

INSENSATE

Rob Pomeroy



*To Miss Rigg, Mrs Hand,
Mr Capell and Mrs Cherrill
for inspirational teaching
and for infusing a love of language.*

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Characters

Jonathan Fenton	Son of Ron and Penelope
Isobel Fenton	His wife (parents Gordon and Faith)
Graye Level	A Hearer
Plykar Level	Husband of Graye
<u>The Elders of the Etherean Guard</u>	
	Yorgish bayle Prout , senior elder
	Garmon Weir
	Mekly Sur , administrator for the elders
	Ruith ru Contin , sister of Hesdar
	Gylan Gorph
	Jish Storbont
<u>Members of the High Congregation</u>	
	Hesdar ru Contin (Chair)
	Bars Medok (Director)
	Ti'par ru Masal (successor to Bars Medok)
	Resar Playne , associate of Gylan Gorph
	Jowl Ruban
	Dayle Rother
<u>The Central Elect – Disciples of Belee'al</u>	
	Klushere (Senior Preceptor)
	Sivian (Klushere's closest disciple)
	Jerud (organiser of the Chosen)
	Delturn
Al'aran Kytone	The Grand Preceptor; most senior servant of Belee'al
Martin Plowright	An Etherean
Ulsa Grabe	A braccarpium master
Elena Plowright	Martin's wife
Floom Medok	Wife of Bars
Neevairy Ewtoe	A persuader
Bravish Ha'ware	A gambling magnate

Prologue

The three figures paused, gasping for breath in the thin mountain air. The evil one they sought to elude was not far behind. A silver knife-edge glint of moonlight from behind a cloud revealed the silhouettes of two adults and a small child, all wrapped generously against the freezing air. From their department it could be seen that they were in a great hurry; more observant eyes would also detect a high state of agitation.

The taller of the two men turned and said something to the other, pointing far into the distance. With that, and with an embrace as befits two good friends who will never again meet, they parted company, the shorter man hurrying the child, who could have been no more than five, towards the place his companion had marked out. The other, seeming to sigh inwardly, set off at a tangent to the first. His was the weary trudge of a man who did not expect to see another sunrise.

Some five minutes later, a lone wanderer appeared at the point where the two friends had separated. Although only in his mid teens, he was dressed for battle and his stature bespoke a confidence of victory. He paused briefly, looking about and then followed the path that had been taken by the shorter man.

Over the brow of the hill, unseen by the pursuer, were the taller

man and the boy standing beside a small shrine, hidden in a rocky outcrop. "Take a deep breath, little Chankwar," the man said. He closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them again, his eyes were fixed on a point beyond the building and beyond reality. He took hold of the boy's hand and they stepped towards the building together. And vanished.

On the other side of the hill the pursuer had cornered his quarry within a blind ravine. The hunted bravely turned to face the hunter. He nodded slightly, as if he knew that he would surely be vanquished. He was not wrong. The teenager drew forth a sinister twin-bladed sword and with an elegant, complex but single stroke simultaneously disembowelled and beheaded the man he had chased. Turning from the loathsome spectacle, he then sniffed about in the air, as if searching for something. Realising he would not find it, he threw his head back and screamed in rage. In his bitter disappointment—or was it purely malice?—he wreaked his sacrilegious vengeance on the body of the man but twenty seconds dead.

1

It was the kind of thing that only happened in films.

Jonathan Fenton was driving to a meeting. He was not looking forward to the meeting. He was under orders from his immediate superior to convince the powers that be that the structured cabling at their server farm was obsolescent and should be replaced urgently with a fibre optic network at a projected cost of £2million.

The trouble was he was a little too good at his job. He had ensured the relatively smooth running of the company's network for a little over 12 months. Of course this good work went largely unappreciated. But he was running out of useful hacks to enable the hardware to keep up with the increasing demands made of it and he knew that disaster was imminent.

He wasn't looking forward to the meeting, because frankly it was going to be very boring. There was nothing exciting about fibre optic cabling. For sure, some people would disagree with him about this. *Some very weird people*, he thought.

As he joined the southbound motorway, he reminded himself that this job was a means to an end. He was hopping on stepping stones through the fast-flowing river of technology. Instinct and good fortune had thus far kept him out of the water. He was acquiring

valuable experience. Pointless meetings with predestined outcomes were, no matter how irritating, an essential part of the journey.

He had scary diagrams coming out of his ears. His superiors would froth and foam and complain and contradict, but in the end they would reach the same inescapable conclusion. The fulcrum of their IT infrastructure was founded on ten year old technology and the company's younger competitors were far ahead in terms of capacity, simply because they started later with newer and more efficient resources.

The budget would be released; the meeting would conclude with a positive decision. But prior to that, a three hour charade was necessary in order for the purse bearers to justify their existence.

If Jon had known that the meeting would never take place, even if he had known the fraught and ultimately tragic circumstances that would prevent it, he would have smiled, ruefully.

It had been a mistake not to switch on the traffic announcement facility on his radio. His reverie was interrupted shortly after joining the motorway as he saw the flow of traffic becoming dense and sluggish like a post-courting swarm of drone bees. For the next six miles, the speedometer barely registered more than thirty miles per hour.

Eventually, he came upon the cause of the bottleneck. An extremely wide load was taking up the best part of two lanes, travelling slowly. The rest of the motorway occupants fought and jostled for the third lane, passing the hold up and then buzzing off at speed.

Jon experienced a pleasant feeling of relief as he anticipated passing the wide load. His hand dropped to the gear stick, ready to change down for some long-awaited acceleration. He looked over his shoulder, checking for a gap in the traffic in the outer lane. And then he almost drove his car into the central reservation in shock, as something shot over his right shoulder.

He snapped his head forward, trying to follow whatever it was, but it was gone. Perhaps a large bird had been sucked into the traffic stream and was now embedded in the radiator of one of the other vehicles. But it had seemed large for a bird.

Jon found his gap and pulled out. He was within six car lengths of the wide load and picking up speed, when something very ominous happened. The wide load consisted of three gigantic sections of pipe. The bore of these sections was so large that a lorry could comfortably drive through them. They dwarfed the vehicle towing them.

One of the sections was moving sideways off the trailer.

His actions of course defied all reason. As the gargantuan pipe rolled onto the motorway, the obvious, instinctive course of action would have been to brake and swerve away from the obstacle. Not to drive through it. But drive through it he did.

As his car flipped upside-down Jon's only thought was to protect his head. When the car hurtled out the other side, its passenger was unconscious and for the moment completely unaware of the carnage surrounding him.

Unconscious mind. Active mind. Why do horrors overwhelm at such times?



Ashley's fist pumped into Jonathan's nose twice and withdrew, pursued by a volcano of blood.

"*Déjà vu*," thought Jonathan, falling to the ground as was expected of him. He rolled to his side and received a swift kick for his troubles.

Ashley towered over him, his bleached white face snarling and shouted, "Yer weird pansy!" He then covered Jonathan's bloodied face with phlegm.

Briefly Jon wondered if he should use his advantage against the bully. As always, he concluded this would only make life worse. Relief swept over him as he detected the crowd parting like waves in

the wake of Mr Pratt. As Ashley's porcine fist raised itself to rain down once more, it was plucked from the air by the red-faced Pratt.

"He called me mum a fat slag!" bleated Ashley. And of course Pratt believed him.

"Yes, well that will do, thank you Ashley." Letting go of Ashley's arm, he turned to survey the damage and let out a quiet low whistle. "You really went for it this time, didn't you, you little psycho," he murmured. With unusual care, Mr Pratt assisted Jonathan to his feet and took him back into the building.

Jon took some pains to drip blood on Mr Pratt, but only on the back of his jacket, where he wouldn't notice until later. "I think I need to go to casualty, sir," was all he said. Pratt ignored him. So Jonathan fell to the ground unconscious. Thus ended one nightmare; now began another.



His alarm clock sounded odd. A single drawn out wail rather than short repeated chirps. Then a sound of rushing water joined in. *Why have I taken my alarm into the shower?* Jonathan thought sleepily.

The alarm became more insistent and the rushing sound louder and a Rottweiler was alternately biting his face and then licking it. The rushing became a roar and then the dog started hurling itself at Jonathan's right side. Thud. Patter patter patter. Thud. Patter patter patter. Thud. Patter patter patter. Thud. Patter patter patter. *Smash.*

And the dog landed on his lap. Only it wasn't a dog—it was a steering wheel. And it wasn't an alarm clock—it was his car horn. And the dog was licking blood off his face. No—there was no dog. But there was a buzzing in his ear. The biggest hornet in history was buzzing round him, buzzing angrily, buzzing, buzzing, saying, "ARE YOU ALL RIGHT MATE?"

Jon's eyes snapped fully open as his brain strove to shake off the visions that had briefly beset his bruised mind. An upside-down disembodied yellow head was six inches from his face—mercifully

out of the path of Jon's arterial fountain, which was real enough and which was moistening the steering wheel. The steering wheel was inexplicably resting in his lap, detached from the steering column. Jonathan noticed that he was still clutching the steering wheel with both hands. He told his hands to let go but they resolutely maintained their grasp.

"He's opened his eyes!" shouted the head—a fireman's, it seemed—and disappeared.

Without his permission, Jonathan's eyes scanned about, surveying the wreckage. His car, a beloved but ancient Ford Granada Scorpio was now somewhat narrower than he remembered it to be. It was also shorter. Isobel's furry gremlin was missing from its usual position, dangling from the rear-view mirror. Ah—the mirror was missing too. *Not a bad day all in all!* he thought ironically, chuckling to himself and then he passed out from the effort.



His nose was broken in seven places—'mashed' would be a better description—and there was a steering-wheel dent in his forehead. He had broken several ribs and his right shoulder was dislocated. Broken ribs were a misery. The dislocated shoulder would mend quickly, but—the ribs! How could he hug Izzy in this state?

The hospital was apparently anticipating neurological damage. That was advantageous since he was accordingly receiving extra pampering courtesy of the NHS. The disadvantage was that there was no chance of being left to pee in peace.

Jon had no intention of disclosing the impossibility of brain damage. Something had happened during the accident that he could not entirely explain, but he knew that his head was safe. The medics would examine the x-rays and conclude that their patient had an exceptionally hard head. The truth about how he had protected his head was much stranger.

He could not presently remember much about the accident. His

post-trauma hallucinations—including that horrible school memory—were his strongest impressions. The staff nurse, angel, whatever she was, had told him that a gigantic section of concrete pipe had rolled off a lorry in front of him, flattening several cars. It was loaded lengthways on the lorry and thus parallel to the motorway. He had allegedly driven his car through the centre of the pipe.

Of the four drivers who had a direct physical encounter with the pipe, Jon was the only survivor. He felt that his extraordinarily fortunate escape had caused him to be regarded with some suspicion by the staff and patients. It was almost as if they thought some witchcraft was at work. In Jon's mind, the good fortune of his escape was easily outweighed by the misery of being in the thick of the mêlée.

His wife was a long time coming. He hoped she would arrive soon. Wriggling to adjust himself in the bed, he felt himself losing consciousness again. *Blast, what a nuis...* was his last thought.



With the sweet, pure touch of consciousness came the pleasant awareness that he was looking into the most fabulous green eyes. Such eyes! Perfect white with grey-ringed irises and dark mottled green muscles linked to a further grey ring encompassing an ethereal blackness. Above and around these eyes swept extravagant lashes and high-arched light brown brows. A luxurious smile filled Jon's face at the proximity of his first love.

