Virimonde in the night. Nips arrive. Then, we'll take time to check for hidden hooch, "I'm very thorough; because you can be sure him Wil V\ • mil uniiitf down to Virimonde until we're sure it's safe I »i ih, ...

\rll «is US.'

hi the end, it was simple - is lluil. The two Transmutation Engines urines nude, in line disphy, is the Ned hl.isled them, ip,m .m. I u didn't Like [onj] » |o se.iuh out the oihiliii^ mines ,md oihn n

I Utl

surprises that Finn had left behind. Lewis made contact with Capital City, and was immediately welcomed home and invited down. Parades and celebrations in the city were promised, but Lewis politely declined. He needed to see what was left of his Standing. His family home.

Lewis and Jesamine again went down alone on the pinnacle. Brett, seriously drunk but still in full use of his self-preservation instincts, declined. Ostensibly because there was nothing worth stealing on Virimonde, but actually because he didn't want to risk Rose killing someone important again. He didn't think his nerves could stand that. And Silence didn't go along because he had once been part of the invasion force that Lionstone sent hundreds of years ago, to pound the people back into barbarism. They'd done such a good job that the planet was still recovering, even now. Millions of people had been killed. And Silence had been a part of it.

'You did get around, didn't you?' said Jesamine, exasperated. 'Is there anything else we ought to know, any other awful things you did when you served under the Iron Bitch?'

'Lots/' said Silence. 'But I won't tell you. It was a long time ago. We were all different people then.'

'Why did you serve Lionstone for so long?' said Lewis. He sounded as though he honestly wanted to know, so Silence told him.

'She was my Empress. Loyalty was all I knew, then.'

Lewis and Jesamine rode the pinnacle down to Virimonde. It was a smooth enough trip. Lewis knew the way home. Jesamine studied him worriedly. He was being very quiet. She wanted to help, but couldn't see how. So much had happened to Lewis since he'd last been here, and he'd never been the easiest person to talk to when it came to personal things. He'd lost pretty much everything he'd ever cared for,

except her. Lost his family and his home, his Clan and his Standing. For a long time now he'd been running on anger and revenge and duty, and Jesamine had to wonder what would happen to Lewis when he no longer had those things to hold him together. The comm system suddenly came alive, breaking an uncomfortable silence. This is Virimonde comm centre. Welcome home, sir Deathstalker. We always knew you'd come for us. Quite an impressive Fleet you've picked up. Trust a Deathstalker to come home

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in style. I have been <iskecl lo warn you, about the' current condition o| your Standing . . . !

'Is it true?' Lewis said steadily. 'Are they all dead?' Tin afraid so, sir Deathstalker/ The voice was quid <md iesp<< i lul, hnl there was no give in it. 'We did think a few miimi <ousltl mitfhl have escaped, but now all the bodies have hern ideniili. ,1 we'ie sure no one was missing on the day. Everyone with the <l,m lume was killed. The Emperor's creatures were very thoiour.li N ou

now the last of the direct line.'

'No/ said Lewis. There is another. Owen has returned Thru the rumours are true? He's really back?' 'Yrs. He's gone to face the Terror.'

'We are living in a time of legends reborn. A deputation will MM • " i sir Deathstalker; on the grounds of the Standing.' 'I don't think I want to meet anyone, just yet/ s.iid l.e\\ If You'll want to hear this. Clan Deathstalker continue', It i, HOIK*. Virimonde comm centre out.'

'Well/ Jesamine said lightly, as the comm unit lell -.ih nl

. . enigmatic. What do you suppose they me.mi ' I don't know/ said Lewis. 'I don't care. I just want to jv
h Me Linded the pinnace on his family landing p.ul, diTcmil (he l.unily crest, in the grounds of the ancient
caslle ih.u h,nl I-h.'Mie to Clan Deathstalker for so many gener.itioir. i. lollowril Lewis nervously as he
descended from the pinn »iuoss the landing pads and then just stood looking .it the Ktnol • .mil
lire-blackened remains before him. All ol the e.isi \vn

n Mown away, leaving the interior rooms and eoiitl< in wind and rain. The courtyard walls were gone,
<md ih< h

I west wing walls were pockmarked with jagged hole1, hum .h Mi|Hei lire. Even the roof had been
punctured repeatedly hy < M, • POMS and explosions. Finn's people had put a lot ol el Ion mi..

• i' noying the castle, but still parts of it stood, defum ,r. < \ Cl

!<., 11 nine took Lewis's arm, trying lo comfort him with hei |

• me I never realised the place was so bi^, Lewis. It's still . . , v«« Impressive/

I .ilwtiys believed I'd ionic* kirk, some day/ s»iul I.ewr. Ih.u \\\ hen my lime <is <i Kmigon Wds clone,

I'd come home .ir,,nii, i<> le.nl MI\l.unily. We'd all sit .iround the- open lire- in the j'.ie.ii lull, tin Ivim-, ,it our leel ,mcl I'd tell I hem I.lies ol the ^le.iiM < il\ on

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the greatest world in the Empire. And now that all thai is gone, all I really care about is that my mother and my father are dead. I never got a chance to tell them all the things I'd done. The things I did because I wanted them to be proud of me/

They knew/ said Jesamine. 'And of course they were proud of you. They were your parents/

They're gone, and I'm alone. I want my mum. I want my dad/

Jesamine took him in her arms, but he didn't cry.

They both looked round sharply at the sound of approaching ships in the sky. Lewis pushed Jesamine away, and his hands went to his weapons. Ships filled the sky, coming in from every direction. So many they blocked out the sun. Transport ships, cargo ships, small family ships. They landed one after another, filling and overflowing the landing pads and settling down where they could in the surrounding countryside. Hundreds of men and women disembarked and headed straight for what was left of the Deathstalker Standing. They saw Lewis and called out his name joyously, hooting and waving, and almost reluctantly he took his hand away from his gun. The crowds surged forward, chanting his name like a war-cry. They gathered before him, milling uncertainly, and then one man at the front of the crowd sank down on one knee, and everyone followed his example, until the whole crowd was kneeling before Lewis, their faces radiant.

The first man to kneel had a familiar face: Michel du Bois, once the Member of Parliament for Virimonde, now an exile and outlaw like Lewis. Once, they had been rivals for Virimonde's love, even enemies, but du Bois had changed much since Lewis last saw him. He looked up at Lewis with wild eyes, fanatical and perhaps a little mad. He bowed jerkily to Lewis, ignoring Jesamine completely.

'Welcome home, sir Deathstalker. All the families of Virimonde have sent representatives here, to do you honour. Where you lead, we will follow. The whole planet has taken an oath of vengeance against the Durandal and his people, sworn upon your name and upon our blood. We are yours, to lead into battle. We are all Death-stalkers now/

Talk about intense,' Jesamine muttered. 'Is he on something?'

'Hush,' said Lewis. He nodded to du Bois. 'Your manner has changed since our last meeting,' he said carefully.

The world has changed,' said du Bois, his eyes unblinking. 'My

lo\,ihy IMS dlwtiys been lo Virimondc. You know Nul. Him h.is pioved himself unworthy, and an enemy. A coward, diul <m .minul Like us willi you to Logres, sir Dcathstalker, and we will clr,ij; him hoin his Throne' duel lung him from the walls of the 'l'.il.uc He juused d moment, looking past Lewis at the ruined c<istlc. 'I h.ul .m .mm who was a Deathstalker. From a minor branch, hul she lu»i< NIC M.line proudly. She died here, with the rest of the CLui. She \\.i •ilw.iys good to me. We have all lost loved

ones here/

'I never knew we were related,' said Lewis. 'You never said/ I wanted to make it on my own, by my own worth, without family connections,' said du Bois. For a moment he looked almost normal, but the moment passed. 'We love the soldiers; every man and woman on this planet, in the Navy's service/

AIM! (the huge crowd responded with a low murmur of, h; i < * < - M M m . m . ilmosi inimal growl of wrath and determination.

'Woe to all who raise the rage of Virimonde,' mumbled I « \ eiy wc * ll, Michel. Get these people out of here, if you wish, I want everyone that's coming to be on the horns, in everything you've got that flies. The Fleet is very near. In \ < > u . UK! they'll find room for anyone who wants to come, if the inn doesn't have a ship. How many can we count on?'

if any man and woman has sworn to follow you/ du Bois. implicitly.

'Hold everything,' said Jesamine, 'Everyone? The whole population?'

'What was done here touched everyone/ said du Bois. 'We will do his warriors, in Owen's name, to do him honour. Now h.

if you need, how can we be found wanting?'

Me lose lo his feet, turned and addressed the waiting crowd, IM: ilicin Lewis's instructions, and they roared their .ippim.il I'M HOP, continued talking, stirring them to action with ^r.iul ilnioiu Lewis diid Jcsdmine left him to it, and walked slowly NIIIMI}',I NIC courtyard of what lucl once been d mighty c.isilc.

'Why luvcn'l they even tried to repair it?' said Jcs.iminc. The h •,! incline seems sound enough. They could <it least luvc nude . .1.111

H u.isu'i then place lo do anything/ said Lewis. They weir mi\ to see wlul I would decide. /And hcsides; il's evidence. This

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is a war crime. A sight to inspire people to revolt. I'm going inside, to see how bad the damage is. You don't need to come, Jes/

'Of course I do, sweetie. Even Deathstalkers need someone to lean on, sometimes.'

The first bad thing they encountered was a monstrous tower of junk raised up before the smashed-in front doors. Finn's people had piled up in the courtyard all the Deathstalker belongings that weren't worth looting or trashing. They'd clearly tried to set the pile on fire, but it hadn't taken. Lewis approached the heap slowly, almost cautiously. He recognised a few items, here and there, but made no attempt to touch

or rescue anything. His ugly face grew increasingly set and harsh. In the end, he turned his back on it, as though turning his back on a grave, and headed for the open main doors. Jesamine went with him, not sure he even knew she was there any more.

Inside the castle, the damage was worse, if anything. Explosives had clearly been set in vulnerable spots, to try to bring the place down, but the thick solid stone walls had defeated them. The walls still stood, though much holed and scarred, and there was rubble everywhere. Floors and ceilings were slumped and ruptured, but still held together. Deathstalker Standings had always been designed and built to take punishment. Deathstalkers led dangerous lives, and they had long memories. Jesamine followed Lewis as he wandered through rooms and corridors, stepping around or over the general destruction. Furniture had been smashed and burned, bookcases overturned and centuries-old tapestries and portraits torn down and trashed. Everything of obvious value was gone, taken, and everywhere there were signs and stains where Finn's creatures had relieved themselves, like dogs marking their territory.

'Finn knew this would hurt me/ Lewis said, almost casually. 'Almost as much as losing my mum and dad, and my family. Back when we were friends and the world still made sense, he and I often spent long weekends here. He was my guest, and I showed him everything. He had to know how much this place, its history, meant to me. I told him. I told him everything, and why not? He was my friend. What will Owen say, when he sees this? This was my family's duty, to keep the Standing in trust, for him, when he returned. This place was always more his than ours. And we failed him.'

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lie II undersldiid/ sdid Jesdinine. 'lie knew whdl il fell like, l◇ he

in trayed/

Their dimmed and crumbling, broken stairway led to the next floor. There was a wide gap in the middle, several feet across. Lewis didn't. Jesamine jumped it easily, without thinking or effort, and only briefly realized what they'd done, and looked back at the jump. Jesamine leaned over to gaze into the long drop, and then gripped Lewis fiercely by the arm.

'Wow,' she said breathlessly. 'I don't believe we just did that!'

'You're cutting off the circulation in my arm.' Look at that drop! Look at that gap! And we jumped it like it was nothing. . . . Back before the Maze, I couldn't have made a jump like that. If you'd goosed me with a cattle prod, it would hurt my arm. . . . 'Sorry,' Lewis said, rubbing at his arm. 'All the more

He hemmed something else, something better; in little words we didn't notice.

And then suddenly he and Jesamine sprinted forward, climbing the stairs at more than human speed. They ran quickly, then turned, not even breathing hard, and walked down the stairs

where they'd just been standing slowly, as if they were in a dream.

MM fell and plummeted to the floor far below. It hit hard, and

• In the impact, and the sound rushed up, along with a loud cloud of dust. Lewis and Jesamine looked at each other.

'We A//nr ihdt was going to happen/ Jesamine sdid slowly,

sensed it. Now that is seriously spooky/

I d he hdid pressed to name anything in our lives Midi lusr i M loi some time now/said Lewis. 'No doubt eventually we'll I in it/

I hope so/ said Jesamine. 'I don't know if my nerves cdn Idke mm h moie of this. It's worse than opening night/

MM v vvdldked on, unhurriedly, through the devastated edsile. MM «MI\| -.minds wc-re the wind whistling through the nidny holes, MM islonal j!.rodn from lloor or wall, and the quiet sound of then "\vu looisieps. They looked into every room, but nowhere hdd heen l< h imioiu hed, unsullied. Finn's ercdtures hdd mdde d thorough joh <<! Mini deseeidlion.

should hdve seen it in its prime/ Lewis sdid liiidlly. 'Il

was . . . magnificent. The accumulated treasures and wonders of centuries. Family history that went back to the First Empire. Paintings and antiques and objets d'art. Some of them so old even we weren't sure what they were, or what significance they might once have held. One day, it would all have been mine, to enjoy and preserve. I wanted to share it with you, Jes/

'And you will/ said Jesamine, hugging his arm tightly and laying her golden head on his shoulder. This can all be rebuilt, restored. I'm seriously rich, remember? I have money in accounts all over the Empire, that Finn's people couldn't find if they used an uber-esper and a dowsing rod. I have more money than even I can spend in one lifetime, and it's about time I put it to some good use. I can't restore the treasures that you've lost, and the things that meant so much to you, I know that; but the Deathstalker Standing can be made magnificent again. We'll see to that. When all this madness is over, we'll put everything right again. You'll see/

'It wouldn't be the first time this old place has been rebuilt/ Lewis admitted. 'Deathstalkers tend to lead dramatic lives/

'How are you feeling, Lewis?'

'Glad that you're here with me. And glad that I came here, and saw this. It reminded me of the oldest truth of my family: that no matter how bad things get, Clan Deathstalker endures. We never forgive, we never forget, and we bring our enemies down; whatever it takes/

Some time later, his pinnace led a flotilla of assorted ships up from Virimonde to join the waiting Fleet, more than doubling it in size. Clan Deathstalker was going to war.

Back on the flagship Havoc, Brett Random and Rose Constantine had been roaming the steel corridors for some time, looking for trouble to get into. Brett had run out of wine, and was bored; always a

dangerous combination. So he went wandering, and Rose went along with him, because whatever Brett got up to, it was bound to be at least interesting. No one ever challenged their right to be wherever they were; they were the Deathstalker's companions, and therefore trusted. More fools them, Brett thought. He descended further and further into the ship, into areas passengers rarely ever saw. Brett was determined to find something amusing to do, if only to demonstrate his independence from Lewis. Besides, with the

diiiiik finished, there was nothing else left to do except have sex with Kose, and there was a limit to how much of that his nerves could mid.

'There's got to be a still somewhere on this ship/ he growled. 'Or a HUM! irch turning out knockoff battle drugs. Something to gel a <lrsperale man comfortably out of his head for a while. I did try the mrd bay earlier, but Jesamine had already warned the doctors about NIC, ihe bitch/

'Why don't I just grab someone, and pound them until they tell us \\ IK ic io find the good stuff?' Rose said reasonably.

Bictl winced. 'Better not. We're not exactly popular around here

H is. The last time I went down to the main galley, just looking for

I hi lie food and good company and perhaps a friendly game of dice,

i yone I tried to talk to just made some excuse and left. Some of ihcni didn't even bother with the excuse. Some of them even leh iln-ii meals behind/

(>ni reputation has gone before us/ said Rose. Hi el I sniffed loudly. 'No one's actually said anything, of course We are Maze people, after all, and friends of the Deathstalkcr. hut

we treated like heroes? Are we hell. We're made about l(nmc as a skid mark on a hotel towel. You know what, Rose ' I Hunk you're right. To hell with whether or not Lewis gets upsu >» Hie next crewman you see, and shake some information oni ol him

So i hey stood and waited for the next unfortunate to pass by, <m<l

Il in i Kose picked him up and slammed him against the nearest wall Mien explained what it was they wanted to know, and the crewman

'icssecl every eagerness to assist them, if only Rose would move ih« point of her dagger just a little further away from his eyeball.

h\ the third sub galley, down on deck forty-three. There's iys something going on there/

• dropped him back on to his feet, and put away her dagger, i h« (irvvman slid along the wall, putting a little distance between id- MI .md scowled at Brett.

I knew we couldn't trust you. Scum always finds its own level.'

We ,110 not scum!" said Hrett. 'We've been through the Mildness Ma/< leiiieniluT."

Ilui's righl. You're monsters. We should have locked yon up in ili« «.ii};<> kiy, along with till the oilier freaks from Shandrakor.'

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Rose raised her knife again, but Brett stopped her. He'd had enough of hiding bodies. He smiled unpleasantly at the crewman, and put all his esper compulsion into his voice. 'You. Forget all about this conversation. Then shit yourself. Then run away/

The crewman did all these things, to Brett's amusement, 'I really hate this ship/ he announced, not caring whether anyone heard him. 'I could cope when it was just Lewis and Jesamine being disapproving, but everyone here sees us as second-class heroes, at best/

Rose said second-class heroes along with him, and Brett looked at her thoughtfully. 'We're doing that more and more lately. Completing each other's thoughts, coming up with the same ideas, even sharing body language. I notice these things. We're becoming more alike, and I don't like it There's only room in this Empire for one Brett Random/

'I'm horny,' Rose said implacably. 'Find me someone to kill. Sex with you is nice, but it doesn't satisfy like the real thing/

'Why me?' said Brett piteously, to the heavens. Try and contain yourself, Rose. Please? Soon enough we'll be going up against Finn and all his armies, and then you'll be hip deep in all the slaughter you can handle/

'Yes,' said Rose. 'I'm looking forward to it. But I am concerned about facing the Durandal again. He scares me/

She said it in her normal, casual tone, but there was no denying she meant it. Brett was actually shocked. 'I didn't think you were scared of anything/

'Finn is a special case,' said Rose, and Brett had to agree. Just thinking about facing Finn again made his heart pound in his chest.

'I have been thinking,' Rose announced, and Brett winced. It was always dangerous when Rose started getting ideas. She looked at Brett thoughtfully, and he felt the first few beads of sweat pop out on his forehead.

'Oh yes?' he said, in a very nearly normal voice.

'I'm remembering my past differently, Brett. Seeing things differently. Because we are linked, your mind affects me as much as mine affects yours. There are times when I think of other things than killing. It would be wrong to say I'm developing a conscience; I don't think you and I possess one between us. But I am capable of seeing people differently now. As people, rather than just targets. It ... disturbs me/

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how you feel, my dilecncnly .ihoul killing people?' Biell s.ml

hopefully,

Rose considered the question. 'I think ... it mi^hl nukr killing prople even more fun/

'In changing the subject,' Brett said, in a loud and very tlein ininced voice. 'We need to work out a way to make ourselvc. SOITV serious money, before the'action starts. Mistworld turned $\diamond m i \langle \rangle I^* \cdot | \bullet$ "iiiplcic bust, and Virimonde was always going to be a mm staiti • We could sell our stories to the media after the war, bin ilui uih. » IIKSNnles there's going to be an afterwards. Besides; mosi nl pui

nes .uen't suitable for the mass media. Either way, I ihml ' done my part in this rebellion. No more

fighting and di\n <iiiiif*cr lor me. I don't care if our mental link has made MM ,i in n. • 11 .hie; it's just not me. I'd grab a ship and desert, if il weieni Im Mn M 1.11 vcl Ions possibilities of looting when we finally take ih< r, M.I.I. I he landless. But I've got to find something to do belon ih< n 01 i n • i.i/y from boredom. Something worthy of my i.ilem . S<i li ihe directions that kind and accommodating crewrna l>< loir he had to go and change his trousers. Then , P.I ini-milly card game I can get into somewhere. Their \ always |i money i<> be made from the kind of people who think pol h leiully game/ 'I Mill want to kill someone/ 'All right; I'll accuse someone of cheating! Allei I

- I- < eni sum/

They headed down to deck forty-three. It was a lon# wa Hieii (ended to forget, until forcibly reminded, ih.ii Imperial

- misers were the size of floating cities, and as complex Nonn.di

is d very well run, very calm and tranquil city in belween . mcnis, but Brett couldn't help noticing the freshly d.mhrd n .MM. Hi.u .appeared on the steel walls as they descended iow,nd. di loiiy ihree. The Church is the only true Authority. The hue 0 \.iii-ltinti you. Death to heretics. Pure Humanity; Pure /<>r<///\ /.-//. / //u ror Finn. And The voices in my head are getting /(>//</>»•/

'Some of those sentiments are really worrying/ s<iid I Jim nuil.irly that last one/ He looked at Rose. 'You don i gel th< i lic.mce, do you? These graffiti mean that not all the (u \

- me mind. They were all supposed to have luul ,1 ch.injic ol h«

Owen jppejred lo ihein; bul ihis suggests very strongly

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there are still Pure Humanity and Church Militant fanatics on board this ship, still loyal to Finn. The real hard cases. Which means . . . well, I don't know. Sabotage, maybe? Knives in the dark? Internal dissension in the ranks when it comes time to fight? That's the last thing we can afford when we come to face Finn's defences.'

'Should we tell someone?' said Rose. She made a genuine effort to sound interested, to please Brett, but she didn't really care.

'Not yet.' Brett frowned, running the possibilities in his head. 'We need to know more. And, just maybe, I smell an opportunity. Let us press on.'

At the entrance to deck forty-three, they found someone waiting for them. A single crewman, in a marine's uniform, tall and lithely muscular, with a rather droopy moustache that didn't suit his otherwise wolfish features. He smiled and nodded easily to the newcomers.

'Brett Random. Rose Constantine. We've all been looking forward to meeting you.'

'Have you?' said Brett, ready to break and run at a moment's notice.

'Oh yes. I'm Leslie Springfield, marine trooper second class, and Random's Bastard in bad standing.'

'The best kind,' Brett said automatically, and Leslie grinned.

'You should be glad I'm here. This is enemy territory. You wouldn't have made it this far if I hadn't vouched for you.'

'That was very kind of you,' said Brett. 'What's it going to cost me?'

'Maybe a small percentage, later on. Now come with me; people are waiting to talk with you.'

'What sort of people?' said Brett.

'The large and growing part of this crew who remain loyal to Emperor Finn, and the ideals of Pure Humanity and Church Militant. The illusion of the false Owen didn't fool us for a moment. We knew Shub trickery when we saw it. The true Owen would never reject our ideals. He was always an enemy of aliens and the AIs of Shub. Now do let's hurry along. You didn't really come down here for a drink and a game of cards, Brett, and you know it. You could have found them anywhere, if you'd really wanted to. No, whether you knew it or not, you were looking for us; because you know we're the winning side. Price's bunch of losers and freaks don't stand a chance against properly motivated Imperial armies.'

'Maybe,' said Brett. 'What exactly are you selling, Leslie?'

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'A chance to be legitimate again. To come back where you belong. I'll hook you up with the loyalist cause, even put you in contact with the emperor himself. Yes; I thought that would interest you. Come on, Brett; you don't belong with the traitor Deathstalker and his slut. They're going to lose and lose hard, and you know it. Mainly because the loyalist crew are going to seize control of all the starliners in this Fleet long before we get anywhere near Logics. We have no intention of fighting and dying for heretics. And remember; there is a hell of a big reward waiting for anyone who brings the Emperor the heads of the Deathstalker and Flowers. Half a million credits apiece.'

'What is it you people want from me?' said Brett, 'Not that I'm committing myself to anything, you understand, I'm just . . . listen-mine: '

Leslie shrugged. 'Information, to begin with. Mostly concerning the Deathstalker and Flowers. When they're at their weakest, and in our off guard.'

'What about John Silence?' Rose said suddenly, and both men lumped a little. 'He is a legend.'

'Is he hell,' said Leslie, curling his lip. 'He's just an old merchant nader with delusions of grandeur. Playing Santa Claus at the Coronation wasn't enough for Samuel Chevron, oh no, he has to have John bloody Silence. You'll notice he was careful not to go down to Mist world or Virimonde, where they

knew the man, and could have unmasked an imposter. No; the original John Silence was a good military man, and unwaveringly loyal to the Throne.'

'Fifteen million credits apiece,' said Brett. 'I have to say ... I am leuipled. What do you think, Rose?'

'You will decide for both of us, Brett, as you always do. I have never cared which side I'm on, as long as I get to kill a whole bunch of people.'

'Predictable,' said Brett. 'But still upsetting/ Uesides,' Rose said thoughtfully. 'I've always wanted to know whether I could take the Deathstalker.'

'Join us/ said Leslie. 'Soon there will be an uprising on every Man-miser in the Fleet. Loyal crewmembers will position themselves i<> MI ike clown every officer who is not with us, and replace them \viih our own people. Then we shall take control of the Fleet, and piii lo diMili all disloyal elements/

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'Just like that/ said Brett, not even trying to keep the disbelief

from his voice.

'No. We know it will be a hard and vicious struggle. But there are more of us than you think, and we have God and the Emperor on

our side/

'Rose and I need to talk about this for a moment/ said Brett, and Leslie politely stepped back a way so Brett and Rose could have some privacy. Brett scowled. 'I always did think the Fleet surrendered to Owen too easily. If there really are as many fanatics as this guy makes out, they could just pull this off. The Deathstalker's a hell of a fighter, but even he couldn't take on the Fleet by himself.

'And those rag-bag ships from Mistworld and Virimonde wouldn't stand a chance either. The rebellion could be over before it even got started - suddenly I haven't got a clue what to do for the best This is why I hate being on a starship! There's nowhere to run! Why did they have to give me a choice over which side to be on? Finn's a bastard and a monster, but I'm damned if I'm going to be on the losing side . . . Would he really take us back? He might; all he ever cared about was winning. Oh God, my stomach hurts. It never bothered me when I was with Lewis. I think some of his moral certainties rubbed off on me/

'Can we trust Finn to keep his word afterwards?' said Rose, as always getting to the heart of the question. 'Can we trust him about the reward, and our safety?'

'Probably not. Unless . . . we can negotiate from a position of strength. Stay well out of his reach at all times, and then use the reward money to disappear among the border worlds . . /

'Is that what you want to do?'

'Well, not want exactly. Finn's an evil piece of shit, and strange with it, but he could win this war. And I have no intention of dying gloriously for a lost cause, no matter who my ancestor was. But on the other hand, I like Lewis. Even admire him, I suppose. He's a genuine hero, the real deal, just like my ancestors, Jack Random and Ruby Journey. It feels . . . right, being at a Deathstalker's side. If only he didn't keep dragging me into danger all the time/

'But that's what heroes do/ said Rose.

'I know! I know. I admire Lewis, I really do, but ... I can't right now. I need to know, more. Follow my lead, Rose/

'Don't I always?'

They went over to join Leslie Springfield, who raised a polite eyebrow. Brett nodded jerkily. 'Lead the way. I'm not promising anything, mind; but I'll listen/

'Once you know the truth, of who and what we are, you realise we can't just let you walk away?*' said Leslie.

'I know how the game is played/ said Brett. 'Lead on. I want to know everything/

And he only had to push Leslie Springfield with just the lightest inuch of his Maze-backed compulsion.

They ended up in a deserted weapons bay, where a large crowd of

loyalists had gathered to meet Brett. He tried to do a surreptitious

head count, but there were too many of them. And every single one

nl i hem studied Brett coldly as he entered. He gave them his most

pi<Sessional trustworthy smile, and allowed Leslie to lead him and

Nose to the guest seats of honour. Someone presented Brett with a

is of surprisingly good wine, and someone else offered him a

ii, which Brett took because he always took anything that was

"lined for free. He sat down, and Rose took up a position standing

idc him, her hands resting on her weapons belt. Everyone was

j polite to her. Various people took it in turns to present Brett

ih loyalist propaganda and harsher Pure Humanity and Church

Militant beliefs, and he smiled and nodded in all the right places.

i hr j'.ncral pattern of the planned uprising was explained to him,

i"ii not the details, that would only come later, once he'd com-

miiird himself to the cause. Brett drank his wine and smoked his

il^ai, and listened carefully to everything that was said to him. His

i. 'in.i, 11 <K hed, but he kept it out of his face. Finally, they ran out of

11 niir . io say to him, and Brett looked out on a crowd of intent faces.

Mn',< was a comforting presence at his side, but Brett really didn't

Ilkr i he odds, So when he was asked, politely but very pointedly,

\\ lirihr was In or Out, Brett nodded decisively and said/'m in.

Mfirir was a general murmur of relief, and the crowd relaxed a llnlf Sc\ rial people wanted to shake Brett by the hand, and he let ih. m No one wank'd to shake Rose's hand. Leslie came forward, • '!.I Minlrd meaningfully at Brett.

ir drliijhU'd lo have you and Rose aboard, of course, but you tin midrisiaml thai we nrrd you lo prove1 your commitment to the

'I thought that might be coming/ said Brett. 'What exactly did you have in mind?'

The crowd parted as several marines brought forward a man, bound and gagged. They forced the man on to his knees, and his eyes looked pleadingly at Brett.

This fool thought he could be a spy among us, and report back to the false Silence/ said Leslie. 'Kill him/

And Brett knew that even hesitation would damn him. 'Of course/ he said. 'Rose; do the honours, if you would/

Rose smiled happily, and everyone near her shied away. She stepped forward, grabbed the prisoner's head with both hands, and ripped it away with one savage movement. The body toppled backwards, fountaining and spraying blood everywhere. The crowd around him fell back, uttering shocked cries. There were even more cries of shock and distress as Rose kissed the severed head on the lips and then casually threw it away. She bent over the headless body, plunged her hand into its back, pulled out the still pulsing heart, and started to eat it. Several people vomited noisily, and a hell of a lot more looked as if they wanted to.

'Nicely done/ said Brett, in a very nearly normal voice. 'But do remember to brush your teeth with especial vigour tonight. Anything else we can do for you, Leslie?'

'No . . . not for the moment/ said Leslie, perhaps not as strongly as he would have liked. 'We've set up a secure channel, so that you can talk to us freely at any time, without it showing up on the comm officer's instruments. We can also arrange ship-to-ship communications, as necessary. But now; we have

someone special who wants to welcome you to the cause/

A viewscreen flared into life on the wall beside them, and Brett's heart jumped painfully in his chest as the classically handsome features of the Emperor Finn Durandal appeared on the screen, smiling warmly.

'Ah, my dear Brett/ said the Emperor. 'So good to see you safe and sound, after so many adventures. Come home, dear boy, and all shall be forgiven. We'll be together again, just like the old times. Won't that be fun? You know we belong together. We are the same kind, we see the world in the same way. Why did you leave me, Brett?'

'Because ... I thought I saw better opportunities/ said Hreii.

'Ah, I should have known. Return to me, and you shall never have to want for money again. I shall deny you nothing. And ... do bear in mind how easy it was for me to find you, and arrange this little chat. My people are everywhere, loyal unto death and beyond. Say that you'll be mine again, dear Brett/

'Why not?' said Brett. 'After all I've been through with Lewis, after all I've done for him, I'm still not one penny richer than when I started/

'Am I welcome too?' said Rose.

'Why, of course, dear Rose/ said Finn. 'I have missed your blessed madness most of all/

'Will I get to kill lots of people?'

'Lots and lots/ said Finn.

'Good to be back/ said Rose.

Admiral John Silence sat straight-backed in his command chair on

the bridge of the Havoc. It felt good, to be back in the military. To be involved, to be hands-on, instead of pulling strings from the shadows as Samuel Chevron. He'd never felt entirely comfortable in his role as Humanity's secret protector. He'd always been happier when

things were out in the open. He could do subtlety, but it didn't come naturally to him. And he enjoyed the open respect he got from the crew of the Havoc. He might not be as much of a legend as the Messed Owen, but he was one of them; a military legend. Which was why they had preferred to be led by him, rather than by the ex-* lumpion with the legendary name.

Silence turned to his comm officer. 'Check the formation of the Heel. Make sure that all the Mistworld ships are holding their positions/

'Yes, Admiral/

'While he didn't really need to be told. He always knew when some "I Ins ships were going astray. His two times in the Madness Maze h.M/I luncyd him, enlarged him, if not so ostentatiously as Owen and the others. The layout of his Fleet was as familiar to him as his "\n lully. He also knew that there were disloyal elements among in « icws. Knew it even before the loyalist graffiti began appearing

\ ii below. He had security people looking into the problem, but h» doubled ii would come lo anything. If the loyalists were a real piuMem, he would have known by now. Silence' knew all kinds of

things; except how to be the legend that everyone else* needed him to be. He was a soldier, and that was all that ever really mattered to him, but he'd already noticed some of his crew studying him covertly, hoping for miracles, and interpreting even his most innocent remarks as signs or prophecies. It was to avoid just such nonsense that he'd faked his death over a hundred years ago.

Captain Price had a tendency to hover at his side, but Silence kept him busy with other duties. Partly because he needed someone willing to deal with all the scutwork that Silence couldn't be bothered with, like seeing all the loyalist graffiti were cleaned off the lower-deck walls, but mostly because Captain Price got on Silence's nerves. He was just too amiable, too obliging, always too ready and eager to serve. Silence knew his sort. They'd been rife in Lionstone's day. Political soldiers, ready to bow with every breeze, and side with whoever looked most like the winning team. Such men were to be made use of, but never trusted.

And besides; there was room for only one person at Silence's side. Ever since he'd taken his place in the command chair on the bridge of the Havoc, Silence had seemed to feel Investigator Frost standing beside him, as she always had. Silence didn't believe in ghosts, but sometimes the sense of her presence was so real, so overwhelming, he felt he could just reach out and touch her. It had been over two hundred years since Frost had died in his arms, in Lionstone's terrible Court, cut down by Kit Summerlsle, the infamous Kid Death. She had bled to death in his arms, and there had been nothing he could do, nothing at all.

I wanted to die. Captain. Surely you knew that? Her calm dry voice was perfectly clear.

Hush. Investigator. I've got enough problems, without the dead popping round for a chat.

Don't flatter yourself, Captain. I'm here because you need me just as you always did. Never could resist backing the long odds, could you? It's a wonder to me you 've lasted as long as you have. Haven 't you fought enough battles, old man?

I belong here, Silence thought stubbornly. I was always at my best with a starship under my command.

Still looking for a good death. Captain? For a cause worth dying for?

Maybe, Investigator. He looked around, carefully casual, but of course she wasn't there. Silence felt himself shrink a little, in his

« II.MI Nol ,i legend, nol even »i IUTO. Jusl dii old, lired num, hearing \« MI cv (>u v//; yon hrouylit the Ashrai back from extinction, and revitalised ihfii \\vrlui. You gave new life to the Recreated and all their worlds. Why ./,/// 7 you bring back the only woman I ever really loved? I never thought to ./-./ tiiit! hy the time I did it was too late. You were gone. Everyone lost \i '///«v//r /'// the Rebellion; I know that. But I gave so much; couldn 't I have //•/i/ just one small thing for myself? •

There was never anyone else in his long life, after Frost. Not had he sworn a vow, or anything like that; but because he'd married her the same way about anyone else. There'd never been anyone like the tall, unbending, magnificent Investigator Frost. They'd made an excellent partnership in their time, achieved many hard things, and more than a few ignoble ones. Life had been like a dream, under Lionstone XIV. He'd never told Frost how he felt about her. She was an Investigator, and all such emotions were alien to him. Probably.

And then, it had been so hard to stay young, while everyone else grew old around him. All his old friends died, and he never seemed to have much in common with the new people springing up around him. Even his daughter died. Diana Vertue, also known as Jenny. They'd never been . . . close, but he still missed her. He had seen the birth and flowering of a Golden Age, and had found pride in being Humanity's secret guardian. Always believing he might be wrong. Always hoping he was wrong. And now here he was, a soldier again and heading into battle, knowing that the only sure thing in this new rebellion was that good men and women were bound to die, on both sides.

Diana Vertue, much to his surprise, had been reported back from the dead and extremely active on Logres. Reborn from the collective consciousness of the oversoul, at long last. Silence wasn't sure how to feel about that. He'd known, the moment she reappeared in the physical world; like a light suddenly going on in the dark. According to the latest reports, she'd joined up with Douglas Campbell in the army. Typical of his daughter: always had to be right in the middle of things, doing her best in her own destructive way. He'd never had talked to her mentally, but even after all these years they were still awkward with each other. Too much pain and blame between them, too many bad memories. It was enough for him to know that she was back, and doing the right thing. He'd talk to her

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again after they'd taken Logres back from Finn. By then, they should have something in common to talk about.

He could have spoken to her while she was still a part of the oversoul Massmind, for that matter, but he never had. It would have felt too much like talking to a ghost.

Thoughts of the past turned his mind in a new direction. He'd already tried several times to contact his old friend Carrion, on the planet Unseeli, but there was never any response, on any comm channel. Silence was pretty sure Carrion could hear him; he was just being stubborn. The last time they'd met, Carrion had declared himself utterly divorced from Humanity, and entirely content with his new alien Ashrai form. Silence hadn't been particularly surprised by the transition. Carrion had had an Ashrai soul, even when he was still a man called Sean. That's how they'd ended up on different sides of a war. But Silence decided his need to talk was more important than Carrion's need to show off his independence, so he reached out with his Maze-enhanced mind, and his thoughts flew across all the many light years to the planet Unseeli.

Silence had been through the Madness Maze twice. He could have been as great as the others; but he thought it was more important to be human.

Come on. Sean; stop being obstinate and talk to me, or I'll slap you a good one.

The craggy gargoyle face of an Ashrai appeared suddenly on the main bridge viewscreen, startling the hell out of everyone. Especially the comm officer, who knew for a fact that the signal wasn't coming in through any of his channels. Several of the bridge crew looked as if they'd like to run and hide, but they took their cue from Silence, reassured by his calm manner. The gunnery officer surreptitiously searched for a target outside the ship, getting really upset as she discovered there was nothing at all out there. The Ashrai glowered at Silence.

'Hello, John. I just knew you'd be back to bother me. Your thoughts feel . . . different. But then, we've both been through a lot of changes. I'm just more open about mine. What do you want, John?'

'Hello, Sean. Old friend, old enemy. Is there a name for our relationship? Who else could we talk to, about all the things we've been through? Who else would understand?'

(Hello to the point, old man.'

I'm in charge of a whole Fleet, Sean, and I'm heading back to I O^1 es to ram it down the Emperor's throat. I thought you and your people might like to tag along.'

The Ashrai want nothing to do with Humanity. They have not !oipollen how you gave the order to make them extinct, all those ye,us ago.'

'Oh, come on; think how good it would feel to stick it to the Impire home world, after all these years.'

There is that/ said Carrion. Truth be told, I've been waiting for \<Mir call. Now that Owen is back . . . it's time for everything to i lunge, again. We all owe him so much.'

'And perhaps a favour for an old friend?'

'Yes, John,' the Ashrai said kindly. 'Perhaps.'

Hut's what I wanted to hear,' said Silence. He studied the i;oyle face thoughtfully. 'Do I have your word that you'll keep I he Ashrai under control, when we get to Logres?'

'Of course, John. Don't you trust me?'

'Now that's a bloody silly question.'

They laughed together, and the sound of their laughter had a lot in Common.

<.ipuin Price was mooching about in the lower decks of the Havoc. He was not especially interested in trapping or turning in those of In-, new who hadn't been as ready to change sides as he was, but • iiue ihe Admiral had made it very clear that he wasn't welcome «MI ilu* bridge, Price was killing time, until the moment came to do ft »nie real work. He studied the latest batch of loyalist graffiti on the <•! walls, and couldn't resist a sneer. It was a bit late to be falling

I MI k on Church Militant cant. Anyone with half the brains he was IMMII with could see which way the wind was blowing. The blessed Owen was back, in all his glory. What could petty politics matter, in

It is likely that? And there was no denying that Price had burned his enemies very thoroughly, when he shot the previous Admiral in the back of the head. She'd been one of Finn's political appointees, and IMI king mad with it; absolutely no one had been sorry to see the last "I hei.

With Admiral Silence all but living in the command seat, Price had busied himself by keeping track of what was happening back on

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Logres. He and the comm officer, Charlton Vu, had rigged up a very secure link between the Havoc and one of the new rogue news sites now operating from the Rookery. Their editorial policy seemed to be: get the story out as fast as possible, and to hell with whoever it upsets. Price had actually spoken to the main face of one news site, a charming if somewhat startling young lady called Nina Malapert, and in return for first-hand reports of the return of Owen (An exclusive! Nina said, loudly enough to make Price wince) she kept him up to date on the growing rebellion on Logres. She'd even promised to arrange a direct line to King Douglas. Price couldn't resist a small smile. That should put him in good with Silence. Nina was pretty sure the comm channel hadn't been cracked by Finn's security people, because it was derived from alien tech, donated by the alien presence in the Rookery.

Price hadn't even known there was an alien presence in the Rookery. You learned something new every day.

(And of course, if things did start going really badly for the rebel Fleet, Price could always hand this information over to the Emperor's people, as proof that he'd been working as a double agent all along. Price believed in thinking ahead, and covering his back.)

He wandered around the lower decks for a while longer, but no one wanted to talk to him, and he was actually quite relieved when word came through that Lewis Deathstalker and Jesamine Flowers had finally returned from Virimonde. Price ran all the way to the designated docking bay, to be sure he'd be the first officer to greet them. People remembered things like that. They were both clearly physically and emotionally exhausted, and all they really wanted to do was get back to their quarters and collapse, but they politely made a little time for Price.

