



Dark Future III

Comeback Tour

Jack Yeovil

PROLOGUE

Cape Canaveral, 1978.

The Dream was dying.

Commander Lawrence Jerome Fonvielle gritted his teeth and held back tears as the console lights went out, bank by bank. The technicians were calmly proceeding with the shutdown, going from desk to desk, flicking switches and pulling wires. They were as thorough and efficient as he would have demanded them to be, had he still been responsible for issuing their orders. His title was almost purely honorary, now. You couldn't be a Commander when the Suits took your command out from under you.

"We have a splash-down, sir," said Wardle, still monitoring the Big Screen. "Dead centre of the target area."

The Old Magic. American Know-How. It was still there.

"The USS Eisenhower is deploying the Sikorskis to pick up Santini's men."

Fonvielle nodded. He could not count the number of splashdowns he had anxiously lived through. This, he knew, would be the last.

Bobbing out there in the South Pacific in their Vulcan capsule were the last generation. Eleven men and three women in a tin can, waiting to be choppered out before the spacecraft sank.

"CampGlennis still operational, sir. Good steady signals."

Fonvielle could not reply. He looked at the monitors. The base in the Sea of Tranquillity, so recently evacuated, would continue its measuring, evaluating and transmitting long after there was anyone on Earth interested in the data. These days, if there wasn't any money in it, no one gave a damn. Fonvielle was an old-time fighter jock himself, and the new math gave him a headache, but he could appreciate the beauty of the data. He understood the gleam in the scientists' eyes as they pored over the rock samples or the graph curves.

The Dream wasn't about money. It wasn't just about data, either, but that was part of it. The Dream was about Victory. This was America's purest conquest, the fulfilment of a national destiny. The wars were still being fought, the war for the ownership of the sky." Fonvielle still believed what he had heard all through his training. The sky belonged to the men who could take it, to the men with the Right Stuff. The Dream was about sticking your hand into the sky and making a fist, holding it fast.

"Edwards has been monitoring steadily since last night," said Wardle. "I'm closing our contact."

Fonvielle had done his year in Tranquillity back in the '60s, when Richard Nixon was president and the Needlepoint System was still in the planning stages. He remembered Camp Glenn as a peaceful place; his off-duty time spent suited up outside the dome, his intercom down, the silence and stillness stretching out forever, had been the most intense experiences of his life. None of his marriages had offered any hours to compare with those. He had been withdrawn from the spaceside of the programme after a psychiatric evaluation diagnosed him as prone to what they were calling Raptures of the Stars, that curious detachment that affected long-term astronauts. A lot of space jocks got religion when they flopped down to Earth, or cracked up. Fonvielle had just hiked himself up the chain of command. If he couldn't have the sky himself, he would make sure that his country kept its grip on it.

"Excuse me, sir."

An orange-suited technician slipped between him and the Tranquillity Monitor, and broke the contacts. The screen winked out. Glenn was still transmitting, but its signal was being fed into a computer bank at

Edwards now. The administration trusted the machines to alert them if the automatic sensors came up with anything interesting.

The Needlepoint System. That was where the programme had sailed into choppy waters. It had been President Nixon's legacy. Trickydick had done so well with his 1960 inaugural promise to put an American on the moon by 1965, with Glenn and Schirra touching down a full nine months ahead of schedule, that he had resolved publicly to do something about the balance of power, and sworn to ring the Earth with a series of weapons satellites capable of knocking out a flight of Soviet bombers scrambling in Tashkent, or, indeed, a cockroach scuttling across a loft floor in Harlem.

A woman came into the control room with an armful of semi-opaque polythene sheets, and doled them out. They fitted over the equipment like loose condoms, and gave the consoles, monitors, terminals and databanks a ghostlike feel. Now the dust could settle in peace.

Fonvielle had been second-in-command of the Needlepoint Project when Nixon gracefully bowed out in '68, passing on the presidential seal to Barry Goldwater. Then, NASA had really screwed the pooch. During the years of struggle and failure, as system after system crashed, he had fought long and hard with his subordinates at suppressing the nickname everyone in NASA was using for the programme. The Needledick System.

Wardle took off his headphones, and dropped them on his desk. The usual cluttermdashpictures of his kids, coffee cups, markerpens, scribblepads, the Mickey Mouse mugmdashhad been cleared away. He was the last of them. And he would be transferring tomorrow. A few of the lesser lights were dim enough to put up with the travesty at Edwards. The rest were quitting the service. The private sector was dangling fat contracts in front of more than a few NASA personnel, particularly ex-astronauts with high-profile names. But Fonvielle knew those jobs were just glamour assignments, with no guts. The corporate space programmes didn't need men, they needed human adding machines with currency symbols carved on their hearts.

"The Eisenhower just hauled Santini and the rest out of the drink. That's over with."

Fonvielle couldn't trust himself to reply.

"Chrissie Farren says 'hi'."

Fonvielle nodded. Chrissie had been the third woman in space. He remembered her as an eager-beaver lieutenant. The jocks had taken bets about who would get first into her electrically-heated long Johns. He couldn't remember who, if anyone, had swept the pool.

Wardle was disengaged from his console now. He pulled on his civilian jacket, and walked away.

Fonvielle had been among the first to transfer to NASA, shifting from the X-11 programme in the '50s. And now he was one of the last to get out of the kitchen.

The heat had really started with President Agnew. Spiro T. had insisted on seeing some return for the billions of federal dollars that had been flushed into the bowl of the Needlepoint Project. Fonvielle had argued the System wasn't ready for testing. He knew only too well that the bugs needed a through ironing-out.

After the moonbase fiasco, when Needlepoint had come within fifteen feet of breaching the dome during the test run, Agnew had ridden hard on NASA. Senate Committees were set up, and the Suits

descended on Houston and Canaveral. Men with ledgers eased men with vision out of their seats.

The space programme had had a twenty-year run, and the gravy days were over. America had conquered the moon, and left the Soviets and their sputniks standing. Russia had had too many internal problems to divert the funds to StarCity, and their programme had fizzled when the first man into space rained back on the steppes as microscopic ash. His name had been Yuri Gagarin, Fonvielle remembered. The Soviets could have recovered, but the pointless war in Vietnam had drained all their military and scientific muscle. StarCity had been a ghost town for ten years.

A ghost town. Just like Canaveral would be tomorrow.

"Sir?"

Fonvielle was distracted. The matronly woman in charge of the shut-down shoved a clipboard at him.

"Your signature, sir. By the X."

She handed him a pen, and he scrawled.

"Thank you, sir."

The lights on the big board went out one by one.

Fonvielle remembered the American dead. The programmes had all been costly. Mercury, Gemini, Apollo, Hercules, Pegasus, Circe, Argos, Vulcan. But there had always been men and, for the last seven years, women. Everyone wanted to cross the threshold, and reach into space. He had lost friends to the stars. More than he should have. Alan Shepard, Grissom, Cap Collins, Capaldi, Len Nimoy, Rusoff, Mikko Griffith, Mildred Kuhn, Mihailoff, Hamill, Con Lindsay, Garret Breedlove. The white heat of the early '60s, with Nixon riding them for results, had been exhilarating at the time, but the historians were right. Corners had been cut, and the drive to get Apollo together had killed too many people. He remembered the blown hatch that had taken Grissom, lightheaded from the first spacewalk, to the bottom of the ocean. And the computer error that had turned Richard Rusoff into a second moon, silently orbiting the Earth for a projected five centuries before the burn-up cremated his dried and preserved body. And the fuel leak which had burned up Griffith, Kuhn and Mihailoff in an instant just before take-off.

But it had taken the Needlepoint failures to bring down the programme.

Needlepoint was up there somewhere, glinting in the night sky. A ring of satellites, fully equipped with laser weapons, hanging useless in their erratic orbits. It would be at least thirty years before they started tumbling towards the ionosphere or out into space. Every time an American strategist looked up at the stars on a clear night, he would be reminded of the money pit the Needlepoint System had turned out to be. And he would curse the memory of President Trickydick Nixon. And of Commander Lawrence Jerome Fonvielle.

They left him alone, and turned off the main lights. He stood in the dark, surrounded by dead machines.

At last, he could give in. Tears coursed down his cheeks, and his entire body was racked with silent sobs.

He slumped onto a polythene-covered swivel chair, and wiped his leaking eyes.

The skeleton programme NASA was keeping up at Edwards Air Force Base was a joke. Just a few green airmen peering at the monitors to make sure all the government-owned satellites were still spinning in their orbits, keeping out of the way of all the private junk. Agnew had given up the country's hold on the sky, and left only a few multinationals in the space market. And all they were interested in was throwing up a horde of little silver balls so they could beam porno into the depths of the Amazon basin, or shift electronic blips of money from Switzerland to Osaka. The age of the explorers, the pioneers and the heroes was over. The Suits had thrown it away, and now the merchants were moving in.

His face dry at last, he swore to keep the Dream alive.

## PART ONE:DIXIE

### I

"C'mon, Jesse Garon, don't fail me now..."

Whenever he was alone, which was most of the time, the Op talked to Jesse Garon as if his brother were there. In a sense, he was. In the backwoods, they said that when one of identical twins died, the survivor would carry the baby's soul for the rest of his natural life.

"C'mon..."

Despite his thick leather waders, the cold of the Mississippi Delta swamp was seeping into his legs. He had been in one place for over two hours, since before sundown, waiting for the attack to come.

On a still night, you could hear the helicopters coming from a long way away. He had enough time to take the rocketlauncher out of its watertight case, and load up with a GenTech one-shot Ground-to-Air missile. The weapon was heavy on his shoulder, but he stood his ground, putting up with the ache, his right eye to the nightsight.

Around him in the swamps, the cicadas trilled. There were water moccasins weaving across the surface of the rancid waters, and he had heard that the 'gator population was rising now they were raising the reptiles for food. But he'd been trailing through swamps all his life, and nothing had bitten him to death yet.

He wore a heavy black leather jacket, zipped up to his chin. Underneath, his shirt was a vivid pink. He didn't want that flash of colour in the night, marking him out as a target for the CAF. His face and hands were camouflage-streaked.

Finally, he heard the whup-whup-whup of the spidercopters. The CAF nightriders were flying out of Vicksburg in precise military manoeuvres, raiding, extracting tribute, coralling a load of indenture boys and girls, and retreating. They were connected in the state legislature, the Op knew. Indenture was a profitable system for the corps and politicians. In boardrooms across the world, they had wet dreams about workers you don't have to pay. The swampies had tried to get some official law in to deal with the Confederates, but no one was interested. They had had to pool their money and hire themselves some protection.



When he was first mustered out of the army, back in '60, he had gone to a Western movie with his Mama Gladys and the Original Colonel. The Magnificent Seven. In that picture, a group of poor Mexican farmers were being terrorized by a gang of banditos led by Eli Wallach. They put all their money together and appealed to some American gunfighters to come and help them out. Although they had very little, the cowboy heroes agreed to fight and mostly die for the farmers. Back then, when he was taking down \$10,000 a week, he hadn't believed those seven gunfighters would really take the job.

But here he was, nearly forty years later, with a rocketlauncher cricking his neck, preparing to go into battle with a couple of chopperloads of Klan-hooded killerscum for what amounted to a potful of beans and some used-up cashplastic tokens.

He could see the spidercopters now, stealthing their way across the bayou, ripple-patterning the waters. They were painted with the stars and bars, and they were packing enough hardware to burn out a small town. Which, since Mayor Kettle had refused to pay tribute or hand over any more young people as indentees, was exactly what they planned to do to what was left of YazooCity .

The New South was full of factions like the Confederate Air Force, semi-official gangcults with some money behind them. With the gradual erosion of centralized government and the permeation of the state law-enforcement agencies by the big corps, a whole slew of patriotic warlords had set out to carve themselves little empires.

The Commander-in-Chief of the CAF was a dyed-in-the-wool white supremacist fanatic called Burtram Fassett whose last gangcult had called themselves the Knights of the White Magnolia and operated out of Phoenix . Turner-Harvest-Ramirez had broken up that crap game in the early '90s, but now he was in the bigotry and intolerance business again, lording it over a cadre of tightly-drilled white trash soldiers dreaming of white-columned, ivy-swathed mansions they'd never get their dirty boots into. Robert E. Lee would have had them shot down like dogs, but they sang "Dixie," "The Bonnie Blue Flag" and "I'm a Good Old Rebel" while they were burning out black churches and families, and could recite all the dialogue from Gone With the Wind if prompted. The South had always raised as good a crop of hatred as of cotton.

There were three spidercopters, moving in the classical arrowhead formation. The Op had flown similar ships in Central America in the '80s, and remembered how devastating it had been when the Sandinistas got hold of weapons like the one he was hefting right now. He grinned at the memory of high-tech engines of death crashing in flames in the jungle. It was time the CAF birdmen got a taste of their own napalm...

The young men of Yazoo Citymdashdespite its name not much more than a collection of swamp-harvester's huts these daysmdashwere spread out through the swamp, hefting rusty burpguns and flamethrowers. The Op had drilled them for a few weeks, and knew they would do their best. They couldn't hope to stand up to Fassett's forces for any length of time, but he was counting on the CAF being so spooked by meeting any resistance at all that they went to pieces. That was more than likely. The fanatics were always the first to run when you shot back. He remembered only too well being the only one to stand tall outside Managua when the government troops popped out of the ground. Those Contra yellowbellies Uncle Sam had had him supporting probably hadn't stopped running.

The lead copter hovered, and its attendants held their places in the formation, noses slightly down, weapon arms bobbing. The Op had the flying machine in his sights, and initiated the launch sequence. The LED below the sight counted down from twenty. He found himself twitching to the beat of the LED, his hips moving in his waders, his free hand clicking his fingers to the music only he could hear. The music he

had heard all his life. A hatch opened in the spidercopter, and the cross speared down into the swamp, rooting itself deep into the mud bottom, only slightly askew. The Op raised the rocketlauncher as the chopper lifted up. The cross exploded into flame, and stood there burning.

Thirty yards to the left, William Soule swore. 95% of the citizens of Yazoo City were poor and black, and that put them high on the CAF's list of undesirables.

The spidercopter to the left squirted bunting napalm in a high arc over the swamp. The CAF knew there were people down in the waters waiting for them, and were trying to end it early. Large things crashed through the burning waters, and the Op hoped his line of defence would hold. It was time. It was time to rock and roll. The rocket whizzed out of the launcher, and he had the weapon back in its case before it struck home. The pilot saw it coming too late, and tried to take evasive action, but the missile's inbuilt homing system adjusted its course. It exploded dead centre on the spidercopter's nose, and the craft's napalm tanks went up. It was like a small sun for a moment, and then fell in fiery metal chunks into the swamp. The Op held a clump of hanging moss as the wave hit him at chest-height. Water slopped into his waders, and he was nearly knocked over.

The other copters were rising out of range, computerized baffle systems coming on-line to defer any further high-tech assaults. The Op didn't mind that. He knew he would only have one shot with the tube. The baffles meant that the CAF couldn't use any of their smart missiles on him either.

Unslinging his G-Mek Rapide full-automatic machine gun, he sloshed across the swamp towards the island where the first wave would be coming down. It was the only semi-solid footing for a mile or so, and the CAF commandos would naturally strike for it.

There were bursts of flame as the CAF blundered into the booby-traps they had set earlier.

"Whoo-eeee," yelled Soule, punching the air. "Gonna fry us some hoodhead honkie ass tonight!"

The Op signalled to Soule, and the kid passed the order on. The Yazoo Krewe were to move in.

One of the spidercopters was over the island, men on ropes abseiling down from it. They were mainly frozen in mid-air since the first explosions, but a few of the hoodheads on the ground were calling for back-up. The other chopper had withdrawn to a safe height and was laying down more napalm.

People were screaming, trying to get the stuff off them. The Op knew that was hopeless. The best you could hope for with a GenTech napalm product was a quick death from traumatic shock. This new stuff was bio-based and bonded with your tissue on first contact. It burned inside you until there was nothing left to burn. And it burned underwater, so pulling yourself into the swamp was no help. He hoped the Yazoo Krewe hadn't lost too many.

The CAF was laying down conventional fire now, but they hadn't got the range yet. Bullets threw up little splashes twenty feet behind them.

"Pore-ass motherfuckers," Soule yelled. "Ofey ratskaggers, lowbrow cornhole connoisseurs!"

The Op wished the kid would concentrate on the action, rather than taking the time to use his extensive vocabulary.

"Shape up, Soule," he shouted. "This is serious."

"Yes, Colonel," the boy snapped.

The Op sighted on a hoodhead who seemed to be directing the ground troops on the island, and took him apart with a burst. That should throw some confusion into the ranks.

Matthew Croke, the Yazoo City selectman who had visited him in Memphis, floated by, half his head shot away. He rippled through the reflection of the burning cross.

Soule saw the man in the water, and swore again. He lifted his 'gator-baiter rifle and sniped three hoods in a row, bringing them down with precise heartshots.

They still couldn't decide whether to land more gunmen or pull out entirely. The spidercopter was hovering indecisively. Its lase swivelled, and burned a line across the ground. The grass singed, and smoked.

The Op whistled, a pre-arranged signal, and the Yazoo Krewe stormed the beaches like John Wayne hitting two Jima. The Op rapid-fired his weapon, jitterbugging a group of hoodheads.

Soule and three others were assembling a mortar under the cover of a dead tree. The Op gave them some covering fire while they got the thing put together, and took a couple of shots at the copter. A hoodhead fell from his rope, and splashed into the swamp. Someone up there maddash probably chickenheart Fassett maddash made a decision to cut the ground troops loose and make a tactical retreat, and the copter shifted in the air, its updrafts humming.

Come on, Soule.

"On line, Colonel," Soule shouted.

"Take the bird down," he ordered.

The kid's grin was a line of white in the night, and he worked the lever.

The shell rose in an arc, and peaked a few feet too low. It came down on the other side of the island, exploding shrapnel into the thick greenery.

The spidercopter was still lifting, not yet up to speed. Its blades rhythmically sliced the air.

"Give it another fifty feet," he judged.

"Sure thing, Colonel," Soule replied.

The adjustment was made, and the next shell exploded in the belly of the copter. The left nacelle, which housed the lase and the napalm squirters, was dislodged and tumbled downwards, flames flickering around it, the stars and bars peeling.

"Down," the Op ordered, throwing himself to the soft, muddy earth and sinking his face into it.

He heard the explosion as the napalm tank burst, and felt scraps of fire on the back of his jacket. He rolled quickly back into the water, and stayed under, holding the air in his lungs.

This wasn't doing his clothes any good.



His eyes open, he realized that above him the surface of the water was a dull orange. The area was on fire. He heard the blood pounding inside his head.

He kicked and swam until there was a cool darkness above him, and, chest bursting, spluttered his way to the surface. He coughed and spat water and shook his thick hair. He had been born with blondish-brown hair. It might be greying now, but he'd been dyeing it black since his early twenties. His years in the army and, then, the Op business, had kept him in trim. But all the regen treatments in the world and the personal attention of Dr Zarathustra couldn't take the years away. His face was unlined, but he was 64 years old.

The copter was coming down in a lazy spiral, burning hoodheads bailing out, splashing into the pool of napalm. The cicadas were quiet now, and there was only the sound of human pain to disturb the swamp. Quite a few of the Yazoo Krewe would have been killed by the exploding napalm tank. The Op blamed himself. He should have known what would happen. There was no point in winning the battle if there was no one left at the end to get the benefit.

Guns still chattered as Fassett's hoodheads and Soule's Yazoo Krewe exchanged fire between the hanging curtains of Spanish moss.

A man on fire ran at him, firing wildly, and he put a shot in his head. Camouflage robes tented around him as he sank into the dark waters.

The Op realized he was up to his neck in the swamp now, and that his footing was none too good. The napalm had driven him further away from the island than was advisable.

He struck towards the shore, avoiding the floating patches of fire, shaking the water out of his guaranteed moisture-proof Rapide. Something crashed out of the swamp a few feet away, and he swung around to open fire. The gun squelched as he pulled the trigger, and he swore to get his money back.

The hoodhead was huge, easily six-seven, and built like a professional wrestler. He had IR shades over his cloth face, and was holding up a two-foot-long dagger with a wickedly serrated edge. They sure grew their rats big in Vicksburg .

The Op had his combat knife out of his belt, and held it just under the water. The hoodhead slipped himself onto it, taking the steel up to the hilt in his hard belly, just under the ribcage.

He screamed in rage, and blood darkened his hood over his mouth, but he was still slashing wildly.

The Op got a lock on the hoodhead's wrist, and tried to crush the bones, but they felt durium-laced.

"Nigra-lover," the hoodhead spat.

The Op carved into the man's gut, feeling the entrails uncoiling under the water like anemone tendrils.

His enemy had lost the dagger, but got a surprisingly strong grip on his throat. The Op corded his neck muscles, and kept the air passage open. He had Zarathustra threads in there, and could lock his pipes open. But the hoodhead was more interested in pulling him under the water than throttling him.

The Op struck a couple of karate blows to the hoodhead's neck, and felt the grip relaxing, but only slightly. Out of the water, his karate training would tell and he would be able to use the man's weight

against him. Here, they were just a couple of scratching and biting animals.

The 'gator came from somewhere, and latched onto the hoodhead. It must be the intestines trailing in the water, calling to predators, signalling the presence of something mortally wounded and edible. The Op kicked in the water, and swam away from the thrashing mass where the reptile was clamping its jaws into the hoodhead, tearing limbs free, scattering blood in droplets. A hand reached for a frag, and flipped the top.

The Op threw himself under the waters again, as his merciful grenade blew hoodhead and 'gator to pieces. The Shockwave knocked him off balance, and he felt his hand sink into the mud as he tried to steady himself. His Rapide, still slung around his arm, floated on the surface, pulling him up.

He broke the waters, and struggled towards the island. The fighting was dying down.

The third spidercopter was gone. The CAF had been stung badly, and were withdrawing.

There were dead and burned people floating thick around the island. With their skins and clothes napalmed off them, they all looked the same colour.

The gunshots weren't so frequent now. The fighting was more or less over. The cross had burned itself out. There was a half-hearted cheer as it toppled hissing into the swamp.

The Op pulled himself out of the swamp, water cascading out of his clothes, and walked across the island. Soule was down on one knee near the crashed chopper, a friend trying to tighten a tourniquet around his leg. His boot was exploded, and three of his toes were gone.

Soule grinned, and gave the Op the thumbs-up.

"We rocked," he said. "We rocked and rolled!"

His leathers heavy with water, his hair over his face, the Op walked towards the wreckage. The Yazoo Krewe were clustered around a few wounded and captured hoodheads, prodding them with rifles, kicking them with steel-toed boots. The CAF were yelping as they took their punishment. Chickenhearts to a man, the Op guessed.

Ellroy Kettle, the Mayor of Yazoo City, was laying into the head of a fat man in a muddy once-white sheet.

"How yo like that, massah?" Kettle shouted, tears running into the brown creases of his face. "That 'nuff cotton plucked fo yo, Mistah Rhett Freakin' Butler? Yo want some iced lemonade on the freakin' verandah, massah?"

Earlier, the Mayor had spoken with a cultivated Harvard accent. Now, he sounded like a cross between Stagger Lee, the badass dude who took his razor to every whitey sheriff who came after him, and Stepin Fetchit, the scaredy-cat pop-eyed slave of all those Hollywood movies.

"Hold on there, Mr Mayor," the Op said. "The fight's over."

A couple of younger men tried to hold Kettle back, but he was carried away. The last time the CAF flew against Yazoo City, they had harvested a crop of "indentees," young people conscripted to work as cheap labour in the corp-run factories and fields of Alabama and Georgia. Kettle's daughter Rosaria was

one of those indenture girls, and she had died from a smacksynth overdose in a whorehouse in the Montgomery NoGo. Some Japcorp honcho had been dissatisfied with the services and shot her up with enough Hero-9 to cardiac-arrest an elephant. The Confederates had managed to bring back at least one of the South's cherished antebellum traditions: indenture was just a gussied-up name for slavery. Old times, they were not forgotten.

Kettle kicked the fat sheet wearer in his hood. There was blood dribbling from the eyeholes.

The Op stepped in, and laid his hands on the Mayor's shoulders. The man stopped kicking, and his face fell. He was crying uncontrollably, now.

"My little girl... my little girl..."

The Op hugged the Mayor, and let the man cry, feeling his chest-heaving sobs run through both their bodies. The Yazoo Krewe stood around, sobered, the exhilaration of battle sapping away. The Op had seen this before, in South and Central America, in the Middle East and in the Good Old U.S. of A. There were lots of people crying, with pain, fear or fatigue. It had all been over in less than twenty minutes, but everyone alive would carry the marks for the rest of their lives. Either the marks on their bodies, or the marks on their souls.

Dr Ali Bales, the nearest thing to a medic in Yazoo City, was going around looking to the wounded. She was passing out squeezers of morph-plus to everyone who showed her blood. Soule took Kettle away from the Op, and the Mayor went along quietly.

The hoodhead on the ground squealed, his flabby fingers clawing at his mask.

"White robes, huh? Must be a Grand High Exalted Something-or-Other," said the Op.

A sixteen-year-old swamp fighter, gangcult scars on his brown cheeks, tore the mask away, and they all saw the battered face of Burtram Fassett. The Confederate spat out teeth and insults. There was drying blood in his white goatee beard.

"Nigra vermin," he choked. Something about the man reminded the Op of the Original Colonel. Maybe it was the beard, maybe it was the fat.

Someone raised a gun, but the Op waved it down.

"Under the Enderby Act, I am obliged to tell you that you have just been made the subject of a legal Sanctioned Op's arrest. You will be charged with crimes against the constitution of the United States ..."

"Yankee trash," Fassett spat.

The Op resented that. He had been born in Tupelo, Mississippi.

"You have the right to remain silent while white-hot pokers are shoved up your ass," he shouted. "You have the right to have an attorney present when they snip your fingers with carpetshears, and if you cannot afford an attorney the court will toss you into a plague-pit with fifteen psychopathic killers until it can get around to spitting in your face. Do you understand these rights?"

Fassett wasn't hearing anything. He was breathing, but unconscious. Broken, he looked like a dandified Santa Claus on the night the reindeer rebelled and trampled him into the snow.

Suddenly, the Op felt tired. His back stung from the napalm spots, and his neck ached from the giant hoodhead's killer grip.

"We whipped 'em," Soule was shouting. "We whipped em good, didn't we?"

Bales was searing the open wound on Soule's foot with a lase scalpel, and shooting morph-plus into his ankle. She'd been a Combat Physician with the Voodoo Brotherhood gangcult in Detroit . She was calmly used to this.

The Op nodded at the boy.

"They won't come back to Yazoo City , no more, no way, now how, no sir!"

Soule was flying as the morph-plus hit his system. The Op wondered how the boy would feel tomorrow when he woke up and saw the crutch.

Bales gave the Op a clenched-fist salute, and took the next squeezer out of her mouth to shoot up some other kid.

He yanked Fassett upright, and bent the Confederate's arms back so he could slip on the thumbcuffs. Fassett woke up when the pain hit him, but sagged again.

If he could push the case through the FBI or some independent agency, there was a chance that the CAF's highplaced buddies wouldn't be able to save him. There were still plenty of incitement and extortion beefs against the old IGW in Arizona , and the Op was sure he could scrape up a few extra charges. There might even be some bounties on the bastard's pointy head. The spare change would come in handy. He had been doing too many of these charity cases recently, and the coffers could do with some heavy replenishing.

The Yazoo Krewe were busy with their wounds, and with mopping up. Later, they'd probably all get drunk and sing songs. The Op remembered the early days, when he'd heard the Mississippi songs. And later caught up with the great bluesmen: Robert Johnson, who some say sold his soul to the Devil to make the music, Arthur Crudup, who wrote "That's All Right (Mama)," Johnny Ace, who shot himself playing Russian Roulette just as "Pledging My Heart" hit the charts in 1954, Kokomo Arnold, who wrote the original "Milkcow Blues Boogie," Junior Parker, B.B. King, Rufus "Bear Cat" Thomas, Big Memphis Ma Rainey, Hardrock Gunter, the Ripley Cotton Choppers, Big Bill Broonzy, Howlin' Wolf...

The music was faint now. It had been a long time. Forty years. But you couldn't ever burn it out of you. If you were born with it, it was always there.

He heaved Burtram Fassett towards the powerboat, and dumped him in. He'd make his way back quietly to Yazoo , and lock the Confederate into the reinforced trunk of his Cadillac convertible. Then, he'd head back to Memphis .

"Hey, Colonel," said a sharp-looking young swampy, tightly curled masses of hair pulled back by a rubber band, "where you goin'?"

Elvis Aron Presley, Op, shrugged, and said, "Home, I guess."

## II

The sinking city smelled of dead fish, Paris perfume and easy money. Every time the waters rose, the locals just added another layer to the sidewalks, and shored up all the buildings below the waterline. A few months ago, the wall of The Crab Shell, a famous nightspot, had given way and a roomful of high-rolling gamblers had drowned. The New Orleans canal-rats had been scooping poker chips, jewellery, fancy hats and sodden paper money out of the drainage sluices ever since. Roger Duroc knew Venice well, and recognized the odours of damp and corruption as the encroaching swampwater ate away at the foundations of this city. One day New Orleans would just collapse like the House of Usher, and disappear under the stagnant waters. He wouldn't be sorry.

Before leaving Salt Lake City, he had had to take a course of inoculation shots that still made his arm itch. New Orleans was the disease capital of the South-East, and he didn't want to bring away any of the wide variety of rots, agues, fevers or plagues endemic to the city. Most people on the canals wore breathing masks. Given the high proportion of criminal elements in the city, it was wide-open, a PZ in name only. Duroc assumed that they were as much for disguise as for protection. Some of the masks were carnival fashion accessories, with tinsel whiskers stuck out of the breather snouts and twirled spangle eyebrows above the eyeplate dominos.

Duroc sat in Fat Pierre's, a fast-food joint, spooning thin hot gumbo into his mouth, and listening to the owner's teevee. Dressed in the black suit and wide hat of a Josephite elder, he was mainly ignored by the hustlers and hookers who made up the rest of the clientele. That was fine by him. A hugely obese chef, presumably Fat Pierre himself, was stirring his bottomless pot of gumbo, dropping in huge slabs of vat-grown Boosted Rooster from time to time and generously sinking okra into the gloop.

On the teevee, Lola Stechkin was hosting a documentary about the rash of inexplicable phenomena that had been sweeping the world for the past year. They had footage of the ruins of the Monastery of Santa de Nogueira in Arizona, which had last December been the focus of an inexplicable devastation the news people were trying to pass off as a freak meteorological occurrence. A British science-fiction writer wearing a circus-tent sarong was talking to Lola about rains of frogs, the tracks of Bigfoot, and Buick-sized lumps of ice falling in the desert, while a tattooed astrologer was waving an hourglass and trying to get in on the act. There were all sorts of experts on the inexplicable, and they were always on the teevee these days.

Duroc suppressed a shudder. He hadn't been there, but since Santa de Nogueira, his worldview had not been the same. All his life, he had known about the Dark Ones and the powers that had run in his family for centuries. Always, Nguyen Seth, the Elder, had been there, talking of things beyond anyone's comprehension. Seth the Summoner had always been with his family, down through the centuries, ageless and unchanging, stalking the back alleys of history. And, in his dreams, he had been with his ancestors in the dungeons of the Inquisition, Place de la Guillotine, Dien Bien Phu. But only when the thing called the Jibbenainosay squeezed itself into the universe and joined in combat with the woman-shaped fiend Krokodil had Duroc really been forced to accept the reality.

With the Jibbenainosay towering above him in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, vast and alive beyond the reach of his mind, he had known the truth of the catch-phrase people had been using recently. Quoting Judy Garland's words in *The Wizard of Oz*, people would react to each new wonder, each new horror, with "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas any more."

From Santa de Nogueira, Lola cut to a more recent Arizona disaster site. Fort Apache, where madmen had run riot, and strange presences had infiltrated the computer system. An expert was blandly explaining

how close to holocaust the economic and information systems of the entire country had come.

Duroc had been mixed up in that, too. He hadn't been there, of course, but he had carried in his body the demon that had attacked the fort. The pain was still with him.

The gumbo scalded his mouth, and he washed it down with a swallow of mineral water.

Lola segued into a commercial for the GenTech biodiv, and a trustworthy-looking actor in a white coat was holding his midriff open so you could see how well his vat-grown liver was working as it dealt with a bottle of triple-strength vodka.

Duroc thought of the women he had never met, but whom he had tried to kill. Chantal Juillerat, S.J., Swiss national, Op and exorcist. Jessamyn Amanda Bonney, alias Jazzbeaux, alias Krokodil, former juvenile delinquent, current host of an entity so alien that it made Nguyen Seth seem like a human being. These women, and their menmdashTrooper Nathan Stack, Sergeant James Quincannon, Cardinal Fabrizio De Angelis, Hawk-That-Settlesmdashhad interfered in the business of Elder Seth, and would inevitably die. They could not hope to survive against the Dark Ones.

Lola came back, and her Serious Expression evaporated into her Smiley Face as she started boosting the ZeeBeeCee Blotto Lotto. "Who knows," she was saying with moist lips, "maybe you'll be the lucky winner..."

What kind of a country was this? They took the mind-stretchingly unimaginable and spat it out in three-minute chunks before doing a money-making link into a pie-in-the-sky game. Don't worry about the End of the Universe, because you could be the LUCKY WINNER!!!!

Lola was talking with a robot-voiced computer named RaLPPH, as it went through the arduous process of selecting the citizen who would be the beneficiary of the teevee station's giveaway. Stock shots of poolside mansions, hunks and bimbos in immodest swimming suits, piles of sparkling gems, gleaming sports cars and screen-filling stacks of high denomination bills appeared. The dreams of America were so petty.

"Say, m'sieur," began a coffee-skinned indenture girl, slipping onto the stool next to him, "are you lonesome tonight?"

Duroc looked sternly at her. She was young. She wore a filmy dress which changed colour as she moved. It was slit to the thigh, and cut low on her neck. Her hair was short and brittle with setting gel. Her lipstick and eyeshadow were vivid scarlet.

He shrugged, and nodded to the gumbo chef.

"Anis," he said, holding up two fingers. "Deux."

FatPierre grunted, and reached for a dusty bottle. They called themselves French in the sinking city, but couldn't make a proper anis.

"I'm Simone Scarlet," she said, shaking her blood-red nails.

"Enchanté," he replied.

"Are you a preacher?"



"Would it matter?"

The girl smiled. "Preachers are just men like others."

"I'm not a preacher. I'm an Elder of the Church of Joseph."

The drinks arrived. He sipped his. He had to fight to stop his hands shaking. The shadow of the Jibbenainosay was still in his mind. It could never be banished.

Simone Scarlet drank. "You're from Salt Lake City?"

He nodded.

"And does the desert really bloom?"

"It does."

Duroc put her age at about seventeen. She was a little undernourished, her silky limbs a shade too meagre, her skull a touch too apparent under her velvety skin.

Simone Scarlet sighed. "I'd love to become a resettler. It looks so exciting on the newsnets. As if you're really doing something, not just sitting here while the waters rise."

He laid a hand over hers. She was warm to the touch.

"There are always places for the pure in heart, child..."

Her face fell. "Pure... some chance, huh?"

"Pure in heart."

He touched her breast, and felt her fragile heart beating birdlike under her ribs.

She saw something in his eyes he couldn't keep out of them. Her heartbeat increased, and there was a spasm of fear tugging at her mouth.

"You're not..."

"A preacher?" He smiled. "I told you that."

She was trying to back away, but he held her. She looked across the room at a flashily-dressed young black man with an electric blue velour jumpsuit, a mink-banded cowboy hat and more gold in his teeth, on his fingers and around his neck than you'd find in a federal reserve. He nodded to her, urging her on. Simone Scarlet wasn't sure...

Duroc kissed her, hungrily. When he shut his eyes, the Jibbenainosay expanded in his mind, and terror gripped him. He lost his interest in the girl, and let her go.

She looked at him with eyes older than her body. She was torn between being frightened of him and feeling pity.

He called for more anis, and his hands shook.

"What... what is it?"

"Time, Simone," he said. "It's out of joint."

"I don't understand." She laid a hand on his shoulder, massaging through his shoulderpad.

He remembered his business in the city. It was urgent. Nguyen Seth was expecting the best of him. The Path of Joseph had been thorny these last few months. Krokodil was still a nuisance, and the failure of the demon download atFortApache had been a severe disappointment to the Dark Ones. A lot of blood would have to be spilled to win back the favour of the masters.

"M'sieur," she said. "I have an apartment nearby. It is above the waterline. Very little damp."

He finished his drink, and handed his cashplastic to the chef. He slipped it through the machine and returned it to him.

He opened his wallet, and slid the cashplastic back into its slit. It didn't quite fit.

He looked at Fat Pierre, who was stirring the steaming gumbo.

"Hand it over," he said.

The chef shrugged, and kept stirring.

"You know very well what I mean, salaud. The American Excess card. Give it back to me."

"I already did."

He took out the fake and crushed it in his fist. It dropped on the counter.

Simone Scarlet was shrinking away again.

"Why you do that?"

Duroc let out a stream of French abuse at Fat Pierre, switching between Parisian gutterspeak and authentic Creole.

He wrenched the card-processing machine off the counter, and pulled it apart. His card, along with several others, was in a compartment at the bottom of the thing. It was a clever device, which reproduced the impressions of the code numbers on a blank plastic chip and turned out an almost-perfect fake in seconds.

FatPierre reached for a large knife that was hanging on a rack, but Duroc got him by the scruff of the neck with a strong grip. He swung himself over the counter, and got the chef in a necklock.

Everyone in the diner was looking at him.

The chef tried to ram an elbow into his stomach, but he dodged. He wrestled the burly man over to the

stove, and shoved his head into the boiling gumbo.

FatPierre's screams bubbled out of the pot. Duroc let the man go and, a towel pressed to his scalded face, he slumped to the floor, whimpering.

Simone Scarlet's mouth was wide open.

Duroc came out from behind the counter, and took Simone's elbow, helping her on with her fakefur wrap.

"Your apartment?" he said. "Can we walk there?"

She nodded.

He steered her past the young man with the golden accessories, and out onto the street.

"Toto," he said, "I don't think we're in Kansas any more."

There was music playing in the distance. With the ripples lapping the kerb, they walked three blocks to Simone Scarlet's apartment house.

As the sun went down, the stench got worse.

### III

"Hey, Elvis," said Nick Papageorgiadis, "va-vamdashvoooooom!" Tired, the Op flashed his one-sided sneery grin at the mechanic, and dutifully answered, "Yeah, va-va-voom..."

He was wearing a clean black leather jacket over one of his trademark pink shirts, black pants, black leather boots and a black string tie. His jacket was an Op special, cut loose around the chest to hang unnoticeably over the harness-holster.

Nick shimmied across the garage, waving his rag, and abased himself in front of the pink Cadillac like a Voodoo Bro before Lord Shango or Damballah. The man was into cars like some men were into women or whisky.

"Cad-dee-laaaac, yo!" Nick breathed reverentially, touching the unscarred bodywork of the classic automobile. "Va-va-voooooom!"

"Yeah, it'll va-va-voom all right. Check the engine and the oil, though. Can't be too careful about maintenance with a baby like this."

Nick caressed the gleaming hood as if it were his baby daughter, and sprung the concealed catch, exposing the G-Mek engine in its cradle. There was enough power in its gleaming cylinders to lift a Vixen jet fighter off the runway. The mechanic sighed, lasciviously, and reached into the car's workings to tighten a few nuts.

The Op had bought the automobile originally on September the 3rd, 1956, as a gift for Mama Gladys, who didn't drive. It had mainly been in storage in Nick's garage for thirty years, used only when Elvis was

on furlough from the army. Ten years ago, Nick had persuaded him to have it completely refitted. An Op needed a flashy car, Nick told him. The Cadillac was fully convertible now, with swampskimmer attachments. If Nick could have found a place to put wings on the thing, it would fly like a bird.

"The lase mounting is a degree off, Nick."

The mechanic looked shocked. "Oh, Elvis, I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. Just fix it."

"I do it free. I miss it last time."

"You work, you get paid, Nick. You know how I feel about that."

Nick looked sheepish, and shrugged. Elvis could trust him to do a perfect job with the Cadillac. Sometimes, the Op thought Nick loved the car more than his own family.

It was certainly a prime piece of American workmanship. Not a scrap of Japtech in there, from the IFF transmitter to the chaingun. The trunk was spacious enough to accommodate a felon in relative comfort. Fassett had complained, of course, but he had been lucky. If Elvis had left him around Yazoo City, the Krewe would have nailed him to a tree and stripped off his skin.

He'd just dropped his prisoner off at the Federal holding penitentiary on the outskirts of town, and promised to download the documentation into the FBI's files tomorrow. From the car, he had made a few calls to personal friends in the bureau. He thought he could guarantee that Fassett would serve some hard time in a reeducation centre.

That was another shred of scum out of circulation. Elvis felt good about that.

Leaving Nick to work on the car, the Op rode the elevator up to his apartment on the 15th floor. It was small, but served him well on the rare occasions when he was in town. Most of the time, on the road, he lived out of the Cadillac. It had been made in an era which prized size as well as style; you could probably settle down and raise a family in the car. Not that he had ever been in a position to find out. There hadn't been much time in his life for putting down roots.

He entered his code in the building's security system, and the automatic gates let him in. There was a uniformed guardmdashsome ageing kid called Springsteen who was always hanging around, asking him questions about being an Opmdashbut he was just for show. The machines ran the building.

Springsteen was busy just now, so Elvis was able to walk past him with just a hello. He was too tired for talk. He'd been driving hard, working off the adrenalin that had built up before the firefight. The swampy roads weren't busy, and he had had a clear route, passing only a few corp convoys and a solo cyker or two. Fassett had stopped banging after an hour, and it had been a quiet trip. Pushing 130 most of the way, he had made it from Yazoo to Memphis in just under two hours, crossing the state line at dawn. Of course, it had taken the rest of the day to deal with the Safe Route through the NoGo and to detour by the Federal Prisoner Depository.

Now, he just wanted to get some sleep. Tomorrow, he'd do his document work and sew up that bastard Fassett with the courts. He'd want to do a careful job. The CAF had pricey shysters backing them up. Then, he'd check his answering service and see if any more commissions were in the offing.

His funds were low, he knew. He ought to take a high-paying bodyguard or courier gig if he was going to finance another few Yazoo City actions. The trouble was that the people who most needed the help were the ones least able to afford it. And once you got a rep for being a Samaritan Op, you were overloaded with deserving and undeserving cases. It was a tough century, and someone had to look after his neighbours.

He had been born dirt-poor in a house that was just a few tarred boards the right side of a shack. His Pa had had so little in the way of education that he had misspelled his surviving son's middle name on his birth certificate. Elvis Aron. It was supposed to be Elvis Aaron. Often, he'd thought of getting it changed by deed poll, but that would mean admitting old Vernon had made a mistake. He wouldn't insult his Pa's memory that way.

He opened the door of his apartment, and stepped into the tiny hall. The first thing he saw was the only picture he had from the wild years before the army, a small framed photograph of him on stage, swivelling his hips, trying to keep hold of a guitar and a microphone at the same time. Behind him, you could see Bill Black twanging his bass. That had been when he and Bill and Scotty Moore were the Blue Moon Boys, doing the Louisiana Hayride show. Before it all got crazy, and the Original Colonel stepped in, and the music went weird...

