

For a change, Huw's head hurts more than his bladder. He's lying head-down, on his back, in a bathtub. He scrabbles for a handhold and pulls himself upright. A tub is a terrible place to spend a night—or a morning, come to think of it—he blinks and sees that it's midafternoon. The light slanting in through a high window limns the strange bathroom's treacherous Victorian fixtures with a roseate glow.

That was quite a party. He vaguely remembers the gathering dawn, its red glow staining the wall outside the kitchen window as he discussed environmental politics with a tall, shaven-headed woman with a blue forelock and a black leather mini-dress straight out of the twentieth century. (He has an equally vague memory of her defending a hardcore transhumanist line: score nil-nil to both sides.) A brief glance tells him that this room wasn't a bathroom when he went to sleep in it: bits of the bidet are still crawling into position and there's a strong smell of VOCs in the air. His head hurts.

Leaning over the sink, Huw twiddles the taps until they begin to dribble cold water. He splashes his face and runs his hand through his thinning hair, glances up at the mirror, and yells "*Shit!*"

There's a spindly black biohazard trefoil tattooed on his forehead. It wasn't there yesterday.

Behind him, the door opens. "Having a good morning?" asks Sandra Lal, whose mutable attic this must therefore be. She's holding a three-kilo minisledge in one hand, tossing it into the air and catching it like a baton-twirler, her grotesquely muscled forearm bulging with hyperpressured blood and hormones at each catch.

"I wish," he groans. Sandra's parties tend to be wild. "Am I too late for the dead dog?"

"You're never too late." Sandra smiles broadly, camping it up. "Coffee's on in the kitchen, which is on the ground floor today. Bonnie gave me a subscription to House of the Week and today's my new edition—don't worry if you can't remember where everything is, just remember the entrance is at ground level, okay?"

"Coffee," Huw says fervently. His head is pounding, but so is his bladder. "Um. Can I have a minute?"

"Yes, but I'd like my spare rest room back afterwards. It's going to be en-suite, but first I've got to knock out the wall through into the bedroom." She hefts her sledgehammer suggestively.

Huw slumps down on the toilet as Sandra shuts the door behind her and bounces off to roust out any other left-over revelers. He shakes his head as he relieves himself: trapped in a mutating bathroom by a transgendered atheist Pakistani role-playing critic. *Why do I keep ending up in these situations?* he wonders as the toilet gives him a scented wash and blow-dry: when it offers him a pubic trim he hastily retrieves his kilt and goes in search of coffee.

Sandra's new kitchen is frighteningly modern—it's one of those white room jobs that looks empty at first, sterile as an operating theatre, but oozes when you glance away, extruding worktops and food processors and fresh-fabbed cutlery. If you sit suddenly there'll be a chair waiting to catch your buttocks on the way down. No separate appliances, just smart matter and raw ingredient feedstock. Last night it looked charmingly gas-fired and Victorian, but now Huw can see it in the raw. He feels queasy, wondering if he ate anything from it. But relief is at hand. At the far end of the room there's a traditional-looking dumb worktop with a battered old-fashioned electric *cafetière* sitting on it. And some joe who looks strangely familiar is sitting there reading a newsheet.

Huw nods at him. "Uh, where are the mugs?" he asks.

The guy stares at Huw's forehead for an uncomfortable moment, then gestures at something foggy that's stacked behind the pot. "Pick one of those," he says.

"Uh, right." Glassy aerogel cups with walls a centimeter thick, light as frozen cigar smoke. He takes the jug and pours, hand shaking. Huw has got the hot-and-cold sweats. *What the hell was I drinking?* he wonders as he takes a sip.

He glances at his companion, evidently another survivor of the party: a medium-height bald joe, maybe in his mid-thirties, with the unnaturally stringy build that comes from overusing a calorie-restriction implant. No piercings, no scars, tattoos, or neomorphisms—apart from his figure—which might be natural. That plus his black leather body suit means he could be a fellow naturalist. But this is Sandra's house, and she has distressingly eclectic tastes.

"That today's?" he asks, glancing at the paper.

"It could be." The fellow puts it down and grins oddly. "Had a good lie-in?"

"I woke up in the bathroom," Huw says ruefully. "Milk—"

"Here." He shoves something that resembles a bowl of blue ice-cubes at Huw. Huw pokes at one dubiously, then dunks it in his mug. "Hey, this stuff is organic, isn't it?"

"Only the best polymer-stabilized emulsions for Sandra," the joe says sardonically. "Of course it's organic—nothing but carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and a tinge of oxygen to them." Huw takes a sip. "Of course, you could say the same about your cellphone," adds the stranger.

"Ah." Huw puts the mug down, unsure where the conversation's leading. There's something disturbing about this: a sense of *déjà vu* nagging at the edges of his mind, as if—

"You don't remember me, do you?" asks his companion.

"Alcohol has this effect on me at times," Huw confesses in a grateful rush. "I've got an awful memory—"

"The name's Bonnie," says the man. "You spent most of the early hours trying to cop a feel by convincing me that Nietzsche was responsible for global cooling." Huw stares at him and feels something in his head do an uneasy flip-flop: yes, the resemblance is clear, this *is* the woman he was talking to last night. " 's amazing what a good bathroom can do in the way of cellular redifferentiation surgery these days, you know?" the bald guy—Bonnie?—continues. Then he winks at Huw with what Huw realizes, to his horror, is either lascivious intent or broad and filthy-minded humor. "How's your hangover? Are you up to picking things up where we left off?"

"Aaaugh," says Huw, as the full force of the post-party cultural hangover hits him between the eyes, right beneath the biohazard trefoil, and the coffee hits his stomach. "Need fresh air *now* ..."

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The next morning, Huw wakes up more gently. Awakened by sunlight, but this time in his own bed. He yawns and sits up, pauses for a moment to get his bearings, then ventures down the comfortably unchanging stairs to retrieve his post. The dusty tiles in his vintage late-nineteenth-century terrace house are cold beneath his bare feet. A draft leaks around the ill-fitting outer door, raising gooseflesh on his bare legs. Two-thirds of the mail is spam, which goes straight on the recycle-before-reading pile, but there's also a genuine letter, complete with a *stamp* on the envelope. Ink on paper—someone took the trouble to communicate with him personally, putting dumb, thrax-prone matter in motion to make a point.

He rips the envelope open with a cracked fingernail. He reads: *your application for international triage jury service has been provisionally accepted. To activate your application, present this letter in person to ...*

He carries the letter through into the kitchen, puts it on the table so he can keep an eye on it as he eats. He barely notices the morning chill as the battered Red Crescent surplus food processor barfs up a lukewarm cup of Turkish coffee, a vague facsimile of scrambled eggs, and an even vaguer pastiche of bacon. Today is Huw's big day. He's been hoping for this day for months.

Soon, he'll get to say what he thinks about some item of new technology—and they'll have to listen to him.

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Welcome to the fractured future, at the dusk of the twenty-first century.

Earth has a population of roughly a billion hominids. For the most part, they are happy with their lot, living in a preserve at the bottom of a gravity well. Those who are unhappy have emigrated, joining one or another of the swarming densethinker clades that fog the inner solar system with a dust of molecular machinery so thick that it obscures the sun. Except for the solitary lighthouse beam that perpetually tracks the Earth in its

orbit, the system from outside resembles a spherical fogbank radiating in the infrared spectrum; a matrioshka brain, nested Dyson orbitals built from the dismantled bones of moons and planets.

The splintery metaconsciousness of the solar-system has largely sworn off its pre-post-human cousins dirtside, but its minds sometimes wander nostalgically. When that happens, it casually spams Earth's RF spectrum with plans for cataclysmically disruptive technologies that emulsify whole industries, cultures, and spiritual systems.

A sane species would ignore these get-evolved-quick schemes, but there's always *someone* who'll take a bite from the forbidden Cox Pippin. There's always someone whom evolution has failed to breed the let's-lick-the-frozen-fencepost instinct out of. There's always a fucking geek who'll do it because it's a historical goddamned technical fucking imperative.

Whether the enlightened, occulting smartcloud sends out its missives as pranks, poison or care-packages is up for debate. Asking it to explain its motives is roughly as painful as negotiating with an ant colony to get it to abandon your kitchen. Whatever the motive, humanity would be much better off if the Cloud would evolve into something so smart as to be uninterested in communicating with meatpeople. But until that happy day, there's the tech jury service: defending the earth from the scum of the post-singularity patent office.

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After breakfast, Huw pulls on jeans, boots, and shirt. He locks the front door carefully behind himself and tells his bicycle to unbolt itself from the rusting red drainpipe that stains the brick side of his house with green moss. He pedals uncertainly to the end of the road, then eases out into traffic, sneering as the omnipresent web of surveillance routes the peplemovers around him.

Safe cycling is one of the modern conveniences that irritate him most. Also: polite youngsters with plastic smiles; cops who think like social workers; and geeks who think they understand technology. Geeks, the old aristocracy. He'll show them, one of these days. Huw wobbles along the side of the main road and pulls in beside the door of the Libyan consulate.

"Mister Rogers? I am pleased to meet you." The young man behind the desk has a plastic smile and is far too polite for Huw's taste: Huw grunts assent and sits down in the indicated seat. "Your application has been forwarded to us and, ah? If you would be pleased to travel to our beautiful country, I can assure you of just one week's jury service."

Huw nods again.

The polite man fidgets with the air of someone trying to come up with an inoffensive way of saying something potentially rather rude. "I'm pleased to inform you that our young land is quite tolerant of other culture's customs. I can assure you that whatever ISO-standard containment suit you choose to bring with you will be respected by our people."

Huw shakes his head. "What huh?"

"Your, that is, your—" The smiler leans across his desk and points at Huw's trefoil-marked forehead. The finger he points with meets resistance. A plastic sheet has hermetically sealed Huw's side of the room off from the rest of the consulate. It is so fantastically transparent that Huw hasn't even noticed it until the smiler's finger puckered a singularity in its vertical run, causing it to scatter light at funny angles and funhouse distort the solid and sensible wood-paneled walls behind the desk.

"Ah," Huw says. "Ah. No, you see, it's a joke of some sort. Not an official warning."

"I'm very glad to hear it, Mister Rogers! You will, of course, have documents attesting to that before you clear our immigration?"

"Right," Huw says. "Of course." *Fucking Sandra*. Whether or not she is directly responsible for the tat is beside the point. It happened on her prem, therefore she is culpable. Dammit. He has errands to run before he catches the flight—attracting the attention of the gene police is not on his agenda.

"Then we will see you soon." The smiler reaches into a desk drawer and pulls out a small tarnished metal teapot which he shoves experimentally at the barrier. It puckers around it and suddenly the teapot is sitting on Huw's side of the desk, wearing an iridescent soap-bubble of pinched-off containment. "Peace be with you."

"And you," says Huw, rising. The interview is obviously at an end. He picks up the teapot and follows the blinkenlights to the exit from the consulate, studiously avoiding the blurred patches of air where other visitors are screened from one another by the utility fog. "What now?" he asks the teapot.

Blrrrt. Greetings, tech-juror Rogers. I am a guidance iffrit from the People's Magical Libyan Jamahiriya. Show me to representatives of the People's Revolutionary Command Councils and I am required to intercede for you. Polish me and I will install translation leeches in your Broca's area, then assist you in memorizing the Qur'an and *hadiths*. Release me and I will grant your deepest wish."

"Um, I don't think so." Huw scratches his head. *Fucking Sandra*, he thinks again, then he packs the pot into his pannier and pedals heavily away towards the quaint industrial-age pottery where he oversees the antique solid-volume renderers, applies the finishing human touches, and packs the finished articles for shipment. It's going to be a long working day—almost five hours—before he can get around to trying to sort this mess out, but at least the wet squishy sensation of clay under his fingernails will help calm the roiling indignation he feels at his violation by a random GM party prankster.

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Two days later, Huw's waiting with his bicycle and a large backpack on a soccer field in a valley outside Monmouth. It has rained overnight, and the field is muddy. A couple of large crows sit on the rusting goal-post, regarding him curiously. There are one or two other people slouching around the departure area dispiritedly. Airports just haven't been the same since the end of the jet age.

Huw tries to scratch the side of his nose, irritably. *Fucking Sandra*, he thinks again as he pokes at the opaque spidergoat silk of his biohazard burka. He'd gone round to remonstrate with her after work the other day, only to find that her house had turned into a size two thousand Timberland hiking boot and the homeowner herself had decided to winter in Fukuyama this year. A net search would probably find her but he wasn't prepared to expose himself to any more viruses this week. One was quite enough—especially after he discovered that the matching trefoil brand on his shoulder glowed in the dark.