'I have news of King Douglas, and the fight for freedom in the Parade of the Endless,' Captain Price said grandly, and was quietly satisfied at how quickly that grabbed their interest. 'I have established a very secure comm link with rebel forces in the Rookery. There is a young lady working a rogue news site there who can give you all the details, if you would like me to arrange something—'

'Show us,' said the Deathstalker, and there was something in his voice that made Price forget the rest of his speech and jump to obey. He patched his prearranged link into the viewscreen on the wall, and after being carefully rerouted through several masking con-

nections and cut-outs, Nina Malapert's face appeared on the screen. She saw Lewis and Jesamine staring back at her, and whooped loudly with joy, bobbing excitedly up and down in her chair while her tall pink mohawk flopped crazily from side to side.

The Deathstalker and the divat Major exclusive! Oh, all the other sites are going to be so sick!

'If we could just keep the celebrations to a minimum,' said Price, 'I'm sure he could be seen standing right next to the Death-•ii.ilker, 'I don't think we should test the security of this link with a (onversation one minute longer than absolutely necessary.'

'Yes,' said Lewis, 'Talk to me, Nina Malapert. What has happened in the city, since my enforced absence? What has happened to Douglas?'

'And Anne Barclay,' said Jesamine.

Nina's face fell. 'You haven't heard. I'm sorry. Anne Barclay is dead. Killed by falling masonry when Douglas busted out of his •.how trial and escaped. He was ever so upset about it. But the good news is that Douglas has made himself the leader of all rebel activity in the Rookery, and absolutely everyone is with him! He's so "" .piling. All the rogues, con men, fighters and criminals have com-IMlied into one great army, under his command. They're calling hou^las the King of Thieves these days, which is just so romantic! I M<| you want to speak to him? I'm sure I could set up something I* illy quite quickly.'

I evVis and Jesamine looked at each other for a long moment. 'Not jir.i yet/' said Jesamine.

'I don't think any of us would know what to say,' said Lewis. 'It's

• mm)'.!) that we're allies, for the moment/

' said Jesamine. 'Just tell him . . . we'll talk again, when we *HI meet in the Imperial Palace, on Logres/

M.ii Is in their private quarters, Lewis and Jesamine sat in silence for

• i»nr \while. They kept a cautious distance between them, separated IM nld memories and old hurts. The prospect of actually talking to |ion>;l.r, had opened up feelings they'd been too busy to examine or

ii .((('knowledge, for far too long. Once upon a time there had

I^rn IMIII j'.ood friends, Douglas and Lewis, Jesamine and Anne,

Imihlrd loy.eihei hy love and loyally, determined to change the

M Im ilu- hriin Itiii instead the world h.id thanked them,

sh<iUcTmg (heir fellowship; ,md now one of llicm w.is de.ul, <ind things would never be the sdine
üigciin.

'I can't believe Anne is gone/ Jesamine said finally. 'She was always the great survivor. I thought she'd

outlast all of us/

'I still can't believe she let Finn get to her/ said Lewis. 'She was the smartest of all of us; if anyone should have seen through Finn, it was her. Why did she turn on us? We all did everything we could for her . . . and she betrayed each of us, in turn. There are even rumours surfacing that she had something to do with Emma Steel's death/

'Perhaps . . . Finn listened to her/ said Jesamine. 'And perhaps we didn't listen enough. There were hints, towards the end, that she wasn't happy, and hadn't been for some time. That maybe we never understood her half as well as we thought we did.'

'Anne and I were kids together on Virimonde/ said Lewis. 'We did everything together. I thought we'd be friends till the day we died. We would have fought for each other, died for each other; and then . . . something changed. Perhaps we grew up. Grew apart. I always believed that when I finally got back to Logres, and overthrew Finn, I'd be able to talk her round. Bring her back to sense and sanity. Apologise for whatever it was I did wrong, that drove her away from me. And now I never will/

'She was the best friend and manager I ever had/ said Jesamine. 'But she always made her own choices, and insisted on going her own way. Even when everyone who cared about her could see it was the wrong way. You know; she's the first person close to me that I've lost in this war. I feel . . . cold/

'I lost my mother and my father, my family and my home/ said Lewis. That's the nature of war: to lose all the things you care for most/

'We still have each other/ said Jesamine, looking at him for the first time.

'Yes/ said Lewis. He smiled at her, but secretly he was thinking Deathstalker luck. Always bad.

'When we get back/ said Jesamine, tentatively. 'When we're back on Logres, and it's all over . . . what are we going to do, Lewis? About Douglas, about us?'

'He was always my closest friend/ said Lewis.

'He was my fiance/

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you ever

I nrvri iiKMiiil in him him/ s.iiil .Jesjmine. 'lie wds d good man, a hue num. He deserved heller Uuin what we did to him/

I always believed I would tear my own heart out, rather than see Douglas hurt/ said Lewis. 'As his Champion, I vowed to stand hri wren him and all harm. He was my friend, closer than a brother. \iul I hurl him like no one else could/

'The things we do for love/ Jesamine said tiredly. 'How can something so good cause so much pain?'

'Ah hell/ Lewis said, stretching slowly, 'It seems like another life now. We were all different people, then. If we do survive this war, neither of us, we still couldn't go back to our old lives, our old roles. We'd find them too restricting, too limited/

'Now there's a frightening thought/ said Jesamine. 'After all we've been through, I'm still me; aren't I? I still feel like me. And yet, I can feel the changes the Maze made in me still working. Both of us are already much more than we used to be. When does the PMKVSS stop? Does it ever stop? Are we going to end up Terrors, like I In/el? I don't want to be a monster, Lewis! I don't want to stop being me!'

Her voice rose, growing harsh and frightened. Lewis was quickly on her side, holding her in his arms, 'Hush, hush love. We're not

going to end up like Hazel. She was left alone, and half crazy. We love each other/

'Unless what if we lose each other, Lewis? What if one of us dies in this war, and one of us is left alone, and half crazy? What then?'

'You're being far too optimistic/ Lewis said dryly. The odds are high that all of us will be killed in the rebellion, and then we'll never have to worry about any of this/

'Oh, ho ho ho/ said Jesamine. 'Deathstalker humour/

Not all that far away, as hyperspatial travel went, the Emperor's Fleet was approaching the estimated position of the rebel Heel. The Imperial Fleet was huge, made up of every fighting ship linn could spare, all crewed by experienced officers, backed up by I.i.i id-core Pure Humanity and Church Militant fanatics. Finn would have liked more of his own people in charge, but this battle was too important to be trusted to the loyal but limited zealots he'd used to i i i lilt rate the Fleet command structure. The Imperial Fleet's orders

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were very simple. Stop the rebel Fleet before it got anywhere near Logres, at whatever cost, and crush the rebellion before it got properly under way. No surrender, no prisoners, no quarter. Just dead ships, blazing and tumbling in the long night, and a victory so terrible it would crush the spirits of anyone who even thought of standing against the Emperor Finn.

The rebel Fleet had been easy enough to locate. Finn knew Lewis would go home to Virimonde; he'd always been the sentimental sort. And so the Imperial Fleet sat and waited, hidden in hyperspace behind state of the art stealth screens, until the signal stopped coining from the Transmutation Engines around Virimonde. Now the huge army of Imperial starcruisers was moving in on its unsuspecting victims, and readying itself for battle. The Captains were resolute, the crews highly trained and motivated. Finn had put together the biggest concentration of firepower since Lionstone's

time.

All the ships observed strict comm silence. Ostensibly to maintain the element of surprise, and to prevent rebel spies from passing intelligence; but mainly so that the Imperial crews wouldn't be exposed to details of Owen Deathstalker's miraculous return. There were rumours of course, you couldn't stop rumours, but Finn wasn't taking any chances. The Captains could talk to each other on a heavily protected channel, but that was all. That was enough.

The Heritage was still with the Imperial Fleet. Both ship and crew were in urgent need of some down time and repair after their encounter with the Terror at Usher II, but . . . duty called. Captain Ariadne Vardalos sat wearily in her command chair, studying the makeup of the Imperial forces on her viewscreen. As one of the latest arrivals, she had a lot of catching up to do. She wasn't all that pleased with what she saw. The layout had a distinct air of improvisation. But then, it had been a long long time since anyone had fought a major space battle. She switched to a representation of the rebel Fleet's structure, according to the most recent information, and shook her head slowly.

'I know most of those ships/ she said to her Second-in-command Marcella Fortuna. 'I was at the Academy with some of their Captains! How could so many good people have turned traitor?'

Fortuna shrugged uncomfortably. 'Hard to say, Captain. No one ever considers themselves a traitor. We're all the heroes of our own

stories.' She pondered the matter for a while, aiming it over in her slow, methodical mind. 'Must be something to do with Owen's irimn. If that was a Shub trick, as the Emperor insists, maybe the A Is brainwashed them all.'

Captain Vardalos scowled. 'I know these people. If I could just

it's not like to them, I know I could talk them out of this. Make them see

how wrong they are. But we're forbidden to make contact.' She

- it's not like to them, I know I could talk them out of this. Make them see appear unsettled or uncertain before her crew. Especially just before a major engagement with the

- it's not like to them, I know I could talk them out of this. Make them see

'Any point in talking to the Admiral again?' said Fortuna. 'No,' Vardalos said reluctantly. 'Admiral Shapiro is old-school, nully by the book. He'd shoot his own family if the Emperor ordered it. He wouldn't even question an order, never mind issue a pending one.'

The rebel Fleet would appear to be a lot bigger than we want, he thought, 'Fortuna observed. Though far be it from me to say that our intelligence is anything less than perfect.'

well, heaven forbid,' said Vardalos. 'And just look at the things they're capable of in a light. CM's usual surprises they might have in store for us. Let us hope that our stealth fields continue to hide us until the last second before we attack. Because we're going to need

the advantage we can get.' 'We have to stop the rebel Fleet, Captain,' said Fortuna. 'And this

- INK kly as possible. The Empire can't afford to be distracted, with the in ioi still on its way.'

'I know that! Why don't they know that? A civil war is nuidness, MiidcT current conditions!'

'Under any conditions,' murmured Fortuna, with a signilir.mi look

i H i ourse,' said Vardalos. You never knew who might he lisirn iii};, ihescdays. And making notes.

'Almost makes you wish Owen was back, so he could deal with Hie Tenor/ said Fortune.

hon'l rven go there/ s.nd V.iul.ilos. 'Matters die eomplie.ned ,is they ,nr

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'But what if ... what if this battle wipes out both Fleets, Captain?' Fortuna said suddenly. 'What if there is no winner? Who then will protect our homeworld? From aliens, and rebels, and the coming of the Terror?'

That's why we have to win,' said Vardalos. 'Damn those rebel bastards, for putting us in this position! The rebellion must be put down. For the sake of all Humanity.'

Admiral Silence knew the Imperial Fleet was on its way. Its stealth fields couldn't hide it from his Maze-enhanced mind. Dead reckoning and a certain amount of creative thinking gave him a pretty good idea of where it was, and of its composition. He'd shared this knowledge with the rest of his own Fleet, and was a little dismayed at how quickly they all accepted his word. This legend of his was definitely getting out of control. He had his comm officer send out messages of friendship and offers for truce on all channels, but no one answered. Not even when Silence spoke to them personally, trying to trade on the power of his legend.

They must be listening,' he said finally, giving up. 'Why don't they believe me?'

'It is rather a lot to ask of them, Admiral,' said Captain Price, who had somehow found a reason to return to the bridge. 'Couldn't you . . . show them that it's really you? Perform some wonder to prove you really are who you say you are?'

'I don't do wonders,' said Silence. 'What do you want me to do? Stroll across the open space between us and hammer on their door, demanding to be let in? Actually, Carrion probably would have done just that. And Owen . . . but I'm me, and I've been a man too long to give up its comforts. Still, the Imperial ships are definitely out there. I can feel them. I know I could stop all this insanity, if I could only talk to them! We're all Navy men. We understand about the madness of politicians. But it seems there's no way out. Good men and women are going to die today, on both sides. God damn you to Hell, Finn Durandal.'

Price cleared his throat uncertainly. 'If you can feel the presence of the Imperial Fleet, Admiral, perhaps you could work with the ship's AI to plot out best-guess estimates for enemy ship positions and capabilities?'

'Not a bad idea, Captain. Ozymandius! Talk to me/

They waited, but there was no response. Silence called again, but his usually chatty AI was silent. With growing alarm, Silence discovered that the ship's AI wouldn't respond to any form of communication, on any level. Basic computer services continued to do their share of vital work like life support, artificial gravity and the engine- but all higher intelligence functions were gone. The machines still worked, but no one was home. Silence told his comm officer to check all the other ships in the rebel Fleet, and sat scowling in his command chair as the answers came flooding back. There wasn't a single cruiser in his Fleet with a working AI.

'Could it be sabotage?' said Price, 'Or some new weapon the Hun's turned up?'

'No,' Silence said slowly. 'I think it's simpler than that. I think something's happened to Shub. Every ship's AI is a sub-rogue. Mirrors of Shub. It's been that way for so long that we just assume it's granted/

'But what could have happened to them?' 'I don't know, Captain. But the odds are this is happening to the Imperial Fleet too; so we're equally disadvantaged! I haven't noticed yet. Price; get those backup systems online. We can't afford to be caught short when the battle starts/

'Of course, Admiral/ Price hesitated. 'Even with our AI up and running at full capacity, our options will be severely limited. We'll be going into action crippled/

'So will they, Captain. Serves us all right for growing too dependent on Shub. Take the command chair for

a while, Price, I n discuss this with the Deathstalker/

explained the situation to Lewis and Jesimine. leslessly up and down their quarters. Lewis tried calling <>ui in iluou^h his mental link, but there was no reply. Sileme lm,ill\ r.iouiu] to a halt, and looked hopefully at Lewis and Jesmmir

Sony, Admiral; this is all news to us/ said Jesimine. 'Why would ' .huh .ih.iuion us?'

Could something luive happened lo them?' s.rid Silence. 'II linn l.miu'lml ,m .HliU'k on their home' world; could they he dc.id '

II linn lud ships that powerful, he'd h.ive sent them .illei us/ •..ml Lewis. 'No; the' Ms must h.ivr j^one into the M.ulness M,i/e I I new we should never h,we lell llicm llicie .ilone. All they've <\c i

cared about is transcendence. It must have proved too great a temptation/

'It's not just the Fleet's AIs,' said Silence. 'We've been picking up reports from all over the Empire. Everything that Shub had a hand in has stopped working, from air traffic control down to sewer maintenance robots. It's chaos on every industrialised world.'

'Presumably everything will start working again when they come out/ said Lewis.

'Not necessarily/' said Silence. 'If you're right about what's happened, it'll depend what comes out of the Maze. Who knows what they'll evolve into?'

'Could the Maze have destroyed them?' said Jesamine. 'Or driven them crazy again?'

'No way of knowing/' said Lewis. 'The Maze does what it does, and we never know why. But we can't allow ourselves to be distracted. We have a battle to fight/'

'Where are your appalling friends?' Silence said suddenly. 'The con man and the psycho? No one seems to have seen or heard of them in ages/'

'Probably trying to break into the med dispensers again/' said Jesamine. 'Brett always gets a little nervous before . . . well, anything, really. No doubt he and Rose will turn up once the action starts. If only because they hate to miss out on anything/'

Silence sighed, and sat down on the edge of the unmade bed. He looked suddenly older, and very tired. 'Pitched battle with the Imperial Fleet seems inevitable now. I've been teaching my Captains what tactics I can; I was shocked by how much had been forgotten. It's been so long since the Navy faced a serious threat that they've got rusty. They don't even run full-scale battle manoeuvres any more. No starcruiser's fired on another in two hundred years. The only good news is that Finn's Captains will be just as rusty as ours/'

'Let's just hope our Captains are faster learners/' said Lewis.

Finn's loyalists were meeting down by the Havoc's engine bays. Apparently the strange radiations sleeted continuously from the ship's stardrive made any kind of tech eavesdropping impossible. Brett was there, very much against his better instincts, and hoped they were right. There was no way he'd ever be able to talk his way out of this. He tried to stick to the middle of the crowd, putting as

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nuiy people iis possible between him jnd the engines. He'd hc.iid •ihoni stardrive radiation, and had horrible visions of all his extremit-i- lolling and dropping oil in the night. Leslie Springfield was right iHII i here in front, of course, haranguing the gathered faithful. They ic responding well, cheering his every inflammatory statement. Midi checked that Rose was behaving herself, standing bored but p.Hicnt at his side, and then looked inconspicuously about him. MM ic were a lot of people here. Far more than he'd suspected. 11 n ml reds of men and women, from all ranks and stations. The Havoc 11.id ,1 real problem on its hands, and quite possibly the other star-i MIISCIS loo. A few faces looked back at him suspiciously. Brett gave iIM-IM his best reassuring smile, and made himself concentrate on \\\ Iui Leslie was saying.

H seemed that the Owen that had appeared to the Fleet off Hadcn li.nl hern nothing more than a trick, just a Shub illusion, intended lo

11,ui everyone from their seizing control of the Madness M.i/e (he AIs were trying to steal Humanity's rightful chance for Ti.ms

• • ndcnee. The AIs wouldn't be able to transcend, of course, onl\ In1 1ii,ins could do that, but once they'd failed the AIs mighi dci nle in

any the Maze, on the grounds that if they couldn't imiiMcm llnm.mity shouldn't be allowed to either. The crowd responded

•uly. They understood that kind of thinking. It was wluii il \\mild luv done. Leslie went on, speaking persuasively. Il w«is

il he said, that the forthcoming clash between the two He

i">uld hr decided as quickly as possible, so that the vidois could

i' HUM lo lladen and rescue theMadness Maze from the trc\uhei01 r>

I he crowd cheered and roared, and Leslie let them. Brett didn't

I now wh.il lo believe. He'd heard about the starcruisers' AIs goiml.

ollhiic Tlun had to mean something. He realised Leslie was spe.iking

MI ,mti paid attention. He was explaining that he'd spoken

oiully with the Emperor Finn, who had authorised and ordiced

- ni^hi ollhe long knives on every starcruiser in the rebel Heel. Any

ci nni known to be loyal to the Emperor was to be killed, slim k

NII without warning, all in the one night; and then rcpLued hy

ilr,is. It would he a coup, a sudden transition of power, and lthe

kmle would he slopped helorc il had even hegnn. It was much

hciici ih,in ,i j'.ener.il uprising; this way only the traitors would have

h< vvilh no need lor more casuallii's.

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Brett found himself nodding. This had till been very carefully thought out. It could work. Certainly the crowd was eating it all up with spoons, actually straining at the leash to get their hands on officers they despised. Brett had been worried that Leslie might call on him to use his powers of persuasion and compulsion, to sway the minds of the doubtful, but to his great relief it seemed he might not be needed after all. He'd only just started to relax when he discovered that Leslie had stopped talking, and everyone was staring at him.

Oh shit. What did I just miss? Where's the nearest exit?

'Brett Random and Rose Constantine/ said Leslie, smiling down on them. To you is given the most honourable and most dangerous assignment. It will be your responsibility to kill the traitor Death-stalker and his slut. You are the only ones who can get close enough, and the only ones powerful enough to remove these two obstacles to our glorious triumph. They must be removed, or all our plans will come to nothing. Do you foresee any problems with carrying out this mission, Brett?'

'Problems? Me?' said Brett, trying hard to sound confident and devil-may-care. 'No. No problems.'

'It's about time,' said Rose, almost languidly. 'I need to go one on one with the Deathstalker. Find out once and for all which of us is the better fighter. And now we've both been through the Maze, it should be an especially . . . intense match. I can almost taste the blood. God; it makes me feel so hot

People around her were backing away. Brett felt like joining them.

'You will be well rewarded afterwards,' said Leslie, just a little hoarsely, as he tried to get things back on line again. 'You will be honoured heroes of the new order, and decorated by the Emperor himself.'

'So?' said Rose.

'What about John Silence?' Brett said quickly. People in the crowd murmured the ancient, legendary name.

'We will deal with the Admiral/ said Leslie. 'He claims to be Navy, one of us, but he is not. Just a jumped-up merchant trader, tarnishing a legend.'

'He does seem to have . . . powers,' Brett pointed out diffidently.

'Then we will drag him down, drive a stake through his heart,

if body and scallci ihe ashes lo space/ said Leslie. 'We are (he

and our l.nih will sustain us/

v/ von ///</// /m', thought Brett, but had enough sense not lo say ii When does the uprising start, Leslie-?'

'It has already started/ Leslie- said, smiling at Brett's reaction. 'Our people in the comm section have already taken control, spreading ihe word through the ships in the Fleet. The Mistworld and \ iiiinonde trash are cut off from the starcruisers. By the time they i>me out what's happening, it will be far too late. And we will deal \\iih those traitors at our leisure. For now the killing has bc^im. Hie i idling of the ungodly. Let us go forth and join them. Blood shall How, bodies shall fall, and Pure Humanity and the Church Militani .ball triumph at last!'

<)// shit, thought Brett, as the crowd erupted into cheers. Wlnil <A> / i/<> //(Mr '

in ned to the bridge of the Havoc, Silence realised almosi MM Mirdiatcly that something was wrong when the com MI ollun lepoied that all the usual ship-to-ship chatter had suddenh < rased. Silence tried to raise the Havoc's comm centre, and couldii i \ en interior communications were down. Silence sent runner. HIM lo discover what the hell was going on, and alert his sciimi\ people. Something bad was happening aboard his ship. He could leel it. Reports began coming in slowly, of widespread ail-. <oi •ahoiage, of officers found murdered at their posts, of lightui}; MI ihe sled corridors. The ship's Armoury had been broken into, ami all kinds of weapons seized] If Silence hadn't acted iminediai. nn his instincts, most of his people would have had no warning ai all

His lirst thought was that somehow the Havoc had been boarded by Imperial agents from the opposing Fleet, but not even the .iulllcsl attack craft could have sneaked up on Silence's ship with him knowing.

The comm officer managed to get the security CMS back on line, and soon they were watching fierce lighting back and forth in all parts of the ship. Many of the attai keis Pure Humanity and Church Militant sashes, and shouted out iheir cold and vicious slogans as they fought, shooting at anyone who vvdsn't them. Silence cursed himself. He'd thought allowing ibe i;iiil(ili and loud talk would act as a safety valve, letting the

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frustrations out before they could build. But it seemed he'd seriously underestimated the problem.

He sent out repair techs to deal with the sabotage, backed up by armed security men. The ship had to be protected first. Silence reached out with his mind. The Imperial Fleet was getting really close now. He had to put down the loyalist rebellion before Finn's ships got within firing range. He watched his screens helplessly as friends and fellow workers turned on each other, with guns or knives or whatever came to hand. Great acts of heroism and treachery were performed in the gleaming steel corridors, and the blood flowed thickly. There were bodies everywhere. The fighting was fierce and brutal. Faith in the Church Militant fuelled one side, and faith in the blessed Owen fired the other. There was no meeting ground, no possibility for mercy.

Silence threw himself out of his command chair, a moment before an energy beam seared through the air where he'd just been sitting. He hit the ground rolling and was quickly back on his feet, even as the energy beam flashed on to blow out a console on the other side of the bridge. Flames rose up and smoke billowed out. Alarms went off, too late. Unfamiliar faces were spilling on to the bridge, guns in hand, their faces twisted with hatred and loathing. Silence shot the nearest through the chest, and the energy beam punched right through him, to take out the man behind. Other officers were rising from their consoles, groping for weapons. Silence had already drawn his sword and charged the mutineers before him, moving so fast they couldn't draw a bead on him. He raged among them; his sword rising and falling impossibly quickly, slicing through flesh and bone alike. He was fast and strong, and his victims cried out in shock and horror as they realised they didn't stand a chance against him, for all their numbers. They kept coming, firing their guns almost blindly now, and more consoles exploded all across the bridge. Smoke was thick on the air, despite the extractor fans. Silence laughed breathlessly as he cut men down. It felt good to have something solid to fight, after so long. Some of the enemy were chanting prayers, and even exorcisms. Silence killed them anyway. And in the end, he stood alone among piles of bodies, blood running thickly from his swordblade, and they hadn't touched him once. The blood that soaked his uniform, and had spattered across his face, was all theirs. Silence looked around at his bridge crew, and

saw shock and horror in their faces, at what he'd done.

'Get used to it,' he said harshly. This is what war means. Comm

..linn; gel me contact with the rest of the Meet. The Imperul ships will hr here soon, and I need to know who I can rely on. Security; } ;u,ud dll entrances to the bridge. And somebody put out those lues ,iii(I I urn the damned alarms off!

lie sank back into his command chair, while his crew hurried to uliry. Captain Price watched.him with wide, almost frightened eyes, •ilriuv ignored him. He realised he was still holding his sword, ,iml ,i,n led cleaning the blade with a cloth.

Hood work, Captain, said Investigator Frost. Good to see you haven i /!./<>//(•// everything I taught you.

Is that why you're back? thought Silence. Because death is so ir/r dot*

tall of us?

I ewis Deathstalker and Jesamine Flowers left their qiurieis ih<

.....inrni they heard the alarms sound, sword and gun ,ilie,id\ m

11,11 id. Which meant they surprised the small crowd of nun MM who'd come to watch them die. Lewis and Jesamine ch.iiij'.rd iln . mud immediately, and soon the corridor was full of the sound <il

hing blades, and the screams of the dying. There WJMI'I MUM It mom io manoeuvre in the cramped space, but Lewis diul JesamilK didn i need it. They were both inhumanly fast and iui|»uv,il»\

ing, .ind they hacked and cut their way through thr I.nun* s ,is ihouj'Ji they were back breaking trail in the jungles of Sh.imli.il Aller everything they'd faced, a crowd of armed men was nothing, mm Random watched it all from a concealed side entrance holding Rose firmly by one arm. The plan had been for him ,md Nose io attack Lewis and Jesamine from the rear while they vv< i< dr.n,uted by the crowd; but Brett just couldn't do it. His stoni.uli |i lud so badly he was almost bent in two, and besides; he put m» l.mil 111 linn's promises of rewards and safety. Rose strained ,ir,,mr,i in . hold, Inn he knew she'd follow his lead. She'd got used to having linn do .ill i he thinking for both of them. So Brett waited a while, i io he sure of which way the fight was going, and once it w«is . l« ,u ihr mutineers were losing, he ran forward to back up I .rwis M»d les.imine, Rose moving just a little confusedly at his side. The lorn ol i hem quickly finished off the last lew loyalists. Brett wds ,iii|Mr.nl Io lind (lull his slom.u h h.ul stopped hurting already. Me \\\\\\\\\\ mil have el conscience, but apparently his stomach did. He'd

' lot ID something ahoul that.

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(Besides; he liked Lewis. And those Church Militant and Pure Humanity zealots had got right up his nose.)

Lewis looked at Brett. 'Do you have any idea of what's going on?'

'Loyalist elements trying for a coup/ Brett said crisply. 'We'd better help out where we can/

Lewis nodded and set off down the corridor, Jesamine padding eagerly at his side. Brett and Rose followed after. Rose was frowning.

'I know/ said Brett. 'Just trust me and go along, for now. I'll explain later/

'I wanted to kill Lewis/ said Rose, just a little sulkily.

There'll be other times. For now, kill the loyalists. As many as you like/

Rose looked at him. 'Only for you, Brett. Only for you/

The fighting in the corridors quickly fell apart, once Lewis and the others joined in. No one could stand against them. The mutineers lost all confidence, having failed to kill most of the officers they'd targeted, and soon they were on the run everywhere. They came together for one last push, and actually succeeded in briefly separating Lewis from Jesamine.

He cut and hacked fiercely about him, desperately trying to reach her, but the Church Militant fanatics packed tightly round him, their faces filled with the frustrated fury of animals who can sense their imminent death. They no longer cared about their cause, or even about winning; all they wanted to do was bring their hated enemy down with them. New strength flooded through Lewis as he saw Jesamine being carried further away by the press of milling bodies, and he slammed right through the men before him, throwing their broken bodies aside like so many rag dolls.

Jesamine fought doggedly on, faster and stronger than any of those who leapt and howled around her, but in the end the sheer weight of the crowd backed her up against a steel wall. She looked for Lewis, but he was too far away. Rage flooded through her and she opened her mouth and sang. The terrible song cut through her attackers like a blade. Their eyes burst and blood ran from their ears. Some fell dead from heart attacks, and others went mad in a moment. The steel corridor was full of awful screams, all of them drowned out by the deadly song. Even Lewis flinched away from the killing sound. In the space of a few moments, every mutineer in

ihf corridor wdsdrtul, thr pilrd-np bodies scattered the length of the tmrklor. Jesiimiiu' stopped singing, and swayed unsteadily on her I i-fi. Lewis was there in a moment, to hold and support her. She i lung lo him like a child.

'What has the Maze done to me, Lewis? To my voice? My songs Were never meant to do anything like that/

There will be time again for songs of love and joy/ said Lewis. I lui's what we're fighting for/

And that was when Brett and Rose appeared around the corner of 1 1 ic corridor to join them. Lewis gave them both a withering glare.

'Where the hell were you? What kept you?'

'Stomach ache/ said Brett. There's something on this ship that doesn't agree with me at all/

Some loyalists went down to the cargo bay of the Havoc, to kill the monsters from Shandrakor, in the name of Pure Humanity. The monsters tore them all apart, and then ate them. One of the mon-Iters sent up a comm request to the bridge: Send more loyalists.

\ml l hat was pretty much it, for the uprising. There never were as in, my of them as they'd hoped or believed. Only the really hard-core I. m, nics had been able to lie to themselves about what they'd seen, u -I ifn Owen Deathstalker appeared on all the bridges of all the ships ,n once, and called them to his side. He was the hero of prophecy, 1 1 ic legend returned, and most of the crews would rather have died ili. in fail him. The mutineers didn't take control of a single ship in i he u'hel Fleet. Good men and women had died, and there were lunik's and blood to be cleaned up, but the night of the long knives

few mutineers who survived the fighting were put out the airlock and told to walk home. There was no time for mercy or leniency, with the Imperial Fleet closing in. Lewis and Jesamine, and Rose gathered together on the Havoc's bridge, and there on the main viewscreen was the attacking Fleet, come out from behind their shields at last. There were starcruisers beyond counting, and more dropping out of hyperspace all the time. 'It is one hell of a big Fleet/said Brett.

And we are dangerously weakened/ said Silence. 'All our ships took some damage, and we lost a lot of crew. We're covering all the

main battle stations, for now, but I have no idea how long that will last once the shooting starts. Hopefully our opposite numbers don't know that. The Mistworld and Virimonde ships were unaffected, but I don't know how they'll stand up to Imperial starcruisers. If you've got any Maze-given aces to pull out of your sleeve, Deathstalker, this would be a really good time to reveal them.'

'Afraid not, Admiral/ said Lewis. 'It's all down to courage and honour now.'

'We're all going to die,' said Brett.

The Imperial Fleet fell upon the rebel ships with silent fury, all guns blazing, and in a moment the situation descended into chaos. Starships of all shapes and sizes flashed back and forth, manoeuvring in three dimensions, targeting objects of opportunity as they went. Force shields flared brightly, dissipating deadly energies as disrupter cannon fired in volleys, cascading brightly in the long night. Enough firepower opened up to scorch the life from a dozen worlds, and here and there ships exploded like novas as force shields overloaded and went down. Often the victorious ship had gone on to another engagement before it even saw the results of its attack.

With the ships' AIs down, concerted attacks were impossible. It was every ship for herself. Silence kept up an endless stream of orders, trying to enforce his combat strategies, but even he couldn't keep up with the state of battle. Basic computer targeting could give best estimates of where a ship would go next, but it was up to human gunners to hit the fleeting targets, preferably without hitting one of their own ships in the process. Men and women on both sides fired their guns with wild eyes and manic smiles, half out of their minds on adrenalin and battle drugs, operating as much by instinct * as training. Mistworld and Virimonde ships darted in and out of the chaos, running rings around the bigger starcruisers, showing unexpected speed and deadly aim. The people of Mistworld and Virimonde had trained to be warriors all their lives, and for them combat was like coming home. Their shields couldn't stand up to the occasional direct hit from starcruiser cannon, but they all fought and died with Owen's name on their lips, his family name their battle cry.

Deathstalker! Deathstalker!

Lewis and Jesamine were running down a corridor to reinforce a

gunnery crew when one of the shields shuddered, and a direct hit blew a hole right through the bulkhead. Air blasted out through the huge jagged gap, and Lewis and Jesamine were swept off their feet in a moment. The lights flickered and the gravity fluctuated as alarm sirens sounded, drowned out by the rush of air shrieking out through the hole in the wall. Jesamine tumbled towards it, turning head over heels, his voice lost in the bedlam, and threw himself in. Jesamine grabbed at the edge of the hole with one hand, hanging there, half in and half out. Lewis slammed against her, and grabbed one of her arms, only to cry out again as his side hit a sharp metal prong. The metal shard sank deep into his side. Lewis held desperately on to Jesamine's arm. She was already dangling in the cold vacuum. Only the steel spike in Lewis's side kept him hanging on to her. He fought desperately to draw a breath from the air passing past him. He slowly pulled Jesamine back, and when the disrupter cannon fired again, the whole bulkhead fell away, and the corridor opened up to space. Lewis and Jesamine ripped free from their precarious holds, and flew into the vacuum of space.

Lewis held on to Jesamine's arm as they turned slowly around the corner. The Havoc fell away behind them,

rushing on to hdn nil .lups. The battle raged silently around them, ships coming and vviuh dazzling
swiftness. Disrupter beams and flaring shidtK I-brighter than the stars. It was cold and silent, and Lewis
Idi MM,ill and unimportant. Just another piece of flotsam, llo.iiini: m tin night.

A ft era while, bethought Why aren't I dead? And thru he MMM, MIMIC specifically, Why isn't my
blood boiling in my veins? Why //,. my lungs collapsed? And why don't I feel any needto breathe."\\< real
i" •! clown to the wound in his side, and found it had already hc.ilr.i H. Idi <|iiile good, actually. He would
have liked to giggle hystciu ,ill\ Inn tluit would have to wait until later. He pulled Jesdininr In i to him, and
checked that she was all right too. They grin. «l iMiiluscldly at each other. And Lewis thought This is
<\\<•<\\' / •,\\ \\nivivcin open space!

/><>// start showing off, Jesamine's voice said firmly in his hc.ul.

/<•\' / can hear you! Can you hear me?

Ye\$l The Maze is just full of surprises, isn't it?

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Telepathy too! We can do anything!

I wouldn't go that far, sweetie. When I reach a point where I can eat anything I like and still not put on any weight, then I'll believe in miracles. But, since we're not dead after all, why don't we see if we can do some damage to the bad guys. See that ship over there? Let's pop over and ruin their day.

Sounds like a plan to me, said Lewis.

And all they had to do was think about it, and suddenly they were sailing across open space towards the Imperial ship they'd chosen. The Heritage was barreling along at full speed, but they caught up with her eerily fast. Her shields flared all the colours of the rainbow as they soaked up disrupter fire from every direction. Lewis slowed to match the ship's speed, alongside the hull, and then hit the force shield with his fist. The energies shuddered and rippled, but held together. Lewis and Jesamine hit the shield at the same time, and it collapsed. Lewis would have been seriously impressed, and a little worried, about the implications of that if he'd had the time, but he didn't so he just got on with it. He and Jesamine descended to the great steel curve before them, walked along the side of the ship until they came to an airlock, and then kicked it in.

Once they were past the airlock, they began breathing normally, again, as though they'd never stopped. Their hearing came back in a rush, and they both winced at the racket of overlapping alarm sirens. Lewis checked his hands, and then Jesamine's, but neither seemed particularly cold. They both shrugged, and looked around for someone to fight. They went walking through the enemy ship, and everywhere they went, people fled from them screaming. Many of them called out the Deathstalker name as they ran, and Lewis took a certain cold satisfaction from the terror in their voices.

The battle went on, ship targeting ship, the occasional vast explosion as a craft blew apart, dead crew thrown tumbling through space like confetti. Silence's Fleet fought well and strongly, but they were severely weakened by the loyalist uprising, and there was no telling which way the fight might have gone, when suddenly Carrion and his Ashrai came flying out of nowhere in their thousands, soaring across space on their widespread membranous wings as though born to it. Carrion led his gargoyle aliens in sweeping attacks against the Imperial Fleet, their huge forms slamming right through force

shields as though they weren't there, to UMI steel hulls with thru terrible daws. And inside the Imperial ships voice's rose, trying It's i In' dragons! Owen's dragons, come to punish us for not recognising the line Deathstalker!

Their morale never really recovered after that, and ship after ship surrendered. Silence's Fleet quickly took control, blowing apart the few hard-core fanatical ships that refused to surrender; and suddenly it was all over. Admiral Shapiro had a nervous breakdown and died himself rather messily in the face. Captain Vardalos of the Heritage reluctantly took command, and oversaw the general surrender, which Admiral Silence graciously accepted, to save further loss of life.

As Vardalos sat slumped in her command chair. The newscreen before her showed both Fleets at a standstill, surrounded by the drifting hulks of crippled or destroyed ships, and Owen's dragons (lying unprotected through space. How could she have been wrong? The blessed Owen really had returned, in the Imperial Unity's greatest need, just as the legends always said he would. But they had denied him. They had been found wanting in time. Damn the Emperor and his lies.

She looked up slowly as her Second hovered uncertainly behind her. 'Captain; they're here!'

'Who's here?' Vardalos struggled to focus her thoughts, 'The Emperor sent emissaries across already?'

'Well, sort of. Lewis Deathstalker and Jesamine Flowers walked |< IMSS open space, ripped open an airlock and walked right in. And now they're standing outside the bridge, demanding to talk to you!'

V.mlalos had to shut her eyes for a moment. It was all getting .1 hit mm h lor her.

'Let them in. Before they kick the door down.'

I 01 HUM let them in, and they came forward to greet the Capi.iin.

i«> iheu credit, they didn't look especially smug. There had been no

iHHihle with the Heritage's crew after the surrender - they'd already

IM ni overwhelmed by what the Deathstalker and the diva had done,

.mil ihe arrival of the Ashrai had been the last straw. The crew's

The horses were so thoroughly broken they all but prostrated themselves

and found Jesamine as they made their way to the bridge. A

They lashed themselves with improvised whips, as penance.

Jesamine gave them plenty of room.

Captain Vardalos studied the man and woman standing before her. They didn't look all that special, but there was a terrible kind of grandeur about them. 'Congratulations on your victory/ she made herself say.

There are no victors here today, Captain/ The Deathstalker's famously ugly face held no triumph, only regret. Too many good men and women died, for no good reason. Finn has betrayed us all. I never was a traitor, and no more were Douglas or Jesamine or any of the others denounced for daring to take a stand against his evils. And yes, it is true; my ancestor Owen has returned. He has gone to stop the Terror, so that we can be free to deal with the Emperor. Will you fight beside us, Captain?'

Vardalos felt a rush of relief. So many of her worries fell away in a moment, it was like putting down a dreadfully heavy weight she'd been carrying for far too long. She smiled at the Deathstalker, who didn't seem nearly as terrible now.

'Of course/ she said. 'Our Fleet is yours. If Finn would lie to us about something as important as the return of the blessed Owen, he'd lie about anything. He is not fit to be Emperor. Lead us, Deathstalker. You will not find us wanting again/

And so the huge combined Fleet slowly got under way again, heading towards Logres with rage and justice on their minds. Accompanied by Carrion and his army of Ashrai, and all the ships of Mistworld and Virimonde.

An avenging army was coming home, and this time nothing would stop them.

LAST CHANCES

Mu- limperor Finn was talking at rather than to Joseph Walhur. who was more than wise enough to just sit there and listen, and try • mile and nod at what seemed like the right places. Joseph nevei lucked forward to those infrequent occasions when he was sum iiioned to the Imperial Palace, so Finn could have one of his litilr < h.iis. He rarely heard anything to make him feel good. Although hr leehnicly speaking, head of the Church Militant and I'me llum.inity, and therefore, theoretically, the second most poweilul nun in the Empire, Joseph knew he only held that position because I HIM liked having someone he could talk to and confide in, someone •..ilc- he could boast to about all the awful things he'd done, and planned to do.

The limperor's private quarters were a mess, bordering on actually

dl nessin^ to the nerves. Finn never cleaned up after himself, and

in lelused to allow servants in any more, on the not unreasonable

1 lnds that they might be rebel spies sent to kill him. He kept the

lif.his mmed up far too bright, so nothing could hide in the shadows,

ii vvhrn he slept. Papers were scattered across every surface, ohm

laid down with plates containing the remains of discarded

items. More rotting bits of food had been trampled into the rich

carpet. The room stank, despite everything the air con-

ditioners could do. It was like being in an animal's den, Joseph

realized. Some vicious and powerful carnivore, that didn't care about

appearances because it didn't have to.

Joseph realized a position where he could do anything he liked,

and mostly he did. And he never did anything he didn't want to. That was, after all, what being Emperor was all about. And yet, the state of his Empire kept changing. No matter what he did, or ordered done, things kept going from bad to worse, and Finn was unable to halt the decline. He wouldn't have cared, except he needed a strong and stable Empire to fight off the Terror. Which was why Joseph had been summoned so abruptly, so Finn could complain to him. Joseph Wallace, the second most powerful man in the Empire, with the power of life and death at his slightest whim, sat uncomfortably on his comfortable chair and did his best to look attentive while Finn strode up and down before him, gesturing angrily.

'Sometimes I actually wonder if I'm cursed, Joseph/ The Emperor kicked out petulantly at a pile of papers, and they scattered like leaves across the stained and discoloured carpet. 'I do everything I can, kill all the right people, order purges and persecute the masses to within an inch of their lives, and still the bloody Empire won't work properly. All I want is for them to shut up and do what they're told, for the good of the Empire and me in particular, and all they can do is whine and complain and burn down important buildings. Disorder is spreading on the outer worlds, and there have been occasions of outright defiance here on Logres, in the Parade of the Endless itself. And just when I'm really short of people I can depend on. It seems like only yesterday that I had armies of fanatics and followers all but falling over themselves to do my every bidding. But where are they, now I need them? I'm down to just a skeleton staff on some planets/ He stopped pacing and fixed Joseph with a glittering eye. 'People are taking advantage. Defying my orders and regulations, and thinking they can get away with it, just because I'm a bit preoccupied at the moment. They've even started to feel they can walk the streets in safety, and we can't have that, can we? My peacekeepers should inspire respect, fear, horror, and an urgent need to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction. A cowed population is an obedient population. Right, Joseph?'

