

AT FIRST JUST GHOSTLY

Karl Edward Wagner

I. Beginning Our Descent

His name was Cody Lennox, and he was coming back to England to die, or maybe just to forget, and after all it's about the same in the long run.

He had been dozing for the last hour or so, when the British Airways stewardess politely offered him an immigration card to be filled in. He placed it upon the tray table beside the unfinished game of solitaire and the finished glass of Scotch, which he must now remember to call whisky when asking at the bar, and this was one of the few things he was unlikely to forget.

Lennox tapped his glass. "Time for another?"

"Certainly, sir." The stewardess was blonde and compactly pretty and carefully spoke BBC English with only a trace of a Lancashire accent. Her training had also taught her not to look askance at first class passengers who declined breakfast in favor of another large whisky.

Lennox's fellow passenger in the aisle seat favored him with a bifocaled frown and returned to his book of crossword puzzles. Lennox had fantasied him to be an accountant for some particularly corrupt television evangelist, doubtlessly on an urgent mission to Switzerland. They had not spoken since the first hour of the flight, when after preflight champagne and three subsequent large whiskies Lennox had admitted to being a writer.

Fellow passenger (scathingly): "Oh, well then—name something you've written."

Lennox (in apparent good humor): "You go first. Name something you've read."

In the ensuing frostiness Lennox played countless hands of solitaire with the deck the stewardess had provided and downed almost as many large whiskies, which she also dutifully provided. He considered a visit to the overhead lounge, but a trip to the lavatory convinced him that his legs weren't to be trusted on the stairs. So he played solitaire, patiently, undeterred by total lack of success, losing despite the nagging temptation to cheat. Lennox had once been told by a friend in a moment of drunken insight that a Total Loser was someone who cheated at solitaire and still lost, and Lennox didn't care to take that chance. Eventually he fell asleep.

Cody Lennox liked to fly first class. He stood a rangy six-foot-four, and while he still combed his hair to look like James Dean, his joints were the other side of forty and rebelled at being folded into a 747's tourist-class orange crates. He was wont to say that the edible food and free booze were more than worth the additional expense on a seven-hour flight, and his preventive remedy for tedium and for jet-lag was to drink himself into a blissful stupor and sleep throughout the flight. Once he and Cathy had flown over on the Concorde, and for that cherished memory he would never do so again.

He still hadn't got used to traveling alone, and he supposed he never would.

He looked through the window and into darkness fading to grey. As they chased the dawn, clouds began to appear and break apart; below them monotonous expanses of grey sea gave way to glimpses of distant green land. Coming in over Ireland, he supposed, and finished his drink.

He felt steadier now, and he filled out the immigration card, wincing, as he knew he would, over the inquiry as to marital status, etc. He placed the card inside his passport, avoiding looking at his photograph there. There was time for another hand, so he collected and reshuffled his cards.

"We are beginning our descent into London Heathrow," someone was announcing. Lennox had nodded off. "Please make certain your seatbelts are fastened, your seat backs are in the upright position, your tray tables are..."

"The passengers will please refrain," prompted Lennox, scooping up the cards and locking back his

tray. "Batten the hatches, you swabs. Prepare to abandon ship."

"Do you want to know why you never won?"

"Eh?" said Lennox, startled by his seatmate's first attempt at conversation since the Jersey shore.

The mysterious accountant pointed an incisive finger toward the cabin floor. "You haven't been playing with a full deck."

The Queen of Spades peeked out from beneath the accountant's tight black shoes.

"The opportunity to deliver a line such as that comes only once in a lifetime," Lennox said with admiration. He reached down to recover the truant card, but the impact of landing skidded it away.

Probably the really and truly best thing about flying first class across the Atlantic was that you were first off the plane and first to get through immigration and customs. Lennox had a morbid dread of being engulfed by gabbling hordes of blue-haired widows from New Jersey or milling throngs of students hunchbacked by garish knapsacks and sleeping bags. "Americans never queue up," he once observed to an icily patient gentleman, similarly overrun while waiting for a teller at a London bank. "They just mill about and make confused sounds."

"The purpose of your stay here, sir?" asked the immigrations officer, flipping through Lennox's passport.

"Primarily I'm on holiday," said Lennox. "Although for tax purposes I'll be mixing in a little business, as I'm also here to attend the World Science Fiction Convention in Brighton some days from now."

The officer was automatically stamping his passport. "So then, you're a writer, are you, sir?" His eyes abruptly focused through the boredom of routine, and he flipped back to the passport photo.

"Cody Lennox!" He compared photo and face in disbelief. "Lord, and I've just finished reading *They Do Not Die*!"

"Small world," said Cody imaginatively. "Will you still let me in?"

"First celebrity I've had here." The immigrations officer returned his passport. "Your books have given me and the wife some fair shivers. Working on a new one, are you?"

"Might write one while I'm here."

"I'll want to read it, then."

Lennox passed through to baggage claim and found his two scruffy suitcases. They were half-empty, as he preferred to buy whatever he needed when he needed it, and he hated to pack. He also hated carry-on luggage, people who carried on carry-on luggage, and cameras of all sorts. Such eccentricities frequently excited some speculation as to his nationality.

Cody Lennox was, however, American: born in Los Angeles of a Scandinavian bit-player and a father who worked in pictures before skipping to Mexico; educated across the States with two never-to-be-completed doctorates scattered along the way, and now living in New York City. He had had eight best-selling horror novels over the last five years, in addition to some other books that had paid the bills early on. His novels weren't all that long on the best-seller lists, but they were there, nonetheless, and film rights and script work all added up to an enviable bundle. He had been on *Johnny Carson* twice, but he had never hosted *Saturday Night Live*. His books could be found at supermarket check-out counters between the tabloids and the *TV Guides*, but only for a month or so. It was a living. Once he had been happy with his life.

Cody Lennox hauled his pair of cases through the green lane at Heathrow customs. He had made this trip a dozen times or more, and he had never been stopped. Sometimes he considered becoming a smuggler. Probably he looked too non-innocent for the customs officers to bother examining his luggage.

He looked a little like an on-the-skids rock star with his designer jeans and T-shirt and wrinkled linen jacket. He still had the face of a young James Dean, but his ash-blond hair was so pale as to seem dead-white. His left ear was pierced, but he seldom bothered to wear anything there, and his week-old smear of a beard was fashionable but too light to be noticed. He wore blue-lensed glasses over his pale blue eyes, but this was more of necessity than style: Lennox was virtually blinded by bright sunlight.

Lennox adjusted his scarred watch to London time while he waited to cash a traveler's check at the bank outside the customs exit. He saw no sign of his seatmate, and for this he was grateful. Bastard might have told him about the missing card.

The Piccadilly Line ran from Heathrow to where Lennox meant to go, but he was in no mood for the early morning crush on the tube. Still feeling the buzz of a long flight and too many drinks, he joined the queue for a taxi—nudging his cases along with his foot, as he endured confused American tourists and aggressive Germans who simply shoved to the front of it all.

Lennox was very tired and somewhere on the verge of a hangover, when the next black Austin stopped for him. He tossed his cases into the missing left-side front seat and pulled himself into the back. After the 747 the back seat was spacious, and he stretched out his long legs.

He said: "The Bloomsbury Park Hotel. Small place on Southampton Row. Just off Russell Square."

"I know it, gov," said the driver. "Changed the name again, have they?"

"Right. Used to be the Grand. God only knows what it was before that"

II. Lost Without a Crowd

It was not much after nine when the cab made a neat U-turn across Southampton Row and landed Lennox and his cases at the door of his hotel. In addition to changing its name, the Bloomsbury Park Hotel had changed management half a dozen times in the dozen or so years that Lennox had been stopping there, but the head porter had been there probably since before the Blitz, and he greeted Lennox with a warm smile.

"Good to see you again, sir."

"Good to be back, Mr. Edwards."

It had been about a year since his last stay here, and Edwards remembered not to inquire about his wife.

The newest management had redone the foyer again; this time in trendy Art Deco, which fitted as well with the original Art Nouveau decor as did the kilt on the golden-ager tourist who was complaining his way across the lobby in tow of his wife.

Jack Martin was at the reception desk, scribbling away at a piece of hotel stationery.

"Hello, Jack."

"Cody! I don't believe it! I was just writing you a note telling you where I was staying."

"Synchronicity, good buddy. When'd you get here?"

"Flew in Sunday from L.A. Still coping with jet-lag, but I walked over here to see whether you'd checked in yet. Had breakfast? Guess they fed you on the flight. How was it?"

"OK. Anything you can walk away from is OK. Here, better let me register."

Lennox filled in forms while Martin worked on a cigarette. No, his room wasn't ready yet, but Lennox had expected that, and the porters would see to his cases in the meantime.

The girl at the desk was auburn-haired, Irish, and half Lennox's age, and he wondered if she'd been here last time. Probably so, or else she was instinctively cheeky.

"You're very popular, sir. Two calls for you already."

"More likely ten, judging by my usual luck with hotel switchboards." Lennox studied the messages. "Mike Carson says to give him a ring and I owe him a pint. And the other one—from a Mr. Kane?"

"He said he'd be getting in touch."

"Never heard of him. Social secretary from Buckingham Palace, isn't he? Come on, Jack. Let's go get something to drink."

"Pubs won't open until eleven," Martin pointed out.

"Let me show you my private club."

There was a minimart just down Southampton Row from the hotel, and Lennox bought Martin a

carton of orange juice and two cans of lager for himself. Cosmo Place was the alleyway that connected onto Queen Square, where there were vacant benches beneath the trees. Lennox was just able to keep his hands from shaking as he popped his first lager.

Martin was trying to solve the juice carton. "So, Cody. How are things going?"

It was more than a casual question and Lennox hated the glance of watchful concern that accompanied it, but he had grown accustomed to it all and it no longer hurt so bitterly.

"Can't complain, Jack. *They Do Not Die!* is still hanging high on the lists, and Mack says the sharks are in a feeding frenzy to bid on my next one."

"How's that been coming along?"

Lennox killed his lager, stretched out with a sigh, and thoughtfully opened the second can. He said: "Cathy and I used to come here and sit. Place close by on Theobald's Road sells some of the best fish and chips I've ever had. Used to carry them back, sit and eat here, and then we'd walk back to The Sun and wash it all down with pints of gut-wrenching ales."

He closed his eyes and took a long pull of lager, remembering. When he opened his eyes he saw the worn benches stained with pigeon droppings, the dustbins overstuffed with cider bottles, the litter of empty beer cans and crisps packets. The square smelled of urine and unwashed bodies; the derelicts slept all about here at night.

"Let it go, Cody."

"Can't. Nothing left to hang onto but memories."

"But you're just killing yourself."

"I'm already dead."

The church steeple tolled ten. Lennox had always suspected that its bells were an array of old iron pots. A deaf gnome banged on them with a soup ladle. The steeple was a ponderous embarrassment that clashed with what remained of the simple Queen Anne architecture.

"The Church of St. George the Martyr," Lennox said. "Loads of history here. See that steeple? Hawksmoor had a hand in it."

"Who's Hawksmoor?"

"The hero of a famous fairyland fantasy trilogy. Did you know, for example, that the church crypts here are connected by a tunnel beneath Cosmo Place to the cellars of that pub on the corner—The Queen's Larder?"

"Didn't know you read guidebooks."

"Don't. Old pensioner Cathy and I used to drink with there told us. Name was Dennis, and he always drank purple velvets—that's stout mixed with port. Haven't seen him since then."

"With that to drink, I'm not surprised." Martin tossed his juice carton into a bin. "So why St. George the Martyr? I always thought old George slew that dragon. Must have been another George somewhere."