A low rumble rattles the goal post and disturbs the crows as a cloud-shadow slides across the pitch. Huw looks up, and up, and up—his eyes can't quite take in what he's seeing. *That's got to be more than a kilometer long!* he realizes. The engine note rises as the huge catamaran airship jinks and wobbles sideways towards the far end of the pitch and engages its station-keeping motors, then begins to unreel an elevator car the size of a shipping container.

"Attention, passengers now waiting for flight FL-052 to North Africa and stations in the Middle East, please prepare for boarding. This means you." Huw nearly jumps out of his skin as one of the customs crows lands heavily on his shoulder. "You listening, mate?"

"Yes, yes, I'm listening." Huw shrugs and tries to keep one eye on the big bird. "Over there, huh?"

"Boarding will commence through lift *bzzt gurgle* four in five minutes. Even-numbered passengers first." The crow flaps heavily towards the huge, rusting shipping container as it lands in the muddy field with a clang. "All aboard!" it squawks raucously.

Huw wheels his bike towards the steel box then pauses as a door opens and a couple of confused-looking Australian backpackers stumble out, leading their kangaroo-familars. "Boarding now!" adds the crow.

Huw waits while the other three passengers step aboard, then gingerly rolls his bike inside and leans against the guardrail spot-glued to the wall. "Haul away lively, there!" someone yells above, and there's a creak of ropes as the cargo container lurches into the air. Even before it's clear of the goal posts the huge airship has cut the station-keepers and is spooling up to its impressive fifty knot cruising speed. Huw looks down at the town and the mediaeval castle unrolling beneath him and takes a deep breath. He can tell this is going to be a long trip.

His nose is itching again.

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Air travel is so slow you'd almost always be faster going by train. But the Gibraltar bridge is down for repair again and last time Huw caught a TGV through the Carpathians he was propositioned incessantly by a feral privatized blood bank that seemed to have a thing for Welsh T-helper lymphocytes. At least this tramp floater with its cargo of Christmas trees and chameleon paint is going to give Huw and his fellow-passengers a shortcut around the Mediterranean, even if the common room smells of stale marijuana smoke and the other passengers are all dubious cheapskate hitchers and netburn cases who want to ship their meatbodies around instead of doing the decent (and sanitary) telepresence thing. Huw isn't dubious; he's just on jury service, which requires your physical in-the-flesh presence to prevent identity spoofing by imported weakly godlike AIs and suchlike. But judging from the way the other passengers are avoiding him he *looks* dubious. Or maybe it's just the biohazard burka and the many layers of anti-nanophage underwear he's trussed up in underneath it. *There has got to be a better way of fighting runaway technology*, he tells himself on the second morning as he prepares to go get some breakfast.

Most of the airship's crew are uplifted gibbons, and during their years of plying the skyways over the Middle East they've picked up enough Islam that it's murder getting the mess deck food processors to barf up a realistic bacon sandwich. Huw has his mouth-lock extended and is picking morosely at a scrambled egg and something that claims to be black pudding with his fork when someone bounces into the seat beside him, reaches into the folds of his burka and tears off a bite of the sandwich.

The stranger is a disreputable backpacker in wash-n-wear tropical-weight everything, the smart-wicking, dirt-shedding, rip-stopping gossamer uniform of the globe-slogging hostel-denizens who write long, rambling HOWTOs online describing their adventures living in Mumbai or Manhattan or some other blasted corner of the world for six months on just five dollars. This one clearly fancies himself quite a merry traveller, eyes a-twinkle, crowsfeet etched by a thousand foreign sunsets, dimples you could lose a fifty-dollar coin in.

"ello!" he says, around a mouthful of Huw's sandwich. "You look interesting. Let's have a conversation!"

"You don't look interesting to me," Huw says, plunking the rest of his food on the backpacker's lap. "Let's not."

"Oh, come on," the backpacker says. "My name's Adrian, and I've loads of interesting anecdotes about my adventures abroad, including some rather racy ones involving lovely foreign ladies. I'm very entertaining, honestly! Give me a try, why don't you?"

"I really don't think so," Huw says, pointedly. "You'd best get back into your seat—the monkeys don't like a disorderly cabin. Besides, I'm infectious."

"Monkeys! You think I'm worried about monkeys? Brother, I once spent a month in a Tasmanian work-camp for public drunkenness—imagine, an *Australian* judge locking an *Englishman* up for drunkenness! There were some hard men in that camp, let me tell you. The aborigines had the black-market liquor racket all sewn up, but the Maori prisoners were starting up their own thing, and here's me, a poor, gormless white man in the middle of it all, dodging home-made shivs and poison arrows. Went a week without eating after it got out that the Maoris were smearing shit in the cookpots to poison the abos. Biowar, that's what it was! By the end of that week, I was hallucinating angels and chewing scrub-grass I found on work-details, while the abos I was chained to shat themselves bloody and collapsed. I caught a ballistic out of there an hour after I'd served my sentence, got shot right to East Timor, where I gorged myself on Gado-Gado and Riztaffel and got food poisoning anyway and spent the night in the crapper, throwing up my lungs. So don't tell me about monkeys!" Adrian broke off his monologue and began industriously masticating the rest of Huw's lunch.

"Yes, that's all very disgusting. I'm going to have a bit of a nap now, all right?"

"Oh, don't be a weak sister!" says Adrian. "You won't last five minutes in Libya with an attitude like that. Never been to Libya, have you?"

"No," Huw says, pointedly bunching up a fold of burka into a pillow and turning his head away.

"You'll love it. Nothing like a taste of real, down-home socialism after dirty old London. People's this and Popular that and Democratic the other, everyone off on the latest plebiscite, holding caucuses in the cafes. It's fantastic! The girls, too—fantastic, fantastic. Just talk a little politics with them and they'll bend your ear until you think you're going to fall asleep, and then they'll try to bang the bourgeois out of you. In twos and threes, if you're recalcitrant enough. I've had some *fantastic* nights in Libya. I can barely wait to touch down."

"Adrian, can I tell you something, in all honesty?"

"Sure, mate, sure!"

"You're a jackass. Really revolting and duller than I can imagine. If you don't get the fuck back to your own seat, I'm going to tell the monkeys you're threatening to blow up the airship and they'll strap you into a restraint-chute and push you overboard."

"You're a bloody card, you are."

Huw gathers up his burka, stands, climbs over Adrian and moves to the back of the cabin. He selects an empty row, slides in, and stretches out. A moment later, Adrian comes up and grabs his toe, then wiggles it.

"All right then, we'll talk later. Have a nice nap. Thanks for the sarnie!"

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It takes three days for the tramp freighter to bumble its way to Tripoli. It gingerly climbs to its maximum pressure height to skirt the wild and beautiful (but radioactive and deadly) Normandy coastline, then heads south-east, to drop a cargo of incognito Glaswegian gangsters on the outskirts of Marseilles. Then it crosses the Mediterranean coast, and spends a whole twenty-two hours doodling in broad circles around Corsica. Huw tries to amuse himself during this latter interlude by keeping an eye open for smugglers with micro-UAVs, but even this pathetic attempt at distraction falls flat when, after eight hours, a rigging monkey scampers into the forward passenger lounge and delivers a fifty-minute harangue about worker's solidarity and the black gang's right to strike in flight, justifying it in language eerily familiar to anyone who—like Huw—has spent days heroically probing the boundaries of suicidal boredom by studying the proceedings of the Third Communist International.

Having exhausted his entire stash of antique read-only books two days into a projected two-week expedition, and having found his fellow passengers to consist of lunatics and jackasses, Huw succumbs to the inevitable. He glues his burka to a support truss in the cargo fold, dials the eye slit to opaque, swallows a mug of valerian-laced decaff espresso, and estivates like a lungfish in the dry season.

His first warning that the airship has arrived comes when he awakens in a sticky sweat. *Is the house on fire?* he wonders muzzily. It feels like someone has opened an oven door and stuck his feet in it, and the sensation is climbing his chest. There's an anxious moment, then he gets his eye slit working again, and is promptly inundated with visual spam.

"Hello! Welcome effendi! The Thousand Nights and One Night Hotel welcomes careful westerners! We take euros, dollars, yen, and hash (subject to assay)! For a good night out visit Ali's American Diner! Hamburgers one hundred percent Halal goat here! Need travel insurance and ignorant of *shari'a* banking regulations? Let the al-Jammu Traveler's Assistance put your mind to rest with our—"

Huw instantly posts a bid for adbuster proxy services, picks the cheapest on offer, and waits patiently for his visual field to clear. After a minute or two he can see again, except for a persistent and annoying green star in the corner of his left eye. Finally, he struggles to unglue himself and looks about.

The passenger lounge is almost empty, a door gaping open in one side. Huw wheels his bicycle over and hops down onto the dusty concrete apron of the former airport. It's already over thirty degrees in the shade, but once he gets out of the shadow of the blimp his burka's solar-powered air conditioning should sort that out. The question is, where to go next? "Hmm." He rummages crossly in the pannier until he finds the battered teapot. "Hey, you. Iffrit! Whatever you call yourself. Which way to the courtroom?"

A cartoon djinn pops into transparent life above the pot's nozzle and winks at him. "Peace be unto you, oh esteemed Madame tech-juror Rogers Huw! If you will but bear with me for a moment—" The iffrit fizzles for a moment as it hunts for a parasitic network to colonize—"I believe you will first wish to enter the terminal buildings and present yourself to the Revolutionary Airport Command and Cleaning Council, to present your entry visa. Then they will direct you to a hotel where you will be accommodated in boundless paradisiacal luxury at the expense of the grateful People's Magical Libyan Jamahiriya! (Or at least in a good VR facsimile of paradise.)"

"Uh-huh." Huw looks about. The airport is a deserted dump—literally deserted, for the anti-desertification defenses of the twentieth century, and the greenery planted under the aegis of King Muammar the First, have faded. The Libyan national obsession with virtual landscaping (not to mention emigration to Italy) has led to the return of the sand dunes, and the death of the gas-guzzling airline industry has left the airport with the

maintenance budget of a rural cross-country bus stop. Broken windows gape emptily from rusting tin huts; a once-outstanding airport terminal building basks in the heat like a torpid lizard, doors open to the breeze, and even the local snack vendors don't seem to come here any more. It takes Huw half an hour to find the Revolutionary Airport Command and Cleaning Council, a wizened-looking old woman who has her Nike-soled feet propped up on a battered wooden desk in the lobby beneath the International Youth Hostelling sign, snoring softly through her open mouth.

"Excuse me, but are you the government?" Huw asks politely, talking through his teapot translator. "I have come from Wales to serve on a technology jury. Can you direct me to the public transport terminus?"

"I wouldn't bother if I were you," someone says from behind him, making Huw jump so high he almost punches a hole in the yellowing ceiling tiles. "She's moonlighting, driving a Thai investment bank's security bots on the evening shift. See the bandwidth?"

"Um, no, as a matter of fact I don't," Huw says defensively. "I stick to the visible spectrum."

The interloper is probably female and from somewhere in northern Europe, judging by the way she's smeared zinc ointment across her entire observable epidermis. Chilly fog spills from her cuffs at wrist and ankle and there's the whine of a peltier cooler pushed to the limit coming from her bum-bag. About all Huw can see of her is her eyes and an electric blue ponytail erupting from the back of her anti-melanoma hood.

"Isn't it a bit rude to snoop on someone else's dreams?" he adds.

"Not really." The interloper shrugs, then grins alarmingly at him. "It's what I do for a living." She offers him a hand, and before he can stop himself he's shaking it politely. "I'm Björk. Doctor Björk."

"Björk, uh—"

"I know what you're going to say, named after the early twenty-first century bard, yes. I specialize in musical dream therapy. And I'm here on a tech jury gig, too. Perhaps we'll get a chance to work on the same case?"

At that moment the Revolutionary Airport Command and Cleaning Council coughs, spasms painfully, sits up, and looks around querulously. *I'm not working! Honest!* She exclaims through the medium of Huw's teapot translator. Then, getting a grip: "Oh, you're tourists. Can I help you?" Her manner is so abrupt and rude that Huw feels right at home. "Yes, yes," he declares impatiently. "We're jurors and we need to get to a hotel. Where's the light rail terminal or bus stand?"

"Are no busses. Today is Friday, can't you read?"

"Friday—" Huw does a double-take.

"Yes, but how are we to our hotel to ride?" asks Doctor Björk, sounding puzzled.

"Why don't you walk?" the Council asks with gloomy satisfaction. "Haven't you got legs? Didn't Allah, the merciful, bless you with a full complement of homeobox genes?"

"But it's—" Huw consults his wrist-map and does a double-take—"twelve kilometers! And it's forty-three degrees in the shade!"

"It's Friday," the old woman repeats placidly. "Nothing works on Fridays. It's in the Qur'an."

"So why are you working for a Burmese banking cartel as a security bot supervisor?" Björk asks sharply.

"That's—!" the Council glares at her. "That's none of your business!"

