

# Night Flowers



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Part 2

J&J  
BOOKS

## III / CRISIS

## Monday, Halgary 22nd

### 24. *Sandy Meets Dorry and Tenbright*

Wearing his sleeve gun for the first time in what seemed like a week, Devrel Sovershend followed Jules Sandford through a revolving door. They left the Mitton Gardens Hotel and entered the corridor that led to the O/U station. Sandy headed straight for a bench.

"Ten-eighteen," Sovershend read from the digital clock. "Twelve minutes yet."

"Oh, yes?" muttered Sandy in a 'so what?' tone. When he disappeared behind the inevitable news sheet, Sovershend decided that further comment would be superfluous and took his airport paperback from the side pocket of his jacket.

Jones appeared at 10:29, one minute early. He had forsaken his cover-all for a business suit in bold, very un-Camerlish stripes. Sovershend gazed at the suit with veiled amusement, Sandy with ill-concealed envy.

"Been here long?" asked Jones.

"Nah, no more than a week," returned Sovershend in mild criticism of Sandy's idea of punctuality.

"Morning, Sandy," beamed Jones.

"Jones," nodded Sandy. Curiosity got the better of him. "Tell me, where did you get your suit?"

"Place on Circle Street," Jones replied warily. "Like it?"

"Yes, very fashionable," approved Sandy. His own outfit was a very conventional suit in *desert tan*, a shade which matched his hair fairly closely. "I must take a look along there later on."

The train arrived with a menacing roar and a blast of cold air.

"How far are we going?" asked Sandy, diverging from Jones's lack of dress sense.

"Couple or three stops," Jones replied. "We'll be there in just a few minutes."

Doors whooshed together. The moderately well-filled train began its acceleration dive. A small army of studious types left at Petran Square, steeling themselves for the security searches and identity checks at the city's main library. A different class of student descended at Baron's Drive South, gateway to the city's porn-belt.

"This is it," said Jones as the train ran up to Riverside, the next station, which occupied the site of a former post office near Regent's Bridge.

The trio emerged from the depths into brilliant morning sunshine. Above their heads, muted rushing and rumbling sounds told of passing vehicles on the Dungard Expressway.

"We cross over here," said Jones.

As he spoke, the traffic died away to a trickle. Not stopping to wonder why, Jones sprinted to the island in the centre of the wide road, then across to the far pavement. Sovershend and Sandy managed to follow him before the flood started again. Another dash took them across Water Street and through the shadow of the ramp that connected the middle two lanes with the elevated expressway. Jones led them along Dawson Street.

Four and a half acres of wasteland, according to an ancient and battered *For Sale* sign, sprawled away on their left. The mixture of rubble, grass and sorry-looking bushes had been wild for as long as most people could remember. There had been talk of landscaping the area into a park, but none of the residents in the area believe that anything would ever develop from the plans.

Jones ducked through the rotting wire just before a padlocked gate. A ruined building of decaying brick became a short length of high, red brick wall. Both hid an artificial branch of the River Dunan for the first few yards of the well-made, single lane road which connected the gate with a two storey building fifty yards away. When it came into view, the water in the cutting looked green, neglected and fairly lethal.

The group's destination was a branch of Easton Security Products. It was the last survivor of the rank of warehouses which the cutting from the main canal had been built to serve. Single-storey huts dotted the area on the other side of the cutting and a huge, cream-painted structure grew in the far corner, beside the railway viaduct, a left-over from a cement works.

Blue lightning flashes adorned the *DANGER! ELECTRIFIED!* notices on the substantial fence around the site. A gate rolled to the left as the visitors approached. Sandy turned sideways to pass through the two yard gap. A piteous groaning sounded from the steel door on the front of the building. Jones gave it a hefty kick with one of his tyre-soled boots to put it out of its misery. The door screamed open.

"That's the trouble with this spot," remarked Jones as the trio entered the building. "There's always a bit of subsidence. Twists the whole ganar building. You get the bockan doors sticking, windows jamming and so on."

"Are you sure its safe?" asked Sandy nervously.

"Oh, sure," replied Jones airily. "It's not due to collapse for at least twenty-five years, if our tame surveyor got his sums right. We'll be long gone by then."

Their route took them through a receiving bay and then into a central corridor covered with filthy and long-dead scraps of carpet. Steel bracing bars appeared and disappeared at regular intervals up the well-worn, wooden staircase. Sandy found them both disquieting and reassuring at the same time. At the top of the stairs, Jones heaved open a door and led the visitors along another corridor. The carpet on the upper floor was marginally less ancient than the relics below, but the paint on the walls was just as grease-stained and chipped.

The third door on the left opened with a pure horror-film creak into a small office. A strip of bright orange stair carpet in the empty room kinked through a right angle to the right and led to the next office. The communicating door was standing open – a rectangle which would never again fill its parallelogram frame.

"Welcome, vreitei," said one of the men at an old, dark desk. "Did you have a comfortable night at the Mitton?"

"Excellent," nodded Sandy, dividing his attention between the proprietors of the storehouse and the room.

The room won. Some mad genius had been experimenting with flame paint. A rainbow network of blending lines, writhing and churning in response to a random signal generator in one corner of the room, was making the walls shiver and dance as though in the grip of an earthquake. A different technique had been adopted for the ceiling, which seemed to pulse – alternately approaching and shying away from the floor. Mercifully, the sand-gold cushion-plastic tiles were an island of immobile sanity.

"Here's a chair," said Jones, bringing Sandy out of his mesmeric trance. "This is Keith Dorry," he continued, introducing Sandy to a grey, anonymous man in a dark check business suit. "And Stan Tenbright."

Sandy shook hands all round. Tenbright looked about five times older than Dorry, which made his age around two hundred and fifteen. His coverall was solid black, as were the nails of his shrivelled fingers. The strength of his grip suggested that Tenbright was wearing a cunning disguise – which he was. He was no more than three years older than Sovershend's thirty-two. Where Sovershend's identity documents disagreed about his height, Tenbright's made his date of birth a lottery.

"The heap of excrement behind us is called Rossiter," added Sovershend as Sandy was lowering himself into his chair. "Professional sobok

and general pain in the yadren. Don't bother shaking hands, you might not get all your fingers back."

Sandy was still turning to look at such a desperate character when something bright flashed through the spot occupied by Sovershend an instant before.

"His one saving grace is his generosity," continued Sovershend. Sandy watched in amazement as he plunged his hand into the crawling illusion of a wall and extracted a leaf-bladed throwing knife. "He's given me enough of these to start a scrap yard."

The blade of the weapon was as long as an average roller pen, the handle a mere stub. Sovershend took a leather sheath from a pocket and gave the knife a new home. Sandy stared at Rossiter in horror, wondering what sort of maniac was allowed to go around throwing knives at people. He received a vague impression of a tallish, slimish, youngish man with hole-black hair.

A viridescent flame suit, which was attempting to respond to the antics of both the office's walls and ceiling, made it difficult to focus on the wearer.

"Get out of here, Rossiter," croaked Tenbright. "Sorry about that. There's a lot of bad blood between them."

"And Rossiter's self-control leaves a lot to be desired," added Dorry. "Anyway, let's get started."

"Coffee, anyone?" said Jones, reducing his status in Sandy's eyes from equal partner in the storage and distribution enterprise to mere minion.

"Just bring the pot and some cups," ordered Dorry. "Those that want it can help themselves."

Jones located a door in the left hand wall.

"And can we have these svozhnar walls off? They're giving me a headache."

"Can't take it, hey?" cackled Tenbright. "I thought that sort of thing appealed to you youngsters?"

"Vyen s'vogan," invited Dorry, heaving himself to his feet. He approached the control box on the floor cautiously. The first button that he prodded with his foot had no effect. The second speeded up the pattern shift of the walls. Sandy closed his eyes and clung to the arms of his chair to keep the world steady.

"Cosmic!" murmured Sovershend, thinking seriously about redecorating his flat in Dungard – which he had not mentioned in case Sandy suggested that they stay there instead of the Mitton Gardens Hotel. Sovershend had a streak of the Jones in him when it came to hotels like the Mitton.

"Chas!" bellowed Dorry, admitting defeat. "How do you shut down this svozhnar zakh?"

"Swearing at it won't help," called Jones from the other room. "Try keying either *PN* or *MP*."

Dorry went down on his hands and knees and peered at the control panel. "I've done both. Nothing."

"Hang about." Jones reappeared with a tray. He dumped it on the desk, then joined Dorry at the control box. "Hmmm!" he said significantly after prodding the keys mentioned. "There's something wrong with the bockan zakh. What we need is a more scientific approach. Stand back."

Dorry retreated to the desk. Jones picked his spot, drew back a booted foot and gave the box a mighty kick. An alarming explosion took place inside it. The walls died to an unexciting, rather muddy shade of green.

"Why didn't you just unplug it?" suggested Sovershend.

"It's not plugged in," Jones explained. "It draws its power from the walls with these light cells . . ."

"Chas!" groaned Dorry. "Is that thing off now?"

"I've only tripped the overload circuit," grinned Jones. "It should be on again in an hour."

"Is this one of your efforts?" Sovershend remarked.

"That's right," nodded Jones. "I think there's a loop in the circuitry. Yugal if I can find it, though. But it shifts from a nice, background ripple to a mad war dance. Then you can't switch it off without overloading it. But there's a steady input trickle that switches the walls on again in an hour and starts it off again."

"Can you two continue your discussion in your own time?" Dorry suggested.

"All right." Jones turned his attention to the coffee, looking deeply offended.

"Now then, Vreitar Sandy . . .," said Dorry.

"Just Sandy," he interrupted, seeking to maintain an informal and youthful image.

"Sandy, yes. Well, Jones has detailed your timetable. The fuel you need for your vehicles will be arriving this afternoon. I understand you want us to store fifty cases for you and put the rest on the distribution network?"

"That's right," nodded Sandy. He had been instructed to maintain a thread of contact with the northern distributors. He did not know, because his concern was transport not personnel, that Charles Demirell

was planning to eliminate Sovershend.

"Jones has explained our storage terms to you?"

"Yes, they're acceptable. And payment on the night?"

"The usual way is a hundred and seventy-seven ounces in gold and the other four hundred and six pounds in cash."

"Acceptable," nodded Sandy. "I think that covers everything."

"Perhaps you'd like to see over the place?" suggested Tenbright. "Chas?"

"Yes, that should be interesting," Sandy replied, rising to his feet. He looked uncertainly at Sovershend, who remained seated.

"Sovershend will be staying here," said Dorry. "I don't want him to meet Rossiter again. It's almost impossible to get blood out of wooden floors."

"I see," said Sandy in a tone which suggested the opposite.

"This way." Jones waved him to the ever-open door to the anteroom and the corridor.

"Where did you meet him?" asked Tenbright, shedding his old man's voice.

Sovershend lit a Norlish cigarette, then handed the packet across the desk. "He knows Martin from Strode Street. They've been doing business for months."

"There's money to be made there," observed Dorry.

"Thanks for telling me," laughed Sovershend. "I hadn't noticed."

"Nobody likes a young smartok," quavered Tenbright.

"How about an old dummock?" asked Sovershend. "What's he supposed to be, anyway?" he added to Dorry.

"His dramatic group are doing *Evening For Vreitar Eastham* next month," Dorry explained. "He's working on the make-up for the old man."

"I suppose he can have a hobby," grinned Sovershend.

"Fervoek! It's hot in here." Tenbright shed a thin plastic mask and about 180 years. Then he turned a thumb towards Dorry. "His hobby is making money. And his favourite colour's the red they use for C-notes."

"He spends it too," protested Dorry before he could be accused of being a miser. "Is this Sandy really serious about using hovercraft? Aren't they a bit noisy and messy?"

"True, but they've got speed the flexibility to go anywhere they want," countered Sovershend. "And there's bad weather forecast for the middle of the week. They're supposed to get lost in that."

"Funny no one's thought of using the Ship Canal before," remarked Tenbright.



"There's supposed to be a lot of psychology involved in that," said Sovershend. "If you think about inland water transport, you think of speeds of about five mph. The cargo's exposed for so long, hardly anyone's prepared to take the risk. According to Sandy, he expects to be up and down the canal in a couple of hours, including time spent unloading and refuelling."

"What about the locks?" asked Dorry. "You've got to get past about five or six sets of them."

"He didn't say anything about that," Sovershend admitted. "But Martin reckons he's something of a genius when it comes to arranging transport."

"He better had be for your sake," remarked Dorry. "He strikes me as a bit of a vague sobok."

"Depends how you look at it," Sovershend told him. "His job is to transport twelve tons of cargo in containers of a certain size from Norland to here. He doesn't have to know how many cases of uisge that represents. Just how much space that weight takes up. In fact, he's a great one for keeping his mind free of unnecessary details."

"I suppose you can get away with sloppiness like that down South," said Tenbright scathingly. "We're a bit more organized up here."

"I told him that. But he didn't seem impressed."

"Anyway," said Dorry, "he'd better stick to his timetable. If he's more than an hour late at this end, he can forget it. He's on his own."

"I'll pass that on," nodded Sovershend. "It might cheer him up if he starts running late."

"I'll say this for your funny friend," remarked Tenbright, fortifying his coffee with Norlish Magic, "he's got enough cheek. Coming down the west coast about the time Ambrose of Nottridge has got his *Big Job* on."

"Ambrose of Nottridge," scoffed Sovershend. "I don't know how anyone can take him seriously with a fervoeeking stupid name like that. Are you passing that round?" He held out a hand for the bottle of smuggled uisge.

"It's not as bad as ganar Sovershend," replied Tenbright. "And you shouldn't be drinking. It's not eleven yet."

Sovershend shrugged. "It's not my fault if my dad was a foreigner with inheritable bad habits. And I bet they'd have a good laugh at Tenbright across the Inland Sea in Kraagen."

"His trouble is he picks up bad habits too easily," remarked Dorry.

"And anyway, I don't go round calling myself Sovershend of Great Hovarks, do I?" he added, referring to the district of Dungard in which his second home was to be found.

"Is that 'of' or 'with'?" asked Dorry innocently.

Sovershend ignored him. "It's all in Sandy's brilliant plan," he told Tenbright. "He's sneaking in from the north while everyone's looking south, waiting for Ambrose to show up."

"Audacity and deviousness, two vital ingredients of any smuggling operation," observed Dorry. "And no showing off, unlike Ambrose."

"And a better than thirty per cent return on capital," added Sovershend. "More or less overnight."

"That's half the fun for Ambrose," said Tenbright. "Telling everyone he's got a *Big Job* planned and pulling it off."

"Just as long as he pulls it off at the end of the week, we'll be happy," remarked Sovershend.

"Worried he's pulled it off already?" grinned Tenbright.

"No," returned Sovershend confidently. "It's still to come. But what I think's going to happen is he'll start smiling about Thursday lunchtime and going on about what a huge success it was. Then bring his stuff over on Thursday night. He may get up your nose like a bad smell, but he gets eleven out of ten for low cunning."

"Let's hope Sandy can bring off his *Big Job*," said Dorry. "That's the one that matters to us."

"If he's half as good as he thinks he is, it's going to one for the history books," Sovershend assured him. "Not that I can see him getting away with it more than once."

"It better had be good," threatened Tenbright. "Or we'll let Rossiter loose on you."

"Wow! You've got me really worried," scoffed Sovershend. "I wish all my problems were as trivial as his feeble attempts to cancel my membership card."

"He came pretty close with that knife," said Dorry.

"Close is nothing," returned Sovershend. "The time to start worrying is when he can manage adjacent."

"Are you staying here till the shipment arrives?" Dorry asked, wondering whether he would have to keep Rossiter locked up for a couple of days. It would be very inconvenient to lose either or both of the rivals. Rossiter's father was a respected if not entirely respectable solicitor – and a valued friend, advisor and customer. Sovershend was a man who stuck to his own trade – an importer who did not try to take all of the profit by distributing as well.

"My plans depend on Sandy," replied Sovershend. "If we're not back at the Mitton before noon, I'll be there till tomorrow at least."

Tenbright drew back his left cuff. "By the hairs on my wrist, it's only

about eleven. Jones won't be long now. I don't think you're going to be pushed for time."

"Ah, well," said Sovershend philosophically. "Something's bound to turn up."

Sandy arrived back at the office looking impressed. On the way back to the O/U station with Sovershend, he kept up a detailed description of the cellar system beneath the storehouse and most of the wasteland between the cutting and Water Street. Sovershend listened with half an ear for five patient minutes, then tried to tell his companion that he knew all about the cellars. Sandy kept up the flow regardless.

Armed with a map of the city centre, on which shops were labelled with both a trading name and a business category, Sandy abandoned Sovershend when the train reached Mitton Gardens. He wanted to do some shopping. A horrible vision of a duplicate of Jones's striped suit seared Sovershend's mind's eye. He felt a sudden need for a bracer before lunch.

Weaponless and wearing a gold *Class 1* (resident) security tag on his left sleeve, Sovershend claimed a table in the mezzanine *Rainbow Bar* and gazed through golden railings at the *Albert Room* until a minion arrived to take his order. The hotel's dining room was famous for its quality and infamous for its prices. Sovershend asked for a menu with his drink. People like Sandy, who were armed with a bottomless UniCredit card, did not cross his path too often. Sovershend felt that it would be criminal not to make the most of his good fortune.

#### *25. Postmortem For the PSF*

Oscar Brooks, the regional coordinator for the Popular Socialist Front in the north-eastern country of Dunston, was in deep trouble. "I just can't understand it," he protested. "I gave clear instructions to Denton and Murphy. I don't think anyone believes they made a deliberate addle of the job, right?" He looked at the others with a challenging stare.

The PSF favoured open-air meetings in remote locations. Brooks, his lieutenant Bert Shaw and three members of the regional committee were taking a working lunch in the toppled remains of an ancient hill fort. They were sitting on battered stone blocks, one hundred yards from a dirt road and their vehicles. Brooks was pacing up and down in front of the others, waving his arms and half-shouting his indignation.

"I think we're involved in a circular argument here," said Shaw, supporting his leader in measured tones of age and wisdom. "One we

can't resolve by just talking."

"Just the same, Brooks is responsible," insisted Helen Lewis, her thin, thirtyish face pinched in anger. "He was co-ordinating Friday's raid on the Mirbank RecCen. And he was well aware of the purpose of the raid – demonstration and certainly not destruction."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Brooks leant forward to yell into her face. "Slap my bockan wrists and tell me I'm a bad boy like one of the little kids at your school? Hold one of your fake seances and get the lads that died to say it was my fault? You ganar dobok! I don't give a bock what you think. You weren't there. You know yog' all about what happened. You were sitting at home on your skinny arse while the real work was going on."

"How dare you speak to me like that!" Lewis aimed a wild swing at Brooks.

He straightened up and hopped back. Robbed of a stabilizing impact. Lewis fell forward onto the grass.

"Pack it in," ordered Trasker. He was big enough and heavy enough to subdue the pair of them without exerting himself unduly. "Honestly! The whole movement's dropping to bits. You're as bad as that lot down South. The mob the Hondos scooped up after a party to celebrate the job they did in Losebridge. Carelessly overconfident. Let's have a bit less scrapping and a bit more thought."

Muttering angrily, Lewis regained her perch and began to brush dead grass from her jacket. Brooks resumed his pacing.

"What about the smoke bombs?" asked Seldon. He was dark, bearded, approaching middle age and puffing at his pipe as calmly as if he were a party to a reasoned discussion.

"What about the madky bombs?" growled Brooks.

"Could they have contained explosives?"

"Of course not!" scoffed Brooks. "Why should they?"

"I was just thinking about the motives of our suppliers," replied Seldon, stroking along his jawline with a finger and thumb to bring his dark beard to a point. "All the damage at Mirbank has put smiles on a lot of faces in the building trade."

"That's rubbish," said Brooks. "They set off one of the bockan smoke bombs to show us how to work them."

"It could have been the only genuine one," said Seldon.

"We've still got one," Brooks recalled. "Bert was fooling around with one. He stuck it in his pocket. He didn't find it till after. Just sit tight." Brooks ran down the hill to his mid-blue van.

"We're going to have to do something about him," hissed Helen

Lewis. She was thirty-one, three years younger than Brooks, but she looked as if she had a ten-year start on him.

"He reacting perfectly normally to what he sees as unfair criticism," said Seldon, releasing billows of smoke. "He's sure he did a good job. And we're by no means sure that the people who actually carried out the raid weren't persuaded to go farther than planned."

"I still think he's unreliable and should be replaced," snapped Lewis.

"That's something for the next full meeting, not now," said Bert Shaw, becoming irritated by her persistent venom.

"There you are," panted Brooks, returning to the rough oval of stone blocks. "One smoke bomb." He threw it to Lewis, who caught it clumsily. "See anything wrong with it? Or have you never seen one before? You ought to try doing something for a change instead of sitting on your skinny arse, bocking out words and getting yog' all done."

"I still say you're responsible for the whole madky addle." Lewis threw the smoke bomb back at Brooks after giving it a cursory examination. "It could contain explosive."

"All right, we'll find out," Brooks challenged. "Bockan green wrapper off, give me a count in, Bert."

"Four, three, two, one, go!" said Shaw, activating the stopwatch part of his wrist chronometer.

Brooks twisted the activating ring through a quarter turn. "There, that's set the sobokandar fuse going. Thirty seconds from now, smoke or a bang. Want to hold it?"

Brooks thrust the neat canister towards Helen Lewis, who recoiled in horror. Laughing with demi-demented glee, Brooks threw the smoke bomb over her head. It bounced and rolled down the hill, on the opposite side from the vehicles.

"Twenty eight, nine, thirty!" counted Shaw.

Green fog jetted from the smoke bomb, hiding it from view and forming a curtain which began to drift with the breeze.

"There you are!" said Brooks in triumph.

"We've only got your word it's from the same lot," Lewis pointed out.

"You have my word as well," said Shaw with cold dignity.

"Oh . . . yoge' vars!" Brooks bit out in disgust. "There's no telling you bockan anything, is there? You'll be telling us *we* put explosives in the smoke bombs next."

"That's enough," interrupted Trasker, exerting his authority as his patience started to wear tissue-thin. "Fighting among ourselves will achieve nothing. We're going to have to investigate the whole matter thoroughly. And I'm going to recommend we reduce our campaign to

harassing tactics only until we can be sure of achieving the agreed aims when we raid a Reclamation Centre."

"Well, I'll vote against it," said Lewis angrily. "There's no reason to assume everyone's as incompetent as this pair."

"You can cast your vote as you think fit, Helen," said Trasker. "But you'll be expected to abide by the majority decision."

"They ought to send you out on a raid," said Brooks, stabbing a finger at Lewis. "Then we'd see how to make a real yadrast of one."

"Flitter!" exclaimed Bert Shaw urgently, cutting across the acrimony to point beyond the hilltop to a black shape drifting towards them from the nearby expressway.

"That's your ganar smoke bomb!" screeched Helen Lewis. Her monster handbag rattled as she dragged out a Heitainan-made *Zinder* sub-machine gun. She was so intent on unfolding the stock and working the first cartridge into the breech that she failed to notice that Shaw, Trasker and Seldon were running down the hill towards their vehicles.