"Or another dragon," said Lennox. "Let's just see if my room is ready by now."

His room was ready. Lennox poured himself a glass of Scotch from the coals-to-Newcastle bottle in his suitcase, then phoned Mike Carson. Carson said he'd meet them at The Swan soon after eleven, and he did.

Lennox was at the bar buying the first round. The day was turning warm and bright after last night's rain, and they had seats at an outside table on Cosmo Place.

"You ever notice," observed Carson, "how Cody always seems to bring good weather when he's over?"

"No, I hadn't," said Martin. "Just must be luck."

Carson offered a cigarette, and they both lit up. "Cody once said to me," he said, inhaling, "that the English carry umbrellas because they expect it to rain. Cody says he never does, because he expects the

day to be clear."

"First optimistic thing I've ever heard about that Cody said."

"It's not optimism," Carson explained. "It's bloody arrogance."

Martin turned to peer into the pub. Lennox was still waiting to be served. Martin said: "God knows it can't be good luck. Not with Cody."

"So, then. How is he?"

"God knows. Not taking it well. I'm worried."

Jack Martin was short for his generation, neatly groomed with a frost of grey starting in his carefully trimmed beard, and there was a hint of middle-age spread beneath his raw silk sport jacket. He had known Lennox from when they were both determined young writers in Los Angeles, before Lennox had connected and split for New York; and while his own several books in no way competed with Lennox's sales figures, he had scripted at least three successful horror films (one from an early Lennox novel), and he had a devoted following among discriminating readers of the genre. Martin's ambition was to become an emerging mainstream writer. He had known Lennox as a friend since high school days.

Mike Carson was taller than Martin, shorter than Lennox, and spare of frame, with short black hair and a brooding face. He wore a long overcoat, loose shirt and baggy trousers, and stopped just short of punk. He looked like an unbalanced and consumptive artist who was slowly starving in a garret; in fact he was Irish and scraping out a fair living between moderately frequent assignments and his wife's steady job. Carson had done the British paperback covers for the last five of Lennox's novels, and, although Lennox had never said so, Carson knew that Lennox had insisted that his choice of artist be included in his contracts. Carson had known Lennox since the first time Cody and Cathy had visited London—when West End pints cost 30p, and Carson had made the mistake of trying to drink him under the table.

"Two bitters, and here's your lager, Jack," said Lennox, sloshing their pints on the pebble-grained aluminum table. "Christ, I hate these straight-sided glasses. They look like oversized Coca-Cola glasses."

"Cheers."

"Oh, thanks, Cody."

They drank.

"Well," said Lennox, halfway through his bitter at a gulp. "So who else is over here?"

"Haven't seen very many stray American writers," Martin told him. "Still a bit early, I guess. Geoffrey Marsh is here—staying over at the Wansbeck. Saw Sanford Vade coming out of an off-license with two jail-baits and a bottle of Beam's Choice. Oh, and I did run into Kent Allard in the lobby this morning. He asked if you were coming over."

"He would." Lennox finished his pint. "You said you were staying at the Russell?"

"That's right."

"I'll get these." Carson downed his pint.

"I'm still OK." Martin sipped at his lager.

Lennox belched. "Crazy town where you have to do your drinking between eleven and three—and then try to find a loo. At least this time next year they'll have twelve-hour opening."

"Why don't you come down to Mexico with me sometime?" Martin suggested. "We could stay a week for what a day here costs. I know some great places."

"My destiny lies here."

"Bullshit. You can get just as drunk in Mexico for a lot less money."

"Money means nothing to me."

"Bullshit."

"Besides, in Mexico I might run into my father."

Carson crashed down three pints. Martin had started to raise a hand in protest. The aluminum table tipped. Martin's fresh pint of lager rocked and tilted. Lennox reached across his own pint glass to catch Martin's. His heavy wristwatch band shattered the top off of the straight-sided glass. Lennox caught

Martin's pint and set it safely upright.

"Reflexes," said Lennox proudly.

"You're bleeding," said Martin.

"No, I'm not."

Carson pointed. "Then where's all this blood coming from?"

Lennox examined his wrist, then pulled out the splinter of glass. "Shit. I've ruined my pint."

It was a minor cut, but it bled stubbornly. Martin gave him a crumpled tissue to use until Carson returned with several paper serviettes and another pint of bitter.

"Don't drink the other," Carson advised. "It's all full of glass and blood."

"I'll hide the evidence," said Lennox, dabbing at his cut wrist. He carried his broken glass to the sewer grating between The Swan and The Queen's Larder. As he bent to pour out the blood-tinged mess, he noticed a playing card balanced against the grating. It was the Queen of Spades.

Lennox reached down for it clumsily, but a splash of his blood was faster and struck the edge of the card, flipping it into the darkness below.

III. Wicked Malt

"I understand you just slashed your wrist."

"Hello, Kent," said Lennox without enthusiasm. "Nice to see you again. Been over here long?"

Kent Allard had joined their table while Lennox was disposing of his shattered glass. Kent looked like any well-to-do Hollywood hustler—permanently tanned and forever thirty-five. He wrote about writers, made books about books, and had ghosted half the celebrity kiss-and-tell autobiographies of the past decade. Lennox had heard that Allard was somehow related to one of the Great Departed. Martin liked Allard and called him a demonic genius in wolf's clothing; Lennox saw in Allard most of the reasons why he had fled from Los Angeles.

"What a coincidence," said Lennox, reaching for his fresh pint.

"Slashing your wrist?"

"No. Running into you here."

"It's all because of the Harmonic Convergence," said Allard. "Synchronicity is in the air. Besides, I'm staying down the block at the Russell, and Jack said you might be meeting here for lunch. So, how are things going for you, Cody?"

"Keeping busy. What's the Harmonic Convergence?"

"You mean you missed it? August 16-17? Scant hours ago."

"I was in transit. Just got in scant hours ago."

"Didn't really miss anything. Now, what about lunch?"

"I'm on jet-lag," Lennox begged off. "Think I'll just mellow out with a few more of these and hit the sack."

"I ate just before coming over," Carson lied.

"You and me then, Jack," said Allard. "I'm in a mood for Italian. Anyone know a good place?"

Martin pointed. "One right here's a good one."

They left, and Lennox said to Carson: "Let's get out of here."

Lennox kept dabbing at his wrist, but it had long since quit bleeding. He and Carson ended up at the Nellie Dean in Soho, for no particular reason. Inside it was crowded, loud, smoky and hot, so they leaned against the wall outside and drained many pints. Lennox had twice already bashed his head on the rafters going downstairs to the gents'.

"English pubs have a distinct aura," said Lennox.

"What's that?"

"A smell of strong tobacco, spilled bitter, stale clothing, sweat and breath."

"That's aroma you meant."

"Very possibly." Lennox glanced at his watch, saw no blood, decided they had less than half an hour to drink. "Have you noticed that all the women are dressed in black?"

"It's the fashion," Carson explained.

"Black everything. Neck to their shoes. Everything very tight. And those wide belts to cinch their waistline. Do you know what it all signifies?"

"My round," said Carson.

"It's the return of *fin de siecle* decadence. This is 1987, the dawn of a new *fin de siecle*. A new age of decadence. All of it kicked off by the Harmonic Emergence."

Carson remembered that Martin had asked him to look after Lennox. He bought another round.

"Some wicked malt," Carson nodded.

She was dressed in a black leather mini and might have been seventeen. They solemnly watched her parade by on her stiletto heels.

"Christ, I'm horny." Lennox downed his pint. "And I need to piss. And I need some sleep."

"It's your round," prompted Carson.

And soon it was three o'clock closing time.

The walk back to the hotel was a staggering muddle of crowded sidewalks and near-misses when crossing streets. Carson served as a guide of sorts.

"Here, have you seen these?"

They were leaning against a telephone kiosk, catching their breath and getting their bearings.

"Seen what?"

"These here."

The inside of the booth was papered with a dozen handprinted stickers, all offering sexual services and a phone number to call:

... PUNISHMENT FOR WENDY-NAUGHTY SCHOOLGIRL & UNIFORMS... LETS GET ON YOUR KNEES, BOY... TIE & TEASE TV RUBBER... WANT SAFE SEX? GET BREAST RELIEF... PUNK BOYS AGAINST THE WALL... NAUGHTY BOYS GET BOTTOM MARKS...

"Here." Carson abruptly began peeling off stickers, handing them to Lennox. "In case you get lonely."

Lennox dutifully stuck the torn patches into his notebook. "I don't think I'm really into caning punk boys until they cry and all that. I'm just horny. Do any of them say anything about just that? I mean, just screwing?"

"You said you were decadent."

"Well, not that way. What happens when you call one of these numbers? Do the cops come around?"

"Don't know. Never tried. But I know this geezer who did. Woman comes up to his hotel room, and there's a big bloke lurking back down the corridor to make sure there's no trouble for her."

"What happened?"

"She let the ponce in, he bashed the geezer, and they took his wallet and watch."

"Did he have to pay extra for all that?"

It was about four by the time they managed to get back to his hotel. Lennox was feeling the double effects of jet-lag and too much booze on an empty stomach. Carson dutifully saw him to his room, had a

glass of whisky with him, then left Lennox with the advice that he have a lie-down. Lennox did.

He slept soundly, which was rare for him these days, and it was past ten when he awoke.

Lennox sensed the familiar throb of an incipient hangover, so he washed his face, changed shirt and jacket, and headed for the residents' bar.

He was briefly confused, as the new management had moved the residents' bar into the former restaurant on the ground floor. In the course of remodeling the foyer, they had evidently inserted some striking stained-glass panels beside the steps leading to the downstairs bar. Some sort of heraldic designs, Lennox noted in passing, one of them a little garish.

Lennox decided on a large whisky, then chased it with three aspirin and a pint of lager. The lager settled in nicely, and he had another—drinking it slowly as his hangover receded. He began to feel almost alive once again, and with his third pint he was chatting up the willowy blonde barmaid. She was patient, if not receptive.

The bar was nearly empty, and Lennox might have pressed onward, were it not for the table of blue-haired widows who were discussing the quaintness of the British in voices that probably carried all the way back to New Jersey.

Lennox finished his fourth pint and gave up. He stopped by the front desk on the way to his room. There were two messages: one from his British agent and one from a Mr. Kane. Both said they would ring back.

Lennox was just able to manage the plastic card that unlocked his door. Supposedly this improvement over the old metal keys made his room secure from hotel thieves. Lennox wished said thieves the possession of his dirty socks.

He poured himself a generous shot of Scotch and slumped into a chair. The nightcap had no apparent effect, so he tried another. The long nap had left him restless, and it was still early bedtime in New York. Digging out his pocket notebook, Lennox decided to tally the day's expenses. Must keep the IRS happy.

And there he found the peeled-off stickers from the phone booths. Lennox had almost forgotten the incident, and he chuckled as he re-read them:

MISS NIPPLES

SLAP HAPPY BITCH

FUN AND GAMES

It might be fun to phone one of them, just to hear what they'd say—Lennox studied his collection. Most of the stickers had torn when Carson pulled them off, and Lennox had stuck them all in a jumble onto the pages. No, he didn't want to talk to the enema specialist. Lennox closed his eyes, stabbed a finger onto the notebook. There was a phone number under his finger, but nothing more; the sticker had torn in half in coming away, and all Lennox had left was a badly smudged phone number.

Better that way. Strictly random. Besides, he had no intention of telling Ms. Switch or whoever where he was staying. Was that a 2 or a 7?