"Burma isn't an Islamic country," Huw muses aloud, seeing which direction Björk is heading in. *Maybe she's not a fucknozzle after all*, he thinks to himself, although he has his doubts about anyone who has anything to do with dream therapy, much less musical dream therapy. (Unless she's only in it for purely practical reasons, such as money.) "Do you suppose they might be dealing with their demographic deficit by importing out-of-timezone *gastarbeiters* from Islamic countries who want to work on the day of rest?"

"What an astonishing thought!" echoes Björk. "That must be illegal, mustn't it?"

"Stop! Stop!" The Revolutionary Airport Command and Cleaning Council puts her hands up in the air. "I have a nephew, he has a car! Perhaps he can give you a ride on his way to mosque? I'm sure he must be going there in only half an hour, and I'm sure your hotel will turn out to be on his way."

The car, when it arrives, is a gigantic early twenty-first century Mercedes diesel, with tinted windows and air conditioning and plastic seats that have cracked and split in the dry desert heat. A brilliantly detailed green-and-silver miniature mosque conceals a packet of tissues on the rear parcel shelf and the dash is plastered with green and gold stickers bearing edifying quotations from the *hadiths*. The Council's nephew looks too young to bear the weight of his huge black moustache, let alone to be driving this Teutonic behemoth, but at least he's awake and moving in the noonday furnace-heat.

"Hotel Marriott," Björk says. "*Vite-schnell-pronto! ¡Hale, hale!*"

The Mercedes crawls along the highway like a dung beetle on the lowest step of a pyramid. As they head towards the outskirts of the mostly-closed city of Tripoli Huw feels the gigantic and oppressive weight of advertising bearing down on his proxy filters. When Libya got serious about consumerism in the second decade of millennium three, they went overboard on superficial glitz and cheezy sloganizing. The deluge of CoolTown webfitti they're driving through alternates between insanely dense technobabble and a bizarrely arabized version of discreet Victorian trader's notices, with just a seasoning of old-time anti-western paranoia. Once they drive under the threshold of the gigantic tinted geodesic dome that hovers above the city, lifted on its own column of hot air, it finally gets through to Huw: he's not in Monmouth any more, or even Bradford.

The Council's nephew narrates a shouted, heavily accented travelogue as they hoot and lurch through the traffic, but most of it is lost in the roar of the air-conditioner and the whine of the differential. What little Huw can make out seems to be pitches for local businesses—cafes, hash-bars, amusement parlors. Doctor Björk and Huw sit awkwardly at opposite sides of the Merc's rear bench, conversation an impossibility at the current decibel level.

Doctor Björk fishes in her old-fashioned bum-bag and produces a stylus and a scrap of scribable material, scribbles a moment and passes it over: DINNER PLANS?

Huw shook his head. Dinner—ugh. He's gamy and crusty with dried sweat under his burka and can't imagine eating, but he supposes he'd better put some fuel in the boiler before he sleeps.

Björk scrolls her message off the material, then scribbles again: I KNOW A PLACE. LOBBY@18H?

Huw nods, suppressing a wince. Björk smiles at him, looking impossibly healthy and scrubbed underneath her zinc armor.

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The Marriott is not a Marriott; it's a Revolutionary Progress Hostel. (There are real hotels elsewhere in Tripoli, but they all charge real hotel bills, and the government is trying to run the tech jury service on the cheap.) Huw's djinn spiels a little rantlet about King Ghadaffi's critique of trademarks, and explains that this is the *People's* Marriott, where the depredations of servile labor have been eliminated in favor of automated conveniences, the maintenance and disposition of which is managed by a Resident's Committee, and primly admonishes him for being twenty minutes late to his first Committee meeting, which is to run for another two hours and forty minutes.

"Can't I just go to my room and have a wash?" Huw asks. "I'm filthy."

"Ah! One thousand pardons, Madame! Would that our world was a perfect one and the needs of the flesh could come before the commonweal! It is, however, a requirement of residence at the People's Marriott. You need to attend and be assigned a maintenance detail, and be trained in the chores you are to perform. The common room is wonderfully comfortable, though, and your fellow committee members will be delighted to make you most very welcome indeed!"

"Crap," Huw says.

"Yes," the djinn says, "of course. You'll find a WC to your left after you pass through the main doors."

Huw stalks through both sets of automatic doors, which judder and groan open and creak shut. The lobby is a grandiose atrium with grimy spun diamond panes fifteen meters above his head through which streams gray light that feeds a riotous garden of root-vegetables and xeroscaped desert scrub. His vision clouds over, then a double row of shaky blinkenlights appear before him, strobing the way to the common room. Huw heaves a put-upon sigh and shambles along their path.

The common-room is hostel chic, filled with sagging sofas, a sad and splintery gamesurface, and a collection of a half-dozen morose international travelers clutching at their teapots and scrawling desultorily on a virtual whiteboard. The collaborative space is cluttered with torn-off sheets of whiteboard, covering every surface. Doc Björk has beaten him here, and she is already in the center of the group, animatedly negotiating for the lightest detail possible.

"Huw!" she calls as he plants himself in the most remote sofa, which coughs up a cloud of dust and stale farts smelling of the world's variegated cuisines.

He lifts one hand weakly and waves. The other committee members are staring at him coldly, with a glint of feral calculation in their eyes, and Huw has a feeling he's about to get the shittiest job in the place. *Mitigate the risk*, he thinks.

"Hi there, I'm Huw. I'm here on jury duty, so I'm not going to be available during the days. I'm also a little, uh, toxic at the moment, so I'll need to stay away from anything health-related. Something in the early evening, not involving food or waste systems would be ideal, really. What fits the bill?" He waits a moment while the teapots chatter translations from all over the room. Huw hears Arabic, Farsi, Hindi, Spanish, French, and American.

Various whiteboards are reshuffled from around the room, and finally a heroically ugly ancient Frenchman who looks like an albino chimp squeaks some dependencies across the various boards with a stylus. He coughs out a rapid and hostile stream of French, which the teapot presently translates. "You'll be on comms patrol. There's a transceiver every three meters. You take spare parts around to each of them, reboot them, watch the Power-On Self-Test and swap out any dead parts. Even numbered floors tonight, odd floors tomorrow, guest rooms the day after." He tosses a whiteboard at Huw, and it snaps to centimeters from his nose, a-crawl with floorplans and schematics for broadband relay transceivers.

"Well, that's done," Huw says. "Thanks."

Björk laughs. "You're not even close to done. That's your *tentative assignment*—you need to get checked out on every job, in case you're reassigned due to illness or misadventure."

"You're kidding," he says, rolling his eyes.

"I am not. My assignment is training new committee members. Now, come and sit next to me, the Training and Skills-Assessment sub-committee is convening here."

.....

Huw zones out during the endless sub-committee meetings that last into early evening, then suffers himself to be dragged to the hotel refectory by Doc Björk and a dusky Romanian Lothario from the Cordon Bleu Catering Committee who casts pointed and ugly looks at him until he slouches away from his baklava and dispiritedly climbs the unfinished concrete utility stairway to sub-level 1, where his toil is to begin. He spends the next four hours trudging around the endless sub-levels of the hotel—bare concrete corridors optimized for robotic, not human, access—hunting buggy transceivers. By the time he gets to his room he's exhausted, footsore, and even more sweaty.

Huw's room is surprisingly posh, but he can't appreciate it. He looks at the oversized sleep-surface and sees the maintenance regimen for its control and feedback mechanism. He spins slowly in the spa-sized loo and all he can think about is the poxy little bots that patrol the plumbing and polish the tile. The media center is a dismal reminder of his responsibility to patrol the endless miles of empty corridor, rebooting little silver mushrooms and watching their blinkenlights for telltale reds.

He fills the pool-sized tub with steaming, lavender- and eucalyptus-scented water, then climbs in, burka and all. The djinn's lamp perches on the tub's edge getting soaked in oversloshes as he shifts his weight, watching the folds of cloth flutter in aquatic slomo as its osmotic layers convect gentle streams of water over his many nooks and (especially) crannies.

"Esteemed sir," the djinn says, its voice echoing off the painted tile.

"Figured that one out, huh?" Huw says. "No more Madame?"

"My infinite pardons," it says. "I have received your jury assignment. You are to report to Fifth People's Technology Court at 0800 tomorrow. You will be supplied with a delicious breakfast of fruits and semolina, and a cold lunch of local delicacies. You should be well-rested and prepared for a deliberation of at least four days."

"Sure thing," Huw says, dunking his head and letting the water rush into his ears. He resurfaces and shakes his head, splattering the walls with water that's slightly gray with bodily ick. "How far's the courthouse?"

"A mere two kilometers. The walk through the colorful and ancient Tripoli streets is both bracing and elevating. You will arrive in a most pleasant and serene state of mind."

Huw kicks at the drain control and the tub gurgles itself empty, reminding him of the great water-reclamation facilities in the sub-basement and their various osmotic tissues and dams. He stands and the burka steams for a moment as every drop of moisture is instantly wrung loose from its weave. "Pleasant and serene. Yeah, right." He climbs tiredly out of the tub and slouches towards the bedroom. "What time is it?"

"It is two-fifteen, esteemed sir," says the djinn. "Would sir care for a sleeping draught?"

"Sir would care for a real hotel," Huw grunts, then lies down on the enormous white rectangle that occupies the center of the bedroom. He doesn't hear the djinn's reply. He's asleep as soon as his head touches the pillow.

.....

A noise like cats fucking in a trash can drags Huw awake most promptly at zero-dark o'clock. "What's *that*?" he yells.

The djinn doesn't answer: it's prostrate on the bedside table as if hiding from an invisible overhead axe blade. The noise gets louder, if anything, then modulates into chickens drowning in their own blood, with a side-order of Van Halen guitar riffs. "Make it stop!" shouts Huw, stuffing his fingers in his ears.

The noise dies to a distant wail. A minute later it stops and the djinn flickers upright. "My apologies, esteemed sir," it says dejectedly. "I did not with the room sound system mixer volume control interface correctly. That was the most blessed Imam Anwar Mohammed calling the faithful to prayer, or it would have been if not for the feedback."

Huw rolls over and grabs the teapot. "Djinn."

"Yes, oh esteemed sirrah?"

Huw pauses. "You keep calling me that," he says slowly. "Do you realize just how rude that is?"

"Eep! Rude? You appear to be squeezing—"

"Listen." Huw is breathing heavily. He sits up and looks out of the window at the sleeping city. Somewhere, a hundred gigameters beyond the horizon, the sun might be thinking about the faint possibility of rising. "I am a patient man. But. If you keep provoking me like this—"

"—Like what?"

"This hostel. The fucking alarm clock. Talking down to me. Repeatedly insulting my intelligence -

"—I'm not insulting!—"

"Shut up." Huw blows out a deep breath. "Unless you want me to give you a guided tour of the hotel waste compactor and heavy metal reclamation subsystem. From the inside."

"Ulp." The djinn shuts up.

"That's better. Now. Breakfast. I want, let's see ... fried eggs. Bacon rashers. Pork sausages. Toast with butter on it, piles of butter. Don't argue, I've had a grey-market LDL anti-cholesterol hack. Oh yeah. Black pudding. Tell your little friends in the canteen to have it waiting for me. There is no 'or else' for you to grasp at, you horrible little robot, you're going to do this my way or you're not going to do very much at all, ever again." Huw stands up and stretches. A plink with the pinky remote and his bicycle unlocks and stretches too, folding itself into shopping-mall mode. Memory metal frames are one of the few benefits of high technology, in Huw's opinion—along with the ability to eat seven different flavors of grease for breakfast and not die of a heart attack before lunchtime.

"Got that?"

"I told them, but they say these Turkish food processors, they don't like working with non-Halal—"

The djinn shuts up at Huw's snarl. Huw picks up the teapot, hangs it from his bike's handle-bars, and pedals off down the hotel corridor with blood in his eye.

I wonder what my chances are of getting a hanging judge?

.....

Huw pedals to the end of the hotel's drive and hangs a left, following the djinn's directions, rides two more blocks, turns right, and confronts a wall of humanity.

It's a good, old-fashioned throng. From his vantagepoint atop the saddle, it seems to writhe, a mass of variegated robes and business-attire, individuals lost in the teem. He studies it for a moment longer, and sees that for all its density it's moving rather quickly, though with little regard for personal space. He dismounts the bike and it extrudes its kickstand. Planting his hands on his hips, he belches up a *haram* gust of bacon-grease and ponders. He can always lock up the bike and proceed afoot, but nothing handy presents itself for locking. The djinn is manifesting a glowing countdown timer, ticking away the seconds before he will be late at court.

Just then, the crowd shifts out a person, who makes a beeline for him.

"Hello, Adrian," Huw says, once the backpacker is within shouting distance—about sixty centimeters, given the din of footfalls and conversations. Huw is somehow unsurprised to see the backpacker again, clad in his travelwear and a rakish stubble, eyes red as a baboon's ass after a night's hashtaking.