Unsure of Lewis's intentions, Brooks raced across the oval and took cover behind one of the massive stone blocks left over from ancient fortifications. He drew a needle gun from a waist holster and replaced the clip of solid shot with incendiary, wishing that he had a clip of explosive. A line of shocks ran across the armoured belly of the helicopter as it reached the fringes of the green smoke. It reared away as the pilot gained height and pulled back out of range.

"That's not very friendly," murmured Senior Inspector Lyra Chappell as she pulled what she called her *hunting rifle* from the retaining clips on the left hand door. "Can you get the numbers of those vehicles, Steel?"

Helen Lewis was struggling to change the clip of her *Zinder*, her fingers an unco-operative tremble of fear, rage and excitement.

"No, sir." In the helicopter, Patrol Officer Steel lowered her binoculars. "The plates are covered with mud. Which is an offence."

Inspector Chappell opened a firing port in the helicopter's door. "Put a description on the airwaves for an intercept. There's not too many places they can go in a hurry."

Steel's lips moved behind the visor of her riot helmet.

"Down, down, Carson," ordered the inspector.

The pilot swooped towards the hilltop. Lewis sprayed a burst in the general direction of the helicopter, loosing off half of the magazine in less than a second.

Inspector Chappell took a microphone from the control panel and held it to her mouth. "This is the police," boomed from the broadcast

speaker on the side of the helicopter. "Put that weapon down and walk away from it with your hands in the air."

Lewis stood her ground and began to fire off the last of the clip as three round bursts.

"No telling some people," remarked the inspector. She took careful aim and fired one shot. Helen Lewis crashed backwards as though hit by a runaway transiter, firing her last three rounds straight up into the air.

"Right, down and land," ordered Inspector Chappell, keeping the still figure on the ground covered.

Brooks crouched behind his block of stone, peeping at the approaching helicopter through a frost-splintered slit in the edge of the rock. Deep shadow swallowed him. He had decided that the wisest thing to do was to stay put and hope that the traffic police patrol failed to spot him. Their defence systems would be scanning for objects in motion but Brooks felt that he would not be detected if he stayed perfectly still.

Patrol Officer Steel climbed nimbly out of the rear of the helicopter and crabbed through the turmoil of rotor wash to Lewis's body. She checked the throat for a pulse, drawing the obvious conclusion from pale eyes, which were gazing from a shocked expression directly at the high and bright sun.

Steel made a wash-out signal, an out-and-in double chop of her hands, toward the helicopter. Inspector Chappell continued to scan the area, rifle at the ready for ambushers, and told Steel to bring the *Zinder* sub-machine gun and the dead woman's bag.

The helicopter set off in pursuit of the fleeing vehicles in a storm of dust and dead grass. Brooks waited in his pocket of shadow until the police helicopter had reduced itself to a comfortably small dot on the horizon, then he slid his needler back into its waist holster and took stock of his position.

He had no choice but to head westwards, towards the shelter of the dense woods through which the expressway sliced. Open farmland with very little immediate cover rolled away from the hill in all other directions. He began to trot, imagining that he could hear a siren in the distance. The Traffic police in the helicopter were sure to have called for an ambulance to pick up Lewis's body, but Brooks felt confident that he would be safely screened by trees in mid-summer leaf before it reached the hill.

Trasker and Seldon in their much more powerful car had almost reached the Bylstock, the county town of Dunstan, by the time the

helicopter caught up with Bert Shaw in the battered Roydon van. Patrol Officer Steel relayed a position report to the ground forces, then switched to the broadcast speaker. Senior Inspector Chappell took her rifle from its securing clips again.

"This is the police," said Steel in a precise voice. "You in the van. Stop immediately and get out of your vehicle."

Bert Shaw decided to ignore the helicopter.

"Must be deaf," remarked Inspector Chappell.

The helicopter swooped down to a parallel course on the right of the speeding van, skimming at thirty feet over a field of ripening corn. Inspector Chappell took careful aim, then fired two shots at the van's engine compartment. A cloud of steam gushed fiercely from beneath the short bonnet and pieces of shattered metal clattered the length of the vehicle before bouncing freely into the lush grass on either side of the dirt road.

"About time too," muttered Inspector Chappell, spotting a flash of blue light in the distance.

The patrol car rounded a bend half a mile away. Pink fluorescent striped on its flanks identified it as a Special Service vehicle. By the time the Traffic helicopter reached the first buildings of the residential fringe of Bylstock, Trasker and Seldon had disappeared.

"Where the ferveok are they?" muttered Patrol Officer Carson, the pilot, fighting an updraught as the helicopter burst across the width of an elevated section of the expressway.

"What do those soboks down there have to say for themselves?" demanded Inspector Chappell. She could see four white patrol cars cruising the streets below them in a rather lost fashion.

"No sign of them, sir," replied Steel. She paused to listen. "Message from Senior Inspector Fowler, sir. She says thanks for your assistance, and her people will take over the hunt now."

"Fer-voek!" Inspector Chappell bit out the word in an undertone. She rammed the rifle back into its clips with careful force. "All right, my compliments to Inspector Fowler and tell her if she's not caught them by now, she's wasting her time. No, forget it. Just sign off. Patrol pattern again, Carson."

"Yes, sir," replied Steel and Carson in chorus.

Trasker stopped the car on the fourth floor of a car stack and climbed out. Seldon emptied a small aerosol spray into the vehicle before he closed his door. Both of them were wearing gloves and old clothes, which would be disposed of as soon as possible to break their trail. The



aerosol would destroy any chemical signatures from their bodies, if the claims of the Ferran manufacturers were to be believed.

They walked down the concrete stairs slowly, scanning the graffiti, attracting no more attention than any other users of the car park. A police car ground past as they stepped into the cool, dense shadows on that side of the street. Half-way down the block, they stopped at a Belldan restaurant.

While Seldon ordered a light snack to top off a meal of tartines and tinned beer consumed during their meeting, Trasker made a videolink call to a local number. He arranged for someone to pick them up in half an hour, allowing sufficient time for their light meal and the pursuit to be abandoned. Even if all three of their colleagues had been taken into custody, Trasker and Seldon were confident that they would be out of the area long before the police obtained anything useful from their prisoners.

## *26. Ambrose of Nottridge in Brivauche*

The Department of Brivauche takes in the centre of Belldon's northern coastline, extending between the tusk of Dura and the peninsula of Atmain. A cooling breeze from the sea was sweeping the one-sided main street of Trentec, a small town in a bay opposite Tann's Head, the westernmost reach of the Camerlish mainland.

Shifting dunes of dust were creeping along the sides of the stone buildings, but they were not rising high enough to inconvenience drinkers at the tables outside the town's only bar. Several squadrons of summer flies had taken over the role of mischief makers at glass level.

The conversation was broken by occasional cries of triumph. In a bid to reduce the fly population, the bar's owner had invested in two dozen low-powered laser pistols. The weapons had an effective range of about two feet and a pulse duration of half a second.

Most of the drinkers had a row of crisp, wingless trophies in front of them. The one with the greatest kill did not have to chip in when a group required another round of locally produced cider. Most of the twenty or so drinkers were fishermen, filling in an hour or so before the rise of the evening tide refloated their boats.

Two men were not playing the game. One of them was a local and unarmed. He was wearing a black peaked cap, a thick, much darned, off-white jersey despite the season, thick, balding, corded trousers and sea boots. As a concession to summer and a hot evening, he had pushed the sleeves of his jersey up to his elbows, revealing dark brown, black-

haired, indecipherably tattooed arms. His companion, clearly a foreigner, was sitting upwind of Xavier to avoid the faint odour of well-aged fish, which the wind plucked from his outfit.

Ambrose Mellbury of Nottridge, who thought of himself as the only Camerlish smuggler with any style, had a laser pistol but he was not keeping track of his successes. Unscrupulous neighbours had been observed dropping things near his table in order to scoop up a few of the raisin-like objects on the dusty pavement.

At rest, Ambrose Mellbury looked a picture of good health. His tight hunting-green coverall bulged in all of the right places and none of the wrong ones. His limping arrival at the bar had told a different story. A car crash at the beginning of the year had left him with a reconstructed left leg which would not be back to full strength much before Year-End. By playing on his vanity, his wife Lillith had managed to persuade him to use a sword stick as a much-needed walking stick.

Ambrose and Xavier were speaking the coastal dialect, which differed from standard Belldan almost as much as Ambrose's native language.

"Yes, it's all ready," Xavier assured Ambrose for the ninth time. "The goods are waiting for us. I've seen them myself."

The goods in question were Belldan liqueurs which had been transferred already to Sanvo, the largest of the scattering of small islands off the western coast of the Camerlish county of Stanton.

"Our unknown friends are still trying to sell us their protection," remarked Ambrose. "Yogar! You should have seen the krovan they sent with their last offer." He pantomimed mopping his waxing brow. "It took me all my time to say no to that, I can tell you."

"I don't think we're in any danger." Xavier took time to jet a stream of saliva towards the gutter. It missed the nose of a passing dog by a fraction of an inch.

Ambrose downed two flies with his laser pistol and burned a wing from a third. A brace of beams from the adjoining table struck the spiralling fly a moment later. After much discussion, the laser gunmen agreed to bisect the unfortunate insect as a fair settlement of their joint claim.

"As long as they're watching you, not me, we should be safe," continued Xavier. He took his cap off to wipe his forehead with a piece of grey rag. The wind tugged at the slender bridge of black which connected the two arms of his U-shaped hair. Xavier ran a hand across the top of his head absently, re-pasting the strands back into place across his brown dome. "It was a new one that came to see you?"

"A krovly blonde with a tan you could dive into." Ambrose released

a deep groan of thwarted passion. "Lilly would kill me if she knew what I'm thinking now."

"I thought you Camerlish are cold blooded?" grinned Xavier. "Especially Camerlish wives."

"Don't you believe it," laughed Ambrose. "Something like that really warms you up. I might have tried my luck, but there was something wrong about her." Ambrose refilled his glass with a delicately green southern wine and held the bottle up to the light to check the level through the dark brown glass.

"How do you mean?" invited Xavier. "Something wrong?"

"Hard to explain, really. She just struck me as the type to try and seduce you wearing a bra full of plastic explosive and fitted with contact detonators." Ambrose glanced along the street, towards the apology for a car park at the eastern end of the row of buildings. "Here comes the lad."

Xavier turned and squinted over his shoulder. The spare figure in a cotton tee-vest and white yachting trousers waved a greeting and continued to approach at a leisurely pace. Ambrose moved a chair away from the table with his foot. Armand Rivaud threaded a path through the evening drinkers. He sat down with a sigh, flapping his sweat-stained, blue and white hooped tee-vest.

He was Heitainan and came from one of the western departments where Belldan was the first language. He was slightly built, with hole-black hair cut to frame a delicate, almost feminine face. Regular and brilliantly white teeth, a vivid contrast with his deep tan, filled to overflowing a mouth set in a smirk of satisfaction and self-congratulation.

"This weather is much too hot for me," he puffed. Belldan spoken with a distinctive, sibilant, Heitainan accent drew hostile glances from the surrounding Brivauches. Ambrose leaned over to the window of the bar and flagged a signal to the owner, who produced a frosting mug of cider with commendable speed.

"Everything set?" Ambrose asked in Camerlish when Rivaud had taken the edge off his thirst.

"The boats are tuned and fuelled," Rivaud assured him.

"Are you sure you want to lead the decoy fleet?"

"It's a job for someone young," returned Rivaud with a quick sidelong glance at Xavier. "And anyway, nothing is going to go wrong, is it?"

"I almost wish something would, just to teach you a lesson," said Xavier. "A man of my age isn't old." He was fifty-four, exactly twice Rivaud's age.

"We know," grinned the younger man. "You just look old."

Xavier spat into the gutter to show his contempt for youth. The exchange lacked heat. Trentec was a very pleasant, relaxing place in summer. Ambrose of Nottridge took a swallow of wine and checked his watch. The yellow-on-black dial was showing 18:40. Their evening meal would be ready in a few minutes. One of the greatest attractions of *The Madrigal* was the excellent cooking of Angeline, the co-owner.

27. *A Night Out For Sovershend and Sandy*

A vision of dancing dreadfulness breezed into Devrel Sovershend's suite at the Mitton Gardens Hotel as he was preparing to go out for the night.

"Like it?" asked Jules Sandford, alias Sandy, revolving on his axis several times to give Sovershend a demonstration of a blue-biased flame suit.

"Very decorative," Sovershend replied, keeping his face straight. *If you're crazy enough go in for that sort of thing*, he added to himself.

"The Camerlish say least when they're most impressed," Sandy quoted, as if reciting a mnemonic to his full length reflection in the mirror on Sovershend's wardrobe.

*That's not the sort of remark you'd expect from a native of these shores*, thought Sovershend. *But if he's a foreigner, that could explain his total lack of dress sense.*

Sovershend filed the matter of Sandy's origins away in his memory as an interesting but irrelevant mystery.

"Going out?" asked his employer of the moment with devastating perception.

"The thought had crossed my mind," Sovershend admitted, smoothing his very reserved jacket in mountain green.

"I'll go with you," offered Sandy.

*The things you do for money*, Sovershend mocked himself.

"All right," he said aloud. "I was thinking of getting something to eat, then going on to a club in the *Complex*."

"Sounds fine," nodded Sandy, having caught the words 'eat' and 'club' while basking in the flickering blue magnificence of his reflection.

They left the hotel at street level, stepping into a warm, dusty, summer evening as a clock some distance to their right was striking eight. A walk of a few minutes brought them to the chosen restaurant – an island of lights in a street of gap-toothed office buildings. The area was being heavily re-developed, mainly to provide huge buildings for banks trying to show off how much money they had.

Sandy's off-hand, almost casually arrogant manner in the restaurant

set the doorman and then the waiter bristling with a desire to knee him in the yadren or to drop a plate of something hot, wet and sticky onto his thick rug of pale hair. But he emerged from the restaurant unassaulted. Sovershend attributed the miracle to Sandy's habit of distributing too-large tips to handy members of the hired help. Just the same, Sovershend marked the establishment down as one to avoid until memories had had a chance to gloss over.

As they retraced their steps, heading for the city's central gardens, the chiming clock was counting out nine. Sandy was feeling quite pleased with himself, having resolved by purely intellectual means a problem that had been nibbling at him since his first meeting with Sovershend. He had noticed that Sovershend's eyes roved his surroundings constantly – scanning, checking, rechecking, taking in such a mass of data that they had to be looking for differences from moment to moment rather than a mass of details.

Sandy's flash of insight had told him that his initial diagnosis of a low attention span was a mile wide of the mark. In fact, Sovershend was constantly on the alert for danger. His smooth, rapid movements were fuelled by a nervous energy, which held him in constant readiness for trouble – such as the attempt on his life by the man Rossiter at the storehouse. Sovershend was a survival machine in what could be a dangerous world – a world that Sandy and others gifted with UniCredit cards hardly ever glimpsed.

The streets were starting to fill up again. In about an hour and a half, 'lensters would be out on their nightly patrols of derelict areas, looking for diversion. Thanks to efficient policing and a system of monitor television cameras at street corners, the city police maintained an irregular 'lenster-free area in the centre of Dungard.

Knowing the fact but not believing it, Sandy began a vigilant survey of their surroundings as Sovershend led him into the back streets beyond Mitton Gardens. Sandy was more used to driving, or being driven, than walking.

Their destination was the web of gently rotting buildings which formed the city's neo-expressionist, neon-culture, arts complex. The city council wanted to level and redevelop the area but it had been held in check by a perverted guilt fuelled by the words 'culture' and 'arts' – a hypocritical reluctance to destroy part of Dungard's architectural heritage combined with a lack of money.

The complex was untroubled by cars, thanks to the inhabitants' charming habit of strewing sharp objects on the streets to discourage vehicled invaders. Most of the buildings had been four and five storey

warehouses and office buildings built in darkening sandstone. They had become a confusing jumble of craft centres, art galleries, pubs, clubs and cafés. Each establishment boasted its own distinctive sign-sculpture in flame paint and neon strips. At night, the displays were so bright that street lighting was unnecessary.

Perhaps intimidated by the open curiosity of pavement loungers, Sandy kept his flame suit on 'low' until they reached the chosen club. His spirits and the flicker of his suit rose in proportion to the volume of the music rolling from a four-piece band on a minute stage. Despite the crush of bodies, the interior of the club was distinctly cooler and more pleasant than the closeness of the evening outside.

Sovershend stayed with Sandy for the first half of a pint of fortbeer. Then he moved away to join a trio of friends, leaving Sandy deep in discussion with a group of fellow youth-recapturing fifty-year-olds. That was one area in which Sandy excelled – getting on with people whom he perceived to be his social equals.

### *28. Demirell Reports To The Duke of Atmain*

The Duke of Atmain did not appreciate the programs offered by the holovision service of his adopted homeland. But his hilltop concrete castle lay well within the transmission area of *NHV*, the station which served the country of Neal, across the Straits in Camerland.

The Duke left his living quarters and crossed the corridor to his office in the north-eastern tower of his castle's keep. The fifteen minute *News at 22* had just finished. The Duke's videolink was pulsing with the white 'calling' disc as he lowered himself into the well-padded chair behind an uncluttered desk. Charles Demirell's face was wearing a shadow of a frown when it formed in the screen. They exchanged brief greetings, then Demirell began his report.

"We're having trouble with the PSF. They've suffered some unexpected losses over the weekend," Demirell began.

"Unexpected?" The Duke picked out the key word, which had received a delicate stress for his benefit.

"Yes, sir. Some of them have been rather careless, if not stupid. But the rank and file have been going down at a rate that suggests the Camerlish police are receiving higher grade information suddenly. And there have been accidents."

"Accidents?" Again, a word received a subtle emphasis.

"Deaths of high-ranking members, sir. Individually, our computer gives a ninety-eight per cent probability they're true accidents. Taken

together, it drops to sixty-two per cent."

"And you think this is significant?" frowned the Duke.

"The Popular Socialist Front do, sir," replied Demirell. "The inner council is on the point of suspending assaults on RecCens until things cool off. They say they don't think further destruction would fall in line with their objectives. I think they're scared blue. Especially with the CSP jumping all over their organization in Stanton yesterday. And then one dead and one captured in the north-east this afternoon. They're starting to feel vulnerable."

"Yogar!" The Duke thumped the arm of his chair with a fist. He and took in a deep breath then released it slowly through his teeth to express his disgust at the faint hearts of Camerlish terrorists. "How does this affect our plans?"

"Fairly seriously in the short term. In order to keep the pressure on our competitors, we'll have to make use of much smaller lunatic groups. I'll need more personnel, more equipment, and . . ."

"More money?" finished the Duke.

"A certain amount, yes." Demirell nodded in meaningless apology. He knew that his demands would be met. The importance of his mission overruled all other considerations. Seeking to strike an optimistic note, he added, "We're not completely stuck, though. While our capacity to inflict new damage on the competition may have decreased, there's a lot we can do to disrupt the Refuse Barons' attempts to make good the damage already caused."

"I don't have to tell you how easy it is to bring a certain type of person out on strike in this country, given a grievance, real or imaginary, to believe in. And the kick they get out of the sense of power at being able to affect the lives of a lot of other people."

"You don't have to tell me that," nodded the Duke. "That's why I'm over this side of the Straits."

"Yes, sir. As regards establishing your position over here, we're able to use this time of disruption we're created to build up our chain of RecCens and getting businesses used to coming to us instead of going to the Refuse Barons."

The Duke nodded approval, then he slipped into a frown. "I thought we had a majority on the PSF inner council? Enough to make any vote go our way?"

"We did – until this afternoon," Demirell pointed out.

"The accidents and the arrests, yes. I think you'd better drop the PSF completely. Our competitors might discover too much," decided the Duke.

"I'm in the process of severing all links and checking our tracks are completely covered," said Demirell, glowing self-satisfaction.

"You don't think they could be suspicious?" A trace of worry folded the ducal brow.

"Oh, no," replied Demirell confidently. "The Camerlish Refuse Barons and the PSF are old enemies. There's no reason for them to look any deeper. It's just a routine precaution on our part – no action, no contact."

"That's good," murmured the Duke from behind the finger and thumb which were stroking his disciplined black moustache. "Well, carry on with the good work."

"Yes, sir." The confident gleam in Charles Demirell's dark and sinister eyes faded with his holographic projection.

### 29. *Dortmann Discontented*

Monday in Belldon had half an hour left to run. A figure in a dark green uniform was pacing the corridor outside the Duke of Atmain's private rooms. Ilse Dortmann, his security executive, knew better than to disturb her employer while he was watching the videolink. A small monitor screen strapped to her left wrist told her that the late film on *NHV* had not yet reached a commercial break.

As usual, the film was a pre-holovision 'flattie', but in colour. The rival national channel was having another of its festivals – an excuse to repeat ancient, flat programs in black and white. Both alternatives, one national channel and one commercial, had closed down for the night.

At last, the film faded into a caption. Dortmann ground a honey-flavoured cigarette into a container of sand and dabbed at her helmet of dark blonde hair. Then she touched the call button. The door retreated, allowing her to enter a small anteroom.

"Come in, Herta," called the Duke.

Dortmann pushed through a door padded with dark green leather which matched her uniform. The Duke rotated his armchair in her direction.

"Could I have a word, sir?" she asked deferentially.

"As long as it doesn't take too long."

The Duke climbed to his feet and headed for the door, travelling from a personal to a business environment. His wife turned to give Dortmann an awkward smile. Dortmann responded with a brief smile and a grave nod. Joyce Chatelle turned back to watch a herd of large animals in a dust cloud trampling a carpet as part of a durability test. She never felt



comfortable in the presence of 'Norman's female military'

The Duke accompanied Dortmann to her office in the south-eastern tower of the keep. Dortmann offered him a comfortable chair, then retired to the bar.

"We have a problem?" invited the Duke with a smile.

"The perennial problem, sir – Demirell," responded his security executive grimly. She handed the Duke a glass containing orange liqueur, chinchon water and lemon juice.

Her employer rotated his chair slowly, running his eyes idly over his surroundings while Dortmann poured herself a glass of wine. The office was an uncomfortable room, constantly at war with itself. Oppressive, dark, close-grained, wood-textured panelling sought to close the walls in, fighting shadowless, concealed lighting.

The room lacked an exterior window. Instead, behind the ordered desk, there was a holowindow, which was just a dormant grey blur and amplified the sense of enclosure. Dortmann found that the room gave her a psychological edge over visitors. Her employer was a conspicuous exception; the Duke was fairly insensitive to atmosphere. Dreams of a glorious future occupied most of his attention.

"What's Demirell done now, Herta?" asked the Duke patiently when Dortmann was sitting behind her desk.

"My department is being crippled, sir," she replied, fighting the irritation generated by her employer's patronising tone. "Six of my section heads are either packing or on their way to Camerland at this very moment. And I only found this out tonight because two of them had the courtesy to make a personal videolink call to me instead of just dropping a note into the internal mail."