Lennox had a third drink and just was able to sort out the buttons on the phone. He was still chuckling while it rang.

Three rings, and someone picked up the receiver.

"Howdy there!" Lennox answered the silence. "My name's Bubba Joe McBob, and I'm here from Texas, and I sure could use a little action. What you all got for me, honey?"

"Do you wish me to come to you?" The voice was coldly formal, but at least it was a woman's voice.

"You bet I do, sugar britches."

"As you wish, Cody Lennox."

Lennox stared stupidly at the phone. There was only an empty buzzing from the receiver. He started to dial again, then began to laugh.

"That barmaid," he chuckled, hanging up. "She's watching switchboard, now that the bar's closed down. Cut into my call."

He struggled out of his shoes and considered trying another call. Was that barmaid going to come up to his room after work? She just might. She'd taken the trouble to remember his name. Why miss a chance to sleep with a famous author?

That last drink had made him sleepy. Lennox turned off most of the lights and stretched out on his bed to await the hot-to-trot blonde barmaid. Almost immediately he began to snore.

Lennox was certain he was awake when his door opened and the woman entered his room.

Passkey, he thought, raising himself on his elbows.

It wasn't the barmaid.

"Well, hello now," he said, thinking, *so much for plastic keys and burglar-proof locks*.

She stared at him as if he were part of the furnishings—her eyes slowly taking stock of the room. She was dressed entirely in black, and he could barely see her pale face beneath her low cap. If her eyes hadn't so dominated, he might have seen her face.

Lennox cleared his throat, wondering how to handle the situation. Was she just a hotel thief, or did these call services have some sort of high-tech tracing device? The hotel management wouldn't be amused if he phoned down for them to evict the call girl he'd summoned. Besides...

"Cody Lennox?" she asked, and it was the voice on the phone.

"At your service," said Lennox. "Or vice versa, I suppose."

She pulled off her cap, and her hair was straight and short and black. Its blackness accentuated the paleness of her face—devoid of any color other than the black-red bruise of her lips. Lennox thought her eyes must be black as well.

She had many rings on her fingers and her nails were varnished black. She unclasped the wide cinch at her waist, and when she tugged off the black turtle-neck, her breasts were small and her erect nipples were as pale as the rest of her body. She kicked off her black stiletto pumps, then wriggled free of black tube-skirt and tights with a sinuous motion that reminded Lennox of how a snake would shed its skin. Her hips were small and well-rounded, and her pubic hair was a narrow black V against her white skin.

Lennox remembered to close his jaw.

She sprang onto the bed—cat-like, thought Lennox—and all of this was moving much too fast. Her black-nailed fingers clawed at his belt and zipper, and his jeans were jerked down and away from his growing erection.

"Whoa!" Lennox protested, trying to unbutton his shirt. "Hey, let me just..." And the door must have opened, because there was another man suddenly in the room.

The woman froze.

"Hey," said Lennox. "You're shit out of luck. I put everything in the hotel's safe deposit."

His voice trailed off. He sensed tension, far too much tension, and he knew this was not just a hotel burglary, and he desperately hoped it was only a dream.

The man was not as tall as Lennox, but he was built like an all-pro NFL lineman. He was wearing kicker boots, punker black leathers, and a lot of chains and badges and things. His combed-back red hair and short beard were like rust surrounding a brutal face, and his eyes were cold blue and malevolent. Lennox quickly looked away. It was time to try pinching himself. He tried. It hurt.

"Stay out of this, Kane!" said the woman, backing away like a cat before a pit bull.

"It's you who should go," said Kane, "while you still can."

"We grow stronger."

"But not strong enough. I was in time."

"Hey," said Lennox. "Are you two sure you're in the right room? Or, just tell me if I've made a ..."
She made a gesture. A globe of blue fire darted from her fingers toward Kane. It faded before it reached him.

"Pathetic," said Kane. "Now, get out."

She made a virginal dash for her clothes, clasping their bundle before her, and Lennox almost failed to notice that her feet were changing into cloven hooves.

Then she was gone.

Like that.

"I'll let myself out," said Kane.

"This is the weirdest dream yet," Lennox congratulated him. "If I can remember this when I wake up, you guys are going into my next book. You got an agent?"

"Remember this, Cody," said Kane. "Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean someone isn't really shooting at you."

And Lennox must then have drifted back into dreamless sleep, because he didn't remember when Kane left, and he didn't remember how the pair of black stiletto pumps came to be at the foot of his bed.

IV. Blue Pumps

Lennox awoke at around noon with the grandfather of all hangovers and the maid clattering at his door. He managed to get into his clothes, looked at his face in the mirror and swore never to drink again. As he headed for the bar, he told the maid: "Previous guest left her shoes under the bed. You take them. Not my size."

Two pints of lager put him right, and Lennox remembered that he was supposed to meet Jack Martin for lunch. A third pint, and he was able to paw through his notebook for the time and place. He gazed curiously at the clusters of stickers from the telephone kiosks in Soho. No sign of the number he had dreamt that he called last night.

"We thought you was dead," said Mike Carson, sitting down beside him. "Sorry I'm late, but the bus was held up in traffic. How's the wrist?"

"What?" Lennox was surprised to note a small scab and swelling next to his watchband.

"Don't you remember? You karate-chopped your pint yesterday. Is it lager you're drinking?"

Carson carried over a round just as Jack Martin hustled down the steps into the downstairs bar. "Sorry I'm late," he said, "but it's not my fault."

"Is it lager you're having?" asked Carson.

Lennox finally found an indecipherable scrawl that seemed to indicate he was to meet Martin and Carson here at Peter's Bar at noon. He felt a little smug as he closed his notebook.

"So," said Martin, cautiously. "Are you rested up?"

"Slept like the dead," said Lennox. "A lustful lady in black visited my dreams."

"Whoa!"

"She was chased away by Hulk Hogan before I starched the sheets." Lennox was feeling much better. "What do you say we drink up and wander over to The Friend at Hand? They do a super pub lunch there."

Lennox was able to cope with a ploughman's lunch with Stilton, and he only hit his head once on the eccentric copper lanterns that hung from the fake wooden beams. The food steadied him, and after three pints of bitter he felt up to laying waste to London.

Martin dropped all of his change into a fruit machine, despite his avowed prowess with the Vegas slots, and when he asked for just one more 10p, instead Lennox stuffed the coin into the machine himself and collected five pounds. "Synchronicity," explained Lennox, who had pushed buttons purely at random.

Beginner's luck, he decided privately, and converted his winnings into pints.

It was close and crowded inside, so they found a table outside next to the door. They watched the crowds hurry by along Herbrand Street behind the Hotel Russell; it was a shortcut from the Russell Square tube station to Southampton Row and on toward the British Museum. Tourists wandered in confusion, consulting guidebooks. Office workers strode purposefully by,

"Blue pumps," said Lennox.

"Eh?" Carson was headed inside for his round.

"My next book," Lennox confided. "You got your camera, Jack?"

"Sure. Why?" Martin was carefully picking out the bits of kidney from his steak-and-kidney pie.

"In this Our Harmonic August of Our Lord, 1987," said Lennox, "London women are all wearing pumps."

"Training shoes?" Carson glanced at Martin's Reeboks. "I think you mean stilettos." He continued inside.

"Sorry, I do not speak your language so good. No, look. The tourists are all wearing tennis shoes or something ugly and comfortable. London women all wear stiletto pumps. And they have that quick, purposeful stride, and they never look about; they know where they're going even if they don't want to go there."

"Didn't know you had a foot fetish," Martin said.

"A lovely turn of the ankle," Lennox went on. "Pure *fin de siècle*."

"Skirts are a bit shorter though."

"We'll get a cab," said Lennox. "Drive all around London. You take pictures of their pumps. I'll write the commentary. *Blue Pumps*. Retitle it *Blue Stilettos* for the UK edition. Coffee table book. Pop art. Sell millions of copies. You got enough film?"

"I've got to piss," decided Martin. "You going to be all right here?"

"Steam into this," invited Carson, bringing fresh pints. "You feeling any better?"

"Never better." Lennox was staring back into the pub. "See her?"

"Where?"

"Girl in black."

"Which one?"

"Back by the corner—next to the cigarette machine. Near the Gents'. Jack just walked past her."

"I can't see who you're talking about."

"She's the Lady in Black from my dream."

"Here, sink your pint, Cody. It'll steady you a bit."

"No, wait." Lennox made it to his feet. "I'm going to check this out. Ready for a slash anyway."

Lennox passed Martin as he entered the pub, and Martin gave his back a worried look.

She was standing alone by the bar, her back was to him, and she was dressed all in black. Beside her, talking to one another, stood a group of workmen wearing white boiler suits, somewhat smudged with soot and grime. The side door, which opened onto a sort of tiny alleyway named Colonnade, let circulate a welcome breeze to part the dense tobacco smoke.

She was pretty from the back, and her tight black skirt set off her figure. Lennox figured to walk past her, buy a pack of cigarettes from the machine, then turn to glance at her face. Next he'd casually move beside her at the bar, order a large Glenfiddich (very impressive), open his cigarettes, politely offer her one, and conversation would follow. He was aware that Carson and Martin were observing his progress from beyond the other doorway.

Lennox had almost reached her, but one of the workmen—a rather large bloke—turned away from the chattering group and leaned a thick arm across the bar to block his way. Lennox started to say something.

"Don't," said Kane, turning to face him. "It's another bad move."

Lennox had only a vague memory of his face, but his eyes were not to be forgotten, and the man in the white boiler suit was the man from his dream.

Lennox found drunken *sang-froid*. "Have we met?"

Kane ignored him, not removing his arm from the bar. He said to the

Lady in Black: "Turn around, Bright Eyes."

She slowly turned her head toward Lennox. Beneath the black cap, her face was a leathery mask of tattered flesh clinging to a blackened skull—Lennox felt his beer coming back up.

"Leave us," Kane told her. "Lunchbreak is over."

Lennox closed his eyes tightly, battling to hold his stomach under control. She—whatever he had seen—wasn't there when he opened his eyes again.

Kane was. "That's twice now," he said. "You and I need to talk, Cody. How about over dinner? I'll have my girl get in touch."

Lennox pressed his hand to his mouth and surged toward the Gents'. Kane let him pass.

"Catch you later," Kane called after him.

Kane was gone when Lennox stumbled out of the Gents'. When he had toweled himself clean, his face in the mirror was ghostly pale. He stopped at the bar and quickly downed a large whisky. He was shaking badly, but the second whisky settled him down. Carson and Martin were studiously trying not to watch him too closely as he stumbled onto his seat.

"You OK, Cody?" asked Martin.

Lennox wanted to say: "I'm all right, Jack." Instead he said: "I'm not sure."

"Ought to go easy," Carson suggested. "Jet-lag."

Lennox swallowed his pint. "Look, did you see her?"

"See who?" Martin exchanged glances with Carson.

"Look. What did I just do?"

"What? Just now?"

"When I got up from this table a minute ago."

Martin put down his cigarette. "Well, Cody, I wasn't really paying much attention. You told Mike you thought you'd recognized some girl at the bar and that you needed to take a leak. Then you groped your way past one of those workmen and vanished into the loo. Mike was about to look in on you when you staggered out, tossed back two shots, and found your way back here. I really think you ought to get a nap."

"The girl! The girl in black at the bar. Where did she go?"

"There was never a girl at the bar," said Carson. "Not that we could see."

"My round, I think." Lennox gathered up their glasses and lurched for the bar.

"Don't let him drink too much," Martin cautioned Carson.

"He's really not taking it well," said Carson, "about Cathy."