"Oh, my dear," she said and leant close to kiss him. Jonathan flinched involuntarily.

"They said you were in a bad way," she looked round almost guiltily, "but I thought maybe you had..."

"I didn't," Jon interrupted. Isobel relaxed visibly. "Only my brain, I think. Not sure how I did *that*," he continued. "But I seem to have lost some blood..."

"That was careless!" Izzy smiled sympathetically. Jonathan

smiled too, but only slightly. He was not eager to risk fainting again. "Are you all right though?" she continued.

"I think so. Don't think I'm going to manage my squash match with Mick tonight though." He raised an eyebrow. "Sorry to drag you out here like this, love."

Isobel smiled. But not her full-toothed heart-melting smile; just her lips-only smile. Jon knew that she must have serious concerns about him being in hospital. He shared those concerns. The underlying tension in their lives which they both tried to ignore, was always heightened in the presence of the medically qualified. "No trouble," she lied, "but I think a remarkable recovery is in order."

"How can I?" he questioned, looking down at the probes and devices attached. Isobel caught his meaning. What Izzy was suggesting was far too risky, especially here and now.

"How did you get here?" he asked, to divert attention away from himself.

"Doug dropped me off." Jon was slightly surprised by that. Her boss's personal assistant would rarely accept any disruption to his regimented schedule. "His mother is here in D wing." The terminal wing. That explained it.

"Oh, is she all right?" Jonathan wondered, slightly stupidly.

"Er—no. They're giving her only days. Doug has been coming in here every lunch time. He's looking awful..." She paused, reflectively. "Like you, actually!"

There was the sparkle he loved so much. Isobel was relaxing after her breathless arrival. Jonathan would recover, she had decided. Sensing this and not wishing the sympathy to end so soon, Jon let out a little whimper. Instantly Izzy's face fell. Jon grinned wickedly.

"Oh—you...!" and she started trying to tickle him through the bedclothes.

"Help! No! Aagh!" Jon let out a yelp of genuine pain, causing the six other occupants of the room to stare round.

"He deserved it!" Izzy announced to the ward—and the patients' eyes grew wider. They all looked away in very English embarrassment.

It would have been plain to see for anyone with eyes, that here were the best of friends. Both deeply concerned for each other's welfare, both trying to put the other at ease. Their banter continued for some time, until Isobel noticed that Jonathan was flagging.

"Are you okay?" she inquired. She sat gently on the bed, where she could best see his face and studied him intently.

"Um, I think I had better get some more sleep." He was feeling annoyingly worn out already. "What will you do now?"

She passed her hand over her face. "I'll have to get back to the office really. I've already cancelled two appointments—the work will be piling up..." There she was, her gorgeous but unmanageable auburn hair pulled tightly back, a few rebellious curls bursting out of the clip, dressed in a navy pinstripe trouser suit and appliquéd cream blouse, but girlishly sitting cross-legged on the bed and pouting most pleasingly. This was one of many moments when Jonathan wished he had his camera.

"I really meant tonight, though."

Misery descended over her face, only part mock. "I'll probably stay up festering until 3 o'clock, watching some useless Japanese B movie and then fall asleep snuggled on the settee with Mr Spencer." Mr Spencer was a four foot tall polar bear soft toy with frayed ears. He had become a substitute bed companion for Jon's wife whenever Jon was away from home overnight. Jonathan wasn't quite sure why only Mr Spencer's ears showed signs of wear. In truth, neither Isobel nor Jonathan liked to be separated from the other. But sometimes it was necessary, like now.

As an afterthought, Isobel smiled, as if she were making a joke. Jon didn't approve. "You've got work tomorrow," he said and frowned.

"You know I won't get any sleep though, so what's the point in trying?" Izzy retorted. Jon was aware that it was true. He counted himself exceptionally lucky to have such a devoted wife and was secretly pleased that she missed him and worried about him so much when he was away that she couldn't sleep.

They parted, wistfully; she to her office, he to his sleep. He prayed it would be dreamless.

2

There was an ominous silence in the temple of Belee'al. Klushere sat, crossed-legged in worship, resolved not to leave until he had his answer. He was concerned that they had been required to wait so long and he found that he was perspiring moderately in the intensity of the moment, although it was two hours before dawn and cool as yet. Inside he remained at peace. His disciples were becoming more nervous however and the cold stone floor drained their confidence along with their bodily warmth. They were fully aware that the longer the silence lasted, the more their own lives were at risk. And yet, to flee would incur greater risk still. And so they, the twenty Central Elect, remained kneeling a respectful distance from their Preceptor, anxiously awaiting his next word.

When Klushere spoke, it was in an ancient tongue, known only to the highest elect amongst them. He spoke in praise of the Ultimate Preceptor and begged him for a hearing. And then Belee'al replied. His voice was heard deep inside the blackest recesses of the hearts of all those present. Few besides Klushere understood the message.

I did not expect a meeting so soon my friend. There can be but one petition that brings you here. Often have we communed concerning this subject. You have pleased me greatly by your

cleansing of the High Congregation. And so now your time of satisfaction draws near.

Klushere could not suppress a sigh. He had worked and striven hard to hear these words from his master.

Indeed you fast approach the point in your training that will take you Beyond. When you enter Beyond, there you will find the object of your hate. You must bring him to me. Then, in his destruction, will you reach the final initiation.

Klushere smiled.

Ah yes. You know it well. You have learnt much these two decades and yes, I am pleased with you. Prepare yourself, therefore. Sixty sunrises hence I will allow you to pursue him. Then will you bring him to me. Then will you take your birthright. Then will we commune deeply.

The smile that had been on Klushere's mouth disappeared into an indescribable beatified look. Today he was hearing the promise he had longed for. His whole body and mind reeled with the shock of at last approaching his life's goal. With a supreme effort of will, he stayed sufficiently focused to hear the remainder of his master's message.

I must have you pure before you can begin. Devote yourself to sanctification for two months. Bring to me the arch blasphemer and purify yourself in his torment before me. Now go. Leave with me the one called Delturn.

The last sentence was spoken in their native language clearly for all to hear. Klushere's eyes opened with a look of triumph and determination. All of his disciples except for Delturn arose with him and followed behind as he exited the temple. As they left, Delturn could not help lowering his head in despair. He crouched there, trembling on the unforgiving rough hewn flagstones, tears flowing in spite of himself as he awaited his fate and his departure from this life.



The remaining nineteen of the Central Elect were overwhelmingly relieved to find their Preceptor in high spirits having left the temple. They now journeyed through a dense forest, on their way to a less formal meeting place. They drew comfort from his evident satisfaction and this helped them to keep their minds away from the fate of their former peer.

Sivian, the closest of the group to Klushere and the one amongst the disciples who had heard Belee'al most clearly, spoke respectfully to his mentor. "Preceptor, the Great Lord seeks the removal from office of Bars Medok, does he not?"

"You discern correctly, son Sivian. For many years has Medok blasphemed Belee'al and now he will suffer and learn penitence! I have looked forward to the day my master would sanction the removal of this vermin. It brings me pleasure indeed to know that he will at last feel the touch of my sword." Involuntarily he touched the straps of his back harness that held his ever-present weapon of ritual cleansing.

Bars considered himself to be a straightforward man. He championed justice (at least his own personal idea of justice, since all view the concept through tinted glasses) and despised oppression. Although he did not chair the High Congregation, taking the lower role of Director, his voice was greatly respected by the majority and the Chair, Hesdar ru Contin considered herself almost permanently indebted to this wise, powerful and mostly humble man who supported her and her retinue.

Bars Medok was an outspoken member of the ruling Congregation. It was known that some others of the High Congregation had started to immerse themselves in the more arcane practices of this planet. Bars had been quick to denounce any such activity amongst the elected rulers, asserting that the roots of these dark traditions lay in anti-democratic ideals; the elevation of the individual at the expense of the community; the domination of one's

will over another. Publicly all of the Congregation supported his views. Privately though, there were increasing numbers of people who sought the favour of Belee'al.

The Congregation was formed democratically, but the elected rulers were subsequently treated like royalty. The intention of the founders of this system was that those elected would aspire to just leadership. The incentives for those in office were supposed to encourage them to rule wisely enough to be re-elected. The success of the system was largely dependent on having a fair and benevolent Chair. Such was true at present. Amongst some of the lower ranks, there were those who were less scrupulous. Bars Medok was more aware of their murmurings than was Hesdar, the Chair—that was one of the things that made Bars so valuable to her. It was also the thing that made Medok more of a target.

The politics on Deb were largely peaceful at this time, thanks mainly to the brilliant and balanced team in office. Below the surface, however one could find the usual ambition, deceit and treachery and jostling for positions of honour, that may be found wherever one person has power over another and where humans are humans. Of late, the tension had increased since, while not publicly admitting it, some members of the Congregation had certainly been less private concerning their devotion to an ancient religion of Belee'al-worship—a religion understandably regarded with some suspicion and distrust by those not a party to it. Little was known about this religion by the uninitiated, but it was generally believed that the faith involved worship of a spirit presence who was said to sanction and encourage selfish ambition, psychological manipulation and even assassination.

"How will we take him Preceptor?" intoned Jerud, a lithe and muscular woman, much used by Klushere in covert kidnappings and assassinations.

"It must be by overwhelming force, in order to bring him into true humiliation before our Lord, my daughter." Klushere replied. Jerud

smiled. Not an evil smile particularly. More a smile of devotion and eagerness to accomplish a task to bring her further into favour with her two Lords—the one physical and the other spiritual. "A conference is necessary with the Chosen. Arrange it."

"Yes, my Lord," Jerud replied subserviently and melted away from the group.

Turning back to Sivian, Klushere asked, "What of the hospital assignment, son Sivian?"

"My Lord, it is well advanced. We have Belee'ans in key positions within the main administration centres for hospitals Rebke-side and Norvesh-side." Sivian picked at his short, well-groomed beard. "I am inclined to believe that we will have no difficulty in achieving your desired objective at short notice."

Klushere paused for a moment, plucking a berry from an overhanging tree, simply because it was there. Then, symbolically crushing it between thumb and forefinger and looking at Sivian across the flow of juice he said, "There must be no evidence of our influence, my son."

"None at all," Sivian replied.



The meetings of the Chosen were shrouded in even more secrecy than those of the Central Elect, if that were possible. The call to meet was traditionally signified by a particular symbol being affixed to a central monument, such as a local public timepiece. The symbol was written using a chalk-like substance and resembled a smear. Therefore any uninitiated onlooker would presume it was simply dirt or debris.

Once the symbol first appeared, the Chosen were to make it their business to propagate the sign in other similar places. They were then to attend the meeting place, always by thirty degrees of the sun after nightfall. The next day, the Chosen must covertly remove all traces of the sign, thus avoiding any false alarms. The system worked surprisingly well.

Apart from Jerud the leader, the identities of the Chosen were a closely guarded secret. Members attended meetings hooded and cloaked and respected mutual vows of privacy. This was understandable, since their joint ventures were rarely lawful. Should one member be caught, it was crucial that he or she be unable to reveal the identity of other members, even under duress. Members of the Belee'al cult, those gifted with Etherean skills, were obliged to consider carefully whether they truly wished to join the Chosen. Once a part of that group, desertion was not an option. Belee'al himself would reveal the identity of the deserter and the price for desertion was high.