"Charles needs more personnel, Herta," interrupted the Duke. "This was something of an emergency."

"Everything Demirell does is an emergency," growled Dortmann. "There's also the question of the arms, ammunition and other equipment he's requisitioned. Are we at war with Camerland, by any chance, sir?"

The Duke started guiltily, then he decided that the question was too absurd to merit an answer – but not before Dortmann had noted the twitch of his glass. "These are difficult times for all of us, Herta," he pronounced. "We must all cope as best we can. Now you really must excuse me." His late night viewing beckoned now that he had given tacit approval to Demirell's demands.

"I'd like to go to Camerland to see Demirell, sir," persisted Dortmann. "To sort out this mess. We can't go on like this, without any lines of

communication.”

“No, no. Not at the moment. I need you here.” The Duke shook a prohibitory hand to amplify the message of his head. “I’m sure you can cope. I have every confidence in you. Good night, Herta.” He drained his glass and hurried to the door to block further argument. His wife would have put the videolink on record so that he would miss none of the film.

Dortmann put the Duke’s empty glass into the washer and topped up her own glass with white wine. It was dry and grapey, and came from Heitain’s Zinder Valley. Her throat felt dry from too many cigarettes. She drank half of the wine in a single swallow, then filled up the glass again. Back at her desk, she lit another cigarette automatically as an aid to thought and stared at the regular grain of the desk top.

Her position was becoming impossible on top of intolerable. Demirell’s constant predations on her personnel and equipment had stretched the Duke’s defences at his Belldan Refuse Reclamation Centres to a dangerous façade. The way he called his security executive ‘Herta’ as if she were a maid was another source of major irritation. But most serious of all, in Dortmann’s opinion, were the hints at the true scope of Demirell’s mission in Camerland.

If he was waging a covert war of sabotage and he provoked retaliation in kind from the Camerlish Refuse Barons, Dortmann’s department would be hard pushed to provide adequate protection for the Duke’s Belldan interests.

Reluctantly, Dortmann was coming to terms with the only sensible solution to her problems – to get out before the whole house of cards collapsed.

A section of the panelled wall slid to the left to admit Clive Westwood, the commander of the castle guard. He threw a friendly salute in Dortmann’s direction and removed his riot helmet. He had been inspecting the castle night guard.

“Not very nice out there,” he remarked. “Hot as a bakery and much too quiet. Sticky, that’s what it is. I think there’s a storm brewing.”

Dortmann looked up and nodded absently, her thoughts elsewhere. Westwood tramped across the gloomy carpet to pour himself some wine, then dropped into the chair beside the desk. He waved a hand in front of Dortmann’s face to attract her attention.

“Hello, anyone there? If so, I’d like to report the castle secure for the night.”

Dortmann blinked reflexively and refocussed her eyes. She smiled a belated greeting. “Just thinking a few evil thoughts, Clive.”

"I'm not surprised in this dismal office of yours. I hope it's not me in for the tough time?"

"As long as you behave yourself," smiled Dortmann. "Clive, have you ever thought about a change?"

"What, leave this place?" laughed Westwood. "Good pay, good food and the prettiest SecEx I've ever had? I may look bockan daft but I'm not stupid. Or are you trying to get rid of me?"

"No, no," Dortmann told him with a smile. "It was just a thought. Who knows, Demirell might have plans for you."

"Next time he shows his face here, I've got a good mind to shove him off the highest battlement after I've told him just what I think of him," snarled Westwood.

"I'm first in that particular queue." Dortmann glanced up at the concealed security camera reflexively.

In theory, the automatic system which covered the offices of senior personnel was for use in the event of an emergency, such as a fire. But Dortmann could no longer feel certain that someone loyal to Demirell wasn't spying on her.

Westwood noted the direction of her glance and returned the conversation to a casual level. "You know, I have a recurring nightmare. There's a huge mob of 'lensters bearing down the gates, but when I get to the guardroom, there's no one there. Just a note saying, 'Sorry. Gone to Camerland. Demirell's orders.'"

"That's not funny, Clive," said Dortmann gloomily.

## Tuesday, Halgary 23rd

### 30. Trouble For Sandy

Just about the time when some of the digital clocks and watches in the world were showing 24:00 and the rest were insisting that it was 00:00 for the next minute, Devrel Sovershend became aware of growing tension somewhere close at hand. A sudden gap in the mob in the club stayed open long enough for him to spot Sandy and a giant locked in mortal confrontation. He approached.

A woman who looked like a *sporty*, the current euphemism for a prostitute, was urging the giant to pound Sandy to a crimson pulp. The intended victim had acquired a desperate expression and he had been trying to edge out of range while hoping to catch the eye of one of the club's security men. His edgings had brought him up against the plastic and chrome bar.

"Forget it," said Sovershend, coming between the two parties. He found that his eye level corresponded with the giant's mouth level, which made for easier lip reading.

"Geigem, sobok," advised twenty stones of correctly-placed muscle, sparing Sovershend a moment of his attention in passing.

"We don't want any trouble," Sovershend insisted, holding his ground and preparing for a fast draw of his sleeve gun.

"Move," returned the giant, flexing his thumping muscles.

Sovershend's jacket was hanging open to reveal an unimpressive physique. He could scrape together only slightly more than half of the giant's mass, and he looked in deadly danger of being wafted away by the draught of the big man's first swipe at Sandy.

"What's going on?" demanded one of the club's security men in as menacing a tone as he could manage.

"S'vogan, sobok," invited the giant, towering over him. "This is private business."

"S'vogan yourself," returned the guard, bring his riot club to the ready position. A violet glow outlined the business end.

"He insulted my woman," blustered the giant, realizing that no matter what he did, one of the security men would get in at least one touch with his riot club. No one who has ever experienced the agonizingly

intense muscle cramps induced by that permitted defence weapon courts an encore. Certainly not someone with more muscle than most.

"Your woman?" yelled an anonymous voice from a safe distance. "I thought she was anyone's for a fiver."

"Who said that?" roared the giant, blowing up in a different direction.

"I did!" yelled another voice from across the room.

Two more security men arrived on the scene, riot clubs glowing gently. The most senior came to a decision. "You! Out!" he told the giant. "And take your woman with you."

The heavyweight snarled an indistinct oath, but he moved toward the door to the street. His woman followed, screaming threats at Sandy.

"Sorry about that, sir," the senior guard told Sandy smoothly. "Frank," he added to a hovering barman, "give the vreitar a drink on the house." As a matter of pure economics, Sandy had to be in the right. He obviously had much more money to spend than the bigger man.

"Thank you," whispered Sandy. He was drenched with sweat and quivering visibly. The crowd turned away. The fun was over. Released from the pressure of eyes on all sides, Sandy picked up free drink and downed it in one, not caring what the glass contained.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he added to the security men, who were still hovering.

"Not on duty, sir. Not now." The words 'duty' and 'now' received a subtle emphasis.

"I see. Later, then?" Sandy passed each of them a £10 coin.

'Two' Sovershend mouthed, preserving protocol by nodding to the senior guard.

Sandy parted with another coin with the easy grace of someone who was not spending his own money.

"Thank you, sir. Glad to be of service. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening." The guards dispersed to their lurking positions.

"What was that all about?" Sovershend asked.

"That woman," quivered Sandy indignantly. "She offered her services to me. And when I turned her down, she started screaming something or other. Then that great ganar ape appeared and started threatening me."

"Sounds like you've been having fun."

"I can do without that sort of fun," returned Sandy angrily.

Sovershend shrugged. "Cheer up. Nothing happened. The rescue party arrived at the first minute, not the last."

"I suppose so," Sandy conceded.

Sovershend had been trying without success to attract one of the

barmen. Sandy just snapped his fingers in a commanding fashion. The head barman broke off in the middle of an order to rush two half pints of fort-beer over to a good tipper.

Sandy washed down a trunk from his pocket pharmacy, then he retired to the washroom for a mopping up session. When he returned, he was looking slightly more composed. His face was as pale as before, but his tremble had been tranquillized away.

He soon became involved in a discussion about some obscure wordsmith with a collection of young and very earnest people with literary pretensions. One of them had a thing about one hundred and eighty thousand word novels, but he seemed to have little idea of the amount of work involved in producing a work of that length. Sovershend stayed close, determined that nothing was going to happen to Sandy – until the job was over.

Sandy had soaked in enough of the city's night life by one-thirty. Sovershend, too, was starting to feel rather tired and the best of the entertainment was over by then. They pushed through a mob of people for whom Tuesday was not a working day in search of an exit. It was light and dark outside. White and rainbow splashes from neon signs alternated with misty, grey shadows along the almost empty streets. All of the action was indoors.

"It's very quiet out here," remarked Sandy, glancing idly at the whole-food menu whitewashed on a window.

"The beginning of the week's usually fairly quiet," said Sovershend. "Thursday to Sunday, though, the streets are packed all night."

They turned a corner, cutting down a gloomy side street.

"Perhaps it's just as well . . ." Sandy began.

A large arm reached out of the mouth of an alley and grabbed Sandy. His comment became a squeak as he disappeared into deep shadow. Sovershend slipped on a pair of Ferran image-converter glasses and followed rapidly but cautiously. In ghostly grey-green, he saw the heavyweight from the club sitting Sandy on a dustbin.

"I'm going to break every bone in your bockan body," gloated the giant, waving a massive fist under Sandy's nose.

Sandy's vision was a blur of decaying after-images, but the tone of voice and the powerful grip brought recognition and paralysis.

"I think you ought to change your mind," Sovershend remarked in an even tone.

Sandy's assailant turned rapidly, maintaining a grip on his victim's shoulder. He saw Sovershend standing about five yards away, nicely silhouetted against the glow in the street. "Change my mind?" he asked

with an unpleasant laugh.

"That's what I said." Sovershend flicked his sleeve gun into his hand and extended his arm, catching a blue glint with the barrel of the needler. "Back off."

"You wouldn't dare use that toy, sonny." The tone was a challenge.

Sovershend lowered his aim and squeezed the trigger. Four steel needles struck beside the giant's right foot, skipping sparks and chips of paving stone up his trouser leg. The big man leapt back, leaving Sandy perched on the dustbin, paralyzed by fear. Sovershend put two more needles through the material of the heavyweight's trousers, near the ankle, then he lifted his hand.

"The rest of the clip goes between your eyes if you're still here in five seconds." Sovershend's voice related cold, emotionless fact. "And it's explosive shot from now on."

His fleshy face contorted into an expression of mingled amazement and disbelief, the giant took to his heels. All his strength was no match for explosive needles travelling at over twice the speed of sound.

"You're pretty good at making enemies," Sovershend told Sandy as he helped him to his feet. His employer rose from the dustbin dreamily, still trying to decide whether to believe in the events of the previous two minutes. Sovershend located Sandy's pocket pharmacy and extracted a trunk. Sandy crunched it wordlessly.

"The thing that lights my fuse is the way these soboks step in and take your life over, and then expect you to do nothing about it," remarked Sovershend. "Come the next war, I think we'll shoot them when we start on the politicians."

"War?" repeated Sandy, alarmed.

"The one they've been talking about for the last ninety years to dig us out of our continent-wide stagnation. The one they say's inevitable unless we elect alternative leaders who aren't self-seeking, greedy soboks like the lot in power now."

"Oh, that war," groaned Sandy.

The trunk had worked by the time the pair had reached Mitton Gardens. Sandy had the air of someone who had been struck by something large and solid. But he could navigate without prompting and he did not appear to be on the point of collapse from reaction.

"I don't think this country of yours is very safe," he told Sovershend. There was a trace of a foreign accent, but not enough for Sovershend to pin down.

"Oh, it's not too bad," he replied.

"Would you have shot him? That man?" Sandy sounded doubtful.

"Bet your boots I would," Sovershend assured him. "That big kerel could have taken the pair of us to pieces without breaking into a sweat."

"Really?" Sandy seemed both reassured and repelled. "You could kill someone?"

"If he's about to cancel your membership card, you don't agonize about taking a human life. A survivor takes aim and pulls the trigger."

"Somewhat unfair, though, against an unarmed man?"

"You don't think you could have given him a fair fight with your bare hands, do you?"

"Well, no," admitted Sandy.

"Well, then. Which would you rather be – smashed to pieces because you couldn't stand up to him man to man? Or still alive and kicking because I'd shot him?"

"Well, if you put it like that . . ."

"That's what hits the floor. And don't forget: he started it."

They turned a corner at the bus station, which was ablaze with lights in the middle of the night and the scene of a surprising amount of activity.

"Thanks, anyway," said Sandy as they crossed the road towards a row of shops.

"Glad to prevent the mayhem." Sovershend felt honoured. Sandy was not the sort of person to offer gratitude.

A pair of CSP Auxiliaries followed them with their eyes until Sovershend and Sandy reached the entrance to the Mitton Gardens Hotel. The night receptionist at the desk seemed disgustingly wide awake for one forty-two on a Tuesday morning.

"I'm glad I'm going north later on," Sandy remarked when they were in the lift and on their way up to the fourth floor.

*I'll bet*, thought Sovershend. "Till when?" he added aloud.

"Tonight. I'll come back with the goods."

"I hope you don't get scooped up."

"Thank you!" Sandy gave Sovershend a look of faint surprise.

"You still owe me half my fee, remember?"

"As good a reason as any for wishing me well," decided Sandy. "Would you like to come along? You'd be useful to have around." He was under orders to involve Sovershend as deeply as possible in the venture.

"For the ride? I don't know. Might be fun."

"I'll be leaving at eleven," said Sandy, pausing at the door of his suite. "Let me know at breakfast."

"Right," nodded Sovershend. *It might not be such a bad idea*, he



thought. *Protecting a large investment of time and knowledge makes sense. And I don't really have anything better to do.*

Before going to sleep, Sovershend toyed with the alarm, then he decided not to set it. He made a deal with his body. If it managed to wake up in good time unaided, then he would take it to Norland.

### *31. Negative Reports*

Alex Cardinal intended to begin that Tuesday with a quick job as a favour to a friend and colleague. Chris Fox, a private investigator, had been entrusted with the task of serving a summons on an elusive and allegedly violent Heitainan businessman and he preferred not to be alone. Although Cardinal's eleven and a half stones spread over five feet ten inches did not add up to more than a very average physique, he was slightly taller and more massive than Chris Fox, and he was definitely faster on the draw.

Cardinal left a message in the office videolink's memory to tell his secretary where and how to contact him, and how long he expected to be away from the office. A gentle chiming began as soon as he touched the *END* panel on the keyboard.

A projection of Sir Nigel Grantby formed in the screen. It charged through a series of dizzy convolutions when Cardinal activated a scrambler. He was still working for the Refuse Baron. Grantby had accepted his increase in charges without a murmur – assuming, correctly, that the revision included danger money.

"Morning, Cardinal," rumbled Grantby, leaning towards the videolink as if slightly short-sighted. The investigator held his ground as the craggy face with its bushy eyebrows seemed to intrude deeper into his personal space. "I had a brief message from Major Tarpigan about the captured Zinders," added the Refuse Baron. "But no great detail."

"The Zinders, yes," temporized Cardinal. "Ah! He traced them back to a Belldan arms dealer. But the trail stopped there."

"The sobok won't talk, eh?"

"It's more a question of finding him. He's thought to be up to no good in the Tropics at the moment."

Annoyance and disappointment flitted across the Refuse Baron's face. "Still, I assume he's following up something else?"

"Oh, yes," nodded Cardinal.

Grantby assumed from the lack of follow-up that the Major was operating against the PSF and he had not, of course, discussed his plans with Cardinal.

"We discussed a security consultant who would act for your Group as a whole some time ago," the investigator added before the conversation could swing round to his plans for the day and a progress report. "I've heard the security executive of the Chatelle organization in Belldon could be open to offers."

"A tall, dark fellow called Dortmann?" said the Refuse Baron through a frown of recollection.

"Dortmann's a she," corrected Cardinal.

"Then who was the bloke with Norm at the trade fair at Meermond last year?"

"Perhaps you're thinking of the second in command, Charles Demirell?" suggested Cardinal.

"I knew the name began with a 'd'," nodded Grantby. "Struck me as a bright lad, did Demirell."

"I've heard, well, let's say his judgement at times can be questionable. But it's his boss who's thinking of a move."

"Well, I'll think about it." Grantby promised nothing. "How are you getting on?"

"Following leads," Cardinal returned cautiously. "Mostly clearing the picture by eliminating irrelevancies."

Three bursts on the door buzzer allowed him to draw a veil over his lack of progress. "Ah, he's here."

"A contact, eh?" approved Grantby, drawing back from his videolink. "I'll let you get on with it."

His videolink screen shimmered into a random colour swirl. Alex Cardinal switched it off, then he hurried across his office to let Chris Fox in before he wore out the door buzzer.

### *32. Illegal Entry / Clandestine Exit*

Devrel Sovershend surprised himself by waking in time to join Jules Sandford for a late breakfast. Sandy wished him good morning, handed him an envelope, then disappeared behind a morning news sheet.

"What's this?" asked Sovershend, punching out orange juice, sausages, scrambled eggs and tomato halves on the menu, and hoping that they would not arrive in the same container as the coffee.

"Your new identity card and passport," Sandy told him.

"What do I need these for?"

"So that there won't be any questions in future if you're shown to have entered Norland and never left."

"Where I normally cross the border, no one ever asks to see an Ident

card. And I don't need a passport to go north."

Sandy shrugged. "This is part of the plan." His tone suggested that there was no scope for alteration in his plan.

"Well, all right," Sovershend surrendered.

*Perhaps friend Sandy's not the cross-border sneaking type*, he told himself. *And he must have been pretty sure I'd go with him if he got all this together. And the man with the money is always right.*

"All right, who am I now?" he continued aloud, examining the contents of his envelope. "Svey yoget! This picture even looks a bit like me. Silv Hander. A madky Tombrian! I can't speak that."

"How about Belldan?" Sandy asked.

"Yes, I can manage that. Why, have you got another set of papers?"

"No, but I'll be travelling as a Belldan citizen. All you have to do is speak Belldan with a Tombrian accent."

"I can't even do Ferran with a Tombrian accent, never mind bockan Belldan!" protested Sovershend. "Why couldn't I have been Belldan too? Or better still, stayed Camerlish?"

"It's all a matter of getting hold of appropriate papers," Sandy told him with unusual patience. "Which isn't easy at short notice."

"Oh, well," Sovershend conceded as his breakfast arrived. "I suppose we'll manage somehow. But Silv, though. Every sobokandar Tombrian on the vid's called that."

Sandy just shrugged to tell him that he would have to live with the name for a few hours.

Before they caught the O/U train for Dungard South airport, Sovershend followed Sandy's instructions and reserved their suites for one more day, glad that he was not paying the bills. But Sandy seemed unconcerned by the cost of his expedition. He was too used to being shielded from the horrors of poverty by an apparently inexhaustible UniCredit card.

Tarbolt airport, which lies seven miles inland of the west coast Norlish city of the same name, was still a mass of coronation decorations a week after the event. Norlish flags of various authenticities tangled with sags of bunting, and the souvenir stalls were still doing brisk business.

The Customs and Immigration officer glanced through Sovershend's Tombrian passport, but subjected the photograph to a lingering scrutiny. Sandy received the same treatment. A Camerlish businessman behind them just held up his identity card and was allowed to stroll down the outside of the queue to the autochecker. Without breaking his stride, he slipped his identity card into one slot and recovered it from another a yard and a half further on.

Having been graciously granted permission to enter Norland, Sovershend and Sandy headed for one of the car rental agencies. Sandy hovered in the background, allowing 'Silv Hander' to take care of the details. Sovershend checked that the car was fuelled, wearing four decent tyres and maintained up to date. Then he applied an illegible signature to an endless succession of forms, nodded goodbye to the girl at the counter, failed to return her smile and marched out into a dull Norlish afternoon. Anyone who associated herself with so much form-filling had to be an enemy, no matter how outwardly attractive. Sovershend had never been one for smiling at enemies.

Sandy was leaning against the car, smoking a small cigar when Sovershend reached him. Before they moved off, Sandy passed a square envelope across to his companion and told him to put the false passport and identify card in it. Sovershend obeyed, then he moved across the hire car compound to the gate.

The barrier rattled to the right as he approached, allowing Sovershend to roll out onto the roadway and tag on to a line of traffic. The hand holding the envelope drifted to Sandy's window. When he wound it up again, apparently losing his taste for fresh air, the envelope had disappeared. A man crossed the road behind the car, walking at a casual pace and not appearing to be tucking an envelope into his pocket.

The line of traffic rolled forward twenty yards, then stopped again. Sovershend adjusted his mirror to follow the man whom he assumed had picked up Sandy's envelope. The fairly anonymous figure turned into one of the airline offices; possibly Ferran International. Sovershend's thoughts turned to his friend Cool Cal, who was also an agent of Ferran Overseas Intelligence. He began to wonder why the FOI was supplying Sandy with false identity documents. Nothing sensible came to mind.

"It says here that Camerland is in danger of becoming Norland's poor relation," remarked Sandy, quoting from his news sheet.

"Some Norlish news sheets are famous for their ridiculous optimism," scoffed Sovershend. "Which way?"

"Left. Take the road for Tarbolt. It says here Norland will become the whole island's power house if the tidal power generation scheme off the Minkies is a success."

"Oh, sure!" scoffed Sovershend. "That's very long-term. They haven't even decided what to build, never mind starting to build it."

"Then there's their mutant strain of euphorbiaceae, if that's how you pronounce it. You know, the shrubs they process to make synthetic motor spirit."

"Years before they get a high-yield strain adapted to the colder climate. And they'll need all they can grow when their oilfields in the Inland Sea run out. What does it say about the experimental fusion reactor the international consortium is building near Leviton?"

"It doesn't seem to be mentioned," Sandy admitted.

"What about the oilfields Camerland hasn't even touched in the western approaches to the South Channel?"

"Nor them."

"There you are then," said Sovershend, resting his case. "That's how comprehensive it is."

The road headed for the sea and the town of Tarbolt, which came and went in an unreasonable length of time thanks to an unexplained hold up in the centre of the town. Sovershend followed the coast road. Four miles north of the city, the road divided.

Sandy directed his driver along the left-hand, coastal branch. Black rocks, very green vegetation and white water lay on either side of the road. They passed through three small towns in twenty-five miles before reaching the neck of land which prevented the Beck of Morival from becoming an island like Mink, its cousin of almost equal size.

With the sea on his right for a change, Sovershend continued his westward progress. High ground closed in almost immediately as the road turned directly for the town of Elms at the tip of the beck. After a further eighteen miles, Sandy told his driver to turn right, onto a track of marshy ruts on either side of a strip of very healthy grass. A small wood swallowed them briefly. Then they emerged into a roughly circular clearing. Sovershend crossed it and stopped beside a series of humps which were shrouded with camouflage nets.

The objects were matt black and looked rather like helicopters – until Sovershend noticed that their tails and rotors had been removed and to make room for huge black tyre-shapes attached to the back of the motor housing. Sandy slid out of the car, stretched furiously, then strolled over to three men who were lurking beside one of the mysterious machines.