"Well, fancy!" says Adrian. "Out for a bit of a ride?"

"No, actually," replies Huw. "On my way somewhere, and running late. Do you think I can ride around this crowd on another street?"

The backpacker snorts. "Sure, if you ride to Tunisia. That's not going to do you much good here, I'm afraid. And don't think about locking it up, mate, or it'll be nationalized by the Popular Low-Impact Transit Committee before you've gone three steps."

"Shit," grunts Huw. He gestures at the bike and it deflates and compacts itself into a carry-case. He hefts it—the fucking thing weighs a ton.

"Yup," Adrian agrees, cheerily. "Nice to have if you want to go on a tour of the ruins or get somewhere at three A.M.—not much good otherwise, though. Want to sell it to me? I met a pair of sisters last night who're going to take me off to the countryside for a couple days of indoctrination and heavy petting. I'd love to have some personal transport."

"Fuck," says Huw. He's had the bike for seven years; it's an old friend, jealously guarded. "How about I rent it to you?"

Adrian grins and produces a smokesaver from one of the many snap-pockets on his chest. A nugget of hash smolders inside the plastic tube, a barely visible coal in the thick smoke. He puts his mouth over the end and slurps down the smoke, holds it for a thoughtful moment, then expels it over Huw's head.

"Lovely. I'll return it in two days, three tops. Where're you staying?"

"The fucking Marriott."

"Wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Here, will this be enough?" He hands Huw a foil-wrapped brick of Assassin-brand hash, the size of a paving-stone. "The sisters're into hashishim-revival. Quite versatile minds, they have."

Huw is already copping a light buzz from the sidestream Adrian's blowing his way. This much hash will likely put him in a three-day incontinence coma. But someone might want it, he supposes. "Tell you what," he says. "Let's call this a deposit. You can have it back for the safe return of the bike in four days at the Marriott, all right?"

Adrian works his head from side to side. "Sure, mate. Works for me. Shame you don't trust me to return the bike on my own, but that's how it is, I suppose."

"Okay. But you'd better bloody look after it. That bike has sentimental value, we've come a long way together." Huw whispers into the bike's handlebars and hands it to Adrian. It interfaces with his PAN, accepts him as its new erstwhile owner, and unfolds. Adrian saddles up, waves once, and pedals off for points rural and lecherous.

Huw holds the djinn's lamp up and hisses at it. "Right," he says. "Get me to the court on time."

"With the utmost of pleasures, sirrah," it begins. Huw gives it a sharp shake. "All right, then," it says. "Let me teach you to say, 'Out of my bloody way,' and we'll be off."

.....

Huw doesn't know quite what to expect from the Fifth People's Technology Court. A yurt? Sandstone? Horrible modernist-brutalist white-sheathed space-age pile?

As it turns out, it's an inflatable building, an outsized bounce-house made of metallic fabric and compressed air. The whole thing could be deflated and carted elsewhere on a flatbed truck in a morning, or simply attached to a dirigible and lifted to a new spot. A great safety-yellow rubbery gasket the size of a manhole cover sprouts from one side, hooked into power, bandwidth, sewage, and water, armored flex-hoses coursing with modcons.

It's shaped like a casino-owner's idea of the Parthenon, cartoonish columns and squishy frescoes depicting mankind's dominance over technology. Huw bounds up the rubbery steps and through the six-meter doors. A fourteen-year-old boy with a bad moustache confronts him as he passes into the lobby.

"Pizzpot," grunts the kid, hefting a curare-blower in Huw's direction. Huw skids to a stop on the yielding floor.

"Pardon?"

"Pizzpot," repeats the boy. He's wearing some kind of uniform, yellow semi-disposable coveralls tailored like a potato-sack and all abristle with insignia. It looks like the kind of thing that Biohazard Containment passes out when they quarantine a borough because it's dissolving into brightly colored machine parts.

"The People's Revolutionary Technology Court Guardsman wishes to see your passport, sirrah," his djinn explains. "Court will be in session in fifteen seconds."

Huw rolls up his sleeve and pressed his forearm against the grimy passport reader the Guardsman has pulled from his waistband. "Gaah. Show me the way." A faint glowing trail appears in front of Huw, snaking down the hall and up to a battered-looking door.

Huw stumbles up to the door and leans on it. It opens easily, sucking him through with a gust of dusty air, and he staggers into a brightly lit green room with a row of benches stretching round three walls. The center of the room is dominated by two boxes; a strangely menacing black cube a meter on a side, and a lectern, behind which hunches a somewhat moth-eaten vulture in a black robe.

Faces turn to watch Huw as he stumbles to a halt. "You're late," squawks the vulture—on second thoughts, Huw realizes she's not an uplifted avian, but a human being, wizened and twisted by age, her face dominated by a great hatchet of a nose.

"Terribly sorry," Huw pants apologetically. "Won't happen again."

"Better not." The judge harrumphed consumptively. "Dammit, I deserve some respect! Horrible children."

As the judge rants on about punctuality and the behavior of the dutiful and obedient juror (which, Huw is led to believe, had always been deplorable but has been in terminal decline ever since the abolition of capital punishment for contempt of court back in the eighteenth century) he takes stock of his fellow jurors. For the first time he has reason to be glad of his biohazard burka—and its ability to completely obscure his snarl of anger—because he knows at least half of them. The bastard pseudo-random number generators at the People's Magical Libyan Jamahiriya embassy must be on the blink, because besides Doc Björk—whom he kind-of expected—the jury service has summoned none other than Sandra Lal, and an ominously familiar guy with a blue forelock, and the irritating perpetually-drunk centenarian boomer from next door but one. There are a couple of native Libyans, but it looks as if the perennially booming Tripolitanian economy has turned jury service evasion into a national sport. Hence the need to import guest-jurors.

Fuck me, all I need is that turd Adrian to make it a clean sweep, thinks Huw. *This must be some kind of set-up*. He settles on a bench in a rustle of static-charged fabric and waits for proceedings to begin.

The Vulture stands up and hunches over the lectern. "Listen up!" She rasps, in a forty-a-day voice that sounds like she's about due for another pair of lungs. "I am doctor Rosa Giulliani—that's a doctor of law—and I have volunteered my services for the next two weeks to chair this court, or focus group, or three-ring circus. You are the jury, or potential consumers, or performing animals. Procedurally the PMLJ have given me total autonomy as long as I conduct this hearing in strict accordance within the bounds of international law as laid down by the Hague Tribunal on Trans-Human Manifestations and Magic. Some of you may not fully comprehend what this means. What it means is that you are here to decide whether a reasonable person would consider it safe to unleash Exhibit A on the world. If Exhibit A turns out to be a weapon of planetary destruction, we will probably all die. If Exhibit A turns out to be a widget that brings everlasting happiness to the whole of humanity, we will probably all get to benefit from the consequences. So I will enforce *extreme* measures against any rat-bastard who tries to smuggle a sample out of this room. I will also nail to the wall the hide of anyone who talks about Exhibit A outside this room, because there are hardware superweapons and there are software superweapons, and we don't know what Exhibit A is, yet. For all we know it's a piece of hardware that looks like a portable shower cubicle then turns round and installs antique Microsoft crashware in your thalamus. So."

Giulliani subsides in a fit of racking coughs. The person next to Huw, a young punk of indeterminate—or no—gender, turns and winks at him, then mutters something incomprehensible in Czech. "Cool, I wonder what she'll pay for a new set of Kurdish lungs, one careful owner?" Huw's tea-pot translates.

Huw stares back for a moment, then shrugs.

Judge Giulliani gathers herself, and Huw fiddles idly with the dialect gain on the djinn's translation engine control panel:

"We follow a set procedure. Y'all liss'n here. A statement is delivard by the dayum fool script kiddies who downloaded the memeplex from the metasphere an' who're applyin fer custodial riat's ta it. This describes the prior backgroun' ta their actions. Ya reckon? Secondly, a preliminary activation of the device may be conducted in a closed environment. Thirdly, o buss dis. You rabble git to talk 'boutit. Foethly, you split into two teams: advocates an' prosecution. Yo tax be to convince members uh de othuh team to join you. Sheeit! Finally, you deliver your majority verdict to me and I check it for procedural compliance. Then with any luck I get to hang the meddling kids. Ere-a zeere-a uny qoesshuns?"

Huw shakes his head, bemused. For some reason he can't get the teapot to give Judge Giulliani an authentic Neapolitan accent. But Doc Björk is already waving a hand in the air, eager to please. The judge turns a black gaze on her, one that reminds Huw of historical documentaries about the Ayatollah Khomeini, but Björk refuses to wilt.

"What," rasps Giulliani, "is it?"

"About this Exhibit, yah? Is it the box, in? And if so, how secure the containment is? I would hate for your worries to depart the abstract and concretize themselves, as it were."

"Huh." The judge stalks out from behind her lectern and kicks the box, hard. She must be wearing steel toe-caps, from the noise it makes. Huw whimpers faintly, envisaging imminent post-singularity grey goop catalyzed nano-annihilation, beyond any hope of resurrection. But the only terrible consequence is that the judge smiles, horribly. "It are being safe," she announces. "Box are being waste containment vessel left over from second French fast breeder program." This announcement brings an appreciative nod from a couple of members of the audience. The second French fast breeder program was nothing to do with nuclear reactors and everything to do with disaster-mitigation replicators bred to mop up the eight giga-Curies of plutonium the first program scattered all over Normandy. Even Huw is forced to admit that the alien memeplex is probably safe behind the Maginot line of nanotech containment widgets lining the diamond-reinforced tungsten carbide safe.

"So when do we get to see it?" asks Huw, tweaking his teapot back onto its original dialect setting.

Judge Giulliani turns her vicious gaze on him. "Right *now!*" She snarls, and thumps her fist on the lectern. The lights dim, and a multimedia presentation wobbles and firms up on top of her lectern. "Listen up! Let the following testimony entered under oath on placeholder-goes-here be entered in the court record under this-case-number. Go ahead, play, damn you."

The scene is much as Huw would have imagined it: a couple of pudgy nocturnal hackers holed up in a messy bedroom floored in discarded ready meal packs, air hazy with programmable utility foglets, are building a homebrew long baseline radio telescope array by reprogramming their smart wallpaper. They work quietly, exchanging occasional cryptic suggestions about how to improve their rig's resolving power and gain. About the only thing that surprises Huw is that they're both three years old—foreheads swollen before their time with premature brain bridges. A discarded pile of wooden alphabet blocks lies in one corner of the room. A forlorn teddy bear lies on the top bunk with its back to the camera viewpoint.

"Ooh, aren't they *cute?*" squeaks Sandra. "The one on the left is *just like* my younger brother was, before his little accident!"

"Silence in court, damn your eyes! What do you think this is, an adoption hearing? Behold, Abdul and Karim Bey. Their father is a waiter and their mother is a member of the presidential guard." (Brief clips of a waiter and a woman in green battle-dress with an improbably complicated gun drift to either side of the nursery scene.) "Their parents love them, which is why they paid for the very best prenatal brainbox upgrades. With predictable results."

Abdul and Karim are pounding away at their tower of rather goopy-looking foglets—like all artifacts exposed to small children, it has begun to turn gray and crinkly at the corners—but now they are receiving a signal, loud and clear. They're short on juice, but Karim has the bright idea of eviscerating Teddy and plugging his methanol-powered fuel cell into the tots' telescope. It briefly extrudes a maser, blats a signal up through the thin roof of their commodity housing, and collapses in exhaustion.

The hackers have only five minutes or so to wait—in which time Abdul speed-reads an illicit download of *The Satanic Verses* while Karim rolls on his back making googling noises as he tries to grab his feet—for they have apparently found the weakly godlike AIs of the metasphere in a receptive mood. As the bitstream comes in, Abdul whacks his twin brother upside the head with a purple velour giraffe. Karim responds by irritably uploading a correctly formatted patent application with the godvomit as an attachment.

"I hate smart-alec kids," mumbles the bald guy with the blue forelock, sitting across the room. The judge pretends to ignore him.

"These two miscreants are below the contractual age of consent," Huw hears himself muttering, "so how come their application is being accepted?"

"Here in the PMLJ, as you should well know seeing you're staying here," the judge croaks, "your civil rights are a function of your ability to demand them. Which is a bit annoying, because Karim demanded the vote six months ago, while Abdul is a second lieutenant in the People's Memetic Self-Defense Forces and a dab-hand at creating new meme viruses. In fact, there's some question over whether we shouldn't actually be dragging him up in front of a military tribunal instead."

Judge Giulliani seems to have forgotten to snarl; her commentary is becoming almost civilized as the presentation from the subpoenaed crib-cam fast-forwards to the terrible two's attempt to instantiate the bitstream in atoms. Using a ripped Teddy bear as a containment vessel.