Jerud took herself to Sang's tower clock at Plaedon Central, rendered herself invisible while out of sight and then scaled the outer face. Sang's clock was as popular with the Chosen as it was with regular citizens. It stood over thirty metres high, as Earth reckons them and the exterior decorations rendered by the architect Javorn Sang made the clock easily surmountable. Jerud took the climb slowly. Like many of her colleagues, although endowed with the power of the Ethereans she still found the task of remaining invisible arduous. She conserved her energy by taking regular breaks during her ascent.

She never failed to marvel at the view from this point. To her left as she leant against the clock, all of Hulladon was spread beneath her, with its unfussy architecture and spacious gardens. She could almost imagine herself settling in that quarter, in time. Immediately ahead was Plaedon Central—an intense area fighting to march in time with the capital, Rebke. And as she looked beyond Central, she could see in the distance the six towers of Rebke. In amongst those towers she knew, was the Seat of the High Congregation. Perhaps even now they were deep in discussion, analysing the trends of opinion of the electorate; puzzling over the current waves of crime in a usually peaceful metropolis. Her Lord Klushere had initiated many ventures

to keep the Ethereal Guard occupied while he extended his influence there unnoticed.

She reached the clock's plinth and there daubed her sign. A thrill overcame her as she thought of tonight's conference.



If a walker were to tarry awhile on the road between Plaedon and Rebke, at a certain point near a towering evergreen tree, she may be surprised to note a disturbance in the shady ground beneath that aged denizen. She might draw closer. Perhaps a small rodent is foraging amongst the fallen leaves; perhaps a large invertebrate has set up home there. And then a gust blows away the leaves and she can see neither beast nor plant there. Nothing grows or lingers where the tree alone has rights to the earth's nutrients. It is perhaps a figment of the imagination.

And yet—a strange sensation is experienced—as though one is watched by unseen eyes. An Ethereal noting this feeling would, as a learnt reflex, flick spiritual eyes over the Ether.

Of course none of the Ethereal Guard is here. The Chosen would never consciously enter their meeting place whilst the ever wary Guards looked on.

It is a wonder that the place had so long escaped the notice of those enemies of the Chosen. The site was, many aeons previously, a burial ground and an ancient temple. Perhaps such history provides some measure of protection. All Jerud knew was that the Chosen had never been disturbed here—not in living memory.

She took her place in the long underground chamber, near the vent through the hollow part of the tree above. It was natural that the leader of this group should select the most comfortable seat, but in truth Jerud had never noticed that she was in a prime position, as it were.

The Chosen tended to descend through the chamber ceiling at the opposite end, before materialising and illuminating their underground

lights. Jerud had a good view from where she sat. The anticipation made her smile.

She glanced momentarily at her notes, although she had no real need of them. In the past, their operations had required careful planning and precise timing. This time, however, things would be much more straightforward.

Cloaked figures had begun to appear. They seated themselves round the chamber and took a moment to meditate before the meeting began. It was not long before all were assembled. The Chosen were pathologically punctual. Often their lives depended upon it.

One of the Chosen, as if on cue, opened the meeting with a word of dedication to Belee'al. And then Jerud began.

"My friends; warriors and spies; thank you for coming tonight. I will not labour in lengthy introductions; my purpose is simple. Belee'al has requested that Bars Medok be captured, humbled and brought to him and Preceptor Klushere enjoins us to this task."

Murmurs of assorted varieties were heard in all quarters. Some of disdain, some of relief; but all expressing approbation.

"We will take numbers for this assignment and all of you will be needed." Jerud called out "one" and in turn, the others called out ascending numbers in a clockwork sequence round the chamber. These would be their assigned identities for the duration of the mission. Anonymity was retained so far as possible.

Jerud continued, "The Ethereans have been kept busy. I am delighted to note some of our own handiwork and would give credit where it is due!" This was something of an in-joke. Being one of the Chosen meant by definition receiving neither praise nor criticism for one's actions. Jerud could feel the twinkles in the eyes of her comrades without needing to see them.

Although without exception all of the Chosen could technically call themselves "Etherean," they preferred not to. That designation was reserved in their minds for their natural enemies, the Etherean

Guard.

"I also see that many others have rallied to our cause," Jerud proceeded, "although how much they are in support of us and how much in support of plain *insurrection*, I cannot say. Certainly though, having walked the paths around the Seat of the Congregation, I can tell that the Ethereans' presence is much diminished. I therefore favour a direct concentrated strike at the Seat. Do the Chosen concur?" This was an indication that the plan was open for discussion.

A few places to Jerud's right, a man's deep voice questioned, "It seems to me that a strike will require all of our efforts. How then are we to ensure that the Ethereans do not call the reserves to assist?" It was a good question. Only with the bulk of these protectors of order occupied at other places away from the Seat, could the Chosen hope to stand against the Congregational guard. "Member twenty-three," he appended, so that Jerud could address him direct if she wished.

A somewhat shriller male voice interjected from across the room, before Jerud could respond, "Member five. Twenty-three need not be concerned. I have reason to believe that the gambling community may be relied upon to begin a recruiting campaign at a moment's notice." That would certainly assist.

"The Ethereans won't like that!" a woman concurred, with a chuckle, without identifying herself.

Jerud sounded hopeful when she asked, "Are you sure, five? I had considered approaching a magnate for whom I occasionally freelance myself with a direct request."

Five replied, "We need not stoop to begging, my lady. I have certain influence there and I know that the leaders shall be glad of an excuse to begin an incursion within Rebke. There are many who feel that the time is right." In a relatively short time, the Ethereans had become deeply unsettled by the outbreaks of violence seen in and around Rebke. The truth is that after decades of peace, few had thought it likely that the Guard would be required to engage in

combat of any sort. They were never to be underestimated of course. But at present, it was true that they appeared to be sufficiently stretched to allow the Etherean Guard contingent at the Seat to thin perceptibly. This was an obvious cue of sorts, evidently seen by Belee'al. Little if anything escaped the Ultimate Preceptor's notice, particularly where it concerned the Ethereans.

"Very well then five. I would request the campaign begin at nightfall two days hence. Could the gamblers be ready in this time?" Jerud asked.

"My lady, I am certain of it," five replied simply.

And thus was the only known obstacle overcome. The rest of Jerud's briefing contained little for discussion. The Chosen were each assigned their places for the attack. It would take place late at night. Bars Medok would no doubt still be hard at work, but there would not be many others around. There were a few places where diversions and smokescreens would be required—more than one might imagine, since there were more than just the three dimensions to contend with. But the Chosen were not strangers to such things.

Most of those not engaged in diversions would be required to fight Ethereans hand to hand. A couple of members were assigned projectile weapons, but these would be reserved for use against the regular security corps since Ethereans are for all intents and purposes immune to bullets and suchlike. Even the fighting would be diversionary. Not many of the Chosen would hope to succeed in sustained combat against superior numbers of Ethereans—not even complacent Ethereans.

By their shape and size, Jerud could loosely recognise some of the people around her. This helped her in selecting two particular members whose skills she knew she could rely on to assist her in the delicate task of the kidnapping itself.

The plans concluded, Jerud gave the redundant order for all to rest and meditate. She closed with a brief commitment to Belee'al and they then left as silently and secretly as they had come.

3

When Jon met Isobel, he was a naïve undergraduate of Stone University, in his final year of a software engineering degree. She was a postgraduate at the same university, on a one-year business administration course. Jonathan was rather too wrapped up in computing to have any time to consider romance; Izzy was emerging from the tatters of a failed marriage and was at that time firmly convinced that all men were scum.

All men? No. During her life there was one man who had been ever constant. He had supported her through her various romantic dramas—culminating in a grand disastrous finale: her marriage part way through her first degree to a charismatic but thoroughly irresponsible art student. Her father had never criticised, except in a constructive sense. Although he expressed concerns and reservations, when eventually he was proved right he never took the opportunity to claim psychic prowess or perceptive superiority. Isobel knew that her lovely dad would never let her down or abandon her. Indeed he doted on his effervescent daughter. Yes her father was okay. *But to hell with the rest of them!*

Neither Jon nor Isobel were looking for a relationship. This meant that they were both ideally placed to begin a friendship without

romance or sex getting in the way.

As is often the case, an ultimately great and tender romance had an inauspicious and commonplace beginning. They could both trace the start of their relationship to an incident concerning the communal printer in the chemistry department's computer room. The chemistry department was unique amongst the university's departments in this respect: The department heads appreciated that if they opened up a facility to the wider university community, this would give them a material advantage when petitioning for finance. This was the only area in which any department of the university saw beyond its own self-interests.

It was a homely autumnal day, with no meteorological menace about the air—just the sleepiness of nature post-breeding and undergraduates pre-essay deadlines. Contributing to the lethargy of the moment, more importantly, was the fact that it was nine o'clock on a Saturday morning. Most of the university community was not due to rise for at least another two hours.

Izzy was having trouble printing. No—it is unfair to say that of such an intelligent young lady. The printer was militantly and belligerently refusing to cooperate with a simple request. If that were not enough to irritate her beyond expression, the geek on the other side of the room doubtless knew the appropriate incantation to utter in order to cajole the machinery into submission. He was at that moment smirking over her impotence, letting her stew for a minute before he strode over and asserted his masculine dominance over all things mechanical. She was persuaded that this must be his attitude at least—she would not humiliate herself by actually looking at him to check.

Isobel refused to give any impression that she was a damsel in distress, requiring rescuing. Indeed, she endeavoured by strategic use of body language and looks of concentration, to convey the message that she was entirely in control of the situation.

Two observations had led her to deduce that he was of the IT inclination. Firstly, he had arrived shortly after her, at eight a.m. Only a serious computer freak could be that desperate for computer contact. And secondly, he had been tapping away furiously, in distinct mockery of her hunt-and-peck two-fingered style.

As the frustration deepened, she walked over to the Hewlett-Packard (for that was the fiendish company responsible for spawning this obnoxious creation), muttering dark imprecations under her breath. The printer sat there oozing supreme indifference. No lights were flashing, but the power light was on. She knew enough to appreciate that this indicated it had either not received her request, or had chosen to ignore it. She strongly suspected the latter.

"The queue's jammed," the other occupant of the room offered helpfully. Drat the man. She gave a grunt in reply that could have meant anything from, "Of course I knew that," to, "Drop dead you technofreak." He tapped away loudly and then suddenly the printer sprung into life.

He's made a pact with Satan, she concluded. Right on cue, the voice in her head told her not to be so ungrateful. As a penance, she flashed a slight hint of a smile and said, "Thanks." It wasn't worth it—he was long since past the moment and deep into programming.

Jonathan had been aware of the problem for some time. Although not conscious of this, Isobel had started tutting and groaning the moment it became apparent her printout would be delayed. Jon found tutting very distracting, so he looked for a way to end it. Covertly he noticed that the woman kept looking across at the printer. He decided to investigate.

To start with, he found out who was currently logged on, from the central server. He filtered this list so that it only showed the computers in the chemistry department. There were few people logged on at that time. One of them was him. Several others showed hung processes, suggesting failures to log out. The only other active

login process must be hers. He made a mental note of the user id associated to the process.

Next, following his hunch, he listed the spooled printer jobs and saw in the list a job bearing the same user id. There was one job ahead of it in the queue that seemed to have been sat there for many hours. *Bingo.*

Jon had picked up several administrator passwords during the course of his studies. They were less powerful than the superuser's, but they gave access to many useful facilities nevertheless and they were less frequently changed than the superuser's. He logged on as pg12rg, a CompSci postgraduate called Russell Grew. Russ's account—unbeknown to its owner who was at that moment blissfully dreaming of a beautiful young undergraduate called Helen—was then responsible for removing the stalled print job.