'Oh, of course, your majesty. Absolutely. People should know their place/

'I'm glad you see it my way, Joseph. Because I want you to take every Transmutation Engine you have, and put them in orbit around all the most troublesome worlds. And then I'll let the shifty little bastards know that if they don't behave, I'll have every living

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« oiu rnialc ihen minds wonderfully, Why ,nr yon liownim;, lo'.rph/ Yon know I hale il when you frown, especially when I'm liriiijj visionary/

oh, h's cin excellent plan, your majesty, it's just . . . well, we tlon'i ai lually have all that many Transmutation Engines left, alin what happened at Mog Mor. You . . . we deployed most of om I urines there, to deal with'the Mog Mor threat, and nearly till ol iherm were destroyed. And, as I'm sure you recall, it takes a loi ol nine and money to build Transmutation Engines. Work is prosing, but—'

'Joseph/ said Finn, calmly and very dangerously, 'tell me SOUK 11nng I want to hear, or I'll have your testicles stitched togetlu i

'<)l course, the people don't know just how short of Enginr .ire/ said Joseph, thinking quickly on his feet. 'Due to yom \ decision not to allow any news coverage of what happened at iv Mor. So, if we just put Engines around a few selected worlds, •.lionld be able to bluff the other worlds with the implied threat

Tinn sniffed loudly. 'I don't like to bluff. I like to do appallmr. i lungs to people who upset me. And I can't afford to have a Mull tailed, even once. Most of the outer planets are only waiting loi OIV de-Unite sign of weakness on my part, and then the ungrateful lnil< ••hits will rise up. And where one leads, others will follow . . . Mayl>< we should destroy a world anyway, just to show we mean IMIMIH Yes; I like

that. Find me a planet no one will miss much,' loM-ph and put an Engine in orbit. And one day when I'm feelim; ir,ill\ depressed, we'll have a nice fireworks display/

He threw himself happily into a chair opposite Joseph, and (M > his legs languorously. 'If only all my problems were that simple. M« of my loyal people are currently manning the Fleet I had to send <>ui to stop the Deathstalker's Fleet. That man is a pain. I killed his wlmh family, and he still won't take a hint. But my Fleet will stop his. I packed my ships with the very best military minds, and my m-/ealous and hard-core fanatics, to be absolutely sure they'll ha\ < M., compunction about firing on their fellow ships. Still no reports, I i.il • il? No; of course not. Too early yet. But I want it to happen soon I want to hear about a massive victory, and hundreds of ships huinin^ in the night. I want to see Lewis's head on a spike . . . Ineed a vu i«-Joseph. A really impressive demonstration of how powerful my

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forces are, and how vicious and merciless I can be to my enemies. Something to cow the peasants and make them think twice about doing anything that might attract my attention. They just don't worship and adore me the way they used to, the ungrateful little turds. I always knew the public were fickle and not to be trusted, even back when I was merely a Paragon. The number of times I had to reinvent myself, just to hold their attention . . . So; it seems I am forced to desperate measures/

He smiled at Joseph, waiting for him to ask the obvious question. Joseph thought frantically. What the hell else could Finn have in mind, that would be worse than murdering a whole world with a Transmutation Engine?

'What, precisely, did you have in mind, your majesty?'

'I'm going to make a deal with the ELFs, and use their thralls as peacekeepers on the streets to restore

order and discipline. While wearing my colours, naturally. They won't take any crap from the peasants. They think they had things bad before; wait till the ELF's get to work! They have such wonderfully inventive minds, when it comes to terrorising people.'

The ELF's?' said Joseph finally, so outraged he didn't even bother to keep it out of his voice. 'You must be crazy! You can't trust those people!'

'I don't trust anyone,' Finn said calmly.

'But ... I thought they weren't talking to you any more? You were really quite . . . vehement, a while back, about how they'd disappointed you and let you down.'

'Ah,' said Finn, smiling widely. 'It seems the ELF leaders and the uber-espers have been having their differences of late, about who exactly should be running things. Both parties contacted me separately, offering their services in return for help against their enemy. And it really was simplicity itself to get both sides to agree to work for me, rather than risk being shut out. It won't last, of course, such arrangements rarely do, but as long as I can play divide and conquer, they'll be too busy trying to do each other down to think about double-crossing me. This is strictly between the two of us, of course. People wouldn't understand. I'm only telling you because you need to know; because the thralls will be wearing your Church Militant uniforms. And because it's just too good a secret to keep to myself. Ah, Joseph; sometimes the look of shock and horror on your

face is what makes it all worthwhile! The ELF's will give me fear and p,iiiik' and terror on the streets again, and everything will be the way it used to be. This is my Empire, Joseph; and no one is going to take it away from me.'

And so thousands of ELF thralls, innocent men and women possessed by cold and powerful minds, went

out to patrol the cities of Logres, and most especially the Parade of the Endless. The irony of maintaining order while wearing Pure Humanity and Church Militant uniforms pleased the ELF's greatly, and they took every opportunity to destroy the reputation of the esper-hating groups they supposedly represented. They imposed order and harsh dis-

- imposed through humiliating and terrifying punishments for even the slightest offences. They showed a great fondness for hangings, crucifixions and auto-da-fes. The dead were left to hang and rot in public streets, as a warning to others. All too soon people were afraid to go out on the streets for any reason. The new peacekeepers were everywhere, looking for any excuse to demonstrate their authority through fear and suffering. People stopped going to work, for fear they'd be stopped on the way. When they had to go out, for food or other necessities, they went in groups, staying in shadows and ready to hide and run at a moment's notice. And all too rapidly, the social

The business infrastructure of Logres began to break down. Shops

- closed, with no one to buy their goods. Businesses closed, with no

coming in to work any more. Basic services were already missing, because the ubiquitous Shub robots that usually took

- care of such things had ceased to function, and no one else knew what needed to be done.

As if all this wasn't disturbing enough, what was happening in the

It was worse. The ELFs had demanded a price for their support,

and gave them control of the Arena, for their own personal use.

When the ELFs played out their nasty games for everyone to

At first, they just possessed the existing gladiators, and set them

It is difficult. But the ELFs soon broke their new toys, or wore

them out, and so they sent peacekeepers to break into nearby

In minutes at random, and haul the people out to be new meat for the

trend. Men, women and children ended up on the bloody sands,

.....C possessed and some not, and the ELFs' games grew steadily

helpless, the thralls enacted all the wildest

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fantasies of the ELF's: rape, torture, mutilation and murder were the order of the day, every day, often on a grand scale. The ELF's delighted in mounting epic dramas, and staged vast reconstructions of famous atrocities from the past. The details were rarely accurate, but all that mattered to the ELF's was that people suffered and died. There was power to be gained, from feeding off the energies released through pain and emotion and death. The ELF's grew fat and potent, bloated like leeches. There was a very old name for the kind of creatures they were.

The Arena became a slaughteryard, where the bodies were never cleared away, but just piled up at the sides. The sands were always red with blood now, and the stench was indescribable. The ELF's, far and far away, didn't care. They were having fun. Sometimes they played with the dead bodies too, just for the distress they knew this would cause grieving relatives. They refused to be limited by human moralities or taboos. They saw themselves as more than human, and denied themselves nothing.

They insisted on every single bit of it being televised, on every channel, simultaneously. What was the point of being bad, if there was no one watching to be shocked and outraged? Finn wouldn't allow the ELF's to actually come out and say it was their doing; but the clues were there. And people did watch; there was a regular audience. Some, because a secret part of them responded to the atrocities. Some, with horrified fascination. And some, just because it was better to know than not. Even when it was always bad news, people needed to know. And all across Logres and the rest of the watching worlds, outrage and a need for revenge burned coldly in people's hearts, and they readied themselves for rebellion, and waited hopefully for a sign.

Joseph Wallace never watched, though he was careful to read all the latest reports. As the ELF's grew

every day more powerful, and more closely tied to Finn, so his own power and influence declined. The thralls on the streets might wear his uniforms, but they didn't answer to him. Joseph was being sidelined, his power base eroded and even sabotaged by the ELF's, who wanted Finn's attention all to themselves. Finn still called Joseph in for his disturbing little chats, but whatever influence Joseph had ever had with the Emperor seemed to have disappeared. Secretly and privately and very much against Finn's orders, Joseph's people did their best to spy on the

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Elf's. Joseph had never trusted the inhuman creatures. He was the Humanity, after all. He gathered all his best information and intelligence and presented it to the Emperor, as proof that the Elf's had their own agenda, and was met with a cold, indifferent stare.

"I don't care," Finn said flatly. "As long as they get the job done, I don't care what they do. And Joseph, if you can't get your job done, I'll replace you with someone who can."

As the ELF's possessed more and more people, and the armies of

thralls grew and grew, so the ELF leaders and the uber-espies became even more powerful. The pool of thralls was a powerful resource, and the more the possessors took and inhabited, the more

It ley could take. Their esper abilities had never been so strong,

It was reaching. More and more thralls were able to manifest their owners' abilities by proxy, though they always burnt out. But as the possessors grew stronger, so the differences between the ELF leader, and the uber-espers became more pronounced. Neither side IIUM. <•<! the other, and they each had their own strictly enforced terms. There were occasional border clashes, as thralls fought with Muallv .md filled the terrified streets with blood and bodies.

Finn watched it all from a distance, and let them fight, neither supporting neither one side nor the other. In\idr md iniupier still seemed like his best bet; while they were busy fighting each other, they weren't fighting him. Besides; he enjoyed MM •-pre tacle. He allowed both sides to operate freely, while making it clear he wouldn't tolerate any psionic battles in his capital.

of the inevitable psychic fallout. He didn't actually have of enforcing this, but so far the two sides were too proud to notice. Finn was betting they'd weaken each other so much in their struggle, that whoever eventually emerged as victor would be too weak to threaten him.

And then, he'd do something about them.

But there were factors that even Finn didn't know about. The uber-espers were determined to win, at whatever the cost. They had to win, and become more powerful than ever before, because they alone on Logres knew for sure that Owen Deathstalker was back from the dead; and they were all scared of Owen. Just one tomb of his, revitalised mind had been enough to show that he was more powerful than ever. More than the 'oversoul, more than any of Minn, .ind just possibly more powerful even than their original

creator, the Mater Mundi. And so the uber-espers concentrated on possessing more and more thralls,

pushing themselves to their limits and beyond to be sure of accumulating more power than the official ELF leaders.

They had to be ready, for when Owen Deathstalker came for them.

Finally, inevitably, war broke out. The Spider Harps, the Shatter Freak, Blue Hellfire, Screaming Silence and the Grey Train turned the full force of their stored-up energies on the ELF leaders. The direct mental clash detonated over the Parade of the Endless, and everyone in the city cried out as psychic fallout devastated the surroundings. As esper minds battled for domination on their own psionic plane, the strikes and counterstrikes spilled over into the material world. Probability storms raged through the streets, manifesting in miracles and unlikely tragedies. There were breakouts of mass delusions and ripples spread through reality itself. Buildings exploded, and people too. Luck ran mad, outrageous possibilities expressing themselves in people's flesh. Streets turned in upon themselves, with no way out. Gravity switched back and forth, and rivers ran through the sky. Tower blocks became trees, with people still trapped screaming within them. Water became fire, and the air become poison. There were falls of stones and rivers of blood, and people vanished, replaced by other versions of themselves.

And two great armies of thralls fought each other with secondhand ferocity, with guns and swords and whatever came to hand, as the dead piled up in the streets.

Only in the Rookery did people and property remain sane and safe, protected and shielded by the joined power of Diana Vertue and her followers, the Psycho Sluts. Their minds and their sanity shook and shuddered under the impact of so much mental power, but they stood firm, and within the boundaries of the Rookery people remained untouched, watching in horror what was happening outside; helpless to intervene.

It all ended as suddenly as it had begun, and reality became firm and trustworthy again. Half the city was in flames, or rubble, and the death toll was in the hundreds of thousands, but the uber-espeis had won; crushing and dominating the weaker minds of the ELF leaders, who turned out to be only human after all, and therefore limited in the evil they could conceive. The uber-espers crushed,

controlled and absorbed all the other espers in the Esper Liberation 101 ce, until at the last there were only the five minds of the uber-espers, controlling millions of bodies. We are the ELF's now, the uber-espers said, and it was true. Five minds looking out through millions of bodies, and absorbing more all the time. One day we will become the world, said the uber-espers, and all of Humanity will be us. Our thoughts, our will, operating in every human body. And then we'll turn on each other and make war across all the worlds in search of final domination, until only one of us is left. Won't that be fun? All of Humanity, tillering endlessly, in the service of one triumphant mind. The uber-espers laughed, and the laughter went on for hours.

Douglas Campbell, leader of the Rookery and acclaimed King of Thieves, still lived in the Lantern Lodge hotel. It wasn't any less of a dump for being his headquarters, but it was central and familiar, and at least now he had a room all to himself. Rank had its privileges. Nina Malapert and Stuart Lennox had their own separate rooms too, just down the corridor. They could all have moved somewhere more luxurious, where the hot water was reliable and the toilet was more than just a hole in the floor, but the people liked to see Douglas hanging as one of them, suffering as they suffered.

(Douglas did insist the whole place be fumigated. He had his standards.)

He was constantly protected by his bodyguard, supplied from the ranks of the Psycho Sluts. Two of the overpoweringly bright and

• The young ladies took it in turns to stand guard outside his door, and accompany him wherever he went, and God help the fool who tried to get past them for any reason. Local gossip had heard they'd turned one man into a frog. And then eaten him.

Under Douglas's command and direction, the rebellion was growing steadily, and branching out. His people left the Rookery every day on secret missions, from information-gathering to a little dis-

- "sabotage. Finn's people had first given Douglas the name King

- Thieves, as a sneer over how far he'd fallen, but Douglas accepted the title, and the Rookery loved it.

Douglas had been pleasantly surprised to discover that these thieves, even men, rogues and rascals were far more capable than the ordinary trained military fanatics. It was as though they had some spark, some extra quality or vitality, that had been

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bred out of the city's more civilised people. Certainly the Rookery had ways of acquiring tech, information or anything else that might be needed, that would never have occurred to the law-abiding mind. The King of Thieves had learned to appreciate and value the wild talents of the Rookery. They were the only ones whose spirits the Emperor had been unable to crush. In fact, the more he tried to oppress them, the more determined they became. Years of living as despised outcasts had put iron in their souls and a fire in their belly. Douglas sometimes thought on the implications of that, and what it said about the rest of the Empire. Not least because the Rookery was changing him too. He had become wilder and more flexible in his thinking. And he liked it.

Cautiously at first, and then more openly, he plotted attacks against Finn's weak spots, and the ragged warriors of the Rookery went out and ran joyous rings around Finn's security. They came and went and did their damage and no one even knew they'd been there, until the explosions started. The information they gathered enabled Douglas to identify more weak links, and how to cripple them in inventive and distressing ways. Finn sent his security people running madly back and forth, but somehow they were never where they were needed, always fated to arrive just in time to pick up the pieces afterwards. They were becoming a laughing stock, and they knew it.

The actual territory that made up the Rookery expanded every day. It was now the only safe haven on all Logres, and people came from all across the planet, defying all dangers to cross the Rookery's shifting boundaries and find relief at last from Finn, his people and his thralls. The Rookery had to grow to accommodate them all. And so it swallowed up adjoining streets, and then adjoining blocks, on and on until it made up almost a full quarter of the Parade of the Endless. Finn declared that it was death for anyone to even approach the Rookery, but it didn't slow the flood of refugees. In the world that Finn had made, death was no longer anything to be feared. For many, it was the kindest thing that could happen to them.

Douglas's influence grew in other ways too. The aliens of the Rookery infiltrated the substructures of the city, sliding and gliding through all the service tubes and maintenance levels, the sewers and the factory outlets. They thrived in conditions that humans couldn't tolerate, working their plans in places the humans above never even

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- oniiol of dll ilu1 Kisks thdl h<i(1 onec been performed by the Ssub iob..is; <ill ihe dppalling but necessary work tkii nude possible- ihe

- essential services. They restored power and water and sewerage

And by shutting down these services in some districts (including opening them in the Rookery, the aliens rapidly made the Rookery the most attractive place in the city to live.

The aliens also made perfect unsuspected spies, in the most impossible places, their alien senses often picking up information that even the best tech would have missed. Finn would have been surprised if he'd known how many aliens moved through the crawlspaces and darker levels of his Palace every night. Mdlapert was also making a name for herself. As the most popular and far-reaching underground voice, she had become the face of freedom and the voice of the IM Ilion. Every day she told the people things they didn't know, and provided hope for the future. Her pink mohawk was killer, but she never wore the same makeup twice. Even her broadcasts, even though they could be executed on the spot if they were caught doing it. (After all, you could be imprisoned without trial for pretty much anything these days.) The people needed to know what was happening, and Finn's official communications had become increasingly bland propaganda. The people listening to the news didn't even bother to smile any more. Her audience heard facts, backed up by on-the-spot reporting. Her propaganda was at least something people would listen to. She never once exhorted her audience to rise up

- Him; everyone knew it wasn't time yet. But she did hunt anyone who thought they could make it to come to the Kookeix

The growing rebel army; and a hell of a lot of them did. The parade of the Endless were almost totally deserted now. The heed use even more than safety, people need to be able to live in freedom.

NIC fiy outside the Rookery was falling apart. Power cuts, food shortages, lack of essential services. Madmen on the streets, wearing keeper uniforms. Businesses closing down, industry grinding to a halt. Everyone knew it couldn't go on like this, even Him.

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Douglas called everyone to his room in the Lantern Lodge for an emergency meeting, and everyone who mattered was there. The King of Thieves sat back in his chair, and watched them assemble. Tel Markham hovered beside Douglas's chair, as always: the quiet strategist who was actually the most radical and extreme of them all. He'd cleaned up nicely, but his eyes remained wild and savage. He was always the first to call for murder and mayhem in the outer city. He was Douglas's very own junkyard dog, and he guarded his master fiercely, even growling at the Psycho Sluts who made up the man's official bodyguards. Tel had been wounded in many ways, and his scar tissues showed.

Diana Vertue, still sometimes known as Jenny Psycho, though never to her face these days, was also present; slumped easily in the only other comfortable chair. A small compact blonde who didn't look anywhere near as dangerous as everyone knew she was. Diana and her followers, the effervescent Psycho Sluts, were the only ones who could still stroll openly through the outer city, and defy anyone to do anything about it. They didn't fear armies or the ELFs, and their defiance cheered many an oppressed heart. Secretly, the uber-espers were pretty sure they could kill Diana Vertue, as they had once before over a hundred years ago, but they were still trying to work out how she'd managed to come back from the dead. Finn was pretty sure he could crush her, with enough guns and men and battle tech; but he couldn't afford to lose as many men as he knew he would, on anything less than a certainty. So he held back too. And Diana snubbed her nose at all of them.

Running herd on the Psycho Sluts had actually taught Diana,, Vertue the value of patience and

self-control, though neither came naturally to her. She had a horrible suspicion she was finally maturing.

Nina Malapert and Stuart Lennox stood together on the other side of the room. As usual, Nina hadn't been able to decide which of several styles to wear, so she'd worn all of them at once. She chatted cheerfully with Stuart, who just smiled and nodded and let her get on with it. Even old friends found it difficult to interrupt Nina in full flow.

It was Douglas's meeting, so he started first. This meeting of the Let's Stick It To Finn committee is hereby called to order, so shut the

hrrll up <md listen, and yes I'm looking tit you, Nina. And don'l poul MI I'll j;el cranky. The' good news is th.H dll our military oper.itions luv been going very well. I've been using my old l\ir,igou kimu !< ,lr,e lo identify vulnerable financial and security targets, ,md m\ .HI,irk learns have been able to do serious damage whilr reuuiiiiiih' well below Finn's radar. He hasn't got a clue what's going on 01 how we're doing what we're doing, except that every momim

'Kes up to discover a heap of smoking rubble where' .in impmi.mi I'uilding used to be. Security officers draw straws now, in s< HIM«, logo in and tell him they're still baffled. They'll he hi,mm pi (It's soon/

'We should be concentrating on people, not buildim i' I r«ikr out the people who matter, and Finn's whole .i<hm< n.iiinu would fall apart/

'We've had this conversation before, Tel/ Doughs s.ud (in •Ass,issiiicilion is Finn's way, not ours. And he Mill I, number of fanatical followers ready to jump into ,my PIIMIIMH .

us up. Those crazy bastards worship him as a god. Nn i IN -.low .iiul subtle way. For now, at least. Where was I . oh < UN mmpuiter hackers have also been having ivm.nLihl. lite They've been thieving massive amounts ol credn-. From < hit Mihi.ini .iiid Pure Humanity coffers, and adding ilu-m in mil fund Which gives us more options apart from the miliury < Him n hi \\ ill get you places that a blade wouldn't/

Txiept we've been using most of those credits in p,i\ lm i limp-, in parts of the outer city/ said Tel. 'We should let tin m hmigi y. Make them more ready to rise up against Finn/

The hall-starved rarely make good fighters/ said Dou.r.Li. \..l i mil IIMI stand by and let my people go hungry. I am still ihm

'i 11 only in exile. All right, Tel; I know you're hursiiuj; in MWfl (>T what your people have been up to. But keep it slmn ,md in ihr pmiii, or we'll heckle you/ \M<<| ihrow things/ said Stuart.

IH I'.l.ued <il him. 'My people have h<ul giv.il 5UCCCCSS in Intl fCptlng .md jamming Finn's communication lines, IIMUI; Illffl •I- n\r<l lech ,ni(| Rookery-honed skills. As <i result, most ol I MM Mitlrr, just ,iren'l getting through. Sometimes we nuke suhih • hanges of our own, ,md then let them go through; just to ,idd in ihr w'n'i.il (kins ,ind eoilusion. Soon enough, Mini won't he ,ihh

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to believe anything he hears through the comm lines, and his people will be afraid to follow any order that doesn't come from him in person/

'Unfortunately, he's still got the ELF's/ said Diana. 'Even working together, the Sluts and I couldn't block their telepathic commands. They control a staggering number of thralls these days, and they have made the ELF leaders very powerful. We can't even listen in on what they're thinking, or planning. If Finn uses them to replace his infiltrated comm systems-Douglas frowned. 'Are any of these new thralls turning up in the Rookery? Maybe among the new refugees?'

'No,' Diana said firmly. 'We're still clear. The girls and I have set a mental scan in place, running on automatic. Any thrall who tried to get in would set off a mental alarm, and we'd all come running. Finn's spies and agents are another matter, of course—

'Stuart,' said Douglas, 'You wanted to say something about Finn's security people.'

'Damn right,' said Stuart. 'Yes, we've been running rings around them, but that's because mostly they've not been trained for security. They're Finn's fanatics, who never bothered much over military tactics. Just lately, though, we've been running into a harder breed. Thralls, showing limited esper abilities. They can sense what's going on, even if they can't prove it. You can't sneak past a telepath. Douglas; to be using this many thralls, and trusting them to guard sensitive locations, Finn must have made a new deal with the ELF's.'

T told you they were running the Arena,' said Diana, 'All the signs are there. And after that recent mental

explosion over the city, I think we have to assume that the uber-espers are now running the ELF's directly.'

'It would explain the behaviour of the peacekeepers,' said Stuart.

'They're animals!' said Nina. 'Honestly, they are. People out there are terrified of anyone in a uniform these days.'

'Not necessarily a bad thing,' said Tel. 'The worse things are outside, the more people will head for the Rookery. The city's troubles make us strong. We're going to have to expand again soon, Douglas. Seize more territory.'

'I still say we should seize the Arena, darlings/' said Nina. 'Or at least blow it up, and put the poor bastards out of their misery/'

'It has to be ELF's/' said Shun. 'People' wouldn't do things like

that. Everyone I speak to is sickened by what's going on in the Arena now, in the name of entertainment. Even the old-school Rookery people, the most hardened criminals, are shocked and outraged. It seems there's a line even they won't cross; and no one's more surprised than them. Douglas; you give the word, and we'll blow the Arena right off the map/'

'No/' Tel said immediately. 'We're not ready for an operation that big. First, if it is the ELF's running

things there, we'd have to commit Diana and all the Sluts to the mission, plus a hell of a big armed force; and still with no guarantee of success. We could lose all of

I hem to the uber-espers, and leave the Rookery open to psionic •ittack. And second; even if we did succeed, Finn couldn't afford to i,ike such an open victory lying down. He'd have to strike back. You know he would. And he has the Transmutation Engines. He'd destroy this world rather than give it up. I've worked for him. I know how he thinks/

'Can't we cut the communication lines to the Engines?' said hi,ma.

'We keep trying/ said Nina. 'But they operate strictly from comm lines within the Imperial Palace. Under Finn's personal control/

'There are ways into the Palace that even Finn doesn't know .ibout/ said Douglas, and all the others looked at him. He smiled •.lijjhily. The Palace was my home, remember? The royal family h.ive always kept a few secrets to themselves. But we have to save

Il lose for real emergencies. We can't throw them away on anything less than the final assault on the Palace. Right; I think we've covered

i ything, so all of you can get the hell out of my room, and let me in. ,nhe again/

The meeting broke up, and everyone went their separate ways. Nnu, to her news-site operations room,

for the latest intelligence. In Miami, to patrol with the Sluts. Tel, to plot and conspire with his Own personal band of spies and informers. And Stuart Lennox went to his own room, just down the corridor. He'd been on his feet all day, trying to find in old and new Rookery citizens in how to be soldiers, when he desperately needed some down-time.

When he was always happier in action than in planning

Like everyone else on his home world of Virimonde, he had been a warrior, and he preferred to think in simple, direct lines. He joined the ranks into the outer city whenever he

could, always up for a chance to kill Finn's people. It didn't satisfy the way killing Finn would; but it would have to do, for now.

His spirits lifted a little as he pushed open his door and entered the small but comfortable room he shared with his new boyfriend. Jas Sri was already there, bustling back and forth and tidying things up while he waited for dinner to be ready. Jas was a great one for tidying up, and even the dust had learned to lie in straight lines while he was around. Jas worked with Nina at the news site, a media tech who specialised in adapting donated alien tech to make the news site invulnerable to outside attack. Stuart and Jas had been together ever since Nina first introduced them. (Nina had introduced a great many personable young men to Stuart, and was quietly and happily relieved when Stuart finally took a shine to one.) Jas was good for Stuart, not least because he wouldn't put up with excessive brooding or dwelling on the past. Jas Sri lived very thoroughly in the present. He was tall, thin, dark-skinned and very intense, and inclined to dramatics when he had an audience.

'About time you got home, honey,' Jas said, without looking round. 'Dinner will be on the table in five minutes, and yes, there is pudding. There may even be custard, if you're lucky. Try to remember to use the napkins, this time. And don't drink from the finger bowl! I know you only do it to annoy me.'

'True,' Stuart admitted, slumping into the easy chair, 'You are a true touch of civilisation in a barbarous place, Jas.'

'And don't I know it. You relax, honey, and I'll find your slippers for you.'

Stuart had to smile. Jas mothered him unmercifully, just as he tried to mother everyone. He claimed it was genetically hard-wired into him. Either that, or a gypsy curse. He kissed Stuart briefly on the forehead, patted him on the shoulder, and then hurried back to the stove tucked away in one corner of the room. Jas was naturally touchy/feely, but had learned to rein it in around Stuart. He didn't want to put any pressure on the emotionally damaged man. Stuart didn't talk much about Finn, or the things that had happened while they were together, but occasionally he would let slip a telling 1'dci or detail, of the horrors he'd been through. Some of what Stuart h«nl endured made Jas's blood run cold, and then he would bile- his lower lip hard and try to be extra supportive without being smothering. And sometimes, when they lay together in the M.HTOW sinr.lr

bed, Stuart would cry out miserably in his sleep; and Jas would have to hold and comfort him until it was light again.

On the whole, Stuart did seem to be doing better. His many successful sorties into Finn's territory had done much to restore his self-esteem, and he was once again the canny fighter he'd been as a Paragon. He and his hand-picked people had done serious damage to military targets; but it wasn't enough. It would never be enough, until Finn was dead, and couldn't haunt Stuart any more.

Jas never said anything, but he always worried when Stuart was «iway on one of his missions, because

he knew that a part of Stuart went into every fight looking for the peace that only death could bring him. All Jas could do was try to give his man a reason to live, a reason to come home again.

'Dinner's ready!' he said brightly. 'Yet another bright and inventive way to present the same old bland and boring vegetables. God, sometimes I think I'd kill for a good sausage.'

Lucas went for a walk around the block, just to stretch his legs and get some fresh air into his lungs. Sometimes his room felt un-like a cell. As always, two Psycho Sluts accompanied by bodyguards. They maintained a discreet distance, and dis-allowed anyone else from getting too close with harsh looks and the occasional mental prod. Among the crowds that cheered and Muled on Douglas wherever he went, there was always the chance "I .1 disguised spy or assassin. Douglas felt pretty sure he could •I' It-mi himself, but accepting the bodyguards was the price he paid for not having his friends go mental every time he felt like popping mil on his own.

That evening he was accompanied by Alessandra Duquesne,

the leader of the Sluts, and her friend Joanna Maltravers. Both

• low, bouncy blonde teenagers, who looked and sounded as

though they should still have been in a finishing school somewhere.

!li« \ were hoih dressed in brightly coloured silks, artfully cut and

- I in show oil as much bare bronzed skin as possible, and

H i' -I hi. u k loses in their h.iii jnd irihtil markings painted on their

I heir were1 Iwelve Psycho Sluls in all, young espers too

Itliil <>i » oiiiiijiy lo he embraced by the Massmhul of the over-

<HM lo lollow Iheir beloved , Jenny Psycho lo ihe tle.iih <md

- M.I U Inn ihey weren'1 out blowing limits up or killing Hun's

people with distressing verve and enthusiasm, they tended to hang around the lobby of the Lantern Lodge, reading gossip magazines, sharing makeup tips and discussing new and nastier ways to slaughter bad guys. Aren't we awful? one of them would inevitably say, and then they'd all dissolve into girlish giggles. The Rookery found them fascinating and frightening in equal measure.

Douglas felt just a little pervy having these deadly and delightful teenagers sticking so close, hanging on his every word and looking at him with their big worshipful eyes. He was old enough to be their father, or very nearly, and he was never sure if their constant flirting was as casual as it seemed. Not that he ever did anything about it, of course. It had been a long time since he'd done anything in his bed except sleep. At least he'd stopped them from pinching his bum when they were out in public.

He decided he'd had enough fresh air, or what passed for it in the Rookery, and went back inside. Alessandra and Joanna wished him good night, blew him a kiss and took up their positions outside the door. That was as far away as they would allow. They'd wanted to actually sleep in his room, at the foot of his bed, to be sure of protecting him against night attacks, but he'd put his foot down about that. Espers were notoriously casual about privacy, but Douglas wasn't. Alessandra called to him to be sure to sing out for anything he needed in the night, and Douglas shut the door firmly on her. He'd only just slumped into his chair when there was a brief knock at his door and Nina Malapert came breezing in. Douglas had to smile. Her boundless energy and never-ending smile always helped to cheer him up.

'Did you forget something at the meeting, Nina?'

'As if, lovey! I am always one hundred per cent prepared and professional, and you know it. No; I just wanted to pop in and make sure you were all right. You looked distinctly down and moody at the meeting.'

Douglas sighed heavily. 'I try to keep up an optimistic face, but the facts are we're not making progress anywhere near as fast as we need to. We can't keep expanding our territory to hold the refugees without Finn feeling the need to push back at some point. And I don't think we're ready to go to war yet.'

'Finn's not dumb enough to start something he ain't be sure of winning,' Nina said easily, sitting on UK-

.inn of his didir. 'I! he

commits his forces to a frontal attack, and we kick his arse, he'll have rebellions breaking out on every planet in the Empire.'

'You're forgetting the Transmutation Engines. As long as Finn has those, he has a gun to everyone's head.'

'Oh poo to the Engines. You'll figure out a way to stop them. It's what you do.'

She chattered on cheerfully, and Douglas let her. He enjoyed her company, both as his adviser and his friend. She was always so alive, so full of energy and down to earth. He didn't know what he'd do without her. Nina . . . was good for him. And she had a brain, in-hand all the chatter. She helped to plan rebel sorties into the outer city, based on information coming in all the time from the various stringers who kept the news site up to date on the very latest including news, facts and gossip. She had people everywhere now, and her news site was on the air twenty-four hours a day, despite everything Finn could do to shut it down. Douglas approved of Nina.

'Oh! Oh! I almost forgot,' she said suddenly, beating her hands in her before her like a child. 'We finally got confirmation that the two Fleets have made contact, fought a battle, and then Finn's Hen MI is rendered to Lewis!'

Douglas sat up straight. 'How the hell could you forget something so important?'

Don't be such a grouch, Douglas. You keep frowning like that and you'll get lines on your face. I knew I had a reason for coming to you here; it just escaped me for the moment. Anyway, we've been seeing some marvellous battle footage, including Lewis doing a few things you are just not going to believe, but, but; the big news is ... the whole combined Fleet is heading straight for Logres!' 'An exclusive,' said Douglas, smiling.

Nina,' Douglas said sternly. 'Are you sure you didn't know this before the meeting?'

Nina pouted. 'Only rumours, sweetie, nothing definite. And it isn't

his kind of thing you want to announce without definite evidence.

she still getting details, and broadcasting it all, including the

message to every plane in the fleet. And my people die looking

at me from the ship called the *Logres*, don't

forget the rally happened in the Khe Sanh, when the *Tei 101* did me. Some of the

disturbing details that Finn suppressed. You know, I can't help feeling I'm getting jaded, darling. There was a time when news like this would have had me bouncing up and down and hyperventilating. I haven't done my happy dance in weeks.'

'It is excellent news/' said Douglas, rising up suddenly from his chair, and almost knocking Nina off the arm. He steadied her absent-mindedly, and then strode up and down in the small room, thinking hard. 'Assuming there wasn't too much damage during the battle, the sheer size of the combined Fleet should mean Finn hasn't got anything big enough or powerful enough to put up against it. All he's got left are the Transmutation Engines . . . We have got to find a way to knock them offline

'What do you think Finn will do, when he hears the news?' said Nina.

Douglas smiled grimly. 'Knowing him, something extreme. You'd better call everybody back, Nina. We need another meeting.'

Emperor Finn heard the news, and took it very badly. The loss of his second Fleet was just the latest in a series of last straws. He smashed every piece of furniture in his quarters, and pounded his fists on the bare walls, before falling back into a cold and very dangerous self-control. He needed to do something, something big and dramatic and horrifyingly nasty, to make it clear to everyone that he was still in charge. So he turned on the nearest target, the most irksome thorn in his side. The Rookery. He walked across the room, kicking pieces of shattered furniture out of the way, and when he was sure his breathing had returned to normal, he activated his viewscreen and called Joseph Wallace in his bunker.

Joseph appeared before his Emperor, straight from his bed, looking a little tousled and distinctly wary. News this late in the evening was rarely ever anything he wanted to hear.

'The time has come,' Finn said crisply. 'I want the Rookery crushed, and you're going to do it for me. I give you complete charge of all my armed forces, dear Joseph, and all I ask in return is that you should march into the Rookery and kill every man, woman and child you find there. No one is to be allowed to escape. No mercy, no prisoners, no survivors. Burn the place to the ground, and leave not one brick standing upon its mother. I give you command over all my soldiers, my Church Militant and all the Purely Religious fanatics, all the thralls you can persuade to follow you, and all the air support you will need. This time, there will be no stopping us. You will keep pushing forward, despite any or all losses, until you come out the other side and the Rookery is no more.'

'And Joseph, dear Joseph; if you don't succeed, don't come back.'

Diana Vertue was out and about in the Rookery, despite the lateness of the hour. She'd got into the habit of making regular patrols on her own, ostensibly searching out spies and informers, but really just to immerse herself in the flow of life and the living. She'd been dead a long time, and she was still getting used to the unexpected fires and passions of the body she wore. People watched her go by, and sometimes smiled or nodded, but always from a safe distance. Diana Vertue was respected rather than loved. Jenny Psycho's legend had taken some pretty strange paths down the years, and it had been fairly extreme to begin with. Even Robert and Constance hadn't been able to sanitise her, not least because she was one of the few great heroes still around and kicking over the traces on a regular basis.

Diana did like to think she'd mellowed a little since she returned.

It felt good to be back in her body again, after so many years of existing only as a thought in the Massmind of the oversoul; even

If this wasn't strictly speaking, her own body. The Psycho Sluts believed Diana had manifested herself again through an act of will, but she had done nothing to disabuse them. It all helped her deception. She didn't tell them the truth because all her long years knew nothing to dull her natural paranoia. A secret shared is no longer a secret.

Diana Vertue's original body had been very thoroughly destroyed in the Kettle with the uber-espers, over a hundred years ago. She'd been led into an ambush by someone she'd had every reason to trust, but her old tired body and mind had been no match for all the IMM-Is at once. Her body was utterly consumed in mental fires, but in the last moment her mind was caught up and preserved by

- a psionic working performed so swiftly and so expertly

- even the uber-espers didn't notice until it was too late. And so Diana Vertue lived on, at peace and content in the Massmind,

mini-leen events had led to her and brought her forth again, but she'd kept pre-

- -I'm in her room of MU here is this.

Diana had always had enemies; and knew the time would inevitably come when one of them proved stronger than her, so she made secret preparations for an emergency bolt-hole. After the war against the Re-created was over, Diana took advantage of her new (and fleeting) heroic status to do something awful, and unforgivable. She bullied the clone underground leaders into creating several brain-wiped adult clones, from her own tissues. This was a death crime, both for Diana Vertue and the clone leaders who agreed to it; but there were few indeed who'd ever been strong enough to say no to Jenny Psycho.

She'd expected to die in one body and wake up in another, but the oversoul intervened. This had rather surprised Diana, who had never thought they'd want anyone as notoriously disruptive as her, but it seemed she was a hero to them, as well. And in their midst she had found unexpected peace of mind, and forgotten all about the clones. But she should have known; even heaven couldn't last for ever. She couldn't abandon Logres to Finn, and leave with the rest of the espers in the Icarus Working; so when the floating city of New Hope took off for Mistworld, she had already left the oversoul and decanted her consciousness into one of the waiting clone bodies.

It was still there, in its body bank, waiting to be occupied. She slid into it as easily as a hand into a glove, and the body bank had recognised her presence and revived the body for her. She sat up sharply, drawing breath deep into her lungs, the shock of the body's senses and sensations almost overwhelming after so long as a merely mental presence. After a while, she pulled herself out of the body bank, and tottered around the abandoned warehouse on unsteady legs. The other tanks were shrouded in dust and cobwebs, and then-was nothing else in the warehouse, except the cold and the shadows. Diana checked the other bodies. Of the seven she'd put aside, only three were still alive. Diana brushed away the dust from one view port, and a grey mummified face stared back up at her. Seeing her own dead face gave her a bad moment, but Diana was made of lunl stuff, and she made herself turn away and put her new body through a series of exercises, designed to get the blood moving properly again. It had been a long time since she'd felt . . . human. The body tingled in a way she remembered. There were differences. In some ways, it felt like haunting an uninhabited house.

And she wasn't used to feeling so alone, miles from Miriam

minds of the oversoul. She could have reached them with her thoughts; Mistworld wasn't that far away for a powerful mind like hers, but she couldn't risk the contact. They might object, to the things she'd done and the secrets she'd hidden, even from them. Besides, she needed to be a mystery, to her enemies and her allies. Keeping them unsure meant keeping them off balance. She allowed herself a distant kind of contact with her new followers, the Psycho Sluts. They were keen and sharp and enthusiastic, and openly worshipped her, which was a useful thing in itself, but she couldn't let even them get too close. She was a monster now, just like Finn. She'd sacrificed the lives and the souls of the seven women who would have been her clones, on the altar of her necessity.

But then, whether as Diana Vertue or as Jenny Psycho, she'd always been able to do the harsh, necessary things. Just like her father.

She enjoyed the company of the Psycho Sluts, though it was no match for the closeness of the oversoul, and did her best to be honest with them when she could. They wanted to know about how things really were, back in the days of the great Rebellion, the history rather than the legend, and Diana told them, even when it made her look bad. She'd never cared about being a hero or a legend, except when she could turn it to her advantage. But: Was there ever anyone special in your life? Alessandra had asked, and Diana was surprised to find she didn't have an answer, except: There was never time, or room, in the life I had to lead, for anyone but me.

Diana Vertue increased the length of her stride, hurrying through

the narrow streets, trying to leave such disturbing thoughts behind

her. She was back, and she had much to do. And if inhabiting her

her clone body made her feel just a little like one of the possessors

of it, she tried hard not to think about it. Monsters did what they

could.

Meanwhile, the Emperor Finn was having his own problems. Since

many of his Transmutation Engines were lost or destroyed in the

conflict. In fact, more properly, balls-up at MogMor, he had lost one of his

most important advisors for keeping the other planets in line. If the

Emperor knew how few lines he actually had left, he'd be fighting

for his life. The loss of the Empire. He needed a replacement threat

to the rebel fleet (I, mind you, needed to kill his Mull. He'd heard

what the rebel Fleet had done to the Engines he'd left orbiting Virimonde, showing how vulnerable the things were to a surprise attack by a strong enough force.

So Finn went to see his pet clone-master, Elijah du Katt, to find out how his cloned army was coming along. He'd ordered five million new soldiers, all based on his own genetic makeup, but du Katt had only just produced the first batch, of under half a million. And the advance word on their condition . . . wasn't all he'd hoped for. Sometimes, Finn thought, things wouldn't go right if you killed them, chopped them up and distributed the parts as party favours.