Some said that Elvis Presley had gone to the Devil. Now, the Op wasn't so sure they hadn't been right.

The Op shucked his jacket, and carefully hung it up. He pulled off his shoulder holster, which was weighed down with three gunsmdasha Colt Police Python for the left armpit, a G-Mek Finishing Touch automatic for the right, and a one-shot derringer for the small of the backmdashand hung that on the stand.

His frozen nineteen-year-old self yelled silently at him. What had the song been? "That's All Right (Mama)," his first recording at Sun? "Good Rockin' Tonight"? "Mystery Train"? "I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone"? The kid had the music in him, for sure, stronger than anything else. That felt remote, but he could dimly remember the urges that seemed to come directly from his gut as soon as puberty hit him. He chased girls like all the others, that was certain. But there was something else, another need, another drive. Some Preachers had called him an instrument of the Devil.

He broke away from the picture, and went into his studio. Slipping off his shoes, he sank onto his couch and, too tired to sleep, just stared...

The music had seemed to come out of him like blood spurting from a knifewound. It had been joyous, but there'd been pain too. He was full of the music like some of the backwoods preachers were full of the Word of the Lord, and he had to let it loose. Even when he sang gospel, people said the Devil was in his voice, in the movements of his hips.

The Devil's Music, they had called it. It had been called that forever. Any music that got inside people and stirred them up was in Satan's Top Forty. Elvis remembered the stories about Paganini having sold his soul for the music, and the things they still whispered about poor, lost, stabbed-through-the-heart-at-28 Robert Johnson.

And if the Devil didn't want his soul for himself, he sent Colonel Thomas Parker to claim it for Hell's side.

The Original Colonel.

Elvis loosened his shirt, and stabbed a button on the couch arm. The air conditioning kicked in, and he felt cool air on his chest.

He remembered the Colonel. And the Colonel's strange, money-doling shadow, Mr Seth.

Seth had been with the Colonel from the carnival days, always sponsoring the promoter, nurturing him for some unknown life's work. An old-time barker, on the payroll as one of the Colonel's many nebulous advisors, had told him a story about Parker's early days in showbusiness, about a band called Bob Willis and the Texas Playboys and about Colonel Parker's Dancing Chickens. Seth had told the Colonel that a country music show he was arranging would qualify as an agricultural event and thus not be liable for tax just so long as he had an animal act on the bill. What Parker did was put a hotplate in the bottom of a cage and cover it with straw. When it was plugged in and heated up, the band would play "Turkey in the Straw" and the curtain would go up on a couple of chickens high-stepping to the music, their pain-squawks covered by the fast fiddling. When the chickens gave out, the Colonel would Southern-fry the fowl and serve them to hungry customers during the intermissions. One of the scary things about the Colonel was that he liked to hear that story told, and never could understand why it made people look at him in a different way. As far as he was concerned, the whole point was that he had put one over on the revenue men.

Once he signed up with the Colonel in 1956, Elvis Presley had become just another Dancing Chicken, and the music thing had gone crazy.

Outside it was getting dark. Elvis turned the lights up, and stretched out on the couch, letting all the old pains fade away.

He had been yanked from Sun Records, where Sam Phillips had said that a white man with a black sound would be worth a million dollars. He had developed his style, and switched to RCA Victor, where he got his first taste of the corps. The hits came thick and fast: "Heartbreak Hotel," "Blue Suede Shoes," "Hound Dog," "Don't Be Cruel," "All Shook Up" — and he'd been walked through some movies. Love Me Tender, swivelling his hips as a cowboy just after the Civil War, Jailhouse Rock, Loving You, King Creole. They hadn't been so bad, but then came his draft notice, and, away from the Colonel, he had time to do some thinking.

In the army, the music had receded. It seemed a lot less important somehow than learning to drive a tank. That had been just like driving the pick-up truck he had been working before the music hit big. Elvis had always loved to be behind the wheel of a powerful machine. That was one thing that never changed. At first, the army had been a circus, being shifted from unit to unit, his whereabouts guarded more jealously from the fans and the press than a secret weapon. Once billed as "the Nation's Only Atomic Powered Singer," he had found his military niche trucking nuclear weapons around testing sites in the desert. It made sense; the expected news clamp-down on the atomic tests also covered up his presence, and at last he was just another dogface GI, angling for some NCO insignia. People stopped asking him to sing in the barracks, and, surrounded for the first time by guys his own age rather than the Colonel's wrinkled carny cronies, he had started questioning the way his career was being handled.

Back then, everybody in his life wanted him to be something: Sam Phillips wanted him to be a white negro; Vernon and Gladys wanted him to be a movie star as big as The King, Clark Gable; Colonel Parker wanted him to be a younger Dean Martin who shat gold; the fans wanted him to take every girl in America between the ages of fourteen and nineteen into his bed; the TV censors wanted him to stop shaking his hips while he played and sang; Jerry Lee Lewis wanted him to die tragically and make way for a new King of Rock 'n' Roll; the Hollywood moguls wanted him to be the new James Dean, the new Marlon Brando, the new Cary Grant; Billy Graham and Jimmy Swaggart wanted him to stop, period,



even if he swore only to sing Gospel, claiming the Sin wasn't so much in the words as it was in the music; and Mr Seth... well, Mr Seth wanted something he wasn't talking about... maybe, Mr Seth wanted his soul. Only the army seemed to be interested in him being just plain Elvis A. Presley, US 53310761.

He had all his records, boxed up and locked away, but he almost never got them out. He didn't even have a system that could play the 78s. Nobody else remembered any more, so why should he? If you turned on the rock stations, all you got was Petya Tcherkassoff, Vania Vanianova and all the other Soves who had copy-catted his style. America had lost rock 'n' roll sometime in the '60s floundering under the weight of British heartache drivel, and the Russians had bulled in with the beetroot beat. Good luck to them.

He had got out of the army in 1960, having risen to buck sergeant, and the Colonel had a whole life waiting for him. Hollywood movies, a TV show with Frank Sinatra, a stack of songs. And a new contract which gave Elvis nearly half of what he earned. It was time for the chicken to dance again. He had seen what was coming. An endless procession of fluffily idiotic scripts, no-balls songs, willing women in bikinis, a mansion which was less of a home than the old Presley shack. And throughout it all there was Colonel Parker, raking in the money, forcing him to bow his head, tying him up with contracts that would outlive him. Mr Seth wasn't around much any more, but his grinning skull photograph remained with all the others in Parker's office. The Colonel turned his family against him, bought off Mama and Papa with the comforts they had never had, and paid friends to spy on the valuable bird. The hot plate was heated up regularly, and the Dancing Chicken screamed unheard pain while the audiences called out for more.

He turned on the teevee, without watching or listening, flicking the channels at random.

The crisis had been in October, 1960. Everybody remembered where they were when they heard the news about JFK. Elvis had been in the back seat of his mama's pink Cadillac with a prom queen. When the news came on the radio, interrupting Connie Francis' "Among My Souvenirs," the girl, her hair set solid in a Jackie Kennedy bouffant, broke down and cried. Then, the whole country seemed to be falling apart along with the Kennedy marriage. Elvis remembered that awful, public struggle as more traumatic than any of his own heartbreaks. After all, when Jackie found her husband, the Democratic presidential candidate, in bed with that Hollywood blonde, the world had been shaken. Suddenly, no-hoper Richard Nixon, who had looked like Boris Karloff next to Kennedy's Errol Flynn on the televised debates, was in the White House, and things were different .

On the pornochannel, a hairy-legged satyr was extensively coupling with a green-gilled underwater nymphet. The pounding close-ups reminded Elvis of a documentary about open-heart surgery, and he skipped channels.

Rock 'n' roll was out of favour in 1960, anyway. There were insurrections against it, against the Devil's music. There was mass burnings of records in major cities, and stem parents forced their teenagers to renounce the Devil's music. Buddy, Eddie, Ritchie and Gene were dead in cars or planes and then, in January 1961, the Reverend Jimmy Swaggart led a march against Madison Square Gardens in New York, where Alan Freed, Mr Rock 'n' Roll, was welcoming in a rockin' New Year with nineteen acts and twenty-five thousand fans. Elvis shuddered to think that he had nearly topped that bill; only the Colonel's ridiculous demands had kept him out of the bloodbath. The National Guard had had to be called in to quell what everybody called the Rock 'n' Roll Riots. They had raged for three days, and President-Elect Nixon branded the Devil's music as a greater threat to the moral fibre of the nation than communism, organized crime and poverty rolled together. When the riots were over, Freed, Chuck Berry, Harvey Fuqua, Jackie Wilson, Little Richard and three thousand others were dead, and Jerry Lee Lewis, Swaggart's cousin, was crippled for life. Elvis imagined Lewis sitting angrily on his piano stool, dead from the neck down, straining to move his hands, bashing his forehead against the keys.

To the Colonel, the wave of anti-rock 'n' roll feeling that swept across the country just meant more tuxedo tunes, bubblegum movies, and Las Vegas lounges. He said that Elvis Presley could outlive rock 'n' roll and that "nobody likes that nigger yelling no how." He could have been right. Suddenly, the Billboard charts were full of Pat Boone singing milk-and-water gospel, nice white girls singing nice white songs about nice white dresses, and crappy English Invasion mush from Ken Dodd, Mrs Mills, Matt Monro and Valerie Singleton. Some senate sub-committee set up a ratings board for all music recordings, handing down rulings like a national school principal about what was and was not permissible. The record companies all caved in and drew up their own code, enforcing a strict ban on electric guitars and saxophones that would only be overturned in the early '70s by David Cassidy, decreeing that all live performers should stand up straight like schoolchildren giving a recital. Frankie Avalon, Fabian Forte and Bobby Zimmermann scraped through; Sheb Wooley, the Platters and Tuesday Weld didn't. There was a sudden dash for the milquetoast mainstream, and performers who couldn't adapt to the new style were out of the business.

He had a meeting with the Colonel, and Mr Seth, back from overseas, turned up with a new contract the size of a telephone book. For hours, they explained it to him. There were TV specials, a film in Hawaii, the rights to cover "Tears for Souvenirs" and all Dodd's vomit-making hits, an income for life. And in the background, while the Colonel was talking at him and Mr Seth was just sitting there behind his dark glasses, Elvis could swear that he heard Robert Johnson singing about the hellhound on his trail, about meeting the Devil at the crossroads, about taking the Greyhound Bus to Hell. That had been his crossroads, and he had walked away from it without dipping the pen into a vein and signing his name. He had been set to star in G.I. Blues for Paramount in the spring, but it had been put off for over a year while the Colonel tried to put one over on Hollywood. After the rock 'n' roll riots, studio hatchet men had been through the script with a scalpel, taking out anything that might possibly be construed as rock 'n' roll-esque, substituting pure pap. Two days before he was due to report to the Paramount lot, where he was supposed to sing cute songs to puppets, babies and Juliet Prowse, he had hitch-hiked from Hollywood to Los Angeles and found a recruiting office where he could sign up again. He was immediately switched to OTC and started going for his captain's bars.

On the teevee, the world was going to Hell faster than Johnson's Greyhound Bus. That foxy Lola Stechkin was standing beside more smoking ruins, trying to look sympathetic but gorgeous as she interviewed the survivors of another catastrophe. It was space aliens in flying saucers, a survivor was claiming.

The Colonel had sued him for everything he had, of course. And had got most of it. It was a miracle that he couldn't attach any of his earnings as a soldier. Elvis set up trusts to take care of Vernon and Gladys, and disappeared into the army for twenty-five years.

The last he had heard, the Colonel was trying to do something with his chicken recipes. Mr Seth had just faded back into the night. Elvis dreamed about him sometimes. He had never figured the financier out. The Colonel just wanted enough thousand-dollar bills to fill the Grand Canyon. Mr Seth had something else in mind, some deeper, darker purpose. He couldn't listen to Johnson singing about Blues That Walked Like a Man without thinking of Mr Seth.

Lola and an expert were talking about sunspots. Next up was going to be an interview with a hunter who was claiming to have captured Bigfoot. But first, the station was going over to RaiPPH, to see how the Blotto Lotto was going. Elvis zapped the channels and found an old movie. Rebel Without a Cause, one of his favourites. He watched the film for a few moments, then realized that all the young, confused actors—James Dean, Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo, Nick Adams, Dennis Hopper—were dead. Through freak accidents, violence or suicide. Adams had been a friend for a while, until Elvis found out he

was snitching for the Colonel. He found a cartoon show about a Spanish-accented burro with bio-implants fighting crime, and let it run. Pepe the Robomule kept saying "hee-haw," and declaring himself "a stubborn crusader for justice."

The army had been easier than rock 'n' roll. He had seen action in Grenada, Nicaragua and Israel, and become a Colonel himself. He would have stayed with the service all his life, but in the late '70s he noticed that he was increasingly being asked to fight on the wrong side. Not just the losing side, as a rebel from way back he was used to that, but the wrong side. And he wondered whether his orders were coming from the President of the United States or some Japcorp boardroom. He still thought Nixon had been a hell of a good president—they had met when he received his Congressional Medal of Honour after the taking of Havana—but everyone since had been in the pocket of the corps. The army paid for his Zarathustra treatments, kept him in shape, kept him out of the craziness. But it couldn't be a shelter forever.

In 1987, coming out of the service, exchanging his uniform for civilian leathers, he had felt like Rip Van Winkle. So much had passed him by while he fought for his country.

America was a different place. Great stretches of it were desert, and there were predators out there. The corps were running the show, buying justice for themselves. And the gang culture—homicidal hoodlums—were quarrelling for whatever territory the corps were willing to deed to them. The people came last in the queue for everything.

Just about the only thing he could honourably do was become a Sanctioned Op. He knew he couldn't make much of a difference, but he wouldn't have been half the man his Pa had raised him to be if he didn't try. And so here he was, the sole owner and sole employee of the Hound Dog Agency, operating out of Memphis, Tennessee. His skills had found a use at last.

His phone rang. Too tired to stretch a hand out, he let the answerphone cut in.

After the message, a clear female voice sounded out.

"Colonel Presley, I know you're there. My name is Krokodil. Would you kindly pick up the phone and take this call. It is worth one million dollars."

#### IV

The ceiling fan revolved lazily, not doing much good. Roger Duroc lay naked on the bed, looking at the hotel room through mosquito netting. The insects were hell in the city, swarming all over the place. No matter how many screens you put up, you couldn't keep them out. The Ancien Grenouille Hotel had balconies with elaborate ironwork railings, but it would be asking for the death of a thousand bites to step out in one during the daytime.

According to a documentary he had seen on the telly in some other anonymous hotel room, the world's insect population was exploding. Man might find things heavy-going, what with all the toxic wastes and poison leaks, but the hardy bugs were thriving. New species were being discovered every day. Out in the Great Central Desert, there were apparently foot-long ants, barely able to haul their exoskeletons along, and a plague of locusts was chewing up everything in its path somewhere down in Nicaragua. Daniel Ortega was accusing President North of bioengineering the strain as a weapon of war, and the US Government was issuing strenuously unconvincing denials. This was the age of bugwar.

Even the gangcults had bioweapons in some cities: the Virus Vigilantes of Detroit had wiped out the Black Dragon Tong with a breed of killer-skeeters that did nothing but lay poison eggs in people wearing Black Dragon colours.

Beyond New Orleans, in the swamps, there was apparently a resurgence in the living fossil population. The trilobites were growing to the size of dinner-plates and nipping unwary waders, passing on nasty diseases. Duroc couldn't be sure, but he thought it all had to do with Nguyen Seth and the Dark Ones. Anything that could produce the Jibbenainosay would find a mere race of prehistoric lice easy to pull out of the black top hat. Despite his supposed position in a Christian Church, he hadn't cracked open a Bible since his spell in the seminary. But he knew that plagues of insects were one of the seals of the Apocalypse.

Across the room, her dark body indistinct in the gloom, the girl was fussing with the contents of the hospitality fridge.

He had brought Simone from her apartment. She passed the time, and was in no hurry to leave him alone. He discovered that she had been a high school student out in one of the Delta communities until the indenture men came by with papers and forced the town to hand over a goodly portion of its youngsters in lieu of taxes. Most of the girls had wound up in a vehicle components factory in Natchez, run by a GenTech boardroom. He still thought Nixon had been a hell of a good presidentmdashthey had met when he received his Congressional Medal of Honour after the taking of Havanamdashbut everyone since had been in the pocket of the corps. The army paid for his Zarathustra treatments, kept him in shape, kept him out of the craziness. But it couldn't be a shelter forever.

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She was a typical Delta breedmdasha little black, a little Cajun, a little Choctawmdashbut the overseer classed her as negro, and the indenture program was heavily biased against blacks. As Duroc understood it, the indenture laws had been pushed through theMississippi ,Tennessee andFlorida legislatures by affiliates of the Ku Klux Klan.Washington wasn't happy, but didn't want to push the issue in case.the Southern States tried to secede again from theUnion . This time, they might get away with it. Ollie North was not Abraham Lincoln.

It all seemed paltry to Duroc. If these people knew what was really going down in the world, all the hot air would be over with and they would have to do something. Perhaps that was why so many people refused to believe what was happening all around them. After all, if you tried to deal with the fact that the fundamental laws of physics were being repealed en masse, your head started to hurt and you needed a brewski, a burger and a snort to make the pain go away.

Simone brought him a tall green drink with lots of ice and fake fruit in it. She still had the traces of stripemarks on her back. He sipped his cocktail, and ran his fingers over her scars.

The overseer had passed her on to the GenTech East CEO at the plant. A traditionalist to the core, the Japanese executive went in for tea ceremonies, long baths and the pleasures of the whip. Then, a few



private pornovideos later, she had been sublet to Mink Hat, the young man she had been with at Fat Pierre's. She believed he was still turning over a percentage to the corp. Duroc wondered how those earnings showed up on the company books. "Exploitation of Assets"? "Leasing of Lubrication Equipment"?

InSaltLake , he had been given sundry goods to buy his way where money was no good. He had opened his magic suitcase and offered her a selection of drugs, but she politely declined. She drank only mineral water from the well-stocked fridge. She didn't even want to eat anything, although Duroc guessed she was on the point of starvation.

All she really wanted was to stay.

Duroc didn't care either way. Simone Scarlet was as good an accessory for his disguise as any. She expected so little, asked so little. He felt under no pressure from her. It was almost as if she were a blank onto which he could project whatever he wanted from a woman. Last year, there had been Sister Harrison inSaltLake , but she had been caught in adultery with another man and publicly stoned. She was in a coma. Since then, Duroc had only known a succession of interchangeable bodies, interchangeable smiles, interchangeable cheerleader strips. Kandi, Randi, Mandi, Sandy, Cyndi, Mindi, Nikki, Vikki, Rikki, Buffy, Muffie. Simone Scarlet was perhaps the first American girl he'd had sex with whose first name didn't end with an "i" sound.

He wriggled into his black silk robe, and got out of the bed. Captain Machsler would be here soon. They had talked over the phone earlier, and arranged a time for the meeting.

He considered the sombre black Josephite outfit hanging in the closet, but opted for a lightweight tropical number.

Simone lay on her back under the nets, stretching out like a long, thin cat. She had been an honour student. Math, Chem and Geology. She had had a place waiting for her at Tallahatchie Tech when the indenture men came for her.

Duroc saw a cockroach, easily seven inches long, scuttling out from under the double bed. He bent over swiftly, and pinched the insect between thumb and forefinger. Simone ughed in revulsion and he held it up, its six legs wriggling in the air, mandibles working. The creature was fascinating, monstrous. It twisted round, trying to clamp some flesh in its mildly-venomed jaws. Duroc held it carefully, and smiled.

"Ladybug, ladybug," he cooed, "fly away home..."

He dropped it into his barely sipped drink, and prodded it down past the icecubes and the fruit chunks with the plastic stirrer. Then, he clamped a coaster over the top of the glass, and watched the insect drown. It took a long time. The new breed of cockroaches were hard to kill.

"Your house is on fire, your children are gone..."

Finally, the thing stopped kicking and floated dead in the drink.

Simone was watching him with a horrid fascination.

"Why do you do that?"

Duroc took off the coaster, and gulped down a swallow of bug-flavoured cocktail.



"Whenever you kill something, it makes you more alive."

The girl didn't question his answer.

There was a knock at the door. Simone made a pull for the quilt, drawing it up over her nakedness. Duroc signed to her to lie there still, and opened the door.

Machsler was out of uniform, but was unmistakably a soldier even in jeans and T-shirt. The shirt bore a familiar survivalist logo. "Kill 'Em AllmdashLet God Sort 'Em Out." The officer held a battered briefcase, and wore a cowboy-style sidearm slung in a leather holster on his hip.

"Mr Duroc?"

"Elder Duroc."

Machsler shook his hand, and sidled into the room, looking over his shoulder. Duroc gently closed the door.

The soldier looked around, as if expecting a gang of Maniax to be lurking in the closet. He stared at Simone.

"Don't mind Mademoiselle Scarlet," Duroc said. "She's an old friend."

Machsler obviously wasn't sure about that, but decided he could live with it. He hadn't met the same person twice since Seth got him on the hook, so he must be used to nervous situations.

"Can I get you a drink? Some iced tea? Co-Cola?"

The soldier shook his head, and paced the room like a caged tiger. Duroc noticed he kept his hands above his waist. That way he would have a chance to get one up in front of his adam's apple if someone looped a cheesecutter over his head. The Special Forces trained its people thoroughly.

"You have the money?"

Duroc patted his top pocket.

"Good."

"You have the merchandise?"

Machsler held up the briefcase. It had a fancy lock attached to the old leather.

"Then we can do business?"

The soldier sat down, case in his lap. He was sweating, and scratching at the bites on his forearms. He was tattooed with the symbol and number of his unit, and his blood group and medical details.

"Are you fromNew Orleans ?" he asked.

Duroc shrugged. "My accent, you mean? No. I am fromParis,France . But that was a long time ago. I

am a citizen of Deseret, now."

Machsler was satisfied. The officer was the captain of the high school football team, ten or fifteen years on, fighting to keep his ball-player's body despite too many gassy beers, greasy chilli dogs and butt-flattening hours at a desk. All those "i" sound girls had been over him like a cheap suit when he was a kid, but those days were past. Maybe he had an expensive wife, who insisted on being called by her full "a" sound name. Not Cyndi but Cynthia, not Mindy but Miranda. Probably, he wanted to send his kids to a pricey PZ school with well-dressed killers as security guards, not to some public hellhole where the blackboard monitors forced fourteen-year-olds to turn tricks in the lunch hours, the canteen had a semi-official smacksynth dealer and the school clinic knew more about abortions than grazed knees. America still had dreams, but these days the pricetag was high. Too high for honest public servants.

"Look, it's not my business," began Machsler, "but what do you want with this stuff? It's fifteen-twenty years out of date. Very low priority."

"You are right. It is none of your business."

"Okay, okay." The soldier was regretting his involvement in this transaction. Duroc could see that it was problematic for the man.

Nguyen Seth had been cultivating Captain Ronald Machsler for three years now, pulling him towards the Faustian bargain all men must make. At first, it had been the usual army surplus scam. The Elder's agents had approached the Captain and offered him a good price for ammunition, slightly behind-the-state-of-the-art weaponry and bulk supplies of medicinal drugs. The Church of Joseph had its own supplies of those commodities, of course, but Captain Machsler had to get used to dealing with the Devil, had to get in deep enough not to kick when the real bite came. They had tested him by asking for confidential documents. Troop dispositions along the Rio Grande Wall, the codenames and cover identities of some military intelligence personnel in Managua, the routes of some nuclear waste convoys. It was stuff Seth had no interest in, but Duroc had cast an interested eye over the material, and disseminated it on the underground nets. A minor gangcult took out one of the convoys and, for thirty-eight hours, were in possession of enough weapons-grade plutonium to win them a seat at the United Nations. Turner-Harvest-Ramirez put them out of business, but the raid served to convince Captain Machsler that he was deep into Seth's pocket. Since then, they had been blinding him with silly requests, for almost random information. Having been forced to dredge up a lot of barely-classified documents about long-abandoned plans for military intervention in Central America and rejected designs for long-range missile transportation, Machsler was thoroughly confused. He must be putting his current commission down to the same quixotic interest in military ephemera, which was just what Seth wanted. There would be a few more blind requests over the next year, just to keep the soldier in the dark, but this was the important leak. Duroc was taking personal receipt of this briefcase.

He slipped the cashcard out of his pocket, and laid it on the coffee table. The hologram shimmered in the light. It was real gold. Machsler whistled unconsciously.

"A pay rise?"

"You do good work, Ronald. Elder Seth thinks you deserve it."

Machsler reached, and then froze. He put his hand back on the briefcase. He flushed. Underneath his bee-fuzz crewcut, his scalp glowed red.

Duroc raised his drink in a toast. The soldier goggled at the bug slowly revolving in the glass.

Machsler got up, and put the briefcase down by Duroc's chair. Then he took the cashplastic, slipped it into his back pocket and sat down.

Duroc tapped the access code into the lock, and opened the case. The file was brittle cardboard, full of yellowing papers. He cast an eye over the top few sheets. There were some wiring diagrams and, essentially, a page of deep-buried codewords.

"Are you sure you won't have that drink?"

"Positive."

There was an embarrassed moment. Obviously, Machsler wanted to leave, to get as far away from the hotel as possible, but felt he had to stay for form's sake.

Simone got out of bed and walked across the room to the fridge. Machsler's eyes followed her, but Duroc could not tell whether he was fixing on her body in general or the marks on her back in particular.

"You play rough, eh?" he said, with a weak smile.

Duroc was offended by the soldier's presumption. He sipped his drink. "Sometimes."

Machsler got up, and edged towards the door. "I have a gondola waiting," he said. "I have to be back in base by nineteen hundred hours."

"Goodbye, Ronald."

"Goodbye, Elder. It's a pleasure doing business with you."

"Likewise."

Machsler closed the door behind him, and Simone poured herself another tumbler of mineral water. Her body was finely sheened with perspiration. She was displaying herself to him, as she had been taught. She was a good little indenture girl.

Duroc was more interested in the papers Machsler had brought him. He would have to supervise the reconnection. Fonvielle was too far gone to be much help in that department. The Church had its experts on call, but Duroc would have to oversee the project.

"What are you reading?"

Simone was standing with her hip cocked, weight on one leg, a red-nailed hand idly scratching her flat lower belly. She was obviously posing, a private pornosnap for the customers.

"These are the instructions for a machine we've just bought. They tell me how to light the blue touch paper and retire..."

That was over the girl's head.

He had an idea. "Simone," he said, "have you ever been to Florida?"

"Izumi took me to Daytona Beach for a convention once. We stayed in the hotel most of the time. There was a kumite contest, one of those to-the-death pyramid games. Gen Tech were sponsoring a fighter they'd tricked out with bio-bits. The fighter won, but was too damaged to appear in the teevee ads. Izumi was furious."

She ran her finger along her thigh, outlining a barely visible scar.

"When Izumi was furious, he was a beast."

Regular as a digital watch, it started to rain outside. New Orleans was a monsoon zone. It was something to do with the Winter Corporation's chemical synthetics plant, Duroc had heard. From three till five every afternoon, thick sheets of scalding, corrosive rain fell on the city. Everyone had worked the indoor siesta into their lives. Duroc wondered if Machsler's gondolier was caught in the downpour.

"How much would it cost to buy your indenture contract from Mink Hat?"

Simone looked frightened. "I don't think he wants to sell. I'm new in the stable, and I bring in..."

Duroc finished his drink, stranding the dead cockroach in the melting icecubes. "He'll sell. The Church is persuasive, and rich."

"Do you want to..." she couldn't get the word out... "to buy me, m'sieu?"

Duroc nodded. "I'm moving to Florida for the next few months. I would be honoured if you would come with me?"

"Are we going to Daytona? Miami?"

"No. We're going to a little place you may not have heard of. It was quite famous once, before you were born. It's a little place called..."

V

"...Cape Canaveral?"

"It's in Northern Florida," said the smart, sharp-suited young woman.

"I know where it is," snapped the Op. "I just haven't heard the name for a long time. That's the place where the moon rockets used to take off, right?"

"Yes."

Elvis looked at Krokodil, and found her as inexpressive as a statue. She was young, pretty and dressed in a conservative skirt and jacket, dark grey with a fine pinstripe. Immaculately made-up, her only really distinctive feature was the eyepatch half-concealed by a wing of raven-black hair. She was attractive, but there was something hard, almost scary, about her. Elvis had known cyborgs in the services, and there was something of the biomechanical about Krokodil. Her handshake had been a bone-crusher, he wondered how much of her was real, how much from the lab? She spoke perfect English, like an

amnesiac who has had to relearn everything as an adult, but there was an occasional NoGo twist to her vocabulary. Krokodil hadn't been born to the style she was sporting.

The man was easier to take. Dressed in dusty denims, with a weathered face and a black pigtail, he was a Navaho. He had introduced himself as Hawk-That-Settles. Elvis had had a Cherokee great-great-great grandmother. Morning Dove White. As a teenager, watching Western movies from a pickup in the Tupelo Drive-In, he had been torn between his loyalties to the cowboy heroes all the fellows tried to imitate in speech and manner and his yearning for the Indian's life. One of his few regrets about quitting the movies is that he never did get to play the half-Kiowa hero of Flaming Star, the only decent script that got past the Colonel to him. John Saxon had been okay in the picture, but Elvis knew he would have been better.

Hawk was the talker, but Krokodil put over the punchlines.

They were meeting in a diner in Whitehaven, a Southern suburb of Memphis. Elvis knew the place well, and often used it as an office for the Hound Dog Agency. Gracelands, the mansion he had owned in the music days, was five blocks down, owned by a CAF auxiliary, the Church of Jesus Christ, Caucasian.

Cape Canaveral?

"Isn't that under water?"

Hawk smiled. "Yep, but only a foot or so. They threw up them walls along the Indian River Coast when the Cape was still NASA's head office. They leak a little bit, but you can walk around with your head out of the water."

"What about the diseases? And the skeeters?"

"Not much we can do about them, is there?"

"Fair enough."

Cissy, the waitress, came by and refilled Elvis' and Hawk's recaff cups. Krokodil still hadn't touched hers. The Op wondered if she needed to take nourishment at all, or whether a few hours jacked into the mains would juice her up.

"You ready to order?" Cissy asked, simpering a little. Elvis reckoned she was a little sweet on him.

Elvis went for the jambalaya, Krokodil had the crawfish pie and Hawk picked the fillet gumbo. If you're in the South, you eat Southern.

When Cissy had wiggled her plump ass back to the kitchen, Elvis got back down to business.

"I'm still not quite straight on this, ma'am? What is this job? Courier, bodyguard, shotgun?"

Krokodil explained patiently. "The job is whatever the job is. Colonel Presley. I have to make a trip to the Cape, and we would like you to come along to deal with any hazardous eventualities that might arise."

"We're way out of our territory, Colonel," said Hawk. "I'm from Arizona, and Jessamyn... Krokodil, I mean... is from Denver, originally. We're more used to sand than swamp. You must be familiar with the terrain, and with its dangers?"

Elvis knew what Hawk meant. "Uh-huh. Hazardous eventualities is what we have a bellyfull of. The further you get into the swamps, the harder it is, mister. You know about the skeeters and the speedboat gangcults, I guess. But there are other things out there. Lice the size of dogs..."

"You mean the trilobites?"

"Yeah, living fossils. Nasty li'l things. They take a chew on your arm and you're out of the game for a few months. And who knows what other things are coming back to the bayous? It's a regular primordial ooze out there. GenTech and the other corps have been dumping their toxic goop into the swamps for years, and weird things have been breeding. The way I hear it, the big lice ain't the only living fossils you've got to worry about."

"We are familiar with the weird," said Krokodil in a way that struck the Op as being seriously chilly.

"Then you've got your hostile natives. Them Cajuns are strange. One quarter French, one quarter Injunmdashno offence, manmdashone quarter skunk and one quarter 'gator. Sometimes, they like you, and kill you straight off. Other times, you're not so lucky and they invite all their cousins over for a party. I've got a few friends. I do favours whenever I can. But friendships don't stretch very far away from the PZs. There are lots of paranoid little communities on islands. People have been trying to clear them out and make them change their ways ever since the pirate days when Andy Jackson tried to make 'em all dance 'possum up a gumtree' on the end of a rope. They don't like strangers. You and me, we're strangers."

Krokodil didn't seem impressed. Elvis felt he owed them the full scare story before he took the commission.

"So, if you're really going to make this trip, then you'd better have a damn good reason for it."

"I have a good reason," Krokodil said, offering no more.

"And I need to know what it is."

There was a pause.

"That's a problem," said the Indian.

"It's easily solved. I've got two ears, and I've heard a lot of unbelievable stories in my time."

Krokodil brushed her hair away from her eyepatch. "I'm trying to salvage some equipment left behind when the space program closed down."

"Valuable equipment," underlined Hawk.

"It would have to be. If my cut is a million dollars, then you must stand to clear... what... ten? Twenty? More?"

"I will not profit personally."

"Lady, that I don't believe."



"You can believe it or not, but it's the truth."

Looking into her clear, green eye, Elvis was sure that it was. Not the whole truth, but a goodly chunk of it.

"This sounds straightforward, then. Dangerous, but straightforward. You must have a few details you want to tell me. The gig has to have some complications. At least a million bucks' worth, if I'm any judge."

The food arrived. Hawk hungrily spooned his into his mouth. Krokodil left hers alone.

"The Cape is owned by the Josephite Church. They bought it from the government last year."

Elvis looked at the Indian. "The Salt Lake City crowd? What do they want with a stretch of real estate under a foot of stagnant water?"

Hawk shrugged. "Who knows? The Josephites are crazies."

The Indian had spoken just a hair too quickly, had been just a mite too dismissive.

"They seem to be doing all right by their Desert, though. I hear that they've been raising crops where everybody says that can't be done."

"I do not underestimate the Josephites," said Krokodil. "They are dangerous. They are hostile to me."

"Great. If we get through the mutant 'gators, the voodoo butchers and the swamp-skimming psychos, the Black Hats will preach us to death, eh?"

"The Church of Joseph is not what it seems."

"There's a lot of that about."

Did he catch just the barest flicker of an incipient smile twitching at the corners of her mouth? Probably not.

"So, we'll have to go into the swamps loaded for bear?"

Krokodil nodded.

"My advice would be to go in loaded for King Kong and Godzilla," said Hawk. "But what would I know? I'm a Navaho. We haven't won a war since the US Cavalry shoved us on the reservation."

"I'm from the South, mister. We know all about losing wars to the Yankees."

The Indian smiled easily.

Krokodil said, "I'll leave the armaments up to you. You know the country, you get to pick the tools."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Who recommended me to you?"

The Indian answered. "You have a reputation for public-spiritedness."

"So?"

"We guessed that if you spent most of your time robbing the rich to feed the poor, then you could probably do with the mil..."

Elvis laughed. "That's right, Mama, that surely, purely is right."

The Op signalled to Cissy for more recaff. It wasn't like coffee, but it was hot and wet.

"Look, I don't know how this proposition will go down with you guys, but wouldn't it be easier if you just told me what you want from theCape and sent me in to get it? I'm not a professional snatchman, but it sounds to me like I'd have an easier time of it alone than with you along, ma'am."

Krokodil wasn't offended, but she was insistent. "I can take care of myself, Colonel. I will come with you."

"Okay. It was just a suggestion."

Hawk was smiling. "Krokodil will surprise you. Colonel. She came through Santa de Nogueira without a scratch..."

"The monastery that got flattened by the hurricanes and God-alone-knows what else last year?"

"That's right."

Elvis took a swallow of the gritty brown drink. "What did happen there?"

Hawk's face froze slightly, and even Krokodil registered something. The pair had nasty memories.

"Colonel," said Krokodil, "believe me, you don't want to know about Santa de Nogueira."

Elvis believed her.

"Well?"

Elvis looked at the Indian, and at the dark woman.

"One million?"

"You can have cash in any gold standard currency, or GenTech corp scrip, or even negotiable gems."

"Good old US dollars is fine by me."

Cissy brought the check, which Hawk paid with a cashsliver. The waitress gave her smile to the Indian, and Elvis felt a flare of jealousy. He might have to watch his womenfolk with this young buck around.

"We will pay you in advance. Should you not survive the mission, then I'll turn the money over to any heirs you designate."

"I have no family," he said, feeling a little tug of hurt. Some things, you have to give up. On the road, with

the music, in the army and as an Op, he'd had no chances...

"Then I suggest you think of a charity. Not that we expect to lose you. Colonel. It's just a formality."

"Yeah, I know. I've been through it before. Hell, bribe a politician to repeal the indenture acts. That's charity enough for me."

"Will do."

"Hawk, Ma'am, you have yourself an Op."

He stuck out his hand. The Indian shook it, but Krokodil sat still, betraying no emotion.

He got the impression this girl would be difficult to get to know.

## VI

This is ZeeBeeCee, the Station That's Got It All, bringing you What You Want twenty-four hours a day, sponsored by GenTech BioDiv, the caring cybersurgeons with the delicate touch. Next, for all you celibates out there, it's Jack Off With Jake, in which our firm-fingered resident expert guides you to health, happiness and a disease-free sexual release. Send in now for our FREE seventy-six page booklet, and make a down-payment on any of these gorgeous, practical and thoroughly safety-approved home-aids. But first, tune into reality with luscious Lola Stechkin, bringing you The Post-Siesta Bulletin from the comfort of her Japanese garden...

"Hi, America . It's May 8th, 1999, and this is Lola, inviting you onto the open-air waterbed. Here it is, folks, all the news you can handle...

"The big news today is that we have a name! The ZeeBeeCee Blotto Lotto, the one hundred million dollar giveaway that everybody has been talking about for six weeks is finally over, and a winner has been selected by RaLPPH, the Random Lotto Person-Picking Helper. The lucky, lucky winner, who will receive one hundred million dollars in a big suitcase, plus a lifetime of free medical health care from GenTech BioDiv, has been named by Blotto the Clown as... Gavin Mantle, a kitchen appliance salesman from SpringfieldPeeZee, Massachusetts . Gavin, who has a lovely wife named Clodagh and two adorable children, Tish and Reggie, told our Blotto Lotto giveaway crew that his sudden wealth wouldn't change him at all. Gavin Mantle, you are America , and we here at ZeeBeeCee love you for it. Happy spending!

"It's official! Sanctioned Ops can damage your health, and the health of the society you live in! The Senior Senator from California , Robert Redford, best known for his tireless relief work in the aftermath of last year's disastrous tidal wave, was today appointed as the head of the long-promised commission of inquiry into the workings of the Enderby Amendment. Passed on June 23rd, 1985, after an extensive campaign masterminded by then-Senator Terence J. Enderby, the law, under which private firms and individuals can register as law enforcement operatives, has been in operation for nearly fifteen years. Senator Enderby resigned his seat in 1994 when it was alleged by investigative television reporter Ed Murphy that he had sponsored the citizenship of a series of Filipino houseboys whose blood types matched his own, with the intention of using the children as a source of replacement organs. Although the establishment of the Redford Commission has been violently opposed by a number of influential political figures, including the formidably pro-Enderby Governor Jerry Musgrave of Colorado, it has finally been granted the seal of presidential approval by President North, who today was quoted as justifying the

decision with 'well, there's no harm in taking a long, hard look at our public institutions. It's that kind of rigour that has made our country great.' Mitchell Beazley, head of the anti-Enderby pressure group stOP, delivered a brief statement to the media, commending Senator Redford for his impartiality and claiming 'the so-called Sanctioned Ops have had it their own way for too long. They're supposed to protect decent citizens from the gangcults, but in practical terms it seems to be hard to distinguish the one from the other.'

"In addition to its concern with the frequent instances of extreme violence employed by Ops in their daily missions, the Commission will probe the alleged tie-ups between the larger Op Agencies and the multinationals. Public concern has been raised by incidents like the complete destruction in 1997 of the township of Dead Rat, Arizona, by freelance Ops in the pay of the Holderness-Manolo Agency of Los Angeles. Redd Harvest, of the Turner-Harvest-Ramirez Agency, told our midwest bureau, 'I'd like to see Pretty Boy Bobby try to take my person-to-person missile tube away from me.' Governor Musgrave delivered a fifty-eight minute speech in Boulder, referring to Sanctioned Ops as 'America's best and brightest, the true heirs of the Minutemen—dash—you know, those guys who helped kick the Mexicans out of the Alamo—dash—and our last hope for the survival of our way of life in these blighted days.' Privately, Musgrave is alleged to have referred to Redford as 'that lousy commie skag' and to have calculated the Senator's life expectancy if the Amendment is repealed as 'eight to ten minutes.' We'll bring you more on this story as it breaks...

"Dr Ottokar Proctor, alias the Tasmanian Devil, the award-winning economist and serial killer, was today returned to maximum security confinement in the Sunnydales asylum facility. It will be remembered that the former presidential advisor was found guilty on numerous counts of homicide several years ago, and also accused of deliberately making misleading and dangerous suggestions to the North administration in an attempt to ruin the economy of the United States. Although he resumed his murder spree shortly after his escape from Sunnydales over a year ago, little has been heard from him in recent months. He was found wandering vacantly in the desert a few miles away from the site of the still-unexplained meteorological anomaly at the monastery of Santa de Nogueira in Arizona, and has been unable or unwilling to talk about his activities since his last recorded murder, that of Sheriff Marcus Gronquist of Dos Cabezas, shortly after his escape. Dr Thomas Caligari, the newly-appointed director of Sunnydales, insists that the security arrangements at the facility have been considerably tightened up since Dr Proctor's escape, and since the riots late last year which took the lives of famous mass murderers Rex Tenter, Hector Childress and Reynard Pershing Fraylman and several guards.

"The resurgence of the Maniak gangcult, who had been believed to be out of business after the United States Cavalry/Turner-Harvest-Ramirez Joint Action before the new year, continues. Their latest atrocity was the take-over of Welcome Springs, New Hampshire, a peaceful community which has been left in ruins. The Maniak apparently selected the township because it was the home of the Dexter Blumguard Crusade for Christian Capitalism, the successful fund-raising fundamentalist televangelist station. Dirk Mazzini and Blade Barrie, Maniak War Chieftains wanted on counts of multiple murder, evidently inspired by the successful terrorist humiliation of Reverend Bob and Dolly Jackson by still-unidentified pranksters, walked into the Dexter Blumguard show and asked the program's estimated three million viewers to phone in pledges, and suggestions about the ways in which the Reverend Blumguard and his special guest-stars—dash—Sister Ermintrude the Juggling Nun, the Cartwright Family Singers, Holy Roily and His Heaven-Bound Hang-Gliders—dash—should be murdered. The Maniak are believed to have raised thirty-eight million dollars during the massacre, which lasted two and a half days and ended only when a concerned parent in Jerusalem's Lot, Maine, found her teenage son pledging his allowance for six months on the condition that Mazzini make Uncle Buck Cartwright eat his own banjolele, and alerted the authorities. The Grand Exalted Bullmoose, the shadowy head of the gangcult, issued a press statement announcing all-out war on the non-affiliated citizens of the United States.