Shortly after this he was vaguely aware of someone thanking him, but he had by that time switched back to his text editor and was compiling a large chunk of program code in the background. He wasn't generally obsessive about computers, but when he was programming, all other reality faded around him.

Around ten o'clock he was recalled to consciousness by the lady rising and saying, "Well, it's been a blast." Although only four words had passed between them in the previous two hours, he felt confident that this comment was directed at him. He was unsure whether she intended to be sarcastic or ironic, but being a generous-hearted fellow, he assumed the latter and therefore looked up and smiled broadly at the joke.

Isobel, who hadn't decided whether she was being sarcastic or ironic, or even whether she was talking to the computers or to the man, smiled back. Her smile was less reluctant than the last one, because she was pleased to have amused someone. She berated herself all the way back to her room for smiling at him, but the damage was done.

The woman had looked away quickly after the smile and Jonathan gazed after her for some minutes when she left the room. Without being wishy-washy or unduly sentimental, he was telling himself that he had never before seen such a pretty face lit up so brilliantly by so slight a turning of the lips. His memory had taken a snapshot of the face at that instant and he was playing it over and over. He couldn't believe that he had been so engrossed as to overlook how stunningly attractive this curly red-haired, green-eyed lady was.

His thoughts lingered on the woman and the little that had passed between them. Then, with resolve, he turned back to his screen. He had memorised the user id with little effort—these facts stuck in his mind whether he told them to or not. A quick directory query elicited her name from the university's LDAP server. Mrs Isobel Leary. *Mrs. Oh well.* Telling himself to forget it, he continued with his programming. Very quickly, Mrs Leary was a million miles away from his thoughts.

Izzy had not been so lucky dismissing him from her mind. She had not taken him in at all really, but she knew that there had been a connecting moment. It was this that irritated her. *Don't start that foolishness again,* she told herself.



Their paths crossed again, not long after this and under similar circumstances. The following Thursday, Isobel made her way to the open computer lab in the campus library to continue working on her project. Although there was no formal reasoning behind the decision, she had decided to avoid the chemistry department, since she now associated it with a man who for the past five days had tormented her remorselessly. Jon was oblivious to the trauma he was inflicting.

Unfortunately, shortly after Isobel had told herself not to start 'that nonsense' again, the face of the man impressed itself on her consciousness, without her bidding. Before she could replace it with a less male-centred image, she noticed how full it was of life,

tenderness and fun. In truth, none of these characteristics could readily be discerned by any other observer. The fact was, Izzy was irrepressibly romantic, in spite of her past bitter experiences and these briefly suppressed feelings were surfacing again without her permission. Her romantic sensibilities imputed noble virtues on a man who was reasonably attractive and who indeed did possess those virtues. But how such diverse and nebulous emotions could be identified on a face that was concentrating deeply on programming a new optimised network protocol library in C++, the average dispassionate onlooker would not be able to say.

The experience was leaving her feeling displeased with the poor young man and unwilling to renew his acquaintance. On this Thursday, she was less keen than ever to see him.

Evidently a higher power had induced her to enter the library at that time. She stood for a moment on the threshold of the computer room, unable to accept what her eyes were telling her. That *man* was sitting directly opposite the door and worse still, her entrance had coincided with him looking up from his work. The end result was that Isobel stared directly into his intense blue eyes for several long seconds, blinking in consternation.

The first thing that leapt into Jonathan's head was her user id. The second thing that appeared were two terrible words. Mrs Leary. *Alas for that 'Mrs!'* He blanched and looked back at his screen.

Isobel was now in a dichotomy. To leave the room would be to admit everything—to admit, even, things that were not true. Leaving would tell him that she was desperately in love with him and was in fear that she would faint in his presence. She could not allow his ego to reach such conclusions. But on the other hand, to stay was equally intolerable. Their eyes would be sure to meet. He would be sure to persuade himself that he could conquer her with one, deft phrase: "Do you come here often?" And he would doubtless flash her a brilliant smile, made all the brighter by the contrast of ivory teeth against his

ebony skin.

At times like these, it is fortunate indeed that the human mind moves swiftly. Isobel made her decision in less than two seconds—although to her, it felt like two minutes. She resolved to pretend that the man meant nothing to her—less than nothing—and she would take her place in the room like any ordinary person. She noticed that he seemed a little flustered, having met her gaze. This comforted her; it meant that she had the upper hand. He was embarrassed, so she would pretend to be oblivious.

As she moved into the room, she noticed initially to her dismay (which she tried not to show) that the only free computer was adjacent to her nemesis. *Even better*, she thought ultimately, *I can feign disinterestedness at close quarters*. She did not quite believe herself, though.

When Isobel sat down next to him, putting her bag on the desk in between them rather firmly, he noted, Jon offered a quick, "Hi," in recognition. She may be married, so he thought, but she had smiled at him, after all. The greeting was returned, but the conversation proceeded no further.

After having said, "Hi," Isobel cursed herself a thousand times. How much better it would have been to look at him in puzzlement and revulsion, with an expression that could only have meant, "Do I know you? If not, I don't want to." But no, she had said, "Hi," and in so doing, she had admitted that she recognised him, that the chemistry department incident had taken place and that she had made the oft-regretted error of smiling at him.

Jonathan had a terminal window open. Although he was physically at a Windows machine, he was electronically running programs on the Unix server, in another room. To do this required a terminal window. The advantage of this is that most of the screen becomes black and a black screen reflects objects much better than a screen full of multicoloured images. He was therefore able to sneak

glances at Isobel in the reflective surface of his monitor, even though he knew he shouldn't.

She was dressed in an exceptionally fetching cream linen trouser suit. Beneath the jacket was a jade top. She wore no socks or stockings, just fine-strapped cream sandals. The overall effect was devastatingly charming. *Mr Leary is an extremely lucky man, he thought.*

It is hard to say why it never occurred to him that she may be widowed or divorced. Perhaps it was because she was so young. Equally unfathomable is why he never checked the ring finger of her left hand—for he would surely have found it empty. Perhaps he was so far involved in computing, that he had only a passing understanding of women and relationships. Certainly any other man would have looked to the left hand before anywhere else.

Jon had no serious thoughts of romance, or even friendship. But that did not prevent him from looking and from being civilised. His coffee break was nearing. University policy was that drinks were not allowed in the computer room. All the employed computer technicians broke this rule however and the students followed their example. The room was rarely visited by anyone who would particularly care. So Jon rose to fetch himself a drink and it occurred to him that it would only be chivalrous to offer to obtain one for his neighbour.

He gently imposed himself on her consciousness. "I'm going to get a drink—can I get you one?"

Isobel was instantly wary, defensive and closed. "No thank you," she politely but firmly returned.

"Would it make a difference if I told you I was gay?" Jon asked, shocking himself and the lady equally. He covered up his controversial question with a huge smile.

Eventually, Isobel chuckled to herself and then relented. "I'm sorry. It's a very kind offer. I would love a cup of tea—no sugar, if

that's all right—but you must let me pay for mine." She had that look about her of a woman asserting her independence and taking on all male chauvinists who would dare to challenge her. Jon thought it prudent to accept the compromise.

"Sure. Back in a sec."

And so did the friendship begin. Very simply; no pomp or ceremony; no excess of hormones to announce the arrival of something new and exciting. There was an element of attraction on both sides, admittedly, but there so often is between a man and a woman and it so rarely comes to anything.

No—this relationship developed from Jon showing common courtesy to Isobel as she gradually defrosted, reluctantly accepting that she could not shut off all men forever. They grew closer as friends and discovered how to trust one other. Jon soon learnt that Isobel was divorced. He discovered with surprise that there was life beyond computers, while Isobel was reminded that there can be life after marriage.

Their friendship matured, teetering on the brink of deep romance, where it hovered for some time. And then Jon broke the news that would surely make or break the relationship.

4

"Ah, Delturn."

It was definitely not Belee'al's voice. The Ultimate Preceptor's voice was always heard with the spiritual rather than physical ear; its tone was generally smooth, silky, oppressive, dark and sometimes menacing. This voice however was thin, croaky, rasping and laryngitic and definitely human. The first syllable of his name had been spoken with considerable contempt, Delturn felt, as if it meant the same as 'rodent faeces' or 'latrine scum'.

Why wasn't he dead yet? Or at least in unspeakable torment? Delturn could not initially locate the speaker. It was dark in the temple and the tears still stinging his eyes encumbered his view. Automatically though, he looked round.

A sneering little grey-faced elf-like human was leaning on a short staff, glaring at him. He was dressed in the most ridiculously pretentious manner with a flouncy blouson, three-quarter length flared pantaloons and yards of bouffant trimming at every incongruous opportunity. Kneeling down, Delturn was about the same height as the diminutive croaking man. Delturn was considerably better dressed. The man spoke.

"Were the decision mine, I would surely not let you live. You

disgrace the Elect with your conniving ways." He raised a withered hand to halt Delturn's protest and continued, "You know that Belee'al sees all and yet you flagrantly denounce him to your family and friends, as if he would not know! Yes, long slow torture and agonising death is too good for you."

Drops of spittle left the creature's mouth as he spoke, some of them landing in Delturn's face, making him blink involuntarily. Delturn had been about to defend himself, but he knew the accusation to be true. Who wouldn't denounce Belee'al publicly? On the other hand, this evil gnome was apparently suggesting that Delturn would be allowed to live—under what restrictions he could not imagine—but at least there was a glimmer of hope.

Two beady grey eyes looked out at Delturn from folds of flesh barely attached to the thin frame of the dwarf's head, with its oversized brow. How old was this creature? One hundred would have been Delturn's conservative estimate.

"Well, Vomit-stain—what have you to say for yourself?" it squawked. It was managing to cough, splutter and sneer at the same time. Under different circumstances, the effect would have been highly comical.

Delturn's brain had seized and his thoughts were coming slowly. This must be Al'aran Kytone. He had heard Klushere speak of a noble and long-standing servant of Belee'al who went by this name—indeed Klushere had mentioned that he had personally been trained by the venerable and respected Preceptor. To Delturn's certain knowledge, Al'aran had never revealed himself at any of the meetings of the Central Elect, not whilst Delturn had been a member. But this must be him. He felt a profound sense of disappointment—he had hoped for a stately warrior figure, not this shrivelled barely living carcass now standing before him.

"Grand Preceptor Kytone?" Delturn inquired, obeisantly.

The little man snorted, which appeared to be affirmative.

The kneeling disciple chose his words carefully, correctly guessing that his life depended on it. "It causes agony to hear that I have grieved Belee'al. Please tell me how I may atone?"

Al'aran smiled briefly to himself. A cunning, selfish smile. "The Ultimate Preceptor has a task for you. If you complete this task successfully, you may turn away his anger and he may yet spare you." Delturn was more than ready for whatever was to be required of him. If it meant going beyond the end of the world for his Lord, he surely would do it. He expressed his willingness, by a nod.

"Do you know what your master Klushere desires more than anything?" A trail of sputum was collecting on Al'aran's chin. Delturn tried not to look at it.