Martin shook out another cigarette. "What could you expect? I just hope one good drunken binge of a vacation over here will be the catharsis he needs. Otherwise..."

Lennox slammed down the pints, spilling relatively little. He was really feeling lots better. Hair of the dog was a sure cure for DT's. "So, Jack. You got your camera?"

"For *Blue Pumps*?"

"That, too. But mainly so that next time you can take a picture of me with my girl friend."

"Are you Cody Lennox?"

Cody saw her dark blue pumps and followed the nicely filled dark blue hose up to the short denim skirt and jacket. Her breasts were small and firm, and he supposed he could see the rest of them if he unbuttoned her badge-covered jacket. She had that peculiarly perfect British complexion, with a fashion

model's features and short red hair in a sort of spiked crewcut. Behind her mirror shades her eyes would have to be blue, and she was almost as tall as Lennox. She was holding out a copy of *They Do Not Die!*

"I apologize for being so forward," she said. "But I'm a fan of yours, and I'd heard you were coming over for the big convention in Brighton. Well, I'd just purchased your latest book at Dillon's, and then I saw you seated here and looked closely at the photograph on the dust jacket. It's a match. Please, do you mind?"

Lennox did not mind. He dug out his pen. "Would you like this inscribed to...?"

"Klesst. *K - l - e - double - s* and one *t*."

He was trying to place her accent.

Not quite BBC English. Hint of Irish? "Last name and phone number?"

"Just 'Klesst,' please."

Lennox wrote:

All My Best to Klesst. Signed at Her Request. Love from London-Cody Lennox 8/19/87 1:18 PM

He closed the book and set it down on the table. "Here you go. Care to join me and these other debauched celebrities for a drink?"

"Thanks ever so much, but I've got to run." Klesst scooped up her book. "But I'm sure I'll be seeing you again soon." And she hurried away toward the Russell Square tube station.

"Blue pumps, but too long a stride," observed Lennox. "Can't be a native Londoner."

"Christ, but is she twenty-one?" Martin craned his neck to watch her vanish around the corner.

Carson pointed. "She left you a note, Cody. See if it's her address."

There was an envelope lying where the book had been. Lennox turned it over and read *Cody Lennox*, penned in a large masculine hand across the front. He opened the envelope. There was a short note in the same hand and written upon his hotel's stationery:

8/19/87 1:20 PM

Cody—

Let's do dinner. Meet you in the lobby of the Bloomsbury Park Hotel at 6:30 this evening.

My treat.

-Kane

"Shit," said Lennox.

Martin reached out "Let me read it."

Martin read it. He handed the note to Carson. "Know what I think?"

"What do you think?"

"Kent Allard. It's just exactly his sort of twisted humor. Got some pretty fan to pass this to you instead of just phoning you at your hotel. Bet he's watching us from his hotel across the street there, laughing his head off."

"Seems more like M. R. James's 'Passing the Runes,'" said Carson, returning the note to Lennox.

Lennox wadded note and envelope and stuffed them into the ash tray. "Anyway, I know where I *won't* be at 6:30 this evening. Jack, it's your round."

V. As I Wander Through My Playing Cards

Lennox made it back to his hotel, had creatively opened his door, and found his bed. There he remained until 5:30, at which point his headache awakened him. He washed down six aspirin with swigs of Scotch, then decided to kill the rest of the bottle. He sat on the edge of his bed, looking at his hands, thinking about Cathy.

At 6:00 he washed his face, combed his hair, brushed his teeth, and went out in search of adventure. After having parked his lunch in the Gents' at The Friend at Hand, his stomach was raw and uncertain about the whisky. He supposed he really should eat something, so he steamed into a pub by the British Museum and had three pints of lager.

Much improved, Lennox strolled through Soho and into the theatre district. *Follies* was playing at the Shaftesbury Theatre, but he'd already been told that tickets were impossible. He stood outside, wishing he might press his nose against the glass, and a scalper exchanged a Stalls ticket for only thirty quid. Lennox was delighted, and he managed to stay awake throughout the performance, despite an overpowering headache and sense of lethargy. He enjoyed himself, and it was quite a disappointment when he had to go back alone to his hotel instead of having a late dinner with Diana Rigg.

Instead, Lennox stopped in at the first pub he passed. By closing time he had drunk six large whiskies and had won twenty quid from the fruit machines on an investment of 50p. He was getting looks from the barmen as he left. Lennox had played the machines out of boredom, never really understanding what the buttons were supposed to do. Jack Martin, eat your heart out. Lennox decided he'd present Jack with a handful of tokens when they meet for lunch tomorrow.

Lennox was in good voice by now. He considered that a walk back through Soho to his hotel would count as an evening constitutional, all the better because the narrow side streets provided superb echo for his medley of Bon Jovi hits. Lennox had screamed out all that he could remember of "You Give Love a Bad Name," when he found the Queen of Diamonds.

She was lying in the gutter, somewhat soiled: a lost playing card with a buxom and nude lady, very much early 1960s *Playboy* centerfold, and quite demure by Times Square standards. He pocketed this.

Another chorus, a sudden turning, and he found the Queen of Clubs. She had been trod upon, but was in fair repair: a lovely black girl with dusky skin and a fetching smile. Lennox added her to his jacket pocket and proceeded along the turning.

He was quite lost by now, but completely confident, when he found the Queen of Hearts. She was propped against a lamp post, and she was a tall redhead who reminded him of Klesst, whose name had stayed in his memory. Lennox carefully included her with the others and stumbled into another darkened side street, certain he would find the Queen of Spades.

His voice was growing hoarse, and he reckoned he could use another drink, and he realized that he was seriously lost, and then he noticed that five people were closing around him from out of the darkness.

One was the Queen of Spades, dressed all in black, her face a pale shape in the darkness. The others were four ragged, shuffling winos—blowlamps, was that the expression in Cockney rhyming slang for tramps? Whatever. More to the point, they had very long knives.

Of additional interest, as they closed in, Lennox saw that their clothes weren't actually ragged, but rather they were rotted, as were their faces.

"Take him now," said the Lady in Black.

Lennox started to run.

Kane stepped out of a black passageway as Lennox flung past. He was wearing a three-piece pin-striped business suit that was obviously the best of Bond Street, and he had a distinctly professional appearance with his neat beard, bowler, and umbrella.

Kane petulantly threw the closest attacker against the wall. As the wall was on the opposite side of the street, the man hung there for a moment, before sliding down like a filthy and shattered doll. By then Kane had pulled the head off the next assailant and tossed that bit somewhere in the direction of the Lady in Black. The third dead thing lunged for Kane with his knife, but Kane disarmed him, throwing arm and knife into the darkness, and then deftly ripped out his heart.

Hanging back, the last assailant threw his knife at Kane, and, while Kane was catching the blade, rolled behind a large dust bin and pulled an Uzi from beneath his rain coat.

Kane shoved Lennox onto the pavement, as a burst of 9 mm slugs ripped over them. Twisting away, Kane tugged some sort of pistol from his shoulder holster and pointed it at the dust bin. Dust bin,

gunman, a parked car, and most of the wall opposite blew apart into glowing cinders.

The Queen of Spades had disappeared.

Tires howled, and a black Jaguar convertible took the turning on two wheels.

"Pitch him in!" Klesst shouted. She was wearing a black leather jumpsuit, and she was already reversing as Kane tossed in his bowler, umbrella, and Lennox, then tumbled in after—all but crushing the lot.

Perhaps thirty seconds had elapsed from Kane's first appearance. Lennox was in a state of shell shock.

Kane propped up Lennox against the back seat, as Klesst turned Soho streets into Le Mans.

"Well then, Cody," Kane shouted. "I really don't think you should have broken our dinner engagement."

VI. This Ain't the Summer of Love

"You've got dead bits all over your suit," Klesst scolded.

Kane muttered and dropped Lennox onto a leather sofa; he had been carrying him pendulant from his jacket collar, and Lennox collapsed like a stringless puppet.

Lennox said: "I need a drink."

"Single-malted. No ice." Kane nodded to Klesst. "Rather a large one, I think. Same for me."

"You just blew up half of Soho," Lennox remembered.

Kane was shrugging out of his suit jacket, eyeing his carrion-smear hands in distaste. "Threw in a mundane this time. Wonder whether for you or for me? Play hostess, Klesst. I need a quick wash-up."

Lennox noticed the weapon in Kane's left-hand draw shoulder holster.

It seemed to be made of almost translucent black plastic, and it reminded Lennox of the Whitney Lightning .22 automatic he had lusted over in the outdoors magazine ads of his youth.

"He just blew up half of London," said Lennox, accepting the glass from Klesst. "Is that really a raygun?"

"Cosmic ray laser, as close as you'd understand."

Lennox watched Klesst over his glass as he drank. "Oh, sure. I've read too much science fiction for that. Which hand holds the fusion reactor or something?"

"That's just a selective transmitter. Broadcast power on tight-contain. Trans time-time. Two black holes locked in an anti-matter matrix. Dad worked on it for a long real-time."

"Am I supposed to believe any of that?"

"No, Cody. It's really just magic."

"Carried off by Emperor Ming and his charming daughter. This is where writers get their ideas, you know." And for a while he sipped his drink and waited to wake up.

"May I have another?" Lennox handed her his empty glass. She was very long-legged and very lovely in tight black leather. He decided that DT's were nothing to be afraid of, after all.

"You know, my friends did warn me it would come down to this in the end," he told Klesst.

"Still think you're hallucinating, Cody?" Kane had scrubbed his large hands and switched into formal evening attire. They seemed to be in a spacious sort of oak-paneled study. Lennox looked about for the butler and a stuffed moose's head.

"I'm not prepared to argue with a hallucination."

"You might, if I began to pull off your fingers, one at a time," suggested Kane.

Lennox turned to Klesst. "You're not really related to this ogre? You don't look a bit like Myrna Loy."

Kane nodded to Klesst, and she left the room.

"Have we been properly introduced?" Lennox gulped his imaginary drink. Excellent dream whisky.

"Only if you bother to count the three times I've recently pulled your ass out of the fire. I'm Kane."

"Charles Foster Kane?"

"Just Kane."

"So, Kane," said Lennox, sitting up. "How you been? I heard your old folks got evicted. You and your brother still not getting along?"

"Chance?" wondered Klesst, returning with an agate box.

"Not likely. He has the power, but not the control. That's why they want him. And why they can still get to him."

Kane opened the box. It was filled with a white powder. "Care to partake of a few numbers, Cody? Time you were getting back to some semblance of lucidity."

"You Brits manage some awesome coke," Lennox approved. "Let's toot up and party till dawn. You're a great host, Kane, you know, and I'm sorry I called you an ogre. I'm really going to miss you when I wake up. By the way, how old's your daughter?"

"Old enough to break your back," Klesst assured him.

"Kinky." Lennox dipped a golden coke spoon into the white powder, snorted, and refilled for his other nostril. "Smooth." He quickly repeated the process and handed box and spoon to Kane.

"My special blend," said Kane. "Took some work to get right. First one's free."

"Shit," said Lennox.

He was experiencing a rush like nothing he'd ever felt before.

A moment ago he had been close to dropping off into an alcoholic stupor—assuming he hadn't already passed out somewhere.

The drug—clearly not cocaine—cut through the alcohol-soaked blur of his consciousness as shockingly as splinters of ice thrust into his brain. Lennox felt suddenly sober, suddenly aware that he was seated in an opulent study with a leather-clad young lady and a very large and very intimidating man in black tie, and suddenly he began to suspect that this might not be a dream.