"Ah, here, you see it here. The artifact is extremely flexible, but not so flexible that it can gestate in a pseudo-living toy. Abdul's own notes speculate that gestation may be supported in medium-sized dogs, goats, and camels." Over the lectern, the display zooms in on the teddy bear's swollen gut. The bear is jerking spasmodically and ticcing like a Tourette children's TV host, giggling and stuttering nonsensical self-worth affirmations. The gut distends further and the affirmations become more disjointed, and then a long, sharp blade pokes its way through the pseudoflesh and flame-retardant fur-analogue. "There are indications that the artifact floods its host organism with endorphins at metamorphosis-time," the judge says, and the rent in the bear's belly widens, and out climbs a shimmering *thing*.

It takes Huw a moment to understand what he's seeing. The artifact is a tall, metallic stalk, at first coiled like a cobra, but gradually roused to full erectness. Its glistening tip dips down towards the bear. "See how it sutures the exit wound?" the judge says, a breath of admiration in her rough voice. "So tidy. Jurors, take note, this is a *considerate* artifact." Indeed, the bear's fur has been closed with such cunning that it's almost impossible to see the exit wound. However, something has gone horribly awry inside of it, as it is now shaking harder than ever, shivering off its limbs and then its fur, and soon its flesh starts breaking away like the sections of a tangerine.

The artifact stands erect again, bounces experimentally a couple times, then *collapses* in a way that Huw can't make any sense of. He's not alone, either. The jurors let out a collective uncomprehending bleat. "Look closely, jurors!" the judge says, and the scene loops back on itself a couple times in slo-mo, from multiple angles, then again in wireframe. It makes Huw's mind hurt. The artifact's stalk bulges in some places,

contracts in others, all the whole slipping through and around itself. His potmaker's eye tries to no avail to understand what's happening to the topology and volume.

"Fucking lovely," a voice nearby gasps. He recognizes it as Sandra Lal's. She's always had a thing about *trompe l'oeil* solid. "Nicest Klein bottle I've ever seen."

Klein bottle. Of course. Take a Möbius strip and extrude it one more dimension out and you get a vessel with only two dimensions, the inside and outside a single continuous plane. Glassblower shit. Fucking showoffs.

The young brothers are on hands and knees before the artifact now, staring in slack-jawed concentration, drool slipping between their patchworks of baby teeth and down their chins. The cam zooms in on the artifact, and it begins to fluoresce and pulse, as through it were digesting a radioactive hamster. The peristaltic throbbing gives it motion, and it begins to work its way toward the hamper in the corner of the room. It inches its way across the floor, trailed by the crawling brothers, and knocks over the hamper, and begins to burrow through the spilled, reeking linens.

"It's scat-tropic," Doc Björk says.

"Yes," the Judge says. "And scat-powered. Karim notes that its waste products are a kind of silt, similar to diatomaceous earth, and equally effective as a roach and beetle powder, as well as water and trace elements."

"A fractional-dimensional parasitic turd-gobbler from outer space?" Huw says. "Have I got that right?"

"That's right, ma'am," says the blue-forelocked joe. "And it's pretty, too. I'd gestate one, if only to eliminate the need for a bloody toilet. Quite a boon to your average WHO-standard pit-latrine, too, I imagine." The voice, he recognizes the voice. It belongs to Bonnie: the transhumanist she-he that Lal introduced to him at the party where he became patient zero for whatever GM crapola he is carrying. He wonders if she-he is fucking Lal: Sandra's neuter, although it's not as if that's stopped anyone in a decade.

"Of course you'd gestate one," Huw says. "Nothing to you if your body is dissolved into toxic tapioca. I imagine you're just about ready to join the Cloud anyway."

Sandra casts him a poisonous glare. "Fuck you, and the goat you rode into town on," she hisses. "Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Judge?" Doc Björk says, desperately trying to avoid a mass execution for contempt of court, "My co-juror raises an interesting point. What evidence do we have to support Abdul's assertion that the artifact can safely gestate in mammals, or more specifically primates?"

The Judge grunts irritably. "Only simulations, of course," she says. "Were you volunteering?" Doc Björk sits back hastily.

"Are you seated comfortably?" Giuliani asks pointedly. "Then I shall continue." She whacks her gavel on the lectern and the presentation rolls boringly on. "Here, near as we can tell, is the artifact's life-cycle." In fast-forward, the space monster digests the twins' nappy hamper then chows down on their bedding while Abdul—or maybe it's Karim—hastily jury-rigs an EMP gun out of animatronic toys and an air force surplus radar set. The twins back into a corner and wait, wide-eyed, as the *thing* sprouts a pink exoskeleton lined with throbbing veins, rabbit ears, and a set of six baby elephant legs with blue toenails. It squats in the middle of their room, hooting and pinging as it digests the pile of alphabet blocks. Karim—or maybe it's Abdul—improvises a blue goo attack using the roomful of utility fog, but the ad hoc nanoweaponry just slimes off the space monster like so much detergent.

"At this point, the manifestation estivated," announces the Judge.

"Duh, wassatmean?" asks one of the other jurors, one who Huw doesn't know—possibly a nationalist from the Neander valley.

"It went to sleep," explains Doc Björk. "Isn't that right, Judge?"

"Damn straight." The Judge whacks her gavel again. "But if I get any more lip out of you, sunshine, I'll have you flogged. This is *my* trial. Clear?" Björk opens her mouth, closes it, then nods.

"Well," says Judge Giuliani, with some satisfaction, "that's that, then. The thing seems to have fallen deeply asleep. Just in case it wakes up, the PMLJ Neighborhood Sanitation Committee have packed it into a Class Four nanohazard containment vessel—which I'm standing on right now—and shipped it over here. We're going to try a directed revival after lunch, *with* full precautions. Then I'll have a think about it, you damned meddling baboons can enter my verdict, and we'll wrap up in time for tea. Court will adjourn! Make sure you're all back here in three hours time—or else."

In case the message isn't sufficiently clear, the bench Huw is perched on humps up into an uncomfortable ridge, forcing him to stand. The Vulture storms out the back of the courtroom in a flurry of black robes, leaving a pool of affronted jurors milling around a lectern containing a sleeping puddle of reified godvornit.

"All right, everyone," announces Doc Björk, clapping her hands together. "How about we go and find the refectory in this place? I could murder a baklava!"

Huw slouches off towards the entrance in a black humor, teapot clanking at his hip. This isn't going quite the way he'd imagined, and he'll be damned before he'll share a refectory table with that sanctimonious Swedish girl scout, much less Sandra and her genderbending (and disturbingly attractive) friend. Someone is quite clearly doing this in order to get under his skin, and he is deeply pissed off. On the other hand, it's a long time since breakfast—and there must be somewhere that serves a decent tofuburger in Tripoli.

Mustn't there?

.....

It is insanely hot on the sidewalk outside the court, hot and crowded and dusty, and even with his biohazard burka's photovoltaics pumping away heat as fast as they can, Huw is sweating. His skin itches everywhere, but especially on the shoulder where he can feel his skin crawling every time he thinks about the glowing trefoil tattoo.

The court is located in a district full of bleached white shells, buildings thrown up by massively overengineered molluscs—unable to breathe without oxygen supplies—that, having erected a habitable structure, then die in order to provide a delicious moving-in feast for the residents. It's cheap refugee-camp architecture, but durable and far better than the tent cities of a previous century; snail cities have power, recycling services, bandwidth, and a weird kind of hobbitish charm. Some of the bigger shells have been turned into storefronts by various cottage professionals, and Huw is drawn towards one of them by the mouth-watering smell of roasting goat. Not that it makes Huw's mouth water—the idea of eating a *real* dead goat makes him feel queasy—but it might be synthetic, and if nothing else he'll be able to get a feta salad or something.

There are elaborate cast-iron tables outside the shell-front, and cast-iron chairs, and—luxury of luxuries—a parasol over each. There are people inside the shell, but the outside tables are deserted. Huw wilts into the nearest space and puts his teapot down on the table. "You," he grunts.

"Universal translator for anyone who comes my way. I expect service with a smile. *Capisce?*"

"Your wish is my command, effendi," pipes his djinn.

A teenaged girl in a black *salwar kameez*, white face paint, and far too much eye shadow and silver spider-jewelry saunters over, for all the world like a refugee from a Goth night club in Bradford. "Yeah? Whatcher want, granny?"

"It's mister," Huw replies, nettled. "You the waitress?"

"Yeah," She answers in English, staring at him idly. Her earrings stare, too—synthetic eyeballs dangling from desiccated optic nerves. "You a tranny?"

"No, I'm a biohazard. What's on the lunch menu?"

"We've got a choice of any cloned meat shoarma you fancy: goat, mutton, ox-tongue, or Rumsfeld. With salad, olives, cheese, falafel, coffee or Coke. Pretty much anything. Say, are you *really* a biohazard?"

"Listen," Huw says, irritably, "I'm not wearing this fucking sack because I *enjoy* it. Your Ministry of Barbarian Affairs insisted—"

"Why don't you take it off then?" she asks. "If they call you on it, just pay."

"Pay—"

"What's wrong with you? You one of those dumb westerners who doesn't understand baksheesh? Anonymous digital m-cash transactions? Zero-knowledge laundry systems? Wow." She's looking pretty impressed (for a Goth, anyway, which is to say, slightly less gripped by paralyzing boredom and gloom)—and for all the wrong reasons.

Huw sighs. "Look. Just get me the shoarma and falafel. If they're cloned, I'll take the goat. And, uh, a Diet Coke."

"Okay." She turns and beams his order to the kitchen, then wanders over to the bar and begins to pour a tall drink. Huw takes a deep breath. Then he pinches the seal node on his burka and gives it a hard yank. As gestures of defiance go, it's small but profound; he suddenly feels immensely claustrophobic, and can't stop until he's tugged the whole thing off, up and over his head, and yanked down the overalls that make up its bottom half, and stomped them all into the grey dust under his boots. The air is dry, and smells *real*. Huw finally begins to relax. The waitress strolls over bearing a large glass, loaded with Coke and ice cubes. As she gets close her nose wrinkles. "You need a bath, mister biohazard-man."

"Yeah. Well. You tell the Ministry." Huw takes the drink, relishes a long swallow, unencumbered by multiple layers of smart antiviral polymer defenses. He can feel the air on his face, the sunlight on his skin. He puts the glass down. *Wonder how long I'll take to work up a suntan?* He thinks, and glances at his wrist. He freezes.

There's a biohazard trefoil on the back of his hand. Huw stands up, feeling dizzy. "There a toilet here?" he asks.

"Sure." The waitress points him round the back. "Take your time."

The bathroom is a small nautiloid annex, and inside it's as chilly and modern as Sandra Lal's. Huw locks the door and yanks his tee and sweat pants off. He turns anxiously to check his back in the mirror over the sink—but the trefoil on his shoulder has gone. It's on the back of his hand. And it itches.

"Shit," he says, quietly and with feeling.

Back at the table, Huw bolts his food down then rises, leaving an uncharacteristic tip. He picks up the bundle of dusty black biohazard fabric and strolls past the shops. One of them is bound to be a black-market nanohacker. He finds his hands are shaking. He isn't sure which prospect is worse, finding he's got a big medical bill ahead, or trying to live in ignorance.

"Teapot," he says quietly.

"Yes, effendi?"

"Where's the nearest body shop? Doesn't have to be fully legal under WIPO-compliant treaty terms, just legal enough."

"Bzzt. It is regrettably not possible for this humble unit to guide you in the commission of felonies, oh noble sirrah—"

Shake. "There is legal and there is legal," Huw hisses. "I don't give a shit about complying with all the brain-dead treaties the Moral Majority rammed through WIPO in the wake of Microsoftgate. I just want somewhere that the local police won't arrest me for frequenting. Can you do that? Or would you like to tell me where the nearest heavy metal reclamation plant is?"

"Eeek! Turn left, effendi! Left, I say! Yes, ahead of you! Please, do me no injury, sirrah!"

Huw walks up to a featureless Roc's egg and taps on it. "Anyone at home?" he asks.

A door dilates in the shell, emitting a purple-tinged light. "Enter," says a distinctly robotic voice.

Inside the shell, Huw finds himself in a room dominated by something that looks like a dentist's chair as reinvented on behalf of the Spanish Inquisition by H. R. Giger. Standing beside it—

"Does your sister work at the diner along the road?" he asks.

"No, she's my daughter." The woman—who looks young enough to be the waitress's twin, but wears medical white and doesn't have any body piercings that blink at him—looks distinctly unimpressed. "And she's got an attitude problem. Did you come here because of her? What's your problem? She's a Goth, you know. Thinks it's so progressive." She sniffs.

Huw holds up his arm. "I'm here because of this," he says, dodging the question.

"Aha." She peers at his trefoil. "Do you know what it is?"