"Grand Preceptor, Klushere wishes to possess all the powers of an Etherean, I believe—does he not?" Delturn asked the question as though he were unsure of the answer. He was determined not to seem in any wise threatening to the learned man before him. In truth, he knew full well that this was what Klushere had striven for, for the last twenty years. It was no secret.

Al'aran moved in close to Delturn until his eyes were six inches from Delturn's. Delturn, still kneeling struggled not to flinch from Al'aran's rancid breath. And then he bellowed into Delturn's face, "BE NOT SNIVELLING WITH ME! ANSWER FULLY!"

Delturn's heart started pounding again. For a moment he had forgotten the precariousness of his position. He thought hard—his memory was not serving him well at that point. "Erm," he stammered slightly, "Klushere wishes to capture a person that he believes—no that will," he corrected, "confer on him full unlimited Etherean powers."

"Yes, and?" The elf studied him closely.

"And Klushere does not know where that person is, though he has searched for most of his lifetime." He did not add what most people thought in the honesty of their hearts *and surely this person must be a*

figment of Klushere's imagination. If twenty years of searching had revealed nothing, the search was either pointless, insane or both.

Al'aran's eyes narrowed. A line of drool was starting to hang from his wizened chin. He walked round behind Delturn and then whispered in his ear, quoting part of an ancient Precept, "The enlightened man will find his that which he seeks, *Beyond.*" He expelled sufficient air with the last word, to cause a drool strand to connect with Delturn's cheek. Amazingly, Delturn stayed still, although he could feel his jaw muscles clenching. "You will seek the goal, Beyond, Vomit-stain."

Beyond. Beyond reality. Beyond the realms of the living. Beyond his world. This, one of the most obscure Precepts, spoke of another place. Delturn had always assumed that it simply referred to the Ether in which the Ethereans moved. But Al'aran must mean something more. By his arts and with the aid of the Chosen, Klushere had scoured all of the Ether that was within his grasp. Delturn was sure that had Klushere's quarry been hidden within the Ether, the hunt would have ended long ago. So Beyond must be something else. He waited for Al'aran to explain.

The silence lasted so long that, had it not been for the feeling that Al'aran's eyes were burning holes into the back of Delturn's head, he would have assumed that the aged man had fallen asleep.

Intense pain! His back was on fire and again the tears were in his eyes. Al'aran was shrieking, "How much more time will you waste? Are you planning to leave without any preparations? Are you as empty-headed as you are insolent?" In spite of himself, Delturn sprang up and adopted a stance for combat. Al'aran was brandishing his staff menacingly, his face grim. No doubt a blow from this stick had caused the pain in Delturn's back.

Slowly and viciously Al'aran snarled, "Oh please do boy. How I long to wipe you from history." Delturn formed a strong impression that Al'aran was considerably more powerful than he looked. Wisely,

he backed down.

"I am sorry, Grand Preceptor. Habit forces me..."

Al'aran glared for a moment and then he actually smiled. "Perhaps there is hope for you yet then. Now begone. Return to me prepared, in fifteen degrees of the sun." Delturn moved, but Al'aran raised a claw-like hand. "Tell no one. See no one." With that, he turned his back and withdrew into the shadow of the temple.



Being one of the least accomplished of the Ethereans in the service of Belee'al, Delturn found the task of maintaining invisibility—let alone intangibility—very draining. He was a slight man and often felt that he had few reserves of energy. He compensated for this by his religious fervour at cult meetings. In private he was exceptionally committed to his spiritual masters but he never felt that he was particularly gifted at serving them. His development and honing of Etherean skills had been long-winded and painful.

As he walked free of the temple and its heavy influence, the fear of death ebbed. He could now see that he had been selected for an important mission, because of his passion and devotion. No—Belee'al could not kill him. Delturn was too valuable. His heart beat faster for a moment, but this time with pride, not fear. He thought of Klushere and his strange position of honour before Belee'al. Surely that place of honour belonged to a true Etherean, such as Delturn! Perhaps now was a chance to prove his worth.

The temple was well hidden deep within a lush forest area—part of the cultivated conservation reserve northwest of Rebke, Deb's capital. At this time of night he was unlikely to encounter any travellers or nature lovers. Rather than fade to the Ether, he saved his energy for later and set his face towards his home in the west side of Rebke.

It was out of the question to use a vehicle piloted by one of the

Etherean pilots, so Delturn made use of one of Deb's exotic mechanical forms of transport, a rey. He hoisted himself into the centre saddle of the three-wheeled self-propelled contraption that he called his own and began the strange arm gyrations and leg pulsations that were required to move the vehicle forwards. People often asked of the rey, "How do you steer it?" and Delturn would reply with humour, "I don't. I crash often."

Steering a rey is truly an art form and difficult to master. The arms operate the single forward wheel and the brakes. The legs each operate a rear wheel. And so the theory goes that working one leg faster than the other will cause the vehicle to turn. That was the theory. Delturn had often left the road and found himself admiring the local flora and (surprised) fauna somewhat more closely than he had intended. But still it was ten times faster than walking.

By this means he arrived at his home within a few minor degrees of the sun. At that point he became invisible and intangible, to avoid disturbing his family until safe within his chamber. Inspiration forsook him. He had no idea what to pack. He presumed he should not bring more than he could comfortably carry. A weather proof garment, some warm under layers, a few modest preening items (he flinched whilst packing them, sure that Al'aran would disapprove, but equally sure that he would regret leaving them). Instilled in the Ether once more, he explored the victuals stored at home and selected those that he considered to be most compact and nutrient-rich. The fact that they were also the most noxious items in the pantry is an odd coincidence strangely universal throughout the many realms of humans.

He wrote a short note to his parents. He had been called away on business unexpectedly and did not know how long he would be gone. They were not to worry; he had taken a few provisions for the journey and would see them again soon.

Delturn was a mass of contradictions. He hated deceiving his

parents but equally he hated disappointing his spiritual masters. His morality clashed with his spirituality and his loyalties were divided repeatedly until the barest sliver remained for each allegiance. The letter contained not one scrap of truth and yet Delturn believed strongly in honesty in his family relationships. And thus do those forever fecund sisters *pride* and *power* give birth to corruption.



Al'aran descended to the lower levels of the temple. Here the air was more to his liking—redolent with age and mystery. He had spent many years here in these catacombs, giving expositions on the Precepts to those most favoured by Belee'al—a few select members of the Central Elect—and training the band of assassins known as the Chosen. Here also, below his living quarters, easily accessed by a directly connecting staircase, were the dungeons of anguish. In Kytone's mind it was right and proper that all those who denied the authority of Belee'al should atone for their heresy. He had no difficulty with the ideas of torture and murder. They were merely part of his dutiful service to his Master—whose every word was to be obeyed without question.

He took the stair now, down to the room reserved for blasphemers. It was illuminated in the dreariest manner imaginable. A sputtering candle-like device in one corner ever threatened to expire and plunge the hapless captive (whomever that might be) into abominable darkness. Al'aran liked the effect. He surveyed the room, checked the manacles, glanced over his simple instruments of pain and clucked to himself distractedly.

"Medok. How I have been looking forward to your company here," he said. The room was empty apart from Al'aran himself, but in his mind he could clearly see the politician Bars Medok in those chains. Trapped, defeated and beyond the reach of the Ethereans. None of that accursed brood could find their way here. Belee'al, the Ultimate Preceptor had seen to that.

He picked up a knife and held it up to the flickering light. Then, spinning round he hurled it in the direction of the manacles. It embedded itself in the wooden panels beyond—but in Al'aran's mind's eye, it had met flesh and been rewarded with a scream.

It will be a pleasant duty, he thought.

5

There are many spheres of existence in the known universe. The physical sphere is well known and observed by all those of us who have the benefit of physical senses. From the wealth of documentation testifying purely to physical phenomena, one could be pardoned for assuming that there is no other existence. This assumption would be far from the truth however.

The spiritual sphere of existence is less well known. There are a few who have learnt to perceive this other dimension and those most adept could tell you that the spiritual realm is almost wholly coextensive with the "reality" we see and feel. Neither realm can exist without the other. Without flesh, man is nothing. Without spirit, man is less than nothing. We rely on our bodies to sustain our spirits, but without the spirit, the body would become as dust.

Those who undertake to dabble in separating body and spirit do so at great risk. Few can be chosen and gifted to exercise control over these two realms. Men rule the mortal, physical world and angels the immortal, spiritual world. There are some men however, who can pass between worlds as they will. Fortunate indeed the man with this skill, honed and perfected. But oh! how open is it to abuse.

We may not challenge the One who dispenses such power. His

concepts of justice and equality are hard to fathom and often elude us. Suffice it to say that in the course of time, in galaxies other than ours, evil and just men alike have found themselves strangely set apart, with understanding, insight and sense beyond the ordinary, physical realm. Such men are the Ethereans. Such men are they, who may at will walk in the shadows, insubstantial as the mists, as elusive as the desert mirage. Such, one may venture to guess, was Jonathan.

Jon was not at all aware of the extent of his strange gift. Since his early teens, he had known that he had a hidden 'muscle', which when flexed, rendered him physically transparent. Beyond that, he had little comprehension of the mysterious other world in which he moved. His parents knew their adopted son was talented, but they gave him no cause to think that he should experiment or learn more about an ability that would, to their way of thinking, lead to him being further ostracised. At least that was their given reason. From overheard conversations, he was inclined to believe there was more to their concern than that. Whatever the cause, he was carefully drilled that he should reveal his secret to no one and that should temptation to practise overcome him, he must always ensure he was in a private place first.

In reality, his parents did not fully understand. They knew he was different; they knew he was special; but they had no clear idea why. Neither had Jon. Early into their friendship, Isobel guessed that there was something different about Jon. She had not probed though, since she felt sure that he would tell all, in his own time. This showed uncanny good sense.

As the months passed, it became clear to the two that their lives would run together for a good while. Their relationship had mischief, infrequent arguments and a deep common understanding; in short, all the ingredients of a love of promise.

Some six months after Jon and Isobel first admitted they were 'going out', the strain of secrecy had become too much for Jon.

Despite the stern admonishment of his parents, Jon felt that he could—and *must*—trust this woman he loved, with the truth.

The academic year was drawing to a close. Jon was in a flurry of final examinations and Isobel was working hard on her business model project. Their increased workload meant that they were spending even more time with each other, if that were possible, quietly studying.

It was a Wednesday night. Jon had hoped to speak to Isobel at the weekend, but her parents had come to visit and that had been more than enough for him to handle. He had buried his need to talk, but it now surfaced once more. The time was hardly appropriate—he had a fuzzy logic control systems exam in the morning and he could not afford a late night. But they would be talking for some time.

He had been staring blankly at a text book for a while. When he looked up, Isobel had already noticed how distracted he was. She was about to ask him how he was doing, but something in his look halted her.

The muscles along his jaw line were working silently and his brow was furrowed. "Izzy, my love—I have something very important to tell you." Her heart froze. Here came the 'let's be friends' speech. Her reaction was to be quite revealing to her, since it made her realise how much more she wanted from their relationship. She did not have time to consider though. He continued, "There's something I've wanted to tell you for a long time. I have been afraid of telling you this, but I know you love me and I can trust you with this." Isobel nodded reassuringly, because Jon had started looking worried and tearful. He was not prone to crying.