Sovershend followed him. Part of the camouflage net had been thrown back, revealing an aircraft-type cockpit behind a plastic bubble nose. The interior of the vehicle was a solid, non-reflecting black, broken only by instruments and labels. One of the men beside it was sitting at the controls of a power loader. The other two were doing something to a black box on the side of the machine.

"All right," invited Sovershend, catching up with Sandy, "you've baffled me. What are these things?"

"They're called Mobys," said Sandy, providing a label but not an explanation.

One of the men beside the machine looked around, then nudged his companion. "Here he is."

"About time too," responded the other man. In both cases, the language was Ferran but the accent Belldan.

This is a bit cheeky, thought Sovershend. A bunch of Belldans smuggling uisge into Camerland.

"Where are you up to?" asked Sandy in his impeccable Camerlish Ferran.

"This is the last one," replied the most observant of the Belldans. He looked as though he had been deflated, forced into his coverall, and then allowed to expand to his natural bulk. He managed to bulge in places where ordinary people don't have places. His round face shone with sweat, which had pasted his sparse, almost invisibly blonde hair to his sun-tanned dome. When he struggled to his feet, the top of his head barely reached Sandy's nose. A cloud of violent aftershave or deodorant drifted over to Sovershend.

"Right, finished," said the man on the power loader. He backed away from the strange vehicle and drove across the clearing and into the trees.

"We're ready to go now," said the third Belldan, who looked about Sovershend's age. He was not too tall, but the right height for his weight. His face was tanned very dark and he wore his hair as a cool, black stubble.

"This is Sovershend, by the way," said Sandy, hooking a thumb to his right. "John and Marco. I'll check with the others." Sandy had become very brisk and business-like now that he was among his own people and reasonably distant from the kill-crazy Camerlish.

"Right, see you later," said Sovershend casually, dismissing Sandy before he could do the same to him.

"Yes," agreed Sandy, feeling certain that Sovershend had scored off him but not sure how. He drifted away with John at his heels, following the flattened loader tracks across the grassy clearing.

"Right," Sovershend said to the remaining Belldan. "Tell me about this thing."

"This thing," replied Marco, "is a Ferran invention, what else? Based on the GE principle." He paused expectantly.

"Yes, I've heard of the ground effect," said Sovershend, undismayed by the initials.

"How about *STAMP*, heard of that?"

Sovershend found that he had to concentrate quite hard to understand the other man's words, which were masked both by his natural Belldan rhythms and by a drawn-out and half-swallowed Ferran influence.

"All right," Sovershend admitted. "What the fervoek is a *STAMP* if it's not something you stick on a letter?"

Marco's superior grin became one of budding friendship when Sovershend produced a packet of honey-flavoured cigarettes and offered him one. "It stands for 'Small Tactical Aerial Mobility Platform'," he recited.

"Of course, it does. Which leaves me none the wiser," Sovershend added.

"The idea was to build a vehicle similar to an air-cushion floatcraft. For terrain too rough for a wheeled vehicle, too steep for a floatcraft and too enclosed for a helicopter. For wooded hills, light jungle, that sort of thing. It also had to be able to operate above ground effect heights. To actually fly, if necessary. These are *Mark Fours*. The Ferries are up to about Mark Nine, so we were able to rent these fairly cheap."

"How cheap?" Sovershend took a professional interest.

"Five thousand lobsters a day for the four of them."

"A thousand pounds? That's not bad."

"Not for something that cost the Ferries about a million lobrons to build. Don't forget the running costs, though. They work out at fifteen hundred lobsters per Moby per flying hour. But they're very nice to fly."

"I suppose this is the cargo?" Sovershend pointed to the black box on the side of the machine.

It looked like a double coffin for beings almost half as tall again as the average person. Sovershend estimated its dimensions as eight feet long by three feet square. The container could hold ninety-six cases of uisge.

"There's another one on the other side for balance," agreed Marco.

Sandy trotted over to them, looking disturbed and not a little cheated. "Is this all there is, Marco?" he demanded.

"All?" frowned Marco. "Vr. Demirell was quite satisfied when he looked things over."

Sandy impaled him with an uncharacteristically fierce glare which told Sovershend that the name Demirell was not to be uttered in front of strangers. He affected not to have noticed the slip or attached any significance to the name. But he filed it away in his memory for future reference.

"Just eight of these containers?" Sandy persisted. "Didn't anyone listen when I gave you the carrying capacity of a Moby?"

"Why, how much do you think one of them weighs?" Marco asked in a very neutral tone.

"Half a ton?" said Sandy dismissively.

"They weigh three times that," laughed Marco.

Sandy stared at him in disbelief. When Marco had proved that each container held ninety six cases of uisge by opening one up, Sovershend produced a pocket computer and ran through a calculation to verify the weight. Then he prodded at the keyboard again.

"And if you bought the whole load retail in Camerland," he added, "you'd have to find more than a quarter of a million pounds to pay for it."

"Satisfied?" demanded Marco.

Sandy nodded, ignoring the offensive tone from an underling as Sovershend ran through the calculation a second time. He nodded again, offering grudging agreement, when he saw the final figure.

Sovershend consulted his watch. "Time for a brew."

"The Camerlish afternoon tea-break?" scoffed Marco.

"There should be come coffee." Sandy waved a hand towards a tent in the shadows at the edge of the clearing. "I don't know about tea, though."

"Let's find out," said Sovershend, leading the rush.

"This is the time to invade your country," remarked Marco. While you're all drinking tea."

"Who'd want to invade us?" scoffed Sovershend.

"He's right," agreed Sandy. "No invader would be safe in his country."

An hour or so after sunset, a light breeze began to gather strength. Heavy clouds rallied to blacken the sky prematurely. Sandy looked up nervously at the rustling tree tops and started to drop hints about the weather.

"It's going to be cloudy but calm for most of the run," one of the pilots assured him with enough conviction to dissolve most of Sandy's fears. "The rain won't come till we're ready for it."

The road vehicles had left the camp, taking with them all surplus equipment and personnel. Only Sandy, Sovershend, four pilots and the Mobys remained – plus the tent with its vital thermal containers of food and coffee.

The commander of the flight of Mobys was a fierce-looking woman of about Sandy's age. Va. Farges, who also answered to 'Tiger' pronounced as a Beldan word, rapped on the table and announced: "Time to go, vreitei."



Sovershend dragged his attention away from a portable videolink and strolled out into the night. He could see torches waving in the clearing. Splashing noises from somewhere nearby in the trees told him that someone else had decided to have a quick leak before the journey. Then muffled starter-explosions and the rising whine of jet engines running up to speed drowned every other sound.

Sandy climbed into Tiger Farges' Moby and groped helplessly at the seat harness. Sovershend joined Marco. The balloon-shaped John, and a young, very average man called something like Andrayem, started the other two Mobys.

Tiger took the lead down a winding path through the trees, followed by John, Andrayem and then Marco with Sovershend. They moved out in single file onto a long lakan, which was open to the sea at its northern end. Flying about two yards above the dull, grey water, the Mobys were enveloped in miniature inverted rain storms of spray raised by their lift thrusters. "We'll be able to see a bit more clearly when we put on some more speed," Marco told Sovershend.

"I thought pilots did everything by instruments?" he replied.

"Not quite everything," grinned Marco.

The Mobys moved into a blunt arrow-head formation, which took the back markers out of the leaders' spray. Tiger set a course down the centre of the lakan. The eastern sky had merged without a break with the land, but a faint glow could be seen beyond the trees to the west.

"Is that miles an hour?" remarked Sovershend, pointing to dial which was hovering around the 60 mark.

"Right, but you don't get much of a sensation of speed in the dark," said Marco.

"What's our range?" Sovershend added, accepting one of Marco's honey-flavoured Belldan cigarettes.

"About a hundred and sixty miles with this sort of load."

"It's further than that to Dungard. Quite a bit further."

"That's why we're making a refuelling stop at Lesten Island. We do think of these things, you know."

"Surprise, surprise! When do we get there?"

Marco glanced at the map in the clear plastic pouch on his right thigh, which was lit by a downward-directed, pink-tinted lamp. "Twenty-three forty-five. No one told you that?"

"I know the end of the run, but Sandy was a bit vague about the early part."

"That sounds like just him. I hope it's all right to tell you all this. You might be a spy."

"Bit late to worry about that now we're on the move. Is this the first time Sandy's made a run with you?"

"It shows, doesn't it? Can't think why the boss had to come along. He's a marvellous planner but he's no man of action."

"I wonder how his janglers are doing?" grinned Sovershend.

"He's probably got so many pills rattling around inside, he's incapable of feeling anything," grinned Marco.

The Mobys raced on into the night, riding five yards above a rising swell. They reached the mouth of the lakan, turned westwards and then set a south-westerly course to run between the Beck of Mortival and Mink. Time passed slowly and uneventfully.

### *33. Ambrose Of Nottridge Begins His Run*

A fleet of five JL-90 jetfoil craft edged away from Sanvo, heading out from the group of islands which sprawls up to fifty miles from the western coast of the county of Stanton. As they plunged into a black night, Ambrose Mellbury was sitting crouched over the radar screen in the darkened wheelhouse of the lead vessel.

His decoy fleet of two ageing cabin cruisers, under the command of young Armand Rivaud, had just reached the horizon, making a mere fifteen knots on muffled engines. Both fleets were running at a slight angle to the rolling ocean surges, making for Astrik Bay on the border between the counties of Lesham and Westel.

The radio operator bobbed up from his cramped compartment to deliver a signal and to have a look at the night. He had intercepted what appeared to be a random scrap of conversation. But the time and the frequency had told him that Ambrose's second in command had left Haitain on time with his cargo of spirits. "Bekker's on his way. No problems," he reported.

"Let's hope it stays that way," replied Ambrose, tightening one of the straps of his seat web as a defence against the erratic motion of the jetfoil. It was most stable at the highest cruising speed.

"Looks nice out there." Finding the pressing blackness of the overcast night unappetising, the radio operator retired below to his equipment and a cup of synth-café.

"Good night for it," remarked the helmsman, peering into the darkness. In spite of all the advanced instruments, offensive and defensive radars, jammers for unfriendly electronics and other products of the modern age, he still preferred to keep a good pair of eyes in reserve.

34. *By Moby To Lesten Island*

Marco sounded both relieved and tired when he announced, "We're here."

Sovershend dropped the stub of his fourth cigarette into the snuffer and lifted his eyes from the radio dial. "Can't see anything. Oh, yes! I can now." About three hundred yards ahead, according to the radar, he could see a dark hump against the darker sky, and a line of something lighter in front of it.

"Right on the button." Marco pointed to the clock, which was showing: 23:44 - 35.

The Mobys crossed the shore line and headed for a torch and the stream of rapid dots flashing in their direction. They landed in a grassy crater, entering via an opening on the seaward side. Tiger called an enthusiastic greeting to the three men standing beside a dark Range Rider four-wheel-drive vehicle. They hurried over to her Moby to confer rapidly, then two of them got busy with the refuelling operation.

An electric pump powered by batteries in the back of the Range Rider transferred jet fuel from a series of fifty gallon drums. The pilots and Sovershend watched from a safe distance, smoking John's cigarettes and exchanging shop talk about the performance of their machines.

A cold wind from the sea made them clip the seals on their outer garments up to the neck. When Andrayem blasted his cigarette end into the air, the wind seized it and lifted it over to the refuellers. Fortunately, neither of them noticed the glowing missile hurtle past them.

"Looks like the weather's on the way," John remarked in Camerlish coloured with both Belldan and Ferran accents.

"It's weird to want rain when you're flying," added Marco.

Andrayem lit another cigarette and snorted his contempt for the weather.

Sovershend decided that the Belldans had received one of the *get-you-by* electronic language implant courses, which concentrate on vocabulary, grammar and speech patterns, but pay little attention to other than the basics of pronunciation. 'Get the words right, no matter how they sound', was the policy of some language courses. And enough people agreed with them to make their authors rich.

The Mobys were ready to continue within fifteen minutes. Tiger Farges whistled imperially to the other pilots. When the light mounted on the backs of the Range Rider went out, Sovershend found that he could see nothing outside the cockpit of his Moby.

Making no attempt to maintain formation, the Mobys drifted to the

shore, striking wide gaps in the breakers. They resumed their stations as they began to outrun clouds of spray from a rising sea. Air-speed integrators wound up to cruising speed. Sovershend felt his nerves stringing tighter as the Mobys set course for the estuary of the River Capse.

Driving rain came down to blot out the faint running lights of the other Mobys. All that remained of them was three firmer blobs on a display next to the radar screen, which was showing mainly mush. The blue light on a device plugged in to the radar control panel began to flash and intermittent glass-breaking sounds clashed from the dark blue box.

"Does that mean we're about to crash into something big and solid? Or drop to bits?" Sovershend asked lightly, pointing to the cigarette packet-sized device.

Marco cackled in sheer delight. "You Camerlish! What imaginations you've got! That's the radar jambler, which is keeping us off the coastguard screens."

"We're that close, eh?"

"Too late for second thoughts. Is there any food?"

"Couple of tartines left. Duck and cress, I think. I wonder if I could get a bottle out of one of the containers to make this synth-café drinkable?"

"I'll hold the door while you climb out," offered Marco.

"S'vogan, shev," laughed Sovershend.

"What?" Marco leaned closer to hear better.

"Not till we're safely back on the ground, maccar," Sovershend improvised.

*Aha! he thought. Another slip of the programming. Our friends from across the water haven't been supplied with the fashionable Heitainan naughty words. I wonder what they do for swearing?*

## Wednesday, Halgary 24th

### *30. Ranks Of Ambuscade*

A heavy overcast had brought almost total darkness to the Nealan coast but the incoming rain was still over the Inland Sea. There was a marked lack of activity at the half-built yachting marina but it was by no means deserted. Three men were sitting in a blacked-out hut, waiting for the arrival of Bekker, Ambrose Mellbury's second in command. Two of them were playing cards. The third was reading an obscure novel by an even more obscure wordsmith. His companions had inspected the paperback and dismissed it as rubbish. It lacked sex, sadism and slaughter in the desired quantities.

Less than one hundred yards from the hut, the vanguard of a National Temperance Front assault force was waiting impatiently for action. Many of the fifty were feeling distinctly mean, nasty and wound up. Dudley, the leader of the expedition, had forbidden the smoking of javon until afterwards to keep them in that state. But with the wind blowing inland, away from the hut, a few had chosen to disobey the order. They had nothing else to do at one-fifteen on a dark summer morning.

Spread out in a wide arc behind the crescent formation of Lawsonites, the legion of the Church of His Aweful Satanic Majesty lurked passively. CHASM itself was not as strongly represented as the NTF, but it had a greater force. Each of the five True Followers commanded a squad of nineteen NeoKirlans. Heavily armed, the warriors were sitting or lying, according to available cover, filled to the ears with hypnotic control drugs and waiting to be given the antidote and pointed towards what could be their last battle.

The NeoKirlans would enjoy the bloody conflict and their masters would derive their pleasure from thwarting the Lawsonites. While not being able to bring pleasure to all, the True Followers of CHASM intended to follow their creed to the best of their ability by catering for the majority.

36. *Up the Dungard Ship Canal By Moby*

Four Mobys entered the River Capse in line astern, running slightly to the south of the central channel. Their air-speed integrators showed 25 mph, and they had reduced height to a bare two yards above the relatively fast-flowing water. Four apparently more violent patches of rain headed invisibly for the tidal locks at Hamstede, gateway to the Dungard Ship Canal. An effortless, soaring glide took the Mobys over the lock gates. Tiger Farges, in the lead vehicle, took her speed up to 60 mph. Strung out over a quarter of a mile, the Mobys raced for Dungard.

"This must look quite impressive during the day," remarked Marco as they sped past the seemingly endless oil and gas installations at Wallstan.

"I've always been meaning to take the floatcraft tour of the canal," said Sovershend. "Perhaps I will: if I survive this one."

"You can always get out and walk," laughed Marco.

More hops took the convoy over the locks at Dymond, Mirton and Cross. Sovershend decided that the worst part of their journey was going under rather than over bridges. It was a purely psychological effect, but their speed, the poor visibility in the exiting Northern rainstorm and the fact that they were flying above the water instead of sailing on top of it all conspired to create the illusion that they were in deadly danger of crashing into every one of the bridges.

"Can't be far now," said Sovershend as they zoomed beneath the distinctive, echoing, Cross expressway bridge and its companion open-girder railway bridge.

"Four and a half miles," nodded Marco. "Two and a half to the next locks and two more to the turn-off."

"I didn't know you were navigating," said Sovershend, impressed by the complete answer. "I thought you were just following the leader."

Marco shrugged. "It's all down on the map. Have you got any more cigarettes? I've lost my spare packet."

Sovershend offered a uisge-flavoured cigarette.

The canal curved to the right, bringing them to the vast timber yards, Wellmode locks and the first of the docks. A long left turn took them past docks three to six. The Mobys decelerated to 30 mph and closed up to a separation of twenty yards.

"Here we are," announced Marco.

The canal-side embankment cut off their view of Tiger's Moby for a moment. It reappeared in the city's night-glow, swinging abruptly to the right across the canal, just short of the point at which the map described

the waterway as the River Dunan. Their speed halved as the Mobys negotiated a cutting seven yards wide.

A shadowy railway viaduct rose blackly into the air on their left. Almost immediately, the Mobys skimmed beneath the immense, dark, concrete bulk of the Dungard expressway. Dawson Street shadowed them in a much more modest fashion. Sovershend was on familiar ground. The high brick wall on the left of the cutting descended rapidly. The storehouse and its surrounding electrified fence slid into view. The first two Mobys had already hopped over the fence and landed in front of the building. Andrayem joined them, then Marco with Sovershend.

Stan Tenbright ushered the visitors indoors, out of the rain, leaving a crew of his people to get on with unloading and refuelling. As it would be their first and last meeting, Sandy did not trouble to introduce the pilots to Dorry and Tenbright. By-passing Chas Jones with his supplies of food and drink, the visitors made straight for the room with the orange '16' painted on the door. There, in order of seniority, they relieved the pressures of several hours in a Moby.

Sovershend exchanged snarls with Rossiter when he returned from room 16. Dorry immediately found Rossiter a job elsewhere. He realized that a battle would not help the smooth running of a business deal. Sandy looked relieved when Rossiter left, but he made no comment. The prospect of being caught in the crossfire had been troubling him.

"We've finished refuelling," reported a man in a dripping set of waterproofs.

"Thanks, Blackjack," nodded Dorry. "Your people can leave when they're ready," he continued to Tiger Farges. She looked more of a commander than Sandy. Ten minutes had passed since the arrival of the Mobys.

"Right," nodded Tiger.

She exchanged glances with Sandy. The Moby pilots gulped down their synth-café and gathered a selection of tartines and pies for the return journey. Jones had filled their flasks. Two more shifters emerged from the rain for a warming cup of synth-café.

While Tenbright counted gold currency wafers into a carrying case, watched by Tiger and Sandy, Sovershend drew Dorry aside to acquaint him of the nationality of the other visitors. Although slightly uneasy about working with a bunch of foreigners who had not declared themselves as such, Dorry had to admit that he could find nothing sinister in their conduct to date.

Carrying 107 ounces of fine gold, Tiger led the Moby pilots out into the rain. An ocean of spray burst against the steel door when they

started their engines. The Mobys hopped over the boundary fence and just vanished into a solid downpour and a sable night.

The shifters returned to the loading bay five minutes later, having peeled off their wet outer layers. They were carrying mugs of synth-café and Jones's tartines. Blackjack supervised the transfer of eight side-cargoes to the basement, using a section of floor which turned out to be a cargo hoist. His bosses and Sandy used the stairs.

Tenbright removed a locking bar, which ran the full length of one of the containers, and looked with approval at the exposed cases of uisge. "I find a sight like this always cheers me up enormously," he remarked.

"Our young friend still has his sense of wonder intact," said Dorry with a shadow of a superior smile.

Sandy replied with a matching worldly-wise smile.

"The monumental insensitivity of the old," commented Tenbright, addressing thin air. He led the way across the large, bright basement room to a small office formed by two partitions in the corner opposite the hoist. Two men were waiting for them.

"Been here long?" asked Dorry. He made no attempt to introduce them to Sandy.

"A few minutes only," said the older man. A strange, shiny rigidity of the left side of his face gave his voice an odd, lisping quality. His companion stood in a relaxed but alert posture behind his chair, like a holovision gangster. Sandy inspected the silent figure covertly, and thought immediately of Sovershend. Here was the same readiness for action and the eyes that missed nothing.

Dorry and the visitors went into a huddle to discuss quantities. Tenbright shunted Sandy to one side to extract an account of the journey from Norland. Almost immediately above their heads, Jones was doing the same with Sovershend.

More buyers arrived over the next hour or so. Rossiter returned from Dorry's errand and took over the controls of the steel security door at the outward end of the access tunnel. Sandy continued to struggle to believe that the basement had its own underground access road.

"It's starting to get light out there," remarked the last of the buyers as a hurry-up hint to Blackjack and his crew of shifters. "The clouds are going. It might even be a nice day."

"Really?" said Dorry absently, counting £100 notes.

"What kept you, anyway?" asked Tenbright. "You should have been here twenty minutes ago."

"I know," said the buyer. "Bockan van broke down again."

"Why don't you get a new one, you tight-fisted old sobok?"



"New vans cost money. Not everyone's got it to chuck around, like some I could mention." The buyer nodded to Dorry and his fistful of red notes.

"S'vogan, shev," laughed Tenbright. "I happen to know you 'borrowed' this old wreck. Why don't you give it back to whoever owns it and 'borrow' a better one?"

"I might just do that," grinned the buyer. "You don't happen to own a van by any chance?"

"If I did, I wouldn't admit it to you," scoffed Tenbright.

"We've loaded you now, *sir*," interrupted Blackjack, putting a heavy emphasis on the 'sir'.

"Thank you, my man," drawled the buyer grandly. His skin was wrinkled dark chocolate and he had a helmet of jet-dusted white curls. "If you see my lad, he'll fix you up with a small tip."

"Knowing you, a bockan small one," laughed Blackjack.

"Well, that's that," said Dorry as the van started for the tunnel entrance. "A good night's work."

"Made a proper mess of the bockan floor," said Blackjack.

"That's what floors are for," remarked Tenbright, surveying the collection of drying, muddy tyre tracks.

"Guess who doesn't have to clean it up?" remarked Annelish, one of the shifters.

"No point in being the boss if you've got to sweep the bockan floor, is there?" countered Tenbright.

The hoist groaned back to ground level with a human cargo, and filled a dangerous hole in the floor. Tenbright had a look through the small, thick window in the steel door.

Blue sky seemed to be displacing clouds and the sun had added a delicate tint to the grey monstrosity of the railway viaduct. Billows of steam were rising on the other side of the cutting, telling him which of the huts had a roof.

"Looks like it is going to be a nice day, like the forecast said," he remarked.