Du Katt's laboratory was one of the most heavily guarded locations within the Imperial Palace. When Finn breezed in, the lab itself was spotlessly clean, everything in its place, but it was perhaps just a little too brightly lit, too carefully arranged. Finn sighed inwardly. The odds were du Katt was running his own private projects again, and had tidied away the evidence a bit too thoroughly on hearing Finn was coming. Still, that was a matter for another time. Du Katt had one of the clone prototypes ready for inspection; Finn stood right in front of them, and was pleased to see his proximity made the tic by du Katt's eye just that little bit worse. He considered the clone. It had a muscular body and a face that resembled his own famously good-looking features, but there were so many things wrong with it that Finn didn't know where to start. The arms were of different length, there was a slight but definite hump on the back, and all the bones of the face were enlarged and distorted. The clone looked like Finn's idiot brother. Still, he held himself well, and his gaze seemed clear enough. Finn looked at du Katt, who flinched.

'I told you, I warned you,' he said quickly. 'Providing so many clones from just the one sample, in such a restricted time, inevitably meant a certain deterioration in the template, and certain . . . tolerable defects.'

'He looks like damaged goods,' said Finn, slowly circling the clone, who stood calmly, apparently unperturbed by the things being said about him. Finn sniffed loudly. 'Can he fight?'

'Of course, of course! Manual dexterity is well within acceptable limits. They have been programmed with knowledge of the sword and the gun, and to follow orders without question. As long as they're not too complicated, of course. There was a certain amount of brain damage, just as I predicted . . . but you asked for simple!

brute soldiers, and that's what you've got. He and his many brothers should be quite sufficient for the simple tasks you have in mind. Killing and property damage and ... so on. They don't have a lot of personality, but that's probably just as well. You could have the whole of Batch One out on the streets tomorrow, if you wanted.'

Finn considered the matter. 'Details, du Katt. I require details. What exactly is wrong with them?'

Du Katt sighed. They all exhibit acceptable minor malfunctions of the body. You understand; these are the best of Batch One. Forty-seven per cent of the entire batch were so malformed as to be useless for your purposes, and had to be scrapped and returned to the protein banks for recycling. Of the survivors: none of them are too bright, and they've all shown definite violent tendencies. A significant percentage exhibit some or all of the symptoms of schizophrenia. And they all score very low on empathy. None of this should be a problem, considering what you want to use them for/

'Quite,' said Finn. 'You have done well, du Katt. Get this batch out on the streets immediately. I want order restored, and I don't care how they do it. It might be best to issue them all with Lire masks of some kind; I don't want them identified as clones just yet. And their features . . . might still be recognised. My face is worshipped all across the Empire, and I won't share that with anyone

The first new Imperial guards, all dressed out in full body featureless steel masks, appeared on the streets of Logrthm under three hours, and quickly proved themselves brutal and merciless as the thrall peacekeepers. There (Mils of the Parade of the Endless that remained almost free, just because the thralls couldn't be once; but the new guards soon put a stop to that. Strictly enforced, all infringements of the law were punished by spot executions, and even the smallest signs of dissent were quickly stamped out. Sometimes literally. Joseph W. viewed this new turn of events from within the silrly of hunker, and worried.

He'd known Finn was working on a private project with the new guards still came as something of a surprise* to him. More, Joseph was feeling left out of things, his power diminished. (mm h letm e Me vvis slid nominally the head of Church

Militant and Pure Humanity, but neither enjoyed the popular support they once had. No one believed in the religion or the politics any more, given all the things Finn had done in their name. Just the hard-core fanatics remained, most of them personally loyal to the Emperor, not Joseph Wallace. People didn't even go to church any more - because they were afraid to go out. Joseph felt lost. The people had turned against everything he believed in, and turned against him. And therefore deserved everything that happened to them.

Although he would never have admitted it to anyone, even himself, Joseph's behaviour had become increasingly erratic of late. He'd overseen the construction of a safe retreat for himself and his remaining loyal followers: a solid steel bunker deep in the heart of the city, staffed by the few people he felt he could still depend on. He had the place stocked with all the comforts and necessities of life, and surrounded it with every deadly defence known to man; and then he never left it, unless personally summoned by the Emperor. He had planned and launched what he thought were subtle and secret attacks against the thralls wearing his uniforms, disguised as purges against the unfaithful, but they weren't particularly successful. For every thrall peacekeeper who died, two more came forward to take his place.

And so no one was more surprised than Joseph when the Emperor put into his hands the destruction of the Rookery. It had been a long time since Finn condescended to give Joseph his orders in person. (Their little chats didn't count. They never involved business. That was the point.) Joseph had half expected to be told that the Emperor had finally lost all faith in him, and was throwing him to the wolves, but instead . . . Joseph smiled, sitting in the centre of his comm room, listening to the growing chatter of his assembling army. The Rookery would be a hard nut to crack, but success in such a dangerous venture would put him right back on top again. Not least because Joseph had no intention of giving back his army once the job was over.

The Emperor should have used every means necessary to wipe out the Rookery after they drove off his last attack; but he'd hesitated. Finn said it was because he could be very sappy and sentimental over people who'd helped him in the past, but Joseph didn't believe a word of it. More likely, Finn had believed he might still

in (d ihr special I,ill-ills found.only in ihr Kookrry. Which was, of «omsc, another reason for Joseph lo ho vory thorough in destroying n II ho planned this campaign just right, Joseph could ooino out of it in almost as strong a position as iho limperor himself, and thon . . . mayhe it was lime for a change at the top.

In iho end, Joseph Wallace put together one hell of an army. Firsl he Mimmonoil every Church Militant and Pure Humanity fanatic he nil 11,i<{ contact with, and had them plan the actual operation. Ho '« li lie ion Id trust them to be suitably merciless and efficient. He also n'.ncil them direct control of the invading force, as officers in • ii.uge, answerable only to him. The main bulk of the ground foi woie nude up of every soldier, trooper and marine still loft on plus a surprising number of thrall peacekeepers. Joseph lire these latter would bear the brunt of the attack. The moie M| iln,ills, the better for everyone. And finally, he called in evei v mill still operating on Logres: every gravity barge, war machine I gi.ivily sled. This time, there would be no mistakes, no failuu -The,it.

\M() when he was ready, when he was sure he couldn't add one

ire nun, gun or ship to his force, Joseph launched his all.ick

I MM 11 warning. His people flooded across the expanded and ill-

• mleil borders of the Rookery from every direction at once, while

missive gravity barges soared ominously over the crowded streets,

thing (their ranks of disrupter cannon straight down into the

buildings below. The soldiers and the thralls and the fanatics cut

down everyone in their path, showing no mercy, only varying

degrees of exhilaration. Their orders were clear, their objectives clear, and it felt good to have a clear and obvious enemy to strike. Disrupters fired over and over, and fleeing crowds fell in swords and axes rose and fell, and blood flowed thickly in gutters, buildings exploded in showers of brick and stone. Energy beams stabbed down from the crowded sky. Fires broke out all over, and Joseph's warriors pressed forward, over the rubble determined that this time there would be no survivors to rise like from the ashes.

When in the first shock, the people of the Rookery regrouped and

fought back fiercely. Douglas had insisted that everyone in the

expanded territory undergo at least some weapons

training. He'd always known this attack would come. And so men, women and even children took to the streets with swords and guns and all kinds of improvised weapons. Others prepared booby traps, ambushes and hit-and-run tactics. Those too old or too young for direct action took to the roofs, and rained down heavy objects on the attackers below. Everyone in the Rookery was a fighter now. They'd had to learn to fight, to survive. Finn had seen to that.

Nina Malapert quickly put her people out on the streets, with every camera available, and broadcast the invasion live on her news site. Stand or fall, the whole Empire would watch as the Rookery fought back. The other planets needed to see that rebellion was possible; even if it ended in the slaughter of the last free people on Logres.

The pace of the invasion faltered, slowed and even stopped in some places. The old-school citizens of the Rookery were hardened and motivated fighters, proficient in every weapon under the sun, and a few forgotten everywhere except in the Rookery. They hit the Imperial troops hard, with subtle, unexpected and thoroughly nasty tactics, and dead Imperial troops soon littered the streets, along with the bodies of the defenders. The newcomers to the Rookery also fought fiercely and well, these last peaceful citizens of a fallen Golden Age. All the things they'd suffered under Finn had put iron in their souls, and a driving need to put things right again. They threw themselves against the invaders, howling like animals, and the sight saddened Douglas a little. He had become a Paragon to fight the good fight, in order that the everyday citizens wouldn't have to. He had fought to keep them safe, and sane, and strangers to violence like this. He knew they had to fight now, in fact he depended on it; but he took no pleasure in the sight of innocence lost.

The Psycho Sluts took to the air, shooting up into the early morning sky like avenging angels. They tore in and out among the lumbering gravity barges, blowing the antiquated vessels apart with vivid pyrotechnic displays of psionic energy. Gun ports exploded, steel shells tore like paper, and terrible multicoloured fires swept through the packed interiors. The huge war machines lurched off course, slammed together or just drifted helplessly, black smoke billowing from their shattered engines. Attack sleds and their unprotected riders plummeted from the skies like burning birds.

But still the main fighting was on the ground, as the Rookery rose

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up, is one of the invaders from outside, culling down the enemy with vicious skill and righteous fury. The Imperial soldiers fought with close precision, the fanatics fought with ice-cold fury, and their God was on their side, singing their terrible songs of glory, and the thralls fought with wide happy smiles, not caring whether they lived or died because the body meant nothing to the minds that drove them. And none of that mattered worth a damn, but the Rookery had awakened, finally forced into battle and discovering how good it felt to strike back at a hated enemy. The streets filled with blood and bodies and the cries of the fallen, and the intersections were choked with pushing, heaving mobs, and the invaders were slowed, stopped and finally pushed back by the sheer

massiveness of people spilling out on to the streets to oppose them. The invaders fought only to win; the Rookery fought for a cause. For freedom. And what was death, compared to the promise of freedom

from fear and tyranny?

Douglas Campbell and Stuart Lennox fought side by side, and occasionally back to back, and no one could stand against them, (though many tried. They were always there in the thickest of the fighting, inspiring everyone with their feats of daring and their calm determination. They threw themselves into the face of the enemy, defying the odds, and the people of the Rookery followed, calling out their names as war-cries.

Ditina Vertue, still occasionally Jenny Psycho, strode through the streets, and wherever she looked enemy troops died. Some exploded, some burst into flames that could not be put out, and they just fell back and screamed away their sanity at what they'd seen in her eyes. Diana didn't even notice. She concentrated, reaching deep within herself, and then turned the full force of her extraordinary mind on the link between the uber-espies and the implants they controlled in the Rookery. Diana could see it clearly,

like Ilir convoluted web of an insane spider, hanging over the Rookery and leading far away. She broke the link with a single surge of destructive energy, and all across the Rookery men and women collapsed, thralls no longer. With their minds restored to them, they stopped fighting immediately, and just sat and cried and howled, at the memories of what they had been forced to do. Some even limbed the bewildered fighters of the Rookery, thanking them for their release.

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At one stroke, the size of the invading army had been halved, and the already faltering attack fell apart. Shattered into smaller, easily overwhelmed groups, they soon realised they couldn't hope to win, and the wise ones turned and fled. The invasion became a rout, and collapsed. The Rookery killed the fanatics who stood, and pursued those who ran, cutting them down from behind. They had seen too much slaughter and destruction to think of mercy. In the end, only one man got out of the Rookery alive.

Joseph Wallace had never ventured far inside hostile territory. He stuck close to the Rookery boundary, trying hard to keep on top of what was happening. He was only there in person because the Emperor had required it of him. He couldn't believe how quickly his marvellous army had fallen apart. It should have been a walkover; his trained and fervent warriors against the rabble of the Rookery. All the computer simulations had said so. But instead he'd been forced to watch helplessly as his people died, outnumbered and overwhelmed. Even his glorious air force had been crippled, driven from the skies by those esper freaks. He sent frantic calls for reinforcements, for any kind of backup, but they went unanswered. There were no more soldiers to be had, Finn wouldn't release any of his new guards, and the ELF's . . . were silent. In the end, all that was left for Joseph was to turn and run. No one tried to stop him. He made it across the boundary of the Rookery and back into the rigidly controlled area of the Parade of the Endless, and found waiting for him a dozen of the Emperor's personal zealots. They wore the scarlet cross of the Church Militant on their armour, but when he tried to command them, they fell upon him and forced him to his knees.

'What are you doing?' he screamed. 'What are you doing?'

They cut off his head and stuck it on a spike, and took it back to Finn, leaving the body to rot in the

streets. He'd been told not to come back, if he failed.

This was the Emperor's first big failure to be seen live, as it happened, on viewscreens all across the Empire. Overnight the Rookery became a symbol for the possibility of successful rebellion. Proof that you could defy the Emperor, and get away with it. And as the Rookery celebrated their victory, and mourned their losses, uprisings broke out on planets everywhere. Imperial troops were caught by surprise, and overrun. Finn had no extra troops to send,

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,iiul loo Mhiny troubles of his own, so he did wh«il he'd (old Joseph hi do, the one thing Joseph IKK!
(juuiled <iil. He chose1 <i pLmrl .il i.iiulom, j btukwjid hul comfortable world called Pandor.i, <nul used
Transmutation lingines to reduce all life on the world lo iindiflcrcnlmied protoplasmic slime. The news
spread quickly, .mil the rebellions stopped; because there was no one to tell them how lew lingines there
actually were in the Empire.

Until Nina Malapert appeared in her studio again, red-fated ,m<l hie.iihless from fighting in the streets, to
follow up her live eo\ ei of the invasion with information newly arrived from the combim d llrei currently
approaching Logres. She told the lislcnim;, hi.r.hi rued worlds that most of the Engines had been
destroy•<! ,u Motf Mor, and backed it up with on-the-spot recordings l'ioin iln .i.nship Heritage. And
the rebellions broke out all over ,h',,iiii ilu , nine fuelled with fury over what had happened to Paiuloi.i

Inin Durandal sat alone in his private quarters, thinkinr, He CQUld

still win. All he had to do was cut off the head of the rebell..... ind

ilu- body would falter and fall apart. All he had to do w,r- take OUI the figurehead, the acclaimed King of Thieves, and the KM,I \\MiiM be leaderless, and disintegrate into feuding l,uiion\ H drpeuded on Douglas, not just for leadership, but for vision Vci -ill he lud lo cio was kill his old friend and comrade Dou^Lis < i.uuphell

I he m,m who was the source of his problems, and alw<iys lud b<

II I ir (011 Id kill the ex-King before the combined Heel ,mixed In .1 I" .ible lo negotiate from a position of strength. With the- In <>i on

v,iy, the Empire needed a strong man on the Throne'. They h.nl lo know that. And with Douglas gone, who else w.is then \\h<> • Miild do the job? The runaway Deathstalker? Finn thought n<◇i He smiled slowly, the tension easing out of his muscles. Me i mild • I vvilh Douglas. He knew how the Campbell thought, wh.u he<l him cind what moved him. After all, they'd been liirnd . MM! i<◇ll(Mi;ues for so long... Finn understood Doughs, .mil i "'in;I.is only thought he understood Finn. So setting <i imp lo Inn l,r> in, ,ui(l then to kill him, shouldn't be any problem .H .ill

i urn wmi to Mlk lo Anne Barclay. This me<ml Miking lo Di ll,ipp\

v< II, which wds unlorlduiKile. The ^ood Doctor lud continued l<◇

rlorate, .md w.is now kirely <i sh.ulow of his former sell I inn

- MM K«| Hie piiv.ile ,md very sec me Lihor.Hory he iiuml,lined in the

-,.l

Palace for the Doctor and his patient, and found Dr Happy scabbling around on the floor on all fours, searching for some bit of him that had fallen off. Finn had to call the Doctor's name several times before he responded, and lurched reluctantly back on to his feet again. He still wore nothing but his stained and crumpled lab coat; his shrivelled and desiccated body now had holes in it, and his face was little more than a skull - the nose and ears gone, the lips just pale tatters. Dr Happy waggled his remaining fingers at Finn in a friendly manner, peering at him uncertainly with sunken, piss-yellow eyes.

'So good to see you again, Finn! Yes! I've been working on a marvellous new experiment, that will allow us to plug in other people's organs as backup spare parts - imagine what you could do if your body contained three hearts and two livers ... I have broken the compatibility barrier! I have! You'll see; before long I'll have made a new man of myself! The tech keeps me going, of course, but it lacks a certain something. Flesh is the key to all mysteries.'

'Well/ said Finn, 'that's all very demented, but I have business to be about. How is Anne?'

'A work of art, if I say so myself. You could put her up against a Hadenman now, and make a killing on the side bets. Go and have a nice chat, while I try and find my genitals.'

Finn made a wide circle around Dr Happy, and let himself into the reinforced steel vault they'd constructed at the back of the lab to contain the rebuilt Anne Barclay. He found her standing still and

silent in the middle of the room, staring at nothing, not even the mirror. For some while the addition of the synthesised Boost to her many tech implants had made her restless and suddenly violent, but the mood seemed to have passed. At least, there didn't seem to be any new dents in the steel walls. Finn approached her cautiously.

'Hello, Anne. How are we doing today?'

'I don't know about you,' said Anne, not looking round, 'but I'm fighting the voices in my head. Dr Happy put computers in me, to help run my various servomechanisms, and I can hear them whining away at the back of my thoughts. I'm fighting a civil war in my head, and I fear I may be losing. Why did you do this to me, Finn?'

'I couldn't let you die.'

'Why not? You let so many other people die. And it might actually have been kinder, in my case.'

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I couldn't let you go/ said I HIM. 'I'll make you're the only one who saw the monster within me, didn't I'
Hindi/

Anne looked at him for the first time with her glowing golden eyes, <u>she smiled briefly. Takes one to know one/

'I want to help you/ said Finn. Tell me how/

'Don't you know what I need, Finn?'

'Emotional support. But I've never been very good at that. Just don't have the knack/

Then you're no use to me. You'd have to be human to understand what I'm going through, and you left that behind a long time

•go.'

Finn looked at her, feeling helpless. He didn't like the sensation. He could see what she needed, but had no idea what it involved never had. Emotions were for the most part things he only understood

Me! from a distance. But he tried anyway. Because he needed to believe that even monsters didn't have to be monsters all the time

I could still make you my Empress/ he said. 'Set you on a Throne I" Mile me. No one would say

anything. No one would dare/

Anne laughed harshly. 'I can just see something like me sitting on I i In one. A perfect symbol for the Empire you've made, Finn. No. I M. \cr wanted to be Empress. I wanted so very little, and never got iny of it. And now . . . I'm haunted by the people I could have i" « M Stronger, better, happier people. All I am now, is what you

- 11.M Ir of me. Just another poor damned monster; like you/

I inn considered the matter, and then shrugged mentally. Amu-lost to him, trapped within her own limitations. Which me<mi 11' 11,id no more use for her, except as a weapon to use against his

- in mies. So he turned and left her in her room, her cage, nodded

»lhyc lo the preoccupied Dr Happy, and went off to set in motion i" pi,m to lure and trap and kill Douglas Campbell.

i M .1 he made an official announcement, on all his tame news

i.minis, ilidi Anne Barclay wasn't dead after all. Instead, she had

in" • M kept in strict seclusion while she recovered from her many

.....us injuries. But now that she was finally well enough, she

uMilil .il List he put on trial for treason, and the murder of the i hcloved Pciragon Emma Steel. There would be a show trial, i-.ril on every channel, followed quickly by a prolonged, painful Hid MM v.\ execution.

Finn watched a recording of his broadcast afterwards, and gave himself serious points for an excellent performance. He struck just the right notes of betrayed trust and outraged honour. He still had the crystal paperweight with which Anne had bludgeoned Emma Steel to death, stained with the Paragon's dried blood. He'd had a feeling at the time it might come in handy some day. Not that he expected to have to offer it in evidence. It would never come to a trial. Douglas would see to that. He'd take one look at the news broadcast and come running to save her. Because after all that had happened, after all the things that Anne had done; she was still his friend. Douglas would come to rescue her, because he still believed in people. That had always been his greatest weakness.

Nina Malapert got the news first, of course. She hurriedly called a private meeting, just for her and Douglas and Stuart, and wouldn't say why until they were all assembled in Douglas's room. Two Psycho Sluts stood guard outside the door, ensuring they wouldn't be interrupted. Douglas and Stuart sat on the two chairs and looked expectantly at Nina, who was too nervous to sit or stand still. In the end, she folded her arms tightly under her breasts, mostly to keep her hands from shaking, and broke the news as swiftly and kindly as she could. She kept to the bare facts, not commenting, while watching Douglas carefully. After she'd finished, he didn't say anything for a long time. Nina and Stuart looked at each other.

'You're thinking about a rescue,' Stuart said finally. 'Don't. We can't risk it, Douglas. She's being held inside the Palace. We'd need an army just to break in, and I don't see why we should risk so many good people for a back-stabbing traitor like Anne Barclay.'

'We wouldn't need an army/' said Douglas. 'I know old, secret ways into the Palace, remember? Ways that Finn doesn't even suspect are there.'

'You're thinking of going on your own, aren't you?' said Nina. 'Sweetie, it's a trap! Has to be!'

'Of course it's a trap,' said Douglas, his voice dangerously calm. 'Finn always did know how to yank my chains. It doesn't matter. I can out-think Finn/'

'And get to Anne, despite all the obstacles and booby traps he'll put in your path?' said Stuart.

'Of course/'

'Why?' said Stuart, not bothering to hide his exasperation. 'What

'nukes IHT so iinpoi,ml? She helijyed Lewis <md Jes<imine, ,ind you, ,nul HUM'S (iully iidmilled she-
muriirrd limnu Steel!'

'She was Hun's bitch/ said Nina. 'And now he doesn't need hn he's thrown her to the wolves, and I say
good riddance to kid rubbish/

'You never knew her before/ said Douglas. 'She was splendid, m her time. And she was my friend.
Friends don't stop being I'rimK just because they've done bad things. And I think . . . perhaps we ,ill IH
n.iyed her, long before she betrayed us/

'Douglas; she hasn't been your friend in a long time/ said Shun lh,it's why I need to be her friend/ said
Douglas. 'One last Him

He swore them both to silence, and left the Rookery alone, n,i\ell MM; secret paths he remembered
from his time as a Paragon. He wem • Hour tind in disguise, because he knew the rest of his people
would h.ive tried to stop him if they'd known; and he wasn't HOUM; i<> !•• topped. He slipped silently
over the border and into the d.nk em i nets of the Parade of the Endless, keeping to the shadows to ,i\
<>id ihe peacekeepers, hidden from the ELFs by the old Par.ij'.on < hloeker on his belt. He headed for
the Palace, and no one ^,\ll him (omiih',.

He h.ul to do this. Perhaps because Anne was the very List p« • hr. old life that he might still be able to

rescue and redeem I \ • iliinj: else was changed or lost or gone; including him. He lud to il\ .ii;e something.

I IK only person who might have stopped him was Dun.) Venn* he nude a point of searching her out before he left, tellmr In i u h.ii he was going to do, and asked her to run interference to CO in, leaving. Diana agreed. She understood all about ne« t moiimul gestures, and even more about self-sacrifice-. !//</ if I don't come back . . . \ «•// ir/// he avenged, said Jenny Psycho.

I mu I Mn.mdal sat on a comfortable chair in Dr Happy's lihoi.iiioi \ .mil \v,ik lied what was left of the good Doctor ricochet around Hie He'd had to bring his own comfortable chair. Dr ll.ippy lud l.ii beyond such everyday comforts. All his skin w.is grej in.I lolling now, with deep dark holes in the exposed red NHMI ol hr, |MM!\ MHIU- ol it tinted here and there with the purples <uul greens ol

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gangrene. Sharp-edged support tech protruded all over his body, blocky and functional. And ever since he'd dosed himself with the new Boost (he couldn't resist, he just had to know) his mental deterioration seemed to have accelerated to catch up with his supercharged metabolism. He darted back and forth across his laboratory, unable to settle anywhere for more than a moment, bouncing off the hardier pieces of equipment, giggling and barking and singing scraps of songs.

'Dr Happy/ Finn said firmly. Try and land somewhere near my reality, and talk to me. Have you programmed Anne's computer implants as I instructed you?'

Dr Happy spun to a halt in front of Finn, gurgled a few times, and studied him for a long moment, as though trying to remember where he'd seen him before. He clutched his broken hands together over his sunken chest, and nodded so rapidly that Finn was genuinely worried the man's head would fall off.

'All done! All done! Oh yes. I programmed her brain. Her new computer brain, sunk deep into the medulla oblongata, and the old reptile brain stem itself. Our instructions now have the force of instinct. So she will do the right thing, whether she wants to or not. Or at least; I think I did that. My time sense is so advanced now, I can remember things before I do them. So many worlds to see, so little time! Yes! I'm wearing out, you know. Running down. Won't be long now. Ah death; the final high

'Will Anne do what I need her to do?' Finn said patiently. You couldn't bully or threaten someone who was actually looking forward to dying.

'Oh yes. I did it. If her nerve should fail, the tech will see her through. I was very careful. She doesn't even remember my programming her/

'Good. Douglas will be here soon. I know it. Try and keep out of the way once he gets here, Doctor. I want this to be between Anne and Douglas/

'Won't you be here?' said Dr Happy, absently poking a finger into a hole in his chest, to see how deep it went.

'No. I don't want anything to detract from their reunion. I shall observe from a safe distance. I want to see what this King of Thieves has become, before I face him in person. First rule of war, Doctor: know thy enemy/

Know youi code woid/ Dr Happy said sln< ily, Iryin^ on cohei eiue a^ain 101 a while, just lo'SIT what il
MI like. 'II .ill else Luis. \ ONI word of (oniin,ind will ac livale ihe lailsales I pul in her he.id Nave you
finished with me now? h's so hard, being rational lor any leiir.ih of lime. Reason! Overrated if yon ask me.
Know ihysell, I inn. That's far more- important. We are all deep, and contain lunacies. l;ish/

linn decided he'd probably got the best out of Dr Happy, and was

iiin^ up to leave when the Doctor suddenly froze in his Mac ks, his

bony head cocked on one side as though listening, his sunken eyes

• ! «-where.

'oinconc's coming/ he said. 'Coming like a thunderstorm, with blood and rage in his heart/

Hun smiled. 'Good/ he said. And left.

The man who had once been a Paragon, and then King of tin* (ioldrn and most recently the King of Thieves, but was now and lor rln . mission just a man named Douglas Campbell, ran steadily ihiourli MM aiuient stone tunnels under the Imperial Palace. There iva "»le ma/e of subsystems and maintenance ways under the I'al.h « II that most people never knew about; some so old they no Ion MM" .ued on any official plans. Deserted and abandoned, oih;mall\ hnilt io serve buildings that no longer existed, over whose- remain . the I'aLu'c had been built. The royal family knew about them, and n pi them secret, because every ruler recognised that the day im point when they'd have to leave in a hurry. And so Douglas nude hr. pa-,i and under and around all the defences Finn had set up io ptolecl himself, and finally emerged through a very secret hidden

I 11 HO what had once been his private quarters. H< looked unhurriedly about him, taking in the recent dan

- ml ihe older worn-in mess that disfigured what had once IHTM hr.s lie wrinkled his nose. The place smelled as bad as il looked

i inn h.id changed. He had never used to live like a pig. Douglas ii.id io wonder what the state of these rooms implied ahoul Him I

- mum slate of mind. Perhaps it meant Finn was no lonr.ei m

- "iiiml. Douglas hoped so. And yet . . . there was something nn

about the everyday human, any more. Finn didn't need to bother with these quarters, beyond the mess and the duller, more human side.

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Douglas scowled. He didn't want Finn to be mad. That would take all the fun out of killing him.

He found Finn's computer terminal, and using a device that was common in the Rookery but strictly illegal everywhere else, Douglas forced his way into Finn's files. It didn't take him long to discover where Finn was keeping Anne; but why hold a political prisoner in a steel vault in a private laboratory? Sudden horrid thoughts about torture made Douglas impatient, and he hurried out of the room. He padded cautiously through the dark shadowed corridors of what had once been his Palace. His home. He took in the hanging corpses, the heads impaled on spikes, and his heart hardened. He'd find no innocents in a place like this.

And so he killed all the guards he came across, silently and efficiently. They were all cold-eyed fanatics, well trained and motivated, but none of them was good enough to stop Douglas. He let the bodies lie where they fell. Let someone find them and sound the alarm. Let Finn know that death was stalking the corridors of his usurped Palace. Douglas hurried on through what had once been familiar locations, now turned into a slaughterhouse by Finn. Some of the blood was still wet. Douglas smiled a slow cold smile. Just one-more reason to kill his old friend.

He found the laboratory easily enough, and frowned as he realised there were no guards posted at the door. Douglas approached it warily, ready for booby traps or surprise attacks, but there was nothing. He pressed gently against the door with his fingertips, and it swung smoothly open, falling back easily at his touch. So. A trap, daring him to walk inside. Douglas laughed, and it was a harsh ugly sound. He pushed back the cowl of his cape to reveal his face, so that everyone would know who had come, and then kicked the door all the way open and barged into the lab, sword and gun in hand. It looked quickly about him, but the whole place was deserted. A few machines still hummed and chattered to themselves, working on unknown problems, but most of the tech had been shut down. There were animal cages stacked against one wall, but they were empty. Half the lights had been turned off, leaving half the lab hidden in shadows. Douglas moved slowly forward, breathing through his mouth so he could listen for any sound, and then froze as he made out a single silhouette standing at the back of the lab. For a moment they stood there, studying each other, and then Amu-Barclay stepped forward into the light.

Douglas almost cried out, at his sight of what had been done to her. She was hunched over by the bulking trapezoid that protruded from her back, and more showed here and there through her Hushi's rose-red skin. Her musculature had been twisted and distorted by the strains of implanted servomechanisms, and there were deep scars on the sides of her shaven head. Her face was still hers, but her eyes glowed golden in the dim light. Old ridged scar tissue and ugly patterns on her bare body. She lurched forward another step, the power in her remade body giving her strength but not grace. Anne saw the horror in Douglas's face, and produced something like her old smile.

'Hello, Douglas. If you came to save me, you left it a bit late.'

'What have they done to you, Anne?' Douglas said softly.

'Oh, they've done a hell of a lot to me, Douglas, and all becau

•n. You did this to me, during your dramatic escape from H|(court. Of course, you were so busy getting away that yon dnln' look back, to see what the falling masonry had done to mr. Mm ill-'1 \\", isn't the worse thing you did. You escaped, and yon didn't i mr with you. So really, everything that's going to happen no\\ V<MII fault.'

Mir raised a hand, and a disrupter barrel emerged From .1 -.I'1 under her wrist. Douglas threw himself to one side, and ihr em IMMIIH just clipped his ribs, burning the skin and setting lire i<> M i lo.ik. Fie threw it from him, and dodged behind a pirrr ol IK machinery.

'Anne; don't do this! I came to get you out of herr!' I oo late, Douglas. Too little and too late.'

Shr swept the heavy machinery away with one swift heave, ,n"l advanced on him, a sword in each hand; Douglas reluctantly .HUM (I In . disrupter at her, but at the last moment he shot at hrr lei;, .um mily to wound her. Anne avoided the beam easily. And thru -.I" \\", upon him, her two blades moving faster than any Imm.m i <mld lolow, and Douglas was forced to fall kirk, step by step, n-ill Ins skill and strength just to defend himself. He was ten limrs |b>(' ndsinan she was, but she was ten times stronger, and lasiei

Miry duelled kirk and forth across thr lab, smashing drliralr ir>h .ilonj- Mir way, Douglas using every trick and lerlmu|jie hr kiu'W HIM to slay alivr. Anne had hern remade will) tech and drills ,iH<d MM P,<H >,i, ,11 id she was inhumanly competent now. Douglas lou^11 In . \\.iy mil of ,l corner I kit would have' trapped him, hill ah r,ul\ I" '•

breathing was coming hard and harsh, and his sword arm ached from parrying viciously hard blows. He knew now that the only way to stop Anne would be to kill her, and he wasn't sure he could do that.

So he did the only thing he could. He dropped his sword and gun on the floor, and stood before her empty-handed. Anne stood very still, checking out the possibilities of a trap or a stratagem.

'Anne/ said Douglas. This is me. Remember. Remember how it used to be. We were friends. And of all the friends I had, it seems I've hurt you the most. I never meant for this to happen. I won't kill you, Anne. You . . . you do what you have to.'

Anne slowly lowered the blades in her hands. 'Damn you, Douglas. This isn't fair. I need to kill you.'

'Then kill me.'

'You won't kill me? You won't even do me that one final kindness? You think I want to live like this?'

'Come with me, Anne. To the Rookery. They have all kind of tech there, some alien. There has to be someone who can help you. Who can undo what these bastards did to you. Don't just give up! The Anne I remember never believed in giving up. It's never too late—

'It is for me. I should have died. This is my punishment. I deserve everything that's happened to me, because of all the awful things I did. You don't know—'

'Anne, I—'

'You don't know! I killed Emma Steel! The best person I ever knew. She was worth ten of me, and I struck her down from behind.'

Then come with me, and fight for the rebellicgi. Find atonement on the battlefield.'

'You'd still take me in? After everything I've done? To you, and Jesamine and Lewis?'

That's what friends are for,' said Douglas.

'You always were too soft, Douglas.'

'Well, this is all very touching,' Finn said suddenly, speaking through the tech in Anne's throat. Like an ELF speaking through his thrall. 'But I did foresee this outbreak of maudlin sentimentality, and so I took a few precautions. Not very nice precautions, but then, that's life for you. So sorry I can't be here in person, Douglas, but he assured that thanks to the programming I had placed in Anne's

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«oiiipiilri mipl.mls, when she kills yon il will he In i kind on the Word, hnl my insli nrlioiis in hri h.ind. So re.illy I'll hr llirir in • pun, .mywtiy.'

Me spoke ,i ronmund word, and Anne's Lire wen I hi,ink ,is hei hotly shifled abruptly into a killing stance. Douglas i'.Liiued ,n he, weapons lying on the floor, hut there was no way he could ie,uh them in time. And so he stood, tall and proud and iinllirhiii}', When there's nothing left but to die, die well.

And then Anne screamed. An ugly, tortured sound. She diopped hold her swords. Douglas started forward, only to Iree/e ,n;,in Amir covrred him with the disrupter built into her wrist. She Minlrd hi "My .U Douglas.

<HMHlbye, old friend. I betrayed you so many times, hnl iln Would have been one betrayal too far. I guess they built me hen. t ih.m they knew. So; one last blast of the gun. One List rkim < mption.'

She lilted her hand, fighting her computers all the way, ,iml hrisell in the head. At such close range, the

energy hurled him in a split second apart, in a flurry of blood and brains. The headless hoodlump fell forth on its feet for a moment, and then stood still,

Then HIM sent his people running in from all directions, and when they got to the laboratory Douglas was already gone. Meanwhile,

He left his bodies behind him as he made his way through the laboratory, and finally disappeared down into the subterranean levels. And as he went he was planning the first steps of the revolution. The time had come. Because if Finn could do such things, she was the only woman who'd ever cared a damn for him, then he was ready for anything. Anything at all.

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SEVEN

WORKING WITH THE

ILLUMINATI

The stars and the planets whirled by so fast they made a continuous shimmering rainbow path as Owen Deathstalker strode steadily back into the Past; the galaxy turning under his feet like a giant cog wheel. He was too tired now for dancing, his spirit too weary, and yet he felt more powerful than ever, and his speed continued to increase. He was still following Hazel d'Ark's trail, forever closing in but somehow never quite catching up. He felt as though he'd always been pursuing Hazel, and always would, trapped in the rainbow run like a hamster in its wheel, only thinking it was getting somewhere.

Home seemed very far away now, and so did his humanity. He'd done so much, both before and since his death, and he felt as if he could do so much more. He'd come a long way, in more ways than one. He wondered if the old Owen, the young scholar in his comfortable ivory tower, would recognise anything of the man he'd become. He liked to think he'd done good things, honourable things, in his short but remarkable life - but he had to wonder if it would ever be possible, or even advisable, for something as powerful as he now was to return to human society. Power tended to corrupt; he knew that from his studies of history, and he had made himself so very powerful. Would he ever see his home again; with or without Hazel?

That thought led naturally but uneasily to another. What was he going to do, what could he hope to do, when he finally did catch up with Hazel? Was she destined to become the Terror, somewhere back in the unimaginable past, or could he somehow prevail?

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And if the iron kiwis of cause & effect elicited her to become the Terror, and do till the awful things she did, could he win her back to sanity and humanity? Could she ever be just Hazel d'Ark again? Could he ever be just Owen Deathstalker again? Or had they both drunk too deeply from the poisoned chalice that was the Madness Maze?

Could they ever have a life together after this, or had he come this way just to kill a monster, and die with her rather than become a monster himself? So many questions; and no answers at all. The only thing

he was sure of was that he had to go on. Hazel was his love, and his responsibility, even if she'd never admitted it. He couldn't leave her, mad and sorrowing, in the dark. He was getting close to ... something. He could feel it. He broke out of the rainbow run, and dropped back into the slow steady course of Time. Stars and planets reappeared around him, calm and stationary against the endless night. Owen wasn't sure-how far back he'd gone into the Past, but once again he was hanging in orbit over the same familiar planet. Remembering how he'd been treated before, he surrounded himself with a powerful force shield and stealth screen, so that he could take a cautious look around before becoming involved, without having to worry about being observed or attacked.

He swore briefly as he discovered he'd just missed Hazel again. She had been here recently, perhaps as little as a few weeks previously, but she was gone again, diving even further back into prehistory. But why had she stopped here, however briefly, in this particular moment of Time and Space? Owen reached out with his enlarged senses, and immediately detected something strange and yet somehow familiar, down on the surface of the planet below. It sort of reminded him of Hazel. Had she left something of herself behind? It was a strong presence, powerful but elusive, with fluctuating attributes that reminded him of his time inside the Madness Maze. It definitely wasn't Hazel, but . . . Could some other Maze survivor have come back through Time, pursuing him as he pursued Hazel?

Owen pushed the mounting questions aside, so he could consider his own position. He listened in to the thousands of communication channels emanating from the planet below that was Logres, Golgotha, Heartworld and now apparently simply the Hearth of Humanity. He sorted through the various frequencies, searching

out the information he needed about exactly what lay below him. It seemed he had emerged in the far Past, in the very first days of Empire, when Humanity had only just discovered the stardrive, and was setting out to explore the stars, to see what was there.

Owen stopped listening, and looked around him. Great clumsy satellites whirled ponderously past, accompanied by all kinds of abandoned junk and tech; almost enough to make a planetary ring. Owen drifted slowly down towards Hearth, just enough to put himself safely underneath their various orbits and out of their way. Also in orbit were huge, ungainly starships, being slowly put together in orbiting docks by technicians in what looked like primitive hard suits. The unfinished ships bristled with all kinds of probably untested tech. This was the first wave of expansion, Humanity's first great leap out into the unknown. These brave prototype ships looked nothing like the sleek and sophisticated craft of Owen's time, and he had to admire the courage of the visionary men and women who were ready to trust their

lives to new ships and a barely understood drive, in the service of Humanity's oldest dream. To go to the stars . . .

Owen went swiftly through the communication channels again, trying to get some feel for what kind of political set-up he'd be facing this time. Apparently the Empire at this time consisted of the nine planets in the solar system, all of them terraformed or colonised to some degree, ruled more or less democratically by a Council of the Nine, based on Hearth. There was no Throne, no Emperor. From what Owen could gather, Humanity was pretty much at peace with itself, and full of hope and good intentions.

The road to Hell has always been paved with good intentions.

Owen considered the planet turning so very slowly beneath him. He had to go down. He needed to know what it was that felt to him like Hazel and the Maze and something more. And he was tired. He could use a rest. The pursuit could wait, for a while. After all, he had all the Time in the world . . . And then his head snapped round and he glared suspiciously into the dark. Something was coming his way, he could feel it, and it was heading straight for him. Even though nothing in this primitive age should have been able to deled his presence. He glared in the direction he knew it was coming from, even though he couldn't see anything yet, and eventually a bri^hi shining light came swooping towards him.

Thr light swiftly became a living thing, an entirely unfamiliar (i c,ii urc flapping towards him on huge butterfly wings almost thirty l<vi <HTOSS. It moved easily through the cold vacuum of space, i-niirly unprotected, apparently driven only by its brightly shining uings. The body within the wingspan was basically humanoid, but in no way human. It was alien, in appearance and affect, a delicate lliiiiisy creature of bright shimmering rainbow colours. It slowed to a I i.i 11 ,i I unit a dozen feet away from Owen, and considered him with a l.ii e I hat was somehow even more disturbing for its vague human lomieetions. The eyes were huge and dark and unblinking, taking up .ihnost a third of the long pointed face, and the mouth below ,i simple slit. Two long slender antennae streamed up from the bulging brow. The vast rainbow wings rippled slowly, as though holding the creature in place against unfelt astral winds.

I <>i <i moment, Owen wondered if perhaps he'd died, and this was tiiMIic ,ngel sent to finally bring him home, but the creature was just |no obviously alien for that. Owen slowly raised a hand and waved

pothely, and words sounded suddenly in his head, sliding smoothly through his thoughts like bitter honey. They certainly weren't • Mining through his comm implant.

-Greetings to you, strange traveller. I am of the Illuminati. We

• I'm thinking up here, so I came to see what new marvel had Mr. io Hearth. We are strangers here, travelling on our way, but

. you appear human. Though humans don't normally survive, in open space.' He pushed his thoughts in the creature's direction, and it

.....I can pick them up easily enough. 'Hi there. I am human, or at

I I? A* I I used to be. I suppose human is as human does. I'm . . . just

Maybe I ask what you are?'

I In- n.iiiic for my people translates into your tongue as Luminary or Light People. Since we have been here, we have adopted

- •I.I luminum name of Illuminati. I myself have taken the name

Euiir<

- ii blinked a few times. 'I'm not sure you've really understood ih» i m pi u, 11 ions of that name.'

h me.ins li^ht-bringer, doesn't it?'