"In Paris, fighting has broken out again on the Left Bank, as a bewildering array of insurrectionist splinter groups took on the UEC forces of European President LePen. General Bruno Rottweiler, well-known as the Butcher of Deauville, has been placed in charge of the troops and declared a condition of martial law. Sady Charbonneau, the CanalEpico television personality, has put in a bid of nine million European Currency Units with Rottweiler and the leaders of the various rebel factions for the exclusive television rights to dramatizations of the riots. Rottweiler is believed to be holding out for script approval, while Biron le Rouge, this week's spokesman for the Violent Tendency, has asked for his fee to be paid in ScumStopper ammunition and high explosive. Those Montmartre madames, hoteliers and cafe-owners able to remain open during the hostilities report a 58% upswing in trade, partially due to the presence of highly-paid UEC troops, but also thanks to the yearly influx of Japanese tourists.

"Having wrought a veritable miracle with the reclamation of Salt Lake City from the desert sands, Elder Nguyen Seth of the Church of Joseph has announced that there will be a South-East Coast sister community on the site of the former rocketry base, Cape Canaveral. Work has been started on draining the area dry and reestablishing the tidal walls. Currently, the site, which was purchased last year from the United States for a nominal fee, is being used as a training camp for Josephite missionaries. Mark Mannix, our Florida correspondent, was sent to give us an on-the-spot report from the Cape, but appears to have been eaten by alligators. As soon as we find a replacement, we'll bring you the full story on the latest miracle. Asked what they intended to do with any leftover space technology that might be lying around the Cape since the US space program transferred its site of operations to Edwards Air Force Base, Seth replied 'let it rust. We have no need of rocketships and space shuttles to get us to Heaven.' Incidentally, President North will have to find a new Ambassador to the Josephite state of Deseret. Admiral Harriman Bosley, the current holder of the post, has just announced his conversion to the Josephite faith and renounced his worldly position to become Brother Bosley, a tenor in the world-famous Josephite Tabernacle Choir.

"As if to underline Senator Redford's concern over the unruliness of Sanctioned Operatives, fighting broke out today along the Kansas-Missouri border between agents in the employ of the little-known Logan's Runners of Kansas City and the Good Ole Boys, the powerful South-Western Area Agency. Judgement Q. Harbottle of the GOB alleges that Logan's Runners have been involved in the operation of the so-called 'underground railroad' which has been assisting runaway indentees across the state line into Kansas, where the indenture system is not on the statutes. Max Logan, senior partner in the Runners, countercharges that Harbottle is 'nothing but a slave-whopping cotton-picking chickenplucker.' Indenture remains a controversial issue. Those corps who take advantage of indentured labour maintain that the system is not a form of slavery, but 68% of you, according to a recent national poll, don't believe them. We at GenTech would like to stress that those indentees employed in our Tennessee and Mississippi plants have offered their labour entirely voluntarily and have a standard of living far higher than the average for their socio-economic group.

"Talks again broke down between representatives of Russian Premier Boris Yeltsin and Japanese Prime Minister Noburo Sidehara yesterday, with Sidehara refusing to withdraw support from GenTech East's program of undersea mining in the Sea of Okhotsk. During routine naval manoeuvres last week, the Russian navy depth-charged the GenTech submersible rig Toshiro Mifune, and accusations have been flying all over the Far East. Yeltsin refuses to discipline Admiral Yevgeny Tchernobog for his actions, claiming that the Toshiro Mifune was well off its charted course and could easily be mistaken for a seabed rock formation, and is also ignoring the requests of GenTech East CEO Kobayashi that the Soviet Union pay reparations to the corp for the loss of expensive equipment and personnel during the incident. Three members of the Blood Banner Society, the Japanese ultra-nationalist group, took over the Russian Tea Rooms in Osaka, a popular Sovrock nightspot, and held over forty Petya Tcherkassoff fans hostage for five hours. The desperate siege ended only when the Blood Banner group finished their anti-Russian speeches and committed ritual suicide.

"On a lighter note, Dino the Skateboarding Duck was back on the streets again today after his annual medical check-up and road test. The children's favourite will be competing again in the Indianapolis 500 motor race. "And now, back to the studio..."

## VII

"How the hell did you get into the building?" Elvis asked the small man with the big hat in his hand.

Robert E. Lee Chamberlain, Memphis Office Chief of the Good Ole Boys Agency, took a drag on his foot-long cigar.

"Just who d'you think your block committee buys their security from, Presley? The Hound Dog Agency?"

Chamberlain laughed, and coughed smoke into the air. He was leaning against Elvis' Cadillac, trying to look cool despite the sweat running into his white sideburns. Chamberlain was a desk Op if ever there was; all his battles were fought to thfc death in offices, with paperclips and computer terminals.

"That's Colonel Presley to you, Chamberlain. And get your dirty boot offa my clean car."

"Okay, okay. No need for us Southern boys to bite each other's heads clean off, is there?"

Chamberlain stepped away from the Cadillac and held up his hands in mock surrender.

"You should watch where you step, Chamberlain. You never know when a man has bought himself a pair of new shoes he don't want messed up. Like these. They're blue suede, you know."

Chamberlain bit off the wet end of his cigar and spat it out on the floor. Elvis had never liked the man. He had been the Enderby Registration officer for Tennessee before he transferred to the GOB, and had given Elvis a hard time granting the Hound Dog Agency its license. He'd always been in the pocket of Harbottle's Boys, and now it was official.

"We're from different Souths, Chamberlain."

"How do you mean?"

"Yours is all settin' on porches sippin' mint juleps and stringing up the coloured folks with ropes of magnolia blossom, and mine is all starvin' to death in sharecropper shacks goin' blind from bad moonshine and workin' eighteen hours a day just to stay even."

Chamberlain expressed disgust.

Elvis looked around for Nick. He wanted to make sure the car was in peak condition. He and Krokodil planned on hitting the trail tomorrow, and he didn't want to be stranded in the swamp with a burst tyre or a jammed minicannon.

Chamberlain grinned nervously. He was oily enough to get ahead in politics, but Harbottle and the Good Ole Boys could pour more dollars into his numbered bank accounts than the government.



"What the hell do you want anyway. Chamberlain?"

Chamberlain blew more smoke, and scattered ash on the tarmac. "Just a friendly li'l call, Colonel."

"You ain't no friend of mine."

"Aw, c'mon. Colonel. You know, what with this big ol' brouhaha up there in Washington D.C., all us Ops gotta stick together. We got us a whole set of interests to look after. Mutual interests, y'understand. There are damnyank politicians who just plain don't like law and order, y'know."

Elvis spat. "Yeah... well, the way some Agencies do business, I reckon I can understand how they feel."

Chamberlain stabbed the air with his cigar. Its tip glowed.

"You small-time guys really unsettle mah stomach, y'know? We got us a nice thing going here, and you just breeze in and dicker around with the situation like it don't matter whether you're eatin' 'taters or grits."

Elvis began to see what this was about. "Would you mind excusing me. Chamberlain? I've got some arrest documentation to file. I brought in a real scumjumper yesterday. Burtram Fassett. You ever hear of him?"

A deep red flush started at the GOB man's neck and filtered up over his face.

"You needn't bother doing the bytework, Colonel. Fassett hanged himself in jail last night."

"Ain't that a shame..."

"Yeah, you're the one to blame..."

"My tears will fall like rain."

The red reached Chamberlain's hairline, and crept into the roots of his dyed white locks.

"Burtram Fassett was a patriot of the New South, and you had no business turning him over to the damnyanks. No business at all."

Elvis was getting riled himself.

"Burtram Fassett was a psychopath, a dirtbag filth-hog, a disgrace to his state and should have been clapped in the pokey a long time ago."

Chamberlain snorted smoke.

"I wouldn't be right in guessing that there was maybe some little link-up between the Confederate Air Force and the Good Ole Boys, would I?"

Chamberlain didn't answer.

"Some of the hoodheads I tangled with out in the Delta were mighty well tooled-up for a bunch of

fanatics. They had the kind of hardware only the Agencies are supposed to have access to."

"Presley..."

"Colonel Presley."

"Colonel, Field Marshal, Whatever-You-Like, you have to get with the big picture some time..."

"Are you gonna offer me a job with the GOB again?"

"The offer is always there. You're too smart to stay independent all your life, Colonel. Within the organization, there are plenty of slots for a smart cog like you. And soon, the New South will have a lot of use for gun-guys like you and me. Utah has gone secesh, and that sets a precedent. It's the War of Southron Independence all over again, y'know. Them fellers up there in Washington want to mess with our way of life."

Nick's assistant Gandy was working on a Studebaker across the workshop. He kept shooting Chamberlain dark looks. Elvis wondered if the mechanic had any kinfolk out in the boondocks who'd fallen prey to one of the CAF's indenture sweeps. He knew the black man was a worshipper at the hounfort down on Highway 51, and that the voodoo church had been turned over by hoodheads a couple of times. Gandy was hefting a heavy wrench, and looking at Chamberlain's long white hair, wondering about the eggshell skull under it.

"Maybe your way of life ain't so good, Chamberlain."

The GOB Op was really steaming now. His neck was bulging, straining his collar button and bootlace tie.

"Freak you. Colonel. Get with the programme, or get out of the business."

"If your programme means whipping and flogging and all that Southern-fried horsecrap, then you can take it all and shove it..."

"Why, you redneck white trash peckerwood. You're just a nigra wrapped up in a white skin."

"I've heard that said before."

The GOB had been getting fat off indenture for a few years, first hauling in the indentees, and then picking up fees from the corps for bringing back any absconding happy workers. None of the national AgenciesmdashTurner-Harvest-Ramirez, Hammond Maninski, and the othersmdashwould touch the indenture system with a ten-foot electric cattle prod, and so the Good Ole Boys had a monopoly on slave-taking. Unofficially, GenTech had a fifty dollar bounty on the head of any able-bodied indenteed brought back in a condition to work. And sometimes they weren't too scrupulous about examining the bytework, so, if the indenteed you were after got clean over the state line or wound up crippled or dead, you could just pick someone with similar skin-colouring and slap the tagmarker on them. By the time anyone noticed the missing person, he'd have his own indenteed status stuck on him and the New South had itself another gaily singing darkie in the sweatshops.

"Listen, guitar man. You've been scratching up some mighty important folks. This may just have been the last nice li'l talk you get. Mr Judgement Q. Harbottle himself asked me to be real persuasive. Y'know, him and Burtram Fassett went back a long way..."

"Yeah, I heard they were real close in kindergarten, loved dressing up for Hallowe'en in them white sheets and lynching all the other kids' kittens and puppy dogs while they burned those cute little wooden crosses on the porch..."

A couple of Gandy's buddies from the hounfort had shown up. There was often a knot of them hanging around Nick's workshop, doing odd jobs, swapping boasts about broads and cars, listening to Sovrock on the FM, shooting craps. Gandy was pointing at Chamberlain, and making ugly faces as he filled them in on the little man in the white linen suit. The Good Ole Boy hadn't noticed them yet.

"Go right on ahead and laugh. Colonel Presley, laugh all you like, and curl that thick nigra lip o' yours until it just plain sticks to your nose, why don't you. The South is changin', and you'd better change with it, or maybe you're like to find yourself out in some cotton field somewhere with all your nigra buddies singin' them ol' worksongs you used to wiggle your butt to..."

Gandy's half-brother Big Bill was walking over. Big Bill was not a small guy. Elvis had seen him single-handedly win a tug o'war with five members of the Union Avenue Bloods gangcult, and one of his party tricks when he had a few brews in him was to bite bullets in half with his eyeteeth.

"... or maybe you won't be in them cotton fields, guitar man, maybe you'll wind up under 'em. You think about that for a while, hey? And furthermore, I just reckon I might take it into my mind to drop in on that diner you're always hangin' around and give that fat old hash-slinger Cissy Smedley some o' that deep-dish lovin' she ain't been gettin' from you, you dried-up ol'..."

"Is this dude bothering you, Colonel?" Big Bill asked, his flipper-sized hand landing hard on Chamberlain's shoulder.

Elvis shrugged.

The Good Ole Boy looked up at Big Bill, and cowered. Big Bill smiled, showing off eighty-eight ivories. A diamond sparkled in one of his front teeth. Gandy and the boys had wandered over.

"Yo, Elvis," said the mechanic, stretching out his hand. The Op slapped it down, and raised his own palm to be punched.

"Yo, Gandy."

"How's ever' li'l thang?"

"Mighty fine."

Chamberlain was trembling now, and the angry flush was bleaching into a chickenbelly white.

Dollman Cleele, part-time priest of Santeria, pulled out a lump of hard wax, and started whittling away at it with a tiny switchblade. Big Bill angled Chamberlain's head from side to side so the Dollman could get a good likeness.

"Heard you saw some action down in the Delta a few days back," said Gandy.

"Some."

"My man, Elvis. Word is you done pretty good for the bros in the wetside."

Big Bill stuck his long tongue in Chamberlain's ear, and whispered something that turned the Good Ole Boy a yellowish shade of grey. Here was an Op who could get a whole rainbow on his face. The Dollman's fingers moved fast, and flakes of wax fell to the floor like dandruff.

"I tried to do my best, Gandy. I was paid. It's my job."

"You tellin' me you couldn't bring down ten-twenty times the kish workin' for the Man here than you can helpin' out the pore folks?"

The Dollman held up the tiny white head, and his friends admired it. He pulled a headless wooden human figure, its joints loose, out of his pocket, and stuck the head onto the spike sticking up from its neck. He showed the doll to Chamberlain.

"I just go my own way," Elvis said. "I don't like people owning any part of me."

Gandy produced a switchknife, and pressed a pearl stud. A six-inch blade, razor-edged, sprang out.

"I get the 'pression the Man here don't reckon much to the bros?"

Gandy touched the tip of Chamberlain's nose with his knifepoint

"You could say that."

"Hey, massah," Gandy said in a high-pitched voice, "kin Ah pluck yo cotton?"

Chamberlain's chin was shaking. His cigar slipped out of his mouth.

"I always wondered," began Big Bill, "why does a honky need two ears?"

The bros looked at each other, shrugging and saying, "Swiped if I know." Gandy nicked the lobe of Chamberlain's left ear.

"Hey, massah, yo bleedin'. Yo' bleedin' 'zactly the same colour as us tan-tinted types. Ain't that an amazin' fact. Under that lilywhite skin, you just a mess of red blood and brown shit and all them other colours."

Gandy's knife leaped forwards, and Chamberlain flinched, green slime leaking from his nose as he blubbered. Gandy's hand moved fast, and his knife was back in his overall pocket. Chamberlain wasn't hurt. He opened his eyes, and looked around.

Gandy held up a tuft of white hair, which he passed over to the Dollman. Elvis had seen this done before. The Dollman took the hairs and fixed them to the wax head, warming up the surface with a thumb-rub to make the material soft, and then pressing the hair in.

"Finished," he said.

Big Bill let Chamberlain go. The Good Ole Boy was sagging.

The Dollman gave Elvis the stick-figure. "Here's a present, Elvis."

"Thank you."

"The spirits be with you, my son."

The Dollman was twenty-three, and he called everyone "my son," even his grandfather. Elvis had heard he was the best conjure man in the city.

Elvis looked at the little Chamberlain, and at the original model.

The Good Ole Boy was straightening his tie and wiping his face off. Some of the starch was coming back.

"I hope you don't think all that hoodoo mumbo-jumbo scares me none?"

Elvis tossed the doll from hand to hand, almost letting it fall. Chamberlain cringed every time it flew into the air. Everybody had heard the story about the Japcorp exec who gave Dollman's sister Daisy Cleele a squeeze too many down at the cockfights and took mysteriously sick, all his facial features (and other features too) dropping off with a rot that none of the smart boys in the BioDiv had been able to diagnose. And there were people who suggested that Homely Harvey, Dollman's best friend, was only married to a fox like Bonnie the Boom-Boom because of a charm posset the conjure man had put together. Homely Harvey suffered from curvature of the spine, while Bonnie, a dancer at the Hi-Hat Club, benefited from curvature of everything else.

"That's a mighty pretty toy, Elvis," said Gandy. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I reckon I might hang it up in my car where I can see it when I'm driving."

Gandy smiled. "Hang it up?"

"Yeah. I can make a little noose of string, give the little feller a necktie. Then, it'll hang neat as you please, right?"

"It surely will."

"Bye, Elvis."

"Bye, bros."

Gandy and his gang drifted away, back to the Studebaker. Chamberlain looked dangerously at Elvis.

"It won't go easy with you, Presley. It ain't just me you've got to worry about. Harbottle isn't as understanding as me. And he's connected so high you'd need an oxygen mask to get into the office. You understand?"

Elvis nodded, and gave the wax head in his hand a squeeze.

Sweat stood out on Chamberlain's forehead.

"You look peaked, Robert E. Lee. Have you got a migraine coming on?"

Chamberlain rubbed his temples. Elvis didn't know if the voodoo was working, but something was certainly getting to the Good Ole Boy.

"Can I get you an aspirin?"

Chamberlain clamped his hat on his head and stumped out of the garage, leaving nine inches of cigar behind him.

Elvis stamped on it, grinding the tobacco tube into the asphalt.

## VIII

"Old man, can you hear me?"

"..."

"Old Man?"

"Yes?"

"It's me.Krokodil."

"I know."

"Of course. I'll kill you, you know?"

"All must die."

"But you haven't. Not so far."

"No."

"How long has it been?"

"I know not."

"Hundreds of years? Thousands?"

"Longer."

"I feel very close to you, old man."

"You are part of me, just as I am part of you."

"Was it the shades?"

"..."

"Well?"



"Yes. It was the spectacles."

"I saw things through them. Things that weren't there."

"The lesser entities. Yes."

"Lesser than what?"

"..."

"You might as well tell me. I won't go away. Lesser than what?"

"The Dark Ones."

"Like the creature at Santa de Nogueira?"

"The Jibbenainosay. Yes, like that. There are many more like the Jibbenainosay."

"Where do they come from?"

"The Outer Darkness."

"That tells me a lot."

"You would not understand."

"Try me. We have all night to talk.."

"The Outer Darkness lies beyond the lip of the universe."

"Old man?"

"Yes?"

"The thing inside me, is it a Dark One?"

"No."

"Then what is it. What makes Jessamyn into Krokodil?"

"You are host to the Ancient Adversary, the Pawn of the Nullifiers."

"Why are you telling me all this? You know I'll kill you."

"It does me no harm. You cannot understand. It would take centuries to make you understand. Even the creature inside you cannot make you understand."

"Centuries? You've had centuries, haven't you? Do I have centuries? Will I live forever with this Ancient Thing in me?"

"You could, but you won't."

"Why not?"

"There are no more centuries, Krokodil. Not after this one. There are none left. The Dark Ones will descend. It will all come to an end."

"You're looking forward to that?"

"..."

"Well?"

"Yes... I look forward to the Nothing."

"I'll see what I can do for you."

"Believe me, Krokodil, I would thank you for it. But there are things that must be done, and I am here to do them. I am the Summoner."

"You're to blow the last trump? You don't seem like Gabriel to me."

"That is just a story, little girl. One of many. All the stories distort the truth, but contain a little of it."

"Why me?"

"It was just an accident. You took the spectacles. You became a channel to the Outer Darkness."

"Like you?"

"Yes, like me."

"And this thing, the Ancient Adversary, came into me because of that? Just because I took your shades?"

"Yes. That is so."

"But that's insane. I was just a panzergirl. A kid, for freak's sake. How could I know?"

"How could I know? I should have killed you in Spanish Fork."

"Why didn't you?"

"..."

"Well?"

"You knew, didn't you? When you left me alive with the seeds of this thing in my brain. You knew what I would turn into."

"..."

"Am I just another part of the story? Do I have a role to play in your big game?"

"..."

"I won't, you know. I won't be the thing you want me to be. I'll stop you."

"You will try."

"I will win. I'm not alone."

"Neither am I."

"I can scream inside your head forever, Nguyen Seth. I can shriek and shriek until you go mad."

"I am already mad by most standards."

"Big of you to admit it."

"You will never live to know what it is like, to carry the burden of memory as I do. I remember a hundred years ago as if it were the last minute. A thousand, two thousand, ten thousand years ago. I have it all with me. Forever."

"Is that why you want to end it all, then?"

"I do not want to Summon the Dark Ones. I must. I have no choice in the matter."

"I don't believe you."

"Do you not? You are here inside memdashwhy do you not look around? You might learn something."

"I don't like the sound of that. I could end up wandering forever in this dark inside your skull, couldn't I? Would you like that?"

"..."

"I think you would. You're full of tricks."

"The singer will not help you."

"Singer? What singer?"

"Presley."

"The Op? He's not a singer."

"As you will have it."

"You can pick bits and pieces from my mind too, can't you? As I can with yours. You're remembering something from long ago. A boy singing, with a guitar. A contract. Was that Colonel Presley?"

"..."

"I wouldn't have thought it. He was no Petya Tcherkassoff, that's for sure. So you know the Op from a while back, eh? That's good. He should know something about what we'll be up against."

"It does not have to be like this, Jessamyn. I can get rid of the Krokodil-thing inside you. It's quite a simple matter, actually."

"If that big jellyfish of yours couldn't do it, I doubt if you'd get very far."

"You fought the Jibbenainosay. If you were to submit to a small ritual, you could be free. You could be Jessamyn Bonney again."

"You're offering me a deal?"

"A bargain."

"I don't like the sound of that. There are stories about people who make bargains with people like you."

"Just stories. Colonel Presley could have made a bargain with me. I have always taken an interest in music. His life would have been different."

"Better?"

"Different."

"I don't mink I really want to go back to being what I was. I'd have been dead in a few years more with the Psychopomps. I was just wasting my life."

"You don't have to be what you were. You can be what you would have been. You have many qualities. You could join me."

"And look forward to the Big Nothing? That doesn't sound like much of a prospect"

"For some, there will be an afterward. For a select few. You could be one of them."

"That still sounds creepy to me, Seth."

"Well, decide..."

"No."

"As you will."

"That's it? No more persuasion?"

"No. You have decided. I can tell. It is to be regretted, but I can do nothing."

"Yeah, sure. It's to the death, then?"

"If you will have it that way."

"Fine. I'll live with it."

"We shall meet in Deseret, Krokodil. On the last day of the world, we shall meet again."

"Goodnight, old man..."

"... Krokodil, good night."

## IX

Hiroshi Shiba, Assistant Director of the GenTech Florida compound, wrapped up his daily report to Dr Zarathustra, knowing that the high-flying medico would do no more than glance over the whole sheaf when he was next in Narcoossee for one of his quickie inspections. The "events" blank was easy to fill: the "A," "B" and "C" teams were fulfilling their experimental commitments as scheduled, and there had been no unexpected occurrences. The "comments" box was more difficult. Shiba chewed his lightpencil and tapped the screen, trailing ungrammatical bloopers across the report form. There was nothing exactly he could put into official words, but duty tugged at him. He should say something about the strange atmosphere he had perceived recently. He had mentioned the oddly oppressive feelings he had been having to Visser, but the security man had just laughed, scratching his scrotum through his well-filled chinos, and said that summers in the swamp were always like this. That had sounded reasonable, but it still did not explain away all of Shiba's contradictory feelings about the progress the compound was making. It was as if an invisible miasma hung over the whole place like marsh gas, slowing people down, making them irritable, bubbling inside their brainpans.

Shiba was as bound to GenTech as the compound indentees who made the recaff, cleaned the test-tubes and donated their blood. Recruited at the age of eleven, after a four-hour examination assessed by the central computer, he had been taken from his family home in Akashi to the corp's college in Kyoto. The assessment programme had marked him down as an administrator of the future because of the way he had slotted together a selection of irregular shapes on his screen. He had further demonstrated an aptitude for biochemistry by designing some simple gene-splices in order to create a strain of water snail that breathed only half as much as its parent generation. The first night in the Kyoto dormitory, he had wet the bed, and Inoshira Kube, the thirteen-year-old trainee captain, had recommended him for electro-corrective treatment. By the time of his eighteenth birthday he had fully qualified to fill the slot GenTech East had prepared for him, and been initiated into the Blood Banner Society. The corp encouraged him to take an interest in Japan's traditions, and in the political expression of them. He had also been the beneficiary of seven years of intensive and expensive training, which put him in the corp's debt. He was legally bound to work for them at least until his fiftieth year. After that, he would be entitled to seek employment elsewhere if he could find any organizations looking for a fifty-year-old junior trainee with his specialized skills. He fully expected to stay with GenTech until his retirement. He had advanced within the Blood Banner society, along with many of his generation of executives, and had received a substantial yen bonus the day after his satrap arranged for the incendiary-bombing of a Kyoto record store specializing in decadent Sovrock and worthless British pop music.

Shiba downloaded his report into the computer's memory. A print-out would be prepared for Zarathustra, but a copy would be logged at the GenTech US computer banks in Maryland, and eventually logged along with an entire world's worth of data by the masternet in Seoul. Sometimes, the masternet would cross-reference trivial details filed by GenTech managers as far apart as Antarctica and

the Isle of Skye, and come up with a conclusion that could mean billions of yen in profits. He slotted his lightpen back into its hole, and straightened his desk. A neat executive was an efficient executive, and an efficient executive advances steadily. He crossed his sparsely-furnished office and checked his snail tank. The overwhelming majority of his specimens hadn't breathed in over a month, and yet they were still active. Eventually, he would turn over his findings to the masternet andmdashwho knows?mdashmaybe a profitable application would be found. At eleven-o-eight, he left his office, and began his rounds, leaving the admin tower and crossing the compound to check on all three research blocks. His shirt was drenched through by the time he got to "A" block, and he had been badly bitten again by mosquitoes. He was artificially immune to any diseases they might be carrying, but the bites still irritated him like the acne he had left behind with adolescence.

He had been selected for an overseas post by a programme instituted by CEO Kobayashi himself, and had been given a complete gene-level overhaul at the company's expense before being sent to Florida. There had been a moving ceremony at the Kyoto office as he was sent on his way, his belongings in the presentation set of whalehide luggage handed ritually over to him by Inoshira Kube, now advanced to Kyoto bureau chief. At least a third of the smart-suited men and women at the tea ceremony had worn the discreet red ribbons in their lapels that marked them as fellow members of the Blood Banner Society. The Florida appointment was obviously intended to signal to everyone that Shiba was a rising star within the corp. The titular director of the project was Dr Zarathustra, but he was everywhere and nowhere, pursuing his own researches, almost never on site. In the Narcoossee Compound, Hiroshi Shiba was the top dog.

But he felt strangely isolated, almost as he had done those first few weeks away from Akashi. Despite his success with snails, a field he had pursued, he was essentially an organizer, and that set him aside from all three of the distinct groups he had noticed in Narcoossee. The highest and mightiest were the scientists, who felt themselves beloved of director Zarathustra, and made a game out of thwarting Shiba in every minor detail. They were the ones who never kept a correct log of their computer time, and who wasted the satellite link window exchanging chess moves and incomprehensible mathematical in-jokes with their counterparts in Japan, Korea and Europe. Then there were the security people, the Good Ole Boys. They came from one of the Op Agencies, thanks to a secret treaty of alliance made by the corp with someone with the improbable name of Judgement Q. Harbottle. In Japan, Shiba had imagined all American Sanctioned Ops were like Johnny Salvo, the cartoon hero who was always zooming down the roadways of the West taking on the toughest gangcults.

Captain Spermwhale Visser, the GOB Op in charge of security, was about as far from whip-thin, square-jawed Johnny Salvo as Ken Dodd was from Mozart. The third group were the most difficult for Shiba. The scientists were sneaky, the Good Ole Boys were surly, but the indentees were shuffling, smiling and servile. Whenever he saw an indentee sweeping up the corridor, swabbing a slide in the lab or restringing the etemally-ragged compound fence, Shiba had the feeling that the man or woman was planning to assassinate him as soon as his back was turned. God knows what was in the daily drug cocktail they all had to downmdashsomething to keep them going throughout an eighteen-hour shift, something to keep them placid, something of Dr Blaikley's just to see what it would do. Nobody could predict what a diet like that could do. Yes, the Good Ole Boys might have the guns, but the indentees were the ones to be worried about. And yet, these slaves-in-all-but-name were the group Shiba felt himself closest to.

Outside "A" Block, Reuben, the rough-skinned indentee whose job it was to keep the test subjects fed, smiled at Shiba and said "Howdy, Mr Assistant Director."

"Good morning, Reuben," Shiba said. His English vocabulary and syntax were perfect, but he had trouble with the consonants. Sometimes Visser or one of the scientists, usually Mary Louise Blaikley,



would pretend not to understand him, but he knew they were simply being obstreperous. Reuben, like all the indentees, knew better than to try such monkey tricks.

"Hot enough fer you?"

Shiba had heard that question before. He could not understand it.

"Quite the opposite, Reuben. It is too hot for me. This atmosphere is not congenial to human comfort."

Reuben chuckled. "Ain't that the truth, doc?"

"I am not a doctor."

"Sorry. So many docs around a man gets confused."

"That is understandable."

A flight of birds flew low above the compound, squawking wildly. Shiba did not like such birds. They were inelegant and unclean.

"Somethin's sure spooked 'em. The Suitcase People are on the prowl again. We lost chickens from the pens last night."

Shiba was shocked. "What? Why was I not informed?"

"Captain Visser took a look at the damage, suh. It weren't my place to come to you."

Reuben scraped the back of his hand across his forehead. He sounded like two pieces of sandpaper being chafed together. He must have an allergic reaction to the environment. Shiba would order Blaikley to take a look at him. After all, what was the point of having an immunologist in the compound if she didn't take all the opportunities available to further her knowledge.

Visser appeared, with a couple of his gun- and prod-toting Good Olc Boys trotting behind him. His uniform shirt was missing two lower buttons, and a fold of hairy belly poked out above his belt. He hadn't shaved this morning, and Shiba judged that the dark patches under his arms were almost pure alcohol.

He jogged over, gut wobbling obscenely, and cuffed Reuben about the head.

"Don't you be botherin' the Assistant Director, boy," he snapped at the man, who was a good fifteen years older than him.

"These nigras," he said, "they ain't like you and me, Mr Shiba. They ain't like white folks."

Shiba was impatient. "Reuben informs me there was an incident last night. Why wasn't I told?"

Visser wasn't ashamed of his failure. "Nothing to tell. A couple of birds got themselves scragged is all. A 'gator will chew through the wire if its gets hungry enough. Or maybe a couple of our Cajun neighbours got a hankering for somethin' to put in their gumbo."

"I want a full report."

Visser tried to smile his way out of it with an "aw, c'mon, you don't want me to waste my downtime tapping keys when I could be doing some real good, like flushing out that still we all know the 'denties got out there in the wet side. You know what the corp brass are like. If we log it, it'll get inflated by everyone who scans the report and by the time it gets to head office it'll sound like the Beast from 20,000 Fathoms smashed the compound into the mud."

Shiba wasn't impressed. "Just get me a report, Captain Visser. I will deal with head office."

Visser spat a substantial glob of mucus at the ground, and shrugged. He turned away and left, his Good Ole Boys with him. The security staff wore light brown suits, Sterling shades and stetsons, and carried Colt pistols they privately referred to as "coonstoppers" in addition to electroprod truncheons with slick black leather handles. The scientists called them "goons," and the indentees called them "sir" to their faces. The Good Ole Boys called the indentees "nigras" and worse, and called the scientists "eggheads." The indentees tried to keep away from the scientists as much as possible. Everybody, Shiba was sure, called him "that Jap squirt." He missed the community atmosphere of the Kyoto Complex, where there were 20,000 GenTech executives living in their own self-contained community. He told himself that this posting was necessary to his advancement, but also to his spiritual growth. He had originally joined the Blood Banner Society because he had heard it would serve him well in his career, but now he was beginning to understand Lodge Master Kube's speeches about the dangers of succumbing to decadent, non-Japanese influences. From its television programmes, America seemed such a glamorous, exciting, seductive nation. Shiba needed these years in the swamp to reveal the deep corruption that lay beneath the sparkly surface.

The main gates opened, and Dr Blaikley walked in at the head of a crew of indentees. They had poles slung between them, and drugged alligators were hanging in nets from the poles, their pop-eyes glazed over, surplus teeth poking out from their snouts. Blaikley wore a safari hat, thigh-high wading boots and a multi-pouched waistcoat over a green lurex skinsuit. She saluted Shiba with a trace of mockery.

"We'll get that jolly bridge up ouever the Kwai in neu taimé at h'all, commandant," she said with an exaggerated British accent.

"More test subjects?"

"We need 'em if we're to stay on schedule, Hiroshi. We're losing 'em faster than we can bag 'em."

Shiba was exasperated. "You know about last night's incident?"

"What, did I wake you up? I'm a screamer, you know, and that GOB Martens has a truncheon on him like a German sausage. He's a regular Rod Rambone. I was strapping him on all night. You know how it gets, I'm still raw and itchy."

In some obscure way, Shiba mought she was needling him. She was promiscuous, he knew, but Martens was barely intelligent enough to scrape through even the GOB's feeble IQ requirement. Dr Blaikley would never consider bedding him. She thought she could shock the Japanese by acting like a vulgar harlot. She didn't understand. She was not slim like Imiko, his GenTech-appointed geisha. She did not conduct herself in a seemly manner. And yet...

"No, I mean..."

"The break-in? Sure. Reuben told me."

The indentees stood stock still, their burdens grumbling in their sleep.

"Why did you not bring the information to me? You know I make my report at eleven sharp. I was not able to include a record of the incident. It is a breach of good business practice. Even if we only lost chickens, we should be scrupulous in noting it down. As a scientist, you should know that."

Dr Blaikley took off her hat, and shook out her golden hair.

"Hold on there, Hiroshi. Don't jump on my bones for this. Visser's the security honcho. Break-ins and -outs are his bailiwick, not mine. Besides, you've got all your facts in a twist..."

Shiba tried hard not to stamp his feet. "Please explain."

Dr Blaikley turned to the indentees, and addressed them in the patois they had developed since their transportation to this area. Blaikley was the only non-indentee to have mastered this evolving language. They scuttled off to the animal pens.

"Well?"

"Hiroshi, please stop yanking my nipples, will you? I've been bitten badly enough. We didn't just lose chickens."

She slipped a hand into her waistcoat and, with deliberate provocation, massaged her breast. Her eyes went to the disappearing indentees and their reptiles. "Did those babies look like Foghorn Leghorn?"

"Alligators?"

"Yeah, 'gators. Luggage lizards. We needed two, so I went out and got 'em." She wet her glossed lips and pouted. "Just call me Trader Horny."

"Something broke in and freed the alligators?"

"No, not freed the beasts. Ate 'em."

Even in the swamp heat, Shiba felt a sudden chill.

X

Nick rolled up the streetshutter, and the big pink Cadillac eased out onto the road, its engine purring like a big, happy cat. Behind the wheel, which was padded with pink real-leather to match the seat covers, Elvis felt the thrill in his bones. Only three things gave him this sensation; starting up his car, slipping into a willing lover, or, long ago, hitting that first note as his vocal cut in over the guitar. It was a feeling he needed to convince himself he was still alive. Thanks to the incredible suspension, the automobile seemed to float like a hovercraft down the bumpy ramp and onto the hardtop. It was a bright, early summer day. Elvis turned on the air conditioning. It was not uncomfortable inside the car now, but it would be in an hour or two if he didn't take precautions.

He keyed off the engine and slipped out of the Cadillac. It sat at the kerb gracefully, longer than a powerboat, attracting wolf whistles from passing motorists. It was as beautiful now as it had ever been.

Elvis wished his Mama could have got more pleasure out of the perfect machine. Nick emerged blinking into the light, and sighed as he ran his eyes over the car's perfect lines. Gandy stood next to him, a shoulder for the mechanic to cry on when he lamented his unrequited love for the Cadillac. Some cars are curved, like a beautiful ass, and make a man want to seduce them. Elvis could understand that, but didn't want to drive around in a Playboy centrefold. The Cadillac was long and gleaming and clean, but its beauty was manly, like a Greek discus thrower or a gloss-coated stallion. Under the hood, this automobile was packing a pair of testicles the size of basketballs, and he wanted passersby to hear them clacking as he ate up the highway. Have you heard the news, the machine shouted silently, there's good rockin' tonight.

The Cadillac was gassed up good for a thousand miles, and all the weapons systems were primed. The motto of Elvis' old army unit was "Hell on Wheels." He wasn't one of those car queers who gave their machines fancy namesmdashanything that was called Lightning Streak, Road Warrior or Tiger Tornado usually wound up crumpled in a ditch while the anonymous, functional machines were still roaring along the tarmacmdashbut if he had been, "Hell on Wheels" is what he would have chosen. This machine was like the man inside it: you didn't cross it if you wanted to stay healthy, and if it was on your side you didn't have to worry about covering your back.

"Where's yo lady, Elvis?" asked Gandy.

"The ma'am said she'd be 'long round about noontime."

Elvis wasn't sure how much he was looking forward to a few days in the seat next to Krokodil. She looked like an angel, sure, but... Well, Krokodil didn't sound like the sort of handle a nice girl would pick. And there were those panzergirl words that kept cropping up in her otherwise impeccable speech. He had run a check on her, but found nothing under the "Krokodil" alias. The Indian had called her something elsemdashJessamynmdashand that beat some distant drums. There was something about the way Krokodil carried herself that reminded him of Redd, and Elvis had seen Ms Harvest take down five or more Maniax in a solo engagement. Still, for this trip, he'd rather have a combat cutie with him than a Sunday school teacher.

Gandy had one of those GenTech miniradios clipped to his sunglasses, and Elvis could hear the tinny sounds of Petya Tcherkassoff singing "A Cry for Help." The vocal tricks were his, straight off the "Blue Moon of Kentucky" he had done at Sun for Sam Phillips in 1954. "Fine, man!" Sam had shouted, loud enough to get on the master tape, "that's different. That's a pop song now, nearabouts."

"Shut that Sove crap off, Gandy," he snapped. He immediately regretted it. He didn't usually let the stuff get to him.

"Sure, Elvis," Gandy said. "Sorry, man. I wasn't thinking."

Gandy was a late '70s baby. His parents might have remembered who the old Op he hung out with had been, and he had never concealed the fact that he had been a musician before he went in the army. But Gandy's parents were long-term smacksynth mainliners the kid didn't like to be around, and he imagined that Elvis had been in some high school band like the Memphis Cossacks, the imitation Sove group Gandy and Big Bill had messed around with for a while. It was known that he wasn't enthusiastic about Russian musickies, but no one pressed him on it. Once, he had recommended that the kid track down some Carl Perkins if he wanted to listen to real music, but Gandy had never taken him up on it Gandy was more interested in securing a bootleg musichip of Tasha's "Concert for Uzbekhistan."

He found himself humming "Blue Moon of Kentucky" under his breath. Recently, the old songs had been

coming back to him. Something would remind him of a line of lyric, or a piece of music would contain a string of similar notes, and he'd find himself half-way through "Heartbreak Hotel," "Jailhouse Rock" or "Blue Moon." He was getting old, he guessed.

An armourcab drew up across the street, and Krokodil got out, with Hawk-That-Settles in tow. She had forsaken her pinstripes for a loose white outfit a little like Elvis' karate robe. She was carrying a hip-holstered magnum, and a heavy shoulderbag. Her hair was tightly drawn back in a ponytail. Her eyepatch made her look like a zen pirate. Hawk smiled and waved, but Krokodil just carefully crossed the road. Gandy whistled as if a '55 Chevrolet with sharkfins and a chrome jukebox radiator had just cruised by.

"That is some woman," said Nick.

Elvis didn't say anything in reply, but shouted "Good morning ma'am" across the road.

"Hi, Colonel," said the Indian.

"Can I put this in the back?" Krokodil asked.

"I can open up the trunk. There's no one in it."

Krokodil explained. "We may need these things quickly. The back seat will do."

"You're the boss."

Gandy stepped forward, and opened the door for her, grinning. She slipped her bag, which was weighty, onto the seat. Elvis heard metal objects shifting inside the holdall. Krokodil came along with her own tools.

Krokodil left Gandy standing holding the door and walked over to Elvis.

"You're ready?"

"Sure. Do you want a recaff or anything before we set off?"

"No."

There was a pause.

"Fine by me. We might as well go, then..."

Krokodil opened the front passenger door and got in, fastening the seatbelt over her chest. She looked straight ahead, and waited. She didn't have anything to say to Hawk.

Elvis looked around, shook hands with Hawk and Nick and gave Gandy a high five.

He got into the car, and left them standing outside his apartment building. Nick waved a rag.

It was a long, straight highway for a while. In the rearview, Elvis saw Hawk get back into the armourcab. He wondered what the Indian would be doing while his... his what?... employer? mistress? owner? best friend?... while Krokodil was off to Cape Canaveral.

They came to the PZ wall, and the Memphis cops processed them through. They knew Elvis and his business, and didn't give him too much hassle. The cops in this town were okay. It was the Good Ole Boys you had to watch out for.

The Memphis NoGo wasn't too heavy. It was mainly just run-down. People came out of their shacks to watch the cars pass by, but they didn't often set traps or toss petrol bombs. Last year, Elvis had put together a watertight kickback and corruption case against Burke Crowther, a city councilmanmdasha Good Ole Boys client, naturallymdashwho had been trying to get a ruling through at state level declaring any unemployed NoGo dweller as fair game for the indenture gangs. Councilman Crowther had been removed from office, and since then Elvis could park his pink Cadillac unlocked outside the NoGo clubhouse of the Mighty Mean Mothergrabbas gangcult for a week and come back to find it unscavved, unscratched and fresh-polished.

Elvis waved to Mama Maybelline, Den Mother of the MMM chapter, as the Cadillac cruised past her open-air exercise class. Then, they were away from the city and out in the soggy scrublands that would eventually turn into fullblown swamp.

Krokodil sat like a dressmaker's dummy, not speaking. Elvis asked her if she wanted him to play some music on the system. He had some good stuff on pirate CDs. Howlin' Wolf. Johnny Bumette. Hank Williams. Gene Autry. Bobbie Gentry. She wasn't interested. Elvis was beginning to get the impression he was sitting next to a human-shaped refrigerator.

Then, she reacted as if she smelled something. Cyborgs were like that. They had esper senses you couldn't figure out.

She opened one of the dash compartments, and pulled out Dollman Cleele's likeness of Robert E. Lee Chamberlain.

"What's this?" she asked, her tone telling him that she knew all about Santeria.

"A present."

"Who is it?"

"Not a nice man."

"I can tell."

"One of Gandy's friends made the thing. A houngan. Do you believe in all that hoodoo?"

Krokodil was quiet for a moment, looking at the doll's face.

"Do you?" she asked.

Elvis felt an icy tingle. He had a feeling this salvage gig was going to be a lot less simple than it sounded.

"I don't know. I was born in the backwoods. I've spent time in the Caribbean, in Latin America. And I've been in and out of the swamps for ten years or more. I don't know if there's a Jesus H. Christ like my Mama said, or if there's a Damballah, a Baron Samedi, a 'gator that walks on two legs or a Sanity Clause. But I do know there are unnatural things in this world."



"You're right there."

The way she said it, flat and inexpressive, gave him a frisson. Elvis was grateful that they were heading South-East, away from the Delta, away from Robert Johnson's crossroads. But the Blues That Walks Like a Man wasn't just a Mississippi myth, and the Devil was waiting at more than one crossroads.

Krokodil carefully put the doll back into the compartment, and shut it up. She put her hands in her lap and seemed to go to sleep with her eye open, like a machine with the power switched off.