"How could it be anything else after such an excellent start?" said Sandy.

The group strolled into an inner room, where Sovershend and Jones were discussing some weighty matter. Jones turned his attention to brewing some real coffee. Blackjack and his fellow shifters began to drop hints about some real food to go with the real coffee. Jones switched on the cooker and accepted orders.

Moments later, a man burst into the room. "There's Prots all over the

place outside," he yelled, before leaving with even more speed than his arrival. The arrival of the police halted the celebration in its tracks.

### *37. Demirell Delighted*

Lightened of their loads, the Mobys made much better time on the return journey to Lesten Island. A rising wind had stripped the skies of their blanket of cloud by the time they made their landfall. The black-painted vehicles were very visible in the diffuse light twenty minutes before dawn.

The Range Rider was still there when the Mobys swooped into the grassy hollow and settled gracefully to the grass. Doors flew open. The pilots leapt out to stretch energetically. Tiger headed for the group beside the Range Rider.

"It went like a dream, Charles," she called to Demirell when she reached a comfortable hailing distance.

"So the older generation can be trusted out on their own," he told her with a laughed. "But after all we've heard from you and Sandford, I was expecting a hundred and ten per cent success."

Tiger laughed off the insult and lit a honey-flavoured cigarette. Then she surrendered to a cracking yawn, an expression of the extreme exhaustion brought on by the concentration required for low-level flying.

Demirell nodded to his two companions – minor members of the Duke of Atmain's security staff. They dragged a large, cylindrical container from the back of the Range Rider and rolled it towards the Mobys. The pilots finished their stretching and helped them. Once the camouflage tents had been erected, they would be able to catch up on lost sleep. The Mobys would not be returning to Norland until the following night.

"Are you in the mood for a celebration?" Demirell recovered a bottle of expensive Belldan wine from the front seat of the Range Rider.

Farges dipped into a box of tulip glasses. Success was melting the tensions of the mission, leaving her with a delicious sense of achievement and satisfaction. A sparkling Rienne wine from southern Belldon suited her mood perfectly.

Demirell poured generously and raised his glass in a silent toast. Despite an advantage of ground in her favour, he loomed over Farges and kept the crown of his head, where the dark hair was thinning, out of her field of vision. The severe style and his rugged face made him look considerably older than his twenty-eight years. Demirell had

learned that exactly the right appearance could add undeserved authority to his opinions.

He too was in excellent spirits. He had received reports of a disturbance on the Nealan coast and explosions off Astrik Bay on the west coast of Camerland. Both Arlon Bekker and Ambrose Mellbury had fallen into the traps set for them. A good Sovershend look-alike would collect a reward from the Customs And Excise Department later that morning. The modest reward would be more than sufficient to incriminate Sovershend in the vengeful eyes of Ambrose's wife.

John, Marco and Andrayem drifted over to the Range Rider with hopeful expressions. The camouflage tents were in place and refuelling was only a two-man job. Demirell presented them with another bottle and glasses. It was a small gesture, but one calculated to buy popularity and inspire loyalty in a manner not available to Ilse Dortmann, Demirell's immediate superior in the Duke of Atmain's security department.

### *38. Free Fight*

The announcement that the storehouse was surrounded by police cleared the breakfast room – almost. Devrel Sovershend completed building his bacon and egg sandwich, then he attacked it with a knife and fork, totally unconcerned and unaffected by the news. Trapped by indecision, Sandy hovered between flight and a reluctance to leave his companion's sphere of protection.

"Aren't you going to do something?" Sandy asked eventually.

"I am doing something," Sovershend pointed out. "I'm having my breakfast. Why panic till the shooting starts?"

"Shooting?" Sandy turned paler. "I'm going to find out what's happening." He strode purposefully towards the door, then he paused in the corridor outside. "Where did they go?"

"Aunph," said Sovershend through a mouthful of sandwich.

"What?"

"Let me finish this. Don't panic. There's at least fourteen different ways out of here beside the doors."

Slightly reassured, Sandy hovered impatiently, waiting for Sovershend to demolish the remains of his sandwich.

"Right! Let's go." Sovershend filled a mug with real coffee and led the way to the upper floor of the storehouse. He strolled through an open door into a room at the rear left-hand corner of the building, looking from the cutting.

"Well, what's happening?" he asked with total unconcern.

"You tell me," from Dorry coincided with what sounded like a muttered, "Phucknose!" from Blackjack, the head shifter.

Sovershend interpreted the remark as ignorance rather than an insult. None of the eight men clustered round a large videolink and its control board moved to give the newcomers a view of the screen. Following Sovershend's lead, Sandy dragged a chair over to the crowd and stood on the chair.

"There's one," said Tenbright, jabbing a finger at the videolink screen.

A shadow flitted between two abandoned cars on the waste ground outside, Tenbright attempted to zoom the camera in on the moving shape and ended up with a sharp picture of a uniformed leg against a background of blue-and-rust bodywork.

A slight adjustment produced an image of a man in 'city' camouflage, which was dark blue, outline-breaking swirls on a pale grey base. A riot helmet with the visor closed hid the man's face. He was gripping a Bakersfield assault rifle fitted with a long, thirty-round magazine.

"He's no Prot, he's a Hondo," said Blackjack, drawing the distinction between a conventional member of the Civilian Security Police and a paramilitary Special Service Trooper.

"They wouldn't send Hondos to give us a shake," decided Dorry. "Put everything on the big screen."

When the whole-wall screen swirled into life, Sovershend and Sandy found themselves at the front of the crowd and a comfortable four yards from a picture from each of the eight external cameras.

"Look at those two," said Sovershend after studying the multiple image. "The ones going down the side of your fence. They're interested in something happening across the way, not what we're up to."

"You mean they're not looking for us?" said Sandy with a ludicrous mixture of relief, hope and disbelief blended on his face.

"He's right. They're not," confirmed Dorry. "There's no one behind us now. They're all sneaking down the fence to the cutting. Show us what's there, Baz."

Routland, the watchman, switched to a single camera and scanned the ranks of huts. "Not very much," he remarked.

A vicious buzzing jolted the hand on the camera control.

"That's the intercom on the gate," explained Routland. "Someone wants a word with us."

A side camera showed the Special Service Troop's officer crouching in tall, straggling weeds, prodding at the intercom's call key with the business end of his sub-machine gun.

"Who's that?" Tenbright demanded in a suspicious quaver.

"Lieutenant Hawkley, Special Service Troop Eighteen," replied a firm voice. "Would you switch your fence off, sir. I wish to place men on your roof."

"Oh, I can't do that, young feller," returned Tenbright, fighting off a laugh. "The boss would have me."

"If you don't switch the fence off, sir," said the Lieutenant grimly, "I shall order my men to do the job for you. Permanently."

"In that case," replied Tenbright in pretended panic, "it's off now. What's going on?"

"An anti-terrorist sweep," replied the Lieutenant, looking across the cutting with a frown on his young face.

"Good luck, young feller," quavered Tenbright before breaking the connection.

"Ringside seats," remarked Sovershend.

"It's all right for you," said Tenbright, watching Routland checking circuits on the control panel. "But we're in trouble if some urban freedom fighters start shooting anti-personnel rockets at the Hondos on our roof."

"Sue 'em," advised Sovershend.

"Well, the foam blowers are ready at least," said Routland. "If they do set fire to us, we should have it out double quick"

"Why does that not reassure me?" remarked Dorry.

"I bet it's the PSF," remarked Endsleigh, the third shifter.

"I can never get anyone to tell me who the PSF are popular with," remarked Sandy at random.

"Themselves," said Dorry. "Except when they fall out."

"They're more like an arse than a front," muttered Endsleigh. His fellow shifters cackled agreement.

Tenbright switched back to split screen. There was no movement among the derelict buildings. The Special Service Troopers had become immobile humps behind available cover. An occasional vehicle scooted along Water Street or Dawson Street. There was never much traffic anyway at four twenty-five on a Wednesday morning. Tenbright took most of the cameras out of circuit, leaving a panorama of the area across the cutting.

"What are they doing?" wondered Sandy. "Those policemen are going to get wet if they try to cross the canal."

"They're closing a line of retreat," explained Dorry.

A rumbling noise turned nine heads. Chas Jones had returned after slipping away to fetch the coffee-maker.

"Good to see someone in this organization has his priorities right,"

commented Tenbright.

"When are those ganar kerlen going to get started?" Blackjack wanted to know. The material of his coverall tightened ominously as he flexed a pair of well-developed shoulders.

"They were waiting for Jones to get back," returned Endsleigh. "There's another bunch of Hondos."

"Where's that?" invited Annelish.

"On the viaduct. Just on the edge of the screen."

"They're all over the place," added Tenbright, extending a hand for a mug of coffee. "Must be a big job."

"Come on, you soboks," muttered Endsleigh. "Just like the ganar Hondos to take all day."

"I've found their control frequency," said Routland. He advanced a volume control.

"Tack One, up two," said a confident voice. "Tack Nine, stand by."

"Tack Twelve, double contact, Tanstell Invictor," reported someone else.

"Tack Two, ready to . . ." The voice stopped abruptly.

"Routine frequency shift," said Routland, twiddling a dial.

"It doesn't make much sense without their control grid anyway," remarked Sovershend.

" . . . will advance," said the Special Service controller. "Assume form . . ."

"Here we go," said Blackjack confidently.

An enormous, soundless explosion hurled one of the huts into the air. A scattering of debris plopped into the cutting.

"Sound," prompted Annelish. "Come on, Baz."

"You want sound?" muttered Routland.

A crackling of gunfire, broken by heavier explosions, erupted from the multi-sound speakers. Sandy threw himself flat on the floor as something seemed to explode directly behind him. Only Annelish failed to join in the laughter, He too was busy picking himself off the floor too.

"I think an indication of the atmosphere would be quite enough," said Dorry patiently. "I don't think we need total sonic reality."

"Suit yourself," grinned Routland. He cut the sound system down to what he considered to be rather pedestrian front stereo and reduced the volume.

Occasional shapes could be seen moving among the wreckage now. Special Service Troopers began to close in from left and right and, out of sight of the cameras, from the rear. Camouflaged figures flitted

between cover, exposing themselves for a minimum of time, advancing behind a storm of violet riot gun charges and clouds of white fog from gas grenades.

A group of figures detached itself from the wreckage and raced towards the cutting. The five shapes crouched down reflexively when a stray anti-personnel rocket blasted into the tall, cream and rust structure abandoned by a cement firm. Steel splinters peppered the railway viaduct.

"Look out, you lot!" Blackjack called to the escapers. "There's Hondos all over the place over here."

"Bockmakhandar PSF," said Dorry. "They deserve everything they get. You know the soboks blew my car up once?"

"We know," groaned Tenbright. "You didn't shut up about it for a month."

"And the svozhnar insurance didn't pay out."

"Why not?" invited Sandy.

"Said the policy didn't cover acts of terrorism," snarled Dorry.

"What rotten luck!" sympathized Sandy.

"Now tell him what you did about it," laughed Jones.

"He only blew the branch office up and stole the manager's car, didn't he?" supplied Tenbright when Dorry showed no sign of replying. Sandy's sympathy became shock, outrage and not a little fear.

"If they give you lousy service, you're doing them a good turn if you let them know," remarked Sovershend.

"Any minute now," gloated Annelish.

The escaping terrorists reached the bank of the cutting. A barrage of violet globes engulfed them. Sandy refused to look, even when it was all over. He washed down a trunk with some coffee and inspected the lack of polish on his shoes. Sovershend took pity on him and pointed out that the still figures were paralysed, not dead.

Further explosions and gun shots resounded from the battle ground across the cutting. Then a brittle silence fell. A dark green helicopter with gold unit markings and red crosses dropped through a belt of sunlight. The task of gathering up the wounded and dead began.

"Show's over," remarked Tenbright with regret. "It was quite fun while it lasted," added Jones.

"Except for those poor people out there," said Sandy.

"Serves them right for being out there in the first place." Dorry had no great love for policemen, and he hated terrorists of all political colours.

"Before you waste any sympathy on a bunch of soboks," added Jones, "just think how you'd feel if you happened to be standing next to it

when one of their bombs went off. And you woke up in hospital minus an arm and a couple of legs."

Sandy turned paler and stifled his pity. A double line of prisoners formed under police guard on a stretch of clear ground. Routland switched to split-screen again and returned the eight-fold, all round view of the storehouse's environs. The Special Service Troopers on that side of the cutting had formed into loose groups and they were strolling towards Water Street and their transport in a rather unmilitary fashion.

"I wonder if we can switch the fence on again?" remarked Tenbright.

"Save the power," returned Dorry. "Who's going to break in here with most of Dungard's finest around?"

"Does this mean we're stuck here now?" asked Sandy, fighting a losing battle with a yawn. "Some people have been up all night."

"And some people have got rooms waiting at the Mitton Gardens," added Sovershend. "That's what he means. Look at that lot!"

Herds of news personnel and locals, woken by the battle, had converged on the site. A minor war is always guaranteed to get people out of bed before five o'clock on a Wednesday morning.

"No, you'll be all right getting out," Jones assured Sandy. "There's thousands of ways out of this place."

"Actually," mused Dorry, "there might be two less now."

"Oh, vervoek," groaned Tenbright. "We've got two tunnels going that way. Under the cutting. Or we had."

"Reckon I should blow them? Just in case the Hondos find them?" asked Routland.

"Better not," decided Dorry. "The bangs might attract unwelcome attention. We'll just have to keep an eye on them."

"Do you think any of the terrorists found them?" asked Sandy nervously.

"What, that lot?" asked Blackjack scornfully. "Those soboks couldn't find their own arses with a map and both hands."

"But we'll have a little look anyway." Tenbright nodded a command to Routland.

The wall screen shimmered, then faded to a dirty grey. The audience divided into two groups. One turned to the videolink screen on the control board, the other to the coffee maker. A low-light camera revealed a green and grey expanse of tunnel – a former sewer with an irregular heap at the far end. Routland touched keys on the control board, running circuit checks.

"Looks like they set off some of our demolition charges anyway," he remarked.



The view changed to another tunnel. This one had an oblong section and it was longer than the former sewer. Routland zoomed along it. As he brought the heap of rubble at the far end into focus, a trickle of earth slithered down to the damp floor. Shattered bricks followed it. An arm appeared near the tunnel's ceiling.

"Moles!" remarked Sovershend.

"That's a real drone," groaned Dorry.

"Hands to repel boarders," yelled Tenbright. He raced for the door, followed closely by Sovershend, Rossiter and the shifters.

Dorry and Sandy decided that they were no longer men of action and stayed with Routland at the control board.

Tenbright and company made a brief stop at their armoury to collect an assortment of weapons, then they continued down to the sub-basement. Routland reported that the invaders had broken through to the escape tunnel when Tenbright contacted him by an internal telephone system.

"How many are there?" whispered Tenbright.

"Nine," replied Routland, also in a whisper.

"Nine! Svey yoget! What were the soboks doing over there? Having a roll call?"

"Look out!" warned Dorry. "It looks like they're getting ready to blow the door."

"Stand by for visitors," whispered Tenbright, waving his small army to cover.

A grid of concrete pillars at approximately three-yard intervals supported the ceiling of a room fifteen yards long and ten wide. Shoulder high wooden crates formed what would have been a maze to a dwarf immediately in front of the cargo lift, which provided the only conventional entrance and exit.

The crates filled two-thirds of the room. Three of them had escaped into the clear space beyond the main body. Two of the strays were standing against the right-hand wall. The third sat in solitary splendour in the middle of the floor.

"Help me shift this," Tenbright began to tug the farther crate away from the wall.

"Why are we doing this, exactly," asked Sovershend as the crate slid reluctantly into the corner.

"It was right in front of the escape door," panted Blackjack, who had done most of the work.

"Don't you think it might have been a good idea to leave it there?" murmured Sovershend.

"Not if they're going to blow it up," returned Tenbright. "It's full of Belldan liqueur chocolates."

"What's in the rest of them?" wondered Sovershend, the danger forgotten.

"Coffee beans, various teas, the usual rare or high-duty things like that."

"Hoi, you two," whispered Annelish urgently, cradling his police-issue sub-machine gun. "They'll be through while you're vregshing."

"S'vogan, shev," invited Tenbright.

"I might just do that," threatened Annelish.

"Now then, children," laughed Sovershend. "You'll get all the scrapping you want in a minute."

"Vyen s'vogan too," grinned Tenbright.

The defenders selected concrete pillars and crates, and went into hiding. Sovershend made sure that Rossiter was in front of him. His enemy had done little other than glower and sneer since his arrival – presumably because Dorry had ordered Rossiter to behave himself – but Sovershend was not one to take unnecessary risks.

"What sort of coffee?" he asked Tenbright as the silence extended annoyingly.

"Gebbler Mute. Strain Three."

"I'll have some of that. And some Shirokan tea. At trade price, of course."

"Should leave the lights on?" interrupted Blackjack.

*BANG-CLASH!* The steel door of the escape tunnel shot across the basement room, hit the wall opposite and crashed to the concrete floor in a cloud of rust. The defenders swallowed hard to restore their hearing after the pressure-shock. White smoke flowed lazily across the room and upwards to a ventilation duct.

After an interminable delay, a head poked cautiously out of the tunnel. Encouraged by the sight, a body followed the blond and muddy head. Four others pushed after the leader. Their clothes were dark, sodden and streaked with orange clay. One of the intruders pointed to the other end of the room and the open door of the lift, which looked like an exit to a cross-corridor from that angle.

"Go and check where that doorway leads," he ordered in a local accent.

One of his men obeyed. Blackjack crawled into the lift as the man began to thread a passage through the crates. Sovershend was close enough to the lift to hear a scraping sound and a muffled grunt. The intruders heard nothing alarming. Their grunts and mutterings of relief

as they emerged from the tunnel were more than a match for a moment of violent death.

A whispered, "Got him," from the lift coincided with the arrival of the last of the invaders.

"Now!" yelled Tenbright.

He bobbed up and sprayed the intruders with an automatic rifle. Choking powder fumes filled the air, interfering with breathing as well as vision. Six of the intruders went down at once, almost before they had become aware of their danger. The other two managed to throw themselves back into the tunnel.

"I'll fix them," called Tenbright. "Cover me."

Endsleigh, who had the best angle, pumped a steady stream of shots into the tunnel mouth. Tenbright leapt up and lobbed a gas grenade into the oblong passage. It hit the yellow, brick wall and bounced deeper – only to be returned as it began to bock white vapour.

"Out! Bockan quick!" yelled Sovershend.

There was no time to locate the grenade and throw it back. Tenbright and Annelish collided in the doorway of the lift, a close equal second to Sovershend. Endsleigh failed to reach it. Rossiter shoved him out of the way. Endsleigh fell heavily. He sucked in a breath of pain, then began to slow visibly. Blackjack had already started the lift. Endsleigh's unconscious body thudded against the outer door on the way to the concrete floor.

"Baz, reverse ventilation in store six," Tenbright yelled into the telephone.

Routland stabbed at the control board. Gas and fumes from the gun battle flooded back into the basement room. Tenbright distributed honey flavoured cigarettes when the lift reached the floor above. Two minutes dragged past.

"Normal ventilation," reported Routland. "They don't look too lively down there."

"Neither would you, in the circumstances," laughed Dorry.

Tenbright smoked the rest of his cigarette, then led his group back to the lift. On the floor below, they moved Endsleigh out of the way. He would not recover consciousness for at least an hour, but he would suffer no ill-effects after his involuntary nap.

His colleagues approached the scene of the slaughter. The room sloped gently away from the lift. A broad red stream of sticky liquid had established a path to a drain in the corner, seeping thickly under the crate of liqueur chocolates. Tenbright waved Annelish on. Rather reluctantly, he stepped over the stream and entered the escape tunnel.

"Both sleeping like drunks," he reported, a ghostly echo on his voice. Two shots emerged from the tunnel as a series of muffled reverberations. "Forever," Annelish added sombrely.

"Good!" said Tenbright. "We'll have to repack the chocolates," he continued to Blackjack in a business-like tone. "You can never get blood out of wood."

"Yeah, sobokandar nuisance," agreed Blackjack. "I suppose we'd better put this lot back in the tunnel." He gestured to the bodies.

"Best place for them," agreed Tenbright. "Let's get back topside, Dev," he added to Sovershend. "Rossiter, you help with the clearing up," Rossiter mumbled his displeasure.

When Sovershend and Tenbright reached the control room again, Dorry was looking extremely pleased with the outcome of the battle. Sandy looked as if he might be sick at any moment.

"Good job," beamed Dorry. "Hard luck on Mike Endsleigh."

"Rossiter's going to have another enemy when he wakes up," grinned Tenbright.

"Wake up? What's that?" yawned Sovershend.

"I don't think I'll ever sleep again," shivered Sandy. "For fear of nightmares after the things I've seen here."

"Cultivate a more detached approach to life," Sovershend advised. "People die every day. There's nothing you can do about it, so why agonize?"

"But not shot to pieces right in front of my eyes," objected Sandy. "Just wiped out."

Tenbright shrugged. "Don't look."

"That's not the point," returned Sandy.

"Listen," interrupted Dorry. "They were murdering scum and every one of them died with a gun in his hand. They'd have cancelled *your* membership with no warning."

"Perhaps we should have screamed for the Hondos to protect us," grinned Tenbright. "After all, there's fifty cases of illegal uisge down there that belong to you, not us."

"Perhaps everything was beyond your control," Sandy admitted. "Are we ready to go?"

"Let's kill the taste of gunpowder," said Sovershend, who was holding a mug of coffee.

"If it's free, that sobok'll have some," Rossiter remarked from the doorway.

"Pass the rat poison, someone," said Sovershend. "We seem to have missed one."

"Don't you two start," groaned Dorry. "Not till I get behind something bullet-proof."

"What are you doing here anyway?" demanded Tenbright. "I thought I told you to help Blackjack?"

"I had to come up to get a coverall," protested Rossiter, who was wearing an almost new flame suit.

"Well get it and get busy. We want a few tons of earth between us and those stiffes." Tenbright dismissed Rossiter with a wave in the direction of the door.

"I'll get you, Sovershend," hissed Rossiter on his way out.

"By when and how much?" replied Sovershend in a bored tone.

"Saturday noon. Five hundred pounds."

"Have you got that much?" Sovershend asked through a mocking laugh.

"Is it a bet?" Rossiter looked ready to explode. He measured the distance with his eyes to the sub-machine gun that someone had hung on the back of a chair. Sovershend shook his right cuff in warning. "Well, is it?" Rossiter insisted.

"Why not?" said Sovershend airily.

"Rossiter, are you still here?" snapped Dorry.

"No, I went five minutes ago." Rossiter slammed the door and stalked down the corridor. He was back almost immediately to collect a coverall from a cupboard.

"An unpleasant young man," remarked Sandy after the second departure.

"He has his uses," remarked Dorry. "And so does his father."

Sovershend yawned again. "Are we going now?"

"I'll drive you back to the hotel," offered Tenbright.

"Thank you," Sandy told him with a smile of gratitude.