"So glad that you could finally join us, Cody," said Kane. "If you care to stay alive very much longer, there are a few things you really need to know about yourself and about those others who already know all about you."

Lennox looked at his hands.

They should have been trembling, but they weren't.

So, this still had to be a dream.

"Do you understand the popular expression 'synchronicity' as used in the sense of 'coincidence'?"

"Easy one, mine host. Random events or experiences that appear to align in non-random patterns. You start to call your great-aunt Biddie to whom you haven't spoken in years, and as you reach for the phone, it rings, and it's your great-aunt Biddie. Some call it ESP. Paranoids see patterns in it all."

"And you know about the Harmonic Convergence?"

"Some sort of alignment of the planets. Supposed to unleash all sorts of astrological forces, mumbo-jumbo, etc., etc., etc., and change the world forever. What's your sign, by the way?"

"Not on your zodiac. Give him another hit, Klesst."

Lennox helped himself to a couple more generous snorts. "It's some kind of speed, right? Maybe crystal meth mixed with coke?"

"Old world secret," said Kane. "I'll send some home with you, perhaps."

He settled into a leather chair and sipped his drink, watching Lennox. "Suppose a person had the power to control random events?"

"He'd be a very wealthy gambler."

"Won much on the fruit machines, Cody?"

"Now, whoa!"

"Suppose the conscious wish to talk to great-aunt Biddie were powerful enough to cause her to phone up in response to the wish?"

"Suppose great-aunt Biddie's wish to talk to me was the cause of my suddenly thinking of her? *Touche*, I think."

"Rather, that's the whole point, Cody. Cause or effect? Because if synchronicity is not a random phenomenon, then who controls it? Who is the master?"

"Klesst, sweetheart—go fetch your father his nightly Thorazine, while we discuss the one about the chicken and the egg. By the way, where did you buy that outfit?"

"Kensington Market. I have a stall there. Come visit. We also do tattoos and piercing."

Lennox was starting to fade, despite the drug. "Already had my ear pierced."

"That's just a start."

"What a coincidence," said Kane. "Klesst, why not give Cody a sample of your jewelry stock—something to remember us by?"

Lennox was helping himself to the whisky.

"I really should be waking up—I mean, getting back. This really has been real, gang. I just hope I can remember it all tomorrow long enough to write it down."

"You will," Kane told him. "I've seen to that."

Lennox tossed back straight whisky, then poured another. It was his dream, so he could do as he pleased. "So what about the Moronic Confluence?"

"The Harmonic Convergence was a cosmic expression of synchronicity. It unleashed certain forces, certain latent powers. Your powers, for instance."

"So now the world will become a better place for all?"

"Afraid not, Cody. It only unleashed forces which you would consider forces of evil."

"Bummer!"

"Try this." Klesst handed Lennox a silver pendant affixed to a French hook. It was a sunburst, about the size of a one-pound coin. A circle of somewhat serpentine sunrays framed a sun whose face was that of a snarling demon.

Lennox gazed at the amulet uncertainly.

"Allow me," said Kane. Very quickly he inserted the silver hook through Lennox's left earlobe. Lennox winced, touched his hand to his ear, saw blood on his finger. It had been some time since he had had his ear pierced, and the opening must have begun to close.

"Looks good," approved Klesst.

Lennox remembered that you weren't supposed to feel pain in a dream, but then he also felt like he was about to pass out, and that wasn't right for a dream either.

"Where's that coke?"

"Don't want to overdo it first time, do we, Cody?" said Kane. "I think you've had enough to handle tonight. But not to worry: I'll be in touch tomorrow. Too late for a taxi, I'm afraid, but we'll see you safely to your hotel."

"Keys," said Klesst, and caught them as Kane tossed.

"I was really very sober there for a minute or two," Lennox explained, bouncing against Kane's huge shoulder.

"Short-term effect," said Kane. "Just be glad of that."

"How come only evil forces were released?"

"Because there are no good forces."

"So, then. You don't believe that there is a God."

"There was a god."

"Well, then. Where is he now?"

"I killed him," said Kane.

VII. Strange Days Have Found Us

Lennox awoke when his bedside phone began ringing at noon. He was in his hotel room, but he hadn't the slightest as to how he had arrived there. He had some confused memories of the night before... But first, the phone.

It was Carson. "Wake up, you lazy sod. We're all waiting on you."

"Where?"

"In the downstairs bar. Me and Jack, Geoffrey Marsh and Kent Allard. Come on, you're missing your breakfast."

"Be right down."

Lennox automatically went through the motions of dressing. The morning after a blackout was nothing new for him. He wished he had time to shower, but settled for splashing cold water over his face and shoulders, toweling vigorously. The towel caught on something on his left ear, tugged painfully. Lennox wiped cold water from his eyes and saw the sunburst amulet dangling from his left ear.

"Get serious," he told his reflection. Must have bought it off a stall during one of his blackouts. But it was all coming back. Vivid memories of Kane and zombie assassins. No way. Another all-too-real nightmare. Maybe he really should cut down on the booze.

Lennox fingered the silver amulet, but the French hook seemed to be fixed within his earlobe, and it hurt to try to draw it free. No time to fool with it now.

Lennox splashed a little whisky onto his ear to guard against infection, finished dressing, and took the stairway to the downstairs bar. Art Nouveau stained-glass windows, brightened by the midday sun, made each landing a sort of kaleidoscope, and Lennox was winded and dizzy by the time he reached Peter's Bar.

"Steam into this," Carson said. "Reckoned you'd fancy a lager."

Lennox wedged into the table and drained half the pint in a long swallow. "God, that feels good!" He was surprised to notice that his hands were steady. Must have made it an earlier evening than he'd thought. Good job, that. He was aware that they were all trying not to watch him.

"So, where do you guys want to go for lunch?" Jack Martin asked. "Is there someplace near here where we could, like, get a real pizza?"

"Pizza Express in Soho has American-style pizza," offered Geoffrey Marsh. "How've you been, Cody? Enjoying your trip?"

"So far, so good." Cody shook hands across the table. "Good to see you, Geoffrey. Jack said you were over."

Marsh was an athletically fit man whose hair was starting to thin and whose brown beard was showing grey. As he was the same age as Lennox and Martin, the two consoled one another that workouts and tennis evidently could not slow the aging process, and that therefore there was no point in their mending their ways. Marsh wrote what he liked to call "quiet horror" under various pseudonyms, several of which sold very well indeed. He, Martin, and Lennox had been friends and colleagues long enough to become regarded as "the Old Guard" of the horror genre.

"Nice earring, Cody," said Kent Allard. "Are you turning cyberpunk on us?"

"More likely cyberdrunk," Lennox said, finishing his pint. "I caught *Follies* last night, then crawled back here somehow. Look at all the loot I won on the way."

As he poured forth a handful of fruit machine tokens, Lennox asked casually: "Hear about anything going down in Soho last night? Could have sworn I heard some sort of gunfire or something."

"Probably just yobboes," suggested Carson.

"Check the papers, maybe," said Marsh.

"I never read beyond page three," Allard said.

Martin was looking hungrily at the fistful of tokens. "Let's try the machine here. Will it take these same tokens?"

"Just watch me," Lennox said. "I'm on a streak. Has to do with the Harmonic Convergence."

As he and Martin made for a fruit machine, Marsh watched them with concern. He asked Carson: "How's Cody doing? Really."

Carson was acutely aware of Allard's attention, and Allard was a notorious gossip. "He's doing OK," he lied. "Good as any man might after his wife and her lover are found dead in bed in some posh hotel room. He'll get through it."

"I wonder," said Allard.

"Just watch him, Mike," worried Marsh. "I don't think he's in control just now."

"Was he ever?" Carson wondered.

It took Martin most of ten minutes to lose all of Lennox's tokens in the fruit machine, plus the five quid Lennox won for him by suggesting when to hold. Martin then said: "I'm ready to..."

Lennox was already starting for the door, but he stopped short. Martin's voice had halted, as had the plume of his cigarette smoke. Lennox turned about.

No one was moving in the pub.

Nothing was moving in the pub.

Totally freeze-frame.

Awesome.

"Same again, mate?" asked Kane, filling a pint mug from behind the bar. "Lager, isn't it?" He was dressed as a hotel barman.

"What have you done?" Lennox took the pint.

"Time-time," said Kane, helping himself to a pint of Royal Oak. There were bits floating in it. Kane waited for them to settle.

"It isn't three yet," Lennox protested. The pub and all within were entirely motionless.

"I really like your sense of humor. Actually, I meant I'm holding time-time at stop just a bit. Did you know, Cody, that the energy currently being expended could create two moderately large star systems?"

"All right, I'm impressed," admitted Lennox. "Are you real, or am I really over the edge?"

"Right on both counts, Cody." Kane lifted his mug. "Cheers."

Lennox knocked back his pint, set it down on the bar. Nothing moved, save he and Kane.

"Same again?" Kane asked.

"Might as well. Can anyone else see you?"

"Confusing me with Harvey?" Kane refilled their pints. "And after I've just saved your ass yet again."

"How's that?" Lennox drank, because there was little else he could do about matters.

"A horrid and malevolent tentacled thing was lurking about. Here. Just now. Looking for you, I think."

"Didn't notice one. Where? In the Gents?"

"No. Behind the fireplace over there. Take a closer look at its tiles, by the way."

"I've seen them. It's St. George slaying the dragon."

"I said, a closer look. Take it from an experienced dragon fighter: George isn't doing all that well. Could have been you just now."

"I need to sit down."

"I'll join you later."

"I'm going back to my room."

"In that case, that's four pounds eighty, please."

Lennox passed Kane a five pound note, and suddenly everything was moving again.

"... go get something to eat," said Martin, banging on the fruit machine.

"I need out of here!" Lennox was headed for the stair.

But Kane was already seated at their table. He was wearing stone-washed jeans, a Grateful Dead T-shirt, and mirror shades. Lennox was grateful for that last.

"Hello, Cody," said Kane. "Been so looking forward to meeting you at last."

"This is Mr. Kane, said Allard, breaking off their earnest conversation. "He's brought us all invitations..."

"I'm out of here."

"... to the publishers' party tonight..."

"Please do sit down, Cody," Kane invited. The tugging pain from his ear pendant abruptly dragged Lennox back onto his vacated seat. "That's better," said Kane. "I've always wanted the two of us to have a chat."

"... for all of his authors," Allard concluded.

"And you must be Jack Martin." Kane stood up to shake hands. "I've read all your books. I like the one about Damon."

"Are you a writer?" asked Martin, wincing. "Or what?"

"He's a what," said Lennox, gulping Marsh's lager.

"Mr. Kane here—or is that your first name?"

"It's just Kane. Like Sting or Cher or Donovan."

"Kane here," Allard continued smoothly, "recently acquired Midland Books. He's now our major British publisher. I guess you guys hadn't heard the news."

"Just cut the deal. I know it will prove to be a good investment. But, hey, we're all of us in this outlaw profession together." Kane raised his mug. "Death to publishers."

"And Midland Books is having a party for its authors tonight," Allard informed them, thinking good job he'd phoned his agent this morning for the insider information.

"So, do you write yourself?" Martin persisted.

"Barbarian fantasy," said Kane. "Under a pseudonym. Some time back. I'm sure you've never read any of it."

"Can the rest of you guys see him, too?" wondered Lennox.

"Invitations, Kent, as promised," said Kane, distributing engraved cards. "Relatively small gathering of some of my authors and staff. Please do feel free to bring along friends. It's just over at the Hotel Russell, so I know you can find your way."

"You're not British, are you," said Lennox.

"A citizen of the world," Kane explained helpfully. "And by the way, I believe I owe you 20p change." He handed Lennox a coin.