Elvis took the main interstate to Grand June, just dipped into Mississippi to go South of the expanse of still deep water that had been Lake Florence and which filled the Tennessee River Valley. There were church steeples and shaky upper-storeys standing out of the Lake at Tusculumbia and Decatur, where whole towns had been abandoned to the rising water level. They took the high ground around Guntersville and cut South through Alabama, striking towards Birmingham and Montgomery. They made good time. After about three hundred miles of engine purr and air conditioner hum, Elvis cracked and reached into the music rack.

He jammed in a CD at random, and wished he hadn't.

The clear, young voice, given its twang by a curled lip and a flared nostril, filled the car. Krokodil turned to look at him, her neck working like the swivel arm of a security camera.

"Is that...?"

The song was "I Don't Care if the Sun Don't Shine." He had cut it in 1954. The session percussionist, Cunningham, had used an empty record box instead of a drum. Marion Keisker, Sam Phillips' secretary, had written an extra verse in the studio to fill out the song. All these things were creeping back to his mind now.

Krokodil's eye narrowed. Her question hung in the air.

"Yes ma'am," Elvis sighed. "That is."

## PART TWO: THE BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC

### I

The church's executive helicopter had kept fairly low as it flew over the Gulf of Mexico. The main airborne gangcults kept to the Great Central Desert, where there were lots of long, hard freeways to use as landing strips, and the Confederate Air Force shouldn't be interested in tangling with the Church of Joseph, but Roger Duroc knew the South-East was full of 57 varieties of psychopathic crazy, and it only took a set of wings and some air-to-air Stinger missiles to put a severe dent in the flightplan. As it turned out, the flight was quiet. Boring, even.

Simone just sat strapped into her seat and looked out of the window at the flat, sparkling expanse of sea. She had never flown before, and had been afraid it would upset her tummy. After what she had lived

through, she had obviously developed a strong stomach. She didn't complain. Duroc wondered whether the Elder would approve of his bringing the girl along. They were close to the Last Days, and Seth probably wanted the elect to purge themselves of all distractions. Duroc wasn't quite sure why he had decided to pick Simone out of her New Orleans hell, but it still felt like the thing to do.

Since the Jibbenainosay, he had been having to crunch his way through an increasingly scary dosage of narcolep pills to get any sleep. Simone helped. She was energetic, and tired him out. Their love-making was desperate, and draining, and afterwards he could usually sink into a dreamless oblivion for a few hours. It was comforting, after being so close to the Great Secret Shaping Events of the Age, to be around a girl who barely knew the name of the President of the United States. She was smart, but her life had robbed her of too much awareness.

They flew over a little battle. A coastguard PT boat, augmented by a couple of Good Ole Boy skimmers, was methodically sinking a bargeload of Mexicans. On the skimmers, fat men with cowboy hats were picking off the bobbing heads in the water with precision rifles. Duroc wondered what the wetbacks expected in the land of the free. If by some miracle they got through the immigration patrols, they'd just wind up indentured for life. From the perspective of the killing fields of Guanajuato, even a life of servitude in chains must seem like a step in the right direction. At least if you were property, you were valuable enough not to be shot for sport. Duroc wondered whether he could take the time, in the name of chaos-spreading, to lay down some napalm on the Good Ole Boys. Biron the Rouge would approve, he was sure. But it was a side issue. He had Brother Sam Quarrill, the pilot, take the spidercopter up out of range, and they headed on, towards the Keys.

It was difficult to draw a coastline on a map these days. Just as the swell of the Mississippi Delta had put New Orleans on an ineptly-walled island in the mud, so the rising sea level had sunk most of the Florida peninsula. They flew over sunken towns, thickets of swampland, and shallow lakes. East coast resort towns like Daytona and Miami had done their best to keep some tidal integrity, but the rest of the state was practically a primeval waste. There was still some kind of community at Tampa, but that was as far as it went. However, the flyover did reveal some traces of inhabitation. There were swamp-skimmers out, and Duroc noticed more than a few houses in trees or artificial islands.

There was a big GenTech experimental compound at Narcoossee, he had been warned, and it was suggested that he not tangle with them. "Work of the Devil," Quarrill muttered as they overflew Narcoossee. From the air, the place looked like a prisoner-of-war camp. Duroc supposed the boys in Tokyo just kept the plans from WWII in case they ever had to build a swamp hellhole again. There was quite a bit of activity around the compound as they passed. As usual in America, there were people running around with guns.

They came up to Cape Canaveral from due East. The reclamation crew were supposed to have raised a stretch of the firing grounds out of the water as a landing pad, but work had gone slowly. Quarrill inflated the amphibian runners, and touched down on the sea off Merritt Island. They waited for the boat to come for them, and Duroc wondered who he would have to single out for the blame.

The seas were scattered with dead fish.

"Are we there?" asked Simone, waking up.

Duroc nodded.

"It stinks." She wrinkled her nose.

A human body, face-down, floated by. It bumped against the copter and slowly turned over. The fish had taken most of the flesh off its face, but Duroc could tell from the exposed skull that the dead man hadn't been normal. The jaws were lengthened, and seemed to have more teeth than usual, and there were bony ridges around the eyes. What little skin remained was green, and rugose. Duroc stuck his leg out of the copter, and shoved the corpse with his boot toe. It sank beneath the surface, and didn't come up again.

Simone was still looking with distaste.

"There's a boat coming out from the Cape," Quarrill said. A skimmer, its bulk raised out of the water on treads, was darting towards them. A couple of people in Josephite black hats were standing up in the prow. Evidently, they wanted to make a ceremony of greeting the Big Man from Salt Lake City.

Duroc was wearing a short-sleeved black shirt and slacks. He held out his hand, and Simone gave him what she called his preacher hat. He set it on his head, and tried to look religious. Elder Seth's people were indispensable, but Duroc wished they didn't have to go through a lot of this thee and thou crap.

The skimmer slowed, and bobbed next to the spidercopter.

"Elder Duroc," said a square-faced young woman in Josephite strip. Duroc held out his arm, and they awkwardly shook hands across the gap. "I'm Sister Addams. Bethany Addams."

"Well met. Sister. This is Simone. She's my... executive assistant"

Simone wore a flowered beach coat over a coffee-cream string bikini that matched her skin-tone almost exactly. She wiggled close to the open hatch of the copter, and gave Sister Addams a look at her long legs. The Sister wasn't impressed, but swallowed her disapproval. Duroc came with the Elder Nguyen Seth seal of divine approval.

"We'll tow you in. A ceremony of thanks for your arrival has been prepared."

"I am well pleased."

Quarrill and the Brother driving the skimmer got together and slung a line up.

Duroc noticed another person in the skimmer. He was obviously not a Josephite. His head was buried in a mass of angled grey-and-white beard and hair. He wore open-toed rainers, ragged army pants and a denim vest covered in latches. Duroc recognized the names on the patches. Mercury, Gemini, Apollo, Hercules, Pegasus, Circe, Argos, Vulcan.

"This," said Sister Addams, "is Commander Fonvielle."

"Of course. Good afternoon. Commander..."

Fonvielle saluted. "Present and correct, Mr Prezz, sir."

Duroc caught Sister Addams' look.

"And how are things in the White House?" Fonvielle asked. There was drool in his beard.

"Very well thank you."

"And the First Lady?"

"Excellent."

"Bully."

Duroc felt a twinge of worry. The plan depended on Commander Fonvielle's expertise, and the astronaut was obviously a couple of planets short of a solar system.

The skimmer was roped to the copter now. Duroc strode across and got a firm footing on the deck. He helped Simone, and she pushed herself away from the copter door.

Something surfaced between them, pushing the spidercopter and the skimmer apart. Simone screeched, and Duroc grabbed her.

The water was frothing and foaming, and the thingmdasha large animalmdashthrashed.

A long arm, basically human but thickly scaled, latched onto the side of the skimmer. Duroc took in the hand in a glimpse. The fingers were webbed, and instead of nails, the creature had yellow barbs.

Duroc struggled with the thrashing Simone, trying to pull her out of the water, to get her out of the thing's way.

It had both hands on the skimmer now, and was hauling its bulk out of the sea. Streams of saltwater gushed from its orifices. It was wearing the remains of a Lacoste shirt, the alligator still visible over one knobby nipple.

Quarrill had a boathook. He struck the thing on the back of its skull. Roaring, it turned around, opening its snout to reveal a tangle of green-furred teeth. Quarrill backed into the copter, but the thing pushed away from the skimmer and leaped for him. The pilot screamed as the barbs went into his flesh.

It had a long, thick tail, poking through the buttseam of a pair of waterlogged and multiply-holed designer jeans.

Simone was still screaming. Duroc had her in the skimmer now, and she was clutching her knees, certain that her legs ended there. He saw she wasn't hurt.

"A gun," he said. "Give me a gun."

Quarrill's cries got sharper, and then cut off. His head rolled across the floor of the copter, and dropped into the water. The eyes were rolled up, showing only white. The mutant turned around, its jaws bloodied, and yelled in triumph. Pouches under its jaw inflated as it shouted.

"Go for it, buddyboy," it was saying, the words struggling through a throat no longer designed for speech. "No pain, no gain."

Sister Addams was sitting glumly on the other side of the skimmer, hands joined in prayer. She seemed resigned to being high tea for the monster. Religion could be a weird thing.

"I said, give me a gun."

Duroc couldn't believe none of the Josephites were armed.

Simone whimpered. The mutant raised its arms, and roared. It was an ugly son of a bitch.

"Breakfast is for wimps."

Fonvielle lifted up his vest and pulled an old army revolver out of his waistband.

"Mr Prezz..."

Duroc took the antique, and hoped it wouldn't blow up in his hand. He thumb-cocked the piece and sighted on the creature.

All this activity was rocking the skimmer and the copter. But they were too close for him not to get a good shot.

The bony skull was probably too well protected. And the thick plates over the chest looked tough too. Duroc shot the mutant in the greenish white soft V of its throat. It choked on the slug, and threw itself into the water.

Duroc emptied the gun at the thing as it dived, lifting up little spouts of seawater. It twisted in the water and punched the sky with a clawed fist, shouting something defiant but incomprehensible, and went under.

"Freaking yuppies," said Fonvielle. "I hate 'em worse than poison."

## II

Two days on the road, and the trip was going fine. She had taken a turn driving last night, while the Op slept in the back seat. The Cadillac handled well. Krokodil appreciated the machine. Every part was in its place, doing what it was supposed to do. The Cadillac was a fine cocoon, inside which she could ignore the rush of sensations, of information. The thing inside her was dormant, and she was not overwhelmed by its perceptions. She could remember her Jessamyn self. She could remember the Jazzbeaux days, on the road with the Psychopomps. Back then, a fast car, a neat guy, unlimited funds and super-powers might have seemed like the summit of her ambitions. Now, things were different. She felt a driving sense of purpose. It was waiting for her among the flooded silos and rusting gantries of Cape Canaveral.

The Op had been playing her his old records. He had been reticent at first, but a few words had pressed the right button, and he was pulling out more and more scratchy-sounding vinyl-to-tape-to-CD-to-musicchip transfers. She realized she had heard of him before, dimly. She had the idea that he had been quite a big name before she was born. Before her father was born.

The dashscreen flashed a warning.

"Bandits," she said. "One-five."

The Op took a look. There were three flying objects, in tight formation, moving fast. Their current

course would intercept the Cadillac in two and a half minutes.

The Op chewed his lower lip.

"It's probably government, or corp. Just routine."

"Nope," he said. "That's an attack formation."

He was right.

Seth must know she was coming. He could scramble some killcopters with no trouble. Her internal workings buzzed, prepped for a fight.

"Hell, it's the CAF," the Op sneered. "Sorry, ma'am. This ain't your fight, but you're in it."

"What's happening?"

"I pissed off some nasty guys a couple days ago. Hoodheads."

She knew what that meant. In her Jazzbeaux days, she had tangled with the far right gangcults: the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Minutemen, Buckley's Buckaroos. Down South, they had the Confederate Air Force and the Ku Klux Klan instead.

The road up ahead exploded, and Elvis swerved the Cadillac into the soggy brush. He flipped a dash-switch, and the underside air-blowers cut in, putting a cushion between the car and the mud. They wouldn't do for outright swamp, but they should keep the vehicle from getting bogged down.

The killer birds were overhead now. They had broken formation, and were circling around, dropping charges. Krokodil saw the Stars and Bars stencilled on their underside.

The Op was as good a driver as she had heard. The long car slalomed between explosions, sustaining barely a graze. Panels slid open on the car's flanks, and the weapons arms poked out.

"Rock," Elvis said, "and roll..."

That was nothing to do with music. That was the army expression for "lock and load."

The lases sliced the air, and one of the spidercopters had to dodge the red beam, going into a difficult spin the pilot only just managed to pull out of.

"May I?" Krokodil asked.

"Be my guest.."

She reached into her hold-all for the M-312 all-purpose combat rifle she had "liberated" from the US Cavalry back in Arizona, when she and Hawk-That-Settles pulled the first of their fund-raising raids on the G-Mek convoys. It was state-of-the-art deathware, with a laser sight, a full clip of minimissile slugs, and enough punch to put one of its charges through the granite wall of a pyramid. Elvis whistled as she unwrapped it from its antistatic cloth.

"Quite a baby," he said.

"She'll do."

The CAF were laying down ground fire now, angling the copter noses towards the dirt and spitting bullets from the twin snoutguns under the armourbubble.

Krokodil rolled down her window, and squeezed through. This surprised Elvis. But she didn't have to worry too much about the skeetersting slugs these hoodheads would be packing. And she wanted to get a free shot.

The wind whipped her ponytail as she pulled herself with ease up onto the roof of the Cadillac.

She could see the look of astonishment on the haggard face of the pilot of the lead copter. He was wearing a back-turned baseball cap. He paused for a second before pouring some shots into her...

... and a second was all she needed.

Getting a firm footing on the reinforced roof of the Cadillac, she raised the M-312 and put the dot of the laser dead centre on the exposed elastic of the pilot's cap.

One penetration-plus round was all it took.

The pilot's head exploded, and the spidercopter dropped from the sky. Hoodheads rained around it, trying to hurl themselves from the falling machine. Elvis drove in a big semicircle and kept out of range of the explosion, but Krokodil felt the wave of hot air pushing past her.

The Cadillac's lase crossed with a beam from one of the other copters, and there was a chain-lightning crackle as the discharges fed back. The CAF weren't top quality airborne killers. Krokodil reckoned they'd come out second if they took on the Red Baron and his Flying Circus, the Arizona-based aerial gangcult. She put a couple of shots into each of the other copters, to dissuade them from coming in any closer.

Someone was shooting at them from ground cover now. This had the feel of a well-assembled trap. The Cadillac was crashing through thick grass, and the snipers were well dug-in.

Krokodil adjusted the M-312, and squirted concentrated napalm in an arc, hoping to start a brushfire that would distract the ground troops.

One of the copters came too close, and Elvis got off a ground-to-air rocket that took out its right runner and arm-guns. It wavered in the air, and went down for a bumpy landing. Hoodheads poured out, burpguns chattering.

A stray slug passed through Krokodil's thigh, putting a grey hole in her karate pyjamas. The lead just grazed her. Her bioflesh tingled as it knit. She wouldn't even have a graze. Since Dr Threadneedle worked her oyer, even all her old scars were healing over. One morning, she expected to wake up a virgin again and with her eye grown back.

She turned around, feeling the wind press her jacket to her back, and potted enough hoodheads to make the others throw themselves flat. She noticed there were two types of bandit in the assault team. The CAF were the hoodheads with red crusader crosses on their camouflage robes and white steeple hats. The others wore brown suits and stetsons and bootiace ties. Krokodil recognized the usual strip of



the Good Ole Boys, an Agency she had heard only bad things about.

The sole remaining copter was hanging on, keeping high enough to be out of range, but staying in the race. A hatch opened in the bottom, and four black things dropped into the air. They didn't fall, they flew like whizzing birds, clawed arms clacking.

Krokodil recognized the devices as Killer Crabs. They were remote probes that locked in on a human heat pattern and pursued their subjects mercilessly. When they caught up with you, they hugged you with their razor-tipped arms and exploded.

The Killer Crabs moved too fast for her laser sight to be any use, and so she fell back on her senses. Aiming and firing fast, she exploded two and winged a third. The crippled crab fell out of the sky and burst in the grass. The final drone zigzagged towards her. It was too close for the M-312. She reached into the sky, and snatched it, turning it around so that its arms tried to hug the empty air. The Killer Crab pumped streams of paralyzing nerve-toxin out of its arm, and green splashes marred the roof of the Cadillac.

Krokodil's fingers sank through the durium-laced carapace of the crab, and she felt circuit-boards crunch. The Killer Crab sparked, and its legs hung useless. She tossed the piece of junk away.

They were out of the grass and on a highway again. And there were other ve-hickles in the game. This was moonshine country, and the GOB would need souped-up machines to keep up with the moonrunners. Fifty yards back was a wedge-shaped racing tank with a rear-mounted cannon. Krokodil put a line of slugs across its window, turning the supposedly shatterproof white glass to powder. The tank flipped up and over and exploded.

Elvis was slowing down. Krokodil looked up front. There was a block across the road. The kind of block the Op wouldn't drive through.

Krokodil swore. Her hair had come loose, and was streaming around her face in rat-tails.

If the GOB had parked a couple of trucks across the road, and set fire to them, then laid down a hundred yards of minimines and caltrop spikes, then Colonel Presley would probably just have cruised on through and trusted the Cadillac's defences.

The Cadillac rolled to a halt. Krokodil slipped a new clip into her M-312, but held her fire.

Strung across the road was a human chain. Men, women and children in ragged work clothes. They must be indentees. They were chained at ankle and wrist. There were one or two white-ish faces in the chain, but the overwhelming majority were black.

A couple of Good Ole Boys with pumpguns were riding herd on the indentees. There was a small gentleman with white whiskers and a big hat in charge. Krokodil wondered where she had seen him before.

He took off his hat, and swept the floor with a bow.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said. "Always a pleasure to meet a lady."

She sighted the red dot on the crotch of his tan pants. He had an automatic pistol in his hand. It was pointed at the head of a sullen, big-eyed little girl.

"Now, if you would kindly cayuh to lay down your weapon, then I won't have to spread this pickaninny's brains all over the interstate."

Krokodil didn't have time for this. But the Op was already out of the car, without a visible gun and with his hands up.

"Back off, Chamberlain," he was saying.

The pursuit ve-hickles were drawing up around the Cadillac, and Good Ole Boys were pouring out. There were one or two hoodheads left, but most of them had been wasted in the air.

Krokodil kept her sight steady. Her business was too important for this distraction.

"You could be singing soprano," she said to the Southern gentleman.

The automatic kicked, and the little girl screamed, pressing her hand to her head. Chamberlain had just nicked her ear.

"Next one will be two inches to the right."

Krokodil knew why the Good Ole Boy seemed familiar. She had seen his face recently, but not in the flesh.

"Krokodil," said Elvis, "please..."

She let the dot fall to the ground between Chamberlain's feet, and set the M-312 on the car roof. Two Good Ole Boys snatched for it, and immediately started arguing over the bone.

Krokodil stood tall on the Cadillac, feeling the slight breeze in her hair, letting her body relax.

Inside her, the Ancient Adversary stirred.

### III

Shiba's bites were itching badly. He knew he shouldn't scratch, but he lacked the willpower not to. The backs of his hands were worst. Dotted red with bites this morning, they were covered with nail-tracks this afternoon. The scratching didn't help, of course. If he got the time, he would ask Mary Louise Blaikley if there was anything he could do.

He was having to spend the day with Visser, which was not a thing he much relished. There had been another break-in, and a whole stretch of the compound fencing was down. Visser had some of his Good Ole Boys out in the swamp with rifles, tracking whatever large predators were out there. The ground by the fence had been suggestively trampled by something big. Some of the indentees were missing. Shiba wasn't sure whether they had been taken by the intruder or simply taken the opportunity to run away.

There was a work gang seeing to the fence now. The indentees worked slowly. Shiba noticed that there was an apparent epidemic of grogginess among them. One woman had just spent five minutes trying to loop a piece of wire around a pole. It was hard to watch. Shiba felt a compulsion to step in and perform

the simple action. But that was not done. He was in administration. It was his job to administer. The woman acted as if she were drugged, or struck down with a swamp fever. Shiba would check to see that the indentees were being fed and medicated correctly. GenTech knew how to treat a workforce to get the best out of it.

There was a thumping sound, and he turned. Two indentees had been carrying a roll of wire, which was now quarter-sunk in a mudpatch.

"Hey, boys, that there's 'spensive," Visser shouted, slapping his truncheon in his hand.

One of the indentees bent down to get a grip on the wire, and a Good Ole Boy planted a kick on his buttocks. The man took a nasty fall on his face.

Visser laughed. "Get him one o' them mudpack beauty treatments, eh?"

"This is ridiculous, Captain," Shiba snapped. "How can you expect these people to work if you treat them like this?"

"Denties are lazy, sir. You gotta give 'em a couple o' asskicks a day or they fall behind."

The fallen man got up, and a mask of mud fell from his face. Shiba noticed that there was something wrong with his cheek muscles. His lips were pulled away from his teeth in a sardonic grin.

"C'mon, Smiley, git back ter work," sneered the asskicker, administering a light tap with his truncheon.

The indentee pulled the wire out of the mud. There was a sucking sound, and it came free. His mouth grinned, but hatred glowed in his prominent eyes. His eyelids were drawn back, too. And his tight skin had a grey-greenish pallor that didn't look healthy.

"Skeeters got ya?" Visser asked.

Shiba realized he was clawing at his hands. Some of the bites were leaking a milky pus.

"Yes."

Visser rubbed his belly. "Me, too, chief. Ain't a place for a natural man, this ain't."

Shiba was inclined to agree, but didn't want to question the decision of the GenTech committee that had established the research compound, and sent them all here.

"The work can only be carried out under these conditions, you know that."

Visser slapped a bug off his shoulder. "I suppose so. Tell me, chief, don't you ever wonder just 'zactly what the gol-dang work is?"

Smiley was unwrapping the wire like a bale of silk, and the other indentees were languidly stretching it out.

"That's Dr Blaikley's department, Captain. I am not qualified to follow it. We're doing medical research. Important biomedical research."

"That, as my ole Daddy used to say, can cover a whole multitude of sins."

Shiba's hands felt as if they were on fire. He also had pains at the base of his spine and the joints of his jaw. They couldn't be mosquito bites.

"You don't look too chipper, chief."

Shiba left Visser with the fence crew, and walked away. He wanted to get his hands under some cold water.

Suddenly, it was as if a hot poker had been shoved into his belly. He doubled up, and leaned against a wall. His mouth filled with warm water. There was a drainage sluice in the ground. He vomited neatly into it, feeling the hot pain surge up through his pipes. There was blood in his chyme.

Shiba straightened his tie and stood up. He patted his hair into place, and walked towards "A" block. His head was pounding now.

Reuben was outside, getting some feed sacks from the concrete bins. He said something, but Shiba didn't hear him properly.

The flaring pain at the corners of his mouth was making him grind his teeth. That was most unhealthy, Shiba knew.

He remembered the pain of his Blood Banner initiation. This was worse.

He pushed into "A" block. This was Blaikley's kingdom. There was a washroom just past reception.

The duty guardmdasha Good Ole Boy (Good Ole Girl?) called Serafinamdashed forced him to take a plastic tagbadge, and logged him in. His hands couldn't work the catch, and she had to pin it on for him. It was as if acid were eating into his skin. Finally, he was officially able to enter the facility.

Serafina smirked. She obviously thought he needed desperately to urinate.

He blundered into the washroom, and ran a cold tap, filling a basin. As he stood at the washstand, waiting for the bowl to fill, looking at the floor, a scorpion scuttled out from the waterpipes. It was a freak, with two tails. He crushed it under his shoe. The work blocks were supposed to be kept clean of that sort of vermin. It was most unhygienic, irregular. He would upbraid Blaikley severely.

The pain was rising up his spine now, as if the vertebrae were being displaced.

He plunged his hands into the water, and scrubbed viciously. Flakes of skin came away.

He looked up at the mirror, feeling some relief from the pain. His face shocked him. He could see the bones of his skull shifting, dislocating. A trickle of blood crept from one nostril. His jaw shifted from side to side. This was agony.

He realized he was screaming. The sink overflowed, and water cascaded around him. He looked at his hand, and saw the new skin that had risen where he had scratched the old away. It was rougher, greener...

There were people around him, dragging him away from the stand. Someone twisted the taps.

Dr Blaikley had hold of him. He felt her soft body pressed close to him. She was holding his arms at his side while someone else squirted an air bubble out of a hypodermic syringe.

She wasn't joking lewdly now. She was treating him as dispassionately as she did her animal subjects.

But why was she loosening his belt?

He tried to protest, but he couldn't get the words out through his clenched jaws. He could taste his own blood.

Two assistants had him now, and Dr Blaikley was tugging his pants down. He thrashed his legs, and she pulled his jockey shorts to his knees.

Merciful heavens, was the crazy woman trying to rape him?

"Just a little prick," she said, "with a needle."

The assistants turned him round, and bent him over a sink. His spinal column was a fiery mass of pain.

He felt the needle sink into his buttock, and heard Dr Blaikley say, "Got him."

The pain vanished instantly, but so did all other feeling. Still fully conscious, he was unable to move a muscle. He sagged, and someone mercifully pulled his underwear and pants up.

"Shame," said Dr Blaikley. "Still, it's not the size of your pencil, it's how you write your name."

They took him out of the washroom, and there was a gurney waiting for him.

He lay flat, looking up at the white ceiling. A fan was turning up there.

"It's happening fast," someone said. "His metabolism must differ from the others."

"He's not a proper subject," Dr Blaikley snapped. "He's GenTech brass. The fecal matter just collided with the ventilation system."

He was being trundled down a corridor.

"Hiroshi," said Dr Blaikley, looming into his field of vision and talking straight at his face. "You've had a turn. We've seen these symptoms before. There's nothing to worry about. We can help you."

Her hair was hanging into his face. He could smell her lemon shampoo.

"You're going to be just fine."

Then she turned away to someone else and said, under her breath but loud enough for him to hear, "God, I hope the Nip swallows that shit."

He was being wheeled deeper into "A" block.

"Get Visser, and tell him what's happened," Blaikley said. Fans and overhead lights passed. His head

rolled from side to side. He fought to get control of his neck muscles, but couldn't

His head flopped. He realized he was hearing things again. The same sounds that had been getting into his dreams recently. They were like the keening cries of swamp birds. Primordial noises.

There was an animal smell. He had never toured this part of the compound. It was not his field.

Like one of his snails, he snatched a breath that would have to last a long time. His chest wasn't rising properly, as if the dope they'd shot into him had paralyzed his lungs.

"He'll come out of it soon."

"Then freaking hurry up, Misty. I like having two hands and big teats."

The gurney stopped, and he was transferred to a cot. It was just a mattress over an iron frame. Things were stuck into his arm, and he heard the steady beeping of a vital signs monitor.

Dr Blaikley peered into his eyes, pulling the lids back. Her sweet breath was on his face. Her heavy breasts brushed his chest.

"Hurry up, Misty," she said to someone.

His hand was working now. He raised it, and caught Blaikley's skirt, just above her thigh. He felt the warm meat of her hip.

She flinched, and Shiba thought he could see something strange in her expression. It was most un-Mary Louise Blaikley-like. It could have been pity.

She took his hand between thumb and forefinger and put it on his chest, touching it as little as possible as if it were a dead rat. Or a diseased one.

There was a clanking, and Dr Blaikley and the others were gone. The pain was creeping back, and he could move his limbs slightly. His hand stung where Dr Blaikley had touched him.

His lungs expanded, and he tore another breath from the air, feeling the fires raging inside his chest.

There were sprouts of pain all along his jaws now.

He sat up, and realized he was not in an infirmary room. He was in a cage.

#### IV

"You've messed with the Good Ole Boys one time too many, guitar man."

Robert E. Lee Chamberlain was going to fulfil a longstanding ambition by killing him, Elvis realized. But first he was going to make a long, boring speech about it.

Elvis looked around. The indentees were sat down on the ground, their chains between them. Good Ole Boys with guns chewed toothpicks, and tried to look cool behind their Sterlings.

Krokodil was just standing, a little away from the car, her hands out where everybody could see them.

"Got any songs you wanna sing, guitar man?"

Chamberlain was pointing his automatic. The girl he had shot earlier wasn't crying any more, just pressing her ragged ear flat against her head. It was about time they had a slave revolt down here in Georgia.

"How about 'John Brown's Body,' massah?"

Chamberlain sneered, and shot the ground by Elvis's feet. He raised a divot. Elvis wished he hadn't flinched, but knew he had. He had the feeling he'd be seeing Jesse Garon pretty soon.

"How d'you feel without your nigra buddies to help you out, guitar man?"

Elvis didn't say anything. Chamberlain had taken a severe humiliation back in Memphis thanks to Gandy, Big Bill and the Dollman. This wasn't going to be over until the Good Ole Boy thought he had paid the Op back for that.

"I've got orders to put you out of the game, guitar man. Orders from Judgement Q. Harbottle himself."

"The big man?"

Chamberlain grinned. "Yeah. The big man. You should be flattered. Usually, Judgement has better things to do than bother with pissant solos who screw up field Ops. You've been a regular 'skeeter, bitin' and botherin' us. But he says we gotta make an example of you."

He waved at the indentees.

"You'll be real pleased to know that after we do the business on you and your lady friend, we're gonna let these nigras go free as birds."

Chains chinked as the indentees shifted. They knew better than to trust Chamberlain.

"The important thing is not that you get a .45 headache, but that these coloured boys see you check out. You've got quite a rep with the swamp trash. They reckon you're some kind of a hee-ro. But with your brains shot out through your greasy hair, I reckon you'll jus' be another piece of dead shee-it. These nigras will spread the word that the guitar man got blown away, and the Good Ole Boys won't get so much rebelliousness from the 'denties. Killin' you is gonna accomplish a lot of things..."

He brought the gun up to bear, and Elvis could see the rifling on the inside of the barrel.

"... but it's also gonna give me a li'l piece of harmless amusement."

Elvis wasn't sure how what happened next happened, but he lived through ten seconds, and was able to breathe again...

Krokodil moved faster than was possible, and Chamberlain swung around to take a shot at her. It went wild. A Good Ole Boy was on the ground, blood coming out of a hole in his throat. Another was up in a tree with a broken back. A hoodhead was holding his ripped guts to his belly.



Krokodil was cartwheeling, her hands bloody and buzzing.

Elvis was in the grass, moving on his elbows. A shot fired overhead. Chamberlain was out to get him.

Krokodil was wrapping a hoodhead into a pretzel shape. Someone was speeding the hell out of the area on a cyke. That might well be a smart move.

There was another shot, and dirt lifted before Elvis's face.

He was down flat by the Cadillac now. A bullet spanged off the bodywork.

Two Good Ole Boys came at Krokodil with electroprods. She put a hand to her face and shifted her eyepatch. A sizzling beam struck out and the two GOB men fell screaming, their heads on fire. Krokodil had an optic burner implanted to replace her missing eye.

Half of the indentees had tried to make a break, dragging the other half with them. A Good Ole Boy with a scattergun jacked in some shells and was ready to bring them down, but Krokodil was behind him, her elbow nutcracking his neck, and he fell like a broken doll.

She had the scattergun. It went off, and a bloody stetson rolled past Elvis's cover spot.

Most of the enemy would be out of the action by now.

Elvis pulled the car door open, and squirrelled into the passenger seat. He saw Chamberlain through the windscreen. A slug flattened uselessly against the bulletproof glass, and Chamberlain ejected an empty clip, fumbling in his jacket pocket for a spare.

Elvis pulled what he wanted out of the dash, and stepped out of the car.

Krokodil wasn't even breathing heavily. The last of the hoodheads was dead at her feet, still spasming.

Chamberlain had the clip out now, but froze.

Elvis held up the voodoo doll.

"You don't believe in magic, do you?" he said.

The Good Ole Boy rammed the clip into the gun, and sighted at Elvis.

"Careful, you might hit the dolly."

Elvis gripped the doll, feeling the wood strain and crack. Chamberlain looked uncomfortable. His face was red again.

"It's all psychosomatic, you know."

He pulled his tie loose, and his collar button burst.

"It just depends on the victim's credulity."

Chamberlain coughed, and tried to speak. He couldn't.

"You and me, we're not like that, are we?"

Chamberlain threw the gun away.

Elvis dropped the doll in the grass, and Chamberlain spluttered, clutching his throat, cursing...

Krokodil walked over to the car. She seemed almost bored. There was blood on her face and clothes, and several smoke-blackened holes had appeared in her jacket. She pulled the garment off, and wiped her face and hands with it. Her body was bruised, but the skin didn't seem broken at all. She was not self-conscious about her nudity, Elvis saw. She moved like a living statue, and again the Op wondered how much of her was the original girl.

She took an identical suit out of her hold-all, and stepped into the loose pants.

"Enjoying the view?" she said, not at all nastily, but without any invitation either.

"Sorry, ma'am," he gulped. He had been staring. Even Chamberlain, who was drawing in quick, chesty breaths, had been fixing his eyes on her.

She slipped on her jacket and knotted the sash at her waist. With a touch of the vanity she hadn't hitherto suggested, she ran a hand through her unbound hair, tidying it a little. She adjusted her eyepatch over the burner, smiled tightly and said "Ready?" to him.

She slipped into the car, and waited.

Whatever trouble she had been expecting on the journey, this was only a minor instance of it. Elvis was not quite scared by that.

Chamberlain was looking for his gun. Elvis saw it glinting, and kicked it across to the indentees..

A man picked it up, and pressed it to his ankle-lock.

"No," Elvis said, "you'll blow your foot off."

One of the electroprod men had a ring of keys hanging from his belt. He tossed it to the indentee, who unlocked himself, and passed the keys on.

Chamberlain sat glumly, not saying anything.

"The keys will be in their ve-hickles," Elvis told the indentee. "If I were you I'd strike West. You can lose yourself in the Delta country, maybe make it to Texas."

"Thanks, man," he said. Elvis didn't hold out much hope for them. It was a long trip. But the GOBs and the CAF hoodheads had plenty of loose hardware lying around. The runaways would be well-armed, well-wheeled.

All the indentees were free now, rubbing their aching ankles and wrists.

The wounded little girl looked up at Elvis. She had tight curls, and a protruding lower lip. He smiled at

her, and patted her head.

"Here," he said, "have a dolly."

He scooped the Robert E. Lee Chamberlain doll out of the grass and gave it to her. She looked at it, unsure. It was an ugly thing, after all.

Chamberlain opened his mouth to protest, but the girl had her thumb over the doll's face. His eyes stared.

It was just a psychosomatic reaction, Elvis told himself.

He looked at the faces of the indentees, and saw the sufferings that had come with their forefathers from Africa. The man he had given the keys looked a lot like a picture he had seen of Robert Johnson, thin and scared and running...

The girl started chewing on the doll's wooden hand. Agony showed on Chamberlain's flabby face.

The girl laughed, and started twisting the doll's head and limbs.

Chamberlain convulsed, kicking the air.

Elvis waved goodbye, and got into the Cadillac.

Krokodil had already turned the ignition. Elvis took the wheel. The automatic windows rose, cutting out Chamberlain's cries.

He saw the girl waving. The doll had come apart in her hands, and she had what looked like red paint on her dress.

As they drove away, Elvis supposed that really had been the last time he would mess with Robert E. Lee Chamberlain.

He wasn't sorry.

## V

Since the Prezz touched down, things on the Cape had been really jumping. Fonvielle was being consulted all the time as the Black Hats beavered around the command bunker, trying to hook up the systems again. It was a lot like stringing Christmas tree lights. You had to get every circuit working at the same time, or the whole thing would shoot sparks and fall to pieces. The Black Hats weren't up to the old NASA standards, but they were enthusiastic about the work. It was like the early days again. They were on the threshold, expanding the envelope, strutting out the righteous stuff, spitting up at the sun, holing the doughnut and conquering the high frontier.

"We're reaching out again," Fonvielle told the Prezz as the Big Board started to light up. "We're gonna stick up a hand and grab ourselves a fistful of the sky."

The Prezz just smiled and nodded sagely. He looked a lot different now than the last time they had met.

Then, he had been a jowly, growling character, direct and domineering. Now, he was a quiet, confident, smoothly handsome man with a touch of a French accent. Fonvielle was used to the Prezz changing. Over the years, he had taken many new faces, many new bodies. But he was still the Prezz. Fonvielle had taken his oath personally to the President of the United States, and he would stick by it. He had always known that the Prezz would remember, even if the rest of the world forgot. You could count on the White House to be on top of everything.

The Black Hats had been pumping swampwater out of the bunker, and repairing or replacing the rusted equipment. The damage was surprisingly slight. NASA had built to last back in the '60s, before it lost its guts and balls to the Suits. Fonvielle would miss the knee-high warm brine he had been sloshing around in for twenty years. He had rigged himself a hammock between two of the old central consoles, and become an extremely expert spear-fisher.

The locals had all been driven away by the creeping waters, and the few die-hard swamp-dwellers who stuck around on the peninsula had stayed clear of him. They called him the Mad Old Man. He didn't give a damn. He had always known that some day the Prezz would be back, and that he would have to get the Cape operations ready at short notice. He hadn't been lonely. After all, the ghosts were all his friends.

At first, he had thought the figuresmdashmanshapes in charred spacesuits, lumbering around as if weightlessmdashwere hypnagogic visions, and had had to caution himself against going crazy. He would be no use to the Prezz if his mind went out on him. Then, he had started to recognize them. The one with the red-smearred visor was Collins, whose helmet had ruptured during EVA, and the one leaking water from the suitseals was Gus Grissom, who had gone down with his capsule. All the other names came back to him: Shepard, Capaldi, Griffith, Mildred Kuhn, Mihailoff, Lindsay, Breedlove. All the other lost-in-space victims. Even the Russians were there, CCCP stencilled on their cosmonaut suits. Gagarin, the re-entry burn-up, was a man-shaped mass of mobile ash, with a bulbous helmethead. Fonvielle hadn't known the Soviets personally, but he had picked up their names over the years. Victorov, Netelkina, Sementsova, Dvorshetsky, Lazarev, Klimov, Ledogora, Rakan.

Sometimes, the ghosts would congregate in a crowd on the launchpad, standing on the water surface as if it were solid concrete, looking up at the abandoned gantry. Fonvielle understood what they wanted. If the Cape remained abandoned, then their lives and deaths were meaningless. If all this activity was for anyone, it was for the ghosts.

Black Hats with mops were drying the concrete floor. They went about their work with strange smiles on their faces and didn't say much except when they wanted to tell you how wonderful everything was since they saw the light. Fonvielle wasn't used to live people any more, but the Hats didn't seem worse than any of the others.

One thing that was good was that the Black Hats had a full security staff with some heavy hardware. Fonvielle had been getting tired of bucking the odds in his one-man war with the Suitcase People. They had started showing up about two or three years back, slithering out from the inland swamps, tails lashing, jaws grinding. They would eat anything that came their way, including human limbs. Fonvielle had been potting them whenever he got the chance, but he was only one guy and the swamp was getting thick with the Suitcase People. The Hats had already had a tussle or two with the creatures, and had got over the initial shock of their 'gator faces. Now, the problem was being contained. The Prezz had taken one of the things out personally as soon as he arrived. Fonvielle was interpreting that as a policy statement.

Black Hats were working over the consoles. One or two were in poor shape and had been dismantled, tangles of multicoloured wire spilling onto the floor as screwdrivers and soldering-irons were wielded in their insides. Others were operational, and the staff were transmitting test signals. The Black Hats were

using a decommissioned but still-functioning satellite for the tests, bouncing messages off it to their HQ in Salt Lake City. Fonvielle was proud that the technology had lasted so well, so long.

The monitors began to hum, and an operator began tracking the target objects. Fonvielle stood over her and looked at the screen, recognizing the familiar ring of dots in their regular orbits. The operator had taken off her Black Hat to get her phones on. Without their hats, they were just ordinary people, if a bit more perfect-faced. Fonvielle laid a hand on her shoulder, and she smiled up at him, displaying white, even rows of enamel.

The target objects circled the globe projection. A printer began to emit a sheet of graph-paper, recording the twelve regular passages through space. Fonvielle looked across the room and saw Grissom, standing unnoticed amid the scurrying Black Hats. The astronaut gave him the thumbs-up, and Fonvielle shakily returned the gesture. He tried to hold back the tears, but they trickled anyway.

The Great Days were back again. At last, the Dream was shared.

They had had a big meeting in the old conference room, the dustsheet coming off the round table with the NASA symbol inlaid into it. The Prezz and his advisors had yanked out a whole mess of spec sheets on imperishable plastic, and outlined the aims and intentions of the project. It was the one he had expected. He still knew all the plans by heart, and he had been itching for another crack at this for better than two and a half decades.

Mars was more romantic, the Moon had more practical applications, and Deep Space was where the scientific data the whitecoats wanted could be scooped. But this was the one that ate him up from the inside. It had never been right, and Fonvielle didn't like leaving it that way. It could be made right, and he wanted it so.

The Prezz gave orders. And Commander Lawrence Jerome Fonvielle snapped off a precise salute.

There was a schedule. There were targets.

And within a month it would finally be done. The Needlepoint System would come on line.

And down here on Earth, the Arms Race would be over.

## VI

It was just a couple of swamp shacks on poles, but it had a diner. They had been in an amphibious mode for thirty or forty miles now, the Cadillac's wheels sealed off and the rear motors kicking in. The machine displaced quite a bit of water as it cruised through the thick swampland, and they were leaving a foamy wash behind them. Progress was slower than it had been on the road, but Elvis liked being on the waterdashif the thick mud and chemical stew that made up the Florida swamps could be called watermdashand the Cadillac handled, as always, like a streamlined dream. His only worry was that there'd be something toxic in the swamp that would eat the paint off the car's hull. They hadn't crossed streams with anything alive and large enough to be dangerous.

Thanks to an old friend at T-H-R, Elvis' onboard computer had a hook-up into the Gazeteer, the map-making-cum-census-taking service underwritten by the big Agencies. Wacissa was recorded as being still barely populated. The diner was called Casper's Chow-Down, and the trilobite thermidor was

triple-starred. But the date of the last check on the entry was eighteen months ago. You couldn't rely on things staying the same for five minutes out here, let alone a year and a half.

Since their tangle with Chamberlain, Krokodil had been sitting quietly, rarely talking. He was intently conscious that the obstruction had been his fight, not hers. In her place, he would be wondering whether hiring the Op had been worthwhile. After all, as she had shown, she could certainly take care of herself in a fight. Elvis was beginning to feel the strain of so much driving, the familiar ache in his neck and shoulders. And he was tired of their road rations.

He pulled the Cadillac up by the diner's jetty, and used the automatic grapple as an anchor. The ve-hickle settled down, waters lapping around the sides.

Krokodil started, as if jolted out of a waking daze. Elvis had noticed the girl occasionally seemed to lapse into vague trance states. That was what cyborgs did instead of sleeping, he knew. The trances were functional. You could live without sleep, but if you didn't dream you went crazy. Sooner or later, the GenTech brain-meddlers would find a way to burn out the dreaming synapses, and Elvis reckoned the whole human race would just have to give up and die, because it wouldn't be worth carrying on. There were some things the brain boys should just leave well enough alone.

"Chow stop," he said.

He knew that Krokodil did eat, if only occasionally. It was probably a habit, like scratching an itch on an amputated leg.