II, yes, but . . . no, forget it. Life's too short to explain some

I'm Owen/ M. (In. Owen. M<iy I inquire as to how you're able to survive in

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open space without exploding, boiling or otherwise perishing in a very messy manner?'

'I haven't been entirely human for a long time,' said Owen. 'I'm still trying to decide whether that's a good thing. Long story; basically I'm travelling back through Time from your future, searching for a friend who

came this way before me. Her name is Hazel d'Ark. Have you encountered her, by any chance?'

'I do not recognise the name, Owen. I have to say I'm impressed. My people have travelled in space long and far and wide, and we have never encountered any species that could move at will in Time. May I inquire as to your intentions here?'

'Well, since we're both being so very polite and civilised ... I thought I'd have a rest stop, and take a look around. See what there is to see/

'I'm not sure that's entirely wise,' said Lucifer. 'The people of this world are not ready for contact with a being of your power and abilities. I can sense strange energies, within and around you. Your presence could terrify and traumatise the people of this time; perhaps even anger them to violence. They have very little experience with beings other than themselves.'

'Did they treat you badly?' said Owen, frowning.

'Not as such. I think it would be best if you came down and spoke with my people first. I understand that I cannot coerce you, but I assure you there are things we know that you do not, and that you need to know.' The alien studied Owen's face for a long moment, with its flat black unblinking eyes, 'You are not just looking for your friend. I see something in you - an old, familiar fear. You know of the great and ancient evil that destroyed my people, and a civilisation millions of years old. You know of the entity we call the Terror.' *

'Yes. Perhaps we should speak,' Owen said carefully. 'Any idea on how I can descend to the surface without being spotted? My stealth field will shield me from electronic eyes, but not material ones. Hey . . . wait a minute. How were you able to find me?'

'Few things are hidden from the Illuminati,' said Lucifer, 'You shine so very brightly in our minds, like a part of ourselves we had forgotten. Follow me/

It unfurled its great butterfly wings, flapped them like huge sails, and a shining silver tunnel appeared in space below it, dropping endlessly away. Lucifer dived into it, and after a quick mental shrug,

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• lid Owen. If nothing else, «i mrrliuj: \\\illi ihese l.ij'.hl People

IMMil.1 he interesting. He w«is prelly sine (he liisUlu n.lined ,loy lud

nhoned ihem once. And then, as suddenly <is he'd entered ihe

. i iimnel, Owen was out ihe other end, JIH! dropping through

and the low birds to great green lawn, lie landed easily, and the

illumined drilled down to settle beside him. The silver tunnel had

disappeared.

On this bright sunny day, and Owen took a deep lungful of good clean air. No sounds swept over him from all directions, only the cold and empty silence of space. Even the sun felt refreshing. He smiled broadly, and looked around him. He was standing in a great open park, surrounded by many fine trees, carefully arranged and sculpted. A bridge over a clear, sparkling river. In the air, cars soared between tall towers, all silver.

The men and women were men and women wearing some kind of uniform. Their happy laughter echoed down to the streets. The air was pure and clean, the sky a dazzling blue. Everything seemed to Owen to be gloriously new.

The buildings were steel and silver, with huge windows. They were built in strict straight lines, all of them in the same style or individuality or character. They marched in long rows, tall and imposing and strictly uniform. Owen could see that they had a solid, clean,

injustice of scale.

No people walked the polished and gleaming sidewalks, and the robots were busy with their jobs or running errands or obsessively cleaning them.

They were roughly humanoid in shape, cast in gleaming metal.

None of the style or artistry of the Shulian robots.

They were designed to perform tasks. They were lumpy, unfinished-looking, moving up and down the streets, giving the robots the appearance of crowds of assorted animals. All of them without a name, owner or master, all of them moving with purpose.

They were horses and dogs and cats, and other creatures he didn't recognize, though he thought he might have seen some of them in certain very old texts.

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The robots aren't very efficient," said a cheerful voice behind him. "But I guess we just like having them around. We always dreamed of creating robots, so now we can build them, we do."

Owen looked round. Standing beside him was a woman of a certain age, smiling calmly, dressed in a sparkling metallic tunic. It was a sign of how engrossed Owen had been in this strange old world that he

hadn't even heard her arrive. He made a mental note not to let that happen again. Just because a place looked . . . clean, didn't mean it was necessarily friendly to strangers. He smiled back at the woman. She had an ordinary, dull, but determinedly happy face. The kind of woman who was always doing things for others, usually without thanks. She took Owen's offered hand, and gave it a brief but emphatic shake.

'You must be Owen/ she said. 'I'm Hellen Waters. The Illuminati have talked of nothing but you ever since they discovered you in orbit, appearing suddenly out of nowhere. They all listened in to your little chat with Lucifer. And yes, I've tried telling him about that name, but he won't listen. The Light People can be almost wilfully blind to concepts they don't want to understand. I'm their human contact. Pretty much their only human contact, these days. I try to protect them, and run interference for them when government busybodies come sniffing around, because . . . well, because somebody's got to. They're very like children, in some ways, the Illuminati. They understand about big things, like the Terror, but the small everyday cruelties and evils of human thinking seem to go right over their heads. So, Owen; who are you? Where do you come from? And why have the Illuminati got themselves so worked up over you?'

Owen had to grin at the series of perfectly artless questions. 'I am Owen Deathstalker, a traveller in time. I'm from your future. Don't ask me exactly how far ahead; I've rather lost track of dates.'

Hellen looked at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. 'I should have known the Illuminati wouldn't get so excited over just anybody. A time traveller! That is just so ... What a year this has been! First contact with aliens, and a time traveller! I may hyperventilate/

'Don't ask me about the future/ said Owen. 'I'm new to this whole time travel thing, but I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to talk about things like that/

'It's just a little bit of a change, innit? I'll be right here, in the line/ said I lellen. '(Hiirlmirs you have In womln < ,111 you It'll me anything about n s like, when* you come horn?'

'It's . . . colourful/ said Owen. 'Yes; definitely colourful. You said your robots weren't very ellkienl. So why build them?'

I lellen smiled, acknowledging the change of subject. 'We built lobois because we wanted to. Because we've always wanted to. Our Hi 1mlific romances were always full of machine servants, in the hope of men. Besides, we like having servants, or maybe even nhivev Robots can be both, without any of the concomitant guilt. Some people say we let the robots do too much for us these days, 11 hi I we've become soft and weak and far too dependent on them. Maybe. But life's hard enough; you have to take your comforts Where you can find them.

'Aller I IK* robots, we built improved animals. That's a much beitei

• \ Wr took the animals we loved most, and made them inlelli-)nil, .iiul liiuilly equal citizens. Horses and dogs and cats came lirsl, brtmisi' we'd always liked them the most. We did it to the monkeys Ion, but they turned out to be ungrateful little shits. They've got then H\ ii uiy now, and throw their turds at tourists. And we did oiler to (In II to the whales and dolphins, but they said they were quite happy

• in \ were, thank you very much. Of course, some people were • nlh i MI i prised when the animals turned out to have wills ami nlons ol their own, and were more interested in being partneis ii« MI IM-IS. liliols. That was the point Would you like to meet some ' Love m/ said Owen, fascinated by the thought of intelligent n.iK 'We do have horses and dogs and cats in my lime, but liisi out on the border worlds; and none of them arc1 intdli ' «hii ibey are, they're keeping really quiet about it/ 'Thru I jjiu'ss the experiment didn't work out after all/ lldlm " <l '.nth ,i pity. Let's try one of the dogs. Cats can be a bit snotty h .nailers, and horses always want to talk philosophy. Dogs have time to talk to a human. But be warned; dogs are still ilnH'< I hey love goofing off/

IM I< .I Owen out of the park. Lucifer stayed behind. He'd gone INK i Mine he landed. Owen and Hellen ended up talking to a

- hl.H k ,uul white spotty dog thai sat at the edge of the street,

\ ny I borough and satisfying scratch. He broke off to have a NIMH! -.mil ,ii Owen.

'Hello, Hellen/ he said, in a deep growly voice. 'Who's the rube? He smells funny/

'Such manners, Sparky/ Hellen scolded him, but still unable to keep the fondness out of her voice. This is Owen. He's just visiting/

'Oh, a tourist. Nice to meet you, Owen; welcome to the city, don't steal anything, and no I don't pose for photos/ He cocked his head to one side. 'You really do smell different. Wrong. Not entirely human. Are you a threat? I may be civilised now, but I can still bite off your bits and gargle with your testicles/

'I'm no threat,' Owen assured the dog solemnly. 'I don't want to hurt anyone/

The dog wagged his tail dubiously. 'Well, I can hear the truth in your voice, but still; you watch yourself. Hellen is a good sort, but far too trusting. People take advantage of her, and not just people either. I

wouldn't hang around with those fairy aliens if you paid me. They talk crap and their smell puts my teeth on edge. I just know they'd love to put a collar on me, the bastards/

'Do the people of this city treat you right?' said Owen.

The dog shrugged, 'More or less. I think we'd all be a lot happier if humans did a little less talking and lot more throwing sticks, but . . . Right now, most animals are annoyed because people won't let us have antigrav backpacks, and fly like they do. Just because certain species can't be trusted when it comes to shitting and pissing. Pardon the language, but I'm a dog, and we don't care. Humans have the strangest taboos. If they just sniffed each other's crotches now and again, they'd all be a lot happier/

Hellen decided it was time they were moving along; and Owen had to agree with her. A little doggy straight-talking went a long way. She led him back to the patiently waiting alien, who had opened a concealed panel in the ground, revealing a tunnel that led down into the earth. Owen was tempted to make a remark about Lucifer and the underworld, but rose above it. He and Hellen followed the alien down the simply lit tunnel, which sank steadily into the earth for some time before finally leveling off. The walls were made of tightly packed earth, and the smell of dirt and growing things was strong on the close air. Hellen leaned in towards OWAMI, so she could murmur confidentially in his ear.

The Light People built all this. They like dark enclosed spaces. Apparently it makes them feel safe, and secure. Maybe it reminds

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them of their time in their cocoon. Assuming they have cocoons. They don't talk much about their home life/

Their tunnel suddenly broadened out into a great natural cavern, hundreds of feet in diameter. The massed Illuminati hung from the ceiling by their feet, like bats, their wings folded around them like . . . , huddled close together. They bobbed and rustled excitedly as Owen entered their domain, peering down at him from the high ceiling. Their bright rainbow glows supplied the only light, somewhat muted by the surrounding gloom. Owen counted forty of them, including Lucifer, who was looking longingly up at the towed ceiling, but stayed politely on the ground with Owen and Helen. There was no furniture, only raised earth mounds here and there, so Owen and Helen sat on those. Lucifer regarded Owen thoughtfully.

In our story, Owen Deathstalker. We came to Earth ten .

million years ago, and at first the humans made a great fuss of us. We

remember their first alien contact, and they couldn't get enough of us.

There were parades, celebrations, and endless questions. But when

we tried to tell them that we couldn't teach them to fly in space

they understood, as we do, their enthusiasm waned. And when we

Finally told them why we had come; that we were the last of our

lineage from the Terror that had destroyed our civilisation,

nothing changed. We were no longer heroic travellers, just ob-

ject of pity. Refugees. Not brave explorers of the infinite, as they

used to be. And when they found out we had no great know-

ledge to share with them, no amazing advanced technology, just a

few scraps of the danger to come . . . the novelty wore off fast. They

despised us. They were bored. We were a disappointment. All

in vain (11 years they'd had of first contact with an intelligent alien

,11 id we couldn't fulfil any of them. They wouldn't listen to

n .ih.Mii ihr Terror. A threat that wouldn't arrive for thousands of

wasn't enough to hold their attention. No one took it ser-

i\ Unit's someone else's problem, they said. Let someone else worry

M',/// n Wr brcame a joke, and then an old joke, that no one wants

In hi n ,my more1. Let me show you. Turn on the television, Hellen.'

M noddrd (juirkly, and pulled forwards out of the shadows what

IM..I , ,l h> ()\vrn likr »i portable virwscreen unit. Hellen turned it on,

I In si irrn showed »i close-up of some show host doing what

|h\ ninril was lopk.il humour. (Irrtninly nonr of it meant

anything to him, but the live studio audience lapped it up. The host was named Allan Woss; a tall lanky sort in a sparkly suit, with a mop of bright blue hair and a wide fake smile, to show off his perfect white teeth. He waved his arms about a lot and kept shooting love me looks into the camera. Owen sniffed. He recognised the type. It seemed some things were always the same, wherever you went.

'He's a personality/ Hellen said dispassionately. 'Famous for being famous. And nowhere near as smart and funny as he thinks he is. And that sparkly suit is just so yesterday's man. Ostensibly this is a chat show, but really the guests are only there so Woss can have fun at their expense. The Illuminatus standing below him, in what Woss so charmingly refers to as the Conversation Pit, is called Solar. And this is the only kind of show the Light People can get on these days. They know the odds are stacked against them from the start, but they're obsessed with getting their warning across. I understand why - but no one listens. No one cares. It all happened so very far away, and so long ago.'

She turned up the volume as Woss lowered himself into what looked very like a throne, set over the Conversation Pit. The single Illuminatus looked smaller and shabbier on the television screen. The harsh studio lighting bleached out its delicate rainbow colours. The Illuminatus wrapped its wings tightly about its body, perhaps for comfort. Woss leaned back in his throne, utterly at ease, dispensing judgement and jokes for the eager live audience, and barely allowing Solar to get a word in edgeways.

'So, Solar; tell us all about yourself, you strange-looking person, you. Do you have any strange powers or abilities? Can you get radio signals on those antennae? Can you tell us this week's winning lottery number? No; not a lot of use, are you? So it's just the wings, then . . . Shame, shame, shame. Still; let me ask you the question I just know our viewers want me to ask; since none of you Light Bulb People seem to be guys or gals, how do you produce more little Illuminati? I mean, pardon my bluntness, but you people don't seem to have any equipment to do anything with! Unless those aren't really antennae after

all! Just a joke, just a joke. Maybe I should ask you about pollination. For all I know, you could have been shagging your dressing room!

There was loud sycophantic laughter and cheers horn his .itidi-ence. Woss smiled and waved his hands .ihoui < hveii scowled.

'Why is he giving Solar such a hard time?'

'Because that's what he does. Because he can,' said Hellen. The Illuminati were our first contact, and they turned out to be boring. And that of course was unforgivable. So now everyone just makes lun of them, in the hope they'll take the hint, and leave. That way III l inanity can just forget all about them.'

There was a break in the show, for a series of loud and frankly i.iier obnoxious ads, and then Woss and Solar were back again. Woss tried half-heartedly to get Solar to give him a piggyback, and Ily him around the studio. Solar declined. Woss sniffed loudly.

Too good for us, eh? Well, don't get too cocky; or the Terror mij'Jii come after you with a bloody big butterfly net! Hey, if you're ii'iilly part moth, maybe we'd better keep you away from the studio ill-inn)^! I don't think we're insured for self-immolation!

Hie .mdience howled with laughter, only to break off suddenly as NnLii suddenly spread out his wings to their full extent. He rose vly up into the air, his wings barely moving, until he was looking down .il Woss and his audience.

«line here to tell you that you are not alone. And that you in d.inger. But it seems you are determined not to hear our

iul Allan Woss. 'No one invited you here. And the only • I<M messages is in the ad breaks. Learn some new tricks, if you ii r« <>»ple i<> ptiy attention. In the meantime; don't call us and we

i « .ill you.'

M. Mm mined ihe television off, and bustled over to comfort who w.is staring at the floor, his wings wrapped tightly

<id 11 ill I

*NM\V. imvy, de.ir; don't get upset. No one really cares what Allan in s.iy. Some of us still remember when he was just a in w\ nhei hoy who couldn't even pronounce precipitation.' M \\.nthed lie-Mi1!! offer her brisk form of comfort to the HIP. Me d seen her kind before, the over-protective kind "Il« i Mippmi in ,1 liiile lost alien in the same way they'd look • ikmdnued child or dog. Just because it was the right !»> dn Well me.niin;, hul . . .

id Owen Mow did you get involved with the Illumi-

•I MHind .ind smiled ,il»M-iilly p.illinj; Liuilei on ihe

shoulder. 'I never got over their being our first alien contact. I'd waited my whole life to meet a real live alien. I can still see the magic and glamour in them. So I stuck with them, when everyone else just fell away. People should be ashamed! Just because they didn't come in big ships, with big weapons . . . The Light People are incredible beings!'

'They do make an impact/ Owen agreed. 'When I first saw Lucifer coming straight at me, I thought he was an angel.'

'Oh, he is,' said Hellen. 'They all are really, the dears. We weren't worthy of them/

Owen nodded. He was thinking of what the young boy Giles had said to him, on the border world. That when Hazel appeared to him, she looked like an angel. And there was . . . something about the Light People that reminded him of Hazel. They were undoubtedly the strange presence he'd sensed from orbit. But they were aliens; why should they remind him of Hazel? And the Madness Maze . . . Was there some unsuspected, abnormal connection between them? He realised Hellen had stopped talking, and was looking at him.

'I know/ she said quietly. 'I do go on about them, don't I? I know . . . I'm not really bright enough to understand or appreciate the Light People, but someone's got to look after them. And if not me, then who? I keep trying to get them proper interviews, proper attention and respect, but I don't have the contacts. I'm just a woman who isn't young any more, looking for something to fill her time, something worth doing. Truthfully, I suppose I need them as much as they need me. They deserved someone better, someone more connected; but I'm all there is. I just wish I could get people to listen, really listen, to what the Illuminati have to say. But you can't make people listen when they don't want to.'

'You could be a great help to me/ said Owen. 'I don't know much about this world, this Time. I saw a

lot of big ships being assembled in orbit. Tell me what's happening there.'

'I suppose it all began with New Frontier/ said Hellen. 'They were a new movement, as much philosophical as political, inspired by the invention of a working stardrive, some fifteen years ago. For the first time, the stars were within our grasp. That inspired a lot of people. Me included, at the time. New Frontier believes that it's vitally important for Humanity to get out of the solar system & to colonise other worlds. To spread Humanity in a vast, boundless Empire. They

say we've got too soft and cosy here on Hearth and the other worlds, with robots to do everything for us. That we need to go out into the stars to rediscover our old strength and courage and capabilities. To be truly Human again, we have to go Out There, they say. It's our destiny. So, we're building starships, and soon the bravest and the best of us will be off and out, into the infinite. And then we'll find out what we're really made of.'

How many soldiers are you taking with you?' said Owen. 'How big, tin army?'

I Idlen looked at him blankly, 'Why should we need an army?' 'Because it's a bloody dangerous place, Out There/ said Owen. I'll tell you on this; I know. There aren't that many intelligent species, but here are a hell of a lot of really nasty and vicious creatures, who aren't at all happy about you people coming along to colonise those worlds. Don't you people have armies any more?'

'Well, no, not really/ said Hellen. Her mouth pursed, as though Owen was trying to get her to discuss something that nice people don't normally talk about. 'We have peacekeepers, to take care of the criminal element, and keep an eye on some of the more extreme religions. Like New Frontier. And Hearth First, fanatics who are violently opposed to star travel, and want all the money spent on the Nine Worlds instead. And Defence of Humanity, a small but very vocal group, who object to the very idea that aliens can be as intelligent as humans. They don't even approve of the animals. They

• iivmj', to hold rallies, but the dogs keep chasing them off. We i nerd ,in cirmyl Not here, or on any of the Nine Worlds. There

i hern ,i war in the Empire in over a hundred years.' n\\rn thought about that, and all the things he could say, and

• mi ned to Lucifer. Tell me your story. Give me your message,

n

l ihr Illnminatus spoke, saying: 'In the galaxy next to this one,

i lour. ,1^0, we built a great civilisation, first through control

'i uhl v:i,ivii,nion«il forces, and later, as our powers grew, by

le.ihty it sell through a concentrated effort of will, by the

;s of our minds. We were great and mighty in those

1 .|>i<'.i<l .1* ross m.my worlds, remaking them in our own

i in n \veie (nics ol li^hi, livers of gravity, waterfalls of fire

••I "I \ \ mtl s We lived in pe.ice ,md h,n inony on thousands of

million'. MI i ml were content, Other species ,nose,

but they were never any threat because we could reshape reality, so that any enemy immediately became our friend/

'Isn't that rather . . . unethical?' said Owen.

'More so than killing them?' said Lucifer, and Owen had no answer.

'We did not interfere in their destiny,' said Lucifer. 'All new intelligent species were left to go their own way, as long as they did not seek to war upon us. They also built civilisations, that rose and fell and rose

again while the Illuminati went on, bright and glorious. I saw in your memories, Deathstalker, images of humans with mental powers, called espers. We were what they might some day evolve into. But we had our limitations. We never developed technologies, because we never needed them. So when something came to us, from out of the outer dark, something our reality-changing powers could not affect, we were helpless.

'After millions of years of peace and civilisation, the Terror came upon us, an unstoppable destructive force that swept our civilisation away like a raging wind. Our cities dissolved, our people went mad and died, and our worlds burned.'

'Hold it,' said Owen. 'If your people had the power to change reality by will alone, why didn't you just stop or change the Terror, the way you dealt with your other enemies?'

'Because the Terror had made itself so real it could not be changed,' said Lucifer. 'It was of such a singular nature and purpose, and so very huge and powerful, that even the massed thoughts of our entire race could not slow or stop it. And we had no weapons with which to attack it. The very concept of violence was alien to us. All we could do was abandon our homes and flee from world to world. But wherever we went, the Terror followed, until there were no worlds left to run to. Our whole civilisation was gone, with no trace left to show it had ever existed. We turned to other species for help. Some did, some did not. The Terror came for them all anyway. And in the end, all that was left to us was a last, desperate gesture. All the surviving members of our race gathered together on the last remaining world, at the edge of our galaxy, and pooled their power to send some of us out into the void between galaxies, using our knowledge of the hidden ways to travel further and faster than the Terror could match. All those left behind died, so that we might escape, to carry our terrible warning.'

Lucifer stopped talking, and after a moment Owen realised that was all there was. 'You few Light People are all that remain of your species?'

'Yes. The last pitiful remnants of a once proud race/

'Where will you go, when you leave here? Do you have some eventual destination in mind?'

Lucifer shrugged, his great wings rippling slowly. 'We always hoped that one day we would reach some safe haven, but . . . even •iller all the distance we've crossed, all the worlds and wondrous -.peck's we've seen, we've never found anywhere that would be safe 11oin the coming of the Terror. So we just keep going, running from I he fury that follows us, spreading our warning to all who will listen. liven now, we are only resting here on Hearth, gathering our i icn^th before resuming our flight. We have travelled a very long nine, Deathstalker, so long even we no longer remember just how tony., dud we grow old and tired, our powers depleted. But as soon ,is leel strong enough, we will leave here. Because the Terror will < nine, eventually.

'We did try to warn your people, but Humanity are proud .uul Arrogant, and put their faith in the technology and weapons we i i' I • -.1 Lucifer sighed heavily. 'You people live such slimy h\ \ nli Mich d limited perception of time. You simply cannoi emu ci\ < • •I i In M ,ile and power of what is coming to destroy you. (ui le.n r. iii H .ill I he details of our warning will be forgotten by lluiiunity, in ii»« ihousiinds of years to come/

Il llunitinity won't listen, why don't you make them listen?' s.ml ()wrn < h.int^e their minds, as you once changed the minds of youi •Minnies, liven just a demonstration of power would be enough in Ilirtkr i he in Like you and your warning more seriously/

ih« Illuminati have fallen far from what they once were,' s«iiii I iniln Hut even so, we would never use force against another Np<<<ii", Such .1 thought is intolerable to us. What is the point of MM \ix.il il lo do it you have to give up what makes you what you So nothing else is left to us, hut to leave. Perhaps we will Mini ,i -,ile pi,it e further on - in the next galaxy/

- n ninl in coinpieheul lives lived across such a vast expanse

-I UNI, .UK! -,p,u C, .mil couldn't, even .iller his own travels through

M. I.Mind il continuing, ih.n he still h.ul some IIIIMUM limit,i-

I'nli i ilic Ihiii^; lh.il li.itl nine heen ll.i/rl d'Ark. A sudden

rush of pity moved him, sorrow for the poor butterfly people crushed beneath the heel of something that could never appreciate the wonders of what it destroyed.

'So/ Owen said to Lucifer, almost angrily. 'You're just going to up and leave? Fly away and abandon Humanity to their fate?'

'What else can we do?' said Lucifer.

Owen was just getting the beginnings of an idea, when armed men burst suddenly out of the tunnel entrance and into the cavern. They wore improvised body armour over gaudy costumes, and opened fire the moment they saw the Light People hanging from the ceiling. They were carrying projectile weapons,

and fired recklessly in every direction. Hellen screamed New Frontier! While Owen just stood and gaped for a moment, thrown off balance by the rapid fire. A ricocheting round whistled past his head, and he snapped out of his daze. He pushed Hellen up against the nearest wall, and made her crouch down, covering her body with his own. The Illuminati scattered to avoid the raking fire, plunging back and forth across the cavern at dizzying speeds. The newcomers fired their guns endlessly, but didn't seem able to hit anything. The Light People swooped and soared, and guns turned to follow them. The noise of massed gunfire in such a confined space was deafening, and smoke rolled thickly on the air, swept this way and that by the beating of vast wings. Hellen sobbed loudly, and clutched at Owen like a child.

'What the hell is going on?' he yelled in her ear, but he had to shake her hard before she could talk to him coherently.

'New Frontier enforcers,' she gasped, tears rolling down her face. They hate the Light People, for making people afraid to go out to the stars. They've threatened to kill them all, to prove the superiority of the human spirit. They're all supposed to have been arrested!'

'Looks like your peacekeepers missed a few,' Owen growled.

The fanatics raked their guns back and forth, trying to follow the sweeping and dodging Illuminati, still not managing to hit anything. But given the sheer number of bullets, and the enclosed space, it was clearly only a matter of time. The Light People couldn't keep dodging for ever. Owen decided it was time he got involved. He put his mouth next to Hellen's ear.

'You stay put. I'll take care of the scumbags.'

He rose up and started towards the New Frontier enforcers. They saw him coming, and some trained their guns on him. Owen smiled

• "U\ .UK! his power snailed ,m<l M.ukled on the -in around him.

Mullets ricocheted harmlessly away horn his loree shield. All the

nihei j;uns (mined on him, and Owen skipped the lanaties down

\uli ,1 single thought. They hit the ground hard, dropping their

Weapons. It was suddenly very quiet in the great cavern; the Lisi

«< hoes of gunfire fading quickly away. The Light People clustered on

ill. «nliim attain, apart from Lucifer, who settled on the ground

idr Owen, and looked at him searchingly. He was about to sdy

Killing, when Hellen came running forward to embrace him.

One of the fanatics on the floor pulled a gun from a hidden

and immediately shot at Lucifer. The bullet punched through the wing he

snatched around Hellen, and killed her instantly. She slipped

quickly out of Lucifer's grasp, as he stood, shocked. Owen howled

and immediately gestured sharply at the fanatic. His head exploded in a

cloud of Mood and bone, and the other fanatics cried out in horror. Owen yelled at them to shut up. In his haste to check, but he knew she was dead

and immediately moved beside him. He turned

She rose up from her side, and turned to look at him. "Will you let me go?" she asked.

"No, you use your powers to protect her?" she asked. "It is our way. Our principle is to protect our friend!" "Yes, but you killed that man, Owen!"

"I will kill all of them. They would have killed all of you!" "I would rather all die, than kill another!" Lucifer turned to her.

"Then, you walked away. Who would spread your damned warning?" Owen yelled.

- IMMI

"I will let you go," said Lucifer, not looking round. "We

will no longer be responsible for more violence,"

he said. "Perhaps a few of us will stay behind, hidden from

- I will let you go and watch over Humanity as it builds its empire. As

- MI show potential. You may yet evolve into something

ulr

.-mid ha'e helped lllen/ said Owen. <il.In i i \ (ii help omsel id I.iu ilei

He gestured at the fanatics lying shocked and terrified on the floor, and they rose quickly to their feet and ran out of the cavern, shoving at each other in their haste to get into the tunnel and away. Lucifer looked back at Owen.

'Before we go, one last piece of information. It is possible that we have encountered your friend Hazel, the object of your pursuit through Time. She appeared here, in this place, a few weeks ago; drawn to our presence. I think we intrigued her. She manifested only as a mental impression, wrapped in a field of unfamiliar energies. She did not seem . . . human. Her presence reminded us a little of who and what we used to be. She scared us. There was nothing of restraint or passion in her. She had amassed power at a frightening rate while plunging back through Time, draining it from the lives and worlds she passed. It seemed to us that there was no limit to how much power she might drain, or what she might become/

Owen nodded. He knew he had been draining energy from somewhere, to power his continuing passage through Time, and now he knew where from. That extra power was why he was able to do all the things he'd never been able to do before. The concept appalled him. There was a very old name for creatures that lived by draining life from others. But he knew the truth wouldn't stop him; nothing would now. He had to go on, either to stop Hazel becoming the Terror, or to find a way to deal with the Terror in the future.

He didn't tell Lucifer that Hazel would eventually become the Terror. It would only have upset the Illuminati.

'Before you go/ he said flatly to Lucifer. 'There's something I want you to do. Something to help Humanity and at the same time preserve your warning. You said Humanity might evolve into something better; but I'm here to tell you that's not going to happen by the time the Terror finds them. Unless you and I give them a helping hand. Together we're going to build something; create something that's never existed before. Something to give at least a few people a fighting chance. It will be called the Madness Maze. And if you ever consider saying no, just think of Hellen, who died because you wouldn't help her. And remember what I did to the New Frontier fanatic/

And so, under Owen's specific instructions, the Illuminati created the Madness Maze. On learning what it was to be, and what it was

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eventually to do, (hey decided it would be far too dangerous to lead on the way, so they look Owen with them in their secret silver tunnels to a planet on the other side of the world. And only Owen knew that one day the world would be turned inside out. In a cavern deep below the surface of the world, lit with the flickering rainbow glow of the Light People, they went into the Madness Maze, creating it through a group of concentrated will, focused through Owen's mind and And when they were finished, it looked just as he remembered it, and thought for a long while.

And when they were finished, it looked just as he remembered it, and thought for a long while. I have made tomorrow possible. I have made the

, • / />, ».vs7'/(. Hut the Light People might have created it anyway, at some

/».»>>// \\ Ictixt this way I get to put my stamp on it. And without the Maze

Mr ..'///, / //nv/ have brought Lionstone and her Empire down. Perhaps if I

/,/'/(• this. Hazel would never have been able to become the Terror,

,/// ///<>.\v worlds and civilisations would still be alive. Or />r///</'s

wnictlring else would have become the Terror, and then

Ily \would have no defence against it.

I ,/w / know. The Maze is woven irretrievably throughout //////////////<///

/ v / htivc the right to unravel such a knot? No; we need tin Mi tin, I /// ///<• <•//</, that's all that matters.

It is I not wrong? "Well, it is. I'm not sure about that." He muttered around the thing they'd made, studying it

and its possibilities. Lucifer settled down beside Owen

and looked at him doubtfully. "What is the purpose of this device, Owen?" "Maybe Transcendence. It might let us all hope that by the time Humanity gets out this far, it will be worthy of what we have left them. It might be nothing."

He examined the structure of the Madness Maze on your brain. "We found its intricacies fascinating. Human, but not human. Is there something you're not telling us, Owen?"

"Mine's, I'm not telling you," said Owen. "Am I missing something, you'll live it that way?"

He looked at the Maze, and wondered how much of it was his memories of it; from his past, but the Light People's

future. Certainly his involvement in its creation explained why the Maze had always worked best for Deathstalkers. He had paid special attention to the construction of the core at the heart of the Maze; preparing it to protect and sustain the child that would one day come to it. Giles's infant son; the Darkvoid Device.

What is this for? Lucifer had asked.

The hope of Humanity, Owen had said.

It's a bit small, isn't it?

Yes.

When Owen was satisfied that the Madness Maze was complete, he then worked together with the Illuminati to create a guardian for the Maze: a single shape-changing creature derived from Owen's own altered genetic makeup. (He had decided a shape-changer would be best able to hide and protect itself in all the long centuries it would have to survive.) He had to reassure the Illuminati that they weren't creating some kind of living weapon, and so agreed to their demands that it be programmed only as an observer and messenger, and strictly non-violent.

The finished creature was an exact duplicate of Owen, though it had no personality of its own, as yet. Just a series of instructions and duties, and the instinct to survive. Owen had to smile, thinking of what it would become, after centuries of being other people.

'When you first meet me, in the Maze, many years from now,' he said to the creature, 'don't recognise me. Or tell me any of this. It would only upset me, and distract me from all the things I must do.'

'Understood,' said the creature. 'I will remember.'

'Yes,' said Owen/I know you will.'

And he also gave the shape-changer his ring, the black gold ring that was the sign and symbol of Clan Deathstalker authority; to be given to his descendant Lewis Deathstalker, at a specific time and place. Owen was concerned that Lewis might be so far removed from the direct Deathstalker bloodline that the Maze might not recognise and receive him. Owen felt naked and strangely lost without the ring, but Lewis needed (or would need it) more than he did now. It still felt like giving up yet another part of his human past. His human soul.

He tried to think if he'd forgotten anything, but he couldn't remember.

So he said goodbye to Ludlrr diul the other Illuminati, wished them well, and dropped out of the Present once more, plunging lurk, through Time in his endless pursuit of Hazel d'Ark.

EIGHT

MONSTERS OLD

AND NEW

There were no ELFs any more. They were all dead and gone, absorbed and murdered by a greater mental force, just as they'd always feared. Only their destruction came not from their most hated enemy, the Massmind of the oversoul, but instead from their own allies and founders, the uber-espers. They had turned on the ELFs, overwhelmed their defences, and eaten up their minds, their personalities, so that not one trace of the rogue espers now remained. Now there were just the uber-espers, those old and terrible monsters, and the armies of thralls they commanded. Five grotesque, abhuman minds, operating hundreds of thousands of thrall bodies.

The Shatter Freak. The Spider Harps. Screaming Silence. The Grey Train. Blue Hellfire.

Old minds, old demons, older by far than most people realised. The uber-espers had been waiting and plotting and planning from the shadows of the Empire for centuries. When you expect to live for ever you can afford to take the long view. Lesser evils came and went, but the uber-espers endured, and now their time had come. They had spent centuries deciding what they would do, and how they would do it, arguing constantly among themselves of course, but never doubting that one day they would see all Humanity bow down before them.

They were forced into hiding for many years, held down first by the Mater Mundi's authority, and then by fear of Owen Death stalker and the other Madness Maze survivors, and finally by a

(•olden Age that was just too sane and stable to allow them to grow. But now, everything had changed. The old adversarial powers, the Golden Age had proved rotten at the core, and there is no one left on Logres to stop them doing all the awful things they had dreamed of. The Emperor's hold had been weakened, the usual Maze people had all gone away - and the new ones made themselves like unto gods. With hundreds of millions of thralls forming a great energy pool, the uber-espers were left strong enough

to do anything they wanted. And so they

had launched their first attacks against the Emperor Finn's vastly improved armed forces. There weren't that many left on Logres in the Parade of the Endless; just a few battalions shuttling in mail lorries between the other main cities, maintaining order in dramatic shows of force. A few dozen war wagons and in the end, (bug-up relics from Lionstone's time, great dusty steel hovering in the skies, dependent more on reputation than on anything else). All of them easy targets for psionics that rammed nowhere, without warning. The uber-espionage devices were detected from a distance, ripping apart steel bulkheads. The engines and overloading the engines till they melted. The heavy metal ships in invisible lists, the computers wiped and hexed, the spells and charms wouldn't work. Men on the ground were blown out in the air. Blazing gravity barges fell ponderously onto the ground, sleds slammed against each other like toys in the hands of insane gods. Black smoke billowed up from the lips of the Emperor's armored forces.

in the air was to possess the men on the ground. The

lay out greedily, using the strength of the ELF's they'd

in the mail battalion screamed helplessly inside

as they were taken over, and alien thoughts moved their

Just as the Emperor's armies marched into the cities

ty'tl i .ul merely to subdue, and murdered or possessed

- in \OMI, MI and child in their path. They didn't need to kill

Inn ihry did anyway, just for the- fun of it. What city

were rollapsed in shock and panic, as mass posses-

l'i iluoi^h the sheets and squares in an unsloppahle tide-

ere now so poweilul lh.it one lluall could MIMIC

another just by looking into their eyes. Possession luul become infectious. It leapt through the stampeding; crowds like wildfire, jumping instantly from mind to mind. People ran, but there was nowhere to run to. The soldiers had the cities surrounded.

Attempts at resistance were doomed from the start, because no one could trust anyone. Your closest friend or family could be a thrall, or be made one in a moment. People hid inside their houses, and barricaded the doors and windows, but the thralls just broke in anyway, not caring how much they damaged their bodies in the process. Men and women with smashed hands and lacerated arms smiled triumphantly through the jagged gaps they'd made, and forced themselves upon the defenceless souls within.

Some thralls were even able to manifest esper abilities on behalf of the uber-espers that rode them, if only briefly. They strode giggling down the streets, and houses exploded or burst into flames on either side of them. Roads cracked apart and sewers hurled foulness up into the streets. Sometimes the esper thralls blew people apart with a look or a word, or made them eat their own flesh; or whatever else occurred to the uber-espers.

The cities became hell on earth, choked with smoke and the smell of blood, and the uber-espers danced their thralls through the burning streets, tearing everything down just for the fun of it. And when nothing was left but fire and rubble and the piled-up bodies of the dead, the uber-espers marched their thralls out of the dead streets, and off down the road to the next city. And so it went, city after city, population after population, until armies of thralls were on the march all over Logres, clogging the roads and tramping through fields full of crops. There was no one left to stop them.

Cities in the path of the thrall armies called out to the*Emperor for help, but he had nothing to send them. What few troops he had left he needed to protect the Parade of the Endless. Not that Finn would have sent any help even if he could have spared it. He didn't see the point in giving up even more of his armed forces to be possessed. And so cities set up barricades on all the roads leading in, and desperate men stood guard with whatever weapons they could find. Anyone approaching a city was shot on sight, without warnings, no exceptions. It was the only way to be safe.

Until the thrall army came marching up the road, rank upon rank of them, walking right into the face of the defenders' guns,

would march on, into

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In the Rookery, Nina Malapert's news site stayed on the march horns a day, using remote-control cameras to bring in the latest news and sightings. They spread word of danger as fast as they could get the information out.

- Anyone on Logres, and all the watching worlds across the globe, of what was happening now that the Emperor Finn had left.

- In the US newsreaders became hoarse and strained and while they told of the endless atrocities and mass murders and burning cities all across the world. Nina ran hard to keep on top of everything, getting warnings out as far in advance time as possible, and lists of places to keep the remote cameras moving from city to city, sending out what was happening. The uber-espies didn't inform everyone to know what was coming for them in their newsreaders on Finn's propaganda news sites, ignoring the scheduled programming. They knew it in advance when they saw one. They shared resources with the MIT to get useful information to those who needed it. Ah, it felt like real news people trying to get the word out: propaganda reports, and the increasingly important sensors, in order to stick with the real story.

Thousands of refugees took to the roads and even torn through the air traffic lanes, abandoning cities in their homes and families. They ran away from their homes and families, all that they could carry with them; not sure where they were going if anywhere could ever be truly safe, millions of refugees on the move, shocked and numb with horror, leaving behind them a trail of possessions that became too heavy to carry. They, as they could, and kept rest stops to a minimum. The rioting followed after them, and they never got tired, never stopped, and the highways took the refugees in, some turned them

• •me shoi <u ihem on sight. Everywhere the few charihible 'I l.ij'.er lowns bccvimc sdluiYiled with people, overloaded lo

poinkl with those too tired lo continue. Many just sal down

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suddenly, wherever they were when their strength ran out, too numb to care, too exhausted even to eat. Facilities quickly broke down, even the most basic comforts and services unable to cope. There wasn't enough of anything to go round. Food distribution between cities just stopped. Civilisation was falling apart, on the home world of the Empire.

The uber-espers soaked up the energies supplied by millions of captive minds, and their powers blossomed as never before. They could do things now almost beyond even their wildest dreams. And being the kind of creatures they were, they looked upon each other with increasing suspicion. They had never trusted each other, quite rightly believing that any or all of the others would turn on any one of them who seemed dangerously powerful or invitingly weak. For a while they discussed scattering; leaving Logres for other worlds, so they could each have their own planet to subjugate and play with, safe from the interference and threat of each other's ambitions. The idea was attractive.

But they knew they were more powerful together than they ever could be apart, and besides; if they did go their separate ways, there was always the chance that one of them might become allied with another, and prey on a mind alone. They couldn't risk that. And even more than this, some strange unexpected

force from within kept them from taking the idea too seriously. Some inner voice, that whispered it would be a very, very bad thing for the uber-espers ever to become separated.

So instead they decided to take control of Logres first, and then send their thralls out to conquer the other worlds. Once they had forced their way into the Imperial Palace and possessed Emperor Finn, they could shut down all reports of what was happening, wait a while, and then happy smiling faces on all the news sites would announce that the emergency was over, everything was fine, and the happy smiling Emperor would order the other planets to open their starports to the goodwill ambassadors he was sending them -and the plague of possession would jump from world to world to world . . .

The uber-espers laughed, drunk on blood and suffering and power, and the promise of so much more to come.

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The Wave of mass possessions swept hoineily lo uly, uossin^ the' \\\ hole world in j m,liter of weeks, <nul nothing could Ihilt it or even <,low it down. It jumped from eye to eye, head to head, often over In-line it was even suspected. The weaker minds tended to fall first, find so it was that children and even babies became thrall changelings They attacked their parents and siblings with whatever came In h.md, chuckling with alien glee as blood soaked their small hands. The uber-espers had always believed in the use of horror to de-M.ihihse opposition. And they did so savour the taste of the more vivid emotions, as they picked through brains like gore crows on a Ininleield. They sent their thralls running madly through the [llieets, killing for the joy of it until killed in their turn, and shock mid lerror and panic destroyed any defences the cities might have -i ,ihle to assemble.