"A pre-convention bash, is it?" asked Marsh.

"Naturally we'll discuss business matters amidst the champagne. Must do it up proper for taxes, after all. And I'm particularly interested in talking over your current projects, Cody."

"I'm writing a novel about demonic trilobites who gobble people's brains. It's called *The Biting*."

"Much to be explored there. Is the small community in New England or California?"

"How'd you know to find us here?"

"Synchronicity."

"Mike, let's go get something to eat." Lennox stood up.

"Actually, Kent phoned the office to say you were meeting here for lunch."

"Kane is taking us all to lunch," Allard said smugly. "I love this man."

"I got a previous engagement. No time. Come on, Mike."

"Tell Klesst I'll be counting on her as hostess again tonight," Kane called after them.

"You've got to sort of make allowances for Cody," Marsh told Kane. "Sure, he's drinking too much. But he's really been through Hell lately."

"And he's likely to remain there," said Kane, "without a little help from his friends. And I already count him as my friend. My round, I think."

VIII. A Big Chrome Baby and a Black Leather Doll

Carson was examining the engraved invitation. "Do you think I might bring along some prints to show tonight?"

Lennox was searching for a cab. "Kane's no publisher."

"We can take the tube. It's just over there."

"Horrid and malevolent tentacled things lurk beneath underground platforms."

"So, where are we really going?"

"Kensington Market. I need an obscene tattoo and some gross T-shirts."

Lennox secured a cab, and they piled in. "Ken High Street. Anywhere near Holland Road."

"You're missing lunch, and your publisher's paying. What do you think about the prints?"

"Do you know anything about Kane? Anything at all?"

"Never heard of him before today. Kent said Kane's bought Midland, and Kent would know. You know how it is with publishers today—new owners taking over one after another and then selling to the next one. Doesn't do you good to walk out on your publisher. He was going to buy us lunch. Maybe just a few prints, what do you think? He'll have seen some of the covers I've done for Midland."

"The pubs are still open, and it's my round. What was your impression of Kane?"

"Intense. Mega. Crucial. Must work out twice a day." Carson then turned serious. "Buys our lunch, but I wouldn't want to have him come round to the flat after closing. He looks as though he might break you in half if he wanted."

"I never saw Kane before just now. At least, I don't think I *really* did." Lennox found some cigarettes, poked one toward Carson. He'd almost quit. "But I've dreamed about Kane. I've seen Kane before, and I've talked with Kane before, and it all seemed totally real. In my dreams. In my nightmares."

Carson lit their cigarettes. He said, cautiously: "Sometimes, when you've been drinking bad..."

"I only hope that it is just the booze. I can sober up tomorrow or next week. Then, what if Kane's still here?"

"What's your worry? It's just that he's your new publisher. You must have read about him in the papers, seen pictures of him somewhere. Let's just go have a pint, Cody. It'll steady you some."

"We're here," announced Lennox, rapping on the Austin's glass partition. "Just let us out anywhere."

"What's here?" asked Carson.

"Kensington Market. Klesst said she has a stall here."

"The wicked malt whose book you signed yesterday? The original lady in blue pumps?"

"She says she's Kane's daughter."

"And when did she tell you all this?"

"She said she has a stall here. She said that in one of my dreams. What if my dreams are true?"

"Then we'll find her, and then we'll all steam into the closest pub."

"That would mean that it wasn't a dream. That it was all true."

"What's true, then?"

"Kane. And all the madness he's told me."

"You've just met him. All of us just did. He's only your publisher."

"I used to do a whole lot of acid back in my Haight-Ashbury days," Lennox confided.

Carson was getting major worried. "Let's just have a look through, and then we'll find a pub. Maybe an off-license, and we can sit on the benches out behind the church across the way."

Kensington Market enclosed three or so floors crammed with many tiny shops, catering primarily to the latest punk styles. Latex and leather fashions, all glistening black and tailored like a second skin, crowded the aisles—reminding Lennox of the fetish boutiques in L.A. and New York. He guessed that PVC probably meant vinyl or something, and while it was all very shiny and kinky, it looked very hot to wear, and it was sweltering in here. The place smelled like a tire graveyard on a hot day, and was about as organized. It was all a bit too trendy, more sideshow than sordid.

Punkers were everywhere, and Lennox suddenly became aware that, for once, his was maybe the straightest appearance on the scene. He felt more secure when he noticed that some eyes were glancing toward the omnipresent photographs of James Dean, then turning back to study his face.

Carson was thoughtfully looking at Dead Kennedys records.

The sunburst pendant in his ear seemed to turn Lennox's head and his attention away from the record stall. It was very, very hot. And claustrophobic. Images came to mind of Dore illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*. He moved aimlessly along the crowded aisles. He wished he had a drink.

"Hello, Cody. So good of you to drop by."

Klesst had a stall just down from Xotique. She was wearing a black leather bra, a very brief black leather miniskirt, an exposed suspender belt holding up black stockings, and black stiletto boots. This much Lennox took in at first glance. At second glance he saw that she wore an ear pendant similar to his own, but it was her face on the sunburst.

"Klesst?" Lennox's voice was uncertain. This was probably just another hallucination. Got to keep thinking of them as dreams. Nothing more.

"So, Cody. You recovered from last night. Dad was off looking for you earlier. You see him?"

Lennox faltered, then gave it up. "He caught up with me at the hotel bar. Gave me an invitation. To a party. Tonight. Said to remind you that you're to be hostess."

"Boring."

"What are you?" Lennox's voice held panic.

"Good question. What are we all? Why are we here? Do you know Jean-Paul Sartre?"

"Not socially. He doesn't hang out much these days."

"Next question."

"What's happening to me?"

"I thought Kane started to explain that to you last night."

"Sometimes I can't tell my dreams from reality."

"Sometimes there is no distinction."

"I think I'm starting to lose it."

"Are you going to stand here paralyzed in some existential dilemma, or are you going to buy something?"

Lennox stared without focus at her clutter of punk jewelry and studded leather accessories. Extreme. From the corner of his eye, he could see Carson still flipping through the record display. He supposed he ought to re-enter the real world if he could find it, or at least go through the motions. Did he really need a spiked collar?

"Perhaps an earring."

"Then I'll just pierce your other ear. No charge."

"No problem. I'll just take this one out."

"Can't be done."

"Say, what?"

"Do you remember last night?"

"I got very drunk as is my custom. I had some crazy dreams. You were in them. And Kane. That's all. What would you know about my dreams?"

"That was near-time, but real enough. Kane put his mark upon you. Now you bear the mark of

Kane. There's no removing it. Ever."

"Tell that to Vincent van Gogh."

"Never fancied pictures of flowers. You're signed and sealed."

"Come again?"

"And be glad for it. They'll try to kill you, now that they can't possess you. What actually do you think happened to you last night?"

"I got very drunk and walked back to my hotel."

"Kane thinks they were trying for him as much as for you. They never else would have called in a mundane. The Harmonic Convergence has increased their powers, but they still have no control of time-time."

"Look. I read *The Sun* today, page three and all of it. Nothing about Soho being devastated or stray bits of zombies found strewn all about."

"I told you: that took place in near-time. Very dangerous. Kane has much less power there, and that's why they lured you there. But now you're aligned with Kane, they'll come looking for you in real-time as well."

"Are you from around here?"

"Not hardly."

"And is Kane really your father?"

"Obviously."

"He doesn't look old enough."

"You'd be surprised."

"And your mother?"

"Kane killed her."

"And how did you feel about that?"

"She meant to sacrifice me to a well-known demon. She'd made a pact at my birth."

Lennox wondered if he were the only sane person here. And how sane was that?

"Klesst, you're a really beautiful person. May I even say, you're devilishly intriguing. And if I were twenty years younger I'd deck myself out in some of these outrageous costumes they sell here, and I'd carry you off to some dingy basement club where people dance till dawn by bashing their heads together, and afterward I'd tell Kane we were running off to live together in my gentrified loft in New York's SoHo, and if he objected I'd just have to punch him out. However, I'm not twenty years younger, and Kane is bigger than me, so instead I'd like to fix you up with a really good psychiatrist."

"I'm lots older than you think."

"Delighted to hear you say that. I wasn't sure about British laws on the matter."

"So, are you going to buy anything?"

"I haven't really looked about. Maybe a nice leather bra for my closet."

"Have you had your nipples pierced? I can do it here, and I have some lovely golden rings."

"Not today."

"But I'd like that." Klesst moved toward him suddenly, and Lennox as suddenly was afraid.

"Christ, you really did find your lady here." Carson wandered into the stall, holding a Nico album in a plastic bag. He was looking at his watch, calculating how many pints might be sunk before closing.

"She wants to pierce my nipples," complained Lennox.

"Why not just get a tattoo?" Carson compromised. He rolled up his left sleeve. Lennox saw a devil's head above the numbers 666. "Can't remember where I had it done. I'd been pissed for weeks before I noticed it."

"I did it," said Klesst. "Looks great."

"This is Kane's daughter," said Lennox. "I've mostly seen her in my dreams, but I think she's real

enough."

"You might find out how real tonight."

"See there, Carson. They throw themselves at me. Klesst, why did you say that I was aligned with Kane?"

"Ought to be more careful about what you sign your name to, Cody. Yesterday. The book."

"I like the British," said Lennox. "You just have to get used to their odd sense of humor."

"I'm not British," said Klesst. "And you still haven't bought anything. Let you have that spiked collar for a fiver."

"Are the pubs still open?" Lennox asked Carson.

"Try it on."

"We'd best be going," said Carson.

Klesst moved very quickly, and it was over before Lennox could think to struggle.

"Radical," she said. "That's a fiver."

"Klesst, you're beautiful, but you're a true space cadet. Close up, and I'll buy you lunch. You're really from California, aren't you? That can be cured."

"So can reality, Cody. See you tonight."

Lennox fingered his studded leather collar. It chafed his neck, but he paid her anyway. He was aware that he was in serious danger of becoming sober, and he intended to remedy that without further delay.

"I think I'm on to something here," he told Carson. "She was coming on strong to me. Real strong."

Carson looked back. "She's not there now."

Lennox turned around. The labyrinthine aisles of stalls seemed to be shimmering in the stagnant air. He couldn't pick out Klesst's stall. He couldn't see Klesst.

"Whoa! Wait a minute here." He started to go back.

Carson took his arm. "Let's just go have a pint."

Lennox fumbled with his collar. "I think this is locked."

"Get the key after the pubs close."

IX. Say a Prayer in the Darkness for the Magic to Come

Lennox nearly slept past the party, but his hangover and the pain from his earlobe woke him up around seven. He found a half-bottle of Scotch and medicated himself. In the mirror his earlobe did not appear to be inflamed, and it no longer hurt. He tugged at the ear pendant, but it didn't want to come loose. Probably encrusted. Lennox dabbed more whisky onto his earlobe as a safeguard.

He wondered what he was doing wearing a spiked collar, then remembered that Klesst had locked it there and kept the key. He fumbled with its lock, wishing it would open, and the catch snapped. Must be a trick to it, he thought, dropping the collar onto his table.

Just time for a quick shower. The cold water helped to wake him up. He had some vague memories of sitting on a bench behind some church in Kensington and drinking several cans of strong lager, while he explained to Carson all about synchronicity. Carson had managed to get him into a cab and back to his hotel.

Lennox felt much better after he finished with the shower, and he took time to trim his near-beard. He put on a baggy cotton designer shirt and matching trousers, a narrow necktie loosely knotted, and his favorite linen jacket. Got to look the part for your publisher, and besides there was Klesst.