"Fine." She didn't protest. Some of his courier clients objected to anything that slowed down the journey, but as they got nearer Cape Canaveral, Elvis got the impression that the woman was displaying a certain reluctance. She wasn't chicken, the run-in with the hoodheads had demonstrated that, but she was nerving herself up to face something pretty damned formidable out on the Cape. Elvis didn't like to think about the kind of thing Krokodil would find formidable. He had enough nightmares of his own.

The roof rolled back, and the thick, heavy air of the swamp, with its many odours, swept in, blowing away their air-conditioned, pollution-filtered and temperature-regulated bubble of atmosphere.

They stood up, and Krokodil helped him onto the jetty. The old boards creaked under them. Elvis was a little unsteady on his legs after so many straight hours at the wheel. He swivelled his hips to get the circulation moving. A mosquito buzzed by, but a stare from Krokodil warned it off.

"Hi y'all," said a voice. There was someone sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of the diner. "What's yer pleasure?"

Elvis tried to make out the man's shape, but he was shaded by a saggy awning.

"Vittles would go down well, I reckon," he said.

"Yep, I guess they would." The old man laughed, coughing. There was an unhealthy rasp in his chest, as if it were clogged.

"Are you Casper?"

He coughed and laughed again. "Hell, no. Casper done upped and ran off with a li'l high yaller gal a year or so back. I heard he settled down in Cuby with them ceegar-rollers and drug smugglers."

"You run the diner?"

The old man hawked at maximum volume, and spat clear off the jetty. "Nope. You'll find them inside."

"Thank you kindly, sir."

"Don't thank me, boy, until you come out o' the place. You'll find it ain't the same since Casper took off. No sirree, not the same at all."

A spear of sunlight came through the shifting cypresses and landed in the old man's lap. Elvis saw that his hands were knotted with arthritis. They were green and thickly scaled, and his nails were stubby yellow talons. The swamp bred strange things.

Krokodil tugged his sleeve, and they went into the diner.

It was empty of customers, but there was a youngish man standing behind the counter and a woman who could have been his identical twin over by the griddle. The man had a blond crewcut, a pipe clamped between his perfect teeth, a lightweight sports jacket and a Howdy Doody bowtie. The woman had a fluffy blonde perm that had turned to a concrete helmet with pink ribbons, a puffed-out dress, and a tiny, frilly apron. Elvis had the impression that the couple had been posed lifeless as shop-window dummies until the very instant he and Krokodil had come into the diner, wherupon they had sprung miraculously into an imitation of life, like the animatronic presidents in Disneyland.

"Hi, neighbour," said the man. "I'm Donny, and this is my wife Marie. We're here just to serve the Lord, and our good customers. What can I offer you?"

Elvis looked at the menu, which listed plain fare but was covered with curlicue flourishes and smiling cartoon faces licking their lips.

"Recaff, and... tell me, these porkchops you got listed here? They ever walked around as part of a pig?"

"Yes sir. No vatgrown meat at the Walton Family Diner."

"Great. I'll have a couple of them, smothered in brown gravy, with a side order of fries, salad hold the mayo, and, to follow, a slice of deep-dish apple pie, with ice cream if you've got it and nothing if you ain't."

"Coming right up, sir. And for your lovely wife?"

Krokodil raised the eyebrow over her patch, and didn't say anything.

"She'll just have mineral water. She's on a diet"

Donny grinned even wider. "A figure watcher, eh? Just like Marie."

Mrs Walton giggled wholesomely, and slapped a couple of chops on the griddle. She managed to cook without besmirching her pristine self, and the meal that was set before him on the counter looked as perfectly-arranged and brightly coloured as an illustration in a cookbook. A delicious aroma wafted up and curled into his nostrils.



Elvis took his knife and fork, and began carving into the chops.

"Excuse me, sir," cut in Donny, a tone of good-natured disapproval creeping into his easygoing manner, "but aren't you going to say grace?"

Elvis felt a chill, but bowed his head and mumbled.

"There now," said Marie, "don't you feel better now you've thanked the Lord?"

"Yes, ma'am," he raised a forkful of chop to his mouth.

Marie and Donny linked arms and smiled benignly at him. They could have stepped out of a '50s Sears-Roebuck catalogue, fresh from standing admiringly over their new kidney-shaped coffee table, backyard barbecue or atomic fallout shelter. Behind them, between the framed wedding photographs and the Norman Rockwell prints, Elvis could see embroidered Bible sayings.

Krokodil reached out, her arm moving faster than his eye could register, and she took a grip on his wrist. Not knowing what was happening, he instinctively craned his neck forwards, opening his mouth.

His tastebuds tingled, his saliva glands secreted. The hunk of perfectly done chop, rich brown on the outside with a core of subtle pink, was the most delicious fragment of food he had ever lusted after.

Krokodil forced his hand down, making him lower the fork.

"What?"

Donny and Marie smiled even wider. Nobody could smile that wide. Their smiles were slashes that cut into their cheeks almost to the ear, disclosing sharper and sharper back teeth.

"Is everything all right, sir?" Donny asked.

"We refund your money in full if you aren't satisfied with the food or the service," said Marie.

"They're Josephites," Krokodil said. "I've seen this before."

"Praise the Lord," said Donny, hauling a skeletal European machine pistol out from under the counter.

"... and rejoice as you follow the Path of Joseph," said Marie, pulling two three-foot-long, razor-edged skewers from a rack.

Elvis hit the floor, as the first stream of fire ranged across the diner. Plastic tomatoes leaped in the air and exploded ketchup. Salt and sugar shakers shattered. The checkered plastic tablecloths were shredded. Napkins danced as the bullets tore them apart.

Krokodil was flipping across the room, tables and stools flying out of her path, and Donny was trying to bring up the fire.

Elvis had his derringer out of the small of his back. He sighted on the still-grinning Donny's forehead, and put a ScumStopper into it. His fingers felt wrenched off his hand as the recoil hit him. The derringer was a one-shot fight-finisher.

Donny's perfect tan burst open, and gobbets of flesh flowered above his eyes. But there was no blood, and he kept emptying the machine pistol.

Elvis rolled just in time to avoid Marie's skewers, but the metal speared through the sleeve of his leather jacket, sticking him to the floor. Still simpering, she positioned her other spike over his heart.

"Have a nice day," she said.

Hating to strike a lady, Elvis lashed out with his boot, aiming for Marie's midriff. The skewer above his chest wavered and plunged into linoleum, but his foot felt as if he had just tried to give Mount Rushmore a good, solid kicking.

"Now, now, courtesy is cheap, sir," Marie said as she took his ankle and began twisting it viciously.

Donny's gun wasn't chattering any more. As he reloaded, Krokodil vaulted the counter, and double-kicked him in the head. He shrugged it off, and tried to fit a new clip into his pistol. Krokodil slipped behind him, and tried to pin his arms to his sides.

Elvis felt his bones grinding as Marie smilingly continued the torture.

There was a wrenching sound, and Elvis saw that Krokodil had pulled Donny's arms off. He turned to face her, his pipe still clamped in his mouth, and head-butted her. She went down behind the counter, the thump of their clashing skulls resounding throughout the diner. Donny wasn't bleeding from his shoulders.

Elvis tore his jacket free, and dragged himself upright. Marie still clung to his ankle, and hauled herself across the floor, her smile opening. He kicked at her teeth, trying to prevent her from fastening a poisoned mouth on him. Her hair was still perfect. Her make-up was unsmudged. It was as if her cosmetics were part of her skin.

She was babbling about the Will of the Lord and the Path of Joseph, and Elvis realized just what it was about the Josephites that stroked Krokodil's fur the wrong way.

The bastards weren't freaking human.

Donny came at him, kicking. Elvis felt agony explode in his pelvic girdle.

Marie's mouth gaped. The inside was as red as a firehouse.

And Krokodil exploded through the counter, screaming. Donny half-turned into her first slash with the cleaver, and it lodged in his neck. She should have taken his head clean off, but she simply sank the blade deep as if into a hardwood tree, and was unable to pull it out. Donny's pipe snapped, and Krokodil heart-punched him with what Elvis recognized as a killing karate stroke. The Josephite bumped back against the wall, bringing down a paint-on-velvet print of Whistler's Mother. He lurched forwards, and Krokodil shoved Marie's lost skewer into his stomach. The steel length bent as it went in, but Krokodil pushed hard, and Elvis heard the metal sinking into the wall. Pinned like a butterfly, Donny struggled but was held fast. He still wasn't bleeding, but Elvis couldn't see metal flashing in his wounds. If he was a cyborg, he was some odd new variety the Op wasn't familiar with.

Marie let him go, and slithered backwards like a crab, her starched petticoats flaring like a lizard's ruff. She was hissing like an animal.

Suddenly, the woman pushed against the floor and swung upright like a stepped-on rake. It was a neat, impossible trick.

Elvis pulled his Colt Python and shot Marie a couple of times in the chest. It didn't even slow her down. Her blouse erupted where his slugs went in, and blackened.

"It's no use," Krokodil said. "Bullets don't hurt them."

Marie's smile closed, and she spoke in an even, bright, reasonable tone. "Have you noticed how even with the new blue whiteness in your wash, you still can't get rid of understains, static cling, waxy yellow build-up, unpleasant household odours..."

Krokodil stepped in front of Elvis, and bowed to Marie, a martial arts formality that struck the Op as incredibly inappropriate.

"And is your kitchen floor sparkling fresh, lemony-honeyed, economy-sized, family-friendly, cottage-loaved, kissing sweet, babyskin-soft..."

Krokodil kicked Marie in the face, leaving a dusty footprint.

"Pain, tension, headache? You need fast relief..."

Marie's hands were around Krokodil's throat.

"Honey," said Donny, gargling around the steel in his throat, "I'm home." The lights went out inside his eyes, and he sagged dead against the wall.

An adorable dog ran into the room with a rolled-newspaper and a pair of slippers in its jaws. Elvis shot it, and it rolled away in a mewling ball.

Marie's fingers were sinking into Krokodil's flesh. His employer didn't show pain, but Elvis knew she could be hurt.

He punched Marie in the kidneys to no effect, mashing his knuckles. The woman must wear solid steel foundation garments.

He was flagging. His body could take it, but inside his mind voices reminded him of his age. When he had first had the Zarathustra treatments, there had been a lot of barracks scuttlebutt about the so-called Dorian Grey Effect. Apparently, some of the first volunteers had done fine for a while but then had the years catch up with them in fast-forward, like the last reel of a horror movie.

With a gasp, Krokodil broke the grip, and landed a right cross on Marie's chin.

"A Godly Home is a Happy Home..."

Yellow fluid was leaking from Marie's eye, like yolk from a cracked egg. She tossed her hair, trying to make herself perfect again.

The Waltons were like refugees from the 1950s. The thought chilled Elvis, as he remembered the decade of the music. They weren't the only leftovers from the years of canasta, Joe McCarthy, sputnik. Sergeant Bilko and Rock Around the Clock. Sometimes, Elvis felt a peculiar sense of responsibility

about his longevity, as if he were the last survivor of the Battle of Waterloo or the audience at the Gettysburg Address, and it was all down to him to pass on the memory to an uncaring posterity.

Locked together, Marie and Krokodil crashed against the picture window, which exploded outwards. They rolled together onto the jetty, broke apart, and came up fighting.

Elvis left through the door, looking around for something to use as a weapon.

The porch-sitting old-timer had beat it out of there. Something else was missing, but Elvis didn't have time to think about it

Marie pulled up a board from the pier, and the Op saw polished nails sparkling in it. Krokodil put up an arm, and the board splintered against it.

Elvis found Donny's pistol under his feet. He picked it up, and rammed home the clip. Bullets might not hurt the Josephites, but they couldn't do them much good.

Marie stood on the pier, not even breathing heavily. He would show her that he was a mighty, mighty man.

Elvis aimed at the general direction of her head and chest, and emptied the clip in one concentrated burst. Marie shook and shuddered as scraps of her dress and skin flaked away. She lost her footing, and splashed into the swamp.

His hands felt as if they had been through a wringer. Moulinex claimed that this model was recoilless. He ought to report them to the Armaments Ombudsman.

Surfacing, she shouted "my hair is a mess" and struck for the jetty. But somethingmdashquicksand?mdashgrabbed her ankles, and pulled her down. Her smiling face disappeared under the greenish mud, and there were only bubbles left behind.

"What the hell..." Elvis said.

Krokodil had her breath back. "It's like a progressive mutation. I've seen these things before. Not all Josephites are like that, but a lot of them are. I don't know, but I think they might be clones or something."

"Creepy."

"Yeah. And people call me Frankenstein's Daughter..."

Krokodil pulled her jacket over her bruises, and wiped her hair out of her eye.

"They don't have any body hair. They also don't have belly buttons, nipples or private parts. Some of them have their toes fused together like dummies."

"And they come from Salt Lake City?"

"Yeah, God's paradise on Earth. Don't be fooled by all that grace-saying and thanks-giving. These people wouldn't know Jesus Christ if he asked them for change on the street."

The pain in Elvis's ankle flared up again, and he looked down. An arm, still in a sportscoat sleeve, was fixed to him by a gripping fist. It held fast like a beartrap.

Krokodil bent down and prised the fingers loose, snapping them back. The thing still lashed. She tossed it into the swamp, where it floated a while, fingers flopping, and sank.

"Krokodil?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Where's the car?"

## VI

He was able now to view what was happening to him with some detachment. He was even gaining some degree of control over his tail. It was odd having a new appendage, but he found it easily manipulable. With the changes overtaking him, the tail was like an anchor, holding him steady.

His body was finding its own reptile-human equilibrium. He felt hungry all the time, and had to chew his way through the raw carcasses they threw into the cage every few hours, even though the human brain wrapped inside the alligator tissue knew they were using the meat to administer knock-out drugs. After feeding, he would fall asleep and dream of operating tables and agony and Dr Blaikley, and then awake, changed even more, in the cage.

He knew he had been moved permanently into the experimental block, which Dr Blaikley insisted on calling "The House of Pain" for some reason, and that he was no longer an administrator. He was a subject. And he was not alone. There were other cages. He found old friends. Reuben was in one, his black-green skin crinkling as he progressed. And there were those whose changes were almost complete, who could no longer speak properly.

Reuben told him what they were becoming. The indentees called them the Suitcase People. Shiba could not see the point of the experiments, but that was not his business. Dr Zarathustra would have authorized Dr Blaikley's work. The experiments would eventually benefit the corp, and Hiroshi Shiba was not going to jeopardize his position by criticizing them. Inoshira Kube had explained to him that the corp was like a complex organism, with myriads of cells performing differing tasks all geared to the perpetuation and protection of the whole. This might not be as well-publicized an operation as the submarine oil drilling, the transport and media monopolies or the designer plastic surgery, but it contributed to the economic and social health of the whole being that was GenTech. And as a member of the Blood Banner Society, Shiba was sworn above all to protect the corporate colossus that embodied all that was fine and noble and strong in the values of the Orient.

Still, Dr Blaikley was looking juicier and juicier every time she came to feed him and haul him off to her surgery. He estimated that he had been taken to the House of Pain three times in the day and a half since he had moved into "A" block. He was further gone than Reuben, but he could still articulate words. From what he understood, Dr Blaikley hoped to preserve in him the capacity for speech. It was important to the experiment that the subject be able to give a subjective account of the experience.

Just now, he was reciting his Blood Banner oath. He had always had trouble with English consonants, now his throat felt as if it were not suited to Japanese either. He persisted, trying to master his new body.

He must not give in. Great things were expected of him in Kyoto.

He lay on his belly, so his tail wouldn't get in the way, and looked through the bars of his cage. It would be feeding time soon. And then there would be the House of Pain.

Reuben was singing an old negro spiritual about Israel being in Egypt's land.

It occurred to Shiba that perhaps Dr Blaikley was proceeding without Dr Zarathustra's authorization. This line of research was characteristically flamboyant, but it might be a little too wild even for him. And usually Zarathustra's projects had obvious practical applications, like retarding the ageing process or building up the body's auto-immune systems. Shiba couldn't think what earthly use a human being half-turned into an alligator might be. If Dr Blaikley were using lizards as a model, he would assume she were trying to get amputees to grow new limbs. But alligators were just big, ugly reptiles with lazy appetites. Perhaps Suitcase People could be trained to work in sewers, scuttling through pipelines in filthy water. Shiba did not relish the prospect, but GenTech knew best.

"Let my people gooooo," sang Reuben, his voice resonating around the cell block

The food and the pain was late. Shiba wondered if the routine of the compound had been broken. If so, it was due to the lack of a good administrator, he was sure. If he were removed from his position, the corp regs automatically promoted the security chief to the co-ordinator's chair, and Shiba couldn't see the slobbish Spermwhale Visser handling the responsibilities at all well.

Shiba thought of Visser, and wondered whether his nickname wasn't a reference to another strand of Dr Blaikley's experimentation. Was the man ballooning into an aquatic mammal? Did some of the GenTech East executives miss the old days of illegal whale-hunting, and want to reintroduce the creatures into the Sea of Japan so they could resume their sport? As a trainee, Shiba had had to do three weeks on a GenTech R & R yacht, caddying harpoons for the upper-echelons. He felt cheated that the animals had become extinct before he got far enough in the hierarchy to be the whaler rather than the poon-boy. It was the duty of all those who saluted the Blood Banner to kill without a second thought when it was required of them.

Shiba's stomach hurt. Alligators, he had heard, did not need to feed more than once a week. He still had human appetites. Indeed, more intense appetites than he had had as a human.

Although unwilling to admit it, he felt an enormous sexual desire.

He was ravenously hungry. There were growls and cries from the other cages. His condition was shared by the rest of the Suitcase People.

He wrapped his lanterning jaws around the bars and chewed them, but tasted only flake iron. One of his teeth broke and he spat it out. He had the impression that it would grow back. New teeth were sprouting all the time, crowding his lengthening jaw.

This breakdown of the orderly schedule was intolerable. He would issue a reprimand when he was returned to his office.

Reuben stopped singing. There was gunfire outside.

"It's come," he said. "We're rescued."

What was the old indentee talking about?

There were screams amid the gunshots. Shiba heard creaks and crashes, and knew that the compound was under attack. The fences were going down. The security klaxons were sounding.

The lights flickered and went out, then came on again, humming. The emergency generators were working, but the main power plant must be down.

There were explosions outside.

The cage room had no windows. It was most frustrating not to know what was going on. Shiba didn't care to ask Reuben what he knew. It was not seemly for an executive to appear ignorant.

He slithered away from the bars, and waited for further eventualities.

The main doors burst open, and a Good Ole Boy backed in.

He was firing wildly at something advancing on him. The doors swung open and closed as he fired at them. Bullets ricocheted, clanging spent against the bars.

Shiba warned the security man that his carelessness would be reported.

Something big came through the doors, and towered over the Good Ole Boy.

"Hallelujah," breathed Reuben.

It was about twelve feet tall, and reptilian. It had mighty thighs and a tail, but small, almost useless human arms hanging out of the sleeves of a Petya Tcherkassoff T-shirt. Its head was the size and shape of the front of an old-fashioned helicopter, tiny eyes high up on either side, and its sharklike mouth was crammed full of large teeth.

"Yo," said the creature, "we come to bost yo asses out, homes!" It had a hispanic accent, and there was a five-foot scarf knotted around its brow.

It dipped its head to the Good Ole Boy, and opened wide.

"Excelente," it said, chewing. "Thass real radical, maaann! Thees pendejo ees out of the game."

A green-faced, upright figure with combat fatigues and a Statue of Liberty crown of horns squeezed past the saurian, and saluted Shiba.

"We have liberated this facility, sir."

Shiba reared up on his hind legs and stood like a man, tail lashing the floor.

"We are presently trying to locate the keys. You will be free within moments, sir."

Shiba bowed at the soldier lizard, foreclaws locked in humility.

The saurian stumped off, whooping in Spanish, and Shiba heard lab equipment falling over.



"Arriba, arriba!" the saurian shouted.

"Be careful," Shiba told the lizard.

"Discipline will be maintained, but the action is still being fought."

Shiba understood.

Two Suitcase People, former indentees to judge from their dark hides, dragged Visser in. The Good Ole Boy was bloodied and shaky.

The lizard pointed a revolver at Visser's blubbery neck, and ordered him to turn over the keys. They were on a ring attached to his belt. The officer tore them free, and passed them to a female Suitcase Person with long, straight black hair and dainty human hands. She tried the keys systematically until Shiba's cage was open, and then progressed to Reuben's cell and repeated the process.

The lizard saluted. "Captain Tip Marcus, sir," he said.

"Hiroshi Shiba."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance. Are you the ranking official here?"

Shiba looked at Visser, whose eyes were tightly shut, and nodded his head, slapping his chest with his lower jaw.

"We have received a surrender from this man. Do you accept it?"

Shiba lifted Visser's head. The Good Ole Boy's eyes opened. He was speechless with fear.

How much had Visser known? Was he another catspaw, or in on Dr Blaikley's schemings? Shiba growled, and felt saliva fall from his jaws.

"Sir?"

"Oh, yes, the surrender. I accept."

"Very well." Marcus nodded to the Suitcase Men, who shoved Visser in Shiba's old cell. The alligator girl locked him in.

"We're not quite sure, you understand," Marcus said, grinning, "whether to treat these people as prisoners of war... or as emergency rations."

Shiba felt his stiff snout forming a smile.

With Marcus at his side, he walked out of the animal room. The House of Pain was messed up. Evidently, a lot of Marcus's people had suffered extensively here and felt the need to wreak a degree of retribution. But even amid the mess, Shiba could make out the remains of Dr Blaikley's programme of experiments. There were half-dissected alligators lying in shallow tanks of blood. And in the vats, bulbous organs were being grown. A child's paddling pool was incongruously lying in one corner, pale-grey quadruped reptile babies swimming in the shallow water. They looked up at Shiba with big, human eyes.

"We've been regrouping since the initial break-out, sir," said Marcus. "Mother Mary Louise has had this coming for a long time."

Shiba would have to get to the bottom of this backstory eventually. Evidently, his arrival at the Narcoossee compound had come very late in the plot.

"Where is Dr Blaikley?"

Marcus looked at the floor, horizontal lids blinking over his eyes. "I'm sorry, sir... I accept full responsibility... I was unable to maintain discipline..."

He drew back the sheet that had been flung over the main operating table. Bloodied instruments clattered to the floor, and the naked and flayed thing on the red rack writhed, exposed eyes moving in the ruin of a face.

"Old scores, you understand, sir?"

Shiba laid a cold-blooded palm on Dr Blaikley's meaty brow, and felt something approaching regret.

It didn't have to be like this. Marcus's people should have known that the doctor hadn't acted out of malice. She was merely a loyal GenTech employee, doing her best for humanity.

If she hadn't died that instant, Shiba would have ended her life for her.

He paused a moment, in tribute to a woman of science. A woman who had done some good with her life.

Then, he dropped the messy sheet over her and accompanied Marcus back outside, to survey the damage and to resume the organizational reins.

There were reports to be made, and things to be done.

## VIII

There was no sign of Colonel Presley's pink Cadillac. Krokodil suspected the old man who had been on the jetty of spiriting it away. It didn't really matter who had taken the car. Itmdashalong with all their heavy weaponrymdashwas long gone and would never be coming back. While they had been distracted by the Josephite freaks, someone had cleared a neat profit. Ve-hickle theft was a capital offence in most states of the union, including Florida, but few people ever went to the chair for it. Compulsive car thieves didn't have much of a life expectancy anyway, and the professionals were much too cool to get caught

Krokodil, who still retained a residual prejudice against Sanctioned Ops from her gangcult days, wasn't sure how Elvis would take the loss of the carboat. It was a common panzergirl taunt against Ops that their guts were under the hoods of their machines and that if you took their wheels away they were like turtles on their backs. There was even a whole range of semi-obscene jokes about the relationship between Redd Harvest, the top T-H-R Op, and her G-Mek V-12 'Nola Gay. But, hell, Krokodil had known gangcultists who were just as hung up on their hardware.

Elvis surprised her, by taking the loss as a simple irritant. She had gathered that a good deal of his

earnings over the years had been channelled into the Cadillac, and that this would practically wipe him out financially. Apart from the one million he would pick up for this job if he survived, of course. But even a cool mil probably wouldn't replace a '57 Cadillac with more firepower than a US Cavalry cruiser.

"Easy come," Elvis said, "easy go. We better find ourselves a boat to requisition."

"Requisitioning" was a term used by Ops whenever they wanted to steal anything. They would turn over the Walton diner completely before leaving.

They hunted through the ruins of the kitchen and dining room. They came up with a cache of ammunition for the Moulinex machine pistol Elvis had requisitioned from the late Donny Walton.

"Do you reckon any of this stuff is okay to eat?" he asked, indicating a refrigeratorful of supplies.

She wasn't sure. Most of the food looked like the plastic replicas they use for adverts.

"Best be safe."

"Yeah," the Op sighed. "Hell. I could do with a candy bar or something."

"I could catch you a trilobite and we could cook it in swampwater."

Elvis made a face. "I just lost my appetite."

Upstairs, the Waltons had lived in an illustration from an old magazine. Everything was perfect in its place. There were Readers' Digest condensed books in neat rows on shelves, dust-free but blatantly unread. There was no teevee or ceedee. The couches were plastic-covered, and the lamps ugly. A pile of Josephite tracts lay neatly on the table. Happiness Through Spirituality, Miracles by the Moment, Further Down the Path.

"Do you notice?" she asked him.

He looked around. "Nope. Nothing strange here."

"It's what's not here. Colonel."

"What?"

"This is their living room. It's their only room. No bedroom, no bathroom. What kind of people don't need a toilet?"

"Jeeze," he shuddered. "These people are weird."

Krokodil smiled at the understatement. Like almost everyone else in the world. Colonel Presley didn't really know what was going on. It wasn't his fault. She had crossed Elder Seth back when she was a teenager, taken his spectacles and been taught to see the world as it really was, a fragile place being crowded at the edges by the Dark Ones. Monsters and demons walked with her always now. The thing inside her was coiled dormant, but she was forever aware of it, waiting for it to erupt again. She hoped never to see anything like the Jibbenainosay again, but knew that her life held those horrible possibilities, and that she would have to confront them.

"Look at this," Elvis said, pointing to a framed picture.

A talon of fear punctured her heart. It was Elder Nguyen Seth himself, amateurishly painted with an unconvincing angelic smile, standing in front of the Josephite Tabernacle, a glowing halo around his black hat, surrounded by little children who were beaming merrily up at him.

Without thinking, she made a fist and put it through the picture. Glass shattered.

"Whoa there, ma'am. It ain't that ugly."

The picture was torn now, ripped across the face.

In her head, the Elder spoke to her again, taunting her for her many failures. No matter how she strove, she would never stop him. She didn't even know what his Grand Design was; how could she hope to prevent him from the accomplishment of it?

She broke contact with the painted eyes, and stormed downstairs, with Elvis following.

"I never thought to see that face again," Elvis said.

Krokodil didn't understand.

"Mr Seth. He don't look no different now than he did back then."

"Back when?"

Elvis was preoccupied. "The crazy days. The music days. Him and Colonel Parker ran me like a greyhound."

"This is the same man? Elder Nguyen Seth."

"Now you mention it, I suppose they are the same man. That ain't possible, is it?"

Krokodil remembered the memories that had bled into her mind from the Elder's.

"He'd have to be near a hundred years old."

"He's been around for a lot longer than that."

"Lady, what are you in to?"

She shrugged. "You don't really want to know, Colonel Presley. Just get me to the Cape."

"I'll try."

There was a small powerboat in a shack by the diner, gassed up and ready to go. They loaded scavved weapons and ammo into its storage compartments, and Elvis insisted on bringing along some of the more obviously pre-packaged foods.

"There ain't no charts," he said. "We'll have to steer by the stars when it's night. Still, if we cut across the peninsula until we come to the sea and turn South we'll have to find the Cape."

Krokodil didn't doubt that they would get there without getting lost. It was what would happen afterwards that worried her.

"This will slow us down some. Put a couple of days on the journey. And I don't know if there's enough gas in the extra cans to get us there."

"We'll deal with that when it becomes a problem."

"We surely will."

Elvis cast off, and the boat pattered out onto the waters, which rippled thickly as it cut across them.

It was late afternoon, and the insects were thick in the air. The Op was sweating heavily, even with his jacket off, and had to bat the bugs away from his face. They grew them big in this country. Even she was bothered by them. Doc Threadneedle had made her invulnerable to almost everything short of a direct hit with a nuclear weapon, but she could still be bitten by nuisance-value creepy-crawlies. That was science for you. They'd find a cure for cancer before they got around to licking the headcold.

He was humming under his breath. Krokodil wondered if he realized he had that habit.

It was an obscure American folk song, composed by someone called Alligator John Fogarty. She had only heard of it because Petya Tcherkassoff had done a cover version, with a bizarre Russian-accented twist to the English language lyrics, on his A Cry for Help album.

It was called "Born on the Bayou."

## IX

Sister Addams summoned him down to the control bunker. It was good news. Fonvielle had established contact with Keystone, the communications link of the Needlepoint Ring. If the satellite could be made to respond, then the whole chain would fall in line. And the Church of Joseph would wield unparalleled power over the nations of the Earth. His first impulse had been to order someone to report the good news to Elder Seth, but he held back. There was no harm in verifying the situation for himself.

Simone trailed along after him. He rather liked the obvious disapproval the Brothers and Sisters had to choke back whenever she was around. They were prudish fanatics mostly, even the ones who hadn't gone Donny-and-Marie yet. Given free rein, they'd like to stone Simone Scarlet, the Scarlet Woman, to death. They did that sort of thing all the time in Salt Lake, and Seth encouraged it. Spilling blood was all part of the ritual.

She didn't ask questions, but she was learning more and more. She wasn't much like the nervous indentee hooker she had been back in New Orleans. With Commander Fonvielle, she was only too willing to play the role of First Lady. The creature in the sea had unnerved her, but she had put up with all the other horrors without a murmur. The sacrifices were still baking on the tarmac as they strolled across the launchpad. Two were Josephites who had fallen beside the wayside and succumbed to doubt, but the one with a tail was a Suitcase Person. Duroc had ordered that the perimeter guards round a few of the monsters up for study. They had obviously been human once.

Bethany Addams was waiting outside the bunker, her best black dress and poke bonnet on. She had been with NASA before she joined the church, and knew what she was doing. She even remembered Fonvielle from the old days. She was of that generation of Americans that had wanted to be astronauts when it grew up, and been sorely disappointed when the ruinously expensive and dangerous space programme was dismantled.

Duroc looked up into the sky. It seemed close enough to touch. The Needlepoint satellites were up there somewhere. They had been frigidly unyielding for years, but the Frenchman knew they were just waiting to be seduced by the right touch.

They rode the freight elevator down to the bunker. Two goats were tethered in one corner. Ezekiel Astor, a dour Brother in shirtsleeves with a butcher's knife in his waistband, tended them. He was the Officer of the Sacrifice.

Sacrifice was the key to the whole thing. The Needlepoint Ring was lost to scientific endeavour. That had been proven in the '70s. But the Church of Joseph had other avenues of communication with the machine minds that controlled the heavy lasers.

Duroc stepped off the elevator platform and strolled into the control room. Fonvielle saluted his president, and he returned the respect. The commander looked like Ben Gunn, but at least 75% of his brain cells were still firing.

Astor led the goats towards the console that had been opened up. The plastic casing was cast aside, and someone had carefully scraped away the jacketing of most of the wires. Astor gently picked up one of the goats and placed it in the nest of wires. He cut its throat and held its mouth shut as it bled into the machine's insides. There were sparks as the contacts were made.

Simone took it all as a normal rite. She was from the swamps. She knew voodoo when she saw it.

Sister Addams chanted softly as she engaged the monitors. The dying goat kicked feebly, and lay still, its life seeping into the workings.

The big board lit up.

"Contact," Fonvielle said.

There was some discreet cheering from the technicians.

"Keystone, Keystone," Fonvielle said into his throat mike, "do you read?"

The Satellite beeped its response. Later, they would engage its voicebox simulator, and converse in English. For now, mathematical signals would do.

Addams turned round, smiling beautifully. "On line, Elder Duroc."

Duroc quietly punched the air. There was another cheer. It was a shame the Josephites abjured champagne. This was one of those Moet et Chandon occasions.

"You have a subject?" Addams asked.

This had been one of Duroc's odd little tasks, the selection of a test subject. He had run his mind through

a long list of people he had met and whom he thought the world would not be the poorer for the lack of. But then he realized they were so close to the End of All Things that settling one petty score among so many accounts due and soon to be paid was small-minded of him. Spontaneous human combustion had always been random in its nature, and so he decided on a genuinely random form of selection.

He had used the ZeeBeeCee Blotto Lotto RaLPPH, the most finely-tuned random-person selection machine in the world. The station claimed that it picked its winners without regard to any social, racial, sexual, economic, psychological, numerical, alphabetical, moral or sociological consideration. So, smiling a little at the thought of such ill-fortune following on the good, Duroc had picked Gavin Mantle of Springfield PeeZee, Massachusetts.

Gavin had been until recently a salesman for Kitchenmaster appliances. He was 32; married to the former Clodagh Hanrahan; father of little Tish and Reggie; a keen follower of the My Pal, the Biosurgeon soap; the star of his works bowling team; the sometime backstreet lover of Erik Kartalian, a bleached blond muscle builder, still a suspect in the embezzlement of five thousand dollars from the Kitchenmaster slush fund; and just on the point of graduating from zooper-blast and ju-ju pills to smacksynth and Method-1. Duroc supposed Gavin was a typical American. ZeeBeeCee had just given him one hundred million dollars in cash and a lifetime supply of GenTech medical care. His face had rarely been offscreen during the past week, as Lola Stechkin and the news team reported how Gavin was disposing of his fortune.

Duroc fed in the co-ordinates of the walled estate Gavin had moved into without taking Clodagh, Tish and Reggie or Erik and also gave the machine a map of the lucky winner's body-heat patterns.

"Keystone is accurate to the half-centimetre," Fonvielle claimed. In the past accuracy had been the problem. The curvature of the Earth and the distortion of the atmosphere got in the way. But now, with the charm of blood seeping through the works, they should have that problem licked.

The monitors showed the satellite extending its laser arm, and making minute adjustments in its orbit.

A map appeared on the big screen, with a red dot over Springfield. The map was magnified as the aiming became more precise.

Sister Addams was praying.

Duroc imagined Gavin in his new-won palace. He hoped he was alone. For some reason, Duroc felt it would not be fair to singe a GenTech supplied sexclone.

"Target: lock-on!"

Fonvielle was standing over the console.

"We have manual control, Mr President."

He lifted a little cover and revealed an unobtrusive red button.

"Simone," Duroc said, "do the honours, would you?"

With a satisfied smile, Simone walked across the bunker. Even Josephites who had abjured carnal relations couldn't stop themselves staring at her body. She was wearing something white and clinging and silky that set off her skin colour perfectly.



"Goodbye, Gavin," Duroc said.

Simone casually pressed the button, and the red dot on the map flashed.

"Firing sequence initiated," Fonvielle snapped.

There was a rising whine. Brother Astor sacrificed the other goat, almost unnoticed. Duroc was pleased with the man. He liked the way he did his part in the operation without being asked or demanding an acknowledgement.

Sister Addams had her thumbnail between her teeth.

"Firing..."

The big screen suddenly scrambled, and the map was gone. Lights flared.

"...now!"

It was unspectacular. The big screen just shut down. Astor's goat kicked and shrieked, clinging to life.

Fonvielle slumped in his chair. Simone stood away from the console.

"What happened?" Duroc asked.

The commander ripped out a fistful of his beard and chewed it like tobacco.

"Malfunction, Mr Prez." "

"The lase doesn't work?"

Fonvielle spat a hairball on the floor. "Nope. That's fine and dandy. Well up to scratch, in fact."

"So?"

"It's the targeting system we have to get the bugs out of. We don't seem to have reestablished control over the Keystone mapmaster programme."

A read-out chattered. The big screen came back on.

"Ah," said Fonvielle. "Does anyone know where Taabazimbi is?"

"It's in the Transvaal," Duroc said, "in Greater Rhodesia. Why?"

Fonvielle looked sheepish. "Ah, well, because Keystone seems to have um..."

"Out with it, commander!"

"...obliterated it."

X

It was getting dark. The boat was going to need gas soon, or they would be down to using the paddles. Elvis told Krokodil. "Well, there are people nearby..."

Elvis looked at her. "You can tell that from some cyborg sense?"

"No, I can tell that from simple observation. Wherever there's garbage, there are people, and look..."

There was a mud lagoon clogged with food wrappers and other disposables, sinking slowly.

"That's someone's dump."

"Yeah." Elvis reached for his Moulinex.

"Paranoid."

"It's the only way to get to be my age, ma'am."

Nevertheless, he left the gun where it was.

"Yeah," she sighed. "I suppose you're right."

"We'll try silent running from here on in."

He cut the motor, and took the paddles from the stern locker. He handed her one.

They eased the boat forwards. The swamp was thick here, more mud than water, and it was easy to get clogged with the swampgrass. They'd had to stop several times to unwind long tangles from the propellor.

Elvis could hear noises up ahead. Human noises.

"Sounds like a party," Krokodil said.

There was music. Cooking smells reached them.

"I sure hope the natives are friendly round here."

"We'll find out soon enough."

They could see lights through the hanging cypresses. Elvis felt very hungry again.

"'Old eet raight zere, mon ami," said a harsh, loud voice. The accent was backwoods French.

Elvis pulled his paddle out of the water, and raised his hands.

"We're friends," he said.

"Easy to say, 'ard to preuve."

The Frenchman leaned out of the shadows. He was lying in the branches of a cypress, camouflaged among the leaves. He wore a patchwork of oilskins and small pelts, and had long, tangled hair. He was carrying a Grand Guignol shotgun, four barrels welded together in a square. One of those things could blast a hole clear through a bull elephant.

"We're just passing through. My name is Presley, and this is..."

He couldn't think of a way of making "Krokodil" sound like a friendly name.

"Jessamyn," she said.

"Enchanté, mam'selle. Je suis Zhille."

"Where is this place?"

"It 'as no name. We float."

Zhille put up his shotgun.

"Can a feller get some gas around here? Or maybe some food?"

Zhille smiled and kissed his fingers. "If a felleau 'as ze price of ze services."

"We can pay," said Krokodil.

"Zen, come on een, get warm and get fed..."

Zhille held aside a curtain of cypress, and they paddled past his tree.

There was an island ahead, with a bonfire built on it. Elvis realized that it was not a true island, but rather a large raft built on a network of empty oil drums layered over with soil and vegetation. There were shacks and storehouses. And a group of maybe twenty or thirty people, clustered around the fire. A spitted 'gator was turning over the flames, roasting nicely, and big-bellied iron cookpots were heating up gallons of gumbo.

"You laike Cajun cookeeng?" Zhille asked, appearing to tether the boat.

"Yes, sir," Elvis replied politely.

"You laike plenty of 'ot spices, n'est-ce pas?"

"I surely do."

"Zen zis ees ze plaice for yiu."

"The natives," Krokodil whispered, "seem friendly."

Still, Elvis saw her slinging something from Donny Walton's gun collection around her waist. You could never be too careful.

There was a small band by the fire, playing fast, raucous zydeco. A serious, thin-cheeked woman with a derby hat and a long skirt sawed away at a fiddle. The rest were okay, but she was good. A few barefoot children were dancing, but most of the crowd were more interested in eating just now.

Zhille introduced them to the community headman, DuFrezne, and his wife Jeanne, and to others. Places were found for them near the fire, in the food line.

Elvis watched the 'gator turning. He had never eaten 'gator before, but knew people who swore by it.

"At least they've taken its eyes out," Krokodil said.

"They're in the gumbo."

"Oh well, I've eaten raw lizard in my time. This looks appetizing by comparison."

"You need to eat?"

She shook her head. "But I should, here. We don't want anyone thinking there's anything odd about me, do we?"

The fire made strange shapes on her face. Elvis wondered just how odd Krokodil really was. He knew she was packed full of bio-amendments. But there was something else weird about the woman. Sometimes, someone else seemed to be looking out through her eyes.

The music stopped, and the eating started.

Elvis was fortunate enough to get an unidentifiable hunk of tasty, highly-spiced meat. After a day's fast, it was wonderful. And the swamp-brewed moonshine that came with it burned all the tastes out of his mouth anyway. He wondered if his tastebuds had sustained any lasting damage from the liquid fire.

They talked about themselves, but were vague about their reasons for being in the swamplands. Krokodil told DuFrezne her name was Jessamyn Bonney, and that she had been wilder as a teenager. Elvis remembered the name. She had been a War Chief with the Psychopomps, a Western gangcult, four or five years ago. It was hard to imagine the calm woman in glitter make-up and ragged tights. Elvis just said he had been in the army most of his life.

As they talked, Elvis was aware of dark eyes fixed on them. It was the fiddle-player.

As the fires died down, the woman got up, and began a long recital in incomprehensible Cajun French, punctuating her sentences with unearthly melodies.

"Zat ees 'Ti-Mouche," said Zhille, "she ees un p'tit crazy, but she 'as ze saight..."

"The Sight?"

Zhille made an expressive gesture. Elvis gathered 'Ti-Mouche was a wise woman, a white witch.

"She talks about yiu," Zhille said.

'Ti-Mouche was playing a drawn-out but spirited tune, a Devil's Trill.

"What's she saying?"

Zhille wasn't sure whether to pass it on. "She says zat yiu 'ave... uh, eet 'ard to explain... ze talent?"

"Talent?"

"Eet ees witch stoff. She says yiu a powerful sorciere, only' yiu do not know eet. Yiu put aside your magic, turn your back on eet, but ze magic, eet weel not be put aside. Eet come back soon."

Elvis felt the music creep into his spine. 'Ti-Mouche seemed to be playing incredibly complex variations on "Heartbreak Hotel." She couldn't know...

The music got darker, wilder, and 'Ti-Mouche's recital became a rant. Zhille stopped trying to explain, but Elvis could tell he was unnerved. The climate of the gathering chilled, and a few of the children crossed themselves. DuFrezne looked serious, and nodded.

"She's talking about me," Krokodil said.

The bow scraped higher, and 'Ti-Mouche's eyes glowed in the dark. Her skirts whipped around her thin legs, and her caterwauling was answered by cries from creatures out in the swamp.

Elvis nudged Zhille. "What is she saying now?"

Zhille was reluctant. "She talk about your woman. She say your woman 'ave ze diable a sa coeur. Yiu understand." 'Ti-Mouche was saying that Krokodil was the Devil in disguise. Krokodil did not seem unsettled by the accusation.

"Bot, eet alright to make spaice for yiu at ze fire..."

DuFrezne looked happier, his decision vindicated.

"... because yiu such a pow'ful sorciere."

The fires flared up again as Ti-Mouche finished her recital. She flopped down, exhausted, and was handed a jug of white lightning.

After a while, Elvis asked. "Say, how much do we owe you for the food and gas?"

He had his moneyclip out.

Zhille looked offended. "No monai, m'sieu. Yiu pay os een kaind. We feed yiu, warm yiu at our fire, play yiu our museec. Yiu most pay os back weeth a story, a song, a dance. Sometheeng to pass ze naight-taime."

Krokodil was smirking, stretched out like a cat.

'Ti-Mouche knew what to do. She took a battered guitar from one of the band, and laid it in front of him.

"Yiu most play," Zhille said. "'Ti-Mouche wishes eet."

Krokodil sat up, interested.

Elvis ran some chords. It was an old instrument, but a good one.