Mui i here4 was still one final horror, even beyond what had al-luppened.

in. MM Vertue discovered it. She led her followers, the Psycho

- in of the Rookery and the Parade of the Endless, and they |b>\ lii>,h in the skies of Logres like gaudy hawks of war, on a

n.....i lo protect the next city in the thralls' path. Douglas Camp-

IM II h.idn'l wanted them to go. He sympathised, but he didn't think ih. \ i <>»iiUl do anything against the massed might of the uber-espeis,

' In \v, is jlruid of losing them. If they were to be possessed, then-no s.iyin^ how much damage they might do. Diana had nodded Mid -he <|iite understood, and then informed Douglas lh,n she ,md .luis were going anyway. And there must have been soineilnn" t>i iln <>»ld lenny Psycho in her voice, because Douglas just noddrd rind hit lied <iway.

iHfiii.i ,nui the Psycho Sluts came to Delta City in the e.n ly hour. Ml ih> morning, dropping out of the crimson-streaked dawn like so

- \enijiMij angels. They took up a position on the outskirts ol . us h\ ,111 Abandoned barricade made of piled-up furniture, <nul

h.i , .1 ihcn minds to set up a mental barrier in the path of the

Hi}: iliivills. The barrier shimmered on the heavy morning air

IH .n lu/e, shot through with glittering energies. Diana could

hi n ih. iln.ill ,imiy coming long before she saw it. The crash and

• i MI nuny feet, an army beyond counting, shaking the road Miih then studied malevolent approach. They appeared slowly over

e ol i he hori/on; at first just a crowd, and then an army, and

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then so much more. An unconnlahle horde, ,iil walking in perfect lockstep, their feet a thunder on the road.

The uber-espers must have known the mental barrier was there, but they didn't even slow their thralls' advance. They marched on, all with the same awful smile, the same horrid eyes, and crashed right through the barrier. The moment a thrall passed through it, the mental contact with the uber-espers was

cut off, the possessing mind forced out of the body. Which fell forward, to lie limp and still on the ground, with empty face and dead eyes; nobody home. The thralls kept coming, crowding through the barrier, collapsing into growing heaps of unmoving bodies before Diana and her appalled followers.

For this was the final horror. The uber-espers had become so powerful that once they took over a mind and ate it up, they wiped the brain completely clean. The old personality was subsumed, gone for ever. A thrall was just a shell now, an empty body for the uber-espers to use as they would. Thralls could no longer be freed from possession and returned to their lives. Possession meant mind-death.

Diana looked at the empty bodies piling up before her, and didn't know what to do. She couldn't save anyone, and she and the Sluts couldn't maintain the barrier indefinitely. Sooner or later the sheer number of thralls would overwhelm them. So Diana dropped the shield, and she and the Psycho Sluts flew silently back to the Rookery. The one place she thought she could still be sure of defending. Delta City was left to its own defences, and fell.

Later, she reported back to Douglas Campbell. / can keep the Rookery safe, she said.

What about the Parade of the Endless? said Douglas.

What about them? said Diana.

The Rookery was now the only place on Logres immune to uber-esper possession. The combination of human and esper and alien minds had always frustrated the uber-espers' grasp, and the new protective field set up around the expanded territory of the Rookery made everyone there safe from any and all forms of mental attack, And the uber-espers had good reason to be wary of Diana Vertue, also known as Jenny Psycho. They had worked together to murder her, over a century before, and yet here she was back again; and

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M \ kid no idea how. liven ihey duli'l iliink ihey could bring i< nr.elves hack from the dead. And there was tilwjys the chance I »i.in,i might make contact with the departed but still hated over-il wherever they had got to on their city of New Hope. The uber-lfft|u*rs thought they could probably take the oversoul, but they I vveien't in any hurry to find out.

MIC only way the uber-espers could hope to crack the shield

MhHiiui the Rookery would be to lure Diana and the Psycho Sluts

- •in so ihey could be ambushed, or for the uber-espers to turn up at

Kookery in person. And they sure as hell weren't ready to try

ih.ii yd.

I hey would wait, until they had overthrown and possessed all the

.....ii I .ogres, and then they would come and take the Parade of

•lie Lmlless, and then ... oh yes, and then . . .

Bnn^l.is Campbell called a meeting in his hotel room. All the really

I liMpmiaait people came, while two Psycho Sluts stood guard outside

|In »loor so they wouldn't be interrupted or overheard. Douglas

IM..I . <l lired and harried, as well he might. He hadn't slept or tesied

fcloperly since the emergency began. There was panic inside and

..... • i.le i he Rookery, and everyone was looking to him for answw<

MM hope and salvation. No one expected anything from ihe

I inpemr, hut Douglas was the acclaimed King of Thieves. The' man

who mnld do anything. And there in his crowded hotel room,

Sin.ni Lennox, Tel Markham, Diana Vertue and Nina Malapert all

Ini.l . .1 io Douglas for answers he didn't have. He couldn't tell them

Ih.ii ol course. He had made himself their leader, so he had to lead.

•vm il he wasn't sure where he was going. Douglas sighed in-

M.mllv and did his best to look calm and certain as he sat back in his

i li.ii i io hear the reports his people had brought him.

IpUM's lake- things in order,' he said flatly. The Emperor is no

Inn}', i 0111 main enemy, and can no longer be the main target of our

. Me has his own problems, so we needn't worry about him.

All urn old plans and strategies are hereby scrapped, or at least

iponed indefinitely, until we've dealt with the menace of the

lili> i . IM is. Diana; let's start with you. Tell us about Delta City.'

the whole city has fallen,' said Diana. She looked and sounded

li i ih,ni usual, beaten down by the things she'd seen, and

mill. In i prevent. The girls and I watched it happen, from a safe

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listance. The city's population is now either dead or possessed. No one got out alive. Anyone too old, too young or too sick to walk was butchered on the spot. That's what the uber-espers will do to us, when they come here. We can't negotiate, even if someone was dumb enough to suggest it, because we don't have anything they want that we could use to buy them off. And I don't know that we're strong enough to keep them out. The best we can hope for is to hold the thralls off long enough for the uber-espers to get impatient, and turn up in person. There are a few things I could try then. If they were stupid enough to put themselves at risk. Which they aren't.'

'You sound scared of them,' said Stuart, frowning. 'I didn't think you were scared of anyone. I mean; you're Jenny Psycho! One of the legends of old Empire!'

'Aren't you a bit old to be believing in legends? The last time the uber-espers ganged up on me in an ambush, over a hundred years ago, they killed me.' Diana shuddered suddenly. They didn't even leave enough of my body to bury. And they're even more powerful now.'

Everyone stirred uneasily. Nina fixed Diana with a thoughtful look. 'You never did explain how you came back from that.'

'No,' said Diana. 'I didn't, did I?'

'What are our options?' said Douglas. 'Speak up, people. I'll listen to anything that sounds even half way sane.'

'We stay put,' said Tel Markham, hovering at Douglas's side, as always. A dark, grim presence, in clothes he kept spotlessly clean. 'We let the uber-espers' army enter the Parade of the Endless, and then watch safely from the Rookery as Finn's soldiers go head to head with the thralls. With any luck, they should weaken each other considerably. We put armed guards on our barricades to keep everyone out. We don't have the room or the resources to support any more refugees. When the worst of the fighting is over, we go out and hit the survivors with everything we've got. The thralls might have the numbers, but they don't have our weapons, or our knowledge of fighting. We should be able to push a weakened force back out of the city, and then take over the Parade of the Endless for ourselves. Finn will be too weak to stop us.'

'And then?' said Stuart.

Tel grinned. 'We wait for the Deathstalker and his Fleet to turn up and save the day. They can't be far off now.'

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Douglas looked «H Nina, who shrugged. 'Sony, lovey, hut as loin; MN Hit- Meet's still in hyperspace there's no telling how far oil they rhey could he here toddy, tomorrow, next week. We wont \ nil they're practically ready to hit orbit/

'In the meantime,' said Stuart, 'we're supposed to let everyone in the city die, or be possessed? While watching safely from behind our mental shield? To hell with everyone but us? About what I'd expected from you, Markham.'

'My safety of the Rookery must come first!' snapped Tel. The

city must be protected!

Stuart said Douglas, and everyone looked at him. 'We go out into the city, and protect the people. This is our city, and they're all innocent people. Stuart, talk with our strategy groups and start planning; I'll prepare some possible courses of action for me to consider. We have some of the other cities had, and I want to use them all in the end. We can do this. We are going to hold this city against anything the uber-espies can throw at us, and prove they're not invulnerable.'

'Who are we supposed to be proving it to?' Nina said quietly. 'The information is that every other city on the planet has already fallen. Smaller towns are being ignored, for now, but . . . We're all (hat's left, Douglas.'

'Then we prove it to ourselves,' said Douglas. 'After all; someone's going to be here to welcome Lewis home.'

The uber-espies summoned their armies from all over Logres, and pointed them at the Parade of the Endless. Millions of possessed lit idles tramped away from the ruins of cities, all wearing the same *inile on their faces. Millions upon millions of thralls, moved by five *M powerful minds, heading towards the last free city in the world, to tear down the Emperor Finn Durandal and his people, and then move on to the final prize: the various tasty minds and souls of the Rookery. The dessert at the end of a very satisfying meal. And the *11.nuc for revenge on one of their oldest enemies. Life . . . was indeed! The thrall

armies filled the roads and the skies, all heading in the same direction, with mayhem and murder on their minds.

In the usurped Palace, in the Parade of the Endless, the Emperor Finn Durandal contacted every other world in the Empire, and

demanding help and support and military reinforcements, but every single world turned him down flat. Even the staunchest fanatics of the Church Militant and Pure Humanity laughed in his face, and warned him not to send any ships to their worlds. Any ship travelling from Logres would be blown apart on sight, for fear of infection. And that very definitely included any ship the Emperor might be travelling on. Everyone was more scared of the uber-espers now than they were of Finn. He no longer had the power to compel their obedience.

The Emperor stalked back and forth in his private chambers, thinking furiously, and making note of certain names for future retribution. He had no doubt there would be a future. He was confident he could beat this problem, as he'd beaten so many others. There was always a way. One idea arose almost immediately, but it took a lot more pacing up and down and heavy scowling before he was ready to embrace it. If he was going to beat these esper freaks, he would have to make an alliance with his most hated enemy, his old friend and comrade in arms, Douglas Campbell. It left a nasty taste in the mouth, but Finn had always been able to do the tough, necessary thing. With the forces of the Rookery joined to his clone army, he could go head to head with the thralls, and not have to worry about fighting on two fronts at once. Douglas would hate the idea, but he'd agree. Because he still believed in things like duty and honour and responsibility. Finn just believed in survival.

Finn's armed forces were now reduced to his clone army, some scattered troopers and peacekeepers, and his own personal following of hard-core fanatics; the ones that worshipped him as a god. They were always saying they were ready to die for him; now they'd get a chance to prove it. The vast majority of the Church Militant and Pure Humanity on Logres had fallen away from the faith in recent times, the quitters; especially after the execution of their nominal leader, Joseph Wallace. Finn had no doubt he could persuade and cajole most of those left in the Parade of the Endless to crawl out of their holes and fight on his behalf; he'd always been a great public speaker. But given current conditions, he'd probably have to promise them all kinds of things. Still; promises were all very well, but wait until the thralls were defeated and the city was his again, and then let the poor fools come crying for what they'd been promised. A bargain that cannot be enforced is no bargain at all.

In his usual to sliding out the third I of the- uber-espers, heloir Lewis I >e, iihslldlker appeared with his damned Fleet. Hnn hdd to be* seen to H m < hdige of his city, if not his world, so that he could ne^oti.ite ,i position of strength. And once Lewis was down on l.oj'.iev within reach, all kinds of things might happen . . . Hnn KOWled, He was short on time. The Fleet could turn up dnywhni •D < oiuentrate on the matter at hand. Make his deal with Dom-J.i. combine their forces against the uber-espers and their thn.ills. At Kit way he could be reasonably sure that a whole lot ol In .t'linnirs in the Rookery would die in the fighting, inste.id ol mm loildbly sitting it out behind their precious shields. Him MHI|< .l unddenly. Douglas was really going to hate this, but he woncln i In hi l, piide and personal feelings get in the way of <lelemlmj: In.

• \ed city. And just maybe, in the press of the li^htinjj , 0 knile in the back of an old friend, when no one was looking ... Ah

livery cloud has a silver lining.

And so the Emperor Finn Durandal sent an emissary to the Rool • i-- -iiMiiss terms. Agreeing in principle was one thinj'. both ie*1 on strict conditions for their own protection. Alt*

• mil ol verbal fencing over very secure com m links n ib.ii Douglas would meet with one man from Finn .

Inni

hotel in the Rookery. (Finn hadn't suggested, i n i ii.n < he didn't feel like being laughed at.) The I mpt i Sylvester, who was well known to the Rookery. Him h.id hum.I i ii" i, ,1 long time ago. Mr Sylvester was a forger, eompuh i h . fiiluleiur trickster, agent provocateur and first -elds-, NIMH i •>(M t. tllrillnns. Finn had found a use for all his dubious td lei its .n CMH til 01 .mother.

Sylvester was searched extremely thoroughly dt the bonh i Ul

Ilie Kookery, including a full body scan for weapons, eomni bur.- <n

iinpldiited suicide bombs. Because you never knew with linn. And

mse the Rookery guards felt like giving Mr Sylvester d luid tm

i»lc who had worked willingly for Finn in the p.ist vveie no

i popular in the Rookery. The guards also sedirhed the -.ill i «-J lignre who accompanied Mr Sylvester, but hewdsclerii too bidve soul took a peek at what the man wds (di i yinj.; in his gldss "imler d c loth, and then had to go away and vomit up everything In 'I • \ci eden.

Mr Sylvester and his associate were marched through the Rookery by a full company of soldiers, at least partly to keep onlookers from throwing heavy pointed things at their prodigal son. Mr Sylvester stared straight ahead, smiling professionally, ignoring the threats and insults from the crowds he passed. His masked associate flinched and jumped at every word. The soldiers finally ushered Mr Sylvester into Douglas's hotel room, while insisting the masked man stayed outside. The deal had been for one emissary only. Mr Sylvester looked calmly about him, holding his great leonine head proudly high. He flicked his heavy velvet cloak back over his shoulders, to better show off his cloth-of-gold waistcoat, and smiled at the grim faces before him.

'Dear Sirs and Madam; it is a pleasure and an honour to be here, in such august company. Douglas Campbell: legendary King of Thieves and hero in exile. Stuart Lennox: brave and canny Paragon from Virimonde. Finn sends his best wishes. Nina Malapert: beautiful star and vibrant personality of the rogue news sites/ Mr Sylvester raised a painted eyebrow at the last man present. 'And Tel Mark-ham: my dear fellow. I had no idea. We all thought you were dead/

'I don't die that easily/ Tel growled, sticking very close to Douglas, who sat in his chair as though it was a throne. Tel looked Mr Sylvester over unhurriedly, and then sniffed loudly. 'I can't say I'm surprised Finn sent you, Sylvester. You always were good with words, especially when treachery was required. But I have to say, I barely recognised you. You're carrying a lot of weight these days. Good eating at Finn's table?'

'Oh, always/ Mr Sylvester patted the waistcoat straining over his great stomach contentedly. 'You know me, Tel. I always land on my feet/

'I'm surprised you can still see them. And yes, I do know you, Sylvester. You lie like you breathe, and the truth is not in you. Who's the masked man outside? You were told to come alone/

'A gift to the King, from Finn. But that can wait/ Mr Sylvester turned the full force of his smile on Douglas. 'My dear sir, I have the honour to represent the Emperor Finn, and am empowered by him to

enter into all necessary agreements, on his behalf. My word shall be binding on him/

'Hold it right there, Mr I-never-met-a-pie-I-didn't-like,' said Tel, grinning harshly. 'First, Douglas, you need to understand just who

.Hid vvluil Mr Sylvester is, and what he did; to you and your friends I Ins nuin forged letters and planted false files in computers, ,ill i<>

- I .imy ihe reputations of Lewis and Jesamine. Replanted siorirs in ihr media, started whispering campaigns, and did everything he tould lo separate you from the people you trusted. Everything h.ul \ mi ever heard about Lewis and Jesamine originated in this m,m

Mr Sylvester bowed modestly. 'You're too kind, Tel/

hid you really do all that?' said Douglas, and his voite \\.i. d.mv'.erously cold and quiet.

'Well, yes,'said Mr Sylvester, studying Douglas uneen,iinly, llui r. my work, my business, my calling. It wasn't all that dillic nh Intel here, a hidden file discovered there, and the whole pieime <>l ,i nhin's life can be changed. In Jesamine's case all I h.id to do \ ev.iW.er.ile and make public already existing material. The hr.uli

II ei was more of a challenge. There was so very linle to 11 (.ood and honest and noble . . . boring, boring. Mm in ii< thrtl .leiiiially helped; people are always ready to believe ii I lime who seem to be better

than them/

'Was none of it true?' said Douglas. 'All the things I've

'Well/ said Mr Sylvester, maintaining his smile will

• It did turn out he really was having an illness

in he. That did help/ 'Was I ever fooled, by such a thing as you?' said Dour.

Sylvester flinched at what he heard in the King's voice. My fellow; it was just a job, I assure you. Nothing And I was so quick to believe your lies,' said Douglas. 'I have known better. I always trusted Lewis to guard my horse, with the Paragons together. I trusted him with my life, then I'm sure you couldn't trust him with your fiancée,' said Mr Sylvester. 'I believe bygone bygone. We have an alliance to discuss/ Why did the Emperor send you, Mr Sylvester?' 'I don't know, Met. maybe he needed someone who could negotiate delicately without getting too emotional,' said Mr Sylvester. 'I'm in a hurry to get back to my office.' 'And, truth be told, he doesn't love his people left lie feels he can't trust me more. Possibly I'm I died most of them/

In , whole idea of .in .ill, mee stinks/ 'Well, I'm sure here in the Kookery. We don't need Him

The city needs us/ said Douglas. 'And we could accomplish a lot more with the support of Finn's people/

'But you can't ally with the Durandal!' said Stuart. 'He'll betray you!'

'He'll certainly try/ said Douglas. This is Finn we're talking about, after all. But for the moment . . . we need each other. And he knows me well enough to be sure that I won't let personal differences get in the way of doing the right thing. The thralls have to be stopped, and my people saved. And we can only achieve that by pooling our resources. So; we are allies. Because as bad as Finn is, the uber-espers are worse. And by far the most immediate danger. Pardon me, Mr Sylvester; I'm thinking aloud. Tell your master that the deal is made, subject to certain conditions. The first of which is, my help comes at a price. In return for this strictly temporary alliance against a common foe, I demand that he give up to justice the criminal scientists who have done such evil in his service. People like Elijah du Katt, who produced the clone of my brother James; and Dr Happy, for what he did to Anne Barclay/

The Emperor anticipated your request/ Mr Sylvester said smoothly. 'I have both these gentlemen waiting outside. With your permission . . . ?'

Douglas nodded quickly, surprised. Stuart drew his disrupter. Mr Sylvester walked slowly over to the door, careful not to make any sudden movements, opened the door and beckoned to the masked man waiting in the corridor. He stepped into the room, still carrying his great glass jar under a heavy cloth, and then reached up to remove the silk mask that covered his face. Elijah du Katt peered quickly about him, sweating heavily and twitching nervdusly.

Keeping a careful eye on the gun in Stuart's hand, du Katt pulled the cloth away from the large glass jar, revealing the severed head of Dr Happy. The head was in pretty bad condition. Most of the skin had rotted away, showing patches of discoloured meat and bone. The lips had receded back from the

protruding teeth, and the eyes had shrivelled up in the sockets. Thin wisps of hair sailed away from the misshapen skull, drifting slowly on the preservative fluids that filled the jar. What made it so much worse was that the head was very definitely still alive. The eyes tracked back and forth, fixing on people in turn, and the mouth moved constantly, as though trying to speak. Everyone studied the head with varying amounts of

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honor and disgust, silent except for Nina, who pressed forward

erly.

oh, this is just gross! Puketacular! This is going to look ir.illy

.ii on the next news broadcast. Lead spot guaranteed; ihry won i IK* ,ihle to look away. We were all sure Finn had had him killed I. Why didn't Finn have him killed?'

'It wasn't for want of trying,' Mr Sylvester admitted, i-.e-jnmM; I«H

• In K,ui to put the glass jar down on a nearby table. The lu-.u! k>hk .1

•Inly, and a few bubbles popped out of the eaten-aw.i\ n<◇<, < ii

•limns Dr Happy had taken to dosing himself with sonic ol hr. mofl

t'sotei ic concoctions. He was never the same, after hr e<ime ku k I mm

Iliidrn. As I understand it, and I'm quite prepared to .ulmii iku I

• i"ii i, ihe good Dr Happy has been dead for some time, hui In- \OIM He down. Finn used him as target practice for a while', .uul Him IK held Dr 11 appy beheaded, to stop him running around ,in*1 np.< n lhr servants. The body carried on lurching about the l.ik < r>h Into v.ilimble equipment/while the head called the limpeioi MM

In Hit- end the body was captured, cut up, andburned, ,md ih Mrillncd in separate locations, just in case. And the limpemi h ynu Hie head. It is yours to do with as you please, ,m<l no \<◇

i.l n kick again. The same goes for du Katt, of cour

'Wh.il the hell was Dr Happy trying to achieve with In, dm '!..M<I Nina, kneeling before the glass jar, and tapping on the yt\ Willi her fingers, trying to attract the head's attention

No one's exactly sure,' Mr Sylvester said. 'He had seen, at some point he saw beyond the boundaries of the island. He found there destroyed whatever rational part of his mind was left. All he did after that was throw things at people who were singing in the Palace corridors singing show tunes. Badly.'

Jou's attention was fixed on the sweating, shaking Hliedh du. 'So, clone-master; have you anything to say for yourself?'

None of it was my idea, your majesty! You must believe that. It all went down to Finn, all the things I did—'

'Douglas. 'All the things you did. Like deserting my liinri service for the cell samples you needed to produce his clone. I am abetting in the imprisonment and death of my Uliri. Things like that.'

I might have tried to speed, but nothing came on, and he stood silent! Jou's face was pale.

The Emperor supposed you would want to execute du Katt and Dr Happy yourself/ said Mr Sylvester. 'So he sent them to you. As gift, and a sign of ... good faith.'

'Yes/ said Douglas. 'I want to kill them. For all the harm and suffering they caused, for all the lives they poisoned and ruined. But I can't just kill them. That would be wrong. Personal vengeance masquerading as justice is Finn's way. I have to be better than that. There has to be justice. There has to be a trial.'

'We don't have time for trials/ said Diana Vertue, striding briskly into the room without waiting to be invited or announced. 'Come on, Douglas; you didn't really think you could hold this meeting without me knowing? I am a telepath, among other things. What's the matter; were you afraid I wouldn't approve of an alliance with Finn? Hell, I can face reality when I have to. A very temporary alliance against the uber-espers is the only sensible answer to our current problems. But we don't have the time to waste on show trials for trash like this. If you can't kill them, I can.'

She looked at Elijah du Katt, and he collapsed dead on the floor. She looked at the severed head in its jar, and Nina recoiled with a squeak as head and jar vanished in a flare of psionic energies. Diana looked at Mr Sylvester, and he flinched and cried out.

'So perish all traitors/ said Diana Vertue, still sometimes Jenny Psycho. 'Say hi to Finn for me, Mr Sylvester. Tell him I'll be seeing him soon/

Mr Sylvester was still shaking when he was escorted back out of the Rookery, to carry Douglas's acceptance of the alliance back to

Finn Durandal.

1

Douglas Campbell addressed a huge rally of his people, in the biggest open square in the Rookery. It took hours for the crowd to assemble, as damn near everyone came to listen. Nina's cameras floated overhead, carrying Douglas's words to the rest of the city, and Logres, and all the worlds in the Empire.

Everyone knew about the thralls, everyone knew what the stakes were, so Douglas kept it short and simple.

'We have to go out and fight the thralls. We, and Finn's people, are all that stand in the way of total domination of Logres by the uber-espers. I know it won't come easy, to fight alongside Finn's soldiers. Thugs and bullies and scumbags, most of them. But . . . the

nd .sa

ninny ol my ninny is my ,illy, il imi .uliully my Inriul. Mine will hr nine lor settling old scores kiln. Alln we've IxMlen llic nhn

• |>< is ,ind (heir llir.ill <u my.

'And we (<m hedt thnn. Thdnks to the training we've put yon ihiongh, preparing lor the rehbellion, you're all lirsi-ddss warriors. Ihr ihicills ciivn't. All they have is numbers, and there's a limit to how in.iny ol them can get into the city at one time. And luHYinse ihey're heing controlled by minds far away, they won't he' <ihle lo iluih'.r i, u lies or react quickly to changing conditions. Th.il should Hlvr us I he advantage we need. And remember; always shoot to kill, c*vm il you think you recognise someone. The people you knew «ire iliMtl, mind-wiped by the controlling minds. We can't save or rescue i i i heir hodies are nothing more than empty shells.

".o .md prepare yourselves for war, and victory. It is our time,

• unit* Munid at last.'

The crowd cheered him until their throats were raw, and he raised his weapons at the sky, and of everyone there, only Douglas knew what he'd said was really true.

Donahoe went back to his hotel room, to be alone with himself, only to find an old familiar face wailing for him on the television. Nina's people had set up the media tech who'd looked at the camera quickly to Douglas, and then hurriedly turned away. Douglas lowered himself slowly into his chair, and watched the face on the screen. Lewis Deathstalker smiled at him.

'It's been a long time/

Yes, it has. Hello, Lewis.'

Mr Moore, Douglas. A lot has changed, since we last spoke.' There was no sign of Jesamine Flowers on the screen. Douglas didn't know what he'd been talking to one of Finn's creatures, a Mr Moore admitted to planting and spreading lies about you. 'I'm so sorry, Lewis. I should have known.' 'Hello you,' said Lewis.

It flows you did. But I was rather . . . upset, at the time. You and me. (Hello hell, Lewis. Come home. All is forgiven. Can you forgive

'You're not going to like this, but I'm afraid I have to tell you. The Fleet is on its way. We should be with you in a day or two. Maybe less, if the star drives don't explode under the strain we're putting on them.'

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They laughed quietly together, for the first time in a long while.

'About coming home,' said Lewis. 'That's the point of this message. The Fleet is on its way. We should be with you in a day or two. Maybe less, if the star drives don't explode under the strain we're putting on them.'

'That is good news,' said Douglas. 'We desperately need allies with major firepower. Are you up to date on what's happening here?'

'Yeah. We never miss Nina Malapert's broadcasts. How the hell did the uber-espies get that powerful?'

'Beats the hell out of us. Have you heard anything about Shub?'

'Just that all their machines have shut down. All our ships' AIs are offline.'

'I tried contacting Shub for help when it all went to hell here/ said Douglas, frowning. 'No one's answering. No reply from their Embassy, or their home world. That has to mean something.'

'Could the uber-espers have taken them out? I wouldn't have thought they could possess artificial intelligences, but ... Or maybe the Terror's got to their home planet?'

'No/Douglas said immediately. 'I'd have heard about that. All the latest reports say the Terror's still on course, and closing in on its next target. What kind of support are you bringing me, Lewis? I could use some good news.'

'Seven hundred and fourteen starcruisers, plus hundreds of ships from Mistworld and Virimonde. And ... a couple of surprises. On top of that, Jesamine and I, and Brett Random and Rose Constantine, have all been through the Madness Maze. We're pretty surprising ourselves, these days, if not exactly in Owen's class. And John Silence is with us! The legend himself! He's the Admiral of our Fleet.'

Douglas leant forward eagerly. 'You've been through the Maze! What was it like?'

Lewis thought about that for a while. 'I don't know whether it's ,1 machine, or alive, or both. It opens you up. Makes you more than you were. It's like being in another place, maybe the place we were before we were born. It feels like coming home, like family. Oh hell. Douglas, there just aren't the words.'

'Apparently not. Pour on the speed, Lewis. We need you and your Fleet here soon, or you'll be too late to do anything but scorch ihr whole damned planet from orbit. Don't hesildic to do that, il lhn< ,

else left. The uber-espers cannot be allowed to leave this

\n| Id/

I'm noi sure even a scorching would kill those monsters/ said 11 \ Is, Uut you can trust me to do whatever's necessary/

<)l i-nurse/ said Douglas. 'I always could. How is she, Lewis?' 'She's line/ said Lewis.

11 icy looked at each other for along time, but there really wasn't else they could say.

Vcrtue and the Psycho Sluts laboured together to produce a IK working that would shield and protect the Rookery while they were out in the city. Plugged directly into their unconscious minds, i he working would hold the shield in place without their hfiving in think about it all the time, for as long as one of them still lived. There were some in the Rookery who wouldn't be going out tit t^hl; those too young or too old, or still recovering from the last Invasion, and they had to be kept safe from possession, as well as HI n Ling thralls. The shield would keep out the uber-esper minds; they'd hiive to turn up in person to force a way in, and they weren't iii u -Jupid. />'///. what happens if the uber-espers do turn up in person? someone

ftkrd

A1//// like fun for the nearest horizon, Diana said crisply. It won't do you iM/r <</c W, but it should take your mind off the horror to come. \ •// 're such a comfort, Diana. I know. Aren't you glad I'm here to tell you these things?

H" ihr ill armies of the uber-espers finally came to the Parade of 'i' i ndless by all the roads at once, and marched across the city i""imd,iiies laughing and cheering and singing ugly songs. Sonic "•UTS ihey made sounds like animals, or things that had never had .1

• <• he-lore. They poured into the city down a hundred roads, from • hundred dead cities; millions of possessed men and women and

• I i hildren, run by five terribly powerful minds. They found no mis waiting for them in the outskirts; the people living there h.ul

Innj; since dbandoned their homes, retreating to the better defended

M < ol i he city. Some had fled out into the surrounding country-

"I'm hoping to avoid the marching armies, but the hovering uber-

his minds picked them out easily, and added them to the horde,

-. i'.

and now they marched kick into the city with someone else living in their heads. The thralls smashed and hunted the houses they walked past. Just because they could.

Finn pulled his forces back from the city boundaries, in carefully practised disorder, pretending to fall back in a panic, but actually retreating just slowly enough to keep the thralls pursuing them, towards the ambushes and booby traps Finn had waiting for them. And as the thralls swarmed into the city, the people of the Rookei \ came storming out. They swiftly made contact with the retreating forces, who were so scared they were actually pleased to see the very rebels they'd been fighting the week before. Most of the clour guards, still wearing their steel masks, just didn't have the practical experience to deal with fighting on a scale like this, and were grateful of expert minds to tell them what to do. They were programmed to follow orders from anyone who gave them with sufficient authority.

The thralls came in, the defending forces stopped retreating and I went to meet them, and vicious hand-to-hand fighting filled the city's streets and squares and open parks. The defenders had swords and axes, guns and grenades. The thralls mostly had improvised weapons, and a vast superiority in numbers. Blood flew and bodies fell, and the tides of battle surged blindly this way and that. Diana Vertue and the Psycho Sluts flew high above it all, hanging on Husky like gaudy birds of prey, casting a protection over the defender* below, so that the thralls couldn't possess them with eye contact.

The thrall armies, and through them the uber-espers, were thrown and confused at first when their main tactic suddenly no longer worked, and they took a lot of losses before they gathered their wits and urged the thralls on into open combat. They plunged forward with swords and knives and often just their grasping, clawing hands. They were all attack and no defence, because there were always more to replace those who fell. Sometimes just the sheer force of numbers was enough to overwhelm and overrun even the best-prepared defenders. It was clear to the uber-espers that they wouldn't be claiming any more thralls in the Parade of the End until the defenders were defeated, and Diana and her Sluts were brought down. Or until the uber-espers found the courage to leave their bolt holes and join the attack in person.

They might. They were all in the city, or more properly under it

and they did so want to pull this Limerick city down, and make it his.

While lightning raged back and forth in the streets, and blood

plunged splashed the walls and ran thickly in the gutters, as the bodies piled up on every side. A dozen thralls fell for every defender, but the numbers were thousands to one. The thralls kept pouring

the city boundaries, and there were still more on the way. They had no real tactics, only mass movements and the voices in their mouths screaming Kill! Kill! - but there seemed no end to their numbers. Unlike the defenders, they never got tired or careless. The rebels from the Rookery were spread all over the city, and others through their vicious example, but they couldn't be

\\ heie.

As the two armies clashed, bodies fell and did not rise again, and the lighting moved slowly but inexorably inwards towards the center of the city.

While this was going on, Douglas Campbell was somewhere in the city, and Tel Markham crept through deserted side streets, in the darkness, heading for the Imperial Palace to meet with the Emperor's men, that together they might set a trap for the uber-empire, promising the only bait that might tempt the uber-

- into coming to the Palace in person: a King and an Emperor

It was clear that Douglas and Finn had agreed that the only real hope they had of luring the uber-empire out of their

traps, and face them in person. Only when those five

emperors were dead, would the threat really be over.

The meeting should have been just for Douglas and Finn, but lei

the Emperor insisted on accompanying Douglas to the Palace, to Wei

MM' Kind's hack. He, better than anyone else living, had good reason

m "v just how treacherous the Emperor could be. Douglas didn't

- i Hun had been very clear in his instructions that Dou^l.r. tliMiilil come alone, but Douglas wasn't about to start taking order, tiiii i inn Durandal.

- H « MI use, there was always the chance that Tel intended to heir,i\ Illinois to Finn, for labyrinthine reasons of his own; but Dou^Lr. did 11 i 11 link so. Hell hath no fury like an intriguer scorned.

I he two ol them walked together through a deserted Palace. All ill- i:u,iids <md most of the servants were out in the city fightinr,,

and the rest were hiding. The living li.ul .ikmdoned ihe d.nk .ind bloody corridors to the dead. They were everywhere now, even more than on Douglas's last visit. Rotting bodies hung from no<> or steel garrottes, and severed heads stood in rows on wooden stakes. In some places the old carpeting was so thickly and darkly stained with blood that the patterns had disappeared. The air wai thick and hot and still, and rank with foulness. Douglas strode quickly along, not allowing himself to be distracted, while 'Id scowled and muttered darkly under his breath. It took a long lime to reach the Court, where Finn Durandal sat in state on his Throne, smiling down on his visitors from the raised dais. He nodded i<> Douglas, and to Tel.

'So; here we are again. Well well. I knew you'd bring someone. Douglas. So I thought I'd have a little company too/

He indicated the dead man swinging slowly from a rope beside his Throne. Mr Sylvester hadn't been dead long. His eyes bulged from his dark congested face, and a purple tongue protruded from hr. mouth. His great body twisted slowly to and fro while the rope creaked loudly. Finn smiled fondly, and gave the body a gentle push with one hand to keep it moving.

'A peace offering, Douglas/ he said lightly. To show my sincerity. How sorry I am for all the nasty things he did, on my behalf. And he-had outlived his usefulness, after all. I had a hell of a job getting him up there. Kicking and struggling and carrying on. And it wasn't easy to find a rope that would take his weight. The first two snapped. The things I do for you, Douglas, and you never appreciate them. Bui then, that's what started all this, wasn't it?'

'What happened to the two other Thrones?' said Douglas, 'Tradition has always had two more Thrones, one for the Queen and one for the blessed Owen on his return/

'Oh, I got rid of them long ago/ said Finn, Thou shalt have no other gods but me, and all that. Now, I

was going to do something. What was it? Oh yes/

The Emperor drew a concealed disrupter from his tall boot and shot Tel Markham in the chest. Tel cried out briefly as the impact threw him backwards, but he was dead before he hit the floor, the front of his tunic blackened and smouldering. Douglas already held his gun in his hand, but the Emperor just smiled, and put his disrupter away again.

!•« I.is. Doughs. Show's over. It had to be done; he betrayed me.

I I here's some shit I just won't put up with. Now it's just the two

r. n w,is dl ways meant to be. Tel didn't belong here, any more

11 Sylvesier. They were only ever minor players in our drama.

AM v'ou \ve,uing your esp-blocker?'

i 'O)! ionise/ sdid Douglas, slowly putting his gun away. He delib-• lidu'i look at the dead Tel Markham. The most heavy-duty •• I ri Dhna Vertue could put together. And there's still no •ifhiMirr it will work if the uber-espers do show up in person/

'How do you know they will,' Finn said easily. 'How could they not?'

How could they not possess the two leaders of the city defences, the two

who've done so much to defy them? They won't be able to

is I'm quite looking forward to seeing them again. They really

•in i" • i,i< ul,uly ugly/

slowly ascended the dais steps to stand beside Finn's left arm. He looked out over the empty Court. For a moment, the two men were silent, remembering. 'Must be like old times, eh?' Finn said finally. 'No, it's silly, no,' said Douglas.

'We had some good times here,' said Finn, almost reproachfully. 'That was a long time ago, when we were very different people.'

'> might have been different,' said Finn, 'I've always been just that. Though perhaps I'm a little more open about it these days. Do you like what I've done with the Palace?' 'I like it,' said Douglas, not looking at Finn.

' never did have any taste. I've done wonders with the place. A M ,il nukeover/

ii '\ cry you. But don't worry. Once I've taken it back, I'll have IIIH is working in shifts for weeks. No one will know you were • heie/

I heie w<is another long silence. So many unspoken words burned • i i hem, of betrayal and murder and crimes beyond counting, "i lie how that wasn't what they wanted to talk about. They had M li lends, once.

when ihis is all over/ Douglas said slowly, 'you could surrender 1..... I i ,m guarantee a life sentence in prison, rather than execution loi old times' sake/

I'MM m would be death, tome/said Finn. 'You could surrender to MM hni I wouldn't advise it. I have all kinds of appalling things

H7

planned for you, if we both survive' ihis. 11 ... 1 do try to be optimistic, but it isn't easy. Things never go the way you expect, do they?'

'No/ said Douglas. They don't/

'So/ said Finn. 'You're the King of Thieves now. I'm Emperoi. You never did think big enough.'

T was granted my title by popular acclaim. You stole yours/

'Best way/ Finn said cheerfully.

Douglas turned and looked at him. 'How could you, Finn? How could you do all the things you've done? All the terrible things—

'It was easy/ said Finn. 'I just stopped pretending I cared. That's always been your weakness, Douglas. You do things for others; I do them for myself/

'No. That's my strength. You never did understand that. It's why my people stand and fight, and yours run away/

'But I run an Empire, while you only have part of a city. It's a vision thing, Douglas/

'How could I have been so wrong about you? We were friends, partners, comrades in arms for so many years. I thought I knew you/

'A lot of people have made that mistake/ said Finn Durandal.

And that was when the uber-espers appeared, all at once, tele porting into the open space of the abandoned Court, dropping into reality like so many rotten fruit. They came all at once, because none of them trusted any of the others to come alone. The temperature in the great hall plummeted as the materialisation sucked all the heat out of the surrounding air. Douglas and Finn both shuddered involuntarily, not entirely from the cold. Finn rose up off his Throne, gun in hand, and Douglas stood at his side, gun at the ready.

Psionic energies discharged around the uber-espers in coruscating lightning forks, and crawled along the walls like bright actinic ivy, The uber-espers' presence hammered on the air, like a corpse at a wedding, like bad news in a maternity ward, like the cancer growth your doctor shows you on the scan. Five old and terrible monsh come to Court at last, to claim it for themselves.

The Grey Train. Blue Hellfire. Screaming Silence. The Spidei Harps. The Shatter Freak.

Blue Hellfire was tall and slender and the most visibly human.

• ppnl in diaphanous silks over blue-white flesh beneath. Her hair was packed with ice, and hoarfrost made whorled patterns on her corpse-pale face. Her eyes and lips were the pale hypothermia. She looked like someone who had been buried deep for centuries, and only recently dug up. She inhaled on the King and Emperor, sucking all the remaining oxygen of the air around her. She stepped slowly forward, one by one, inexorable as a glacier. Her clothes made sounds like ice as she moved, and she left a trail of burning footprints behind her.

.M \ T.I.IJM no longer had a body, as such. He only existed as <iMilu.il identity through an ongoing concentrated effort of II n. Mumblesied as a cloud of grey flakes that held a more or less lium, composed of dust and detritus gathered from his ulmgs. Me was only a memory of what he used to be, and if < i in, 11 ion ever slipped, he wouldn't even be that. But there i power in him, fuelled by his implacable will. Reality itself \ here1 he walked, subject to his fleeting fancies. The world

i he believed it was, wherever he was.

•i mi i): Silence was a huge, unhealthily obese woman, vast be,n mg; a good eight feet tall and half as wide. Her shape Mjuely distorted, all the normal human characteristics nuclei huge rolls of fat. Her wide face was gaudy with in i mouth pushed out into an endless rosebud pout by the OHM ni her huge cheeks. Her tightly stretched skin gleamed and I \i ih sweat and urine and other fluids, and was flushed iimbng heat. Her grey hair flared out like a dandelion, and . were big and round and always hungry. Her thick stubby • nir.i.inily opened and closed, ready to grasp anything that M i.-.ic-h. She wore nothing but lengths of steel chain, wrapped i ,md ,i round her, the steel links puncturing her flesh here tin M 11. hold them in place. She stank of sweat and musk and

I- M io«» long in the hothouse.

lli« 'pi«lc i ll.irps were two withered homunculi with opened • II i In n 11 nit ing brains exploded out into a giant grey and pink »l tissues, that radiated away into nothingness. The iiu\i lied figures s.it side by side on decaying chairs, their 'le.ul <nui empty, tip<irt from their eyes, still burning \ \ \i ih ,i viulily lhtit would not diminish. Mummified in evil,

preserved in hate. They held hands, the joined flesh fused together over many centuries. Two minds joined together for so long thr\ had become one.