"He's up to something," Sovershend warned Sandy. "Like fixing up a deal that stiffes me good and proper."

"And he looks such a nice young man," remarked Dorry, giving his partner a mocking, empty smile.

### *39. Roast 'Lenster Before Breakfast*

During what seemed like a three-mile hike through the tunnel system, Sovershend and Tenbright thrashed out a deal for one hundred pounds of tea and coffee from storeroom six. Mild claustrophobia, induced by a feeling of being trapped in a pool of torchlight, made six hundred yards of tunnel seem ten times longer. The pressing arch of yellow brick

was an endless trudge past blooming, nitrous walls, echoing drips, things moving in skittering rushes just out of range of the torches and an intermittent evil smell from somewhere behind them.

Tenbright and the visitors returned to the surface on the other side of Capsmouth Road, in a former railway goods yard which had been turned into a car park. A flight of concrete steps led up to a long, thin room. It turned out to be an unusually large cavity between two walls. Tenbright went straight to a wall-mounted snooper and took a good look around.

"Not expecting to see anyone, surely?" remarked Sovershend. "It's only half past five."

"I'm not looking for *people*," Tenbright told him.

Sovershend caught the inflection but it was lost on Sandy.

"Don't tell me you have dog packs?" he asked nervously. He had once been trapped in a car after a breakdown. The pack of wild dogs had snapped and snarled around his vehicle for over an hour before a passing police patrol had come to his rescue.

Tenbright grinned. "No, something even worse. We're right on the edge of the 'lenster border here. There might be some around in a playful mood. Inspired by the shoot-out."

"See anything?" Sovershend flicked his sleeve gun into his right hand and checked the magazine.

"I'm not sure," Tenbright said slowly. "Take a look. Down at the bottom of the fence."

Fifteen feet of chain link ended in a belt of outward-sloping, alternating saw-wire and knife-thread. By chance, the camera could look down over the boot of a car. A group of boys had taken advantage of a split in the tarmac crust, which extended about one yard beyond the fence to meet the paving flags. They had split the hard topping and dug a short, shallow trench in the earth below.

"What do they want?" asked Sandy in an 'are we safe here?' tone. The width of the cavity kept the three of them in single file and Sandy had a poor view of the videolink screen from the back.

"The watchman's takings or what they can find in the cars," said Tenbright, tapping a button on the control board. "Old Gordon should spot them any moment."

"I don't know how they dare do that with police just across the car park," remarked Sandy.

"That's 'lensters for you," said Sovershend. "Once they dream up a stunt, they have to go through with it. Otherwise, the rest of the 'len kicks their heads in for cowardice. They're more scared of their maccars

than a few Prots and the slap on the wrist the courts would give them.”

“I’m sure things were never like this when I was a child,” muttered Sandy.

Sovershend decided not to point out that Belldon and Levetia had fought a war over the Levetian Corridor to the sea when someone of Sandy’s age had been at primary school.

“What happens now?” added the man who didn’t know his own country’s history.

“He’s spotted them.” Tenbright indicated a flashing blue light below the videolink screen. “This place will be crawling with Prots in no time flat. We’ll scoot during the confusion.” Tenbright moozed the camera to get a wider field of view.

“I don’t think I want to watch this,” decided Sandy, saving himself the trouble of finding something to stand on.

*Chopper-chopper-chopper* noises filtered through the walls. An up-turned face flashed whitely in the car park. ‘Lensters flitted between cars, heading for the trench. Tenbright counted eight figures. Two of them were carrying stubby cylinders. Globes of violet light bounced harmlessly from the bonnet of a car when one of the Traffic patrol opened fire with a Boulton riot gun. The next burst was better aimed and felled two ‘lensters.

One of the boys dived into the shallow trench. Another pushed at his feet, impatient to get out of the trap, and managed to snag the first boy’s pullover comprehensively on the fence. The ones with the cylinders began to screw them together. The finished product looked like a five-foot length of wide-bore drainpipe.

The ‘lensters rested the construction against the roof of a car, sighting up at the helicopter with the ball and notch on the side of the launcher. In a splash of flame, a small rocket hurtled up, scraped past the helicopter, then arced over to fall on the car park of *Norton Holovision*. Black smoke spiralled up to obscure the transmitter mast. The police officers in the helicopter set aside their Boulton riot guns. Solid shot slashed at the cars shielding the ‘lensters, exposing bright metal.

“They don’t care about other people’s property, do they?” remarked Sovershend.

“I’m not sure I would, in the circumstances,” laughed Tenbright.

“Fancy blasting away like that,” Sovershend added. “They could quite easily...”

A car exploded in a rush of flame, scattering burning petrol and wreckage in all directions.

“... start a fire,” Sovershend finished.

Reloaded, the drainpipe poked into the air again. Its target was almost overhead, hovering at fifty yards. A second rocket burst upwards on a solid smoke trail and lanced through the helicopter's tail without exploding. Pieces of rotor blade whisked outwards. Engine screaming, the helicopter just managed to clear the fence before bouncing and smashing its undercarriage on Grape Street.

Blazing fuel from ruptured petrol tanks poured into the trench. Two of the 'lensters kicked and fought a passage under the fence. In flames, they raced down to Water Street, causing a pair of drivers to slide into a slow collision while taking instinctive evasive action. One of the 'lensters disappeared over the brick wall, heading for the River Dunan. A climb of ten feet proved too much for the other one.

Muttering curses, the two drivers divided their attention between the damage to their vehicles and watching the blackened shape until it stopped writhing and screaming at the foot of the wall. Police patrols arrived to coax later arrivals into motion and to tidy up the body.

Survivors of the crowd that had gathered to watch the aftermath of the police action against the PSF hurried over to the new attraction. The crew of the crashed helicopter appeared to be shaken but not injured. Colleagues crowded round them to comment on their lucky escape – and to prevent souvenir hunters from looting the wreck.

"I think this is as good a time as any to evaporate," said Tenbright, switching off the snoopers as the police were handcuffing two unconscious and one dazed 'lenster. Only two had managed to escape. Tenbright touched a control. A section of wall slid inwards, then sideways.

"After you," Tenbright called to Sandy.

It was the politeness of necessity. The only way that Tenbright could get out first was to climb over both Sovershend and Sandy. The trio emerged into a decaying cavern formed by rotting bricks, black and shattered windows and a slate and fresh air roof. Anonymous junk was piled against the wall on their left. More junk had been scattered liberally on the broken floor.

"Watch where you're treading," warned Tenbright. "Some of this stuff's pretty sharp. And you get disgusting characters doing anti-social things on the floor."

"You don't have to tell us that," mumbled Sandy, using his handkerchief as a gas mask.

Outside the former train shed of a long-closed goods depot, another car exploded noisily.

"I'm parked over here," said Tenbright. He led the way to a yellow



hybrid parked next to the watchman's blockhouse. "Having trouble, Gordon?" he called to the large figure standing in front of the blockhouse.

"Lenstranth!" snarled Gordon, summing up all his troubles in one inclusive plural. He was a tall, bloated man on indeterminate age. "I hope the whole bockan lot of them fry." He crushed a beer can with one hand and flung it over the fence and into Grape Street. "I spotted them before your alert signal, you know."

"Yeah?" said Tenbright with a sceptical smile.

Another car blew up. The explosions seemed to be getting closer. The distinctive siren of a fire engine became suddenly deafening as it turned a nearby corner and arrived at the car park. A delicate smell of roasting meat flavoured the general smells of burning.

"I don't think it's very safe here," remarked Sovershend as he scrambled into Tenbright's car. "I wouldn't pay him for using a car park as dangerous as this one."

Gordon blew an enthusiastic raspberry at Sovershend as the fire engine snatched to a halt at his blockhouse. Tenbright zoomed out of the car park before he could be asked for a statement. He set a course for Mitton Gardens, keeping to the back streets to avoid further fire engines, which were not noted for staying on their own side of the road when they were in a hurry.

"I shall wake up shortly and find all this has been a terrible dream," said Sandy. "I never imagined it was possible to see a hundred people killed before breakfast in the middle of a major city."

"It's only twenty to six," Sovershend told him. "Plenty of time for a few more to dance the bucket waltz. Anyway, you must be toughening up if you can think about having some breakfast."

Sandy swallowed another trunk. His face could not turn paler.

"Cheerful sort, aren't you?" remarked Tenbright.

"If this is a dream," said Sovershend, flying off at a tangent, "then the shipment doesn't exist."

"In that case, it must all be real," Sandy admitted, finding some consolation in his nett percentage of a profit of more than thirty thousand pounds.

They drove on in silence. Tenbright tried with fair success to ignore Sovershend's frequent and infectious yawns. "Are you coming for a drink with us tonight, Dev?" he asked as he turned into York Street. "How about you, Sandy?"

"I'm afraid I can't," said Sandy. "I have some people to see. I'll be leaving later in the morning. Perhaps next time."

"Next time," invited Tenbright.

"Are you still going to that place just down the road from the Baron's Drive South O/U station?" asked Sovershend.

"That's the place," nodded Tenbright.

"What time do I appear?"

"Nine or so." Tenbright stopped his car opposite the passage that led to the hotel's entrance filters. "Here we are."

The passengers climbed out, watched by the two men waiting beside a videolink service van. Sovershend waved a farewell to Tenbright, then piloted Sandy along the shop-lined tunnel to a short flight of steps.

Sovershend unclipped his sleevegun as he negotiated the revolving door at the top of the steps. At the desk, he surrendered his offensive weapon and attempted to infect the receptionist with his yawns. He had already succeeded with Sandy.

"How about a night cap? Or perhaps a morning cap?" Sandy suggested as their lift limped up to the fourth floor.

"Good idea," said Sovershend. "If I can stop yawning long enough to swallow."

"I know exactly what you mean," yawned Sandy.

They stepped out of the lift. A videolink camera tracked them to the door of Sandy's suite, just to prove that the hotel's security personnel were on the alert. Sandy pulled his case from the lockable storage compartment under the bed and hunted for the bottle in it. Sovershend watched him with interest, wondering what he had brought that was so much better than the Mitton Gardens Hotel's exotic range.

"I supposed to be leaving at eleven-thirty," said Sandy, finding a square, dark green bottle which lacked a label.

"Think you'll be awake by then?" laughed Sovershend.

"I'll just have to be. Here you are."

"Zdrav' mnozhen!" Sovershend toasted his companion, then he tasted the amber fluid in the glass. "Good stuff! Not something you find too often on this side of the Channel."

With a superior but tired smile, Sandy shed his jacket and threw it at a chair. He dropped gracefully onto the sufán. "I suppose we'd better say goodbye now," he decided.

"Goodbye, Sandy." Sovershend raised his empty glass again in salute. "It's been an experience doing business with you."

"Goodbye, Sovershend," returned Sandy. "A drop more?"

"Can't hurt. Have we settled up here, by the way?" Sovershend didn't want Sandy to swan off while he was still in bed, leaving the bill unpaid.

"I don't think so," replied Sandy in the vague tone that he reserved for

such trivialities. "You can take care of it while I see to the drinks. And there's the rest of your fee."

Sovershend handed over his empty glass and fished Sandy's UniCredit card out of the breast pocket of the discarded jacket. As well as settling their account, he also booked and paid for a double room for the night. The hotel's accounts computer chewed at the card's credit rating, then it thanked Sovershend for his custom in a grave, too perfect voice that had to come out of a machine. It was a little too early for real people to be doing such routine jobs.

"There, that's done." Sovershend exchanged the card for his glass and an envelope. Sandy slid the credit card into a trouser pocket carelessly. Sovershend decided not to check the contents of his envelope. It felt heavy enough to contain four one-ounce gold currency wafers and thick enough to contain £292 in notes. The videolink began to chime softly. "Want me to disappear?" asked Sovershend.

"No, you answer it," said Sandy casually. He had made himself too comfortable to move. "You're the nearest."

The face of an hotel minion appeared in the screen. "Please excuse my calling you so early, sir," he said. "But a message has come in for Vr. Sandford, and I noticed his vid was in use when I went to put it in the store."

"What's the message?" called Sandy.

The minion's eyes tracked to Sovershend's right, toward the source of the phantom question. "It's from Vr. Blake, sir. It reads: 'Appointment confirmed.' That's all there is."

"That's fine," called Sandy, happy to converse at long range.

"Good morning, sir," said the minion uncertainly, as if suspecting that Sovershend might be a ventriloquist.

"Morning," said Sovershend. The videolink screen became a mirror again. "Blake? Isn't he the one they named the airport after? There's a green plaque to show where he was born half-way down the extension to Runway Two."

"I think they meant Chapman Blake, the explorer," said Sandy. "It means the Mobys reached Lesten Island safely."

"Oh, a code. Very Secret Service. So everyone's happy?"

"I would imagine so. Where do I contact you if I have another job for you?"

"Leave a message with Martin and it'll reach me. Zdrav'."

"Zdrav'." Sandy drained his glass too.

"Me for bed," yawned Sovershend.. "See you next time I see you, Sandy."

"Until the next time," agreed Sandy.

Sovershend persuaded the connecting door to his suite to open. A green light glowing on the keyboard of his videolink told him that there was a message waiting for him. He closed the door. The automatic lock snapped into action viciously. Sovershend shed his jacket, then touched the ACC key. The screen pearlyed. A restful green message slithered into life.

'Arriving about 22 today (24th). Where & when? K.'

Annoyingly, the name of the pub where he would be meeting Tenbright and company eluded Sovershend. Frowning, he keyed:

'Pub near Baron's Drive S. O/U station from 21 then Mitton Gardens Hotel. D.'

He addressed his message to the location number given at the end of Katuishann's, then he crawled off to bed.

#### *40. Reports To The Duke Of Atmain*

Pacing corridors had become a way of life for Ilse Dortmann. At eight-thirty on that Wednesday morning, she was waiting to enter the Duke's ground floor map room, wishing it were possible to eavesdrop on the Duke's scrambled satellite exchanged with her alleged second-in-command.

Beyond the iron-shod door, surrounded by a generous breakfast, englobed in a hush screen, the Duke of Atmain was beaming at his videolink. "In other words, complete success, Charles?" he chuckled at the end of a report.

"Our own importing operation went very smoothly. Sandford and Farges did an excellent job," said Demirell smugly, including himself in the excellence. "We now have very valuable access to a main distribution focus. And both the unco-operative Mellbury and his man Bekker ran into considerable difficulty."

The Duke tugged at his moustache, which was a sure sign that he was pleased. "Good work, Charles."

"And when Mellbury's wife eliminates Sovershend, Sandford's contact, believing he betrayed her husband, that should create another useful void in the market."

"Excellent!" beamed the Duke. "What are your plans now?"

"There's very little I can do here for the moment, sir. I think it might be useful for me to return to Atmain. Dortmann is being rather difficult about some of the equipment I need for future operations."

"She rather resents your lack of tact, Charles," the Duke said in a

hearty fashion, pouring more coffee. "I suppose Liston can keep thinks ticking over."

"I'm thinking of sending her back," said Demirell regretfully. "She's not very reliable. I'll leave Bleiler in charge."

Louise Liston had a mind of her own and she was not afraid of voicing an unpopular opinion. Bleiler, too, could think for himself but he lacked Liston's persistence. He was convinced that Demirell's mind could never be changed by force of argument. Thus he tended to accept orders without question and to carry out his assignments the way *he* thought they were best done.

The Duke shrugged. "I'll leave everything up to you, Charles." He nodded a dismissal and broke the connection.

Returning to the heated plate beside the videolink, he finished his sausage and tomato pie. Then he remembered that his head of security was wearing a trench in the rush-weave carpet in the corridor outside.

The door swung away from her in invitation. Dortmann entered the map room. Her uniform was immaculate but she had the air of wretched weariness of someone who had been up all night. "Morning, Herta," said the Duke. "Brilliant fellow, that Demirell."

"Yes, sir," Dortmann murmured without enthusiasm.

The Duke made an all-inclusive gesture, which she interpreted as a command to stop hovering, followed by an invitation to help herself to coffee and cigarettes. Dortmann sat gratefully, lubricated her throat with coffee, then lit a honey flavoured cigarette.

"I believe we had a spot of excitement a few hours ago," prompted the Duke.

"That's about all it was, sir," Dortmann replied wearily. "Just the normal rivalry, tensions, or what have you between the young bloods of Atmain and Brivauche. The police at Mont-Michel said it was just a general brawl fuelled by drink. The staff at our Reclamation Centre over-reacted. Fortunately, they only used riotguns, so there were no fatalities. The situation blew up because of a lack of leaders with judgement. Most of ours are in Camerland with Demirell."

"That problem should ease slightly in the near future," said the Duke. "Demirell is thinking of sending Liston home. He feels she's unreliable."

"Unreliable!" spluttered Dortmann, anger overcoming her low state. "Louise Liston is one of my most competent leaders." Then she returned to her coffee, realizing that she might talk the Duke into giving Liston a second chance in Camerland.

Her employer just shrugged. "So last night wasn't really an attack on our RecCen?" There was something akin to relief in his voice, as if he

had been expecting such an attack.

"No, sir." Dortmann was not too tired to catch the overtone.

"In that case, I'll not detain you further." The Duke smiled and turned his attention to the task of spreading butter on a slice of toast.

Dortmann stubbed out her cigarette and glanced at her watch. She was rationing herself to two cigarettes per hour. She popped a pink waker into her mouth when she reached the corridor, then she took the lift up to her office. She had a lot of work to get through before she could snatch a few hours' sleep.

*41. A Bad Night for Ambrose of Nottridge.*

Devrel Sovershend was decently late when he strolled into the pub on Baron's Drive. It was only when he arrived that the reason became apparent for his memory lapse when composing his message to Katuishann in the early hours of the morning. The business had changed hands recently and acquired a new name in doing so. The pub was now the *Sir Jerome Favour* – a fine, patriotic name for any Camerlish pub.

The main bar was prosperously full without being loud and crowded. Sovershend pushed through the mob of people standing just inside the door, trying to create the impression that the place was packed out. Some of the hard, redecorated edges of the face-lift had started to soften but the paint still looked as if it might be wet.

In giving the glossy surface of the open door a wide berth, Sovershend brushed against one of the lurkers – who came close to the verge of objecting when his drink sloshed dangerously close to the rim of his glass. Sovershend paused fractionally to give him a chance to discuss the matter. The challenge in the other's gaze wilted and he turned away, his protest forgotten.

As he neared the bar, Sovershend spotted his hosts. They had split into two camps. Jones, Rossiter and two of the shifters had occupied one of the booths that lined two of the pub's walls. The rest of the organization was infesting an adjoining booth. The leaders were deep in an independent discussion when Sovershend approached them.

"Evening, vreitei," he said, moving to a chair which offered a view of the back of Rossiter's head.

"Ah, you got here," said Dorry. "What are you on?"

"Some fort-light would go down very well."

Tenbright hailed a passing waiter. "Five pints of fort-light, please," he ordered. "See the news today?" he added to Sovershend.

"Why, were you in it?" Sovershend asked with laugh.  
"Just about every sobok else was," Blackjack remarked cryptically.  
"I take it I've missed something?" Sovershend invited.  
"Have you ever!" laughed Tenbright. "If I were you, I'd have a look at a summary when you get home."  
"Just to fill in the bits you forget when you tell me all about it?" said Sovershend.  
"Well, I could sprint through it, if you insist."  
"All right," surrendered Sovershend. "I insist."  
"Well, it's hard to know where to start," Tenbright put on a frown.  
"First, the big build-up, then the big let-down," Sovershend told him.  
"Start with the bit that comes closest to home."  
"Right," nodded Tenbright. "Well, a while after I got back from driving you and Sandy around. When all the action outside was over, the vid-ghouls had packed up and we'd more or less got things straight down below . . ."  
"And we could hear ourselves think again," said Blackjack.  
"Then a helicopter landed in our back yard. And the Prots that got out had no unit flashes on them." Tenbright paused significantly.  
"Intelligence," nodded Sovershend. "Say no more."  
"Do you mean that?" Dorry asked with a look of mock relief.  
"I think we know just how impossible it is to gag Stan in full flood." laughed Sovershend.  
The arrival of the waiter interrupted the narrative still further.  
"What kept you?" asked Tenbright.  
"We are rather full, sir," the waiter pointed out.  
"Really?" Tenbright cast a surveying glance at the least populated area of the room.  
It was clear that the waiter disliked being called a liar but he restrained himself for the sake of the tip. Tenbright showered a generous clatter of coins onto his tray, then dismissed him with a lordly nod. The waiter retired to the bar to count his spoils. At first, he thought that he had been shorted. His recount told him that Tenbright had indeed allowed for a gratuity – the price of a half-pint of dark.  
"Where was I?" said Tenbright, distributing glasses.  
"You'd got the PI on your doorstep," prompted Sovershend.  
"Priyam! Well, a small 'len of Prots climbed out of this flutter and strolled over to the gate. There was a Chief Inspector, a Senior Inspector, and an ordinary Inspector. I think they'd brought her along to carry the recorder."  
"And a Sergeant and a Patrol Officer," added Blackjack. "Armed to the

teeth to make sure none of the peasants gave up any cheek."

"They wanted to question the watchman," continued Tenbright. "So this bunch of soboks practically threw me out of the ganar building to talk to them."

"He thinks he deserves a medal," laughed Dorry.

"And what did they want?" invited Sovershend.

"A statement about everything I'd seen in the night. So I told them I had not seen anything until sun-up, when their lot started sneaking about, shooting at everything in sight."

"But not in so many words?" grinned Sovershend.

"Naturally not. I don't have a suicidal bone in my body."

"I don't know," remarked Dorry. "I was sure they were going to take him away and work him over when he told them he didn't know anything about the powerboats."

"I don't remember any powerboats," frowned Sovershend.

"Oh, yes!" Tenbright assumed a very serious expression and a clipped delivery. "We have had reports that several fleets of power-boats were operating during the night, ferrying terrorists to their meeting place."

"Oh, I like that!" laughed Sovershend. "Very good!"

"Then they wanted to know why I hadn't seen or heard them," Tenbright continued in his normal voice. "I was stuck for a minute. Then my agile brain leapt to the rescue. It was a noisy, rainy night, And besides, the banks of the cutting are high enough to cut off any sound and too high for me to see the water. I even had to let them take a look out of a ground-floor front window to prove I couldn't have seen anything. In the end, they went away thinking I'm a sloppy sobok who switched the alarms on and went to sleep."

"I'm surprised they didn't drag you off to Brootle Street on principle," remarked Sovershend.

"So were we," said Dorry. "I think it was only the casualty ratio being so good that took their minds off it."

"Yeah, eight point zero six two five," Blackjack quoted with relish. "The puts us a clear nought point two four nine ahead of Camer in the Major Engagements League."

"Guess who backed Greater Dungard to win the Nationals?" said Tenbright.

"At nineteen to one," Blackjack added smugly.

"Anyway!" Tenbright resumed his tale. "Some newshounds crawled over next to find out what was on. We made them trade what they knew for a comment from us. It seems the PI have been up half the night, chasing shadows. Once the story of PSF powerboats got round,



every sobok and his dog joined the party. Someone rang the Prots at about three last night to complain about a bunch of kids joy-riding up and down the ship canal at the bottom of his garden. Someone else was listening in on the Prot radio chatter. And somehow the PSF and the powerboats got linked together. And that's what started the balling rolling."