It was as if the music had never gone away.

"Welllll," he began, "since my baby left me...."

XI

Raimundo Rex brought Spermwhale Visser into Shiba's office, and towered over the Good Ole Boy, dripping saliva. Everywhere inside, Raimundo had to hunch over, and still his huge, rough-skinned head scraped paint off ceilings.

"Good morning," Shiba said to the trembling security man.

He had had to wrench the back off his chair to accomodate his tail, and rip out the seats of all his pants. He would be making little adjustments like that for a long time. But he was already used to his new self. The tail apart, his suits still fit him, and he didn't have to worry about the heat or the insects any more.

"An interesting thing about alligators, Mr Visser, did you know that..."

Visser spat blood and teeth. "Can it, Nip!"

The Good Ole Boy was pushed down into a chair by Raimundo's feeble hands. Visser glowered at Shiba, and wiped his bruised face. Raimundo was clumsy by nature, and prone to over-using his teeth and talons.

"Eh, Fatty," Raimundo said, "doncha show no disrespect for the maaan, else maybe yo' cabeza an' my stomach get together for a leetle cha-cha."

The saurian laughed, and flapped an arm.

"Mr Visser, there is no reason why this interview should be unpleasant."

The Good Ole Boy grunted.

"I am no more responsible for my condition than you are for yours. Indeed, if responsibility is to be handed out, you should perhaps step forward to accept it."

Visser fidgeted. He took out a packet of Hi-Tars.

"Kindly refrain from smoking."

Raimundo reached down and lashed the cigarettes out of Visser's hand.

"Don' damage yo' health, Fatty..."

Shiba straightened the files laid out on his desk. He had been making full use of Dr Blaikley's cardkeys.

One of the Suitcase People had been a hacker, and he had got them into the compound's datalink records. Shiba was appalled at how much had been kept from him these past few months. If he had been apprised of the nature and history of Dr Blaikley's project, he might well have done the unthinkable and questioned an order from GenTech central. He certainly wouldn't have come to Florida if he had known what the effects were likely to be. Of course, he was not yet sure how much of the story Dr Blaikley had chosen to share with the corp.

"Your predecessor. Captain Marcus, has been most informative..."

"Freakin' reptile!"

Raimundo growled, and Visser slumped again.

"It seems that you were brought in after Dr Blaikley's first little disaster. A shame. You have done little to prevent the second unfortunate incident..."

"Freakin' mad scientist bitch!"

Shiba was offended by the disloyalty.

"But no. Only now do I fully understand the late doctor's genius. Am I not... improved?"

"You're a freakin' monster, Shiba."

Shiba laughed. "How little you understand. It is a pity that you cannot share my condition..."

Visser blanched.

"I know all about the drugs Dr Blaikley has been giving to you, to make you immune."

Visser looked mutely hostile.

"You should, of course, have shared your supply, shouldn't you?"

Raimundo scratched the wall with his hindleg, leaving five deep clawmarks.

"You should have made sure that I was immune, and the indentees..."

Visser's piggy eyes were open, defiant.

"But you have been profiting from your supplies, haven't you? How many of us are as we are not through Dr Blaikley's designs, but through your greed and carelessness? Oh, I admit that when the changes began, the doctor invariably took advantage of the situation. She never investigated your affairs too closely..."

"She was a cuckoo, Shiba..."

"She was under pressure. After the first outbreak of spontaneous mutation, and the mass escape she must have realized the project was under threat. She stepped up the work. A shame that she died before she realized how well she succeeded."



Shiba stood up, his tail dragging as he walked, and paced the office. Beyond the windows, he could see the Suitcase People basking in the morning sun. How many were there? It was hard to tell. Marcus's group had split up in the swamps. Some had swum towards the coast, others struck south for the Everglades. The rate of change differed from subject to subject. Some evolved naturally, without the need for surgery, but some had been jumped through several stages by Dr Blaikley. It wasn't quite a disease, but it spread from long-term contact among other factors. You had to live in the swamp with the infection in you for at least six months, but when it came upon you the change was quite rapid. Startlingly so, in fact.

"The indentees took a vote, Visser," Shiba said. "They want you and your crew to be weighted down and thrown into the swamp. Some of our reptile brethren think that would be wasteful. They want to... it pains me to say it, but he said it must... they want to eat you."

Visser was sweating. Raimundo chuckled through a thousand teeth. He was whistling "La Bamba."

"What do you want, Shiba?"

"An apology would be nice."

"Sorry."

"Thank you. I appreciate your sincerity."

Shiba nodded, and Raimundo dragged Visser out of the room.

"See yo' later, alligator," Raimundo said.

Shiba smiled, and replied, "after a while, crocodile."

The saurian was surprised he knew the come-back.

"I made a study of American culture at GenTech college in Japan, Raimundo. Bill Haley, Mickey Mouse, Ernest Hemingway. I know all the greats."

"Right onnnn, maaan!" Raimundo made a tiny fist in the air, and shuffled off, the complaining Visser in front of him.

Shiba really had no idea what to do with the Good Ole Boys. He had not yet resolved the question of how to conduct himself, to decide where his loyalties lay. Captain Marcus was confirmed in his old job, replacing Visser as security chief. He had posted guards, and was even supervising the repair of the compound fences. Together with the indentees, many of whom were already showing signs of changing, the Suitcase People were working hard. Some of the indentees had fled into the swamps, but most had stayed. They reasoned that the Suitcase People were at least better company than the Good Ole Boys had been. Shiba was touched that he had always been singled out by the workers for his fair-minded treatment of them and, just as long as he was in charge of the compound, they would elect to stay under his protection. Reuben, a full-jawed Suitcase Person, was their representative, liaising with Shiba and Marcus. The compound was being run more efficiently now that Blaikley and Visser were deposed.

There was a new factor in the area. A group had moved into the abandoned launching site at Cape Canaveral, and Marcus's people had had several clashes with them. Shiba was shown a black-clad corpse. It had been one of a party from the Cape who had ventured inland to hunt down Suitcase

People. The clothes had been unusual, with pegs instead of buttons, no pockets, large stitches. Certain fundamentalist American sects favoured such clothing. Marcus had suggested fortifying the compound against a possible mass attack, and Shiba had authorized the work. He had also organized patrols and sent them out on reconnaissance sweeps through the swampland. He wanted to know the disposition of any hypothetical enemy.

Few of the scientists had survived the attack on the compound. Old scores had been bloodily settled. Shiba had interviewed a lab assistant and a specialist with a tunnel vision knowledge of recombinant DNA and an incredible ignorance about everything else. He had tried to understand Dr Blaikley's idiosyncratic experiment log, written in her own peculiar and profane shorthand, but it was beyond him. Clearly, the death of the scientist did not curtail the experiment. Shiba felt a duty to his employers and to science, not to mention the memory of Mary Louise Blaikley, to continue the collection of data. Any findings would be named after her, he had decided. The Blaikley Effect. The Mary Louise Syndrome.

He would have liked to contact Kyoto and give a full report, but the satellite link radio had been destroyed by an explosion and was beyond repair. He could have used the GenTech intelligence nets to fill him in on the Cape Canaveral situation. But the Suitcase People were on their own until Dr Zarathustra or someone noticed the compound had not been heard from. Then, Shiba would decide whether he owed loyalty to the corp or to his new race. Again, he recited his Blood Banner Oath.

He came to a decision. It would be best all round if Visser were quietly killed without ceremony.

He lashed the intercom buzzer with his tail.

"Marielle," he said to his green-faced secretary, "rustle me up a firing squad, would you?"

He felt hungry.

## XII

Elvis felt different this morning. He had woken up with the music in his head again. It was as strong as it had been in the early days. Before Parker and Seth turned it all bad with B-movies and pep pills.

The Cajuns had listened to him play for over an hour. The words of the songs all came back as if he had sung them the day before, rather than forty years ago. "Blue Suede Shoes," "I Don't Care if the Sun Don't Shine," "Love Me Tender," "Long Tall Sally," "Blue Moon," "Guitar Man," "Good Rockin' Tonight," "Baby, Let's Play House," "Mystery Train," "Remember to Forget," "Lawdy, Miss Clawdy," "Don't Be Cruel," "Poor Boy," "When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again," "Blueberry Hill," "Mean Woman Blues," "Jailhouse Rock," "Crawfish," "Fever," "Are You Lonesome Tonight?," "Love is Strange."

He tried the songs he'd never sung before, just heard over the years. He approximated a few Petya Tcherkassoff numbers, strangled his voice around "Don't Stop the Carnival" — the one Ken Dodd song he could stand — and riffed jokily through Lesley Gore's "It's My Party," taken a shot at the Mothers of Violence's "Tas" and wound up croaking, banging his bleeding fingers against the silver strings as he went through the other Mississippi singer's repertoire. "Crossroads," "Terraplane," "Walking Blues," "Me and the Devil."

The elation that had had the Cajuns dancing now evaporated, leaving only the chill of the encroaching night. Elvis had imagined Robert Johnson himself standing outside the circle of the light, knowing the

hellhound was on his trail, listening to the white boy sing his songs, too bone-weary to react.

When he sang "Me and the Devil," Elvis remembered Mr Seth. He had been a sharp-suited, well-spoken huckster. Now, he was an all-in-black preacher. Elder Nguyen Seth.

It was creepy. That Krokodil and he should have the same Devil. 'Ti-Mouche said he had magic and she had a demon. Something had brought them together.

They had slept in the boat, huddled together under a blanket. At least, he thought Krokodil had slept. He could never be sure.

Once, fighting a dream, he had found himself struggling with her. He had been running through the darkness, trying to keep up with Jesse Garon. She had soothed him like his Mama used to, and quieted him down.

Now, as direct sunlight woke him up, he was alone. His throat was sore, but the real pain was in his fingers. The strings had worn grooves, opened the old wounds.

A hand shot out of the water and grabbed the side of the boat. He made a grab for the Moulinex machine pistol.

A head broke the surface, and Krokodil pulled herself out, naked but not shivering. She towelled herself on the blanket, getting the algae out of her hair.

"You can swim in that muck?"

"I wouldn't advise it for everybody."

"Ain't that the truth."

Dry, she dressed herself. Again, Elvis looked at her body. She looked real. Marie Walton had looked like a cyborg. But Krokodil seemed like a real woman.

"We've got to be on our way. We've waited too long."

Elvis took a hit from the canteen, and swilled the distilled water around his mouth, licking his teeth clean. His tongue was still burned.

Krokodil was checking their weapons. She paused in her task.

"Elvis?"

"Yes?"

She looked at him. "I just wanted to say you sing very well."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"No, I mean it. Your old records don't do you justice. You could have made something of yourself."

"Maybe, maybe not"

There was an early morning fog. It was going to be a hot day. Now, it was pleasantly cool.

"No, really. Why didn't you stay with it?"

He'd been asked that before, but he'd never answered as truly as he did now. "I don't know. Maybe, I wanted to keep a piece of my soul for myself."

"I think I know what you mean. I wasn't always like this. My father... well, you don't want to know about him... it's all ancient history. I'm not even the same person. Not even physically."

She held up her hand, as if trying to look through the skin.

"Durium-laced bones, you know," she said. "And the whole catalogue of doodads. I've got a sponge in my heart that can change the pattern of the beat."

"There's something else, though. Last night, the witch, she said..."

"That I was possessed? Look around you, who isn't?"

"Your soul is all you own, Krokodil. It's worth more than the Devil's hundred dollars."

She smiled. "Is that the going rate?"

"It was for Robert Johnson, they say. A hundred dollars and all the music."

"That sounds like a better deal. All the music."

It really was surprisingly cold. The blanket had been heavy with dew. "Not really."

"But you could have changed the world. You could have been Petya Tcherkassoff."

"Petya Tcherkassoff? Ma'am, you are showing your youth."

"How do you mean?"

"You ain't hardly heard of me, have you?"

"You were very highly recommended. Not many Ops..."

"No, not for the Op Agency, for the music. I don't mean any more to you than, uh, Glenn Miller or Al Jolson?"

"Who?"

"That's what I mean. Who? Lady, without me there wouldn't have been a Petya Tcherkassoff. You know his 'Don't Be Cruel'?"

"Sure. You sang it last night. Pretty well."

"Krokodil, I sang it first. He copied me. Here in the USA, I'm forgotten, but all those Sove musickies

remember. My old records were smuggled into Russia in the '50s. I started the whole thing."

"Come on, now."

"No, really. Once I had this bodyguarding job. A feller called Lennon who came over from England for some UN conference. He's head of their Labour Party. That's the opposition, or something. He ain't got much power or influence or anything, but he's there to speak against the Prime Minister, What's-His-Name Archer. He knew who I was. Back before he was a politician, he used to have all my records. He said that he'd been a musician too. He said that if I hadn't given up, he might have stuck to it despite all the discouragement. But however it turned out, I touched his life. That's a hell of a responsibility, and I ain't sure I really want it. I don't know why it's important I tell you this. I'm just an old man with a trunk full of memories, but you must know that this is the plain truth. I was big, and I walked away from it"

"Why are you telling me? Why is it important?"

"Because of what 'Ti-Mouche said. The thing in you. Don't sell out to it. I had years of that, years of selling out."

"To some crooked manager, sure, but..."

"Seth. He was one of them. He's the Devil, ain't he?"

Krokodil was affected. "Yes. I think he is."

"Damn. I knowed it. I knowed it back in '56 when Colonel Parker took me up to his red-carpeted office and showed me the contracts. I knowed it, I knowed it, I knowed it..."

"You hiring me? It wasn't no accident, was it?"

Krokodil sighed. "No. I don't think so."

"What made you?"

She tried to speak, but found it difficult. "The... the thing in me. It brought me to Memphis. It made me seek you out."

"You don't need a nursemaid. You can take care of yourself. You could have brought your Indian."

"That's true. But I think I need you, Elvis. I don't know what for. It's maddening sometimes. It's not like knowing everything you need to know. You only get little bits and pieces. I keep having visions... waking dreams, whatever... and you were one of them. Hawk tracked you down. He's a dreamwalker, a Navaho witch doctor..."

"These visions, am I... what?... fighting? Dying?"

Krokodil smiled again, a tight and quiet little smile. Her remaining eye twinkled. "No, Elvis. You're singing, playing the guitar. What the hag said last night was true. That's your magic."

"I can't figure this. It's just plumb crazy."

"I've had to live with it since I was seventeen. You can get used to anything."

"You must have had some life, sister."

"Yeah, I must, mustn't I?"

"Well, if it's the Lord's will, I guess we gotta go with it." He looked up at the skies, but only saw a ceiling of fog. "Jesse Garon," he said, "sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't have been better if I'd died, and you'd lived..."

Gently, Krokodil kissed his lips. He put his hand in her hair. She tasted like a real woman. He opened his eye, and saw her patch pressed near his cheek. They clung to each other, trying to shake off the fear.

She pushed him away, alert. She had sensed something. The Moulinex was in her hand, her thumb on the safety. The boat rocked gently. Elvis put out a hand to steady himself.

A figure slipped out of the mists. It was 'Ti-Mouche, her face newly painted. She was carrying the guitar Elvis had played last night.

The witch woman looked at the pair in the boat Krokodil returned her gaze confidently, refusing to be spooked.

Elvis wondered about the demon inside his employer. Whatever it was, he couldn't imagine it being worse than the things that had inhabited Donny and Marie Walton. And he knew there were worse things ahead, at the Cape.

'Ti-Mouche knelt by the water's edge and gave him the instrument.

"Cadeaux," she said, "a present."

"Thank you kindly ma'am, thank you."

He laid the guitar on his lap, feeling the music vibrating sub-audially through the wood and wire.

"Sorciere, use the magic..."

She stepped back into the fog, and became indistinct. Elvis had the impression she was not alone. A manshape stood by her, and he recognized the dreamshadow of himself he knew to be Jesse Garon.

"Elvis," said Krokodil, "what is it?"

"A ghost, ma'am."

"There are lots of ghosts here, you know that."

"Yes."

He ran his fingers across the strings. The chords rung in the air, dissipating in the mists.

The figures—'Ti-Mouche and Jesse Garon—were gone. The chill was being burned off the swamp.

The sun broke through.

### XIII

Simone knew that the mad old man could see the ghosts too. They were the spirits of all the astronauts who had died in space, or on the ground, or under the sea. They were the original sacrifices that had given the space program its brief burst of power. Now, Roger was recharging the voodoo batteries. She understood more than she told. Her aunt had been the mama-loa of the community. She knew all about the spilling of blood, the making of images, the establishment of power.

She wondered if she should tell Roger about the ghosts. She owed him something for taking her out of New Orleans. She was still a 'denty, but now she was a 'denty in three-hundred-dollar dresses, and treated like the First Lady.

The Josephites didn't approve her. She didn't mind that, but she would have to make sure it didn't get in the way. If she paraded herself too much, even Roger couldn't protect her. She knew how small she was in whatever Grand Design was being worked out here at the Cape.

For the most part, while Roger and the mad old man were working in the bunker, she was left to her own devices.

She didn't dare wander too far. The patrols reported that there were a lot of the Suitcase People beyond the perimeter. One of the parties hadn't come back. She was fascinated by the creatures who had been captured and sacrificed. If you looked at them from certain angles, you could see only the reptile. But then, if you shifted your head, you could see the person they had been.

Her life had changed a lot since she hit on Roger in Fat Pierre's. But she was still a 'denty, still a slave.

Her great-great-great grandparents had mainly been slaves, she knew, and now she was following in the tradition. American history seemed to have hit a peak in 1930, and now it was rolling backwards. Eventually, everyone should pack up and set sail on the Mayflower for Plymouth. Or the slave ship for Africa.

The shift changed in the bunker, and Roger came up with the morning crew. She could tell from his face that they hadn't got the Needlepoint System working yet. She had only a vague notion about the System, but she gathered it was a way of channelling the lightning, to smite from above like God.

The black-clad Josephites trooped off in a glum bunch towards the chapel to pray for the success of the project. Roger saw her, and trotted over, trying to smile. He really was quite handsome in a foreign, whitey sort of way.

He kissed her on the lips, and she responded professionally. He used her two or three times a day, always carefully. It wasn't unpleasant.

Without telling her how the work was going, he walked her to the bungalow.

There was a stick figure, oxygen mask welded to its skull, standing by the bungalow. It waved at her, and she shuddered...



"What is it, Simone?"

She couldn't tell him. She couldn't risk being rejected just yet.

"Someone walked over my grave."

The dead astronaut leaned against the whitewashed wall, depressed at failing to make contact. It had a bulky pack burned to its back, and thick, blackened boots. It was still smoking.

Inside the bungalow, Simone took off her dress and lay on the bed.

Roger paused. She said nothing, neither inviting nor forbidding. It was safest to remain neutral. Some of them liked to think you loved it, loved them; others needed your hatred, your resentment, your disgust. She hadn't worked Roger Duroc out yet. She probably never would. He was too cool.

He pulled off his shirt. She had never worked out how old he was, but his body was hard, tough. He had scars, but didn't appear to have any bio-implants.

He bent over her, and stuck his tongue in her tiny navel, pulling at her panties. She ran a hand through his hair, and thought of the ghosts. They were converging on the place.

There were more of them now than there had been when they arrived.

Roger was on the bed with her now, his hands kneading away, his mouth pressing on hers. She moaned ambiguously.

The Suitcase People were more active, too. Everyone knew things were coming to a head.

She gasped as they joined.

On the opposite wall was a framed religious picture. Elder Seth entering Salt Lake City at the head of his multitude. Simone loathed it, but couldn't understand why. It was something about the Elder's thin face and beetle-black glasses.

Roger was finished. They broke apart and lay still for a minute. Sweat dried on her body. She listened to the whirring of the fan, and the beating of her own heart.

Roger sprang off the bed, and walked into the bathroom. He always showered afterwards. He was as clean about himself as he was about his precious weapons.

Simone opened the wardrobe, and picked a dress she had never worn before. They had gone mad with cashplastic in the New Orleans boutiques. She chose a violent orange-and-turquoise sheath, with a matching headscarf. With barely enough material for a pillowcase, the dress had cost more than a contract killing.

The phone rang. She picked it up.

"Elder Duroc's bungalow," she said.

"Get him," snapped a voice. Simone recognized Sister Bethany Addams, and felt the hostility oozing

over the line.

"I'll see if he's available. Roger..."

She held out the phone.

Dressing as he talked, Roger propped the phone between shoulder and cheek.

"Fine," he said, ending the conversation.

Simone had poured out some iced tea.

"They're nearly ready for another test-run," he said. "Fonvielle says he's sure."

Roger took a deep swig of his tea.

"I don't know, Simone. I think he's cracked. This is a bad business."

She was not required to say anything.

"And the Suitcase People are swarming out there. I'm having some heavy firepower imported. We need to get those lizards flushed out."

Simone agreed with that.

"I've got hunter-killer teams out there, but we can't divert enough personnel."

"It's bad gris-gris," she said.

He knew what she meant.

"Yes, that's it exactly."

He set his hat on his head, and left her.

She spilled a little tea on her chest, and let the cold soak through the dress, enjoying the sensation...

Po' little 'denty, she thought.

#### XIV

They were making good progress. The guitar sat in the stern, and Elvis imagined it was singing at him, reprimanding him like a long-neglected lover.

Krokodil was different today. She would never be communicative, but by comparison with her previous form, she was almost chatty, almost nervous. It was nice to know that she had human parts, but also a little frightening. He conceded that there was something attractive in the idea of putting all your trust in a cyborg fighting machine while staying in the bushes and laying down cover fire. He could see the gang-girl coming through now.

She told him things in bits and pieces. She told him about her meeting with Elder Seth, and the spectacles that had changed the way she saw the world.\* She told him that she had spent time wandering in the desert, living like an animal, barely clinging to her sanity. And then she had been worked over by Dr Simon Threadneedle, a world-class bio-surgeon who had made her the Frankensteinian thing she was. After that, there had been many battles, many casualties. Armies had been sent for her, and formidable assassins. She had remade herself spiritually, she said, with the help of Hawk-That-Settles and a channel had been opened up to the beyond, through which had come a powerful manitou that had nestled inside her. It was dormant now, but it could be summoned up. There had been a monster at Santa de Nogueira, a monster she was unable to describe. It had been vast and devastating, and it was banished now, by the slightest of miracles.\*\* Elder Seth had been around for centuries, and sometimes they spoke inside each other's heads. He had to get rid of her, and she had to stop him before he ended the world.

\*See "Route 666" in the Route 666 anthology.

\*\* See Krokodil Tears.

In a way, Elvis wished he didn't know all this. He had seen enough to make him believe her, but he wished it were three weeks ago and all he had to worry about was the Good Ole Boys trying to yank his license or coming home some night to find a hoodhead bomb rigged inside his fridge.

"One thing, lady?"

"What?"

"That million dollars? It ain't enough."

Krokodil laughed. "You want more. Ten million? We've got it. Gold bullion, cashplastic, jewels, negotiable information..."

"How did you get it?"

"I'm Frankenstein's Daughter, remember? Hawk and I stole it from corp convoys. GenTech and Winter can spare it. After all, it's in a good cause."

"I suppose so, if saving the world is a good cause."

"Don't think I haven't thought about it."

They were winding between islands, not pushing the boat too much. Elvis had been aware for an hour or so that there were creatures out there in the swamp. They might be human, they might not. They didn't want to be seen, and that meant he didn't want to see them. Last night, the Cajuns had told him about the babies lost to the local spooks, the Suitcase People.

"Maybe the Prezz will drop all the charges if you pull it off."

"No chance. I don't expect gratitude."

"What do you expect?"

"Honestly? To be dead."

"But what if you come through?"

"Then I just want peace and quiet."

A roaring split the air, and the boat started rocking violently. The waters up ahead broke and a huge head loomed out of the swamp, mud pouring from its mouth.

It was a dinosaur with a headband.

Krokodil had the Moulinex up, but something struck the bottom of the boat. The gun went off, bullets spraying the cypresses.

The dinosaur strode forwards. It was smarter than an animal.

Krokodil was off-balance. Elvis reached out, but she went over, splashing as she hit the swamp.

Green arms went around her, and she was dragged under.

"Hey," the dinosaur said, "leettle maan, behave, okeh?"

Elvis was trying not to be tipped out of the wildly shifting boat. He didn't make it.

"I tol' you so, maaan."

He was struggling in the filthy water with something rough-skinned and cold.

He was pulled under, and took a lungful of ghastly-tasting liquid. He fought for the surface and tried to cough it all out. Clawed hands held him fast.

He elbowed his assailant where the kidneys would have been if he were a man, and was rewarded with a satisfying grunt of pain.

Jaws snapped by his head and, holding his breath, he dived under the water.

He had lost track of Krokodil.

There was gunfire. He recognized the distinctive burp of the Moulinex, even distorted by the water. Krokodil was up and fighting.

He tried to find bottom, and just found the swamp getting thicker. His lungs were straining now, and he could only see blurred shapes in the murk.

"Where ees the maan, Frankie?"

Frankie growled in answer. He didn't know.

Elvis kicked, and swam away from the shapes. He would have to surface soon, or die.

He pushed upwards, exhaling steadily. His head above the water, he breamed again.

He could hear the Suitcase People, but not see them. They made a lot of noise as they crashed through the swamp.

Something took a bite out of the flesh of his arm, and he swallowed a yelp of pain.

He turned, his knife drawn, and stabbed out. He was worried that he'd have to face another one of the man monsters.

The knife speared a trilobite against the bole of a tree. The big louse wriggled and died.

"Prehistoric bastard," he whispered, pulling his knife free.

There wasn't any more gunfire. Had Krokodil got away?

He wanted to get some solid, dry-ish soil under him. He pulled on the lower branches of the tree, and found himself an island.

The mud dried on his pants and jacket. He hated looking and feeling like this. He had been dirty enough as a kid, always running around in ragged blue jeans. He wished he had left all that behind.

Something moved in the water, and Elvis gripped his knife-hilt harder.

It bobbed into view, and he let out his breath. He fished the guitar out of the swamp. It didn't even have any water in it.

He cradled the instrument in his lap like a baby. It was silly, but he felt better with 'Ti-Mouche's gift.

A huge shadow fell over him.

"Hey, Guitar Maaan, how about givin' us a song?"

### PART THREE: ALL MY TRIALS

I

Jay-Zeuss, Mary and Joseph, Lola Stechkin thought, this Gavin Mantle character is an A-One A-Hole! She wished she was in Greater Rhodesia with the serious newshawks, covering the Taabazimbi disaster. That had been some fry-up, a fireball enveloping the town where the Broederbond were holding a mass rally to commemorate the Battle of Blood River. This was peanuts.

"It's like this, Lola-baby," Mantle sleazed, scratching his ballooning gut with an American Excess goldcard, "I figure it's not right to take the two kids out of their school and their old neighbourhood. I have to think this whole thing out, you know sweetbutt. 'Cause I don't want them to grow up with a warped sense of values because they're rich, y'know. So I figure Tish and Reggie can stay with their mommy. I'll still see them on weekends and National Holidays, but, you know, my lifestyle now is, like, very alien to what they have come to expect. So, like I said, I thought the fairest thing was to leave them

out of it..."

Gavin Mantle was floating on an aircushion in his private swimming pool. He was wearing immodest Ballsac swimtrunks that showed off the first of the GenTech-financed bio-amendments he had demanded. She understood that his initial request had been anatomically unfeasible.

The bottom of the doughnut-shaped pool was scattered with gems, inset into the concrete. They sparkled as the sunlight filtered down to them. Tropical fish swam between the beams, perpetually high from the trace stimulants the household system pumped into the water.

She focused on the autoprompt chip in her contact lens, and moved onto the next question.

"And what about Clodagh, Gavin?"

Mantle made a great show of sighing with regret as he poured himself a tureen-sized cocktail of creme de menthe, zooper-blast, Shochaiku Double-Blend, Beluga caviar and Sta-Hard drops.

"Clodagh doesn't understand the demands that wealth visits upon you, Lola-honey," he winked. "She's moved back in with her mother."

One of Mantle's sexclones swam past in a lazy backstroke, her lithe body breaking the surface of the vitamin-enriched water, her unwieldy breasts floating like cherry-topped islands. The sexclones were vat-grown human bodies, perfect in every detail, but with artificially limited brains. The rumour was that they used hormone-dosed rabbit's cerebella for the most successful models. Lola, who had never wanted for willing sexual partners, found the whole notion of screwing a flesh-product nauseating, and she was especially disturbed whenever she encountered one of the creatures encoded with her own genetic structure. Mantle, of course, had ordered one of those. She wished now she hadn't licensed her likeness, but the corp had offered her an enormous commission.

The Lola sexclone was on the patio now, switched off. Lola wondered if her revulsion for the thing had anything to do with the fact that it was modelled on her as she had been five years ago. She dreaded the day they thought one could anchor the show better than her. At twenty-two, she was already one of the oldest newscastresses on the networks.

"So, I reckon it's my duty to all those millions out there to live out all their fantasies of enormous wealth..."

Lola knew that the camcrew were getting everything on tape. Behind Mantle they could see the newbuilt villa. It was rounded and pink, almost obscene, and used only the most expensive materials. A forest of satellite dishes rose from one roof, tuned to receive input from every broadcasting system in the world. Imported ocelots gambolled on the crazy-croquet lawn. The custom-built phallic Rolls Royce was ostentatiously parked in the driveway, its gold filigree gleaming as a muscle implant Adonis polished the glans-shaped hood with creamy white cleanser.

Mantle poured the potentially lethal dosage of intoxicants into his face. Fluid poured over his chest, soaking through his gold-thread T-shirt. It bore the legend in psychedelic silver, "WORLD MUFF DIVING CHAMPIONSHIPS, HABANA, CUBA, 1997." It was probably the most expensive dirty joke in the world. Mantle swallowed, and his eyes started to float. His system had been amended to take care of any side-effects. He could mainline napalm or snort ground glass without getting so much as a slight hangover. However, his body chemistry was being permanently changed; if he urinated on the grass, he would kill it.

"Lola, darlin'," he said, "you know, a guy like me and a gal like you... maybe we ought to get together after the interview..."

His swimming trunks writhed as if he had a rattlesnake down there.

Ick!

The camcrew were getting all this down. The Evening News would be leading off on The Gavin Mantle Story all week. Everything else they had to cover was depressing, and so the producer wanted at least one "up" item between the wars, assassinations, plagues, and famines. Lola was beginning to feel nostalgic about Dino the Skateboarding Duck.

Since he received his one hundred million, Gavin Mantle had been living in the fastest of the fast lanes. The camcrew had followed him through the orgiastic party at which he demonstrated his bio-amendments for the first time, and got enough footage for the X-rated news shows. From a man whose entire life was devoted to kitchenware, he had turned into the kind of sybarite whose party guest list is composed in equal parts of exotic hookers, high-price drug dealers, minor soap-opera stars, third world politicians, over-the-hill Sanctioned Ops pretending to be "security consultants," this week's "in" criminals, religious fanatics, circus performers, lawyers, parasites, gossip columnists, obscure offshoots of forgotten Royal families, ex-Presidents and quack doctors of various specialisms.

There had been fifteen of these Blotto Lotto give-aways in the past five years. Three of the winners were still alive, and one of them was in a shock-trauma coma surrounded by the best medtech money could own.

Mantle was getting bored with the interview, Lola could tell. His implant glands were shooting a recipe of amphetamine, testosterone and adrenalin into his blood. He would have to get back to the party before, like the winner before last, his head and scrotum simply swelled until they burst. The small print of the winner's contract stated that if the Blotto Lotto superluck champion were to die within a year of receiving the prize, the unspent portion of the cash, plus all of the assets purchased with the windfall, would revert to the GenTech subsidiary that organized the contest. It was incredible, when you came to study the figures, how difficult it was for the unimaginative to fritter away a hundred million dollars.

The last question flashed in Lola's eye.

"And how did it feel to win the Blotto Lotto?"

"Well," he grinned with his new Rod Rambone teeth, "it was kinda a lot like sex, y'know. I was watchin' the teevee like usual, waitin' for My Pal, the Biosurgeon to come on. I love that show. Nurse Nookie is such a fox, don't you think? I wonder when she and Doctor Bob will get it on. Anyway, I wasn't really watchin' Blotto the Clown as he was openin' the envelope from RaLPPH, but out of the corner of my ear I hear somethin'. At first, I don't believe I'm hearin' it. Like, y'know, I thought it was Clodagh yellin' my name from the kitchen. Only she never uses my full name. You know, 'Gavin Mantle.' She usually calls me 'Big Stud,' for reasons which are pretty damn obvious. Anyway, I couldn't believe it when it sank in. There was like this earthquake, and it was like suddenly..."

Lola sneaked a look at her wristwatch. This was boring crappo, and she'd ream the producer's ass when she got back to the studio.

"It was like a bolt from the sky, y'know, and then, WHAM-BAM-ZAPPO, like..."



As she nodded, Lola imagined a flash of light.

And there was a pile of smoking ashes on the air cushion, which was hissing as it sank into the pool.

II

"Elvis? Elvis Presley?"

The 'gator man couldn't believe it.

"'All Shook Up'? 'Hound Dog'? 'Heartbreak Hotel'? That Elvis Presley?"

The Op nodded. "Uh huh, sir."

"'Baby, I Don't Care'? 'A Big Hunk o' Love'? 'The Girl of My Best Friend'?"

Hiroshi Shiba was an unnervingly strange creature. His extended snout was that of a swamp 'gator and his grey tail hung down from his black pants, but otherwise he was every inch the perfect Japcorp exec. He wore a sober suit, with a white shirt and a discreetly striped tie. His English was perfect as far as syntax and vocabulary went, but his accent was heavily Japanese and even more heavily alligator. Elvis couldn't help liking the mutant.

Elvis stood quietly, no longer even surprised at the latest off-the-wall twist this gig was taking.

Shiba paced his office, tail lashing, a hungry grin showing in his snout. The handkerchief in his top pocket was folded into a perfect triple point, and he wore emblems of his company and national decorations in a medal ribbon.

"'King Creole'? 'Blue Christmas'? 'Teddy Bear'?"

Elvis always had been popular in Japan. He still got the odd royalty cheque, although most of the money seemed to trickle towards Colonel Parker. There were a few odd little clauses in the original contracts Elvis had not bothered to read back in the '50s, and he was still paying heavily for them.

"This is a great honour," said Shiba, clapping. "A great honour."

Raimundo Rex, the hispanic dinosaur, was less impressed. He was picking his teeth with a breadknife, dislodging fragments of food. Elvis didn't want to know what they had been before they became a meal. The big mutant was practically wild.

The guitar 'Ti-Mouche had given him was on Shiba's neatly-ordered desk, along with his other personal possessions. Money, guns and documentation.

The creature's grin glistened. "'Dirty, Dirty Girl'? 'Your Cheatin' Heart'? 'Blue Suede Shoes'?"

Elvis looked down at his swamp-smearred boots. The mud had dried and fallen off, but he was still dusty. He was feeling light-headed from swamp gas.

The Suitcase People weren't turning out to be the monsters he'd expected. In fact, some of them were proving downright hospitable.

"Get Mr Presley some food, Reuben," Shiba told a black-skinned reptile indentee. "And anything else he wants."

The exec hummed "Tutti Frutti," and laughed. His yellow eyes gleamed, blinking.

"Uh, excuse me, sir... ?"

"Yes, Mr Presley?"

Shiba bowed honourably, displaying the bony ridges that had risen from his scalp.

"Uh, I don't like to ask, but, uh... well... am I a prisoner?"

Raimundo snarled, tiny nostrils flaring, huge jaws grinding. Obviously, dinosaurs didn't dig rock 'n' roll.

Shiba lashed his tail airily. "Oh, no. Much misunderstanding. Most regrettable. We mistook you for some other parties. Enemies have been attacking. Hunting platoons comb the swamps. They come from the coast. From Cape Canaveral."

"The Josephites?"

"Even so. How do you know?"

Elvis wondered if he could recruit any help here. He had the impression that, without Krokodil, he might well need it.

"My friend. The girl you lost in the swamp..."

Raimundo snapped the blade in his mouth and did his best to pout sullenly. It didn't look right on him. His face was too big for such petty expressions to register.

"... we were heading for the Cape. She had business there. The Josephites are our enemies too."

Shiba was delighted. "Good. Of course. They are crazy people."

"Los locos," Raimundo agreed, spitting a fist-sized green ball at the floor.

Elvis wished he knew exactly what Krokodil had wanted to do at the Cape. She had more or less admitted that her salvage story was a cover, but she hadn't confided fully in him. He knew that he had some part in the game that was being played out, but he wished someone had bothered to explain it properly to him.

"They are dangerous," he agreed. "Some of them ain't human."

He realized immediately that hadn't been a tactful thing to say, but Shiba took no offence. Elvis wondered if the Japanese quite realized what had happened to him.

"You are free to go any time, Mr Presley," said Shiba. "Although we should like you to stay and enjoy

our hospitality." He laid a scaly hand on the guitar, twanging a chord. "Of course, if you would care to perform for us, it would be most appreciated..."

Elvis had played some strange shows before, back in the barroom and hootenanny days. But this would be the living end. He picked up the guitar and strummed a few chords. Shiba's mouth stretched into a toothy smile. Elvis sang the first few lines of "Mystery Train"...

"Train I riiiiide... sixteen coaches long... train I riiiiide..."

The music took over, and his fingers found the notes. The words reemerged from the void in his memory into which he had cast them forty years earlier, and meant something to him. He sang about loneliness, desolation and the darkness at the end of the track. The long black train sped from nowhere to nowhere, carrying him along with it. The words of the song were vague. He remembered an argument in the old studio, about whether the mystery train was reuniting the singer with his girl, or speeding her away from him. He had always sung the song neutrally, but there was a persistent despair that crept in. He imagined Colonel Parker in a Casey Jones hat pulling on the whistle, Mr Seth leering like a skull as he wandered through the carriages punching tickets for dead men... and he saw Krokodil standing on the observation platform, waving to him as the mystery train vanished into the tunnel that fed into the depths of the earth and never rose again to daylight.

He finished his song, and said, "I should find my friend."

Shiba clapped, alligator tears on his creased green cheeks. Raimundo snorted steam. Elvis put down the guitar, and the music receded inside him. He remembered 'Ti-Mouche's suggestion that the music was his magic, his source of power. He wondered how he could harness it.

"A thousand apologies for the way you have been treated."

Elvis felt sorry for the humble creature. "That's okay, sir. I understand. You can't be too careful, what with some of the things wandering the swamps these days."

"Indeed, indeed..."

Shiba's intercom buzzed.

"Mr Assistant Director," a voice crackled, "the East perimeter fence has been breached."

Elvis heard gunfire outside.

"This is what I had feared."

Shiba nodded to Raimundo, who charged out of the room, his massive thighs pounding the shaking floor. Elvis had to hang onto a filing cabinet to stay upright. Reuben unlocked a cabinet, and started pulling out automatic weapons.

A klaxon sounded like a hellhound's whine.

"I apologize for this inconvenience," Shiba said to Elvis. Then, to the intercom, "Marielle, scramble the defence squads."

The gunfire was louder, and there were shouts. Through the office window, Elvis could see Suitcase

People running towards the break in the fence. Some of them had guns, but others were just armed with the knives in their mouths and on their fingers. A human-eyed pterodactyl flapped past, flying low on leathery wings.

The window shattered, and Elvis ducked to avoid flying glass.

Outside, in the compound, an armoured transport was rolling across the field. Suitcase People were trying to resist a force of well-drilled soldiers in combat fatigues and black hats. Elvis recognized the adherents of the Church of Joseph. The pterodactyl dipped a beak in a Josephite's chest, but was cut to pieces by a chaingun.

The Moulinex was at the bottom of the swamp, but Elvis had had his side-arms when Raimundo brought him in. He picked up the fully-loaded Python from the desk, and cocked it. Shiba was slithering on all fours.

A grapefruit-sized object came through the window, bounced off the desk and skittered on the floor. Unconsciously counting the seconds, Elvis reached for it, but Shiba was there first. The exec took the grenade in his jaws and tossed it back.

It exploded in the air outside, blowing in the wall of the prefab hut, and filling the room with fragments of plasterboard and wallpaper.

Gunfire poured into the office, scarring the opposite wall.

Papers flew. Reuben was shoved back against the bulletmarks, bloody holes stitched across his chest.

"Reuben," shouted Shiba, scuttling towards the indentee.

The old man's lungs weren't working. Bloody froth leaked from his mouth. Shiba tried to press his paws to the indentee's wounds, but wasn't coordinated enough to do it properly. It would have been no use anyway. The man-thing was dead.

A figure came through the smoke, gun cradled in his hands, and checked the place out for resistance.

The Josephite saw Shiba and Reuben before Elvis, and took aim on the 'gator man's head.

Elvis got off a shot that tore through the Josephite's shoulder, spinning him around. He fired a burst into the ceiling. His hat came off as he steadied himself and brought the machine gun up again.

Elvis went for the head shot, but knew it wouldn't do any good.

The Josephite was Donny Walton. Another one. Blonde and smiling, he had a hole in the middle of his face where his nose had been. He shook his head as if to get the ringing out of his ears and aimed the gun. He pulled back the catch, setting his weapon on single-fire. He was going to take out Elvis and Shiba like a surgeon performing an operation.

Donny Walton pointed the gun at Elvis, and pulled the trigger...

She swam through the thick mud, reverting to her animal self. The Ancient Adversary was stirring inside, ascending within her mind. She was near the Cape, and would have to go on, with or without Colonel Presley. She was sure he would make his own way. Their twinned destiny had yet to be fulfilled. They would come together again.

As the Adversary grew, so did her awareness of Nguyen Seth. The Elder was trying to shield himself from her, to shut her out. But he was thinking of a ring around the Earth. That had something to do with the Cape. He was in Salt Lake City, but his catspaws were out there at the launchpad.

He had to be stopped.

Krokodil surfaced, and wiped the mud from her face.

She was in a quiet lagoon, alone with an old friend.

The fates were drawing her close again. The pink Cadillac was half-grounded on an island, its bodywork streaked with dried mud.

She waded ashore, and looked through the windscreen. An old man, his face wrinkled and scaled, was asleep in the driver's seat, a half-full bottle open against his belly, sloshing moonshine into his lap. It must be the porch-sitter from Donny and Marie's Deathtrap Diner.

Elvis had given her the emergency override entry code for the car door. She opened the keyboard hatch under the doorhandle, and tapped in the number sequence.

The door opened outwards, and a waft of alcoholic reptile body-odour hit her. The drunk grumbled, and made a grab for the jug. It tumbled out of the car and rolled into the swamp.

"Out," she said sharply. "No arguments, Pops."

She took him by the arm, and pulled. He came free and staggered into the sunlight, blinking sideways. As the light hit him, he started screeching. Obviously, the mutation was rendering him abnormally photo-sensitive.

He plunged into the water and immersed himself, leaving only his eyes above the surface. The jug bobbed against his head, and he pulled it down, presumably making a suck for the last of the liquor.

The joyrider hadn't done any harm to the Cadillac when he ran it aground. Krokodil initiated a complete systems check, just to be on the safe side. The car cleared itself.

She braced herself and got a grip on the front bumper. She lifted the three-ton car and eased it off the island and into the water. Dr Threadneedle's augmented muscles did their job.

The joyrider was gone now. Krokodil wondered who he was, and what he was turning into, but she had no time to go into that.