"No, that's why I'm here."

"Very well. If you take a seat and give me your debit token, I'll try to find out for you."

"Will there be any trouble?" Huw asks, lying back on the couch and trying not to focus on the mandibles descending towards him.

"I don't know—yet." She fusses and putters and mumbles to herself. "All right, then," she says, at length. "It's in beta, whatever it is."

"Oh yes?" Huw says, in a way that he hopes sounds intelligent.

"Certainly. That's the watermark—it's compliant with the INEE's RFC 4253.11 on debug-mode self-replicating organisms. Whatever host medium it finds itself in, it advertises its presence by means of the trefoil."

"And ...?" Huw says.

She shakes her head at him. "And that means that either the person who made it is conscientious, or is working with an RFC-compliant SDK."

"I see," Huw says. He supposes that this is probably interesting to people in the biz, but he slept through most of the microcode lessons in school. He prefers concrete stuff he can get his hands on. None of these suspicious self-modifying abstractions that suddenly make you sprout antlers.

The hacker mutters to herself some more. "Well," she says, and "Hmmm," and "Oh," until Huw feels like he will burst. "Right then."

Huw waits. And waits. His whole fucking life seems to consist of conversations like this. He's read some hilariously naive accounts of life in the so-distant "Information Age" about "Future Shock," all those dim ancestors trying to make sense of their info-glut and their rapidly changing world. They fretted about the "Singularity:" the point at which human history goes nonlinear and unpredictable and the world ceases to have any rhyme or reason. Future Shock indeed—try living in the fucking Singularity, and having your world inverted six times before breakfast.

"Well, that's it. I can do it *in vitro* or *in situ*, up to you."

"Do it?"

"Accelerate it. What, you think I'm going to *decompile* this thing? That code is so obfuscated it may as well be cuneiform for all the sense I can make of it. No, there's only one way to find out what it does: accelerate its life-cycle and see what happens. I can do it in your body—that's best, it's already halfway there—or I can do it in glass. Your choice."

"Glass!" Huw blurts, his heart racing at the thought of an accelerated unknown and unlicensed nano-colony hastening to maturity in his precious skin.

The hacker sighs a put-upon exhalation. "Fine," she says. Let's get you cloned, then." Before he can jerk free, the instrument bush hovering over him has scraped a layer of skin from his forearm and drawn a few CCs of blood from the back of his hand, leaving behind an anaesthetized patch of numb skin that spreads over his knuckles and down to his fingertips. Across the room, a tabletop diamond-walled chamber fogs and hums. The mandibles recede and Huw sits up. A ventilation system kicks in, clearing the fog from the chamber and there Huw sees his cloned hand taking shape, starting as a foetal fin, sundering into fingers, bones lengthening, proto-fingernails forming. "That'll take a couple hours to ripen," the hacker says. "Then I'll implant it and we'll see what happens. Come back this time tomorrow, I'll show you what turns up." She rubs her thumbs against her forefingers.

Huw sticks his hand out to touch hers and interface their PANs so he can transfer a payment to her, but she shies back. "I don't think so," she says. "You're infectious, remember?"

"Well, how shall I pay you, then?" he says.

"Over there," she says, gesturing at a meatpuppet in the corner, a wrinkled naked neuter body with no head, just a welter of ramified tubules joined to a bare medulla that flops out of the neck-stump like an alien nosegay. Huw shakes the puppet's clammy hand and interfaces with its PAN, transfers a wad of currency to it and steps back, wiping his hand on the seat of his track-pants afterward.

"This time tomorrow, right?" the hacker says.

"See you then," Huw says.

.....

Back at the courthouse, the People's Revolutionary Technology Court Guardsman doesn't even blink as Huw unrolls the multiple thicknesses of burka he'd wrapped around his telltale hand—which is starting to itch like it was a-crawl with sub-cue fire ants—and forearm.

As he steps into the gloomy courtroom, he thinks for a moment that he's the first one back from lunch, but after a moment he detects movement and slurping sounds from the shadows behind one of the benches. A familiar head with a blue forelock rears back, face a rictus of agonized enjoyment. Huw makes out a female head suctioned to the joe's chest, teeth fastened to his nipple. Christ, Huw thinks, he and Sandra are having a snog in the fucking courtroom. The Vulture's going to string them up by their pubes and skull-fuck them with her gavel.

Then the head turns, worrying at the nipple in a way that looks painful (though it appears to be doing wonders for the joe) and Huw sees that it isn't Sandra Lal masticating that tit, it's Doc Björk. He feels a sear of jealousy jetting from his asshole to his shoulderblades, though who he is jealous of he cannot exactly say. He clears his throat.

The lovebirds spring apart and stand. Doc Björk's shirt is hiked up around her armpits and before she gets it pulled back down, Huw is treated to a stunning display of her chestular appendages, which are rather spectacular in a showy, fantastically perfect way. The joe is more casual, stretches and yawns and pulls his own sweaty leather shirt down. Then he does a double-take as he recognizes Huw.

"You!" he says. "The hell are you doing here?"

"You know him?" Björk asks. She's blushing a rather lovely and fierce Viking red.

Huw partially unrolls his burka from his arm and dangles it in front of his face. "So do you, Doc," he says.

"The transvestite?" she says.

"I'm not a tranny," Huw says. He rewraps the burka around his arm, which is throbbing with itch and needles of alternating ice and fire. "Just got a nasty little itch and took a while to figure out who to bribe." He glares at the guy with the blue forelock, Bonnie the party animal. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about it would you?"

"Who, me?" Bonnie frowns right back at him. "What did you think you were doing barging in here, anyway?"

Huw crosses his arms defensively. "In case you hadn't noticed, this is a courtroom and the Vulture's going to be back in about—"

The door banged open behind him and he turns round. "Where *is* everybody?" croaks the black-clad judge. "Dammit, I expect punctuality in my courtroom!"

Judge Giulliani crosses to her box and stands behind it, tapping her toe on the floor and glowering furiously at the doorway as, one by one, the delinquent jurors filter in. Her stare is lost on Sandra, who sees Huw as she opens the door and nearly jumps out of her skin. Huw smiles at her sweetly and she edges around the far side of the room and sits down as far away from him as possible. So while the Vulture is busy tearing a strip off the Neanderthal, he gets up, walks over, and sits down next to her.

"Hello, Sandra," he says, warmly. "How's it going?"

Sandra leans away from him, looking afraid. "Where did you get *that*?" she asks, eyeing his biohazard-wrapped wrist.

"I thought you and me, we could talk about it." Huw smiles. "I picked it up at your party?"

"Listen, I have *no idea* what this is about, but I don't like it! I don't hang out with people who do that sort of thing, least not without warning. Are you sure you weren't jarked by a stranger on your way over? Or something?"

"Silence in court!" shrieks Giulliani, waving her gavel at Sandra, who cowers, trying to get as far away as possible from both the judge and Huw.

Huw crosses his arms, annoyed. *Is she telling the truth?*

"You puked had better listen up right now! We are about to begin the most dangerous part of the proceedings! Are those of you who believe in physical resurrection all backed up to off-site storage? And are those of you who don't all up to date on your life insurance policies? Because if not, you're too fucking late, haa haa! It is time to *open the box!*"

"Oh *shit*," Huw hastily begins to untangle his burka, in the hope that its advanced biocontainment layers will help if the monster that hatched from the scatotrophic klein-bottle from outer space turns out to be unfriendly. His wrist itches hotly in sympathy, then mercifully stops.

Giulliani twirls her hammer round and presses a button; it turns into something like a cross between a pocket chainsaw and a whittling knife.

"Now, I am about to open the containment," she says, standing over the ominous black cube with a raised knife. "With any luck, it's just sleeping. If it isn't, well, all I can say is it damn well better behave itself in *my* courtroom."

She leans forward and slaps one hand on a side of the box. Something heavy goes CLUNK inside it. A hand goes up from the far side of the jury box. "What is it *now*?" demands the Vulture.

"Please, judge, can I go to the bathroom?" Bonnie is waving an anxious hand in the air.

"Oh fuck off, then," snarls the judge. "Five minutes! Or you'll be sorry!"

She yanks at the lid of the biohazard containment and Bonnie takes off, scampering behind the benches as if his arse is on fire—or maybe he's just afraid that it will be, in a few seconds.

The box deconstructs itself into a pile of bubbling pink slime, to reveal the space monster the brothers Bey downloaded. It squats, curled up, in a nest of shredded teddy bears; two of its six legs are wrapped over what ought to be its snout, and it is making a faint whistling noise that it takes Huw almost a minute to recognize as snoring.

"Behold, the stinking pile of godvomit!" says the Vulture. She stands over it, arms akimbo, Swiss Army chainsaw at the ready, looking almost pleased with herself. "Exhibit A: asleep. It's been this way for the past eighteen days, ever since the Bey twins created it. Any questions?"

A susurrus of conversation sweeps the jury benches. "That's funny," says Huw, "my arm doesn't itch any more."

"Shut up about your arm already!" hisses Sandra. "Look!" She points at the box, just as the space monster emits a deep grunting sigh and rolls over on its side, snuffling sleepily.

"Six limbs, bilateral symmetry, exoskeleton. Has anyone tried deconstructing its proteome yet?" asks Doc Björk, looking rather more cheerful than Huw feels.

"From inside the containment? No." The Vulture looks thoughtful. "But from traces of carapace scraped off the walls of the Bey residence nursery, we have obtained a partial genotype. Tell your guidebooks or familiars or whatever to download Exhibit B for you. As you can see, the genome of the said item is chimeric and shows signs of crude tampering, but it's largely derived from *Drosophila*, *Mus musculus*, and a twentieth-century situationist artist or politician or something called Dan Quayle. Large chunks of its genome appear to be wholly artificial though, written entirely in Arabic, and there's an aqueous phase Turing machine partially derived from octopus ribosomes to interpret them. It looks as if something has been trying to use the *shari'a* code as a platform for implementing a legal virtual machine. We're not sure why, unless it's an obscure joke."

"Does the metasphere have a sense of humor?" Huw hears himself asking. He clears his throat—the dust must be getting to him because it feels as if he's developing a ticklish cough.

"If it didn't, my life would be a lot simpler," the Vulture says. A door at the back of the courtroom bangs, Bonnie coming back from the toilet. Huw notes with a spike of erotic shock that Bonnie is female again, a forelocked vision of heroin-chic skin and bones. "As it is, it makes it hard to tell a piece of sculpture from a practical joke, a new type of washing machine, or an alien superweapon."

"Urk." Huw subsides into a fit of coughing; it doesn't help his throat.

"Can we wake it up?" Doc Björk asks brightly. "If I play it some music, perhaps it can dream awaken from?"

Oh shit, musical dream therapy, Huw realizes with a sinking feeling. So that's *why she's on this panel*.

"That sounds like a possible idea," the Vulture concedes. She prods the sleeping space monster with a steel toe-capped boot but it just snores more loudly and burrows deeper into its nest of disemboweled toys. "I lean towards electroshock, myself."

"Shit," Sandra says. Huw glances sideways at her, and cowers away from him. "Shit!"

"What is it?" he asks.

"Your—" she stops, and rummages in her fanny pack. Pulling out a mirror she passes it to him. "Throat."

At the other end of the bench, Doc Björk is explaining the healing properties of ambient post-industrial music to an interested judge and a couple of less skeptical jurors. Huw holds up the hand mirror and points it at his throat.

Huw stares at the mirror nearly cross-eyed and focuses on his stubby Adam's apple. It has been completely covered with a familiar biohazard trefoil, surrounded by ranked miniature trefoils, each of them fractally ringed with smaller duplicates, and so on, into hairy infinitude that no doubt extends down to mitochondrial detail.

Huw clutches his hands to his throat and feels it buzzing, vibrating, just as Björk lets fly with an eerie ululation. She sings the quasi-melody rather well, noodling around from a ghostly, bluesy I-IV-V progression to something pentatonic that sounds like the wind whistling over the blasted steppes of some distant Eastern land and then into something Celtic and complicated.

The buzzing under his sweating fingertips heightens. The godvomit is vibrating, too, beginning a bobbing sinuous cobra-dance, and it begins to sing, too, a low droning ommmmmm that resonates in Huw's bones, in Huw's throat, in Huw's mind.

His tongue stirs in his mouth and he feels a great, pre-verbal welling from his larynx. He feels a burst of Tourettic obscenities tickling at his lips like a sneeze, and he moves his hands from his throat and claps them over his mouth, but it's too late, he's singing, too.

If you can call it singing. He's giving voice to *two* wordless melodies simultaneously, in artful discord to each other and the joint song of the Kleinmonster and Björk. One voice is *basso profundo*, the other a Tiny Tim falsetto, and the Kleinmonster is turning its attention on him—he can *hear* it thinking joyful thoughts to itself. His skin crawls with creeping horror as his voicebox secedes from his autonomic nervous system and he flees the courtroom, chased by the mystified stares of his co-jurors and the doleful glare of the Vulture.