Kane had reserved a large suite of rooms at the Hotel Russell, so it was just a short walk along Southampton Row. Lennox found his somewhat crumpled invitation, rechecked his image in the mirror, and sailed off in high spirits.

The party had already started, and a hulking biker in a dinner jacket met him at the door and wanted to see his invitation.

"Let him in, Blacklight," Klesst called out. "He's one of us."

Klesst gave him her hand. "Champagne?"

"For sure."

She was wearing some sort of gleaming black sheath dress that laced openly across her breasts and back. The latex dress and stockings clung tightly to her very lovely body, and Lennox decided that these kinky London fashions weren't all that bad, and that having an affair with his publisher's spaced-out daughter was worth checking out.

"Here we are." Klesst lifted two glasses from a passing tray and handed one to Lennox.

"Cheers," he said, touching their glasses.

"Ah! There you are, Cody. So glad you could make it. I see Klesst is taking care of you."

Kane shook his hand. He was casually dressed, as were most of those in the room, and he was playing the perfect host.

"Lots to munch on over there. I imagine you already know most of the people here. Mingle and enjoy. We'll talk later on."

Lennox downed his champagne and reached for another glass. He did know most of the thirty or so people here. It really was just another publisher's party. Jack Martin had seen Lennox and was working his way over to him.

"Well, Klesst," Lennox said. "That's a very lovely dress you almost have on. Are you the Queen of Spades?"

"Wrong card. Have another drink, Cody."

"You're right. She's not a redhead. But you're both in my dreams." Cody grabbed another glass. "And you're much cuter."

"How's it going, Cody?" Martin had just been talking with Mike Carson about the afternoon's adventures. He was close to panic and wondering about commitment laws in England.

"Ms. Klesst Kane, meet famous writer, Jack Martin."

"I already know her," said Martin. "Blue pumps. We all met yesterday at The Friend At Hand. Nobody told us you were the publisher's daughter."

"My secret identity," said Klesst, and then she smiled and left them to greet the always fashionably late Kent Allard.

"Everything OK?" asked Martin.

"No. I don't think so." Lennox emptied his glass.

"You missed a really great lunch. You really ought to eat something. Just look at all this food here!"

"Had a late lunch with Carson. Wonder if Klesst might like a late dinner?"

"Cody!" Kane's massive arm gripped his shoulders. "Grab a glass of champagne, and let's sit down for a minute in the other room. I want to talk about your next book. Jack, please excuse us for a minute. Business."

"Business," echoed Lennox, reaching for another glass as he followed Kane.

Kane closed the door behind them. "So, how's your day been?"

Lennox sipped his champagne. Kane was pulling a fresh bottle from the ice. "Very pleasant. I dropped by Klesst's shop. Nice place for your daughter to work."

"Kids these days." Kane popped the cork. "Heard you bought some neckwear from her. Not wearing it tonight."

"Took it off. Didn't go with my tie. Had trouble with the catch, though."

"Good job, Cody. There was no key to that lock." Kane refilled their glasses. "I'm impressed."

Cody stood up and bunched his fists. "No way do I believe any of this. I'm blitzed out of my skull just now, and I know I need to cut down on my drinking. Let's do lunch tomorrow, if you really exist, and then we can talk about the next novel. I'm sorry if I'm perhaps not making a lot of sense just now, but life's been a bitch."

"Do a couple hits of this, and then you'll be sober enough." Kane tossed him a phial of white powder. "I need you tonight."

Lennox delved into the phial with the attached spoon. "Kane, you are very weird."

"Take a couple hits. Nice big ones."

Lennox blinked and looked about him. He was sitting in a hotel room across from a huge individual who at best just might be mad. And Lennox suddenly felt sober for the first time in months. Then last night...

"Much better," said Kane, retrieving the phial. "Just take a moment to get used to it all."

"You're not a publisher."

"For the moment I am. Needed a real-time framework. Bought Midland Books and kept the staff. Nice cover, and I may even turn a profit. Want to talk about the advance for your next book?"

"Those other times when I saw you. All of that really did happen?"

"Trust me, Cody. It really happened."

"So, I'm not losing my mind."

"Afraid not, Cody."

"So, then." Lennox rubbed his forehead and wondered whether he was over the edge beyond return. "If I'm not crazy, and you're for real, *then* who are you?"

"A friend, Cody. Haven't I saved your life?"

"That was real?"

"All of it. And anyway, you already knew that beneath the alcoholic fog you've been hiding in. Head in the sand, Cody. Doesn't work. *They* can still see you."

"No, *this* is reality: I'm sitting in a hotel room in London talking with my publisher and there's a party going on. One or both of us is quite mad. I think I'll mingle."

"It takes a bit of getting used to," said Kane, escorting him back to the others. "That's why I'm trying to bring you along slowly." He squeezed Lennox's shoulder in a comradely way, and Lennox sensed that beneath the friendly grip there was latent strength that might crush him in an instant. "Now go enjoy yourself. Busy night ahead."

Carson greeted him with a glass of champagne. "So then, did you make a deal?"

"I'm afraid I may have." Lennox tossed back the champagne. "Mike, I'm beginning to think that all of this is really happening to me."

"Best get some food inside you," Carson said, looking about for Martin for help. Martin was chatting up Klesst.

"What I need is some air. I'll just have a stroll around Russell Square. Back in a flash."

"I'll come with you."

"No. I just want to be alone for a minute. Stay here and talk to Kane. See what you make of him."

Allard had cornered Kane, and Lennox waved as he made for the door. "Just getting some air."

"Catch you later, Cody," Kane shouted back, and Blacklight let Lennox out the door.

Feeling somewhat conspiratorial, Lennox did not cross into Russell Square, but instead walked along Southampton Row and turned down Cosmo Place into Queen Square. With a shudder he made to ignore the human wreckage hunched over their bottles and their benches about the cobbled pavement, and he passed through an iron gate onto the green.

It smelled less of urine and unwashed bodies here, if he kept away from the shrubbery which sheltered the enclosing iron fence. The trees deadened the noise of London at night, and the grass felt cool beneath feet bruised by endless pavement.

Lennox walked slowly toward the end of Queen Square, toward the woman's statue there, formerly thought to be a statue of Queen Anne but now believed to be that of Queen Charlotte, Consort of King George III. He paused there, his thoughts aimless—vaguely wondering, as he had so often done before,

as to what Queen Charlotte's downward stretched right hand might be pointing.

It was there and then that Lennox found the Queen of Spades.

She was dressed all in black, and at first he just saw her face, ghostly in the darkness. Lennox stared, and the rest of her emerged from the night.

He said: "Hello, Cathy."

"Hello, Cody."

"You're dead, Cathy."

"You should know, Cody."

"So this is it, then. It's not just the booze and all that. I really am completely mad."

"You must have been to cast your lot with Kane."

She moved toward him, swaying bewitchingly as she balanced forward to keep her stiletto heels from digging into the sod. She had on glossy black stockings and a black cire sheath minidress that would have clung to her waist even without the wide leather cinch. Her dress was strapless and exposed a swath of pale skin from above her breasts to her bare shoulders, where the tops of her long black evening gloves reached the neckline.

Her black hair was gathered in a high chignon, so that her pale face and shoulders seemed to be an alabaster bust floating out of the darkness. Perhaps a plaster deathmask.

Lennox recognized the familiar sensuous mouth and finely boned features, and he knew the shade of green of her eyes even before she gazed into his own.

Lennox grasped her bare shoulders. Her flesh was cool but certainly solid beneath his touch.

"Are you really Cathy?"

"If that's what you want."

"Cathy is dead. There was a funeral, and I stood there. It's been more than a year."

"There's nothing permanent about death, Cody. Not when you have power."

"This is another of Kane's tricks."

"I'm not one of Kane's minions. You are. I'm trying to help you break away from Kane."

"All right, that does it. I've been called a lot of things, but never a minion. No more of Kane's white powder, because God knows what's in it, and it's too much for my mirror. I'm going back to my hotel room, where I will curl up with a bottle of Scotch and find oblivion. If I'm still like this tomorrow, I'm really and truly this time for sure going to seek professional help."

Cathy seized his arm and firmly halted his departure. "I can take you to someone who can help you."

As Lennox spun about, the sunburst pendant on his left ear faced her. She instantly released him and stepped back. "Please," she said. "Please come with me, Cody. Anyway, what have you got to lose?"

"Plainly, not my wits. My sanity is history. I'm standing in a London park talking with my dead wife. You can not be Cathy."

"I can be anyone you want me to be."

"Really? Did you leave your shoes in my room the other night? And did you develop severe acne in the pub the next day? And do you loiter about nonexistent streets in Soho in the company of rotting zombies? Because if you answer yes to any or all of the above, then you are not Cathy. Cathy had her secret life, but nothing this extreme."

"I think you need a drink, Cody. Let's go to my place. There we can talk." Cathy took his right arm.

"You know," Lennox told her. "I think I'm handling all of this very well. It's that mega coke that Kane gave me, isn't it? I learned back when I used to do lots of acid that if the trip starts to get too weird, it's best not to fight it and just go with the flow. So, take me to your leader."

Cathy held fast to his right arm and steered Lennox in the direction of the Russell Square tube station. "You really haven't a clue, do you?"

"I am totally clueless."

There were still meth-men and blowlamps sprawled in the bushes and folded onto benches.

"Promise no more zombies."

"You're marked by Kane."

There were tired tourists and late revelers hurrying along the streets toward the underground for the last trains. Cabs busily scooted past, braking as they dared a zebra crossing, and all of this was very reassuring to a man out on a stroll with his deceased wife.

"Can you see her, too?" Lennox asked a cluster of blue-haired ladies who were puzzling over their maps outside the tube station. He received bifocaled glares and a muttered "Disgusting!" as Cathy dragged him through.

"Let's get a cab," he protested.

"I'm just down the way."

"We'll need tickets."

Lennox stumbled and touched one of the automatic ticket machines. The machine spat out two tickets, and Cathy captured them before he could react.

"I hate these lifts," she said. "Let's take the stairs."

The Russell Square station had a pair of wooden-slat lifts that probably dated back to its Victorian construction. Their open cages crawled down a sooty shaft of geological strata to the depths of London, and often they stuck there when overloaded with too much compressed humanity. Present construction to replace the aged lifts with new shiny steel boxes only added to the congestion.

"These steps go down a hundred miles," Lennox argued, pointing to a sign which advised caution to all those rash enough to attempt the descent. "It's like climbing to the top of the Empire State Building."

"But this is all downhill, Cody. Stop whining and come along."

The stairway bored into the depths in a tight spiral. Cathy's heels made a rhythmic echo, and Lennox began to feel dizzy.

Not many people took these stairs, and just now they met no one at all.

"Cathy," said Lennox, pausing for breath. "If it's really you, I just want to say how glad I am to see you again."

The stairwell was hot and claustrophobic, and Lennox felt certain they should have reached the platform by now.

"Cathy, do you remember when we saw that film, *Deathline*? Parts of it were shot down here."

"Come on, Cody."

"I think the print we saw was retitled *Raw Meat*."

"Right. That was some birthday treat, Cody."

"We had fun afterward."

"Right. You pulled one of my stockings over your head and chased me around the apartment, waving a rubber chicken and yelling: 'Mind the doors!'"

"Was that before you began seeing Aaron?"

"Just keep walking, Cody. We're nearly there."

"I can't hear the trains."

"So, what made you throw in with Kane?"

Lennox grasped at the railing. The brass was warm and seemed to be filmed over with slime. He stumbled and leaned hard against Cathy.