She stripped off her Filthy pyjamas, and washed with non-potable water from the Cadillac's tanks. She found a leech attached under her ribs, and pulled it off. Its teeth hadn't quite penetrated her skin, but it did leave a red suckermark. She hadn't even felt the thing.

She only had one outfit left, a black, green and brown camouflage danskin catsuit. She pulled on jungle boots and a padded vest over it, and then strapped herself into the holster harness. The guns and knives balanced her perfectly.

Ready for everything, she towelled the stinking booze off the driver's seat and dash left greyish stains etched into the tough pink leather, so God alone knew what it did to your stomach and hand slipped into the car.

She was reaching for the ignition keyboard when the brainstorm hit her...

She was sucked back through her life. In the Denver NoGo, Bruno Bonney, her Dad, thrashed wildly with his willow switch, spittle falling from his mouth. Somewhere on the road, Andrew Jean embraced her, long tongue poking into her month, pressing the zooper-blast ampoule against the roof of her mouth as it exploded. Andrew Jean dissolved into Dr Threadneedle, his face burned off his metallic skull, then into Hawk-That-Settles, singing his song of death, and then into Colonel Presley, singing "One Night With You." Through her one eye, she saw the world Nguyen Seth perceived, thick with hidden wonders and horrors. In Spanish Fork, she saw demons dance bloodily in the air as the preacher's spectacles fell from her face. She felt her face pounded against the hard tarmac, blood spattering around her. In the Katz Motel, she faced the risen corpse of a murderer's mother, and felt her mind fleeing. In the desert, she chased lizards for food and took on a Miss America contestant in a swimwear single combat. Miss America's face was superimposed over Mrs Katz's rotten skull, and was displaced by others. A preening prettyboy Op hiding in his machine while she killed her way towards him. Dr Ottokar Proctor, the erudite monster, smiling as the cartoon Tasmanian Devil displaced his features. Then, in its terrible grandeur, the Jibbenainosay blossomed, blotting out the sky, calling a challenge to the being cocooned inside her. She did not know which frightened her more, the monster on the outside, or the thing that expanded to fill her mind and body...

Krokodil gripped the wheel, and tried to clear her mind of the unwanted images. Her entire body shook.

Remembering Hawk's tutoring, she centered herself, trying to make her mind the calm eye of the raging hurricane.

Elder Seth appeared in the centre of the Jibbenainosay, eyes blank. He was waiting for her to kill him, she knew.

She remembered her other selves. Jessamyn Bonney. Jazzbeaux. Jesse Frankenstein's Daughter. They came to her, and melded with her current person.

Krokodil.

She was Krokodil.

She started up the motor, and did a three-point turn in the lagoon. Cape Canaveral was almost directly due East.

The Cadillac knifed through the swampwater, leaving nothing behind but a wake.

Raimundo's jaws closed over the Donny, snapping him off half-way down his torso. The dinosaur worried at the Josephite until the mouthful came loose, and Donny's lower body fell, twitching, to the floor.

"Heyyy, homes," said Raimundo between swallows, "chewy-chewy, maaaann!"

"Watch out," Elvis said. "He's not out of it yet."

Donny's body got up. One arm was still attached by a strand and a joint, and the fist convulsed, discharging the gun. A bullet whined against the blades of the ceiling fan.

Raimundo nudged the headless Josephite, knocking him down, and put a three-taloned foot on the wriggling thing. The dinosaur put all his weight on one leg, and Donny squished apart.

Josephites appeared behind Raimundo. Elvis head-shot two, and they went down. They weren't all Waltons, thank the Lord.

Raimundo stumped off into the thick of battle, stray bullets flattening against his hide.

Elvis and Shiba dashed out of the wrecked office. Shiba chewed the ankles of a Marie Walton, wrenching her leg off. Elvis fired his remaining shots at the armoured transport, and paused to reload. The battle seemed to be turning in their favour.

Raimundo loomed over the transport. Its tower was swivelling, trying to bring a chaingun to bear. The dinosaur ripped the thing free and, its magazine flapping, pointed it down into the interior of the transport. He got a talon into the manual trigger-guard, and fired it. Empty cartridges clattered against the armourplate, and the interior of the transport rang with resounding ricochets and cries of pain.

The Suitcase People were coming out ahead. The Josephites hadn't sent a large enough force on this strike.

Shiba had been stabbed in the tail by a Marie, but was chewing on a writhing arm. He was ripping the creature apart. The head was babbling adspeak, endorsing the latest oven cleanser, while the fingers of her remaining hand crawled towards Shiba's left eye. Elvis grabbed the wrist, and bent it back. Shiba, through a mouthful, said thanks.

A Josephite with his hands up shouted, "I surrender, I surrender," his hat falling from his head. He was a young kid; one of the clear-eyed idealists who wanted a miracle, Elvis supposed. A Donny Walton twisted the boy's head around on his shoulders, and was torn apart by gunfire. He staggered forwards, his face still a smiling blank, and collapsed like a marionette.

Krokodil had said the Waltons were clones, but Elvis wasn't sure. All the sex- and labourclones Elvis had met revealed a total lack of personality. While the Waltons were walking stereotypes, there was a tenaciousness and cunning about them that suggested a nasty intelligence. He was reminded of soldier ants, those insects who move in a huge, hungry mass, seemingly governed by one guiding group mind.

A half-Marie advanced rapidly on its hands, and was hosed down with fire by an indentee humping a flamethrower. The thing screeched and burned, the lacquered hair crumpling in an instant. Elvis shot into the fireball until it wasn't moving any more.

Raimundo was howling with victory, his huge throat open wide enough to swallow a sheep whole. An



iguana-faced soldier gave him a high-five slap, and they bumped asses in a little dance. The dinosaur's steps made the ground shake.

"Yo, homes," Raimundo shouted, "we don' real goooooood!"

Shiba was bipedal again. The smoke cleared. There were dead Josephites all over the compound, and not a few indentees and Suitcase People.

A tear leaked from Shiba's 'gator eye.

"A waste," he said. "Regrettable. The next time, we shall not be so unprepared. I shall see to it."

A lizardman in fatigues walked across, limping slightly, a bloodied pad pressed to a neck wound. He saluted. Elvis recognized Captain Tip Marcus, the security chief he had met earlier.

"I accept full responsibility, Mr Shiba. I should have posted more people in the swamp. You may have my bars..."

Shiba shook his snout. "No. You did what you could with your resources. I am the one who should have foreseen all this."

They could have continued their polite argument, each trying to grab the lion's share of the blame, but there was a distraction.

A Donny crawled out of the transport, broken by Raimundo's random fire, but still in one piece. He hissed, hands turned to claws, and fell off the ve-hickle. Raimundo stomped on him, and he stopped moving. The mess stamped into the dirt spilled recognizable organs, but there wasn't much blood. Krokodil had been right. The combat fatigues were torn enough to disclose a featureless tailor's dummy of a body, without nipples or genitalia.

"Frankie, skin me op, maaan!" the dinosaur shouted.

The iguana soldier pulled a reefer the size of a man's arm out of a haversack and gave it to Raimundo.

"Yow, incredibly gen'rous, homes!"

Raimundo stuck the spliff into his maw, and leaned towards a patch of burning wall that had been spattered by a phosphor grenade. The dinosaur sucked in marijuana smoke, and his eyeballs rolled.

"This ees great shit, maaaaan!"

The dinosaur's chest inflated, stretching his ragged T-shirt to its seams. Then, Raimundo shot ten-foot spurts of smoke from his nostrils.

The whole compound was going to wind up stinking of whoopee weed at this rate.

"Ramirez," snapped Marcus. "Remember... discipline!"

Raimundo waved a claw, and took another prehistoric toke. "Yo, homes. Discipline an' shit, maaan! We don' stomped os some righteous Black Hat bad-ass! Call os the kiiings of the jungle!"

A petite, veiled woman with green arms came up. It was Marielle, Shiba's assistant-cum-secretary. She had a provisional damage and casualty report.

"This is unfortunate," Shiba said, looking at the figures. "We shall have to work hard."

The woman scuttled away, head down.

"We should hit them, maaan! Hit them hard so they don't never forget. The Suitcase People rule the swamp. This is our territory, and don't no one gonna freak with us!"

Raimundo wiped his enormous head with his hands, as if slicking back the hair he didn't have any more. Marcus was nodding.

"He's right, Mr Shiba. We should go on the offensive. I've got some intelligence reports from the Cape. They're up to something. This assault force was below strength because they need all their personnel. We should strike now, while they're preoccupied."

Shiba hung his snout thoughtfully.

"How many people can we put in the field?"

Marcus was eager. "Enough. If we make a strike, we can call in all the non-aligneds out in the swamp. The Josephites haven't been discriminating between factions."

Elvis understood that some of the Suitcase People were living ferally in the swamp. They were the ones who could barely remember their human lives. The bastard who had stolen the Cadillac was probably one of those, although no one he had questioned could think of a mutant matching his description.

"Rolling stock?"

"Visser left us a couple of half-track amphibians. And we've got a stockpile of Good Ole Boy guns 'n' ammo. If Raimundo hasn't shot up the armoured car the Josephites came in too badly, we could requisition and re-equip it."

"Mr Presley," Shiba said to him, "your opinion?"

Elvis thought it through. "Well, it's not my place to make suggestions, but I have to go to the Cape. If you came along, I'd feel a whole lot safer. Whatever the Josephites are up to, I want it stopped. I'll carry a gun and take orders if I have to. I don't really know what kind of a set-up they have at Canaveral, but my guess is that they won't be easy to take out. Those Donny and Marie things are as tough to get shot of as cockroaches."

Shiba was pondering.

"Very well," he said. "Captain Marcus, you have twenty-four hours. Ready a strike unit. We'll hit them tomorrow."

Raimundo expressed his approval with a tail-lashing frenzy.

## V

Since Needlepoint came on line, Fonvielle had been seeing the tall, spear-shape take form out on the main pad. It was a rocket made of immobile smoke. He stood out on the firing grounds, remembering the long-ago times when golf-carts loaded down with generals and politicians and journalists scurried across the empty expanse for every launch. There had been stands like at Yankee Stadium for the spectators. Being wood, they had rotted into the water and now existed only as streaks of colour in the mud. The streaks were ghosts of a sort too, the Commander supposed. He put his hands into his flightsuit pockets and scratched his thighs.

The bent and rusted gantry didn't prop the rocketshape up, but he could see phantom lines running between them. He recognized the craft. It was the next-to-last of the Titan 7 series, the one that had exploded, under Circe IV, killing Mikko Griffith, Lester Mihailoff and Mildred Kuhn. That had been in 1976. Debris had rained all over the peninsula after the firework display, and there had been now-nameless ground casualties. Fonvielle wondered if those smitten-from-the-sky technicians and swamp-rats qualified for the elite ghost cadre, the sacrifices of outer space.

Fonvielle searched his arm for the patch, and found it. The three names were written around the circumference of the circle. A siren pouted against a starscape, posed like Marilyn Monroe in her nude calendar, the Roman numerals modestly concealing her body.

The Indians claimed that even inanimate objects had souls. They were called manitous. Once an object, be it a table, a 1968 Studebaker or a piece of sculpture, was destroyed, its manitou lingered on for the use of the discarnate spirits of men. The Happy Hunting Ground was stocked with spirit game, spirit trees, spirit lodges. Since the white men came to America, Fonvielle assumed that the Indian afterlife was also littered with manitou co-cola cans, drive-in motels and TV sets. There was no reason why a spacecraft should not have a ghost.

None of the Black Hats could see the Titan 7. They walked through it, disappearing into the smoke and emerging the other side. Fonvielle couldn't bring himself to try the experiment. He was afraid that the smoke would be as substantial as the real rocket for him. As far as he could tell, the smoke rocket was becoming denser, more solid. The only other person on the Cape who could see the ghosts was the First Lady. She must have a touch of the Dream...

"Commander?" Addams pulled him out of his reverie.

"Yes?"

"We're dry-firing the system in twenty-five minutes."

"I'll be with you."

The success of the Needlepoint Ring was a vindication, at last, of the programme. With this proven, the Prezz would surely authorize more funds. The Cape would live again. The next rocket wouldn't be a ghost. Mars called, and Deep Space. Camp Glenn should be re-manned. Now America owned the skies, it was time to put on a little show.

The Black Hats were staking out an animal in the sun, and sawing at its throat. It was one of the Suitcase People, a black-hided warthog thing with yellow tusks. Blood trickled across the tarmac, following the almost-erased markings. No spirit shape was coalescing in the air above the sacrifice. It didn't count.

Fonvielle walked towards the bunker. Grissom was waiting for him by the elevator platform, his helmet off. His stocky face was still wet, his hair plastered back with seawater. He looked ill, and his suit sloshed as he moved.

"Gus?" Fonvielle said. None of the ghosts had ever talked.

Grissom nodded his head in recognition. His face was greenish, and slightly swollen.

In 1962, Virgil Grissom had gone EVA in a blaze of glory, and been automatically photographed against the rising sun, waving a confident thumbs-up at the stars. There had been much speculation around the project as to whether Grissom or Glenn would be selected to captain the moon mission. Fred Flintstone and the Clean Marine, they had been called in the press. An artificial rivalry had been generated carefully by the publicity Suits NASA was saddled with, and soon the fake contest became a real one. Fonvielle wondered whether that had been what killed Gus. The board of inquiry said it was a faulty hatch, but the Commander sometimes imagined that Grissom had been pulling some grand gesture stunt, climbing out onto the surface of the capsule to be found sitting on top of it bobbing in the blue Pacific, and had it backfire. That was the Fred Flintstone style. He knew that after the disaster, the Clean Marine had shown his first traces of humanity, getting as drunk as a skunk. Grissom's re-entry had been perfect, but a hatch had opened as soon as he splashed down, and the capsule had sunk like an anvil. By dying after re-entry, he just missed being the first American to perish in space, losing that miserable honour to poor old orbiting Richard Rusoff. Fonvielle remembered the recriminatory inquisition canning every non-essential staff member who could conceivably have touched the hatch mechanism, from the designer down to the janitor. It hadn't been fair, but the purge had gone some way towards assuaging NASA's collective guilt. But, within three months, Rusoff was off his trajectory, and America had another martyr. And Cape Canaveral had another ghost.

"Gus, can you hear me?"

The drowned astronaut shook his head, and opened his mouth. Black brine leaked down the front of his silver suit. His eyes watered.

"What is it, Gus? What do you want?"

Grissom held up his hand, thumbs-down.

"Commander?"

It was Addams. Grissom was transparent, and fading fast. Addams was treating him like an idiot.

"Are you ready?"

Grissom was gone.

"Yes," Fonvielle told Addams. "Take us down."

Addams worked the mechanism, and the platform sank towards the bunker.

The oblong of the sky receded above them.

The Prezz was waiting for them in the bunker, with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Board of General Motors, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Walt Disney and Frank Sinatra. It was the full tum-out. They all

saluted.

"Ah, Fonvielle," said the Prezz, "good to see you. I've reported to the Elder. He is well pleased with our progress."

Fonvielle expected he would get the Congressional Medal of Honour for this.

The First Lady exchanged looks with him. There was something about that one. She was hardly more than a girl. And she was wise to the Cape.

She could see Griffith, Mihailoff and Kuhn clustered in the corner, smouldering.

"Now Keystone is responding," Fonvielle told the Prezz, "it's vital we establish that the inter-satellite communications lasers are angled correctly. We took a certain amount of deviation into our original calculations, but no one has looked at the system for fifteen years."

The Prezz understood. He was up on Needlepoint. He didn't need the lecture really.

"Okay, let's reach for the skies."

## VI

Hiroshi Shiba looked at the Op for the thousandth time, and had to force himself to believe that this really was Elvis Presley. He remembered the old films and television programmes he had watched in his dormitory in Kyoto. He remembered the time Inoshira Kube had made Shiba, Sonny Shamada and Tetsuya Ito abase themselves in front of the entire trainee corps after they had been caught greasing each other's hair into "Elvisu Pu-res-lich" quaffs. Later, while taking the American culture courses all GenTech East execs had to qualify in before they were sent overseas, he had been able to put Elvis in context, tracing the influences on his work. The blues, country and western, Carl Perkins, Dean Martin, Chuck Berry, Al Jolson.

Still, for Shiba, the Elvis of the '50s represented the apex of America as a cultural force. When he vanished into the army, the cutting edge of rock 'n' roll was lost to the USSR and the United States began its long descent into its current position as the warring ground for gangcults, multinats, lunatic factions and desperate psychopaths. So much vitality applied to so little effect. It was frightening.

He wished he could reach out and touch Elvis. The man contained within him all that was great and potentially great about the country. Ideally, he would have liked to recruit the Op as a member of the Blood Banner Societydashhe felt sure Elvis would appreciate the purity of its ideals, its motivesdashbut that honour was open only to pure-born Japanese.

They were working on Visser's half-track amphibians, converting them to assault vehicles. Elvis was with Captain Marcus, checking under the hood. Raimundo Rex hefted the half-track up by its prow, lifting it at a forty-five degree angle so Elvis and the Captain could take a look at the hull. The saurian was a one-mutant combination tank, trash disposal system, fork-lift truck and Spanish lesson. After Elvis, he was the hero of the compound.

Marielle brought Shiba some papers to sign. He tried. His signature was getting problematic now that his fingers were almost fused. He would soon have to revert to the oriental practice and start favouring his

personal seal. Marielle sped away. Since the change began to affect her, she had been veiled with thick mosquito netting. She had never been an extraordinarily attractive girl, but evidently her vanity was affronted by the creeping greenness, the thick scaly plates and the yellowing eyes. That was a shame. The Suitcase People would have to learn to appreciate their own form of beauty.

There had been burials in the swamp earlier, and Shiba had said a few words over Reuben and the others. Reuben had been much loved by the indentees, and his heroic death had bound them to the Suitcase People. Even those who had not picked up Dr Blaikley's modifying enzymes volunteered to go along. Privately, Shiba had decided that once GenTech shut this facility down, he would see to it that the indentees were released from their obligations to the corp. They had earned their freedom. While Reuben had been laid on a bier and ceremonially burned, with Colonel Presley singing "All My Trials" as the embers sank, Spermwhale Visser had been wrapped in oilcloth and dumped in the deepest lagoon with the other Good Ole Boys. Now, they even had a layer of Josephites on top of them. The swamp was getting thick with the dead.

Shiba looked again at Colonel Presley. The hair, dyed black and swept back, was the same, and so was the thin, agile body. He had lost the babyfat he remembered from the earliest films, and was almost gaunt now. Facially, he was an almost exact match for the Statue of Liberty, with sad blank eyes and heavy lips. When he had sung earlier, the voice had been richer, deeper than on the earliest recordings. If only he had kept out of the clutches of managers and madmen, he would have been bigger than all of them. Bigger than Tcherkassoff, than Dodd, than Sinatra...

He was appalled to find that none of the Americans remembered Elvis as more than a fad of the long-ago '50s, on a par with hula-hoops, flagpole-squatting and red and green 3-D movies. That was another reason for the country's degeneracy, its failure. It always neglected its past greatness. As the 21st century bore down, America was backpedalling to stay where it was. It had neither a future, nor a tradition.

Shiba hoped to return to Japan soon.

But at least he had met the King. And, thanks to Dr Blaikley, he had some inkling of the potential within himself.

He dropped to all fours, and weaved across the compound to his office. Once Cape Canaveral was taken, he would requisition a satellite link and communicate with Kyoto. Then, the operation could be decently closed down.

It occurred to him only then that perhaps his current form would not prove pleasing to the higher echelons. There was a great deal of prejudice against the abnormal, the impure. Anger flared as he imagined Inoshira Kube sneering at his craggy grey body. He felt hungry. He imagined his jaws clenching around Inoshira's head.

His body might be that of an alligator, he knew, but his soul was burned pure.

## VII

Once the Keystone was responding properly, the rest of the Needlepoint System fell into place. It was a more or less tedious business, transmitting test signals and receiving the programmed response codes, and Duroc left Sister Addams to handle it. Machsler's files contained all the long-unused Q and A



buzzwords needed to convince the Keystone's Security Program that it was receiving orders from a duly authorized US Government source. Addams estimated at least twelve solid hours of interface were necessary, before they would have full control of the ring of death. Duroc wished someone had thought to tell him that before he first tested the thing out.

Duroc had hoped to get some down-time with Simone. ZeeBeeCee were putting out a three-hour Tribute to Gavin Mantle, complete with home movie footage of his childhood and interviews with all his family, friends and work-mates, followed by a group of experts discussing the phenomenon of spontaneous human combustion. The scientific debate would be the important part of the show. Duroc wanted to find out how close to the truth the investigators were getting. There was still a window of opportunity for someone to cotton on to the takeover and activation of the Needlepoint System and to deploy thermonuclear missiles against Keystone, disabling the entire ring. Once the whole system was on-line, nothing from Earth could get through, and Elder Seth could rain down fire from the heavens at will. But until then, they were vulnerable to a pre-emptive strike.

Duroc, who was used to running through all the worst eventualities, had listed the nations, organizations and individuals capable, working singly or in cooperation, of putting together the missile strike force necessary for the job. GenTech, the Winter Corporation and Hausmann A.G. of course; Russia, America, the UEC and China, probably; the Pan-Islamic Congress. McDisneyworld, Greater Rhodesia, Japan and the Vatican, maybe.

When that listing unnerved him too much, he tried to steel his resolve by listing individuals and institutions against whom the Needlepoint System could be profitably deployed. Pope Georgi headed any list, of course, and Duroc would have added Sister Chantal Juillerat, the pontiff's computer-packing hit woman, and Father Declan O'Shaughnessy, the Vatican's top cyberfeed jockey, to any top ten of dangerous Roman Catholics. After that, it was back to petty personal vendettas: Jessamyn Bonney, by whatever name, was top of that chart; and Dr Ottokar Proctor, for failing to keep his part of a bargain; not to mention United States Cavalry Trooper Nathan Stack, the Navaho Hawk-That-Settles, Simone's bullying pimp, expendable risk Machsler, UEC President Le Pen for being an idiot, and so many others...

But just now the Cape had other, more immediate, problems, and Duroc was supposed to see to them. Brother Turney's expedition against the Suitcase People had not returned, and they had lost radio contact with them. Turney had found an enclosure of the freaks out in the swamps and, at the time of his last report, was about to move in and clean them out. Evidently, he had met with more than the expected resistance. Hitherto, Duroc had assumed he was dealing with a scattered and uncoordinated nuisance, but obviously not all the mutants were sub-normal morons.

He was sequestered in the armoury with Brother Tozer, trying to work out which of the blips on the tablescreen were Suitcase People. It wasn't easy, because each mutation was different. Some were cold-blooded, some weren't. Some of the blips could be ordinary animals. Some of the mutants wouldn't register. Duroc wished he had a spare biochemist to autopsy the Suitcase People they had been able to kill. Maybe there was some nerve poison that would only affect their metabolisms, and they could spray the swamps with it, avoiding a messy shoot-out.

"Radar isn't much use, Elder," Tozer was saying, "nor are thy heat sensors... not that they've ever been satisfactory in this climate. Mine advice would be to install some sort of movement detectors. Nothing can get about in a swamp without making waves. Thou couldst monitor that, and have a perfect early warning system."

Duroc nodded. "How long?"



"Once we getteth the equipment, a day or two at the most."

"Once we get the equipment?"

"Yea verily. Of course, that's the snag. For a job like unto this, thou'd need custom-made goods. GenTech, probably. The ungodly Japcorp supplieth most of the Sanctioned Agencies."

Blips were massing near the site of Turney's last call-in.

"What's that?"

Tozer frowned. "I dost not know. Do alligators swarm?"

Duroc didn't know either. The church had too many people who knew what to do with a desert like Salt Lake City, but no specialists in swampland. Recently, he had been wondering whether Elder Seth wasn't getting too wrapped up in the big picture to take care of the details. This whole Canaveral Project was ridden with niggling minor considerations that hadn't been cleared up. The Suitcase People wouldn't have been a problem if the Church of Joseph had known about them before the establishment of the base on the Cape. A few passes with napalm and some poison in the swamps would have wiped them out. But now, they were going to be more difficult to get rid of than an infestation of termites. They had to be taken in their own environment, and they were a lot better at swamp warfare than any of Tozer's security people.

Provisionally, Duroc decided to request an airlift of Donnys and Maries. He could send them out on search-and-destroy missions and not feel he was wasting a human resource. They were among the most loyal and dedicated of the Elder's followers, but that didn't make him any more comfortable around them.

There was a small teevee in the armoury, usually tuned in to the Josephite cable service with its non-stop fund-raising telethons, choral concerts from the Tabernacle, advertisements for the resettlement drives and smarmy homilies on wishy-washy religious themes. Just now, Duroc had ZeeBeeCee tuned. The Gavin Mantle show was on. There was an intense argument taking place between lawyers representing Clodagh Mantle and Erik Kartalian, both of whom were contesting the channel's claim to Gavin's swelled estate. They cut to Sonny Pigg, singing his instant cash-in song, "Bye-bye Gavin."

"Look," said Tozer, "there seems to be some pattern..."

The blips were converging, amassing. There must be some sort of jungle telegraph. Duroc remembered his uncle taking him to see Johnny Weissmuller films as a child. He imagined hordes of animals crashing through the mud calling out to each other.

"Where is that place?"

Tozer pressed a key, and place names were superimposed over the large-scale map.

"Narcoossee? What's there?"

Tozer asked the map a question, and got a read-out. He whistled.

"'Tis a GenTech research establishment, Elder. BioDiv. Classified, of course. They're supposed to be conducting a long-term investigation into immune reactions."

The green blips were joining together, forming a large blobby mass.

"Immune reactions?"

"That's what they say."

"Nonsense. They're creating monsters."

Tozer agreed. "That's possible. The godless multinats have been trying to get round the legal restrictions on altering the divinely-designed human form for years."

Duroc saw it immediately.

"And they've got a good source of human raw material in the indentees. They can write their own ticket out here."

Duroc wasn't sure how he should proceed. The Church was powerful, and every day its worldly influence grew, but GenTech was the largest organization on the planet. It had more employees than most countries had citizens, and its economy was stronger than that of every nation in the world. He didn't want to get the Church of Joseph into a shooting war with the corp. As the Soviet Union was rapidly finding out, that was a conflict that could only be resolved in the favour of the businessmen.

"Pull in all the patrols that are still out there," he ordered. "I'm going to have to consult with Salt Lake on this."

Tozer saluted. "Blessed be, Elder."

A comedian was delivering Gavin Mantle's funeral oration in a cathedral full of mourners, doing a series of "bolt out of the blue" jokes. He was getting nervous laughs.

"Divine lightning" was the expression that was being mainly used to "explain" the Blotto Lotto winner's sudden death.

Duroc felt unusually on edge. So many of the current circumstances were beyond his control. Tomorrow, when the world was held tight in a Josephite fist, he would breathe again.

He wondered where Simone was. The girl was spooked too, he knew, and he hadn't had time to find out what was wrong.

He left the armoury, and stood on the expanse of cracked, drying concrete. The swamp smell was still strong, and rancid clumps of rotting vegetation were still lying around. He would have them cleared when the crisis point was passed.

The shadow of the rusting gantry fell over the launchpad. Duroc rubbed his eyes. He could have sworn that there was a smudgy shadow in the air by the thing. It was indistinct, but there seemed to be a shape taking form.

"Elder," said a Donny, "would you come over and look at this?"

He was smiling, and had a pipe in his hand. They all had pipes, but he had never seen one smoke.

He followed the terminal-stage Josephite over to the gantry. Close-up, the rotting pile was more ominous. It shifted slightly, creaking. It was probably dangerous, and ought to be pulled down.

He looked up. The shadow was still there.

"Look. These have appeared..."

The Donny pointed into the pit. It had been drained. The bottom was blackened from the immense discharge of a Titan 7 rocket. There had been a bad accident here, he had heard.

At the bottom of the pit, outlined a stark white against the sooty black, were three Hiroshima-blast shadows.

They were negative people, with large round heads and thick limbs.

Duroc looked at the Donny. He was calm, his handsome face expressionless, unreadable. He wondered whether the thing could have curiosity, fear, love...

He looked back at the silhouette astronauts.

"But..."

They had moved. He stared at them for a few seconds, and they were still. One seemed to be reaching out, as if to make a reduced-gravity hop on the moon and languidly drift for fifteen yards. Another was rising from a kneeling position, as if finishing prayers. They didn't move.

He looked at the Donny again, and looked back. The leaper was in the air, his lower-legs bent back from the knees, the riser was nearly upright.

The Donny wandered away silently. Night was falling. The white astronaut shapes were brighter in the darkness.

This was one more thing for Duroc to worry about.

He left the gantry, putting the three blast ghosts out of his mind, and looked for Simone.

He found the indenture girl in the bungalow, and she made him forget all his worries for too-short minutes.

The sun went down on the Cape.

### XIII

Elder Nguyen Seth, the Summoner, concentrated on the bowl of blood, and his consciousness left his ancient body to roam beyond. In the Outer Darkness, the Dark Ones waited patiently, as they had always done, but Seth could feel their excitement building. After millennia, the scant months that stood between the present and the Day of the Summoning were like seconds. Time had always been the one thing Seth had in abundance, but now there were so many things to be done, and so many sacrifices to be seen to.

Elder Seth looked down upon the gently revolving globe, the Needlepoint satellites sharply outlined against the clouds and the oceans. Lights winked on their years-dead exterior surfaces as they communicated with Sister Addams in Cape Canaveral. The ring of satellite weapons felt comfortable. The Elder slipped into them, and took them as a body. He allowed the IFF transmissions to continue, feeling a tingle as each of the links in the Needlepoint Ring came on line.

Down there, humans swarmed towards their predestined End. Seth thought of his favoured followers: Dune in Florida, serving as his family always had done; Priapus in Berlin, the anarchic satyr ejaculating hate with each thrust; the Waiting Snake in Rome, preparing to strike fatally at the heart of the Vatican. He considered the hordes pouring into Salt Lake City, making it a Paradise on Earth, and of their gradual transformation into Waltons, as their hair blonded and stiffened, their features melted and reformed as handsome masks, and their bodies turned to mannequins. How few of them would be among the Elect, the favoured of the Dark Ones.

For his part, Nguyen Seth hungered for oblivion. His centuries weighted him like chains. With the world's end, and the achievement of the Dark Purpose, his ordeals would be over.

"Old man?"

It was Krokodil, still inside his mind like a nestling parasite, trying to eat away at him.

"It's nearly over, old man."

If he was still capable of it, Seth loved Krokodil for her wrong-headed persistence. She contained in her the seeds of the defeat of the Dark Ones, but she would never unleash them so long as she were questing solely for revenge against him. She was so typically human, so limited in her vision. With literally half a view of the world, she was obsessed with him, and that obsession was the key to her failure. How unworthy she was of her ennoblement. She was the only being on the planet who could face down one of the Dark Ones, and yet she frittered her power away on selfish concerns.

"Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock..."

She was mocking him. Foolish girl.

Soon, Dune would feed Krokodil's heat pattern into the Needlepoint computer at Cape Canaveral, and a beam from the sky would end her.

Seth wondered how much he would miss the girl.

IX

PERSEUS: SOURMASH.

KINGMAKER: ADAGGIO.

PICADILLY: YELLOWSTONE.

TIN LIZZY: COPPICE.

PETREL: CLAW HAMMER.

CURLY JOE: VIGILANCE.

Stealth was not one of Raimundo Rex's strong points. They switched off the motors of their swamp-skimmers once they hit the Indian River, which put them within earshot of the Cape, and fell back on paddles. Raimundo kept bumping his head on low cypresses, and his bulk made the skimmer sit dangerously low in the water. Elvis was sure the saurian had been doping before the mission. It was hard to tell what with his independently-floating reptile eyes, but the Op thought Raimundo had hopped himself up on some zooper-blast.

A lot of other Ops used drugs to get them through the combats, but Elvis thought they were stone crazy. Back in the music days, he had popped his share of pills to keep him going eight gigs a week, and in the army he had been shot full of morph-plus several times, when he was badly wounded, and he had found the dissociation from his body deeply disturbing. Since then, he had been down hard on recreational or professional drugs. He had first earned the enmity of the Good Ole Boys by turning over to the cops a couple of Memphis dealers who had paid off plenty to stay in business. The smacksynth salesmen had gone in one side of the revolving door and come out the other, protected by a court order and the word of Judgement Q. Harbottle. Drugs were a poison, seeping through the cities of America, turning everything sour...

In Cuba, when he had been shot in the chest and had been in surgery for twelve hours, they had given him enough morph-plus to deaden the pain of torture by flaying. He had had bad dreams, and never really been able to shake them off. He would find himself standing alone in a beam of bright white light like police interrogators use, uncomfortably strapped into a white, fringed, spangled clown outfit. He was sweating like a pig, and his clothes were sticky, and he was mumbling his way through a song he could barely remember, trying to do his old act despite the pains shooting through his legs and arms. The lyric of "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" hovered just beyond his mental grasp, and he was repeating the title over and over again like a mantra, gabbling "are you lonesome tonight, are you lonesome toniiiiight, are you lonesome toniiiiiiiiight?" The worst of it was that he was weighed down by heavy pads on his stomach, his buttocks, his thighs, his arms, his legs and under his chin. No matter how he fought, he couldn't get free of the weights. They weren't just fixed to him by tape or wire, they were growing out of him as if he had spent twenty years guzzling brews and downing cheeseburgers by the faceful. There were drugs in him too, not just the medical anaesthetics, but a potent mixture of everything illegal that could be injected, snorted, inhaled, infused, swallowed, skin-popped or poured into his ears. Since Cuba, that nightmare had come back to him too often.

Raimundo was weaving about on his skimmer, paddling with his huge foot like a kid on a push-bike. Elvis hoped the dinosaur would be okay in the fight. He'd seen too many gung-ho junkies get death rather than glory.

The dawn was breaking over the Cape. Working with Captain Marcus, Elvis had formulated a plan of attack, trusting that the Josephites were too stretched to maintain a proper defence perimeter around the Cape. The base was too large to be kept secure by anything less than a regiment, and the NASA fences were in a state of severe disrepair. Marcus's intelligence showed that most of the old observation posts weren't even manned most of the time.

The Captain was leading the bulk of their forces, using the captured armoured transport as a Wooden Horse-cum-command centre. They would attack the main gates. Those Suitcase People best adapted to swimming were circling around to come at the Cape from out of the sea, striking up at the sea wall from

the almost unpatrolled beach. And Elvis was to lead a spearhead force up the Indian River whose main task was to draw fire away from Marcus's column.

There were docks on Merritt Island and the instep of the Cape, and the river ran between them. Actually, the river had swollen to such an extent that the narrow causeway separating it from the sea was more or less permanently underwater, a swirling mass of long grass just breaking the surface, and Merritt Island was just another lump in the swamp, but the docks still rose out of the salt marsh. They would provide good cover, and a fine fall-back point.

Aside from Raimundo and a few of his Suitcase People, most of Elvis's team were indentees from the compound, transplanted blacks and Cajuns, rallying behind Shiba. Some bore the marks of the change, but they were less far along than Raimundo, Marcus or the bestial swamp creatures that had responded to their call.

Raimundo was still fidgeting, eager to get into the scrap. The saurian had crossed bullet bandoliers on his chest, and was packing a rocketlauncher and a chaingun, both specially adapted so he could work them with his thick, clawed fingers. Stoned or not, he wasn't what Elvis would have most liked to have come angrily after him.

The indentees were another matter. Elvis couldn't work them out. He wondered why they hadn't scattered into the swamps when Marcus overran the compound. He wondered why they were so quietly acquiescent to the mutations that were overtaking them. He also noticed that they looked at him much as Ti-Mouche had done, with a strange combination of awe, reverence and fear.

He didn't feel magical this morning, although for some reason he had packed the battered guitar into the skimmer's lockers. It was like a totem. Other guys wore lucky medals or carried two-headed coins, he knew. He had never been battle-superstitious beforemdashafter all plenty of two-headed coins had to be prised out of the stiff, dead fists of lucky soldiersmdashbut this wasn't like the other actions he had seen.

There was a warning buoy up ahead, bobbing in the water. Elvis signalled to Raimundo to halt, and the dinosaur just managed it, their small force settling behind him, back-paddling to keep themselves out of the marker's range.

Elvis watched the buoy's flashing lights. It sent out an all-clear every thirty seconds. He could shoot the thing, but that would shut it off, giving just as clear a warning as its alert signal would. There was nothing for it, they would have to trip the thing. After all, the whole point of the Indian River thrust was to make the Josephites think this was the main attack, and to have them concentrate their defences on the South perimeter.

He drew his Colt and took a sight at the buoy. He thought he could blow out the blinking red LED.

Elvis looked around. Raimundo and the others understood. Once this shot was fired, the attack would be on. There would be no way out except victory.

He cocked the pistol.

There was a mass of clicks as safety catches were flicked. Raimundo heaved his shoulders and hefted the rocket tube. A couple of 'gator men slipped off their skimmers and into the water, their weapons floating above their backs in sealed polythene bags.

The disc of the Sun was entirely above the horizon now, staining red the waters beyond the Cape.

Insects buzzed above the marshland. In the distance, Elvis could see the remnant of a rocket gantry, and barely make out a dark shape beside it

The LED flashed. Thirty seconds. It flashed again. If he took it out the instant it winked off, they would have an extra thirty seconds. Some of them could hit the docks by that time. Allowing for a sleep-heavy response time from the defenders, who would either have just woken up or be at the end of a gruelling night shift, they should all be over the docks and penetrating the restrung fences by the time the Josephites had anybody in the field.

Thirty seconds. Flash.

With a prayer, Elvis shot the buoy. It exploded in a geyser of water, raining transistorized parts.

Thirty seconds.

Elvis's people surged forwards, and hit the dock.

An alarm klaxon sounded on the Cape.

Elvis was on the docks himself, hauling up a couple of indentees. There was some light equipment in the skimmers. He wanted it assembled before the welcoming committee turned out with garlands and gas grenades.

The indentees' hands moved fast, slotting together the artillery like child's assembly toys.

Raimundo charged the fence, bringing a section down. The klaxons were nearer now, and Elvis heard boots hitting concrete, engines starting up.

Raimundo roared. The shooting had started. There were whistles, and the shells started to fall.

Fully awake, fully alert, Elvis ran towards the fence, firing from the hip at the advancing black figures.

An indentee next to him took a direct hit and fell in bloody chunks. Red threads crossed the concrete.

They ran across the firing grounds. The smell of cordite was thick in his nostrils. There were dead things on the ground. Suitcase and regular people, meticulously butchered.

What the hell was going on here? And where was Krokodil?

A jeep rumbled towards them, someone with a machine gun standing up in the back and firing wildly. Raimundo launched a rocket at the ve-hickle, which turned up in the air above the explosion, spilling burning people.

There were a lot of Black Hat Josephites now, all armed, all firing.

Elvis found some cover behind a lump of concrete and sniped at them. The Donnys and Maries shrugged off direct hits and kept advancing, but the ordinary Christian Soldiers died like anyone else.

Raimundo had a Donny in his claws, and was chewing his head. The big lizard must be developing a taste for Walton meat.



By his watch, they had been in battle for nearly two minutes. Elvis had promised to keep up the attack for fifteen before Marcus struck.

Bullets impacted with the concrete, spitting up dust and shards. Someone was trying to get a fix on him. Elvis made a quick calculation, and tossed a frag grenade. That put the sniper out of commission.

Twelve and a half minutes to go.

A 'gator man rolled past screaming, one foreleg gone, most of its skull exposed.

If you got killed, Elvis supposed, twelve and a half minutes was forever. . "Jesse Garon," he prayed, "get me through this..."

RIGOLETTO: BELDUNGSROMAN.

Brother Tozer handed him a headset. Without putting it on, he could hear the tinny reports of gunfire from the surface. Roger Duroc made a snap decision.

"Tozer," he said, "seal the bunker."

The Brother was taken aback. "But Elder, we can resist the attack. There's no threat to us.."

"Do what I say."

VANQUISHER: BRANDYWINE.

"But thou wilt be abandoning our faithful up there."

Duroc slapped the security chief across the face. "Seal the bunker."

Tozer shook violently, but brought himself under control. He whispered orders into his lapel microphone.

CHEYENNE: PEPPERPOT.

"This is nothing to be concerned with," Duroc addressed the technicians. "Please continue with your work."

Sister Addams transmitted another coded word to Keystone, and received the correct answer.

ATROPOS: NOCTURNE.

She had been at her console all night, and there were smudged circles under her eyes. Her left hand was twisted in her ratty hair as her right flew over the keyboard.

SPOTLIGHT: SEARCHLIGHT.

The guards rushed past, their raised rifles clattering, and took up positions by the elevator. A lead shield, used during take-offs, was painfully grinding across the shaft.

Duroc could hear the noises of battle above, tinnily from the headset. There were about a hundred Josephites, most of them Waltons, up there. He mentally wrote them off.

After all, sacrifice was what this was all about.

BUCKAROO: COUNTY CORK.

The surface forces should be able to hold off the Suitcase People long enough for Addams to complete the code sequence. After that, the Needlepoint System would get a thorough work-out. The Suitcase People could run from the thin beams, but they couldn't hide. Gavin Mantle's lonely corner of Hell would be getting overcrowded.

CANDIDE: CANDYMAN.

Simone was with him. Duroc was glad of that. He wouldn't have wanted to cut her loose on the surface, to take her chances with the mutants. For some reason, she was important to him. The girl was terrified, but that was only to be expected.

Fonvielle stood over Addams's console as the Sister went down Machsler's list of keywords.

ICE CREAM: CONE.

The Commander's job was nearly over. Duroc wondered whether it was worth the effort of tidying him out of the way. It was so nearly over.

ARROWROOT: HEXAGON.

Duroc wondered who had formulated the codes. They seemed random, at once trivial and suggestive. Each triggered a different function in Needlepoint's vast repertoire of responses.

MAMIE: LEXINGTON.

On the big board, the satellite's readings were clusters of different-coloured lights, each signifying a capability no longer dormant. It was quite pretty. Instruments of mass devastation were always aesthetic triumphs, Duroc mused.

PONDEROSA: BANDERSNATCH.

The freight elevator was rising to meet the lead shield. Tozer's men were yanking wires from the works. They were burying themselves in the bunker on the assumption they could get out later. Tozer himself was dishing out instructions, but didn't look happy about them. Like Addams, he was one of the Church's compromises: he possessed skills necessary to the mission, but along with them a degree of independent thought not to be found in the typical Black Hat Josephite. Most of the worshippers here would swallow battery acid upon the direct order of an Elder of the Church. Fools.

Duroc picked up a headset, and listened to the course of the topside battle.

MOM'S APPLE PIE: CRANBERRY SAUCE.

Orders and cries for help flew between wired-up Josephites. The human ones died easily, but the Waltons were harder, more dangerous. Screams and explosions, shouts and gunfire. None of the bunker staff were concerned for their topside comrades. They all had their work to do.

COCONUT SHY: ERASMUS.

Duroc gathered that the invaders weren't all mutants. They were well armed. He wondered whether GenTech were in on it. That could be a more than momentary nuisance.

CARTWHEEL: JONQUIL.

Simone was sitting quietly, her hands in her lap, trembling.

"They're here," she said.

"What? Who?"

Duroc looked at the indenture girl. She seemed to be seeing more than him. This must have something to do with the strange shapes he had been glimpsing out of the corner of his eye. She could see them more clearly.

"The ghosts..."