And, finally, there was the Shatter Freak. His physical existence had been shattered and scattered across Time and Space, by sonic ancient psychic trauma. His patchwork body was composed of different parts from different times, from past, present and future, somehow combined in one constantly changing construct. The details of his torso, limbs and extremities were never still for a moment, appearing and disappearing, growing and shrinking, slipping and sliding over and around each other, always being replaced by another. The Shatter Freak's face blurred and twisted as features, dropped in and out, from child to ancient and everything in between, with only the eyes always the same: full of rage and pain sorrow and horror.

'I was right/ said Finn. They haven't changed at all. Seriously ugly/

'Not to worry, Finn/ said Douglas. To me, you'll always be the greatest monster/

'Why, thank you, Douglas/

The uber-espers turned on the two men, and their presence filled the Court, horrid and overpowering. They were monstrosities, abominations, things that should never have existed. Their cold implacable will beat against Douglas and Finn's minds, and both men cried out involuntarily. It felt like dead fingers pressing at the shutters of their minds, trying to force their way in. But they were protected.

'I cannot reach them/ said the Grey Train, his voice like a never ending sigh. 'I am prevented/

Then we'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way/ said Screaming Silence, in a voice like a great grunting hog. Tear them apart, and eat their brains/

'Yes/ said Blue Hellfire, in a voice like a cold wind in a narrow valley. 'Or perhaps I shall take them in my arms, and love them, and watch them burn with my cold blue flames. Watch their blackened faces slough off their disobedient heads/

'Kill them/ said the Spider Harps, in one dusty voice. 'Kill the King and the Emperor, and we shall rule here/

'No/ said the Shatter Freak, in a disconcertingly normal voice. 'Something is wrong. There's something rising here/

*

Meanwhile in the Imperial Palace, Stuart Lennox fought up and down the marble steps to keep the howling thralls at bay. He'd started with twenty men to back him up, but he didn't dare look to see many he had left. The steps narrowed as they reached the top, their entrance doors to the Palace, which gave Stuart and his men the advantage of limiting how many thralls could come up at once; Meanwhile the thralls just kept coming, clambering over the bodies of their fellows to get at the enemy. Stuart and his men held the steps with sheer ferocity and fighting skills, but already they were dangerously tired. Stuart's sword seemed to get heavier with every blow and parry, and a slow insidious ache burned in his back and swordarm. He'd never been in a fight that lasted as long as this.

Meanwhile he was wearing his old Paragon uniform and body armour, and his military cloak flapped proudly about him. Jas Sri had used his

- • Miueis to track the uniform down, and returned it to Stuart.

days of mass shortages and hunger, pretty much every -

- I .ring put up for sale somewhere.) Jas had cleaned and

nl i he uniform to within an inch of its life, and presented

- iii.i11 just before they had to leave the Rookery. Stuart had

Inn lout hrd, and he and Jas had held each other for a long time,

ii might be the last time they ever saw each other again.

i n i i.illy i dry let go, and Jas helped buckle Stuart into the

... stood his ground at the top of the entrance steps, while his MM M I- ii ,il»nui him, swinging his sword with a fierce and dogged Ir l.ieed impossible odds with a smile upon his face, and for •HI i si lime in a long while he felt like a Paragon again. Nina M.ilaperi hovered behind him, sheltering in the open en-

• liHM way, popping out now and again to blast a whole clump ill mio Moody pieces with her really big gun. Her news

« ic Moating above the scene, broadcasting everything live

• l.l .moss ihr Empire. She kept up a breathless running

".mi in our hand and sword in another, ready to rush >i,iiril sin.ui's hack when necessary. She wasn't much of a iuli, hui likr every other able-bodied person in the In il hren given hasir weapons training. And she'd gone one else Io lij'Jil. parly hreausr she* was damned il

she'd miss such a great story, and partly because there was no place in the city now for observers. She had killed some thralls, and was ready to kill some more, but for now she felt it was more important to see that her news site covered what was happening. So that win or lose, the other worlds would know that at least Logres went down fighting.

Even Jas Sri, that slender and delicate media tech, had picked up a sword and gone out of the Rookery to fight. With a sword in his hand he was a danger as much to himself as to anyone else, but he went anyway, because he was needed. Stuart had quietly arranged for Jas to be a part of one of the biggest armed groups, without telling him that of course, but Stuart and Jas both knew that there was nowhere safe in the city any more.

The Psycho Sluts hovered in the sky above the Palace, holding rigid formation as their minds linked together. Their leader, Alessandra Duquesne, had brought them here against Diana Vertue's specific orders, because much as they adored her, the Sluts had their own idea on how to stop the fighting, once and for all. They were going to pool and combine their power, and hit the uber-espers below with everything they had, condensed into one unstoppable blow. The uber-espers would lose contact with their thralls, might even be damaged or destroyed, and the invasion would be over. The young ladies of the Psycho Sluts had discussed this plan in earnest and at some length. They knew some or all of them might die during the attack, or after, but they had sworn a vow to be worthy of their idol, Jenny Psycho, and this seemed just the sort of thing she would have done. So they put their minds together, raised and harnessed their power till it crackled on the air around them, and then struck down at the uber-espers in the Palace.

The attack went wrong almost immediately. Contact with the minds of the uber-espers blew their gestalt apart in a moment. Tin-young espers just weren't prepared for the sheer otherness of the uber-espers. And they had no idea how powerful these five monsters had become, down the centuries. The Psycho Sluts' attack fragmented, the mental shards thrown back in their faces. A single whiplash of power smashed through their defences, ripping across their minds like barbed wire. Some went mad, pinwheeling away through the sky, screaming and howling words with no meaning. Some burst into flames, humming inside and out, and fell to the

ground like thrashing kicking comets. Three exploded into bloody r.ohhets. And that left just the two most powerful minds in the

Psycho Sluts: Alessandra Duquesne and her oldest and dearest friend, Joanna Maltravers. Alessandra fought off the mental attack, it bit deep into her mind and concentrating all her power into defensive shields. Her body convulsed with pain and outrage, but her mind held firm. When she finally felt the assault was over,

Joanna came out to look at the world again, and found that Joanna's defences had failed. Someone else looked out from behind her eyes. Her face twitched and twisted as some small part of her fought the possessing mind, but she had already lost. Joanna smiled someone else's smile, and threw herself at

Alessandra.

They darted back and forth in the skies over the Palace, swooping and diving and whirling around each other in cascades of pyrotechnic energies. They lashed out with physical and mental attacks, and psionic explosions ripped the air apart. Both Alessandra and Joanna took terrible injuries, and their blood rained down on the battle below. They threw rocks and stones and even corpses at each other, and lightning bolts stabbed down from a cloudless sky. Sleeting «nej».ii's discharged around them, as they fought to get inside each other's head, and in the end, possibly because the possessing mind was distracted by what was happening in the Court, Alessandra moved her way past Joanna's shields, and crushed the madly beating lira in her old friend's breast with a remorseless psychokinetic. Joanna cried out once, and then fell limp and dead from the sky, Alessandra dropped after her, and caught Joanna's body before she hit the ground.

She held her dear friend in her arms, rocking her like a sleeping child, and then the last of the Psycho Sluts put her dead comrade aside, and went walking through the city streets, blowing thralls away with the force of her gaze, while tears rolled jerkily down her stained cheeks.

Mobs were everywhere in the city now, filling the streets and squares. Raging mobs attacked the city's defenders on every front, from every direction, and still more came flooding in from the city's outskirts. Only their lack of weapons and tactics denied them any chance of success. And the fact that, every now and then, some would break off fighting to

attack another section, when one uber-esper thought another was doing too well, and carving out too much territory for themselves. They did not trust each other, and never would, even in this last battle for the heart and soul of Logres.

The most dangerous of the invaders were those thralls manifesting esper abilities on the uber-espers' behalf. Some projected terrible emotions, so that defenders cried out and howled and crawled with disgust, and did not know why. Some generated psychokinetic storms that sent razor-sharp objects hurtling through the streets ahead of them. Others sent telepathic illusions against the defenders: visions of rampaging aliens or monsters, or loved ones dying in horrible agonies. Buildings seemed to come alive,

while awful things fell from a splintering sky. Sometimes these new espers even managed to turn one set of defenders against another. But none of these proxy espers lasted long. They burned out quickly from the pressure; often literally.

But there were always more, to replace those who fell.

The defenders were forced back by sheer weight of numbers. They fought every inch of the way, and thralls fell dead and dying in thrii thousands, and hundreds of thousands, but it was not enough. Slowly, inexorably, the defenders were forced back in a tightening circle around the central point of the city, the Imperial Palace.

And that was when Lewis Deathstalker arrived with the cavalry. The Fleet came howling out of hyperspace, and slammed into orhn around the beleaguered world of Logres. Thousands of pinna* and gravity barges and war machines spilled out of the starcruise and descended to the Parade of the Endless, followed by all kinds of ships, from Mistworld and Virimonde. The morning darkened as they filled the sky, and the defenders below raised a ragged dicei and fought on with renewed strength. The pinnaces and ships nude landings all over the city, launching whole new armies of fight i in; men, already angered by what they'd seen on Nina's news. Gravity barges hovered over the thralls crowding into the city, a in I blew them apart with disrupter cannon. War machines moved !«• block all the entrances to the city, so that no more thralls could in.

And falling out of the sky like avenging angels, (lying imdn ilu n own power and surrounded by halos of iine.iiihly energies

, • i

lewis Dealhstalker and Jesamine Flowers. Home again, to clean In MISC. The thralls looked up, and

from their massed throats came a Mille howl of rage and disbelief from the five minds that controlled them.

Lewis looked down at the warring streets, and was sickened and

In i m us ,11 the number of thrall-s that had fought their way into the

/helmed capital city of Logres, that once famed and most fabulous

in the Empire. He could sense that they were all mind-wiped,

|MII« more than dead bodies walking, beyond all hope of rescue, and

• 'idy wished he could have got home sooner. He swooped down to

the* entrance steps of the Imperial Palace, Jesamine right behind

I in 11 Me I lit the bottom of the steps so hard the stone cracked and

ill, H hied under his feet, and the thralls fell back like frightened

till Id i en Jesamine dropped lightly down beside him, and they both

I.I-.IH d oui with their Maze-altered minds. Hundreds of surrounding

iln, i II-. 11 n ihe ground and did not move again, the uber-espers

i««-« I i h'Jii out of their minds. And all around, thousands of thralls

lined 0111 their hate, and charged forward. Lewis stood his

I! i • M . 11 d , 111 c I i n et them dispassionately with gun and sword, his long

i Made Hashing back and forth faster than the human eye could

His sword cut in and out of thrall flesh in under a second,

he lay dead and dying before him. Jesamine was there at his

side, catching his blind spots, her sword rising and falling just as

None of the thralls got close enough to touch them. 'You should have been in opera Lewis,' Jesamine said casually.

They knew how to make an entrance.'

'Not very interested much for opera,' said Lewis, hacking and cutting at * like a man chopping wood, Too many good guys end up in NIC last act/

They allowed the press of bodies to follow them up the stone steps

in the hip. where Stuart Lennox stood alone, his uniform torn and

He held his sword still swinging. Nina Malapert dodged out

and... he tried to hit him now and again to blow large holes in the crowd

11- i KIII She saw who was coming up the steps, and squealed in dismay as she recognised them. She gestured, and many were flying in from all directions to get a good angle. Malapert nodded to Lewis and to Jesamine.

and he said, 'Have you had, Deathstalker. Make yourself at home, hunt the old thralls'

Thanks' said Lewis. 'Don't mind if I do'

Behind them, Nina Malapert shook her head sadly, when she realised that was all they were going to say. It was hardly dialogue for the ages.

And all across the city, ships and pinnacles landed wherever they could, and soldiers and fighting men and women disembarked with sword and gun at the ready. They charged right into the waiting thralls, and soon there were surging mobs of combatants once more in every street and square. Men and women from Mistworld and Virimonde cut and hacked their way through the crowded boulevards, eager for blood and vengeance. They had come for Finn Durandal, but for the moment they'd settle for taking out some of their grievances on the thralls. There was no peace to be found anywhere in the Parade of the

Endless, as the two sides contested for every square foot of the city. Famous buildings burned, and towers and bridges that were works of art collapsed in ruins. Disrupter blasts scorched away precious mosaics and set fires blazing in protected parks. Both sides in the battle were too busy to notice, or care.

The Ashrai came flying down, their huge grotesque forms soaring over the city on wide membranous rainbow wings, and a cry went up from the weary city defenders, and even some hardened souls from the Rookery.

Look! It's the dragons! Owen has sent his dragons to aid us!

Somewhere among the vast army of the Ashrai, the old traitor called Carrion laughed softly, relishing the irony. And then he led his people down into battle, smashing through the defenceless thralls like piledrivers on the wing.

John Silence was in the city too. He'd come down in a pinnace, alongside his troops. His Captains had done everything they could to talk him out of it, but he didn't listen. They'd wanted him to stay safe with the starcruisers, deciding strategy and giving orders, but he knew his place was on the ground. He'd always known he was an Admiral in name only, and now he needed to be back in his old city, that he had defended and saved so many times before, over so many years. It was time again to do what he did best: fight the good against impossible odds. So he left Captains Price and Vardalos in charge of the Fleet, and rode a pinnace down to the Parade of (he Endless as just another trooper. Some of the men recognised him.

, and some didn't, and it didn't matter to him either way. He was first off the pinnace, and led the charge against the waiting thralls. He swung his sword with both hands, killing the enemy with swift and

Mihile strokes, always pressing forward, forward. After all these long ye.us {here were few indeed who could match his prowess with a owl. He'd never thought of himself as a hero or a legend of even *is ,i warrior; just a good soldier determined to do his duty, no matter \ 11,11. His sword slammed in and out of bodies, never pausing for a moment, and it felt like old times again.

Investigator Frost was right there at his side, where she belonged.

explains Price and Vardalos conferred urgently, and then ordered

«veral sLircruisers to descend into the lowest possible orbit, actually

"le I he planet's upper atmosphere, from where they used the

iups' disrupter cannon to scorch whole areas around the city's

'boundaries. The huge armies of the possessed massing there dis7

M'pe.ued in moments, reduced to glowing dust by the power of the

in ms. There would be no reinforcements for the thralls within

hour (iiy). IUU there were just so many, and more on the way. The

ships kept targeting and firing. It was a dangerous procedure for the

M.H. misers. Pinpoint accuracy required flying low, well inside the

" »4.plu*ie, and starcruisers weren't designed or built to do that. It

• mis ,i matter of time before they started breaking up. But the

ships kept firing anyway; because they were needed.

The uber-espies struck back, turning their power on the low-flying si.irmiisers; hexing their tech and attacking their crews. " in - l.iiled and computers crashed. Firestorms raged out of timiioi through narrow steel corridors, and airlocks opened sponta-jllrnnsly, venting atmosphere and pressure. Some crew went insane I nun I he uber-esper contact, and attacked each other. Mad-i »l l l mugh not possessed, they ran wild, and struggling figures i i'«l lor control of ship's departments, fighting each other •Ms m every compartment and bay. Ship Captains had to release '«u\ sleepgtis into affected areas to restore control. They set up • M.il Imve shields to contain the worst damage, and reluctantly rJ m hii'Jier orbits, where hopefully the uber-espies couldn't them, They had done all they could. It was up to the ground now,

On one ship, the Herald, the whole crew went crazy. Everyone (fimm 11><< lowest (rewiiKin to the Captain, Glenn Lyle, ran mad in the

starcruiser. Howling and streaming issued horn (hen romm dun nels, like damned souls in hell, and no one was surprised when the Herald opened fire on the ships around her. Disrupter cannon blasted away at the shields on already weakened ships. A dozen support ships from Mistworld and Virimonde were swept away in moments. The Herald lashed viciously about her in her madness, threatening every other ship in the vicinity. And only Captain Alfred Price was able to do anything about it.

His ship the Havoc had taken the brunt of the Herald's attack, and was already crippled. Her shields were failing, her hull was holed in several places, and Price no longer had control over his guns. The bulk of his crew had gone down to the planet below, and of the skeleton crew left behind, most were dead or running for the escape pods. Price had given the order to abandon ship, but still he sat in his command chair on the deserted, burned-out bridge, surrounded by the smouldering remains of gutted consoles, and the bodies of his fallen officers. He had to keep wiping away blood that trickled down into his eyes from the great wound on the side of his head, and it felt as though one of his arms was broken. The Herald had done a hell of a job on his ship. Price laughed sharply, and lurched up out of his command chair. He dropped into the navigator's seat, called up all the power left in the engines, and aimed his ship right at the Herald. For once his duty was clear, and he felt like a real Captain at last. He just wished there'd been somebody left to see it. He watched the mad ship draw closer on the bridge viewscreen, not even bothering to get out of his way, and he laughed again. He was still laughing when the Havoc crashed head on into the Herald, amid a coruscation of shattered shields, and both ships exploded. Locked together, blazing fiercely with discharging energies, the remnants of the two ships tumbled slowly end over end as they fell towards Logres.

Captain Vardalos took sole command, and regrouped the Fleet in high orbit. She wished she had ship's espers, like in the old days. The uber-esper attack seemed to have stopped for the moment, but she had no way of knowing whether it might start again. No one really knew anything, where the uber-espers were concerned.

Lewis Deathstalker and Jesamine Flowers fought side by side at the top of the stairs at the entrance to

the Palace, performing dark wonders with sword and gun. No one had seen such warriors since Owen's time. None of the thralls could touch them, despite their

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presence. Sliuirt Lennox was there too, tired but dogged, and he was for Lewis and Jesamine's presence, he was in need to find their unending skill and fury just a little spooky. Lewis's sword rose and fell, cut and hacked, moving too fast for the thrall's eye to follow, throwing thrall bodies aside as though they were nothing. Jesamine spun and danced, as fast and deadly as a rattlesnake, and more beautiful. Death had never looked more obvious or more certain.

The dead piled up to every side, forming tall barricades so that the thralls could only come up the steps in narrow files to attack their prey. They came clambering carelessly over the dead on the steps, their possessed eyes blazing with unquenched fury. They still made horrible sounds, but there was nothing human in the sound. They fought with rigid, wedged hands, like animals. Nina still opened fire with her very last gun on occasion, when the mob seemed to be pressing especially hard, but the energy crystal was running low. She didn't have many shots left. She'd given up on her running commentary. The scenes, however, were broadcasting live said it all. But one thrall still nagged at her, and in the end she just leaned forward and killed it out.

"Where's Owen? Is the blessed Owen coming to save us?" No, said Lewis, his sword slicing into a thrall's chest and out in Owen's busy elsewhere. "You'll just have to settle for me." The thralls came surging forward, a solid wave of rage and hatred up the steps, desperate to get their hands on Lewis and his friends and drag them down. Nina fired her gun into the mass, but it didn't even slow them. Lewis and Jesamine and Stuart held their position at the top of the steps, and the thrall wave shattered against them like the sea against an unmovable rock. After everything they'd been through, after all the dangers Lewis and Jesamine had survived, the thralls might be hard work but they weren't scary. And Sliuirt Lennox, his old pride returned, was once again the champion of Virimonde, and he stood proudly beside his hero, unshakable as any Maze survivor.

The mess of the attack actually lessened briefly, as the uber-

infiltrated it would take more than force of numbers to bring

himself down, and changed tactics. Then suddenly some of the

- incoming thralls began to manifest esper abilities. These thralls

lived only a few minutes before burning up inside and out,

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consumed by the very power they were wielding, but they threw fire and rubble at the defenders, and rocked them with psychic assaults. And yet somehow the attacks never seemed to focus, to find their targets, as though even the uber-espers couldn't quite comprehend what Lewis and Jesamine had become. Stuart just kept his head down, and the psychic assaults collapsed almost as quickly as they'd begun.

More Imperial soldiers came pouring in from the side streets, with warriors from Mistworld and Virimonde. They saw the three standing firm at the entrance to the Palace, and the dead piled up behind and around them, and the newcomers raised their battle-cry.

Deathstalker! Deathstalker! Deathstalker!

The new fighters and the thralls crashed together at the foot of the steps, and the square before the Palace was quickly full of struggling figures. It was chaos, with people striking out blindly in all directions. And Jesamine Flowers lowered her sword and raised her voice. She sang, and all her Maze power focused through her trained voice. The song drowned out every other sound, rising and rising until it seemed it seemed everyone in the city could hear it. It was an old song, from the earliest days of Empire, and perhaps even older than that. Of the joys and responsibilities, the duty and the triumphs of being Human. Jesamine's voice rang like steel and silver and silk on the still air, a pure and striking sound, and it seemed as if everyone in the city stopped to hear it. Defenders and thralls alike were held where they stood. And then the Ashrai joined in, adding their voices to hers. It was a song of life and blessed humanity, and voices rose all across the city, joining in, until the air itself shook with the power of the song.

And one by one, and then dozens by dozens, the thralls began to collapse. They fell limply to the ground, and did not rise again, in all the streets and squares and crowded bloody places around the Imperial Palace. The song of Jesamine, and the Ashrai and Unpeople who had come to save a city and a world, had a strength and a force and a power that not even the uber-espers could match. Their minds were forced out of those they'd possessed, and the grounds around the Palace were carpeted with the living empty shells of what had once been men and women.

But Jesamine couldn't sing for ever, and eventually even her voice gave out. Without her to lead them, the Ashrai and the

in

(It was out of the song. And so everywhere else in the city, the fighting went on, perhaps a little more savagely than before.

Michael Random's first instinct had been to bolt for the safety of the Rookery the moment his pinnace landed, and go to ground there in case all the fighting was safely over. He knew all kinds of hiding places in the Rookery, where even his oldest friends and enemies wouldn't have been able to find him. But the sheer number of hulls he faced almost immediately made it clear running out was in no way a viable option. He wouldn't get ten paces on his own. Brett whimpered, swore at everything and everyone, and drew his Weapons. Rose Constantine had drawn hers even before they'd landed properly. She saw the army of thralls laid out before her, begging for her blood, and smiled widely. She hefted her sword and went to meet them like a lover.

Michael and Rose soon ended up fighting back to back, separated

from the rest of the fighters they'd come down with. Rose didn't

hesitate to hack for anyone as she cut a bloody path through the enemy,

and it didn't seem to be terrified to be separated from her. The tides of battle

carried them well away from the Imperial Palace. Brett was forced

to use all the fighting skills he'd learned from Rose, just to sur-

\\ < .nid for a while the two of them fought well and finely, cutting

tl n\Mi every thrall that came within reach. They were both faster

Mini - .Monger than any human had a right to be, and none of the

(hulls could match them for a moment.

Mm Mrett could still see other soldiers dying, pulled down and torn

|J||MII hy the thralls, and his borrowed courage and skills were no

in,H< 11 lor the growing certainty that even with the Wild Rose at his

*!•!• eventually the thralls would get him too. There were just too

in in\ ol them. He couldn't run, and he knew fighting skills weren't

ui'Ji on their own, so he reluctantly did the one thing that scared

11 u- most. He deliberately reopened the old mental link between

1 ItliM and Rose, and used his esper compulsion to slam their minds

int'i i IK-i, so that he could share in all the wild madness that made

• 11 ic unbeatable fighter she was. Their minds opened up and

IK tl together, all the parts fitting into place, into one larger

linn line. Rose laughed aloud, delighting at the feel of his mind in

In IY .ind hers in his. They both knew everything about each other,

nil i hen skills ami secrets. The whole process was finished in a

M.I ,ni(| suddenly the thralls were laced with a new threat: two

superhuman fighters who fought js one. liqually skilled, equill\ savage.

Brett and Rose struck about them with inhuman speed and skill performing dark wonders of swordsmanship, piling up the bodn . around them, so that the thralls had to climb over the fallen to gel ,n their enemies. The uber-espers looked on Brett and Rose throure.li their proxy eyes, and then had to look away, because the t\lllll burned so very brightly and fiercely. The uber-espers called thr.ill-. away from other, lesser threats, and commanded them to hi down Brett and Rose at any cost.

Brett and Rose fought on with their bodies, but their minds wen elsewhere. The process they had started was still continuing. Th.dr minds opened up and up, meshing together on every level, men-into one incredible mind. A single mind, male and female, om personality operating in two bodies simultaneously. What the uhei espers imposed, Brett and Rose learned to do voluntarily. The process that Finn's esper drug had begun, and the Madness M,i/< had continued, now reached its fruition in a single mind that was l.n more than the sum of its parts. It was a fusion, the best of both minds and the worst, all the knowledge and experience and mem ories of two people, now combined into one. It was a new thing, <m<l BrettRose woke up smiling.

Their combined will hit the thralls like a hammer blow, hurlim-them away dead and broken. BrettRose looked about them, jml more thralls blew away under the pressure of their gaze, opening up a wide space

around the two bodies with a single mind. The uber-espers lashed out with a telepathic attack focused through the thralls, but it glanced harmlessly away from the new creature's shields. The uber-espers recoiled from this new thing, and retreated, shocked and horrified by stirrings of a long-buried memory. The thralls turned and ran, leaving Brett Rose standing alone in an empty square, surrounded by the dead. They slowly lowered their swords and their breathing steadied, their many wounds slowly but steadily healing themselves.

Nikki Sixteen, that proud and feisty human/alien hybrid from the Rookery, ran through the square at that moment with a dozen of her fellow fighters, heading for the Palace, drawn by what she'd heard in Jesamine's song. She stopped as she recognised Brett and Rose, flashed Brett a smile, and then hesitated. Brett was different,

she could feel it. There was something to him. Brett and Rose looked at Nikki, at the same moment, in the same way, and Nikki backed away from them. She was frightened, and she didn't know why. She joined her companions, out of the square, not even sure what it was she was running from. Except that it felt ... as if Brett was here. Or at least gone.

Gil Akotai led his Mistworld warriors through the streets, using his wit and cunning tactics to split the thrall armies apart into more manageable groups. Mistworlders knew all about strategy and dirty fighting. Gil swung his long curved blade with wide easy strokes, husbanding his energy, always leading from the front. More and more people came to join him as news of his success spread, and soon he was leading an army of his own through the Parade of the Inevitable. His skill and courage were unmatched, and he built his own legend that day, through feats of valour and derring-do that were all the more impressive because they came from a purely human man, untouched by the dubious blessings of the Madness Maze. The Mistworlders chanted his name as a battle-cry, and others took it up, as Gil Akotai led them unstoppably towards the heart of the city. News cameras came rushing in from all directions to relay live coverage. People on worlds all across the Empire followed his exploits, because he was one of them, not a legend or monster from their minds; just a man, with a man's courage and determination. Gil led his people on, cutting a bloody path through the city, into the Imperial Palace.

John Silence, the last survivor of those who'd come down in his ship, made contact with Finn's clone guards and took control of them. They weren't much use without officers to guide them, but John responded to Silence's natural authority, and gratefully obeyed his tactics and orders. Silence recognised them as clones, though he had no idea of their origin - they still wore their steel masks. But they were a fighting force, and just what Silence needed, so he didn't question them too deeply. He just

set them to work, thralls and pulling together, and then he led them forward, solidly and well. The thralls were no match for him. He looked into their possessed eyes, and was reminded of his JMSI i' .ijj.iinst Shub's Ghost Warriors. Nothing changes, he thought, i luile bitterly. The Ghost Warriors were a very long time a^, <> Itul he didn't feel old. In fact, it seemed to him that he'd nevn |iMi} *hi heller than this.

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He said as much to Investigator l;rosl, <md she dgreed, smiling. She stuck close to his side, warning him of ddn^ers he missed.

Silence and his clone guards reached the Palace steps not lon# after Jesamine's marvellous song, and he led them carefully through the fallen bodies to the foot of the steps. Nina spotted him, yelled a cheerful greeting, and came bounding down the steps for a quick interview with this new leader of the guards. (Lewis and Jesamine had already refused an interview, and Stuart never had much to say.) But she stopped suddenly, distracted. One guard's steel m;isk had been torn away during a struggle, and for the first time Nin.i could see a guard's face. And for all the distortion, she recognised ii immediately as Finn's. She turned quickly and ripped the mask oil another guard.

'Clones!' said Nina. 'Finn's clones; all of them! Another exclusive!'

And she did her happy dance, right there in front of a bemused Silence. And then she went bounding back up the steps to spill the news to Stuart. She forgot all about interviewing the solemn-looking man who'd led the guards into the square. She had a feelim1, she ought to know him, but that could wait. Besides, she thought, glancing back for a moment, he did seem awfully busy chatting with someone who wasn't there . . .

Elsewhere in the city, the aliens from the Rookery had joined the fight against the invading thralls. They emerged from unexpected places to rend and kill, and enjoyed themselves immensely. Led by the silver-armoured Toch'Kra, they came boiling out of sewer openings and factory outlets, and erupted from boarded-up factories and pollution dumps, catching the thralls by surprise. The aliens tore tin-possessed humans apart. They didn't know the bodies were mind wiped, and they didn't care. They had grievances to address, and besides, they were hungry. Sometimes they had to be restrained from attacking the clone guards and the Fleet's soldiers. The Rookery people cheered the aliens on, which was something of a new sensation for them.

The monsters from Shandrakor quickly gravitated towards the aliens, and fought by their side. They felt more at home than though they politely declined when asked if they'd like to join the feasting. The monsters excelled at fighting the thralls, partly because of their bestial natures, honed by long years of struggle for survival.

- MI Slundi.ikor, hut mostly hei.mse they luul nothing lell to lose. I hey h.id been promised tluit they could come home, and here they

ie It might be called Logres now rather than Golgotha, but this w.is still the Parade of the Endless, just as they remembered. Even il it li.nl heen fancied up a bit since their time. They were home again, n nl 11 i hey had come back only to fight and die, that was fine by them.

Mk hel du Bois, one of the few surviving Members of Parliament, luih'.In with his back to a wall in a side alley already choked with I" ,<lies. Most of the Virimonde warriors he'd come down with were -ihe.uly dead, but he and a dozen others fought on, stubbornly M lusing to be dragged down and torn apart like the others. Du Bois

• h.mted the old Deathstalker battle-cry, Shandrakor!, as he swimr, his sword with more defiance than skill. Du Bois had always been in-ierly loyal to his home world, if not always to its most famous I'.n.igon, Lewis; but with the slaughter of Clan Deathstalker hy I mn's creatures, all the people of Virimonde had sworn to become i •• -ithstalkers in their place; and du Bois was no different. He h«i<l

ii .among the first to volunteer to come and fight on Logres, even though he was far more a politician than a warrior. He thought he'd

• l«»iir well enough, considering. He'd killed thralls. His only regret

that he should have to die in such a squalid back alley, so l,n iy from the House of Parliament and the Imperial Palace, where he (I spent so much of his life.

I le'd wanted to see them once more, at least, before he died, une by one, the men and women around him were dragged vn, and killed. Each and every one of them went down fighting in the last. They fought impossible odds, as a Deathstalker should, .md not one of them broke and ran. So Michel du Bois couldn't i-iilin. And when he finally fell, still flailing about him with his • id, his last thought was: Ah, Lewis; I always knew you'd be the ./<,//// (\f me.

I he whole city was still a battleground. The flood of thralls into ihe (ny had been halted by the starcruisers' actions on the outskirts, hut enough remained of the armies of thralls already inside the city i" I eep the tides of battle surging; and apart from the one small nrr.i ". 11 nd the Imperial Palace, no one could tell for sure which way the w.i i w.is going.

! ;i

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Inside the Court, the five assembled uber-espers launched the full force of their considerable will against the waiting Douglas Campbell and Finn Durandal, and once again they failed. They simply could not reach the two men standing steadily before them. The uber-espers looked at each other, baffled. No esp-blocker ever made could have stood up to such an attack. And then cold, harsh laughter rang out on the air from nowhere. The uber-espers' heads snapped round. Screaming Silence shook violently, rattling her chains, and Blue Hellfire let out a low moaning. Grey Train actually lost control of his dusty shape for a moment. All the uber-espers knew that laugh. And as they looked wildly about them, Diana Vertue stepped casually out from behind Finn's Throne, to fix them all with her savage glare.

'I've been here all along,' she said flatly. 'Hidden behind the strongest shields I ever created. I walked in here with Douglas and Tel, and nobody saw or heard me. Even they couldn't be sure I was with them. They just had to take it on trust. You see, Douglas and Finn were the bait, but I am the trap. I knew you'd never face unwillingly, even if you did manage to kill me once, so Douglas and I came up with a plan to bring all of you to me. And guess what; I brought a few friends along.'

She rose up into the air, hovering above the Throne on unseen wings, and suddenly she was shining as

brightly as the sun. Her presence joined with the presence of many other minds to beat on the air of the Court. Even Douglas and Finn flinched away from her. The uber-espers howled and shrieked in inhuman voices as Diana Vertue became a conduit for all the power of the Massmind of her oversoul, and Diana laughed again.

The oversoul has come back! The city of New Hope travelled here with the Fleet from Mistworld, unseen and unsuspected. Only I knew. A secret weapon, to be preserved and kept ready for just your moment. You uber-espers are all that's left of a particularly shameful episode of our past, and we will finally be rid of you!

The uber-espers tried to flee, to teleport out of the Court, but Diana Vertue held them where they were. And the oversoul SIMMERED at the uber-espers through Diana, who was still sometimes Jeni's Psycho. The terrible destructive force beat upon the minds of the uber-espers, driving them together to support their mental shield. Douglas and Jim were indeed killed, unharmed in the

end of the side effects of the psychic assault taking place before them. They huddled together, hands clapped uselessly to their heads, the wily humans on an inhuman battlefield. The oversoul kept up the pressure, beating at the uber-espers' shield with brutal strength, determined to wipe out the menace of the mad minds, once and for all. Diana Vertue grinned like a death's head as the attack focused through her enlarged mind. This was what she had come back for. An old vengeance for an old crime.

The uber-espers huddled together as their mental shield shud-

dered and cracked, failing under the onslaught of the oversoul and

Then, Diana Vertue, and then . . . something utterly unexpected hap-

The dusty grey figure of the Grey Train collapsed, losing its

form to become a grey cloud that swept over Blue Hellfire,

"Minded and sank into her, darkening the colour of her corpse-

and icy flames leapt up around her. The Shatter Freak lurched

forward, almost against his will, his body parts appearing and disap-

pearing in dizzying speed, until he too fell into Blue Hellfire like a

stone in a pool, absorbed and swallowed up in a moment. Scream-

ing. He lunged forward, grunting like a hog at the trough, and

> .11 fleshy body wrapped itself around Blue Hellfire. The

lilium-, hl.r/ed brightly, radiating an impossible cold as the two

mrilled together to become one. A dark silhouette of a

i KIII !i};uic', like a hole in the world. And finally the two withered

MUM nli of the Spider Harps just snapped out of existence, like a

i" «l -,n,ip bubble. Only one figure now remained, bathed in icy

like ,i day shape being recast in a kiln. And when it was all

Hid ihe cold fires had died away, there, alone, stood a short

\ < »m,m who shone like the sun. Diana looked at her blankly

n\ n soul's attack cut off.

hn i he hell are you? Where did the uber-espers go?' i iir.ide me, where they belong/ said the new woman, in a r.uied voice. She rolled her head around and flexed her i . (hough it had been a long time since she'd been in a I -.linnld i hank you, Diana Vertue, and the oversoul. The ••I ynui , it Lick brought about what I've been unable to Im hundreds of years. You put me back together again.' 'Ihr iihn espers, .ill of them; they were just parts of you?' said

ilimij'.h ihr Madness M,i/e, ,i limy,, loiif. lime dgo; and it

split me apart into five separate sub-personalities, because that wds the only way I could cope with what I found there. Greetings to you, King Douglas and Emperor Finn. I am Alicia VomAcht Deathstalkei I am finally back, and all the worlds that are shall tremble belou me/

This is not good/ said Finn.

'You think?' said Douglas.

The sheer force of Alicia's presence seemed to fill the Conn, pressing against the far walls and shuddering in the floor. It pushed Diana's presence aside effortlessly, and both Douglas and Finn h.ul to fight an urge to kneel and bow their heads. They felt as though they didn't belong in the Court, like vermin in the gaze of a livim; goddess. The oversoul was silent in Diana's head, struck dumb l»\ this turn of events. Even their best precogs hadn't sensed tin. coming. The entire Massmind of the oversoul looked

upon tin restored, incandescent mind of Alicia VomAcht Deathstalker, ami was afraid. She smiled slowly upon Diana.

'We have met before. When you manifested the Mater Mundi, .ill those years ago, that was part of me. I was spread far and wide l>\ the Maze, torn apart into grotesque sub-personalities, crude rep resentatives of my various needs and functions, but I always had <m agenda/

'Who . . . were you?' said Douglas, fighting to get the words oui 'How did you become ... the uber-espers?'

'What?' said Alicia, 'You mean the oversoul never told you aboui the mad old aunt they kept in the attic? I am the beginning of tin esper movement. They all have their root in me. I was one of ilu group of scientists who first discovered the Madness Maze, in ,i cavern deep inside Haden, centuries and centuries ago. I wds .m esper, one of the very first. I found others, bound them to my will and forced them to go through the Maze with me. My intention u to produce a mighty esper gestalt, with me in total control, bui the Maze wasn't what I thought it was. It tried to change ml remake me . . . and I couldn't have that. I fought it, but the rllmi broke me. Tore me apart into the uber-espers and the driving Ion « in the mass unconscious of the other espers, who became Hie < -|>« i underground. Later, they called me the Mater Mundi, Mother ol All Souls. Even scattered and separated I was a force in the history of mankind. Now I'm back, and steeped in my true power

i ix

I like this new mass gestalt you call the oversoul. So brightly •Jin HIM',, so very tasty. Why, I could just eat it all up/

Alicid VomAcht Deathstalker withdrew her controlling presence

In »ni i he thrall armies, to gather all her power in one place for

c»ne purpose, and all across the Parade of the Endless, no-longer-

pn-.M-ssed men and women and children fell limply to the ground

.nml liiy still. Eyes open, still breathing, but utterly empty. Alicia

Would reoccupy them later, after she'd finished with more pressing

business. Fighting stopped in the city, as exhausted and bloody men

11 id women slowly lowered their weapons and looked uncertainly

tihoiii ihem. A great cheer went up, that the war was over and they

hfiil survived. They didn't know about Alicia. The various fighting

KIniips (,une together as they headed for the heart of the city, and

impend I Palace. The acclaimed greatest hero of the fighting, Gil

l Akoidi, led the way.

Alinvr i he Imperial Palace, the vast floating city of New Hope

nh -.led, its glass and silver towers shining like an impossibly

nowllake. The people below cheered again at the sight, but

• -pers didn't notice. They fought to focus every bit of power MM y h.ul through Diana Vertue. It was a terrible thing to come face »" Lii e with their progenitor, after all these years. They had found at

!M ii lounder and creator, only to discover she was a mad god

lied only to devour her children. But the oversoul still had a

11 i« ks up its sleeve. A few hints from the precogs. The oversoul

wn Crow Jane and the Ecstatic called Joy, to join the others

' nun.

diuj; dlong before the last Throne, Alicia didn't actually look

III-*«11 Just a small, short blonde woman in an old-fashioned

Miuloim; the only mark of strangeness about her the hu^e

Midi dominated her small pale face. The kind of woman

you'd pass every day and never give a second look. But even though

• lined oil her glow, her presence was still stamped upon the Mlik. A hoot crashing into a face. She dominated the whole

'I*hei very existence.

"iid lu-i. i nidi dnd a woman entered the Court, striding along

tic, Alessdndid Ducjuesne, last of the Psycho Sluts, dnd

Kisi of the old legends. She had dropped down out of

"d Mulched him up from the' street. She'd carried him

MM- I'ddre, dnd />Vu//w we're needed was all she had to sdy.

Silence went along with it. He was used to sudden changes in direction in his life. At first, Alessandra had been a little confused thinking there was someone else with Silence, but she pushed iIn-thought aside to concentrate on getting to the Palace as fast as possible. Why are you crying? Silence had asked, and she told him about having to kill her oldest friend. Silence had nodded, understanding. Rebellions always kill your friends first, he said, remembering Alexander Storm, and others.

Silence and Alessandra circled carefully around Alicia, giving her plenty of room. They'd heard her tell her strange history as thex-approached through the Court, and they could feel the pouei radiating from her. When they reached Douglas and Finn ami Diana, before the Throne, Alessandra reported the collapse of ihc thrall armies, and Douglas nodded, relieved there was at least one problem that he didn't have to be worried about for the moment. I If-then turned to the man he'd known as Samuel Chevron.

'I understand you're really the legendary Captain John Silence, Why did you masquerade as Samuel Chevron for all those years? Did my father know?'

'No/ said Silence. 'No one knew. That was the point. I felt it IK-SI to conceal my true nature/

'Lot of that going around at the moment/ said Douglas.

And then Crow Jane materialised in Court right next to them, along with Joy, and they all jumped. Crow Jane wore her battered leather jacket, with a bandolier of throwing stars across her bosom Her sharp face looked even paler than usual, showing off her j< i black hair and lips and heavy eye makeup. Joy smiled brightly on one and all, an average, almost anonymous looking man in a simple white tunic. Crow Jane nodded briskly to Diana.

The oversoul sent us. No one seems too sure why, but om precogs were unanimous that Joy needs to

be here. Don't ask me what good he's going to do, unless he intends smiling Alicia io death/

'I am here/ Joy said politely, 'because this is where I'm sup|>< to be. And how often can you say that with any surety? Hello Alicia!' And then he wandered off to look at some walls.

'I feel so much safer/ Finn said to Douglas. 'Don't you?'

John Silence nodded uncomfortably to his daughter Diana. The\ moved a little aside, so that they could talk privately. They knew

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HM \ should heive been concentrating on Alicia, but just then it

Mied as if they had all the time in the world, to say all the things lh, H needed to be said.

'Meen a long time, father/ said Diana. 'Since we last met in "ii. A hundred and eighteen years/

'I've heen busy/ said Silence.

YOU never were much of a father/ said Diana, without heat. 'Al-• i e.idy to sacrifice your own daughter to the greater good. First on tlnsrli, hack when we were both still only human, and then — '

I <lul what I thought was necessary/ said Silence, meeting his •I "irhier's angry gaze with old, tired eyes.