"There's no easy way to explain this and no way you'd believe me if I just told you, so I'll show you." He stood up, walked over to a coffee table, picked it up and placed it in the middle of the room. Of all the things he could have done, this oddly was the most reassuring. The cynical, still hurting parts of Isobel's mind and heart could not

begin to associate furniture moving with a forthcoming confession of infidelity or murder. She leant back in her chair and started twirling some stray curls with her right index finger, as she often did when concentrating.

Jon was speaking and she caught every word. "This is going to be a little freaky. No—this is going to be totally weird. You'll probably want to run out of the room screaming." Again the troubled look.

"I'm all ears Jon. Is this where you admit you're an alcoholic drag queen and perform your exotic lap dancing routine on the coffee table?" Serious moments always made Isobel jest. Jonathan snorted, but said nothing. Instead he narrowed his eyes and focused on the table. Isobel thought she saw the table levitate, but then realised that was a figment of her imagination. What was not a figment of her imagination was Jon's subsequent slow and deliberate walk *through* the table.

She lowered her voice. "Do that again," she murmured. Jon obliged. He retraced his steps through the furniture and then returned. Finally, he sat down, *in* the coffee table. His waist upwards appeared to be resting on the table top, while disembodied legs could be seen below.

Jon crossed his legs and assumed an apologetic look. Isobel started repeating under her breath, "No way," all the while shaking her head whilst her red locks trembled.

After the twelfth repetition, Jon quietly replied, "*Yes* way. And there's more. Are you ready?"

"Are you joking? This beats the drag act hands down!" Jon smiled. Again he closed his eyes almost completely, but this time, the rest of him followed. It is hard indeed to describe, but a similar effect can be experienced thus: If one were to sit in a darkened room and relax, eyes closing slowly, continuing to look through the narrowing slits; at the point where reality starts to merge with darkness, solidity itself almost seems to fade. This was how Jon appeared to close in

upon himself.

When the transition was complete, Isobel blinked at thin air. She leant forward in her chair, but finding that posture no better suited to grasping the impossible, she slumped back again. She grabbed hold of an empty coffee cup next to her and sniffed it for traces of whisky, or hallucinogenic substances. Her nose had unfortunately ceased to work. At least she thought it was still working, but it was as if all of her sensory input had been re-routed to her mouth and the effect was to make her jaw drop, her mouth drool and her eyes bulge alarmingly. It seemed to her that steam was coming from her open mouth, but this was probably another trick of the senses. The mother of all shivers ran the full length of her spine.

Whilst her eyes remained glued to the table, Jon quietly reappeared, back in his chair. They sat in silence for half a minute. When Izzy broke the silence, it was to utter the greatest profundity that the most educated and eloquent of theoretical physicists could have spoken under similar circumstances. "Whoah." That really did sum it up most succinctly.

Her first degree had been in prosthetics and her science background now caused a thousand questions to rush forward. They all clamoured for attention at the front of her mind, crowding each other out, elbowing and jostling for position. Eventually, a little question small in stature but large in implications slipped past the noisy crowd. "Do you do this often?"

Jon was visibly relieved. She had remained in the room somehow, although he had been expecting her to flee. "Not really that often. Perhaps once a week, of a Saturday night before bed, just to remind myself I can. And then maybe in the morning, if I really don't feel like getting up." He looked up at the ceiling.

"I don't get it."

"The thing is, it's a lot less strain to move around, whilst I'm invisible or intangible. It's like my body is gone and I'm lighter than

air." That made sense. How many times had Izzy lain in bed snuggled under the covers with bleary morning eyes, fantasising that she was already up and getting washed? How wonderful it would be at such times, to rise effortlessly and wander about, waiting for the body to wake up, but not hampered by its slothfulness. Isobel was simultaneously jealous and in awe.

She questioned him for several hours that night, both of them forgetting their academic duties, as they had a dozen times before. Isobel became more and more surprised, frustrated and incredulous that Jon knew little about the extent of his abilities and had not been inclined to investigate. Did he still need to breathe when he was intangible? He hadn't really noticed. Why didn't he fall through the ground when he lost his physical presence? He didn't know. Could he make his hands pass through his own body? He hadn't tried. How long could he stay invisible? It was no real effort, but he hadn't experimented. Had he ever become invisible in order to eavesdrop on other people's conversations about him? No, that had never occurred to him (although his embarrassed look belied his response). Had he ever become invisible in order to spy on girls? A huge smile and a simple shake of the head. Jon was intensely moral, so she could believe that, at least.

Did he have any other secrets? Not that he could think of. And it was then that Isobel knew. She thought back to her reaction, when she had feared he was about to call off their romance. He was the man she had been waiting and hoping for, even while she was married before.



It would be misleading to report that their subsequent marriage was inevitable. In the long run, it was, but as with most relationships, it suffered fits and starts along the way, especially in the in-law department. Jonathan had great difficulty winning the heart of Izzy's mother, partly because he thought it was necessary to and that ruined his ability to relate to her. Her father was a little distant, but

occasionally Jon caught him looking at his daughter with an immensely proud and satisfied eye.

His own parents could do nothing but worry. Bless them—they were good parents, but to worry was their automatic response to all crises and changes of scene. Penelope, Jon's mother was firmly persuaded that Isobel and all of her family would dislike her. Ron, his father, took the view that it was dangerous for his son to associate so closely with anyone—even though it couldn't be helped. He resigned himself to retiring to his garden shed, for a sherry and a few sad shakes of the head. *It will all end in tears*, he regularly thought.

He did not congratulate himself on his prophetic skills, when he later was proved right.

The wedding was a triumph of substance over form. That is to say an outsider would have presumed the occasion to be something of a disaster.

Upon arriving at the church, Isobel was helped from the car by her father Gordon. He hustled her from the back seat and with a tear in his eye, gave her a peck on the cheek as she stood by the open door of the vehicle. He then closed the door on her wedding dress, adding to the immaculate lace a tear and a four inch greasy mark.

The serene bridesmaids flew into a Valkyrian rage, all but boxing the ears of the unfortunate father of the bride as they sought to pin the dress in such a way as to conceal the new defect. Izzy's mother Faith, who had been coping remarkably well until that point, left the bridal party in a quest to find soothing alcoholic beverages. Happily Faith therefore missed the first marathon round of photographs outside the chapel, which culminated in the photographer dropping his camera. The camera flew open expelling its film and twenty tortuous minutes of preening and posing were lost forever.

Four glasses of Bucks Fizz later, a very calm Faith returned to find the photographs beginning again. All parties except for Faith were looking frayed and fractious. Gordon was alternating between

muttering apologies to anyone who would listen and culturing upon his cheeks a bright ruby blush fit to complement the bridesmaids' claret dresses. The bridesmaids were simmering and the photographer was exploring a range of vocabulary that he certainly would not be permitted to continue within the walls of the church.

Isobel had decided that of the two options now open to her—crying hysterically and laughing hysterically—the latter would provide scope for better photographs. The photographer, a maudlin type, clearly did not agree and was not prepared to suffer her hilarity in silence. Izzy was already beyond caring however. It was her wedding and she was determined to enjoy it.

Inside the church, there had been several false starts. The organist, a misnamed Mrs Young, who needed inch-thick glasses to overcome her short-sightedness but who was too vain to wear them, had mistakenly taken a thumbs down from the ushers to be her cue to launch into *The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba*. Betty Young took her music very seriously and once started, she became like a sixteen wheel juggernaut, incapable of being deflected from her sixty mile an hour charge down the musical motorway.

After five repetitions of this, the congregation was becoming heartily sick of the first fifteen bars of the piece. The vicar took to standing next to her, rather than in his accustomed position at the front of the church. He was holding a heavy large print *Book of Common Prayer* and brandishing it menacingly in Mrs Young's direction.

The groom was amusing himself by estimating his pulse rate. So far it had peaked at about 130, during the last of the five solo organ recitals. His best man, an athletic former sport science student called Mick, was doing press-ups with his feet on a pew and his hands on the cold quarry tiled floor.

And thus, at the sixth commencement of the entrance music, no one was quite prepared for Isobel's procession down the aisle. When it

dawned on the congregation that *this was it*, a spontaneous round of applause rippled around the building. This was all the encouragement Mrs Young required to set her pipes to maximum volume. When Isobel finally arrived at Jonathan's side, they were both wincing.

But when they exchanged looks, eyes twinkling, they knew that it didn't matter. Today they would be married! Fortunately they were able maintain this irrepressible cheerful optimism throughout what would prove to be a very long day.

The celebrations continued much as they had started. The highlight of the reception (other than Mick's speech) was the spontaneous combustion of several of the table decorations. The caterers had laid out candles on each table, wreathed in paper flowers. It had occurred to them neither that the candles would burn quite so low during the four-hour reception, nor that it might have been wise to coat the flowers with a fire retardant spray. One elderly gentlemen presumed it was all part of the display and with great gusto threw the dregs of his brandy over the burning pyre.

As their parents shot off in four different directions, searching for fire extinguishers, Jon and Izzy became helpless with laughter. Taking their lead, the guests together formed the view that they should make the most of the situation. As one, they headed to the bar and the assembled company became ever more relaxed. By seven o'clock a food fight had begun.

Once it became clear that the wedding could not be 'rescued' and turned back into the dignified affair they had anticipated, the parents gave up trying to behave appropriately and became instead thoroughly uninhibited. The Fentons, Jon's parents, forgot their worries for a few hours and even managed some exceedingly energetic dancing with their in-law counterparts late into the night.

As they retired to their hotel room, Jonathan mischievously asked Isobel how the wedding had compared to her previous experience—which had been a very grand 'top hat and tails' affair. Izzy was beyond

words. She tried not to, but could not help dissolving into laughter once more. The tears rolled down their faces as they agreed that it had far exceeded their expectations. Exhausted and incapable of anything else, the pair fell asleep giggling.

6

Located within, what on earth would be called the *west* side of Plaedon, is the charming quarter of Hulladon. The people living there are mostly peaceful souls, productive and useful in their community and with commensurately grand residences. Plaedon is just close enough to the capital Rebke, to be of significance to that crowded cacophony of commerce and far enough away to be relatively unsullied by the jostling joy-seekers.

Graye Lovel was one such peaceful soul. Until her recent retirement, she had successfully coordinated offender rehabilitation programmes and taken an active involvement in the retraining processes. Her husband worked within the executive of the Congregation and since her retirement she would occasionally travel with him to the capital. Mostly though she stayed at home, tending her garden. This was by far the safest course of action for her.

Ironically, Graye had never been under threat from her 'pupils' as she called them. In fact she was held in high esteem by almost all who had come within her care. Even those who had not managed to retain all they had learnt and had slipped back into the ways of delinquency, still referred to her as 'Mother' whenever their paths crossed. There was less chance of attack from a pupil than there was of the

scrupulous Bars Medok becoming a gambling magnate.

No, Graye's biggest enemy was herself. The danger was heightened whenever she approached the capital and it was for this reason that she stayed away for the most part. Graye was accomplished, respected, a devout follower of Yershowsh and a compulsive gambler.

No one passing her residence, looking at the stately figure tending her precious plants, would guess the passion with which she would pursue her addiction. None could look at her gracefully ageing face and detect the fury of an all-consuming habit. But when Graye Lovel gambled, she lost all vestiges of grace and respectability. Her features would become ever greyer as her eyes became brighter with the chase—the chase that inevitably would end in ruination of one form or another.