"They've had reports of gangs of PSF roaming around on every stretch of water for fifty miles around," added Blackjack.

"They even had a mind-mangler on the vid, trying to explain the mentality of Prot-stirrers," said Tenbright. "Trying to explain what sort of kick they get out of listening in on their radio channels and vidding them helpful messages."

"I hope you realize you and your Mobys have made everyone with a boat a suspected member of the PSF?" said Dorry.

"Me?" protested Sovershend. "Those Mobies weren't mine. Why, have you got a boat?"

Dorry shook his head.

"Only the ones he plays with in his bath," contributed Tenbright.

"Why worry, then?" said Sovershend. "And how do you know he plays with boats in his bath?"

"I have my sources of information," grinned Tenbright. "He says they belong to his kids."

"I deny everything," growled Dorry. His uncomfortable expression suggested that there might be some substance in the tale.

"Well!" Sovershend drained his glass. "If that's all there is to it, I don't really see any point in recalling the news. You can't have left much out." He signalled to a waiter – a different one.

"Sir?" This waiter was short and bald. His lack of height enabled him to load empty glasses onto his tray without stooping.

"Light all round, please," said Sovershend.

The waiter completed his loading operation and headed for the bar at a high rate of knots.

"Don't tell him any more till I get back," said Dorry. He climbed over Tenbright and headed for the Gents.

"That goes for me too," added Blackjack. "I want to see the look on his face when you tell him the rest." He edged out from behind the table and followed Dorry.

"There's more, is there?" said Sovershend.

"I say, the lad catches on rapidly, doesn't he," drawled Tenbright in marble-mouthed tones.

"Sir?" The waiter materialized at Sovershend's elbow.

"Svey joget! That was fast," approved Sovershend.

"Four pound eleven and eight, sir," said the waiter in a neutral tone.

Sovershend showered six pounds in coins onto the tray. Then he helped himself to one of Bas Routland's honey-flavoured cigarettes. "Have those two gone back to your storehouse to splash their boots?" he remarked.

"They only go half as often as the rest of us," offered Routland.

"But they take twice as long," finished Tenbright.

"That sounded well rehearsed," laughed Sovershend.

The absentees returned eventually and Tenbright resumed his tale. "Part two is about your maccar Ambrose."

"He of Nottbridge?" scoffed Sovershend.

"The very same. Depending on who's telling the story, he's dead or severely wounded or completely unharmed or he was never there at the time."

"Don't tell me," laughed Sovershend. "He's come unstuck. The way he was going on about his *Big Job*, it was a direct challenge to the CustEx to scramble him. But do carry on," he invited, noticing the look of exaggerated patience on Tenbright's face.

"I don't suppose you know how he came unstuck?" inquired Tenbright. "No? Well, his *Big Job* was a two-pronged attack. Arlon Bekker, his number two, came over from Heitain and Ambrose came in from Sanvo Island behind a couple of decoy boats. If the worst came to the worst, he reckoned the CustEx would stomp all over his decoys and miss him. But they did exactly the opposite."

"Good intelligence?" said Sovershend.

"And a lot of help," added Dorry.

"Ambrose was making for Astrik Bay," resumed Tenbright. "He got a signal to say the decoys had landed safely and he was probably kicking himself for not sending more stuff with them. Then he spotted them. Eight Coastguard fast patrol boats strung out in front of him. The forty-five knot jobs."

"I always wanted one of them," remarked Blackjack. "We had them in the Navy – when we still had a proper Navy." He assumed an expression of doleful recollection.

"We know, airships were the death of coastal patrols," sighed Tenbright. "Anyway, Ambrose just kept going. It was a very dark night, he had his radar jammers going and he'd cut his speed down to a crawl. So he didn't think they'd be able to hear him in the dirty weather."

"Anyone with a scrap of sense would have turned round and evaporated, double quick," scoffed Sovershend. "But that's always been

his major failing. Once he makes a plan, he sticks to it because he reckons it must be infallible."

"Well, he did have five JL-90 jetfoils," said Tenbright. "If he could have sneaked past them, they'd never have got near him. But when he got to within five hundred yards of the opposition, a huge shower of water went shooting up into the air in front of him and a Vox started rattling his windows. 'Give up or else', they told him. So Ambrose ordered full speed and put his missile jammers on. They were up on the hydroplanes and going like a runaway transiter when they shot past the CustEx."

"Just when they thought they were away, they saw another patrol coming in to port and ahead of them. Not trying to hide or anything – nice, fat blips on the radar. So Ambrose turned inshore to run in and out of the Archers and escape that way. Then one of his fleet hit something. There was a hell of a bang and it sort of skidded to a stop. Ambrose realized he was heading into a trap and ran straight for the second patrol. They shot him up a bit, but he got away. None of the others did."

"Sounds like the CustEx were using something new and very nasty," remarked Sovershend.

"They were," nodded Tenbright. "Tie-mines."

"They work in pairs," said Blackjack, drawing on his naval experience. "They float on or just under the water, separated by a thin wire. If anything of a certain size goes between them, the mines zoom towards it. They have contact fuses, so if they can't catch up, they bash into each other and you get a proximity effect. From what we heard, they stripped the hydroplanes off Ambrose's boat and peppered the hull with big holes – luckily, above the waterline."

"And only Ambrose got away?" asked Sovershend.

"That's right," nodded Tenbright. "He managed to get to Lesten Island with just a smell in his fuel tank. He's stuck there, of course. The authorities took him into preventive custody the moment he landed. I suppose the CustEx have started extradition proceedings by now."

"What a night," laughed Sovershend. "Cost him a fortune and he gets slung in gaol on top of it all."

"That's only the half of it," Dorry said significantly as Tenbright decided to give his voice a rest. "Arlon Bekker didn't have an easy time either."

"The CustEx can't have caught up with him as well," protested Sovershend. "That's too good to be true."

"Not immediately," chuckled Dorry. "The NTF jumped all over him, fighting that deadly poison alcohol. There was about fifty or sixty of

them, according to official reports. And then, just when it looked like the cargo would be smashed to pieces, CHASM jumped in."

"The Church of His Aweful Satanic Majesty," said Tenbright, savouring the doom-laden words. "Come to protect the importers of liquid delight from a bunch of fanatics. They shoved a gang of NeoKirlans into the scrap, then sneaked off with a couple of lorry-loads of assorted booze."

"That's CHASM. Lots of style and even more cheek. They must have heard that scrap miles away," Sovershend added.

"It attracted two Special Service Troops, plus a contingent from a nearby Army camp," said Dorry. "And an airship and a squadron of fast patrol boats off-shore. And a mob of newshounds getting under everyone's feet. Most of the county was in an uproar."

"Svey yoget!" laughed Sovershend. "It's not the sort of thing you'd wish on anyone. But you can't help feeling glad it happened to Ambrose."

"Of course," added Dorry, "that much trouble means someone talked out of turn. There's not a chance the CustEx worked it all out for themselves."

"And we should find out who it was pretty soon," nodded Sovershend. "No doubt Ambrose's wife is plotting a horrible revenge while she's scraping his fine together."

"Oiling the thumbscrews," remarked Tenbright.

"Oh, you've met Lilly?" said Sovershend.

"Just the once," nodded Tenbright. "She's a real krovan – with a gas grenade down her cleavage, sleeve guns on both arms and a throwing knife down the back of her neck. I never feel safe near that sort of woman. If you put a foot wrong and the woman slaps your face, you can hit back. But blowing your head off's going a bit far."

"It's not my feet that go wrong," grinned Blackjack.

"You've got a good memory," Tenbright scoffed from almost a generation away.

"Any more of your cheek and you won't be around long enough to find out if it is just memories," threatened Blackjack.

"Fat chance of that." Tenbright cast around for a friendly waiter's eye. "Another pint will put you under the table."

Katuishann reached the pub at ten-thirty. She was slightly late, her flight having encountered a spot of bad weather which had refused to obey the edicts of the forecasters. The crowd in the *Sir Jerome Favour* had thinned considerably. The next day was Thursday, which was a fairly popular working day. Drifting around the main room in search of

Sovershend, Katuishann spotted a familiar emaciated face.

"Hello, I didn't recognize you in that wig," said Chas Jones, waving her to a vacant chair. "I don't suppose you're on your own, are you?" he added hopefully.

Katuishann gave him a patient smile. "Hello, Chas. Have you seen Dev? He's supposed to be meeting me here."

"He was here a minute ago. He can't have gone far."

"S'vo, korolan," said a well-oiled voice. Rossiter dumped glasses on the table. He was too mean to use a waiter. "Looking for me?" he asked with a friendly leer.

"I might be," said Katuishann, giving him a winning smile and a 'get lost' inflection.

"Hello, I'm in here," boasted Rossiter. "How do you fancy a couple of drinks and a night of passion?"

"Sounds marvellous," Katuishann admitted, looking past him at Sovershend.

"Great!" beamed Rossiter, starting to rise in order to move closer to Katuishann.

A sudden pressure on the top of his head forced him back into his seat. By the time it had occurred to him that the force might be due to something other than the supernatural, Katuishann was sitting beside Sovershend in the next booth. Rossiter snarled at Jones, who was wearing a broad smile, and swore vengeance on Sovershend. Only the presence of Dorry and Tenbright, he insisted, stopped him from wading into Sovershend and smashing him to a pulp.

"Where are we having this night of passion?" Katuishann asked when Sovershend had introduced her to his companions.

"Would you believe the Mitten Gardens Hotel?" he asked.

"Not really." Katuishann shook unfamiliar blonde curls.

Sovershend shrugged. "Suit yourself. Are you having a drink here, or can you wait for me to open a bottle of Rienne at the hotel?"

"I'll wait for the Rienne," Katuishann decided, helping Sovershend to finish his beer.

She followed him to the door, giving Rossiter a sweet smile in passing. Rossiter's face assumed an even more fearsome scowl. Chas Jones stood by with a glass of fortbeer in case he burst into flames.

#### *42. Lillith Mellbury's Revenge*

Katuishann shook her head as they stepped out of the O/U train at Mitton Gardens. "I still don't believe you."

"I can't think why," protested Sovershend. "When was the last time I lied to you?"

"How should I know? You're always so convincing."

"Thanks very much!" Sovershend was not sure how to take the remark, but he decided on compliment.

"Where are we going really? Your flat?"

"Wait and see, disbeliever."

The couple passed through the revolving door and into the blue pre-reception area of the Mitton Gardens Hotel. Katuishann approached the sapphire blue counter fighting a growing feeling of embarrassment. She was expecting to be thrown out at any second.

Sovershend surrendered his sleeve gun with the air of someone who had come to stay. "You too," he prompted.

Katuishann took a stunner from her shoulder bag. "I still refused to believe this," she announced when she had satisfied the security scanners.

"Suit yourself," grinned Sovershend,

A blue-uniformed security guard cycled them through the double-doored entry filter and into the lobby.

"Good evening, sir," said the receptionist, sounding as pleased as if he were receiving royalty. "Your suite is ready for you."

"Ah, good," drawled Sovershend. He touched the proffered *Class 1* tag to the back of his left hand, where it clung like a section of golden plastic skin.

"May I have your card, please, vreitan?" asked the charming young man, making an extra effort in Katuishann's direction.

In response to a nudge from Sovershend, she handed over her visitor's identity card and her passport. The receptionist ran her documents through a scanner, which interrogated magnetic stripes, verified that the documents were genuine and checked that they were not on the stolen list.

"Suite thirteen-oh-eight," beamed the receptionist, returning Katuishann's documents, together with a *Class 1* tag.

"Where did you leave your bags, korolan?" asked Sovershend.

"The sleeve room at Priadon Station," said Katuishann.

"I'll have them collected at once," said the receptionist.

Sovershend piloted his companion to the lift. "I'll let you into a secret," he remarked as they rose majestically. "The chap I was working for is paying for all this."

"That's very nice of him," laughed Katuishann.

"Actually, he doesn't know about it."

"That's typical of you! An opportunist Good Time Devrel."

"It's the thought that counts, not who's paying for it."

"And it was a very nice thought."

The lift doors zoomed apart at floor 13. The pair of ancients waiting there gave Sovershend and Katuishann a disapproving look apiece, then they pushed into the lift before Sovershend could get out. "Manners are a wonderful thing," he remarked with a pleasant smile, touching the 24 panel as he stepped out. The doors closed and the lift resumed its upward crawl.

"That was a rotten thing to do," laughed Katuishann, who had taught him the trick.

Sovershend shrugged. "Someone has to teach these senile 'lensters how to behave in polite society."

"What would you like to bet they make a complaint about you, svey korol?"

"Let them. If they want to look stupid, why should I stand in their way?"

"You feel no compulsion to save humanity from itself?"

"Not tonight, no." The door of suite 1308 clicked open when Sovershend touched his golden tag to the receptor plate. "Here we are." He waved Katuishann into the room. "Shall I order a bottle of Rienne?"

"Marivodka and orange juice would do just as well if there's none handy." Katuishann began a tour of inspection, opening doors to find out which led to rooms and which to cupboards. "This looks very splendid."

"It ought to," laughed Sovershend. "It's costing our friend enough." He lowered himself gingerly onto a long, padded affair in the middle of the floor. He sank a couple of inches, then came up against something firm yet mobile. Katuishann curled up beside him.

"Cheers, m'dears," she said, accepting a glass.

"Cheers! Where did you learn that?"

"Oh, there was a funny little man on the plane. He kept trying to buy me drinks. I don't think his intentions were strictly honourable," Katuishann added with a giggle.

"Less honourable than mine?" said Sovershend.

"Oh, I don't think your intentions are dishonourable, svey korol," said Katuishann, keeping a more or less straight face. "I think disgraceful would be a better word."

"We make a fine pair, then," grinned Sovershend. "And I see your Camerlish refresher course has taken well."

"Camerlish? I thought I was learning Ferran," Katuishann teased.

The former colonies Camerland and Norland spoke the language of Ferron, but each claimed it as its own. The videolink began to chime softly before Sovershend could come up with a reply.

"Give me your glass," offered Katuishann. "I'll fill us up while you answer that."

Sovershend struggled to his feet, finding the task surprisingly difficult. The nameless item of furniture began to fill in his dent. Katuishann had sunk to within four inches of the floor.

"I don't think this thing's meant for two, Tish," Sovershend decided, taking one of the glasses and helping her to her feet.

He perched in front of the videolink and touched the *ACC* key. His reflection swirled into a holographic projection of the receptionist.

"The lady's luggage had been collected and should be with you almost at once, sir," he reported.

"Thank you," said Sovershend, looking away as someone tapped on the door.

"Good night, sir," said the receptionist as the screen shimmered before settling into a mirror.

Katuishann's larger case had retractable wheels at one corner. She let Sovershend tow it into the sleeping room. Katuishann followed with the glasses and her smaller case. The sliding door was having status trouble. As soon as they were safely through, it began to close in two-inch jerks. After reaching the fully closed position, it began to open again. Sovershend perched on the end of the bed to watch its erratic antics.

"How did your day go?" he asked as the door stopped just short of the fully open position.

"Busy at times, boring at others," Katuishann told him. "And what incredibly illegal things have you done today?"

Sovershend started to tell her about his adventures. Katuishann was fascinated by the Moby journey up the ship canal. Then, for no apparent reason, they found themselves in the middle of a violent argument, shouting and screaming abuse at each other. Part of Sovershend watched in horrified wonder as the rest of him surrendered to an overwhelming urge to kill Katuishann.

"Keep away from me," yelled Katuishann, picking up a fragile, bushy, picollo plant in a solid pot. Sovershend continued to advance.

Katuishann hurled the picollo plant at him. Sovershend dropped flat. The missile crashed into the grill on a ventilation outlet behind him. Thin plastic tore, allowing the pot to shatter inside the duct. Katuishann scrambled across the bed to the door. She raced for the bathroom and locked herself in. Sovershend hammered on the door a couple of times



in frustration, then he realized that it was much too solid to penetrate. But she had to come out sometime. He poured a glass of orange juice and sat down to wait, simmering.

*The nerve of the dobokandar vrag!* he thought. *Calling him a ... what?*

Sovershend drained his glass to ease the fire in his throat, groping at shadows. The reason for his boiling anger was just a vague blur. He could remember talking about his day and the descent into violence. But nothing remained of either cause or content. A numbing calm spread through him as he realized how their explosion could have ended. Badly shaken, he crossed the sitting room and tapped on the bathroom door.

"Go away," yelled Katuishann.

"Tish? I went to talk to you," called Sovershend.

"Veichem!" Something heavy and made of glass crashed against the other side of the door to underline the refusal.

"You don't have to open the door," coaxed Sovershend. "I just want to ask you something. I'll leave you alone if you'll answer one question. What were we fighting about?"

"You know bockan well what it was about."

"What, then?" urged Sovershend.

A long silence followed.

"I don't know," Katuishann admitted eventually.

"Neither do I," said Sovershend. "Tish, what in bock happened to us?"

Katuishann scraped the door open a cautious crack and peeped out. Sovershend retreated to the bar. Katuishann opened the door wider and stepped over a layer of purple crystals and fragments of glass. "Something's wrong, isn't it, Dev?"

"Very wrong," nodded Sovershend.

Katuishann advanced warily into the sitting room. "Could I have something to drink?"

Sovershend looked at his empty glass. "I don't think we'd better touch the drinks. There might be something in them."

Katuishann held out a trembling hand. "Have you got a cigarette?"

Feeling none too steady himself, Sovershend went into the sleeping room to retrieve his jacket from the bed.

Perhaps because he was keyed up, searching for answers, he registered the feeling of uneasiness within moments of crossing the threshold. An irritation began to grow. Feeling irrational anger surging up again, Sovershend grabbed his jacket and retreated immediately – to an unsettling calm in the sitting room.

"Tish, would you do something for me?" he asked. "Would you go in

there, then come out again the moment you notice anything strange.”

“What for?” asked Katuishann suspiciously.

“Trust me for a minute. Just do it. Please, Tish.”

Katuishann walked slowly into the sleeping room. She reached the bed and smoothed the wrinkled coverlet automatically. Then she turned and ran back into the sitting room. Sovershend closed and locked the door.

“You felt it too?” he asked.

Katuishann nodded uncertainly.

“A sort of shaky nervousness?”

“Yes, something like that.”

“And something stirring you up? Like an itch inside your brain?”

“Yes, that was it exactly.”

“Someone set this up for us, korolan. But it’s over now.” Sovershend sat down on the sufán and lit a cigarette. Katuishann joined him. She failed to suppress shudder when he put his arm round her shoulders and passed her the cigarette.

“You’re all right, aren’t you?” Sovershend asked cautiously.

“Apart from a bruise on my leg, I think so. I never knew you had such a violent temper.” Katuishann tried to make a joke out of the statement. Neither of them felt inclined to laugh. She drew on the cigarette and blew out a plume of uisge-flavoured smoke. “You looked ready to kill me, Dev.”

“Someone is going to suffer for that,” Sovershend vowed angrily. “In fact, I’d better do some checking up.”

He crossed to the videolink and tapped out the number of the *Sir Jerome Favour*. Then he asked for Keith Dorry.

“What are you doing out of bed?” Dorry asked with a broad grin and a knowing wink.

“This is serious,” interrupted Sovershend. “One minute Tish and I were chatting, the next we were at each other’s throats. I don’t know what someone’s done to us, but if Tish hadn’t been quick off the mark, I might have killed her.”

“It’s not one of Rossiter’s efforts?” Dorry’s grin shrank inwards.

“What, in the Mitton Gardens? How would he get in here? Look, it might be personal and it might be business. And if it’s business, you lot might be next on the list. That’s why I called you.”

Dorry’s face became grim. “I see what you mean. The first thing to do is try and find out who’s behind it. I know someone for that. Arrange a *Class 2* for myself and a chap called Cardinal. He’s a licensed investigator. I’ll warn the others to stay put here till we know what to

expect when we get home.”

“Right,” nodded Sovershend. He broke the connection and keyed reception.

“Good evening, sir,” said a carefully-painted blonde.

“Evening. This is Sovershend in 1308. I’m expecting a couple of visitors shortly. The names are Cardinal and Dorry.”

“Of course, sir,” smiled the receptionist. “I’ll vid you when they arrive.”

“Thank you,” replied Sovershend.

“What do you think is happening, Dev?” asked Katuishann.

“Yogal if I know, korolan.” Sovershend rejoined her on the suffan.

“We’ll have to wait for Keith and his maccar.”

## Thursday, Halgary 25th

### 43. Cardinal Resolves A Puzzle

Alex Cardinal and Keith Dorry arrived with the new day. They acquired silver visitor tags at the reception desk, then they followed Sovershend to the lifts. Sovershend had never met a private investigator before. Cardinal seemed to be mid-way between his own and Dorry's ages, slightly shorter than himself and of about the same build. His pale blue safari suit reminded Sovershend of a uniform. His bulky, black case said *doctor*.

Cardinal's first action was to test the orange juice and the marivodka using a neat biochemical sampling kit. When he had pronounced them free of contaminants, he backed his judgement by accepting a drink. Then he invited Sovershend and Katuishann to describe their movements from the moment they had entered the suite. His expression became a frown of concentration as the tale unfolded. At the end of it, he took a palm-sized grey box from his bag and extended a telescopic probe.

"I'll take a look in the bedroom now," he decided. "The rest of you had better keep back."

Cardinal slid the door aside and advanced into the sleeping room, as the hotel preferred to call it, following the probe. After a few moments, he grunted significantly and turned towards his audience. "You can come in. There's no danger now. Let's have a look at what's left of it."

A buzz from the outside door of the suite distracted his audience.

"Who is it?" Sovershend asked into the intercom unit.

"Hotel security, sir."

"Let him in," said Cardinal. "I know that voice."

Sovershend opened the door to a smart uniform. The man inside it was anonymous to the point of invisibility.

"What can we do you for, Andy?" asked Cardinal.

"They told me you were here, Alex, so I thought I'd better find out what was going on. I'm Commander Anderson, sir," he added to Sovershend. "Hotel security chief. What appears to be the trouble?"

Sovershend shrugged. "I don't know. I'm waiting for your friend to tell me."

"I think it's all in here," said Cardinal from the sleeping room. "How long has the hotel been putting plants in guests' bedrooms, Andy?"

"It's a special service," said Anderson. "The guest has to request it, though. Otherwise, we might get sued for a few thousand for triggering an allergy."

"I didn't," remarked Sovershend. "Request it."

"Surprise, surprise," said Cardinal, feeling quite cheerful at making so much progress so soon after taking the case. He used a pair of tongs to transfer every fragment of the picollo plant to a sealable plastic bag.

Commander Anderson frowned at the broken grill on the ventilation duct. *Wanton destruction of hotel property* could be seen in his expression.

"I take it neither of you used the vid extension in here?" asked Cardinal.

Sovershend and Katuishann shook their head.