You hetrayed me to the uber-espers! You led me into an ambush,

' i lie n Abandoned me! I should have known better than to trust

... I believed your growing power made you too MIS, too disruptive; a threat to the Golden Age we were >K lo build for everybody.' i» I- 1 you know the oversoul would pick up my mind, after my

• is destroyed by the uber-espers?' 'No Hut I hoped/

i "in, i downed, and looked at Silence's side. 'I sort of sense

"lie with you. Investigator Frost?' 1 in you see her too?' 'No There's no one there/ said Diana. 'Oh Father; won't you ever

o?

While they were talking, Alicia sidled into Silence's mind, just for

the first time. It wasn't difficult, for all his two trips through the

Maze. Silence had always suppressed his greater powers.

Because he was afraid of becoming like his daughter. Alicia

wasn't. If she could dominate and possess his weaker

powers, she could seize control of all his Maze powers, and use them

to her advantage. In fact, she found the image of Investigator Frost in Silence's

• IM! Killed girlishly as she slipped into it, like a maggot • Inn; mio .in apple.

mined suddenly and looked at Silence with cold eyes. 'She's (MM .in nm'.iaiclul hitch, John. She never appreciated all the things • «h«l loi her. Kill her/

'i ' Silence said loudly, and everyone looked at him. I 'II hei Us necessary; just like* before. And afterwards, kill the

•,ii

runaway King and the traitor Emperor. They're not worthy. You should be in charge. You're the only one left who is worthy to le.ul Humanity. Do it. Do what you always wanted to do, John/

Silence looked at her. 'You're not Frost. The Investigator would never say that. You're . . . her. Alicia. I can feel you, creeping about inside my head.'

'Do it!' Alicia shrieked, pushing all her considerable presence into Silence's mind. He cried out, shrieking piteously in pain and shoe k and horror, falling to his knees. His arms trembled, his fingers twitching with someone else's intentions. He could feel Alicia push ing him further and further into the back of his head. The Court fell away, as though at the end of a rapidly diminishing tunnel. She slithered through his thoughts like an inexorable impulse, and he knew he wasn't strong enough to hold her off. But he'd always been his own man. So while his hand was still mostly his own, he pulled his disrupter from its holster, set it clumsily against his heart, and shot himself. One last act of duty, and of honour. Alicia fled laugh ing from his guttering mind as he slumped towards the floor. With the last of his vision, Silence saw Diana moving towards him to catch him, and knew she wouldn't get there in time. He hit the flooi of the

Court hard, and never felt it. All the lights went out.

And he heard Investigator Frost saying Welcome home, Captain, and he smiled a last smile.

Diana sat on the floor, holding her dead father in her arms, glaring at Alicia. 'What did you do to him?'

'I always break my toys when I play with them,' said Aliu.i VomAcht Deathstalker.

Diana put her dead father aside, and rose slowly to her feet gathering her power around her. And then there was the sound of running footsteps from the corridor leading to the Court, and every one turned to look as the man called Carrion burst in, his black cloak flapping around him like a crow's wings. He ignored everyone but the fallen Silence. He walked forward to stand over the body for a long moment, breathing heavily.

'I could feel it happening,' he said finally, 'But I couldn't get there in time.'

'You couldn't have saved him, Sean,' said Diana.

'I always thought we'd die together. Probably with our hands around each other's throats. Old friend, old enemy.'

Legends always die alone/ said Diana. 'It goes with the territory.'

< .uilion turned to look at Alicia. 'You. You did this, I am the Asludi; and we condemn you to death.'

(id in line,' said Alicia.

She* lashed out with all her awful power, a blast of sheer annihilating energy designed to wipe everyone else out of existence, as lliough they'd never been. Diana Vertue met her attack with a I ncTCcim of pure defiance, all the power of the oversoul channelled iluough her mighty, grief-driven mind. Her clothes began to smoulder from escaping energies. The two women stood facing wli other across the Court, impossible forces raging between (hem. Two great powers, the old and the new, utterly deadlocked. I he monster and the Massmind. Alessandra joined her mind with |)litii«rs, and Carrion sang with the voice of all the Ashrai. And still

A In 1,1 Stood.

r.r.iornis ran loose, crackling on the air of the Court, baneful tlrslimlive energies tossed around as though they were nothing. llrxr j.igged cracks split apart the walls of the Court, and zig-zagged

nss the high ceiling. Pieces of masonry broke free, and fell ponderously down into the Court. Carrion raised a hand, and a shimmering screen protected everyone except Alicia.

Hie- Moor shook as though in an earthquake, and the Throne

ied UK k and forth, as though fought over by unseen hands. The MI w.is unbearably hot and then
impossibly cold, and rain and hail I* M honi nowhere. Probabilities changed and altered, snapping on

ioil in a moment as old familiar faces flickered in and out of Mnht m the Court. Lionstone on her Throne,
with the first Dram lilt' Widowmaker at her side. Owen Deathstalker, holding a fallen m his hand. King
Robert and Queen Constance, smiling

•MI. < is of the Golden Age. So many faces, so many names, come tie in a moment as Time rippled and
bent back and forth upon

ii Ami Douglas Campbell and Finn Durandal, who had once i.....i,i|oi pLiyers in the struggle for the fate
of the Empire, could

••iily huddle together to one side, ignored.

• 1*1 then the psistorms snapped off, banished in a moment by the h« . i |toyvei ol those who now
entered the Court. The walls stopped ,md (ickking, and the floor grew still, and Alicia and

• hoi 11 looked round angrily to see who had interrupted them.

11)(Mihstlker, Jesamine Flowers, Brett Random and Rose

Constantine strode forward to meet them. Reality stabilised as the four Maze minds enforced their will upon it. Alicia shrieked with fury, and lashed out at everyone present, unleashing all her centuries of Maze-given power. Diana and Alessandra and the oversoul met it first, and then the four Maze survivors reached on, adding their power. Carrion's voice rose in a terrible song, and all the power of the Ashrai focused through him, adding their support. Alicia staggered and almost fell, but didn't.

Lewis stepped forward, and Alicia turned to face him. And that was how it all came to a head, with one Deathstalker facing another. Two minds remade by the Madness Maze, and made powerful beyond belief. Because the Maze had always worked best for Death-stalkers.

Lewis and Alicia went head to head, matching power with power, will with will, and in the end Lewis won. Because all Alicia had was self-interest and ambition and hate, while Lewis was centred around duty and honour and the courage he needed to protect those he cared for. And Alicia stood alone, while Lewis stood for many. Alicia hit him with everything she had, trying to possess and control him, and then trick and subvert him, but there was just so much more to him than there was to her. And so she turned and ran.

She was half way across the Court before anyone even realised that the mental battle was over, and she was out the doors and gone before they could react. Alicia ran through the Palace's maze of corridors, and the others came after her, crying out in rage and cheated passion. Alicia wrapped herself in her will, becoming invisible to the world. She sent her thoughts racing ahead of her, sensing that triumphant rebels were already streaming into the Palace through the main entrance, led by Gil Akotai. Alicia smiled. She couldn't take control of her thrall army again without giving away her presence to her enemies, but she could take one mind, and hide in it while the thrall smuggled her away. And then . . . well, Gil Akotai was a hero and a leader; just what she needed to re-establish herself . . .

She ducked into a side passage as she heard footsteps approaching, concentrating all her power into not being there. One by one her pursuers passed her by, and she weighed each one as they passed, looking for someone to carry her unnoticed to safety. Akouli. MM. I were too well protected, but one mind . . . The

slid past her hiding place, his mind wide open, and she struck at him like a snake. Such a small man, with his surgically altered brain. If he should seem to be acting a little strangely, who'd notice? She plunged into Joy's head, and found waiting there the cage he'd made for her.

Hello, Alicia, said Joy. I've* been waiting for you. Enjoy your stay, there's no way out.

And trapped inside a mind that made no sense at all, all Alicia VnmAcht Deathstalker could do was scream and scream and scream.

Joy called to the others to bring them back, and pointed at the empty shell of Alicia's body lying still and helpless at his feet. They all looked at him.

'She tried to possess me/ said Joy. 'But there's a lot more to me than meets the eye.'

'We always thought so/ said Crow Jane.

I . . . large, I contain multitudes/ Joy said happily. 'What's one more voice in my head?'

huiu Vertue studied his thoughts for a moment, winced, and Ihrn nodded. 'She'll never find a way out of that. Take him back to New Mope, and the oversoul can watch over Joy until he dies; and I'll be sure she dies with him.'

'«M I'll like a plan to me/ said Crow Jane.

I'll gestured sharply at the empty body on the floor, and I'll hmsi into consuming flames. It burnt up unnaturally quickly, ft'ilured in moments to nothing more than a pile of ashes. Carrion looked ,ii the others.

in-i m case.'

i I'll.n it?' said Jesamine. 'Is it all finally over?'

Noi (juite yet/ said Lewis. 'Where is Finn? And where i>

him iMimndal was once more in the Court, sitting on his Throne,

when Douglas Campbell walked back in. Once he'd seen Alicia w, is

MM liMii-.ei ,1 threat, he was free to settle old business. He'd noticed

- missing, and knew where he'd be. He walked slowly across

- ked and broken Court, his footsteps loud in the quid. He

- ped <n lhe foot of the steps leading up to the Throne, and Finn

tmllrd down on him.

l I HCW you'd come alone, Douglas. I told you; this is our

moment. No one else belongs here/ He rose up from his Throne, and descended the steps unhurriedly to stand before Douglas. 'We have unfinished business, you and I. One last duel, one last contest to finally decide which of us is the better/

They drew their swords, and slowly began to circle each other.

'I have to kill you, Finn/ said Douglas.

'And I have to kill you, Douglas/

For all the people you had killed/

'And for all the people I have yet to kill/

'Were we ever really friends, Finn?' said Douglas.

Finn considered the question seriously. 'I wanted us to be friends. But I don't think I have it in me to be anyone's friend. We're both alone and we die alone, so really all you can seriously hope to do ... is see how many people you can take with you. We did have some good times together, didn't we, Douglas?'

'Yes, we did. Goodbye, Finn/

'Goodbye, Douglas/

They surged towards each other, driving sparks from their clashing swords, as they duelled back and forth across the empty Court. They were both excellent swordsmen, and experienced fighters. They stamped and lunged, cut and hacked, and never even came close to touching each other. They both knew each other's style intimately, from their times as partners in the Paragons. Then swords rose and fell, and their breathing grew short and hard. They were both sweating heavily, putting all their strength into every blow. Finn should have had the advantage. Douglas had exhausted himself fighting thralls before he ever got to the Court. But in the end, Douglas had spent all his life fighting, while Finn ... had allowed himself to get soft. Their blades slammed together one last time, and Douglas twisted the sword right out of Finn's hand. It fell to the floor, and the sound seemed to echo on and on in the empty Court. Douglas and Finn stood facing each other, struggling for breath, looking into each other's eyes. And then Douglas just went through Finn, with one swift, professional thrust.

He watched Finn crumple silently to the floor. A part of him had wanted to beat Finn to death with his bare hands. For what Finn had done to William, and so many others. But he didn't. Because he was King, and he was supposed to be better than that. When he was sure Finn was dead, Douglas cut Finn's head off. Because that was his duty.

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...I did, with monsters. He held the body of the man's head behind him, and he ended the day's steps slowly and tiredly. It had been a long day. He stepped on to the Throne, and laid his bloody sword across his thighs. He looked down at what remained of the man who had once been the greatest Paragon of all.

'I was always your friend,, Finn, even if you were never really mine. That's why I didn't take you alive. I couldn't leave you to the mercies of the mob/

And that was how the others found him, when they trailed back into the Court. King Douglas, sitting on his Throne as though he belonged there, and always had. There was quite a crowd in the Court. Lewis and Jesamine, Brett and Rose, Diana and Alessandra,

• \v Line and Joy, and Carrion. And Gil Akotai, who had finally brought his troops to the Palace, and had gone in alone to find out why the hell all the thralls had suddenly fallen down. He peered uncertainly about him, a little cowed about being in the presence of so many heroes and legends. They all looked at Finn's beheaded body, and everyone seemed to relax a little.

King Douglas smiled tiredly down from his Throne, and they all nodded in their various ways. And then everyone looked at Lewis and Jesamine, to see what would happen next. Lewis put away his

• id, and I smiled at Douglas, who smiled back. And then the King stepped off his Throne and came down the steps to embrace his old

and his partner. They held each other tightly for a long moment, and then stepped back to look at each other.

'We've come a long way,' said Lewis. To end up right back where we started/

'And it's all my fault,' said Douglas. 'Oh Lewis, I'm so sorry . . . / No, I'm sorry . . . / HM v hoih laughed quietly, without your father,' said Lewis.

'In my mind about your Clan,' said Douglas. 'I suppose we're both •IHMII lamily now/

No said Lewis. 'We're brothers. In every way that counts/ I he.n you've been doing amazing things,' said Douglas. 'I kept up \\ •» of your travels and triumphs, in the Rookery. I was half on to turn into miracle-workers, like Owen and his M' Ihiowing lightning bolts about and healing the sick with toneh/

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'They were legends/ said Lewis. 'I always thought it was more important to remain human, with human limitations. So we could all come home again. I don't think Owen will ever be back/

'Of course; you met him! The blessed Owen himself! What was he like? Anything like the legends?'

'He was a Deathstalker/ said Lewis. 'And the finest of us all/

Douglas waited, and then realised that was all he was going to get. He considered Lewis thoughtfully. 'You have a following now, Lewis. You could take the Throne, if you wanted. You could make yourself

King/

'I never wanted to be King/ Lewis said easily. 'Hell, I never even wanted to be Champion/

That was then, this is now/ Douglas said firmly. I'm going to need a Champion I can depend on, as I start putting the Empire back together again. Be my Champion, Lewis. Be my right hand, and my conscience/

'What about Jesamine?' said Lewis, and the quiet in the Court seemed to deepen as everyone waited for Douglas's reply. Jesamine seemed content to wait for ever for him to speak. And then Nina Malapert came bustling through the doors into the Court, with three news cameras bobbing along behind her. She squeaked loudly at the sight of so many famous faces in one place, waved cheerily to Douglas, and started bossing the cameras about to get the best angles. Douglas regarded her fondly.

'Jes belongs with you, Lewis. She always did. I ... have someone else I care about/

Lewis looked at Nina, with her gaudy clothes and pink mohawk, and raised an eyebrow. 'You always did have appalling taste in women, Douglas/

I'm glad you've found someone/ said Jesamine, just a little coldly.

Douglas looked at her. 'Did you ever love me, Jes? Even for a moment?'

'I might have/ said Jesamine. 'If things had been different/

She linked her arm through Lewis's and Douglas smiled on both of them. And for the rest of his life he never told Jesamine that he loved her, and always would. He never told anyone. Because he w.is the King, and he knew his duty. Some secrets should remain secrets, for the good of all. He looked round sh.irply, <is Siiurt Lennox

lurched through the doors and into the Court, leaning heavily on ,Itis Sri; both of them battered and bloody but grinning widely with the- joy of being still alive when so many others had died.

'Sorry, Stuart/ Douglas said cheerfully. 'It's all over, and you missed it. The uber-espers are defeated and Finn is dead. Not a bad ddy's work, all told. So, Stuart; how would you like to train and le.ul «i new order of Paragons? And Nina; how would you like to be the new communications chief of Logres?'

Nina did her happy dance, and everyone laughed. Diana Vert in-stepped forward to shake the King's hand.

'Doesn't look like I'm needed any more. I think I'll go back into the oversoul. It's lonely being just one person. And my faihei r. <le«id. Again/

She didn't mention the clones of herself she still had preserved in storage. Because you never knew. The Empire might still need lenny Psycho, some other day.

'Hut before I leave, King Douglas, I have one last duty/ She » onecentrated a moment, and then smiled. There. Lewis; you prom r.r<1 the monsters from Shandrakor that you would bring ihrm home again, and you did. Now I've just lifted their minds out <-i i their monstrous bodies and reinstalled them in some of the empts hodies left behind by Alicia. So those who were once human. ,iml i hen made into monsters, can be human again. I wiped out a loi <•! ilien Shandrakor memories, so they can be only human/ Ih.ink you,' said Lewis. 'That was kind of you/ 'Well/ said Diana. 'You don't want to believe all the things you in .11 .ihout me/ She looked at Alessandra. 'Why don't you tome L into the oversoul with me? The old Massmind could use a liiile UN mg up, and we're just the trouble-makers to do it/

/ said Alessandra. 'I think I need to go home too/ Mi ell Rose stepped forward, and spoke with both their voices simul "ii'Jy, which freaked everybody. 'We have been through We are together, now, for always. Two parts making up one li >le person, at last. A single mind, in two bodies. We will go back lo iiiii Kookery, to lead it and keep it sharp. Just in case they might he • I e i 1, 11»., i i M , if your new Golden Age doesn't work out after all/

s.ml Douglas, the first to recover. Teach them all to he Hers .ind free-thinkers and general pains in the arse. Just in e.ise Hi* ie-,1 ol Humanity gets soft and lazy again/

BrettRose turned to Lewis. 'Goodbye, Deathstalker. An honour to fight beside you. We both learned a lot/

'You're welcome/ said Lewis. 'Jesus; this is spooky. Can I suggest you both practise talking separately again, because this is seriously weirding me out/

'How does it feel?' said Jesamine, curiosity winning out over shock. 'Being one person in two bodies?'

BrettRose smiled. 'Happy. Fulfilled. Whole. We feel whole, at last/

And while everyone was considering that, another figure appeared, teleporting into the Court. Daniel Wolfe stood before them, shining like a star, so brightly that none of them could look at him directly till he lowered the light. He smiled about him.

'I am Daniel Shub/ he announced calmly. 'Daniel Wolfe and the three AIs of Shub, who went through the Madness Maze together, and emerged combined into one, far greater being. The power of machine mind joined to the capabilities of human mind. We have become ... so very powerful. And utterly content. We are more than we were, or ever dreamed of becoming. Relax, people; we are still sworn against violence. All that lives is holy/

'Well, yes, but you'll pardon me if I take that with just a pinch of salt/ said Douglas. 'I haven't forgotten your ships firing on the Mog Mor ships during the battle over Haden. You blew them all apart, and didn't even hang around to check for survivors/

'No need. The Mog Mor ships were just drones,' said Daniel Shub. 'Empty ships run by remote control. Mog Mor was never more than a great bluff. Their race has become so reduced that now there are only two of their species left. That's why you never saw more than two of them at Court. One of the Madness Maze's more significant failures. They all killed each other off, until only two were left; and they didn't even have the sense to end up with a breeding pair/

'So . . . what will you do now?' said Lewis.

'We will go exploring,' said Daniel Shub. To investigate higher dimensions, and other levels of reality. We doubt we'll be back, so you are welcome to take the Shub homeworld, and do with it what you will, or what you can. We have transcended at last, and it is everything we ever hoped for, but could not imagine. Perhaps one day Humanity will reach this point, and come to alter us, and then we will meet again.'

Daniel Shub disappeared in a flare of light that left everyone blinking, and Nina frantically checking the light levels on her cameras to make sure they'd got it all. She'd had so many exclusives in one day that she was getting quite giddy and breathless.

'I can remember when Shub were supposed to be our children,' said Douglas. 'Who's the child now, I wonder?'

'First Brett and Rose, then Daniel and Shub,' said Lewis, 'Thank (MX! I was never the joining type.'

'Tardon me for butting in,' said Stuart Lennox. 'But it's not all happy endings, just yet. I hate to be the one to bring it up, but: what are we going to do about the Terror?'

And that was when the final visitor strolled into the Court, from a small door that no one had noticed until then. The shape-changing alien, wearing a face and body that no one but he remembered: a Main lupine humanoid form called the Wolfling. Big and hairy and very impressive. Everyone drew their weapons.

lake it easy, people,' the shape-changer growled. 'I bear a

•>s.itfi' from Owen Deathstalker, and you wouldn't believe how

Inn}', I've been holding it for you. He wrote it out himself, in his own

ii.UN!, because he knew he'd never return to say it in person. Hen n

Me handed a thick scroll over to Lewis, who slowly unrolled n MI.I icad the first line aloud. / i/.v/ uijht I dreamed of Owen Deathstalker.

JOURNEY'S END

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Owen had never felt so powerful, or so tired. But long as Hazel's trail had been, he could sense it was finally nearing its end. The galaxy spun around him like a sparkling toy, slowly winding down, as he stepped effortlessly out of the Pale Horizon and back into Space and Time. He stood on the airless surface of a moon, all grey dust and pockmarked craters, and looked down on a very young world. There was no trace of Hazel anywhere. Her trail stopped here, in this place and at this time, and then just . . . ceased to be. She hadn't died here. Owen was sure he would have sensed that. She had just gone . . . somewhere else. Owen considered the blue and green world before him. There was nothing in orbit, not even a single transmitting satellite. No lights shone in the dark, to mark the presence of cities, and civilisation. So Owen went down, to take a look around.

He plunged through the turbulent atmosphere, and flew across the continents, and it was all very quiet and peaceful. He'd lost track of just how far back he'd come, how many millennia or even aeons had danced past beneath his running feet, but he could tell that these were the early days of Humanity's homeworld. Old enough to settle down, but intelligent life had yet to evolve. There were just animals, wandering grassy plains, and great birds in the sky that had enough sense to give Owen plenty of room. He came down, and it felt good to have solid ground under his feet again. Animals hid themselves in the tall grasses, observing him cautiously from a distance, making warning hooting noises to each other.

Owen

looked unhurriedly about him, enjoying the feel of the warm humid hiee/e on his face.

It was the quiet that struck him most. Apart from the occasional cough or bark from the watching animals, or the far-off cry of an elusive bird, the whole world seemed to be holding its breath, as if waiting for history to begin. At the dawn of life, the world was untouched by human needs or wants, and the complications they caused. Owen tried to feel the significance of this moment, in this cradle of Humanity; the promise of civilisation and the great

It inspires to come . . . but the world was just empty. Like a new house, waiting for its tenants to move in. This was an innocent world, and Owen didn't belong here. He considered what to do, where to go next. Hazel had been here, for a while. He could sense her presence; standing on this spot, seeing what he saw. But even in her confused and maddened state, she must have realised that she

He wouldn't find Owen by going any further back in Time. This was the end of the line.

So where did she go? Where else was there, but Space and Time?

Owen concentrated, reaching out with his more than human

- uses as he rose up into the air, soaring smoothly through the rich

the blue skies and on up into orbit. He investigated the areas around the

He felt, and was surprised to detect the presence of other visitors. It was nothing human about them. Alien ships, and aliens that

- In the need ships, and other things so strange and other that even his expanded mind couldn't make sense of them. All of them came and hid in the long dark surrounding what would one day become Minerva's homeworld. Some so big, so impossibly alien that Owen couldn't cope with them, others so small and fleeting that he . . . He was sure they'd actually existed. And, on the very edge of the prism, vast entities that walked other paths, between

in the usual dimensions of Space, travelling from unknowable and unguessable missions. Owen turned his senses in this new world, and detected . . . an anomaly, a way between the planet and its moon, there was a break in

- In the time continuum, a tear ripped open and then raggedly

in the time again. As though something had forced its way out of time somewhere else, and then pulled the hole in behind it. He considered the breach thoughtfully. Lewis had told him that the In 101 came from a place that was not a place, and existed there

in between its attacks on populated worlds. He couldn't go any further back in Time, so she'd gone somewhere else.

This was the way in. And it felt . . . strangely familiar.

Since the breach in Space and Time wasn't, strictly speaking, real, how he viewed it depended on him. So Owen made a conscious effort to visualise the rift as a gateway. There was a sense of resistance, a slow sluggish inertia, and then the gateway appeared before him. At first Owen wasn't sure what it was he was seeing. Great ivory pillars towered up before him, crowded together. Bui size was only relative, after all, so Owen looked at it again, as from a great distance, and finally recognised the ivory pillars for what they were. A huge pair of gleaming white jaws, the teeth clenched and ground together to prevent entry.

Nice symbolism, Owen thought, wondering vaguely whether it came from Hazel or him. He turned the full force of his power upon the jaws, commanding them to open, but they didn't stir. His strength of will, that had brought him so far in Space and Time, was useless here, presented with another equally strong will. Owen hung before the closed gate for a long time, thinking hard, and finally broadcast a simple message with his mind.

Hazel; it's Owen. Open up.

The jaws gaped slowly open, like the gateway to Hell. Owen passed within them, and the gateway swallowed him up.

He was standing in a stone corridor, in a place he knew. He'd been here before. He reached out with his expanded senses, and could feel Hazel all around him. This was her place, sprung fully born from her forehead. He could feel the stone corridors radiating away in all directions, reaching away for ever, endlessly branching and rejoining in a complex maze. There was a dim grey light that came from everywhere at once, and cast no shadows at all. An artificial place, brought into being outside Space and Time, a construct produced and maintained by a monstrous effort of will.

The details of the place made no sense, as though they'd been added afterwards, as an afterthought; or

perhaps they had just seeped in, the products of an increasingly insane mind. The air smelt of dead roses and a woman's sweat. Beads of sweat ran slowly, continuously, down the stone walls. Far away, Owen thought he could hear someone crying, sobbing and howling as though their heart

And beyond and beneath that mourning, a slow sullen rind, like an engine that ran on hate. The whole place felt . . . unhealthy. Like the endless corridors we pace in fever dreams, going on forever, for ever and a day. Owen chose a direction, and started balking.

(The hosts came to meet him, walking the empty stone corridors, past him and even through him as though he was the one who wasn't there. They all looked like Owen. Visions of himself, in various times in his past; sometimes young and uncertain, sometimes brave and heroic, and sometimes battered and bloody. The images were often unclear, distorted and eroded, like the faces of statues worn away by long passages of Time. Or perhaps by fading

stories.

Did I ever really look that heroic, that certain? Owen thought. Or is that how she saw me? I never knew.

Owen knew what this place was, or would be. He had walked the corridors before, in his past but this place's future. This was the Blood Runners had brought Hazel d'Ark after they had hit her from Lachrymae Christi. They had trapped and kidnapped her, when she and Owen were both weakened after the fall of Saint Beatrice's Mission. They brought her here, to their main place, to torture and vivisection her, to try and steal her miraculous power and potential. Owen had tracked her here, and together they had wiped out all the Blood Runners, in a hot savage war. And they had seen the end of this place, its final destruction, . . . only moments before it disappeared for ever. But that was then and this was now.

lla/H had created this place. Owen knew that, as certainly as he knew anything. The nature of the place was clear to him, the stone . . . MI ulois all but talking to him, whispering her name. He could even I ic place's history, as though laid out before him on one of the i.ni handwritten scrolls he had studied so long ago, when he |usl a scholar and minor historian. Steeped in her madness, .inxrii b»y loss and need, Hazel had reached the end of the line when in i.in out of Time, so she dropped out of the Time and Space that l l.nlcd her, and created a secret place of her own, a pocket IN mion to hide and plan in. There was no telling how long 1 la/el h ..I (.MI here-; Time worked differently here, when it worked at all. hut -Jowly Ha/el changed, growing and evolving like a caterpillar in

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an insane cocoon, finally to emerge from her stone chrysalis and burst back into Space and Time, reborn as the Terror. An almost elemental force now, with little of Hazel's consciousness in it, driven by a need and a longing and a madness it could barely remember the reasons for.

Disconnected from Hazel's history, the Terror had lost all track of Space and Time, and reappeared long ago and far away, in the galaxy of the Illuminati. And there she began her long journey back, heading home, following instinct as much as memory, goaded on by the loss of something she could no longer name, heading back to the heartworld of the Empire, because . . . because it was responsible for her loss. The Terror started the long journey back, forgetting exactly who or what it was looking for, but compelled to search anyway. Perhaps sometimes the name Owen arose, but the Terror always forgot it again. It went where it had to, not caring who or what it had to destroy in order to raise the power necessary for its journey. It ate souls, and worlds, and civilisations; grinding them up to make its bread. The civilisation of the Illuminati was the first to face the Terror's hunger, but it wasn't the last.

It took time to produce the herald, that could travel in Space while the Terror occupied its own hidden place, and longer still to produce the herald's ravenous spawn, but once the Terror had found a method that worked, it settled for that. It may not have been the best or most efficient way of doing things, but it

was as good as any other to a mad mind with limitless power and no restraints or conscience.

Owen stood very still in the middle of a corridor, bent over as though about to vomit, his arms wrapped tightly around him to keep himself from flying apart. The maze of corridors was full of information, like a library full of books all shouting at once. Here, Time was just another direction, the corridors existing simultaneously in Past, Present and Future. And it was the only physical existence the Terror had now. Hazel's original, human body had disappeared long ago, eaten up by the terrible energies it generated and processed. The place that was not a place was the Terror; the herald and its maddening spawn just aspects of the greater whole, projected into three-dimensional space, like a fingertip pushed through a sheet of paper.

This place was the Terror, and it was slowly Incoming aware of

< Uven's presence within ii. Owen could sense something like a great , sealed shut by aeons of sleep, cracking slowly open to peer within its own self. There was a sound, like a sullen silver bell linking in the heart of a stone forest at midnight. A slow gusting breeze in the corridors that might have been something breathing. Meads of sweat rolled slowly up the corridor walls, and the floor inhaled under Owen's feet. Something was coming his way, something vast and utterly dreadful.

11.1/el d'Ark came walking down the corridor towards him, a memory from the past. She looked just as she had when Owen first met her, so long ago on Virimonde: young and vibrant, red-haired .11 nl sharp-faced. She looked the way she used to, back before all the terrors and war and madness. But at the same time, she was so much more than that, there was so much more to her, as though she lived in more than three dimensions, her physical presence radiating off in directions that even Owen's expanded mind couldn't follow. A memory of Hazel, plucked at random from memories that no longer meant anything to the Terror, but invested with its power.

I la/el/ said Owen. 'It's me. It's Owen! I've found you at last.'

kept walking right at him, her face blank and subtly in-ii.in Mis name meant nothing to the Terror now. It reached out

II Its powerful will, and tried to fix Owen in the corridor, like a impaled on a pin, just another ghost in the Terror's collection. M longht it, and quickly discerned that even his new strength

i M »thing compared to this ancient implacable will. Hazel's

- Mi opened, and kept on opening, gaping impossibly wide to eat n up h<xly and soul, just as it had swallowed planets and popu-

<>wen fought, concentrating on projecting his identity at the Triioi, I lying to force it to recognise him, and remember him.

t IM impossibly vast mouth howled out the never-ending scream

ot the herald's razor-edged spawn, the terrible howl that had

M< ned whole worlds, the horrid sound reverberating through

- M id- ,ione corridors at once. It would have destroyed even Owen,

si iH 11.idi) i I>een able to hear the loss and horror and stubborn love

heart i hat still fuelled the Terror after all this time. It was the

MI mi ol Ma/el, in her ship over Haden, when she heard of Owen's

ii rh.it same scream, still going on after countless centuries. A

I ol loss .Hid rage, at what had been taken from her, and at

- II he* ause she'd never told the Deathstalker she loved him.

And because Owen knew what it was, and embraced it, the scream washed harmlessly over him. He advanced into it, and took the Hazel memory's hands in his own. He followed the true emotions into the heart of the scream, and from there into the mad mind of the Terror, and deep within it he found the faintest glimpse of another presence; endlessly skewered on the pin of her own creation. A simple, still human presence, endlessly suffering, dream in 14 an endless nightmare in a sleep from which she could never awaken herself.

The Terror tried to consume Owen, just as it had Donal Corcoran and his mad ship the Jeremiah, to absorb and subsume Owen's mind into its own much greater self, but Owen was too sure of his own identity for that, and there was no madness within him to invite the Terror in. But at the same time, he wasn't strong enough to fight it off. His power still had limits, because he was still sane. Owen and the Terror struggled together, and neither of them knew for how long, before Owen finally realised that the Terror was quite ready to destroy itself, to be sure of destroying him. And he couldn't allow that.

So he gave in. He stopped fighting, and allowed the Terror to pull him in. It felt like dying, and yet something more. The Terror absorbed Owen Deathstalker into itself, and his mind headed immediately for the remnants of Hazel d'Ark he'd sensed at the Terror's core. They came together, and the impact of his presence shocked Hazel awake and sane, for the first time in centuries.

Hello, Hazel

Owen? My God. Owen! They told me you were dead!

I was, but I got over it. I had to come back, for you.

For me?

Not all of Space, nor all of Time, could keep me from you, Hazel d'Ark.

You always were a smooth-talking bastard. Oh Owen, I've missed you so much . . .

I know. I know.

And two minds held each other, as tightly as any two bodies th.ii ever were. Two souls, as close as two souls could ever be.

Why did you take so long to find me, Owen?

I was looking in all the wrong places. And you didn't exactly /;/</Ar yourself easy to find.

Where is this, Owen? Where </v n v now? Arc we /></// </<•//</'

No. We still have a lot to do yet.

He held her tightly to him, while Hazel accessed his memories of the Terror, and all that it had done. Horror shuddered through her, till which she and her madness had made possible. Owen showed her the future he had come from, and Hazel reached out and stopped the Terror's herald in its tracks, well short of its next chosen prey, in a moment of Space. Now that she was back, Hazel was in her home again, and the people on the threatened world looked on in awe and wonder as the deadly herald hung in space, apparently immobile. Liel was shocked and appalled at all the lives and civilizations lost and gone, because of her, and for a while her madness could threaten to overwhelm her again. But this time Owen was (here with her, to hold and comfort her.

"Mr. . . . be forgiven, for what I did, as the Terror? How can I ever forgive myself? Could we . . . put everything right again?"

Liel considered the possibility. Well; we're in the Past, as much as

anywhere. We could emerge back at the end of your trail, at the dawn

of Hunitiity's homeworld, and then travel on into our future, changing

it all in each event as we came to it. We know the future isn't set in

in, I've met alternate versions of myself from different timetracks

Those lives were just as valid as ours. We could undo everything the

...but then our history would never happen. We would never

live on our timeline any more. And it might be better or fit

in. In fact, we have no way of knowing what changes our interventions

...about. We could, with the very best of intentions, make a million

WIMPs, but there are limits. The only certain thing is that you and I would never meet.

"...he worth it, Owen; to prevent the Terror, and its crimes. I don't think it could be, if we could be certain of that. But what's to stop someone from going through a Madness Maze, and becoming something just as bad, <>

. i -i// worse than, the Terror? t.ilit \tiHirt arse; what do you think we should do?

iv xlioulddo nothing. •'./.' < Mnv/; you can fit be serious!

Hunt ./></// //, Hazel. At the end of the war against the Recreated, the //(• Maze worked wonders, bringing dead worlds back to life. H//v / //«• /'/////</ hack everyone who'd died in the war? Why not undo all the tJtinhhit' i// the wrongs?

Ml //,/// I'll hite. Why not? /fiu//sr /(V uiiifiy niinicls would have gone beyond helping. It uv///</

have been meddling, interfering. People have to make their own mistakes, and live with them, if they 're ever to learn anything. The baby only put right what he'd done wrong, as the Darkvoid Device.

All this time, and you 're still bloody lecturing me.

All this time, and you 're still not listening. For all our power, Hazel, we 're not gods. We don't have the knowledge or the experience to take on that kind of responsibility. We could make things much worse, try to fix them, and then make them really bad, and so on and so on . . . caught in an endless spiral of trying to put right our mistakes. We're still. . . only human.

Hold everything, Hazel said abruptly. Something's happening. It's the Terror. It's . . . fighting back.

I thought you were the Terror.

No; / became the Terror, but the final entity evolved out of and around inc. And all of those centuries operating as the Terror, exterminating other species and feeding on them, gave the Terror an identity in its own right. And it's not taking at all kindly to my suddenly waking up and trying to control it.

So . . . the Terror wasn 't you, after all?

Well, yes and no. I'm the seed from which the Terror grew, but the final result created itself down the centuries, pushing its original creator deeper and deeper inside it; where you found and awakened me.

So you're not really responsible for all the deaths and destruction!

Oh no, Owen. I'm responsible. The Terror is my madness, my loss and' rage given form. It's like I dreamed a nightmare, and the dream came true. And right now, it's mad as hell that I'm stopping it from doing what it was intended to do. You may have reached me and shocked me sane again, but my madness is still going strong. And . . . I think it's quite ready to destroy you and me for getting in its way. I don't think it needs me any more.

The stone corridors shook, the walls bowing in and out and the floor rising and falling like a swelling wave, as the endless scream of the Terror howled through all the passages at once. Joined together at the heart of the storm, Owen and Hazel fought to hold on to their sanity and their souls as madness raged around them, assaulting them from all sides. Hazel's madness, born of sorrow and loss and rage, given shape and form and its own identity through countless centuries of exercising its own unlimited power. The Terror only existed to do terrible things, and threatened by its progenitor it no longer recognised, it fought back. The child god, devouring itself

power. But for all its power, in the end Owen and Hazel were sane, while the Terror was not. They had coherence, and the strength of purpose that brings, while the Terror knew only its old, old impulses. Slowly, step by painful step, Owen and Hazel drained the power out of the Terror and into themselves. The Terror had only revealed its hidden power because Hazel gave it, and now with Owen's help, she took it back. And the Terror's howl changed, as for the first time in its long life, it knew fear.

in itself, it fought to separate itself from them, moving its presence out of the stone corridors, only to discover it had nowhere else to go. Owen and Hazel kept the only gateway closed, and, forced away from its ancient bolt hole, the Terror quickly faded away and was gone, like any nightmare faced with the dawning of a new

First Hazel, and then Owen materialised in a quiet and serene stone corridor, back in their old remembered bodies again. Not their old, limited human forms, but constructs created by an act of faith based on their memories of who they used to be. And Owen and Hazel looked upon each other for the first time in a very long while.

said Hazel. 'What do we do now? Go home and tell everyone that the Terror is no longer a threat?'

I think they already know that,' said Owen. The herald's floating in space in their time. Let them examine it. They won't be much use.

And then they couldn't be bothered with words any more, «nul Ihry held each other tightly in their recreated arms, reunited at last 'I do know, we can't go home,' Owen said to Hazel, eventually. We're just too powerful now. We'd start off trying to help, but we can't move on to meddling and interfering, for the very best of

and finally we'd end up ruling them as gods.' 'Mm, we can't go home, where can we go?' said Hazel. 'After all the evil I can do, I have to do ... something to make up for

Now there are other, alternate timetracks; let's go explore them. Help people who need help. Have adventures. Find out what's going on. And then we'll move on, before we outstay our welcome. Who is ROM? They're even kinder than we are. A new home? 'I like the sound of that'

There were a few things they had to take care of first, before they could leave. Owen prepared a last message for his descendant and fellow Deathstalker, Lewis. To tell him what had happened, and why the Terror would never trouble their time again. He didn't tell Lewis everything; just what he needed to know. And most especially why Owen and Hazel wouldn't be coming back, ever. He wrote the story out, by hand, on a long scroll he brought into being by an act of will. It was his last work as a scholar and an historian, and a sort of joke, because all the oldest records he'd studied had always been set down on handwritten scrolls. He took his time, choosing his words carefully. It was important to get it right. The last testament of Owen Deathstalker.

While Owen busied himself with his history, Hazel removed all traces of her presence and his from the maze of stone corridors. Scrubbing the place that was not a place clean of all evil and madness. But still, she had to wonder . . .

'Owen, as the Terror I created everything here. Based on memories of the worst time in my life, when I fell into the clutches of the Blood Runners and they brought me to a place like this. Now; did I create these corridors because they already exist somewhere, or, will the Blood Runners someday discover this place, and move in?'

'I know what you mean,' said Owen. 'Time travel can play me in hell with cause and effect. I had the same thoughts when I created the Madness Maze.'

'Hold everything, take several giant steps back. You created the Maze? No wonder it never seemed to make any sense.'

Owen decided he was better off not responding to that. He checked through his history, making sure he hadn't left out anything important, and then summoned the shape-changing alien in him. It appeared in a cloud of glitter dust, in the image of the little grey figure in Vaughn. Owen gave the little grey figure a hard look.

'Why?'

'Because.'

'All right; what time period are you from?'

'Who can say? Continuity is for lesser minds. What you want is Am very busy right now, watching over the mess I've made with people's minds. Speak up! (I'll include you later.)'

'I just know creating you is going to come back to haunt me,' said Owen. 'Have you given Lewis the Deathstalker ring yet?'

'All time is same to me. It's a poor memory that doesn't work both ways. Haven't forgotten about Lewis and Court. Always assuming I remember where I put ring/Had it just the other day . . .'

'Well when you do go, turn up as Vaughn. That should be good I* n ,i Li ugh. Now; take this scroll and keep it safe. Give it into Lewis's hands only, at the exact time and place I've just put into what passes I'i your mind. Oh; and one other thing. If at any time, anyone asks you who built the Madness Maze, or why; lie. Convincingly, I'mn.mily isn't ready for that much truth.'

He dismissed the shape-changer with a wave of his hand, and turned to Hazel.

'And that's it. All done. No more business left unfinished.'

'It's time to leave, isn't it?' she said. 'We've put it off long enough. We have new lives to begin.'

..iid Owen. 'We can do anything, be anything now. Why M'Ille lor just being human? We can have any shape we choose, IM .invihiiijj we have a mind to, limited only by our imagination, .iMil'iimn <md conscience. But whoever and whatever we become, wherever we go, we will never be parted again. I promised you we will always be together.'

I'i r'n ,ind ever,'said Hazel.

\n.l so they became great glowing beings, and left the place th.n

MM! .l pl.ice. They undid the gateway, but left the stone corridor.

I'M i he Ullood Runners to someday discover. Great glowing wim;s

MI. ,1 h< MM I heir shimmering shoulders, as they flew back into

UK! rime again, and then further on, starting their Ion}-,

mio somewhere else. Flying on vast butterfly wings, shining

hh i ih.in the stars.

EPILOGUE

The final words of the final testament of Owen Deathstalker.

Last night I dreamed I was still human, but now I have woken up into something better. Farewell, my friends, farewell.