Her actions had brought dishonour upon her family, a plague upon her marriage and had as surely stalled her husband's political career, as it had brought about the end of her own. The murky world of gambling was inextricably linked to the world of drugs and alcohol and through excessive consumption of both, Graye's health had suffered too. And yet, she had achieved so much in her life and was so adored by her husband that at the point of each crisis, rescue had come. Plykar Lovel had influence within the Congregation. Deals were done, promises made. So far Graye had avoided ending up on one of her own programmes.

It had been some time since her last binge. She had given assurances to Plyk that he had heard before, but she had been so utterly desolate and remorseful that his heart had melted again. On that occasion Graye's redemption started with the two of them spending nearly 45 degrees of the sun—three hours as Earth would reckon them—in tears together. So far as he was able, the gambling contracts that Graye had entered into, Plykar fulfilled. He resigned himself to the prospect of many more years of employment as a

consequence, but he felt this was his duty. He knew that had the circumstances been reversed, his wife would have done as much for him.

Today, Graye's head was clear. She knew who she was; she knew that she served Yershowsh; she knew that her husband needed her. Also her garden needed her and it was here that she found a profound sense of peace.

Neighbours would invariably pass the time of day with Graye as they walked by. This gave her a welcome break from kneeling, tending the soil, but after each conversation, she knelt back down and continued patiently. Sometimes her thoughts turned to her husband, sometimes they turned to prayer to Yershowsh, sometimes she just let her mind wander. But at this moment, her thoughts were with her wayward son.

It was a habitual thought process. In her imagination, she could see several scenarios. In the first, he returned home, penitent and changed and after much remorseful conversation and apologies on both sides, they would be fully reconciled. In another scenario, she saw a desolate man, a shadow of the boy she knew and loved, found barely alive, abandoned by friends and peers. The Lovels would take him back in again and then as a reunited family, the rehabilitation process would begin both for her and for her son.

But the scenario that most troubled Graye was the scenario she most believed in and feared. She tried in vain to shake the thoughts and visions that oppressed her, but time and time again they would return. In apocalyptic style she saw her son rising in infamy and power, pursuing an all-absorbing obsession and being consumed with and consumed by his one goal: to become a true Etherean and to be admired—or feared—by the Etherean Guard.

Anyone watching Graye at this point would have observed a shadow pass over her pensive face. Graye shivered as she lifted tender plants from the ground, although it was not cold. She shook her head

briefly and by that physical action also banished the dreams that troubled her. She did not want to dwell on those things. Such thoughts depressed her. And the road that started with depression ended with obsession. Her obsession meant she was no longer able to work in a job she had loved. And so, with her head clear, she chose to move on and think of other things.

Today it was not difficult to replace these thoughts. During this week there had been considerable excitement at the capital, where Plykar worked. In fact she and her husband had talked about little else. Fifteen days ago there had been an assault on the Seat of the Congregation and Bars Medok was taken. Fifteen days of searching had failed to reveal his location. The Congregation was in uproar and the Etherean Guard in a state of panic bordering on hysteria. For the first time in Graye's memory the peace and tranquillity of this planet she loved seemed to be under serious immediate threat of destruction—save that immediately after Bars' abduction there had been a noticeable and incomprehensible dip in the Rebke-side crime rate.

The Guard was held in high esteem by virtually all inhabitants of Deb, charged as it was with the security of the planet. In a world where there are such men as the Ethereans, only Ethereans can hope to maintain order: ordinary mortals have no other defence against them. But here were the Ethereans, apparently helpless, attacked it would seem by their own number. This was serious indeed. Every member of the Congregation—none more so than Hesdar ru Contin—appreciated that an attack on a member so high in the government meant nothing less than anarchy.



In the temple of Belee'al, Klushere was thinking of his mother. Sometimes it pained him to be so close to her, whilst living in a world so far from hers. He thought about all that they had lost, the disappointments and the regrets. He thought bitterly of her past and

blamed her for his own shortcomings. If his mother had not been so weak, Klushere would be an Etherean today—possibly even a member of the Etherean Guard. The bitter-sweet irony of this made him smile, in spite of himself.

Do you regret the path you have chosen, my son?

Belee'al was speaking. Klushere had momentarily forgotten the reason for his approach to Belee'al's altar. He knew not whether Belee'al was able to see into his mind, but he was unsurprised that his Lord knew where Klushere's thoughts lay. He responded aloud, "My Lord and Ultimate Preceptor, I do not regret a moment of the journey I have taken. I regret the place that I started from, but I do not regret my destination. My service to you is unwavering."

I am glad of that. You are a valued and faithful son to me. And now you will see the rewards of faithful service.

Klushere knew that praise from Belee'al was rare indeed. Ordinarily he would have been reduced to tears of gratitude by such commendation. At this moment however, every part of his being was straining to hear what Belee'al would say next and this overrode his feelings for the time being.

Where mere human effort achieves naught, Belee'al is able. Tonight my son you will see the gateway to Beyond and the start of the last stage of your journey.

A thousand questions flooded into Klushere's head. He knew better than to interrupt however. He fixed his eyes on the Belee'al icon on top of the altar. It was part statue, part minor obelisk. The base was of a copper-coloured metal, in the shape of a ball, representing the planet Deb. Above this, in rare woods and precious metals, there was a stylised representation of a tall man, with multiple arms and an array of eyes. In one hand, the figure held a sword. This represented Belee'al's authority. In another hand the figure held a lamp, representing Belee'al's knowledge. A third hand clasped a snuffer, indicating that Belee'al held the power to withhold knowledge and

extinguish life. And in the fourth hand, there was a miniature gate, showing that Belee'al alone determined the passage into Beyond.

As his eyes rested on the icon, Klushere felt his mind empty and in this way he prepared himself to receive the rest of his master's message.

Before you begin your journey, there is a matter you must attend to. Your mother is proving troublesome to us.

Klushere flinched inwardly. His service to Belee'al was unquestioning and he would obey any direction given to him. He knew that his mother was a Hearer and this made her one of Belee'al's most hated enemies. But Klushere dreaded the day that Belee'al would instruct him to have his mother assassinated.

I am mindful that you still have ties—you do well to overcome these for the most part and your service to me is of such value that I am willing to overlook this weakness. Your mother may live for now. But I must have her distracted again.

With a brief sense of relief, Klushere suggested, "Might I be permitted to despatch a gambler to recruit her once more?"

That will suffice; make it so. Now Bars Medok has proven to be of great assistance to us. He has shown us the way to your goal and for that he shall be rewarded.

Klushere chuckled appreciatively at his Lord's dark humour.

I sent a scout—someone expendable—to lay a trail for you to follow through Beyond. That trail is now complete and you may pursue it. Then you will find that which you seek. You have cleansed yourself and I am greatly pleased.

The trail begins at a shrine hidden between two rocks atop Shy'vash Mountain. Al'aran knows the way to the shrine and will take you there. Now go. Find the one you seek. Bring him to me.

It was against protocol to run from the altar screaming in jubilation. So by a great force of effort, Klushere arose and made the journey from the altar, head bowed in supplication, and left the inner

sanctum. He made his way to Al'aran's lair to discuss the matter—he was sure Kytone would share his joy.



The Elders of the Etherean Guard were in conference at the Seat, in a comfortable room reserved for their use. Each was seated on a low stool, with a drinking receptacle at hand which issued forth gentle wisps of steam.

The Elders all wore their ceremonial robes of office, similar in style, but varying widely in colour. Each outfit was set off by a contrasting sash worn from shoulder to hip. It was this sash that indicated their rank amongst the Etherean Guard that they commanded.

Collectively the Elders were persuaded that the current lull in crime was an ominous harbinger; the calm before the storm. This subject was now foremost on their agenda. Ruith ru Contin, Hesdar's sister, was speaking.

"My friends, it is by now clear that what we are facing is a planned attack, probably by renegade Ethereans, upon our government and our ideology. In such extreme circumstances, I feel that we *must* take the extreme measure of calling in those most trusted amongst the pilots. Only then..."

"No!" interrupted Gylan Gorph, the second eldest of those assembled. "Whilst I respect greatly Ruith's opinions on this subject I feel that she is gravely mistaken in thinking that a solution lies with untrained and inexperienced public servants no matter how well-intentioned!" There were a few mutterings around the room. This was a concern that most of the Elders shared. He continued, "We can only take a measured approach to this solution. If we apply to the Congregation for resources, we can commence an accelerated training process that will supply the..."

The next interruption came from Yorgish bayle Prout, the most senior Elder. His gentle tones were both welcome and soothing. His

interruption started as a polite cough, but due to the respect the other Elders had for him, this was sufficient to silence them all. He looked out at the Elders through immensely bushy eyebrows. His words, slightly muffled by a beard that like his eyebrows had almost never been trimmed, came slowly.

"We will stall our response to our present troubles if we become entangled in this political debate. Ruith and Gylan as usual see different sides of the same problem. They are both right and we must reconcile the differences."

Jish, the youngest of the Elders—an intense lady, fond of brightly coloured outfits and verbal sparring—was ready to interject but desisted when Yorgish raised his hand. The venerable leader of the Guard continued.

"I feel in part responsible for the situation we find ourselves in. No—I do not need you to rush to my defence," he added, seeing that a couple of his protective colleagues were ready to object, "I lay the charge at my own feet, feeling the benefit of hindsight. Had we been more structured in our recruiting and training processes, we would not be here today.

"But," he raised his voice, "rest assured, this trouble would have come to us sooner or later. I know that we have an ever-vigilant foe who will seize his chance whenever it comes. Now faced with this challenge, we must respond to it and with Yershowsh's help, ensure that nothing of this nature happens again."

By the nods and murmurings, Yorgish could tell that all of his audience were agreed on that, at least. He continued, his voice lower and steadier again. "The Etherean pilots historically have been the Guards' most ready source of assistance in times of emergency, but we will undoubtedly face opposition from the Congregation and the public if we seek to restrict their freedom to travel. I am not so naïve that I believe they will readily agree to this simply because it is good for them!" Wry smiles alighted on several faces and then fluttered

away, banished by the gravity of the moment.

"Mek, you hold the lists of pilots—how many would you say have received basic brack and ethics training?"

Mekly Sur, the Elders' administrator looked upward as she calculated. "About fifty of our local pilots are old enough to have been on the training programme before braccarpiums were phased out for non-Guard Ethereans. Farther afield, I would guess at five hundred to a thousand. But most of those," she added, "will be looking to retire and embrace the Ether shortly—not assist in fighting."

Yorgish pressed the point, "Of those fifty, how many could we usefully count on?"

Again, Mek cast her eyes to the low cushioned ceiling. "No more than ten, I would say."

"Ten is a start. Ten would not seriously dent the local transport infrastructure. Ruith, how do you feel your sister would respond to a request for additional personnel at this time?"

Ruith pulled a face, doubling up her wrinkles. "As you know, Yorgish, we do not see eye to eye, Hesdar and I. If the request came from me, I do not think it would be met with much sympathy. The Congregation is stretching its resources anyway, trying to contain the upsurge in gambling recruitment. I could neither persuade her to lend support to the search for Medok, whom most now believe is dead, nor to the defence against the Belee'ans, since few believe or will admit that the cult exists. If Medok were with us," she added with a wistful look, "I am sure that he could secure the resources we need."

Jish spoke up, "But Ruith, you are closer to the Chair than any of us. Surely you will try the petition, at least?"

Ruith's grunt was non-committal. Gylan interjected, "You will be wasting your breath. Hesdar despises you."

Ruith bristled, "Thank you for putting it so delicately Elder Gorph."