He stumbles for the loo, struggling to keep the alien song inside his chest, lips clamped tightly shut. He has an enormous, painful, rock-hard erection and he thinks wildly of auto-erotic asphyxiators who blow their loads in ecstatic writhing as their oxygen-starved brains stage endorphin-fuelled fireworks displays on the backs of their eyelids. He is certain he is dying. He falls to his knees on the rubber tiles of the lav's floor and begins to retch and weep.

He feels a tentative hand caressing his shoulder and he turns his head. Through a haze of tears, he recognizes Bonnie, her eyes smoldering with barely controlled lust. "You're so fucking *transhuman*," s/he says, and clamps her mouth to his, ramming her tongue in almost to his gag reflex. She pins him to the yielding tiles and straddles him, grinding her/his crotch against his.

It's enough to shock him out of despair and into anger. He pushes hard against her bony xylophone chest and spits. "You are *sick*," he says, rolling away. The song is dying now, just a buzz of harmonics that pick at his pulse. "God!"

Bonnie smirks at him and does a cat-stretch on the tile before climbing to her feet. She shakes herself and tosses her fringe and gives him another smirk. "Pity," she says and leaves him alone.

Huw pulls himself to his feet and staggers for the door, his throat no longer itching, but *wriggling*. He pushes weakly against the door and steps out into the corridor, where he confronts the entire court, which has apparently adjourned to follow him. The Vulture's fists are fiercely planted on her hips.

"You're infected," the Vulture says. "Unfortunate. We've got a nanocontainment box for you until we sort it out. We'll pull an alternate juror from the pool." She sounds almost tender, not to say yielding. Sandra, Bonnie, Björk, the caveman and the centenarian are all staring at him like a sideshow curiosity. "Come along then, the Guardsmen will take you to the box." The Guardsmen are a pair of hulking golems, stony-faced and brutal-looking. They advance on him with a thunderous tread, brandishing manacles like B-movie inquisitors.

Huw's mind goes blank—blank with fear and rage. *Bastards!* he tries to scream, and what comes out is an eerie howl that makes the jurors wince and probably terrifies every dog for a kilometer around. He feints towards them, then spins on his heel and dashes for the front doors. Curare darts spang off the rubber walls and rebound around him, but none hit him. He leaps off the courtroom steps and runs headlong into the humanswarm, elbowing his way along.

He runs without any particular direction, but his feet take him back to the hacker's Roc's egg of their own accord. He turns his head and scans the crowd for jurors or officers of the court. Seeing none, he thumps the egg until the door irises open, then dives through it.

The hacker is laid out on her table, encased in the instrument bush. Her fingers and toes work its tendrils in response to unknowable feedback from its goggles and earphones. Huw coughs in three-part harmony, and she gives her fingers a decisive waggle that causes the bush to contract into a fist near the ceiling.

She looks at him, takes in Huw's watermarked throat and two-part snoring drone and shakes her head. "Right," she says. "Looks like you're about done, then." The teapot at his belt translates efficiently, giving her a thick brummie accent for no reason Huw understands.

"What the fuck is this shit?" Huw says, over his drone.

"No need for that sort of language," she says primly. She gets up off her table and gestures towards it. "Up you go," she says.

Reluctantly, Huw climbs up, then watches the bush descend on him and encase him in a quintillion smart gossamer fingers.

"I uploaded your opportunistic code to a mailing-list," the hacker said. "It was a big hit with the Euros—lucky for you it's their waking hours, or it could have been another twelve hours before we heard back. You've solved quite a little mystery, you know.

"The betaware you're infected with has been floating around the North Sea for about a month now, but it has so far failed to land a single successful somatic infection. Lots of carriers but no afflicted. Best guess at its origin is a cometary mass extruded from the Cloud that burned away protecting its payload.

"So it was quite the mystery until I pasted your genome into a followup. Then it was obvious—it's looking for specific T-helper lymphocytes. Welsh ones. Which begs another question: why Welsh?"

"And here we have the answer." The bush's tendrils stroked Huw's growling voicebox. "All those grotty Welsh vowel-sounds and glottals. It needed a trained larynx to manifest."

"Aaaagh," Huw gargles, tensing angrily and trying to argue. The bush takes the opportunity to shove what feels like a wad of cotton wool into his mouth and extrude exploring wisps to brush samples from his epiglottis.

A histogram scrolls across the egg's wall in time with Huw's groan, spiking ferociously. "Oh, *very nice*," she says. "You're modulating about a gigabit a second over a short-range audio link. Pushing the limits of info-sci, you are!"

Huw stutters another groan, then vomits a flood of obscenities: "Segfault fuck piss cuntung shit Bee Ess Oh Dee." They're chased and enveloped with his di-vocal drone, and the histogram spikes in sympathy.

The hacker shakes her head. "No easy way to know what you're spewing, of course. Lots of activity in your language and vision centers, though." The bush firmly grips the sides of his head. "Do that again, will you? I'm going to run a PET scan."

"I don't think I can—" he begins, then, "Whore tripe shiznit kay-rap eatme!"

"Right," she says. "Right. Here's my guess, then. You're x-mitting your sensoria—visual, auditory, olfactory, even tactile. Somewhere out there there's a complimentary bit of receiving equipment that can demodulate the signal. You're a remote sensing apparatus."

"Fuck," Huw says. The histogram is still. He is voluntarily cursing.

"It's kinky, yes?" she says. "Too kinky for you. One second." Tentacles slither down his throat briskly, curl around inside his stomach, then come back out. It feels like he's vomiting, except his guts are limp, and a big bolus of something or other is trying to stick in his throat on the way out. For a panicky moment he feels as if he's choking—then the lump tears away with a bright stabbing pain, but he can breathe through his nose again.

"Ah, that's better," he hears distantly. "A beautiful little whistle! Easy to fence to some out-of-body perv, I think. Oh dear, did I say that aloud?" A fuzzy mat of bush tendrils peel away from his face to reveal an unsympathetic face peering down at him. "You *did* hear that, didn't you? Hmm, what a pity. Well, your left kidney is in good shape—"

There's a loud crash from outside the operating theatre, followed by a wail from his belt. "In here!" screams his teapot. "Help, please come quickly!"

More crashing. The hacker straightens up, cursing under her breath. Casting around, her gaze falls on Huw's biohazard burka. She grabs it and dives for the back door, sending a gleaming operating cart skidding across the floor. She's out the back as a tremendous thudding noise batters at the entrance and the door bulges inwards. Huw struggles to sit up, pushing back the suddenly quiescent instrument bush—it feels like wrestling with a half ton of candyfloss. *What now?* he thinks wildly.

"In here!" shrieks the djinn, standing in holographic miniature on top of the teapot and waving its arms like a stranded sailor.

"You shut up," Huw grunts hoarsely. He manages to get his legs off the side of the chair and stumbles against the trolley. Another crash from the front door, and he sees something on the floor—something silvery and cylindrical, about ten centimeters long and one in diameter, for all the world like a pocket recorder covered in slime. *That's it?* he puzzles, and thoughtlessly picks it up and pockets it just as the door gives up the uneven struggle and slams open to admit the two court golems, followed by an extremely irritated hanging judge.

"Arretez-vous!" yells his djinn. "He's over here! Don't let him get away this time!" With a sense of horror Huw realizes that the little snitch is jumping up and down and pointing at him.

"No chance," grates Judge Giuliani. "Get him!" She tells the golems, and they lurch towards him. "Your palanquin is outside, waiting to take you to the Emperor Ghadaffi Memorial Teaching Hospital. It's quite secure," she adds, with an ugly grin. "Asshole. Do you *want* to spread it around? Have you any idea how much trouble you're in already, breaking biocontainment?"

"The—the bastards, set me fucking shitting up—" The Tourette's is still there, as is a residual urge to break out in song even as the huge golems clamp inhumanly gentle six-fingered hands the size of ditch-diggers around his arms—"party in fucking cunt *Monmouth*, fucking bitch Bonnie slipped me the shit-shit-shitting godvomit raining on Northern fucking Europe, set me up that wasn't the fucking Libyan consulate at all, was it? And, and—"

One of the golems slaps a hand over his face. The hand has some kind of flexible membrane on it, with built-in antisound. Huw can hear himself chattering and cursing inside his own head, but nothing's getting out. The golem slowly shrinkwraps his legs together from hip to ankle, and the other golem picks him up under one arm and carries him through the broken front door. The hands of the first golem part easily at the wrist and go with him, a temporary gag.

"We'll discuss the charges later, in my chambers," Giuliani murmurs in his ear, confidingly. Then she whisks off in a flapping of black-winged robes as the golem lowers Huw into something that looks like a cross between a pedal-powered taxi and an upright coffin.

Bastard fucking bastard must stop fucking swearing, Huw thinks desperately, as he confronts a baby-blue padded cell lined with ominous-looking straps. *Bonnie set me up for this, bastard neophiliac, but why did the fucking tin whistle want to talk to the shit-monster? Why was the thing happy to hear me*—he stops as the lid closes behind him, momentarily shocked. Because that *was* the oddest thing about it; the way the godvomit responded to his unwanted flight of song—

As the golems start leaning on the pedals, something squirms in his pocket, like an inquisitive worm. It's the whistle the hacker yanked out of his throat, he realizes, half-horrified that he's locked in with it. *Which is worse*, he asks himself, *a traitorous djinn or a musical instrument that wants to nest in my larynx?* He gets his answer a moment later as the whistle squirms again, then digs in tiny claws and begins to inch its way up his shirt. Locked in a tiny box, on his way to the cells beneath the courthouse, Huw confronts his most primal fear, gives in, and screams himself hoarse behind his antisound gag.

Eventually, his screams taper off and he notices a heretofore subliminal buzzing against his hip, and he screams afresh as he envisions spidery trefoils crawling over his pelvic girdle towards his crotch. The reason takes over and he realizes that it's his goddamned phone. Squirming around in the cramped box, he pulls it out and shakes it to life, holding it before his mute face. The picture on the other end resolves. Adrian and his bicycle, in some swarming *souk*. "Wotcher!" Adrian says, cheerfully. Huw waggles his eyebrows frantically at the pinhole cam. The whistle is stuck on his hollow chest, crawling in circles as it tries to locate a suitable aperture to return to its nest by.

"Saucy," Adrian says. "Hadn't figured you for bent in *that* direction. Met a lucky lady, then?"

Huw shakes his head frantically, rolling his eyes. Slowly, he pans the phone around the tiny box, then brings it back to eye-level.

"Oh ho! Not voluntary, then."

Huw nods so fiercely his head smacks into the padded wall behind him.

Adrian shakes his head. "Right then. See you in two ticks." The picture on the phone swings crazily as Adrian clips it to one of the thousands of clever grabbers on the front of his wash-n-wears and pedals off on the bike. Periodically, his face looms in the screen as he looks down at the positional data that Huw's phone is relaying.

Then Huw is looking at a jittery high-def image of the Judge's caravan, at the slowly moving lockbox he's encased in. Adrian holds his phone up again and Huw sees that his eyes are, if anything, redder than they'd been that morning, nearly fluorescent with stoned glee. "You're in there, yeah?" he says, and swings the phone toward the strongbox. Huw nods.

"Hrm." Adrian says. "Tricky." He clips his phone back to his shirt and turns around, and Huw sees two young women swathed in paramilitary black bodysuits bulging with cargo pockets and clever sewn-in bandoliers. They exchange rapid hand-signals then the phone's POV wheels sickeningly as Adrian does a tire-attriting doughnut and zips off to the head of the caravan. Now Huw's looking at the two impassive golems pumping the pedals of the palanquin. Adrian rolls the bike directly into their path, then makes terrified tourist squeaks as he rolls clear of the frame at the same moment as the golems plough through it, then grind to a halt as their wheels disintegrate on Huw's bike's frame, which has gone into self-defensive hedgehog mode. Huw hears the Vulture croaking enraged threats at Adrian, whom Huw is certain is shrugging with gormless English apologies.

Then his cage rocks violently and he's thrown to one side, losing his phone in the process. A moment later, light scythes into Huw's cell and he's staring up into the eye-slit of a ceramic-reinforced veil. Strong, long-fingered hands lift him free and he's unceremoniously slung over a hard female shoulder. Dangling upside-down, Huw catches a glimpse of the smoking ceiling of the palanquin, dissolving into blue goo, and the Vulture, her black robe spread out like tattered wings as she waves her arms in their direction. The golems are lumbering toward them, but in a moment they're gone into the crowd, lost in the swarm.

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The safe house is another inflatable, half-buried in sand and ringed with memory-wire fencing some shepherd's noisesome cache of GM livestock—cows that give chocolate milk, goats that eat scrap plastic and excrete a soft spun cotton analogue, miniature hamster-sized chickens that seem even stupider than real chickens and swarm like tropical fish. Adrian's already waiting for them when they arrive, standing over the remains of Huw's bicycle.