Elvis dropped a frag grenade into an airshaft, but it bounced back out. Shutters had closed the aperture. He kicked the grenade like a soccer ball, and it exploded in the air above a Marie Walton, spreading her out on the concrete like a throwrug.

He had heard rumbling from underneath the firing ground. Whoever was down there was fortifying themselves pretty heavily.

Three minutes to go before Marcus struck.

Raimundo was a berserker in battle. His chaingun chattered in one hand, while the other lifted a Donny to his forest of teeth, and his feet tore at a fence.

Elvis knew he had lost a lot of his people in the first wave. He had expected that. In the main, they had died well.

He'd been scratched by flying shrapnel, and was bleeding.

A Donny came at him, smiling placidly. Elvis sprayed the creature with bullets, using his burpgun. It staggered back under the multiple impact, its skin and clothes exploding as each slug slammed into its unreal body. It jitterbugged twenty yards backwards, and fell. It was still kicking, but it couldn't stand up.

A trio of Maries, their hairdos wobbling, took down an indentee with a toadish cast to his features and tore him apart with immaculately manicured bare hands. When he was sure the indentee was beyond help, Elvis tossed a frag into the grouping, and threw himself down as they blew up in a cloud of flame and flesh.

A halftrack went head to head with Raimundo. The saurian got his arms hooked under the ve-hickle and lifted it up off the ground. Its treads flapped loosely as Raimundo tore the machine apart. A Donny, the life ripped out of him, flopped in the driver's seat. Raimundo tore away iron plating to get to the tasty morsel.

A Josephite Black Hat rolled by like a wheel. Was there a wind rising? No, it was a spidercopter.

Hovering over the base, it laid down covering fire, seeming not to care whether defender or invader took it. The nose nozzle squirted burning napalm, and the flames spread.

Elvis signalled to Raimundo. They would have to put the copter out of action before Marcus hit.

One minute, ten seconds.

Elvis bent over and ran towards a half-assembled field mortar. There was a dead indentee by it. He hunted around for the missing struts, but couldn't find them.

Raimundo roared, and stamped over.

Elvis would have to pull a bluff. He took a rocketshell and dropped it into the mortar tube, then made a great play of fiddling with the sights, taking an eyeline on the spidercopter's nose.

The pilot saw him, and the copter eased forwards. A marksman hung out of the door, trying to draw a bead on Elvis. He signalled the pilot to take the craft lower.

Elvis twiddled with the sights, bringing the useless weapon to bear.

Forty-five seconds.

The spidercopter was just fifteen feet off the ground now, and the marksman would have a clear shot

It was close enough.

Raimundo reared up, and pulled the marksman out by his ankle, biting his foot clean off. The man hit the hard ground like a potato sack, and Elvis heard bones splintering. Raimundo trampled him with a horned heel, all the while reaching for the spidercopter's runners with his arms and jaws.

The pilot tried to take the ve-hickle up out of range, but the two-ton dinosaur hung on, shouting obscenities in Spanish.

The copter tipped up, its blades slicing dangerously near Raimundo's head. His skin was thick, but he'd need six-inch durium plate if the blades got to him.

Josephites fell out of the copter, crunching against the ground, screaming. Elvis took an automatic rifle from the dead indentee, and shot at the durium-laced plexibubble. The transparent material didn't shatter, but whitened where the bullets hit. The pilot was struggling with the stick.

Raimundo's tail lashed the ground, finishing off fallen Josephites. He had a dozen shallow bullet wounds up his spined back.

Fifteen seconds.

There was a wrench, and the copter came out of the sky. Its blade ground into the concrete and snapped, spinning away. Raimundo heaved, tossing the heavy mass as far away from him as possible.

The copter rolled over twice, its bubble cracking in half, and exploded.

Raimundo was hurled off his feet, and Elvis was sure the dinosaur was extinct, but he rolled in a surprisingly neat ball, his tail tucked over his head, and came up roaring defiance.

"Freakin' A, maaaaann! The chopper ees come a cropper!"

Five seconds. Elvis shot a running Josephite, bringing him down. He was holding a grenade, which went off as his fingers relaxed.

"Righteous, guitar maaaaan!"

Raimundo was triumphant, indestructible.

"Less kick som' Black Hat ass, homes!"

Now.

ZOOT SUIT: AARDVARK.

Addams was on the ball. She kept going, despite the press of ghosts crowding around her console position.

Fonvielle stuck by her, ready to protect the Black Hat from the ghosts if their mute, motionless threat turned to action.

Grissom was there, and Gagarin, Collins, Capaldi, Rusoff, Kuhn, Breedlove, Griffith. The others were turning up by the moment, taking on ever more solid shape.

WATUSI: CRUSOE.

Even the Prezz could see them now. And the rest of the Black Hats.

"What's going on?" asked the Prezz.

The First Lady's brown face was grey with dread. She saw them even more clearly than Fonvielle.

BESOM: FRIENDSHIP.

Behind the Prezz, two new shapes took form. Poole and Bowman, lost in deep space since '68. At least their presence here confirmed their deaths aboard the Jupiter Probe.

Al Tracy, the first dead man on Mars, was sitting at an unmanned console, his hands filling out. Soon, the ghosts would be solid enough to intervene.

ZODIAC: SPENCER.

"Gus?" Fonvielle said to Grissom. "Not now, no... the Dream. You died for it. You can't betray it now."

Grissom looked him full in the face, and mouthed a word.

ANGELUS: CINCINATTI.

Grissom's thin, black lips moved again. Fonvielle couldn't read them.

"The Dream, Gus. The Dream is alive!"

Grissom didn't look like Fred Flintstone any more. His fishy skin was turning rancid, getting soft. His mouth worked, repeating over and over again...

"Betrayer," the ghost croaked.

It was like a rabbit-punch in the belly.

The Prezz had a pistol out. He walked across, and jammed the gun to Grissom's head. The barrel sank into the ghost's skull. The Prezz wasn't sure whether to fire.

SANDALWOOD: LARGESSE.

"It's cold," the Prezz said, his fingers passing through Grissom's face, making ripples.

The First Lady was beside him, pulling his hand out of the dead astronaut.

Grissom looked at the First Lady, and the ghost of a smile appeared on his dead face.

TOPEKA: DUKE.

There was an explosion topside, and the whole bunker shook. Only the ghosts kept their footing. Fonvielle blundered against Tracy, and felt the shiver running up his arm as he brushed the astronaut's insubstantial form with the back of his hand.

Gagarin had his hands around Addam's throat, but she was resistant. She still couldn't see the ghosts, and so only felt a slight breeze. She flicked at her throat, toying with her crucifix, but kept typing, kept registering the codewords.

MENDACITY: MANDALA.

The Big Board was still lighting up.

"Just keep going," ordered the Prezz. "It's all a trick. Psychological warfare. Ignore it."

VULCAN'S HAMMER: ROYAL FLUSH.

Fonvielle's heart was trip-hammering. The Dream was so close. His fists clenched.

Seawater tears coursed down Gus Grissom's still-rippling face.

"Grab the sky," Fonvielle said to himself, "grab the sky, and never let go."

ESCUTCHEON: WABBIT SEASON.

"Never let go."

Captain Marcus's column rolled through the fences easily. Colonel Presley had done his job well, and

there was little resistance.

Shiba wasn't comfortable in the human-tailored seat of the amphibious vehicle. There was no room for his tail, and he couldn't stand up without bruising his thighs.

Marcus was laying down groundfire and advancing steadily. There was fighting going on hundreds of yards away, out on the concrete expanse of the launchpad.

Shiba ordered Marcus to press on. It was important to relieve Presley before his people were wiped out.

There should be a wave pouring in from the sea.

Shiba leaped out of the transport, and worked his way forwards on all fours, weaving between the explosions and the bullets.

He wished Inoshira Kube were here to see him distinguish himself in honourable combat.

A Josephite fell in front of him, and he got his jaws wrapped around its head, wrenching it free.

He could see Raimundo Rex standing tall on the field of battle, surrounded by fire and smoke.

Where was Colonel Presley?

Marcus's Wooden Horse transport rolled across the concrete plain, its guns rattling.

A row of bungalows set well away from the firing grounds were being fiercely fought over. Josephite snipers were using them as cover to pick off the sea wave as they advanced up the beach to the sea wall.

Marcus directed a few shells towards the bungalows, and one was reduced to burning rubble in an instant.

Scuttling to the top of a wedge of concrete, Shiba could see the beach. There were Suitcase People lying dead and dying on the sand, or being washed back and forth by the waves. It was a killing gallery.

Shiba saw Elvis, his black leathers scuffed, his thick hair hanging over his face. He was trying to pot the bungalow snipers with accurate shots at their darting figures. But the cover was too good.

Marcus blew up another building, and the fires spread.

Shiba saw an iguana man halfway up the beach spin around, blood spurting from his throat, and fall flat.

An indentee, one of Reuben's friends, hit the concrete next to Shiba, a canvas sackful of incendiaries slung over one arm.

"Give me those," Shiba said.

The indentee gladly handed them over.

Shiba took the sackstrap between his teeth and slithered off the wedge, heading for the edge of the field. There was a crushed fence, and beyond that a thick tangle of swampgrass and cypresses. He thanked



providence that the Josephites hadn't done too much clearing, and plunged into the grass.

His soft belly was scratched on the rusty ends of the smashed fence, but he ignored the trickles of blood.

He was near the bungalows now, and he saw three of the clone-faced creatures Elvis called Waltons. They were crouched low behind a three-foot high garden hedge, taking turns to snipe at the beach. They rose, fired, sank, expelled a discharged cartridge, and went through the process again. Synchronized like machine gears, they were firing constantly.

Shiba pulled the tag of an incendiary and tossed it at the snipers. It fell short, but rolled across a neat lawn, coming to rest like an egg against the legs of a pink plastic flamingo.

The Waltons kept firing, working like perpetual motion machines. On the beach, Suitcase People died.

The incendiary fizzled, and one of the Waltons half-turned, raising his rifle to his eye and searching for Shiba.

The bomb was a dud.

Shiba scabbled back deeper into the long grass, but knew the Walton had sighted him well enough to fire blind.

The incendiary flared and exploded, and there was a curtain of flame between Shiba and the Walton.

Shiba took the rest of the bombs and rushed alongside the row of bungalows, tossing incendiaries at twenty-yard intervals. As the first bombs exploded, he sped up, hoping to get out of range.

It did not matter. This would be an honourable way to die.

He yelled his Blood Banner vows. The bungalows were a wall of fire now. Man-shaped flames screamed inside the inferno.

The beach was safe now, and Suitcase People, still wet, were getting over the sea wall.

Shiba felt the waves of heat on his back, but realized he had come through alive. He was surprised.

Something was crashing through the swamp towards him. Something big and mechanical.

He was out of bombs, defenceless.

He turned snout-on to the thing, and awaited the killing stroke.

He tried to sing the GenTech company song, but his throat couldn't manage it.

Trees fell, and the grass parted.

Shiba found himself looking at the snarling radiator grille of a pink Cadillac convertible.

A woman was behind the wheel. She swerved to avoid Shiba, and the beautiful body sped past, lurching up out of the swamp, its roadwheels bursting from its hull.

Shiba had never seen such a gorgeous car. It made the company's Toyotas and Sony LandMasters look like junkyard wrecks.

The driver waved to him.

"See you later, alligator," she shouted.

The wash from the Cadillac rocked him in the water as he tried to follow the car.

"After a while," he yelled, getting a bellyful of foul swampwater, "after a while..."

BLANDISHMENT: DA-DO-RUN-RUN.

MELACHRINO: VOLARE.

MCMURDO SOUND: IOLANTHE.

VARGTIMMEN: SOLITUDE.

"... Krokodil!"

Elvis shouted as the familiar pink monster rolled across the Cape. He didn't have time for questions. He just knew who it had to be.

There was a wave of Suitcase People breaking over the seawall. Marcus's heavy guns were cutting even the Waltons down.

The topside battle was all but over as far as serious fighting went.

A Marie with a machine gun she should barely have been able to lift stood in front of the Cadillac and fired a burst.

Krokodil swerved out of the way and crushed the creature under the front wheels. The car squashed the Marie and cruised on.

Elvis was proud of the old girl. And Krokodil was doing pretty well too.

Marcus, who was visible in the tower of the armoured car, was making snap dispositions of the remaining forces. It was clear that the Josephites had abandoned the surface of the base to the Suitcase People. But that still left the underground complexes.

Whatever it was that Krokodil was concerned with, Elvis bet it was down there, under thirty feet of concrete and durium, guarded by heavily armed psycho clones.

Someone was up in the gantry, sniping at the invaders. One of his bullets ricocheted off the armourplate of Marcus's transport. It had only been a foot or so off. Marcus ducked back into the interior of the ve-hickle.

Krokodil extended the Cadillac's lase, and singed the sniper out of the tower. He fell into the dark shadow Elvis couldn't account for.

There were a lot of unaccountable shadows around the base. They stood implacably while the Josephites and the Suitcase People fought, looking on, waiting for something.

"Toto," Elvis said, "I don't think we're in Kansas any more."

The Cadillac drew to a halt beside him, and the window rolled down.

"What kept you?" he asked.

"I had a dizzy spell," she replied, "lost a few hours. Whose side are we on?"

"The green-faced guys."

"It figures."

There was an explosion nearby, and Elvis cringed. Concrete chips rained against his back and the Cadillac's flank like hailstones.

"We have to get underground," Krokodil said.

"Sweet thing," Elvis began, "there's just one thing I forgot to ask earlier..."

"Yes?" Her smile was dazzling.

"What the freak are we here for?"

WAGNER: MALTHUS.

Simone Scarlet knew suddenly, with a blinding clearness like the rapture her born-again Mammy had promised, that she had to help the ghosts stop whatever Roger was doing.

PENCIL LEAD: CALCUTTA.

The drowned astronaut reached out, and laid a nearly substantial hand on her heart. The cold seeped through her.

Her mother had been reborn, but her mama-loi aunt stayed with the old ways. She remembered prayers to Damballah, Shango...

GORDONSTOUN: ROSEMARY.

The Mad Old Man looked at her, and knew what she would do. He wasn't sure whether he should try to stop her.

The Revelations poured into her mind. There was magic nearby. A powerful houngan was in the area. She must find him, and tell him to work his miracle. Then the ghosts could become solid enough to intervene on the earthly plane.

BRUIN: COPPERPLATE.

The Sister was nearly through now. There wasn't much time.

"Blood," Roger said calmly. "We've not spilled enough blood. The sacrifice has yet to take."

GODHEAD: BROOKLYN BRIDGE.

Roger looked around. Simone realized her saviour was searching for someone to kill. It could even be her.

"Tozer," Roger snapped, "pick your three least capable men and lay them down in the bed of the elevator shaft."

RAWHIDE: TRAVOLTA.

The Brother in charge of security didn't question the order, but he took a few seconds choosing. Roger's face darkened. Simone realized how close he was to a breakdown. He seemed so strong, so solid. And yet he had been walking a knife-point. There was a great blackness in his life.

GREENBACK: FIBONACCI.

Tozer hauled a fat woman, a near-albino blonde boy and a grey middle-aged man out of his line of defence. That left only Waltons, Simone noticed.

None of the potential sacrifices complained as Tozer pushed them at gunpoint into the shaftbed. The woman lay down with an ecstatic look on her face, delighted to be of service to the Church of Joseph. The middle-aged man just sat down without a word and stretched out, resigned to everything. The albino hesitated, and Tozer chopped his gunbutt into the back of the boy's skull, dropping him senseless.

CALEDONIA: ARABESQUE.

"Bring the platform down," Roger ordered.

The drowned man hugged her from behind, his face flattening against the back of her head. Her dress was wet, and her inner eyes were opened. She heard guitar music, and knew the conjure man she must find was a singing shaman. They weren't common, but she had known one in New Orleans, a piano player in the GenTech recreational house who sprinkled chicken blood into his instrument and wrung tortured music from the keys while telling the girls' fortunes.

SPINDRIFT: SEAVTEW.

Tozer was reconnecting the elevator, a fistful of wires jammed together in a sparking tangle as he wound insulated tape around it.

PIDACOR: ??????

Keystone beeped angrily. Sister Addams jumped, tears starting from her eyes. The screen flashed at her.

PIDACOR: ??????

She checked her list, and stared at the screen. The beeping continued. Roger looked as if he were shaking with painful rage.

PIDACOR: ??????

Addams saw the error, and pressed CANCEL, ending the alarm.

PICADOR: DALE ARDEN.

Tozer had the elevator controls working now. The platform was descending.

The albino was moaning. The fat woman was singing "Tis the Gift to Be Simple." She was no conjure woman. Her voice was cracked, and grated on Simone's ears.

CARDINAL: CHEOPS.

"Blood sacrifice," Roger muttered.

BRONISLAU: CHOP SUEY.

The Josephite hymn was cut off with a sickening crunch as the platform ground into the elevator bed.

Simone couldn't stop herself looking. The blood was welling up in the cracks, and dribbling into the bunker. Tozer was slumped, grey-faced, against the far wall, trying not to be sick.

"How soon, Addams?" Roger barked.

Addams nodded.

HOUSEMARTTN: SHOTGUN.

"Very soon. Elder."

AXOLOTL: PLINY.

Simone broke away from the ghost, her mind spinning, her body tingling from her partial possession.

Fonvielle could have tried to stop her, but he just looked away.

She ran for the elevator, and snatched the controls from Tozer.

BRIGADOON: FONTAINBLEAU.

She pushed the Brother away from the platform, and pressed the UP button. She glimpsed Roger's astonished face as she rose, and heard bullets striking the durium-sheeted underside of the platform.

She was being pushed upwards on a solid column. There was a lead shield at ground level which could squash her as flat as the three sacrifices.

But, oddly, she wasn't worried about that...

Krokodil felt the rumbling in the shaft beneath the cover. Someone was coming up.

The Ancient Adversary awoke and uncoiled inside her, swallowing her consciousness at a gulp.

With inhumanly strong hands, she bent back the lead-durium shielding and rolled it like linoleum.

Elvis just raised an eyebrow and pouted, but the lizard-faced army officer in the beret was astonished.

The shield wrenched free, breaking into three pieces. She spun the largest fragment into the air, and sailed it thirty feet across the launchpad. It scraped the concrete with a harsh scream that set teeth on edge.

The elevator platform surfaced, exposing to light a shivering black girl in a thin white silk dress.

The girl looked her in the eye, searching for something she didn't find. She turned away from Krokodil and looked at the others.

She had seen many wonders, obviously. The girl looked at Raimundo Rex, Captain Marcus, Hiroshi Shiba and the others without seeming to see anything unusual.

"Heyyy," said Raimundo, "chiquitaaaaah! Whass happenin' bay-beeeee?"

The girl ignored him, still looking for something, for someone...

The Ancient Adversary relinquished control of Krokodil, and disappeared back into the depths of her mind. She felt pain in her torn and bloody hands.

"Which of you...?" the girl began.

Then she saw Elvis, and sank to her knees.

The Op looked behind him, then thumbed his chest with a sullen "who, me?" expression, and shrugged.

Krokodil remembered the way "Ti-Mouche had treated Elvis in the swamp. She was the host to a magical being, but he had a touch of the pure-bred, pure-born voodoo in him somewhere.

"Conjure man," the girl said.

Elvis shifted his collar. The Suitcase People were staring at him.

"Yes," said the alligator exec, "yes. Conjure man." He clapped his forefeet together.

"You must help them."

There were dark figures among the Suitcase People, shadows becoming human. Krokodil recognized the spirits of the dead.

Elvis passed a hand over his hair, shaping it perfectly.

"Help them?" he asked. "How?"

"You have magic..."

The girl's words were intently serious. She knew exactly what she was saying.

"... you must use it."

Shiba had slithered off. Krokodil wondered where he had gone.

Marcus was wrestling with the elevator controls. "It's no good," he said. "They've disconnected them down there. We'll have to blast our way in. If that's possible."

"No," the girl said, "use the magic."

Krokodil realized how young the girl was, and felt another history of ill-use and exploitation. Perhaps another Daddy like Bruno Bonney, certainly a string of artful torturers...

"Missy," Elvis said, "I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you're tryin' to say. I ain't no conjure man..."

Shiba was back. In his jaws he carried a familiar object.

"You see," the girl said. "He knows. I know. Inside yourself, you know. You must let the magic come out. You must."

Elvis looked at Krokodil, an appeal in his eyes.

Krokodil didn't know. This was not what her dreams had led her to. But she had always known that she must bring Elvis Presley and none other to Cape Canaveral. He had always had his part to play in this drama, even if it had never been made known to him or to her.

"Krokodil, what's this about?"

He picked up the guitar, gently disentangling it from Shiba's mouth, and slung the shoulder strap around him.

"Down there, they're using black magic and blacker science to gain control of a powerful weapon. They're trying to take over the sky."

The Op looked appalled. He was almost unconsciously tuning the instrument, tightening keys and twanging strings. She could feel the power gathering even in such flawed and negligible notes. 'Ti-Mouche had been right. The girl from the bunker was right. This was magic.

"The sky?" Elvis asked. "That can't be. Why... like the man said... the sky..."

CANTICLE: EPILOG.

The Big Screen was a blazing kaleidoscope of lights.

Sister Addams yelled, and Commander Fonvielle hugged her.

"Total control. Elder," she screamed, "we have total control."

Duroc smiled, and recovered his composure. Despite Simone, despite Krokodil, despite everything...



The Needlepoint System was on line.

"Throw me up a large-scale map of the Cape, and give me manual control. We're going to try a little target practice."

"... belongs..."

It had first been said, so the story went, on February 3, 1959, in a small airport near Mason City, Iowa. Charles Hardin Holly, top-lining a mid-west rock 'n' roll tour, had chartered a four-seater Beechcraft Bonanza to take him to Moorhead, North Dakota for the next engagement. Besides the pilot, the plane was already weighed down with Jiles Perry Richardson, The Big Bopper, and there was one seat left. It would go to either Tommy Allsup of the Crickets or the Chicano kid who sang "La-La-La-La-La-La-La Bamba," Richard Valenzuela. The kid won, but was unnerved, his breath frosting in the cold air as he protested to Buddy his lifelong fear of flying. Sometimes, he dreamed of dying in an air crash. "Don't worry Ritchie," said the twenty-two year-old to the seventeen year-old, confident of their immortality, "the sky belongs..."

"... to the stars!"

Elvis began to play, not as he had played for the Cajuns, to return a hospitality, or for Shiba, to please an admirer. This time, he played for himself alone, although maybe he hoped his Mama Gladys and Jesse Garon could hear, and he played as he had never done before.

Always, Colonel Parker had hammered home, he had been a face and a voice and a set of hips, not a pair of hands and a brain and a heart. Now, he was everything.

He had never been a great guitar player, but now his fingers slammed against the strings as well as Buddy's ever had, and his voice found new heights, new depths...

Without thinking, he started off with a song he had heard many times but had never sung before. Buddy Holly's "Everyday..." It must be the association with what he had said.

It was getting closer, and it was coming faster than a rollercoaster...

It was supposed to be a song about a love that had surely come to stay, but Elvis realized as he sang, watching the stricken looks on the faces of the liule group standing around him on that great expanse of blackened and bloody concrete, that it was really a song about darkness, about death, and about what comes after.

Death had certainly come for Buddy, who had often been compared to Elvis, and to so many others. He sang for Buddy, tapping his foot to add the famous handclap to the song, and he sang for Ritchie Valens, the Big Bopper and that nameless pilot. He sang for Robert Johnson, whose ghost must surely be out there in the swamps, for Charlie Parker, for Johnny Ace, for Frankie Lyman, for Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent, dead in a car crash in a foreign land, for Chuck Berry, for Jackie Wilson, for Harvey and the Moonglows, for Alan Freed, for the musical dreams of John Lennon, for Jesse Garon, for Reuben, for all those who had served in battle with him, for the Suitcase People still bleeding on the beach, for the murdered indentees of the Delta, for the mind-robbed Josephites he had killed.

Krokodil was crying, a stream trickling from her one good eye. The ghosts stood solemnly in ranks, solidifying as the song took effect.

Liquid electricity coursed through his veins, and he segued into Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail," singing of the blues that fell down like hail.

The girl from underground was sobbing now, falling into Krokodil's arms. With a tenderness the Op had never seen before, his employer stroked the black girl's short hair, and kissed her forehead.

There were more songs to come. "Jambalaya," he sang, expunging the menace from the melody as he evoked fun on the bayou.

Raimundo Rex was dancing, his feet crunching into the concrete, his tail lashing.

The ghosts were coming up through the elevator platform, emerging slowly like conjurer's phantoms. They were all dressed in spacesuits, all hideously mutilated. Elvis had to sing for them.

Something from an old children's show came to him, and he had to sing it. "I Wish I Were a Spaceman."

Then there was a Sinatra song, "Fly Me to the Moon."

And Petya Tcherkassoff's "Soyuz Love."

There were more ghosts than Suitcase People now. The music fought to get free of him, and he felt like a channel to the beyond through which magic was pouring in an irregular, gushing, dangerous flood...

He sang the first songs, the ones he had laid down with Bill Black and Scotty Moore in the Sun Studio in July, 1954. The songs that had taken him from truck driver to star. They were the songs, the ones that still meant the most to him, meant the most to everybody...

"I Love You Because..."

"That's All Right (Mama)..."

"Blue Moon of Kentucky..."

"Blue Moon..."

Love, defiance, prayer, longing.

It was music to reclaim the stars.

"We haven't got time to take heat pattern readings, just tell Keystone to strike down everybody above ground within a five mile radius of this installation..."

Addams' tired fingers paused over the keyboard. She was on the lip of questioning an order from the Prezz.

Fonvielle knew what was needed. Direct, unhesitating action. If the Dream was to be preserved, he would have to get into the cockpit and haul on the stick.

He elbowed the woman aside, and slipped into her chair. It was a keyboard and a screen, not a joystick and a windshield, but he was a fighter jock again.

He fed in the co-ordinates.

The Prezz laid a supporting hand on his shoulder.

The ghosts were ascending through the ceiling. Grissom was the last to go, with a sad wave. Fonvielle was too busy communicating with Needlepoint to pay attention.

"Target co-ordinates locked in, Mr President..."

The Prezz squeezed his shoulder.

"Firing..."

The kid had come into the studio to cut a presentation record for his mother. Marion couldn't imagine anything more square, and yet there was something about his sulky good looks, and the way he shifted about on his feet. He looked a bit like Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and dressed like a motorcycle hoodlum.

"What kind of singer are you?" she asked as they were setting up.

"I sing all kinds."

"Who do you sound like?"

"I don't sound like nobody."

"Hillbilly?"

"Yeah, I sing hillbilly."

"Who do you sound like in hillbilly?"

"I don't sound like nobody."

Elvis sang, surrounded by a swirl of ghosts. Across the site, by the gantry, the ghost rocketship was taking shape. The ghosts seemed to be converging on the thing, melding into it, giving it substance.

He couldn't stop himself. As he sang and played, his feet moved, his hips moved. The music shook him.

He was all shook up.

"...NOW!"

Fonvielle stabbed the RUN key, and the instructions were downloaded from Keystone into the entire Needlepoint Ring. There were two satellites who could bring their lasers to bear on Florida.

Duroc's fist clenched and his breath caught.

Within seconds...

"You know, Marion," Sam Phillips had said, listening to the ten-inch acetate the kid had made, "that boy

has got something. That boy has got the power!"

Krokodil felt the channels opening up as the Op sang. The music was getting into her too, shaking her down to the depths, the depths where the Ancient Adversary lived.

The whole Cape was shaking.

The gantry creaked enormously as it collapsed, leaving the shadow ship standing, smoke pouring from its base.

The spirits were clustered close around the rocket.

Elvis sang "Jailhouse Rock."

A lizardman burst into flames, and fell in ashes. Krokodil looked up at the sky.

"I wouldn't let my daughter cross the street to go to an Elvis Presley concert," declaimed the shouting preacher in 1958, "with his lewd behaviour, his jungle rhythms, his obscene movements, his suggestive lyrics, and raucous jangles that barely qualify as music, that boy is an instrument of the Devil!"

Nguyen Seth's consciousness nestled inside Keystone, and looked down with a strange detachment at the State of Florida. The hair-thin beams were striking down meticulously, criss-crossing the Cape Canaveral site, snuffing out the inconvenient creatures.

And yet there was a disturbance in the Outer Darkness. A great magic was being worked down on Earth. The Ancient Adversary was exerting its baleful influence.

Krokodil was there. And another shaman, a pure human with great powers.

Seth's anger spurted through the circuits of the satellite. The death rained down with redoubled fury.

Shiba didn't know what was happening. People all around him were exploding in flames.

Captain Marcus shouted to everyone to "take cover, take cover..."

Elvis kept playing, too caught up in the music that possessed him to notice the chaos around him. Shiba wondered if the music was doing this, causing people to explode...

In Japan, they had always said that rock 'n' roll was bad for you.

No, he thought. Whatever this effect is, the music is set against it. If the Op keeps playing, maybe there's a chance that the fires from above will stop.

"... take cover," shouted Marcus, his head smoking, "take..."

The Captain's blood boiled over, leaking out of his mouth, eyes, nostrils and eardrums. He pointed his pistol into the sky, and fired...

His clothes were burning now. Marcus struggled to hold himself together, but it was hopeless.

He burst apart, spreading sizzling scraps around him.

Fonvielle's elation was ebbing.

The Dream was working. Needlepoint was on line. The program would be up and running again.

But the console in front of him was doing funny things.

"T-minus ten..." said a rasping computer-generated voice.

"What?" asked the Prezz.

"It's initiated a launch sequence."

"T-minus nine..."

"What has?"

"T-minus eight..."

"The equipment. Something is cleared for take-off..."

"T-minus seven..."

"... according to the readings, it's the Circe IV..."

"T-minus six..."

"... but that blew up years ago..."

Simone ran, the invisible beams all around her. The Suitcase People were being cut down like stalks of wheat.

The ghosts were together now, in the body of the ghost ship. Great clouds were being discharged from the manitou.

She just hoped she lived to see it take off.

"T-minus five..."

Duroc had turned to ice. Not since the Jibbenainosay, had he felt such a dread.

"T-minus four..."

"Fonvielle, abort take off."

"T-minus three..."

"I'm trying, Mr Prezz, but the instruments..."

"T-minus two..."

"... don't respond."

"T-minus one..."

Duroc hoped Krokodil was dead by now.

"Ignition."

The bunker staff were looking at each other, bewildered. Sister Addams was hugging her knees, tears on her face. Fonvielle was chewing his entire beard.

"Lift-off," said the mechanical voice, "we have lift off!"

"The only possibility in the United States for a humane society," said Phil Ochs, "would be a revolution with Elvis Presley as leader."

It was over. He was exhausted, emptied of music.

Surrounded by burning people, Elvis dropped his guitar and ran.

The dark shape was rising from the Cape, stabbing into the sky.

Krokodil was tearing at the ground, possessed again of an enormous strength, ripping through the elevator platform.

An indentee, down on his knees praying, exploded, spattering Elvis with burning fat. He wiped the fire spots from his jacket.

To the East, the sea was boiling. A tidal wave of boiling steam swept across the base.

Elvis's face and hands stung.

"Something's coming through," Tozer shouted, firing up into the elevator shaft.

"Resist it," Duroc ordered.

Waltons crowded into the shaftbed, trampling underfoot the remains of the sacrifices.

"It's exiting earth atmosphere," Fonvielle said.

Duroc knew where it was going. He swore under his breath.

The Commander was plotting the phantom's trajectory.

"It will intersect with Keystone, sir..."

There was only one thing for it.

"Cease the ground attack. Order Needlepoint to defend itself."

A large chunk of something fell down the shaft, crushing a Donny.

Fonvielle communicated with Needlepoint, rapidly reprogramming it.

Keystone responded, its defensive systems activated.

The rain of death had stopped, Shiba realized, and he was still alive. He looked around to see who else had survived. Raimundo was nowhere to be seen, and that was a bad sign. He should be impossible to miss. Krokodil had torn open the elevator shaft. The black girl from under the ground was wandering out of the smoke, her thin dress wet through. And Elvis was slack-jawed, astonished at what had been torn from him.

The steam felt good on his hide.

Seth withdrew from Keystone, and watched sadly as the Needlepoint System tried to defend itself. Its lasers sliced accurately through the sky and passed harmlessly through the smokeshape of the Titan 7 rocketship.

The object was a cluster of angry ghosts.

"We've screwed the pooch, Mr President," Fonvielle shouted, "the Dream's not for killing. Needlepoint's been rotten from the start. It's an insult to the dead. That's why they want to stop it."

The Prezz had a gun. Fonvielle saluted his chief, but knew that what he had done was an obscenity, a perversion of the great work...

Fonvielle knew he had to take what was coming to him. He knew he had to join the knot of spirits in the manitou of Circe.

The Prezz shot him through the heart. "Thank you, Mr..."

"Prezzzzz..."

He was with the others now. Grissom, Capaldi, Metelkina, Poole, Kuhn, Sementsova, Griffith, Collins, Tracy, Lazarev, Mihailoff, Breedlove, Bowman, Rusoff, Gagarin, Victorov. All of them.

Their bodies had some substance. Not flesh, exactly. More like electricity, or fire...

The Circe IV sped towards its target.

Krokodil dropped frags into the shaft, and ducked away from the blast. This battle was nearly over. She knew now that Elder Seth wasn't down there, that she would have to face the preacher on some other field. But she knew that the Adversary had won a victory today, a victory that would tell...

Duroc looked at the monitor. Underneath the splash of Fonvielle's blood, the Circe IV blip .was nearing Keystone. Only moments until impact.

Seth was hurled out of Keystone as the Circe IV phantom enveloped the satellite, and tugged back to his body in Salt Lake City.

In the daytime sky, a star blazed brightly for an instant.



"Sir, sir," shouted a junior lieutenant at Edwards Air Force base, "we're getting some wild readings from earth orbit."

"Shee-it," swore his superior, "this is like last year's fiasco all over again."

"So, do we log it?"

The officer swilled hot recaff, and knew he was going to regret it, "Yeah, log it..."

The tracking screens were flashing like strobe lamps.

"... but be prepared to swear we're talking instrument failure."

Simone knew Roger was down in the hole. He would be angry with her. But she owed him something.

The Krokodil woman was leading the surviving Suitcase People, readying for a strike into the depths, to wipe out the Josephites.

Simone didn't know what to do.

Duroc watched it on the big screen. Keystone went first, flaring and leaving a black hole amid the light readings. Then the others, one by one, until all twelve were gone.

Addams was back at her monitor. "Needlepoint is down," she said.

There was fighting in the elevator shaft now. Tozer was dead, and the Suitcase People were abseiling down. Most of the Waltons were finished.

The bunker staff mainly sat quietly at their consoles and waited. There were several fires raging as the Needlepoint circuits burned out.

The big screen cracked across, and sheets of glass fell.

There was water on the floor. Hot, salt water.

Duroc threw away the headset he had been gripping throughout, and left his command position.

It was time to pull out.

"Premier Yeltsin, we thought you should know the Americans have been getting rid of some of their astro garbage."

"Does this violate any of the treaties?"

"Most of them."

"Ah well, call up Oliver and give him a bollocking. If he squeals too much, insist on a UN inquiry. What are GenTech... I'm sorry, I mean... what are the Japanese Government doing?"

"Nothing."

"It is good."

Raimundo Rex roared out of a pile of rubble, tail whipcracking, and jumped past Shiba into the elevator shaft.

Krokodil signalled the Suitcase People to follow.

Elvis took a rope, and plunged downwards into the fiery dark.

Shiba followed.

"Holy Father," said Father O'Shaughnessy, "it is happening again. Another major tremor."

Pope Georgi unconsciously popped his ring into his mouth, and pondered.

"Pray, Declan," he said, "pray..."

Elder Seth erupted from his isolation tank, still shaking. In the Outer Darkness, the Dark Ones raged at him. Another failure.

Elvis hit the bottom of the shaft, and sprayed gunfire at the Waltons. The fighting was almost over. Raimundo had finished most of the surviving bunker staff off.

There were fires, and water was coming in from somewhere.

"Bye-bye, Gavin," sang Sonny Pigg, backed in this special commemorative concert by most of The Mothers of Violence and the bassman from Bolt Thrower, "I'm a gonna zap you... " So long, Gavin, you're just a piece of crap, you "Won all that cash, but it was gone in a flash..."

Duroc crammed himself into the escape canister, and pulled levers. This should shoot him three hundred yards through a disused ventilation tunnel, and bring him up in the saltmarsh.

He didn't have time to be angry about the collapse of the Needlepoint Project.

He had to survive, to serve the Summoner again.

Krokodil ran through the corridors, searching, firing into empty rooms.

She was her own self again, the monster receding. There were alarms going off everywhere around her.

At the end of the corridor was a chute of some kind. There was an eggshaped metal pod the size of a man on a pad, and there was someone in it.

Krokodil took aim at the face she had never seen before, and fired...

The ejection system fired, and Duroc felt his entire body slamming against the floor of the pod as it shot through the tunnel. The pain was unbelievable, and he was sure that every bone in his body was broken, every organ ruptured. Grey stone rushed past the faceplate.

... an instant too late. The pod was gone.

But the face of the man inside was indelibly printed in her memory.

There would be another day.

The pod burst through an old iron grille and shot fifty feet into the air, spinning end over end.

The faceplate was overlaid with red. Duroc waited to die.

The pod brushed the tops of some cypresses, breaking branches. Its momentum spent, it fell to the swamp, and settled, bobbing.

There was wetness around him now. Water was leaking in.

Raising a hand that felt as if it had been under a pile driver, Duroc tried to press the buttons.

With the knuckle of his thumb, he hit the right control. Explosive bolts blew off the hatch, and more water flooded in.

Pushing against the seat, Duroc launched himself out of the pod, and hugged a man-sized island.

The pod half-sank and settled. The muddy water was only about four feet deep.

Duroc's vision blurred...

Raimundo was doing a good job of trashing everything, Elvis thought. The remaining Josephites weren't resisting, so he ordered the dinosaur not to kill them. He seemed disappointed, but had plenty of machinery to vent his frustrations on.

Krokodil came back into the main command centre. She conferred with Shiba, bending down to talk to the Japanese.

"Okay, guitar man," she said to him, "the show's over. Let's pull out."

X

Elvis found Krokodil squatting in the blackened area by the collapsed gantry.

"Krokodil?"

She looked up at him, her one eye cold and clear.

"Krokodil, are you still you?"

She nodded, but didn't say anything.

"I got a whole lotta things to think about, you know. I feel all mixed-up inside. You brought me here, and things have been happenin'. I don't know if I can go back to Memphis and pick up. Things ain't like I've been figurin'."

"Go home, Elvis," she said.

"Pardon, ma'am."

"Just get in your Cadillac and go home. Live your life as best you can. We may not have long."

At the other side of the base, Shiba and Raimundo were seeing to the wounded, and trying to salvage something. Shiba was going off the idea of calling up his superiors in Japan. The Suitcase People needed administrators, he had decided. More were coming out of the swamps every hour. There were the makings of a real community.

"And you?"

Krokodil sighed, and stood up. "Salt Lake City. There's something I have to do."

"I could..."

She shook her head. "No. I've taken up too much of your time. I have Hawk."

Elvis felt disappointed. Didn't she think he had done well?

"I'm sorry, Elvis, I shouldn't have changed you so much..."

Elvis didn't understand. The music was coursing through his veins. It was like being young again.

Shiba had released the indentees from their contracts, but most of them, even the unchanged ones, were acting as if they'd rather stay with the Suitcase People than return to their former homes to chance another indenture sweep.

"What will you do with the money?" she asked.

He shrugged, shaking his hair. "That don't matter. I might buy me a congressman and do something about the Good Ole Boys. There's lots of things round the South that need changing."

"That's true."

She kissed him, quietly. This time, it was like being touched by a ghost. Then, she walked to the edge of the base, and slipped through a hole in the fence, into the swamp.

Elvis watched her go.

"C'mon, Jesse Garon," he said. "Work to do..."

Simone found him in the marsh, floating, his face just above water. He wasn't badly hurt, but he was bruised and bleeding. Struggling with his big body, she eased him to dryish ground.

There were Suitcase People all around. Some were out searching for stray Josephites, but most were just wading towards the base where they could be sure of a welcome.

Roger was trying to say something, but was too badly shocked.

She had found a two-person skimmer by the docks, surrounded by the bloated corpses of Suitcase People who had died trying to make their landing.

It was not going to be easy getting Roger into it without tipping it over. She rested.

The conjure man's music still reverberated inside her head. She had never heard anything like that before.

Roger shifted, and tried to sit up. He winced, and slumped down again.

Simone didn't know what she had been a part of...

She slipped her thin arm around his shoulders, and he lolled against her. She hefted his weight, and he vaguely tried to help, pushing against the grassy island.

She levered Roger against the skimmer, and heaved.

Groaning with pain, Roger Duroc eased himself into the driver's seat. He was out of breath.

Her feet were deep in the mud at the bottom now. She pulled them up, and heard submarine sucking sounds. The water was up to her chest. Her thousand-dollar dress might as well be a potato sack now.

He had found her in a swamp, and given her a way out. Now, they were even.

And there was the question of her desertion.

The cold started seeping into her body. She put her hands on the side of the skimmer, and pulled herself up.

Roger shifted, and there was a gun in his hand, its barrel against her forehead.

She slipped back into the water, her feet touching the bottom.

Not saying anything, Roger flipped off the safety catch with a shaking thumb. Simone looked up into his muddy eyes.

There were big things nearby, shaking the cypresses.

With his left hand, Roger engaged the skimmer's engine. A wash began to swirl from the stern, and the craft rose in the water.

Simone bowed her head, her chin dipped into the swamp.

When she looked up, Roger's skimmer was gone, leaving only a frothy wake and a wave that rocked her in the water.

She slid up onto the island, and waited for the Suitcase People.

## NOTES

"When I was a boy I was the hero in comic books and movies. I grew up believing in a dream. Now I've lived it out. That's all a man can ask for."

### Elvis Presley

In case you're confused by the development of the Demon Download Cycle, here's an order of chronology and a taste of things to come. Though Demon Download is the first in the series, Krokodil Tears takes place slightly earlier, with Comeback Tour following on directly from the latter. A forthcoming book will go back to the beginning and deal with 'Route 666', the path taken through the wilderness by the founders of Deseret, and the intertwining adventures of Jessamyn Bonney, Chantal Juillerat, Nathan Stack, Hawk-That-Settles, Redd Harvest and Elvis Presley. These will continue until the apocalyptic conclusion of United States Calvary.

But there's a long and surprising road to travel before then. Interestingly, when this alternate future was originally mapped out in 1989, we made several elements - the premiership of Boris Yeltsin, the casting of Drew Barrymore in sex Goddess roles - that have since come to take place in the real world. Let's just hope that most of the rest of the cycle remains on an alternate timeline.

In writing this book, I owe a great debt to the various people who've written about Elvis Presley and related subjects. I'd like especially to credit Dirk Vallenga and Mick Farren's scarifying Elvis and the Colonel (1988), for the low-down on Colonel Parker, Fred L. Worth and Steven D. Tamerius's Elvis: His Life from A to Z (1988), for everything from details of Elvis's favourite foods to movies and songs, Luis Valdez's film La Bamba (1987), for the subtitle, and, especially, Greil Marcus's Mystery Train (1977), the best thing I've ever read about rock 'n' roll. Thanks also to Brian Craig

The End