Gylan ignored her, "Let me speak to the Congregation. I have some allies there." Yorgish raised his shaggy eyebrows at Gylan's euphemism. "They realise that the Guard needs assistance and I am sure that some bodies can be spared for the now vital task of recruiting. One question immediately presents itself before we begin though—that of the age limit."

This was a much debated topic amongst the Elders. Many felt that the age limit for admittance to the Guard should be kept high, or even increased beyond the now statutory limit of thirty Deban years. This was because young Ethereans often became unstable through lack of maturity—they were unable to handle their powers, honed and perfected by Guard training, responsibly. The powerful Guards could not risk one of their rank becoming hostile.

On the other side of the debate were those who felt that all identified Ethereans should be entered into training and selection processes from the moment of onset—usually around puberty. This view was not favoured by the government. Being responsible for the distribution of all resources on Deb, the Congregation was extremely resistant to requests for resources that were not seen as productive. Over the long term, Deb had been enjoying a time of peace for many years and understandably the Congregation felt that the Guard could be kept to a minimum level.

Whatever debate the Elders had on the subject, they all knew the matter would eventually be decided by the politicians. Jish said what was on many minds, "Let us not start that fruitless discussion. I say go to the Congregation first and seek whatever scraps they will throw us. Then we will be in a position ourselves to decide what ages we can target."

The only Elder who had not spoken in the conference so far, was Garmon Weir. The most contemplative of the Elders, he could always be counted on to focus attention on spiritual matters. He now spoke. "What is Yershowsh saying in all this, I wonder?"

"We have not heard from Yershowsh recently. Is He speaking still?" Yorgish mused.

"We should consult a Hearer," Ruith said, with a nod to Garmon.

Gylan's brow furrowed. "There is only one Hearer in our locality and we all know who that is."

Jish raised her voice, "We cannot go to her! We cannot trust a word she says!"

Yorgish said, "I believe we must guard our feelings for the time being and reserve judgment on anything she might say. Ruith is right. We must consult her. Garmon," he looked across at Weir, "will you visit her on our behalf?"

"I will do so directly."

"Speak to her husband first, at least," Jish said. "Find out her present state of mind."

"That is wise counsel," Garmon assented.

Yorgish brought the meeting to a close, summarising the tasks they had agreed upon. Mek would speak to the ten Etherean pilots she had in mind and she would also contact the Etherean Guard farther afield, to call them to the capital. Gylan would speak to the politicians.

Jish was to assist Yorgish in preparing a report to the Congregation covering the Elders' view of the current crisis. The report was also to be disseminated to the Etherean Guard far and wide.

No one envied Garmon his job for he was to speak to the disgraced Hearer, Graye Lovel.

7

The giant rampaging lizard was so obviously a little Oriental man in a badly fitting rubber suit that the film delighted Isobel even more than usual. The director appeared to be taking it all very seriously, which added greatly to Izzy's mirth. The clock struck three, as she finally lost consciousness, with images before her eyes of trees and houses exploding. The lizard had now acquired death-heat-ray vision—an entirely unforeseen consequence of the military subjecting it to small nuclear explosions.

Izzy dreamt fitfully that night. She was emotionally exhausted from the strain of Jon's accident. To look at Jon, one could hardly tell how serious the incident had been, but three people were killed in the accident and many others were badly injured. It had taken the emergency services the best part of ten hours to clear the motorway. To return home without another human being to talk to, to offload on, had been difficult for Isobel. It was no wonder that she let her brain cruise in neutral whilst she soaked up some late night entertainment.

Yes, perhaps calling this 'entertainment' was stretching the definition.

Her sleep was filled with images of exploding buildings, low budget flashes and sparks and hospital staff wandering through the

wreckage. Just at the point where her subconscious started to become bored of the dream, she was awakened by a loud sound of smashing glass.

Isobel never woke well, least of all in the middle of the night. Blearily, she shifted the assortment of blankets and overcoats that she had gathered up for warmth and looked round in the surreal flickering illumination of the muted television to where the nearest clock would be. All she could see was a huge furry rear end.

Moving Mr Spencer out of the way to get a better view of the clock, she could not help noticing that there was a distinct glow coming from the direction of the kitchen. She clearly remembered turning the light off earlier. She was very particular about things like switching lights off and closing drawers when she was finished with them.

The clock was an anniversary gift—a fairly bog-standard quartz item set in a heavy rough-hewn piece of Lake District slate. Jon and Izzy had honeymooned in the Lakes and Izzy's mum had thoughtfully bought the clock for them the following year. Isobel barely noticed that the clock was reading 4.32am. At the moment, it was simply a weapon.

Isobel slipped out from under the mountain of covers, as carefully as she could. Something about the light—and a strange feeling in the air; what was that?—made her particularly cautious. Her temples started to throb.

Holding her breath, she walked silently towards the kitchen. The pneumatic hammer that was her heart threatened to take her breath away, so fiercely did it percuss. There was a light switch for the lounge next to the kitchen door, so bravely, foolishly, she simultaneously flipped the switch and threw open the kitchen door. The door crashed into the kitchen unit behind and rebounded at her.

When Isobel finally managed to overcome the door and entered the kitchen, she found it empty. The door to the fridge was wide upon

and a jar of jam lay smashed on the floor below. Evidently the glow had been the light from the fridge.

Without questioning how the jar could have launched itself from the fridge, Isobel exchanged her clock for some kitchen roll and bent down to mop up the mess. As she did so, she heard someone whisper, "*Ek dashet. Murcom forshay bo nittlee.*"

She spun round. She was still alone. "Jon, is that you?" she asked with quavering voice. There was no answer.

More assertively she demanded, "Jon, if you're messing around it's not funny." Still no reply. A shiver went down her spine.

In such circumstances, there is only one thing to do. With her heart in her mouth, Isobel went from room to room, systematically switching on all the lights. Only when she had entered every room, checked every cupboard and wardrobe and found no intruders, did she calm down slightly. She finished in the bedroom. The presence of familiar furnishings in a comfortable room had a further calming effect on her mind. Perhaps, after all, it was time to get into bed properly.

"*Vo nun sawtare—prewset vo saravot ca necher!*" A loud voice had spoken directly into her ear, at some length. She felt the breath. Her entire body tensed and every hair on her body stood on end. Her green eyes darted in all directions around the room. Her shoulders hunched up and she pulled her now crumpled jacket tightly around her. There were no obvious weapons within reach. She picked up the phone, just as the wardrobe doors spontaneously slammed shut and she immediately dropped it again.

The terror was rising. She started to cry with the fear. "J-jon, if that's you, you're going too far. Stop it!" she begged.

The bedroom door started to close, slowly, menacingly. Isobel backed up to the wall. And then, by the door, a figure began to appear. It was not Jon. It was no one she knew. The figure was dressed strangely, wearing some kind of armour and had paint on its

face. Had she not been fully convinced that she was awake, the outlandish clothing would have persuaded her that she was still dreaming. But Isobel saw none of it. All she could see, what she could not take her eyes from, was the object that the stranger was holding—an evil-looking double-bladed sword.



A thousand doctors wearing stethoscopes crowded round him. Each of them had found a novel way of exploring different parts of his body. One attempted to insert a catheter in between his toes; another was tugging on Jon's nasal hair with a pair of forceps. They were muttering between themselves, but Jon could not make out what they were saying. A nurse with an echoing voice appeared in seven different places within his vision, saying, "Drink this—you'll feel much better." Except that what she handed to him appeared to be a well-buttered snail shell.

Eventually he had had enough of this and caused himself to vanish—but instead of disappearing completely in a fraction of a second, he was only losing physical presence very gradually. Each of the thousand doctors in loud voices started saying, "He's fading—he's fading."

With a gasp, Jon awoke, drenched in sweat. He groggily looked around the ward. A group of medics of various descriptions were crowded around a bed at the opposite end of the ward, oblivious to Jon's sudden awakening. A heart monitor next to the bed was showing a flat line and the hospital staff members were using a defibrillator in an effort to revive the patient. One particularly stressed doctor was repeating, "He's fading—quickly—clear—now!" There was a loud humming buzz and then the monitor showed a series of erratic blips, which gradually steadied.

As the resurrectee was wheeled away, Jon resolved to himself to leave the building that day. With attention diverted elsewhere, he removed the probes and needles, withdrew to the safety of a bathroom

and faded for real.

Like a lot of teenagers, Jon had been cursed with acne. Although not particularly disfiguring on his dark skin, it had nevertheless caused him considerable pain and embarrassment. Shortly after the awakening of his ability to become invisible, he had made an extraordinary discovery. When he lost physical presence, whether this was due to the lower drain on his metabolic energies or not he was unsure, he experienced a distinct improvement in his bespotted condition. Although not prone to experimentation, he used this discovery to his advantage on occasions when he was injured, since it appeared that all injuries, including glandular disorders, healed much more quickly when he became invisible.

As he faded out, Jon experienced the peculiar sensation of separation from his body. He knew it still existed in some sense or other, but he could not feel it. After a period of ten minutes—not too long to arouse concern or provoke enquiry he hoped—he returned to normal. To his great satisfaction, he felt much recovered.

In the morning, the ward sister put up token resistance only, as he discharged himself. She was puzzled by his apparent rapid recovery and thought it prudent to run some more tests. But they needed the bed and so eventually she settled for a stern admonishment to call an ambulance immediately should he experience any untoward symptoms during the course of the day. Jon happily agreed and ordered a taxi. He thought that he would call Isobel's office, once he got home and surprise her. The thought was soured only slightly because he knew she would lecture him about fading out like that.

As the taxi entered the modern housing estate, he longed as ever for the means to buy the traditional detached farmhouse they both dreamed of. *Good things come to them that wait*, he reminded himself. He had plans. Right now he was accumulating experience in diverse fields of engineering, computing and security, but he had a long-term goal that was such a pipe dream he hadn't even mentioned

it to Isobel. If he could make it work, the farmhouse would be theirs. But it would take time.

He paid the taxi driver and looked up at his box-like house, before walking the four short metres that was the driveway. *At least it's home*, he thought. It was ten o'clock and the milk was still waiting on the doorstep. That was a little unusual, but the milkman occasionally delivered the milk after both the Fentons had left for work.

As he entered the house, he thought he saw something move in the corner of his eye—in the corner of his *spirit* eye. That was odd. He was dimly aware of the other plain of existence, but he rarely saw anything in that other plain. It was probably nothing.

The first stop was the kitchen, to stash the milk. It looked like Isobel had had an accident and left in a hurry. She had probably overslept, after staying up too late watching the television. There was a jammy wad of kitchen roll on the worktop and some sparkling shards of glass on the floor. Jon could imagine the scene. He smiled to himself as he pictured Isobel flinging open the fridge door—whilst simultaneously flipping on the kettle and popping a slice of bread in the toaster—and a jar of jam flying out of the fridge. She would probably have uttered some uncharacteristic but choice words, before reaching for the cleaning materials.

He made himself some filter coffee to compensate for the diabolical froth he had received in the hospital. Then he made his way upstairs. A fresh change of clothes was much in need. His present outfit sported various spots of congealed blood and other unidentifiable substances. Of course Jon had no idea that his carefully prepared drink would end up on the bedroom floor amid slivers of pottery.

For as he opened the bedroom door, the assault on his senses overrode all his bodily control and the mug fell from his numb hand. His wife was in a heap on the floor, bound to a radiator and gagged and there was fresh blood on her forehead.

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