"Guess you get to keep the hash, old son," Adrian says, kicking the wreckage. "Too bad—it was a lovely ride. I see you've met Maizie and Becky. Becky, love, would you mind setting Huw down now? He's looking a little green and I'm sure he'd appreciate some terror firmer and the removal of that horrid gag."

Neat as that, Huw is sitting plonk on his bottom in the sand, helping Adrian laboriously pry back and snap off each of the golem's fingers. Adrian tosses them to the goats and Maizie says something to him that Huw can't understand.

Adrian shakes his head. "You worry too much—those buggers'll eat anything."

Once he's free of the gag, Huw give his jaw an experimental wiggle, then opens his mouth in a wide gasp. Quick as that, the whistle—which has been hiding cannily behind his left ear—circumnavigates his jaw and climbs into his mouth, darting down his throat. "Shit!" Huw says, around the harmonics of the whistle now nestled back in his larynx.

"Aha!" says Adrian. "You're the carrier all right. We read about you online. The sisters want samples, later. You're going to need a bath first, I think. No offense. Come on in," he says, kicking away sand to reveal a trap-door. Hosting it open, Adrian exposes a helical slide into the bounce-house's depths; he slides in feet-first and spirals down into the safe-house.

Huw gasps for breath, balanced on the fine edge between nervousness and stark screaming terror. Normalcy wins: the whistle doesn't hurt, indeed barely feels as if it's there. A goat sidles up behind him with evil in its eyes and leans over his shoulder, snorting, to see if he's edible; the hot breath on his ear reminds him that he's still alive, and not even unable to talk. One of the Libyan Goth ninjettes is squatting patiently by the door. "Hello?" he says, experimentally rubbing his throat.

She shrugs and emits a rapid-fire stream of Arabic. Then, seeing he doesn't understand she shrugs again and points at the slide. "Oh, I get it," says Huw. He peers at her closely. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

She says something else, this time sharply. Huw sighs. "Okay, I don't know you." His throat feels a bit odd, but not as odd as it ought to for someone who's just swallowed an alien communications protocol. *I need to know what's going on*, he realizes, eyeing the trapdoor uneasily. *Oh well*. Steeling himself, he lowers his legs into the slide and forces himself to let go.

The room at the bottom is a large bony cavern, its ceiling hung with what look like gigantic otoliths, floored with pink sensory fronds. Adrian is puttering around with a very definitely non-sapient teapot on a battered Japanese camping stove; the other one of the ninjette twins is sitting cross-legged on the floor, immersed in some kind of control interface to the Red Crescent omnifab that squats against one wall, burbling and occasionally squirting glutinously to itself. "Ah, there y'are. Cup of tea, mate?" says Adrian.

"Don't mind if I do," Huw replies guardedly. "Just what the *fuck fuck fuck*—'scuse me—is going on?"

"Siddown." Adrian waves at a bean-bag. "Milk, sugar?"

"Both, thanks. Agh—damn. Got anything for-for Tourette's?"

"Cording to the user manual it'll go away soon. No worries."

"User manual? Sh—you mean this thing comes with a warranty? That sort of thing?"

"Sure." Adrian pours boiling water into the teapot and sets it aside to stew. Then he sits down besides the oblivious Libyan woman and pulls out a stash tin. He begins to roll a joint, chatting as he does so. "It's been spamming to hell and back for the past six months. Seems something up there wants us to, like, *talk* to it. For some years now it's not had much of a clue about us, but it's finally invented, bred, whatever, an interface to the human deep grammar engine. Sort of like the crappy teapots the embassy issues everyone with. Trouble is, the interface is really specific, so only a few people can assimilate it. You—" Adrian shrugs. "I wasn't involved," he adds.

"Who was?" demands Huw, his knuckles whitening. "If I find them—"

"It was sort of one of those things," Adrian says vaguely. "You know how it happens? Someone does some deep data mining on the proteome and spots a correlation. Posts their findings publicly. Someone else thinks, hey, I know that joe, and invites them to a party along with a bunch of their friends. Someone else spikes the punch while they're chatting up a Sheila, and then a prankster at the Libyan embassy thinks hey, we could maybe rope him into one of the hanging judge's assizes, howzabout that? Boy, you can snap your fingers and before you know what's happening there's a flash conspiracy in action—not your real good old fashioned secret world order, nobody can be arsed tracking those things these days, but the next best thing. A self-propagating telegology meme. Goal-seeking Neat Ideas are the most dangerous kind. You smoke?"

"Thanks," says Huw, accepting the joint. "Is the tea ready?"

"Yeah." And Adrian spends the next minute pouring a couple of mugs of extremely strong breakfast tea, while Huw does his best to calm his shattered nerves by getting blasted right out of his skull on hashishim dope.

"'kay, lemme get this straight. I was never on tech jury call, right? Was a setup. All along."

"Well, hurm. It was a real jury, all right, but that doesn't mean your name was plucked at anything like random, follow?"

"All right. Nobody planned, not a conspiracy, just a set of *accidents* 'cause the Cloud wants to talk. Huh?" Huw leans back on the beanbag and bangs his head on a giant otolith, setting it vibrating with a deep gut-churning rumble. "Sh cool. It wanna talk to *me*?"

"Yer the human condition in microcosm, mate. Here, pass the spliff."

"'kay. So *what* wants to talk?"

"Eh, well, you've met the ambassador already, right? S'okay, Bonnie'll be along in a while with it."

"And whothefuck are *you*? I mean, what're you doing in this?"

"Hell." Adrian looks resigned. "I'm just your ordinary joe, really. Forget the Nobel prize, that doesn't mean anything. 's all a team effort these days, anyway, and I ain't done any lab work for thirty, forty years. Tell the truth, I was just bumming around, enjoying my second teenage *wanderjahr* when I heard 'bout you through the grapevine. Damn shame we couldn't get a sane judge for the hearing. None of this shit would be necessary if it wasn't for Rosa."

"Rosa—"

"Rosa Giulliani. She's like, a bit conservative. Hadn't you noticed?"

"A bit. Conservative."

"Yeah, she's an old-time environmentalist, really likes conserving things—preferably in formalin. Including anyone who's been infected by a communications vector."

"Oh." Huw is still trying to digest the indigestible thought, through a haze of amiability-inducing smoke, when the local unplugs herself from the omnifab's console, stands up and stretches, then plugs in a language module.

"Your bicycle will be healed again in a few hours," she says, nodding at Huw, just as the omni burps and then hawks up a passable replica of a Shimano universal ratio gearhub. "Can you put it together with tools?"

"I, uh—" Huw gawks at her. "Do I know you?" he asks. "You look just like this hacker—"

She shrugs irritably. "I am not responsible for my idiot clone-aunts!"

"But you—" he stops. "There are lots of you?"

"Oh yes." She smiles tightly. "Ade, my friend, I am taking a walk. Don't get up to anything I wouldn't."

"I won't, Beckie. Promise."

"Good. I'm Maizie, though." She climbs onto a toadstool-shaped bone and rapidly rises towards the ceiling on a pillar of *something* that might be muscle, but probably isn't.

"Lovely girls," Adrian says wistfully when she's gone. "Where was I? Ah, yes: the ambassador."

"Ambassador?"

"Yeah, ambassador. It's kind of a high-bandwidth node, with enough translator brains to talk to that thing in your throat. You're the interpreter, see. We've been expecting it for a while, but didn't reckon with those idiot script kiddies ending up in court. It'll be along—"

There's a clattering noise behind Huw, and he looks round so abruptly that he nearly falls off his sack, and though he's feeling mellow—far-better disposed towards his fellow man than he was an hour ago—it's all Huw can do to refrain from jumping up, shrieking.

"You!" says Bonnie, clutching a large and ominously familiar box in her arms as she slides to a halt at the foot of the spiral. "Hey, Ade, is this *your* party?"

The box twitches in her arms, as if something inside it is trying to escape. Huw can feel a scream welling up in his throat, and it isn't his—it's a scream of welcome, a paen of politics. He bites it back with a curse. "How the hell did you get that?" he says.

"Stole it while the judge was running after you," Bonnie says smugly. "There's a README with it that says it needs a translator. That would be you, huh?" She looks at him with ill-concealed lust. "Prepare to plug into the ride of your life!"

"God, no," he groans.

Adrian pats his shoulder. "Pecker up. It's all for the best."

The box opens and the Kleinmonster bobs a curtsey at him, then warbles. His throat warbles in response. The hash has loosened his vocal cords so that there isn't the same sense of forced labor, just a mellow, easy kind of song. His voices and the Kleinmonster's intertwine in an aural handshake and gradually his sensoria fades away, until he's no longer looking out of his eyes, no longer feeling through his skin, but rather he's part of the Cloudmind, smeared across space and time and a billion identities all commingled and a-swirl with unknowable convection currents of thought and deed.

Somewhere there is the Earth, the meatspace whence the Cloudmind has ascended. His point of view inverts and now the Earth is enveloped in him, a messy gobstopper dissolving in a probabilistic mindmouth. It's like looking down at a hatched-out egg, knowing that once upon a time you fit inside that shell, but now you're well shut of it. Meat, meat, meat. Imperfect and ephemeral and needlessly baroque and kludgey, but it calls to the Cloud with a gravatic tug of racial memory.

And then the sensoria recedes and he's eased back into his skin, singing to the Kleinmonster and its uplink to the Cloud. He knows he's x-mitting his own sensoria, the meat and the unreasoning demands of dopamine and endorphin. Ah, says the Ambassador. Ah. Yes. This is what it was like. Ah.

Awful.

Terrible.

Ah.

Well, that's done.

The Kleinmonster uncoils and stretches straight up to the ceiling, then gradually telescopes back into itself until it's just a button of faintly buzzing nanocrud. The buzzing gains down and then vanishes, and it falls still.

Bonnie shakes his shoulders. "What happened?" she says, eyes shining.

"Got what it needed," Huw says, with a barely noticeable under-drone.

"What?"

"What? Oh, a bit of a reminder, I expect. A taste of the meat."

"That's it?" Bonnie says. "All that for—what? A trip down memory lane? All that fucking work and it doesn't even want to stick around and chat?"

Huw shrugs. "That's the Cloud for you. In-fucking-effable."

"Will it be back? I wanted to talk to it about ..." she trailed off, blushing. "I wanted to know what it was like."

Huw thinks of what it was like to be part of the matrioshke-brain, tries to put it into words. "I can't quite describe it," he says. "Not in so many words. Not right now. Give me a while, maybe I'll manage it." He's got a nasty case of the pasties and he guzzles a cup of lukewarm milky tea, swirling it around his starchy tongue. "Of course, if you're really curious, you could always join up."

Bonnie looks away and Adrian huffs a snort. "I'll do it some day," she says. "Just want to know what I'm getting into."

Huw keeps the smile off his phiz. "I understand," he says. "Don't worry, I still think you're an anti-human race-traitor, girlie. You don't need to prove anything to me."

"Fucking right I don't!" Bonnie says. She's blushing rather fetchingly.

"Right," Huw says.

"Right."

Huw begins to hum a little, experimenting with his new transhuman peripheral. The drone is quite nice. He sings a little of the song from the courthouse, in two-part discord. Bonnie's flush deepens and she rubs her palms against her thighs, hissing like a teakettle.

Huw cocks his head at her and leans forward a bit, and she grabs his ears and drags him down on top of her.

Adrian taps him on the shoulder a moment later. "Sorry to interrupt," he says, "but Judge Rosa's bound to come looking for you eventually. We'd best get you out of Libya sharpish."

Huw ignores him, concentrating on the marimba sensation of Bonnie's ribcage grinding over his chest.

Adrian shakes his head. "I'll just go steal a blimp or something, then, shall I?"

Bonnie breaks off worrying Huw's ear with her tongue and teeth and says, "Fuck off a while, will you, Adrian?"

Adrian contemplates the two of them for a moment, trying to decide whether they need a good kick 'round the kidneys, then turns on his heel and goes off to find Maizie, or perhaps Beckie, and sort out an escape.

The Cloud whirls in its orbit, tasting the meat with its multifarious sensory apparati, thinking its in-fucking-effable thoughts, muttering in RF and gravity and eigenstate. The ambassador hibernates on the safe-house's floor, prized loose from under Huw's tailbone, where it had been digging rather uncomfortably, quite spoiling Huw's concentration, and tossed idly into a corner. The Cloud's done with it for now, but its duty-cycle is hardly exhausted, and it wonders what its next use will be.

Huw moans an eerie buzz that sets Bonnie's gut a-quiver in sympathy, which is not nearly as unpleasant as it sounds.

In fact, Bonnie thinks she could rather get used to it.

The End