"He bought out my British publisher, acquired all my contracts. Hey, I just met the guy. He has some awesome coke and a lovely daughter. Inasmuch as you're dead, you'll forgive my lust, won't you?"

There seemed to be steam filling the spiral stairway. Droplets of something fell onto his face, and Lennox wiped them away curiously. The brass railing began to look more like an uncoiled intestine. He

hoped he wouldn't throw up on the steps.

"I think we've been walking too far." The steps were so slimy as to feel gelatinous beneath his feet. Lennox clung to Cathy.

"You're more likely to recognize his name when it's spelled C-a-i-n," she said.

"As in the fratricidal horticulturist? Surely, he's dead by now."

"Immortal," said Cathy. "Unless you can help us stop him. That's why he's bonded you."

The stairway ended, and they walked onto an underground platform of sorts. The overhead tunnel was oozing tendrils of gluey foulness through misshapen tiles, the rails seemed to be writhing like salted worms, the platform and all were clogged by enveloping steamy mist.

For as far as Lennox could see into the mist, hundreds of would-be passengers aimlessly shuffled against one another, rotting in their tatters of medieval clothing.

"Sorry about the mess," said a figure standing on the platform. "Been holding this lot here for quite some years. Really in remarkably good state of preservation though, all things considered—don't you think?"

"Cody Lennox?" The man stepped closer. "Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Satan."

"I think this has gone far enough," Lennox decided. "And anyway, I'm an atheist."

"No problem," said Satan, but he did not offer his hand. He was a tall, dark man with a widow's peak and neatly trimmed black beard, dressed rather theatrically in cape and medieval costume.

"There are no horns and tail," said Satan. "Or would you feel better if there were?"

"You're a theatrical overstatement."

"First impressions," said Satan. His image blurred, and he was much the same but attired in formal dinner dress, fashionable about 1900. Cathy was suddenly wearing a black evening gown from the same period.

"Go away!" begged Lennox, anxiously hoping to awaken.

"Doesn't really matter, does it?" said Satan. "Appearances are deceiving. Like yours. We need to talk."

"That's what Kane told me."

"Cody, I can see that you're confused. Who wouldn't be? So you cut your first deal with Kane. We can renegotiate. What do you want? I've already brought Cathy back. No obligation."

"That's not Cathy," Lennox insisted.

"She could be Cathy. Or whoever you want. Look about you, Cody. Anything you want. Name it. It's yours."

"This is not a mountain top. This is a very horrible subway tunnel, and I don't see anything here that I like. Get thee behind me."

"Good job, Cody," said Kane. He was carrying two glasses of champagne, and he handed one to Lennox. "We missed you at the party, so I came to look."

"Clever move, Kane," Satan said. "So, he led you here."

"Sorry. I should have brought another glass. Satan, is it? Is that what you're going by now? Don't mind if I slip and call you Sathonys out of old acquaintance?"

"Kane, you shouldn't have meddled into this."

"Nice place," approved Kane. "I like the decor. Giger out of Bosch. It's the catacombs beneath Coram's Fields Playground, isn't it? Connects through beneath Queen Square. Very convenient. And I see you've been recruiting from the plague pits."

Lennox made his voice calm. "Kane, are we in Hell or something?"

"What we're in is deep shit," Klesst answered him. "Dad, we're going to run out of champagne."

"The delectable Klesst!" said Satan. "My, how you've grown up!"

"Blacklight can ring room service," Kane told her.

"Klesst," Lennox asked, "is this the well-known..."

"We've all been around for a long, long time, Cody."

"Best be getting back to the party," Kane decided. "Can't trust Blacklight to cope on his own."

"A truce," Satan offered. "We've fought on the same side often enough before."

"But this is my turf now," Kane warned him. "And I don't like your plans for renovation."

"You can't stop this."

"Lighten up, Sathonys. You're like a brother to me."

"Oh, shit!" said Klesst.

Kane's left hand moved, and there was a gun in it, and Kane fired the gun.

Satan had instantly vanished, but the point where he had stood coalesced into a seething mass of flaming destruction.

"Cody, get your ass behind me!"

Dead creatures began tumbling from the walls, crawling over the slime-covered paving. Kane fired another annihilating burst. Part of one wall melted into glowing rubble.

Klesst tugged what might have been a derringer from beneath her skirt. She aimed it at the line of rails just as their tentacled lengths were reaching outward. Most of the platform and rails vanished in a consuming flash that hurtled the three of them backward over the slime and toward where the staircase no longer was.

The ceiling began to crumble. Kane fired pointblank into a collapsing tier of ravenous dead creatures. Stones were falling heavily from above. In seconds nauseous smoke clogged the warren of tunnels. Continuous bursts from Kane's and Klesst's weapons provided a strobe-light vision of disintegrating masonry and mindlessly advancing dead. Beyond that spasmodic glow of destruction, ill-defined shapes hunched toward them.

"What do you say, Cody?" Kane shouted. "Want to go back to the party?"

Something long dead reached out of the buckling catacomb walls and clawed at Lennox's throat. The sunburst pendant at Lennox's ear blazed with instant power, and the desiccated arm vanished into ash.

"I want out of here!" Lennox screamed.

It was instantly quiet. It was very dark. Dank walls still compressed them.

"Just up these stairs, I think," said Kane, holding his gun at alert. "Cover our back, Klesst. Move along, Cody."

"Where are we?" Lennox cursed as he stumbled and bashed his knee against the unseen steps. Klesst powerfully grasped his arm and kept him from falling into uncertain darkness.

"Not on the Russell Square station staircase, as I'd hoped," Kane answered. "That's where we began to follow you. At a guess, we're coming up from beneath Queen Square."

Lennox stumbled again, but Klesst held him upright.

"Can you both see in the dark?" Lennox asked her.

"Yes." Klesst squeezed his arm comfortingly.

"I want out of here."

"Good one, Cody!" Kane congratulated him. "Here's a door that should open onto the cellars beneath the Queen's Larder. We're going to make an awesome team."

Kane snapped the bolt and pushed open the trap door.

"Or, maybe not," said Kane.

Kane shoved away the debris, and they emerged.

The Queen's Larder was a blackened ruin, as were all of the buildings in sight, save for the Church

of St. George the Martyr across the way. The sky was a sodium-flame yellow and outlined an endless horizon of blackened heaps of fused stone and glass. There was no clear evidence of sun or moon through the glowing haze. Occasional and distant shapes seemed to sail on black wings across the dead skies; otherwise there was no sign of life. No sign of any sort of life whatsoever.

"Shit," said Kane.

"You sure threw one hell of a party," Lennox managed. He sat down on a seared heap of wall. "Look, my sanity reserve has been running on empty for too long. Where does one get a drink here?"

"You bastard!" Klesst yelled at him. "You brought us through the wrong way!"

"Whoa! I was only following your dad. You're the ones who can see in the dark—remember?"

"This is worse than it looks," Kane told them.

"Well, it looks really bad, Kane," Lennox agreed. "Whatever happened to time-time, and where's the party?"

Kane suddenly turned the full power of his eyes upon Lennox, and for the first time Lennox was irrevocably convinced that all of this was really happening to him.

And then Cody Lennox knew real fear.

"I've tried to bring you along by stages," Kane said. "The problem is that I need you, and I need you now. What you're looking at right now is a near-time reality—for your entire world."

"Global nuclear holocaust?"

"Worse than that, Cody. It's more like Armageddon or the Day of Judgment. The Harmonic Convergence gave them the power. They'll open the Gates of Hell and raise the dead. Only no one's flying up to Heaven. It won't be a pretty sight. Look about you."

"Straight answers this time, Kane. Was that really Satan?"

"To the best that your theology can comprehend: yes. Disregarding Judeo-Christian myth, that was the Demonlord. What you saw was a physical embodiment of a hostile and predatory force alien to this world."

"And are you also a Judeo-Christian myth?"

"Very possibly. But don't believe everything you read. There are at least two sides to every story."

"And are you human?"

"Yes, and no."

"I was just wondering," said Lennox. "Except for all the muscles, I'm having a very difficult time telling you and Satan apart."

"I am a physical entity," Kane promised him. "Just as is Klesst. Just as are you. Satan, as you saw him, is a physical embodiment of a trans-dimensional force."

"And Cathy?"

"What you saw was a succubus. Another demon, as your theology interprets such matters. Don't blame yourself for summoning her. You've been set up all along."

"Why?"

"Because you can control synchronicity, Cody. It was a latent power, unconsciously used. The Harmonic Convergence has intensified your powers. You haven't attained real control yet, but I can teach you."

"Why should I trust you?"

Kane waved his arms. "Just look at what will happen. At what *has* happened. This is reality, Cody."

"I thought you could control time, Kane."

"Time-time, Cody. And real-time within limits. We followed you into near-time to find their center of power. They shunted us future-forward-on the way back to real-time. I have only physical power here. I need you, Cody, to get back, to keep all this from happening."

"Do it, Cody," Klesst encouraged him. "This place is really boring."

"So. What do I do? I forgot my ruby slippers."

"If you break open the way," Kane said, "I can draw through the power. Think of it this way: you unlock the door, and I come through with the shotgun."

"Kane, I think we'd best just call a tow-truck."

"I really do admire a sense of humor in a man who's facing an unpleasant end." Kane stepped closer, and Lennox was suddenly uncertain as to where the immediate danger might lie.

"It's all random patterns, Cody. It's like a gigantic interlocking puzzle with infinite and equal solutions. When the pieces come together and form a final pattern, it's real-time. Near-time is still in flux. Synchronicity can determine the way the patterns come together. You can control synchronicity. Do it, and get it right this time."

"Do what? Is this where I make an expressionless face and unfocus my eyes?"

"The monster's from the id, Cody. All you have to do is to want something to happen. I'll see that it does."

"I don't begin to understand any of this."

"You don't have to." Klesst put her arm around him. "Hey, don't you wish we were all back at the party and having a good time? Like, here's the three of us together in the bedroom, talking away. Then Dad leaves you and me alone, while he goes to check on the champagne. Our eyes meet, and then our lips crush together."

"Let's party!" Cody shouted.

This time there were no searing blasts of weaponsfire to mask the shock of ripping apart the space-time pattern...

"Sorry, but there's always business," Kane apologized to his guests. "Blacklight, how are we doing on the champagne?"

"Cool," said Blacklight. "Ordered up two more cases. Had some gate-crashers. Bad-looking dude in a tux and a comely Gibson girl in a black formal. Said they were old friends of yours, so I let them in. Don't see them now. Anyway, they said they'd be back."

"I'm sure they will. Carry on."

"Hey, Kane!" Kent Allard lurched toward him. "Did you find Cody?"

"We did."

"We were worried about him. You know..."

"Cody is fine."

Lennox and Klesst chose this moment to emerge from the bedroom. They were arm in arm and talking together furiously.

"Well, well," observed Allard. "Fast mover, our Cody."

"Champagne, Cody?" Kane invited.

"Maybe just one," Lennox said. "Please excuse us for a moment, Kent."

"Of course. Go for it, guy."

Lennox snagged a tray of champagne as he guided Klesst into a corner beside Kane. Each took a glass.

He said: "Kane, I'm not sure I really believe any of this, but I'm throwing in on your side."

"Good decision, Cody."

"Only one thing still bothers me, Kane. Granted, I've met the forces of Evil..."

"Only *inimical* forces, Cody. It's all so relative."

"We'll argue this later. So, when do I meet the forces of Good?"

"Already told you, Cody. There are none. I'm the only hope this world has."

Kane and Klesst touched glasses with Lennox.
"To us," said Kane.