"Good!" approved Cardinal. "Well, if someone would pass my drink, I'll reveal all."

Sovershend topped up glasses. Sensing that he was about to receive bad news, Anderson accepted a modest slug of marivodka.

"Someone's slid past your outfit, Andy," Cardinal began.

Anderson sipped his drink, refusing to be drawn.

"First of all," continued Cardinal, "an intruder got into this suite. Second, the intruder left this rather sorry wreck of a plant for your guests and did some rather clever things to the vid. Third, the intruder very nearly got away with it."

"But with that?" demanded Anderson.

"Murder by proxy," said Cardinal in a casual tone. "Someone tried to make Vr. Sovershend kill his ladyfriend."

Anderson took down the rest of his drink in one gulp, seeing his career sliding into the pit. An attempted murder in an hotel of the class of the Mitton Gardens would bring the wrong sort of publicity and a new security executive. If the news ever got out.

"When I have this plant analysed," resumed Cardinal, "I expect the report to show the presence of a war gas. In this case, a liquid that evaporates slowly. One of the type used to breed aggression, to get the enemy soldiers fighting each other instead of your side. I also suspect these modules I've taken from the vid will contain a by-pass circuit that keeps it active permanently, and a small transmitter."

"We know you're clever, Alex," remarked Dorry. "Now tell us what hit the floor."

"It means the intruder was using the vid to transmit low frequency

vibrations into this room. Frequencies below the threshold of normal hearing can be detected by the human body, but felt rather than heard. Select the right one and the victim becomes uneasy, feels threatened by an invisible menace. *Brain-itch* is a term often applied to the effect.”

“That’s what you called it,” Katuishann remarked to Sovershend, who nodded wisely.

“A sonic stimulus, the vapour blooming from this plant – it’s a combination guaranteed to send people into a homicidal rage over the slightest thing,” said Cardinal. “The gases can be male or female tailored, as they say in the trade. I’d guess this is a mixture to get the pair of you screaming at each other, but biased towards a kill-rage for Vr. Sovershend.”

“That sounds about right,” said Sovershend uncomfortably. Knowing that he could be manipulated so easily was both embarrassing and very frightening.

“In some cases,” added Cardinal, “the victim or victims have no memory of the reason for the rage when the effects of the vapour wear off, which happens within a few minutes of discontinuing exposure. In the case of strangers, there’s some residual memory if one of them is the type of person instantly and irrationally disliked by the other, usually of an imagined insult. When the victims know each other, the rage is generally concerned with some minor personality defect, unless there’s something else more serious.

“Otherwise, they just shout meaningless, unconnected words. Usually swear words, but anything suitable for aggressive speech can be used. If the trigger is a personality defect, the victims always remember it afterwards, which can have a severely disruptive effect on their future relationship.”

“That’s nice to know,” observed Sovershend. “That we’re mutually perfect in the minor personality sense.”

“How nice,” agreed Katuishann. “Remind me to find out what that means.”

“You seem well up on the subject, Alex,” remarked Dorry.

“I read a report in a Ferran trade paper,” Cardinal told him. “As research for a recent case. The client thought something like that was being used on him. But it turned out to be mild carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty gas fire.”

“Well, now we know what was done,” said Commander Anderson, coming out of his state of shock, “the next things to think about are motive and opportunity. And hope they lead us to who did it. But a discreet investigation, Alex.”

Cardinal broke into a grin, which made him look years younger than his grey-dusted temples suggested. "Someone thinking about his job, Andy?"

"The victims might not like the Prots asking them too many questions," suggested Anderson.

"That sounds like a crude attempt at blackmail to me," remarked Dorry.

"Let's give him a fair chance before we shout for the Prots," said Sovershend. "If his job's at stake, Commander Anderson's brain ought to be laser sharp."

"I wish everyone would stop talking about my job," complained Anderson. "It's perfectly clear one or both of the victims isn't exactly lily-white. Not if they know you two." He stared pointedly at Dorry and Cardinal.

"A definite slander," laughed Cardinal. "Well, what's your first move, Super Sleuth?"

"First, I need to know how long that plant has been in the suite," said Anderson.

"Impossible to say," returned Cardinal. "It could have been here for five minutes or five hours, depending on how much of the liquid was sprayed onto the leaves. But given the rate of ventilation, certainly not more than five hours."

Anderson checked his watch. "It's fourteen past midnight now. Let's say six hours to be on the safe side." He walked back into the sitting room and keyed a number on the videolink.

"Security control," said an earnest young woman.

"This is Anderson." A red dot in the bottom-left corner of the screen showed that he had inhibited the visual circuit at his end. "An unauthorized person entered thirteen-oh-eight during the last six hours. Scan through the safety register and give me a list of everyone who entered since eighteen this evening."

"Just a minute, Chief." The brunette's attention moved away from the videolink to the security computer, which kept track of movements as an anti-crime precaution and to assist rescue work in the event of a fire. "The only people to go into that room are the people there with you now, Chief. And one of the porters, Courtney, delivered two cases about an hour ago. But he didn't go in."

"There has to be someone else, Grace," said Anderson very positively, leaving no room for a denial.

"Here's something, Chief," nodded Grace. "We lost power on the surveillance system on floor twelve. An overload and a component

failure. There was some carry-over to the floors on either side. That was from twenty-two twenty-four to twenty-two thirty-three."

Anderson muttered under his breath. "Right, set me up pictures of everyone who left the building since the start of that overload. People who were on floors eleven to thirteen."

"Right, Chief," returned Grace. "Ready in a minute."

Anderson waved Sovershend over to the videolink. "See if you recognize anyone."

"There's no one, Chief," reported Grace, demolishing the experiment.

"Which means whoever did it has to be still in the building," said Cardinal. "Staff or a guest."

"I think it's more likely to be a guest," Anderson decided. "A member of the staff would have suggested something other than a plant as the vehicle for the war gas."

"We'd better take a look at a few guests," said Cardinal.

Anderson chewed at his lower lip for a moment, then he made what was obviously a difficult decision. "Roll up the guest list for floors thirteen down to eleven, Grace," he ordered. "Pictures only with room numbers. No names."

"Is that wise, Chief?" asked his subordinate, twisting her face into an expression of worry.

"Probably not, but do it anyway," said Anderson. "Assuming Vr. Sovershend knows the assassin," he murmured to himself.

"I think that's probably," said Cardinal. "The object of the exercise was to make Vr. Sovershend suffer agonies of remorse when he returned to his senses and discovered he'd killed Va. Verkeinen. I think the person responsible wanted to be around when that happened. That picollo plant needed a decent-sized container for transportation - such as an item of luggage. And the surveillance system was off for less than ten minutes, which indicates a room fairly close to here."

Pictures flicked onto the screen. Green room numbers appeared in the top-right corner of the display.

"Hell in a bucket! Is that me?" said Katuishann when the number became 1308. "I only put that wig on because I didn't have time to wash my hair."

"You've got the eyes for a blonde," remarked Sovershend.

"Would you mind keeping yours on the screen?" said Anderson. "Back two, Grace."

Katuishann took her wig off. An impossible mass of dark chestnut waves tumbled to her shoulders. Dorry and Cardinal exchanged looks of surprise and admiration at her conjuring trick. Two ancients



appeared, the ones whom Sovershend had sent up to floor 24 in the lift. The number on the screen became 1334, then 1337.

"Floor twelve now, Chief," said Grace.

The parade of faces continued.

"Stop," said Sovershend. "Back one."

The occupant of room 1220 reappeared. Sovershend reached to turn the videolink's sound off. "Who's that, Keith?"

Dorry shrugged. "No idea. Never seen her before."

"Have a closer look. Ignore the red hair."

Dorry blocked the top of the screen with a hand.

"Go on, who is it?" he invited, still mystified. "Hang on! That's Lilly. Lilly Mellbury. Is everyone wearing a wig today?"

Anderson tapped at the keyboard. The name 'Gillian Powers' and a citizen identity card number flowed onto the screen. "Does this lady have a reason for wishing you harm?" he asked Sovershend.

Sovershend shrugged. "None that I know of. But I can't think why she should be here. And under a false name."

"Her husband's in gaol on Lesten Island," explained Dorry. "Which is where we'd expect Lilly to be right now. Or at home in Nottridge trying to get him out. Certainly not here."

"And you helped to put her husband in gaol?" Anderson asked Sovershend, assuming that he had reached the heart of the matter.

"No, that was nothing to do with me," Sovershend told him. "He can get himself into enough trouble without any help from me. But Lilly's clever enough and cool enough to have set this up. And we're not exactly friends."

"They say poison is traditionally a woman's weapon," remarked Anderson. "And that irritant gas that was used on you can be described as a form of poison."

"And I have an idea Lilly took a good degree in something to do with electronics," added Dorry.

"I think we'd better have a look at the rest of floor twelve and floor eleven before we have a word with the lady," said Cardinal.

"I don't know about that," Anderson stalled, overwhelmed by natural caution. "Waking a guest at this time of night."

"She's an old friend," Dorry assured him. "She may shout and scream a bit, but she won't say a word."

Sovershend grinned at Katuishann as she puzzled over the remark, trying to eliminate the paradox in a recently-acquired. language.

"I think we need a little more to go on," said Anderson.

"We can always call in the Prots," Sovershend prodded. "And let them

talk to her.”

“Very well,” Anderson let out a heavy sigh of resignation. “We’ll look at the rest of the pictures first. We might come across some homicidal maniac who’s been trying to kill you for years.”

Sovershend and Dorry exchanged a glance which said: ‘Rossiter’.

“I’ll walk the Inland Sea if it *is* him,” scoffed Sovershend.

#### *44. Revelations In Suite 1220*

As Commander Anderson had feared, Sovershend knew none of the other guests in the area affected by the power-cut. Not looking at all happy, Anderson summoned help from his security team.

“Grace, come up to thirteen-oh-eight,” he told an alert-looking, dark-haired woman over the videolink. “Drag Mike out of the canteen to spell you. Bring your stunner. Don’t argue, just do it.” Anderson broke the connection and finished his glass of marivodka. “And I hope to hell this works out,” he added to his audience.

“Just think of it as a spot of elementary job preservation,” said Cardinal. “This Mellbury woman being here under a false name is reasonable grounds for challenging her.”

“It’s not an offence to register under a false name,” Anderson pointed out.

Two minutes dragged by. Then Grace arrived. She was tallish and solidly-built. “What’s going on, Chief?” she asked, flicking her gaze over the group in the room.

“The less you know the better,” Anderson told her. “Just follow me and look official. And say nothing. Let’s go,” he added to the others in the suite. He managed to sound less than happy.

The security monitor camera in the corridor followed them curiously as they walked down the corridor to the lift. Grace folded her arms in order to keep her stunner concealed but ready for use. The rest of the party stopped at suite 1218. Anderson and Grace carried on to the next door.

“Ready?” asked Anderson.

Grace nodded uncertainly.

“Right, let’s get it over with.”

Anderson placed his master disc on the door plate and pushed. The sitting room was in darkness. Anderson nodded towards the sleeping room. The figure on the bed lay still when he slid the door open, admitting a thin slice of light from the corridor. Anderson stepped into the room and switched on the light. The woman in the bed scarcely

moved, but her hand slid under the pillow.

"Security! Freeze!" shouted Grace, aiming her stunner.

"Yes, we are hotel security, vreitan," added Anderson politely, displaying his identity card. He took a stunner from his shoulder holster and aimed it straight at the well-developed chest behind a pale blue sheet. Grace moved round the bed and lifted the pillow. Anderson relaxed slightly when his colleague she removed a small gas grenade. The hotel did not frown on such minor defensive weapons.

"I am Commander Anderson," he announced in an ultra-formal tone. "Head of the hotel security unit. This is Senior Guard Grace."

"What do you want?" Lillith Mellbury asked in a timid voice, dragging the sheet up to her neck.

"I'm inquiring into the circumstances that led to a murderous assault on another guest, vreitan," explained Anderson in his formal voice. "I must warn you that I have an active recording device on my person and that anything you say can be given in evidence."

"How dare you!" Lillith Mellbury tried indignation. "How dare you burst into my room like this. I demand to see the manager."

"Get dressed, vreitan," said Anderson in a bored tone. "We both knew you did it. Your confession is just a formality. We've got enough on you to sink a saint."

Anderson obligingly turned his back. Lillith Mellbury struggled into a dressing gown, muttering furiously. Grace remained facing the prisoner, stunner at the ready. Anderson led them into the sitting room. Lillith Mellbury came to a dead stop when she noticed Dorry and Cardinal. Sovershend and Katuishann were still in the corridor, listening.

"Hello, Lilly," said Dorry gravely.

"What the ferveok's going on?" she demanded, becoming her normal, assertive self.

"All the way into the room, please, vreitan. And sit down, please." Grace resisted the temptation to prod Lillith Mellbury in the back with her stunner. Dorry had warned her that the prisoner would take her arm off if she tried it.

"You know Vr. Dorry," said Anderson. "The other gentleman is Vr. Cardinal. A licensed investigator."

"These are yours, I believe," said Cardinal, stepping to one side to reveal a sundered piccolo plant in a plastic bag and two circuit modules on the table behind him.

"You weren't bluffing," Lillith Mellbury said to Anderson.

"No, vreitan," replied the security executive, hiding relief behind a mask of confidence.

"Right," said Lillith Mellbury in resignation. "What happens now? Not that I'm admitting anything."

"Why don't you just tell us about it, Lilly?" suggested

"Let's keep it in the family for the moment," added Sovershend, stepping into the room.

Lillith Mellbury leapt to her feet with a cry of anger. Katuishann grabbed a half-full bottle of uisge from the writing desk and prepared to use it as either a missile or a club.

"Sit down, vreitan," said Grace firmly.

"Tish!" said Sovershend. He prised the bottle from her hand. "Slide it for the moment. We're going to have a chat first. You can mince her later."

"What now?" asked Anderson, running out of inspiration.

"Thanks for your help," said Sovershend. "There won't be any trouble. Not in the hotel, anyway."

Anderson looked relieved, but his training urged him to turn Lillith Mellbury over to the police. He looked to Cardinal for guidance.

"It doesn't look like he's going to press charges, Andy." Cardinal shrugged. "There's nothing for you to do if there's no official complaint."

"What about . . .?" Dorry nodded to Grace.

"You can count on me, Chief," she said efficiently as she put her stunner into a side pocket.

"All right," conceded Anderson. "I don't pretend to understand that's going on, but whatever it is seems to have been prevented. I'll take your master disc, vreitan," he added to Lillith Mellbury. "I'm sure you have no further plans for visiting other suites tonight."

Lillith Mellbury went into the bedroom, watched closely by Grace, and returned with a small heap of components and a square of circuit board. Anderson stored them in a pocket, then he crossed the room to the door to the corridor.

"I can't very well put you on the blacklist without giving a reason, vreitan," he told Lillith Mellbury. "But I don't expect to see you here again. Good night, everyone else. I hope the rest of your time here is very dull and uneventful. Come on, Grace."

"I'll be going back to bed, then," said Lillith Mellbury when the door had closed again. "And I'll thank you lot to get lost."

"Hang about, Lilly," said Sovershend. "You're not flying free yet. I want an explanation. And if I don't think it's reasonable, you're going to have an accident."

"Are you going to stand there and watch him murder me?" Mellbury

asked Dorry and Cardinal, trying helplessness.

"In view of what you tried to do to him and his friend, I don't feel inclined to stand in his way," returned Cardinal in a neutral tone.

"Come on, Lilly, tell us about it," urged Dorry. "You're not going to be any use to Ambrose if Dev cancels your membership card."

"You too, Keith?" protested Mellbury, looking deeply hurt.

"Don't give us the injured innocence, Lilly," sighed Dorry. "Be sensible."

"All right," said Mellbury. "I had my chance and I fubbed it. And perhaps you ought to know what sort of madky sobok he is. Get me a drink, Keith. I know you set Ambrose up to cover your run," she added venomously to Sovershend. "And I wanted you to suffer for it." The firm set of her mouth relaxed somewhat when she turned to Katuishann. "There was nothing personal as far as you're concerned."

"Nothing personal!" hissed Katuishann. "Let me at her."

"Not yet, Tish." Sovershend tightened his grip on her. "I'm still waiting for something more than words, Lilly. I had nothing to do with dumping Ambrose in the madek. I had no reason to."

"Lilly." Dorry handed her a glass.

"Thanks, Keith." Mellbury poured neat uisge down her throat without tasting it and held out the glass for a refill. "You shouldn't have collected the bounty from the CustEx in person. You were seen."

"You're dreaming!" said Sovershend in amazement. "Seen by you?"

"By someone reliable," returned Mellbury. "We got a tip off about when the bounty would be paid."

"And when was this?" demanded Sovershend.

"You collected it at half-past ten this morning. At the back of the law courts, here in Dungard."

"At half-ten, I was still tucked up in my bed, in spite of the cleaners' best efforts to wrinkle me out of my room," said Sovershend. "The hotel's emergency register can confirm that. So you're telling me that on the strength of some sobok's rotten eyesight, you tried to make me kill Tish?" Sovershend's voice had become level and deadly calm. "You're not safe to be out on your own, Lilly."

"Bob Tork saw you, and he'll tell you so to your face," persisted Mellbury,

"Bob Tork?" repeated Sovershend in surprise. Tork was another of his contacts in the North. "All right, there's nothing wrong with his eyes. But he's made a mistake. Our operation want so smoothly it didn't need any cover. The chap who thought it out is a bit of a genius at transport. And why Bekker, Lilly? I know we're not friends, but we're not rivals either."

Wrecking Ambrose's organization wouldn't do me a bit of good. And where would I have got all the information on timetables and landing points? From Ambrose?"

"That's a good point, Lilly," said Dorry, refusing to believe that Sovershend would inform on a fellow importer. "Nobody outside your organization could have known so much. Enough to wreck every bit of Ambrose's operation."

"So you're trying to tell me it's just a coincidence?" said Lillith Mellbury scornfully. "That he's not working for the bunch that's been trying to sell Ambrose protection?"

"Like who?" asked Sovershend.

"A bunch of Belldans, as you well know."

"All right, so I was linking for some Belldans." Sovershend shrugged. "But that's no reason to think it's the same bunch."

"Suppose we do something a little more constructive than hurling accusations?" Cardinal suggested. He took a jade box the size of a compact dictionary from his case and set it on the writing desk. "Now, I know a truth meter isn't one hundred per cent reliable. But I doubt Vr. Sovershend has taken the precautions necessary to junk the results."

"Just whose side are you on?" demanded Lillith Mellbury suspiciously.

"It's not a question of sides," said Cardinal. "The object of an investigation should be to establish fact, no matter how inconvenient. I'd like to get on with that before we're hip-deep in dead bodies."

"You want Dev to prove he's innocent?" said Katuishann, outraged. "After what that dobokandar vrag did? She's mad. She should be locked up."

"It would be the quickest way of clearing the air," Cardinal pointed out. "What do you say, Vr. Sovershend? It looks to me as if you'll be outnumbered if you start a war with the Mellburys. It sounds a good way to come second."

"That makes sense, Dev," added Dorry.

"Since when did the victim of a murder attempt get the truth meter?" said Sovershend obstinately.

Cardinal and Dorry just looked at him.

"Go on, what do I have to do?" he surrendered. "Let's try your way."

Cardinal waved him to a chair. He smeared electrodes with a conductive jelly and attached them to Sovershend's temples and wrists. Then he asked a series of questions, noting Sovershend's responses when his replies were the truth, a deliberate lie and evasion. The results of the test were fairly crude at that sort of level, but useable.

"Right," said Cardinal, satisfied. "Did you inform on this lady's hus-

band?" he added in the same breath.

"No," returned Sovershend, feeling something of a fool.

"Did you collect a bounty from the CustEx?"

"No."

"Where were you at half-past ten this morning? Or yesterday morning, as it is now."

"In bed asleep. I was up all night."

"All responses have the character of truth," said Cardinal.

"What's the name of the blonde? About twenty-five with a deep suntan?" demanded Lillith Mellbury.

"I've never met her," returned Sovershend.

"What about the small man? Dark hair, half gone. With jug ears and a stink of aniseed liqueur?"

"No idea. Don't know him," said Sovershend.

"Both responses truthful," said Cardinal.

"Unless that was a character called Demirell," Sovershend added. "I never met him."

"Demirell?" repeated Cardinal

"That name slipped out," nodded Sovershend. "Something my Belldan contact said. Why, do you know him?"

"Can't be the same one," said Cardinal.

"Satisfied yet, Lilly?" said Dorry.

"How about letting this box of tricks find that out?" Sovershend said. "So I know whether to arrange that accident."

"All right, that's fair," nodded Lillith Mellbury. "I admit I was wrong about you. And I'll do it with that gadget strapped to me. I don't suppose we can shake hands and forget this, but for what it's worth, I'm sorry, Devrel. Everything pointed to you. And when Torky saw you . . . It must have been your double picking up that bounty. We're in your debt."

"Aren't we going to break a few of her arms?" murmured Katuishann for Sovershend's ears only. She continued to keep a wary eye on Lillith Mellbury, despite the truce.

"I wouldn't advise trying, korolan," replied Sovershend. "She's a lot stronger than she looks. And she knows every dirty trick in the book."

Lillith Mellbury took Sovershend's place in the chair beside the writing desk. Cardinal connected the electrodes to her temples and wrists. After asking a series of questions to calibrate her responses, Cardinal allowed Sovershend to learn her intentions towards him. Satisfied that they were peaceable, Sovershend let Lillith Mellbury remove the electrodes and swab away the now sticky conductive jelly.

"All right, Alex," said Dorry, looking extremely relieve that he had not been forced to choose between two friends, "what do you make of all this?"

"Well, from what's been said," replied Cardinal, "and from what I remember from vid reports, it looks like some rival group has been trying to sell protection to Vr. Mellbury. And when that didn't stick, they using what was most probably inside information to arrange for him to come unstuck in a rather spectacular fashion. As for Vr. Sovershend's part in the affair, he seems to be a rather unnecessary scapegoat."

"Tell us about the bounty, Lilly," said Sovershend. "Who told you I was collecting it?"

"No one actually told me it was you," Lillith Mellbury admitted. "It was all very quick. I got a vid call to tell me someone had informed on Ambrose. About ten-fifteen. No picture and he was on the line long enough to tell me whoever it was would be picking up the bounty at the office behind the law courts very shortly and I had just about time to get someone there to watch."

"Virtually an anonymous tip-off?" said Cardinal.

"I suppose so," nodded Lillith Mellbury. "As I said, at the time I just accepted it and tried to find someone to be there to see it. Torky lives just off Tibbold Street, so he had just enough time to get there."

"It sounds to me like Vr. Sovershend has upset someone," said Cardinal. "Someone who knew his movements and that he'd be here in Dungard yesterday morning. And clever enough to manipulate Va. Mellbury into becoming an unpaid assassin. Have you heard of a man called Emile Duncan?"

"Crazy Emile?" said Lillith Mellbury. "Who hasn't?"

"I haven't," offered Katuishann.

"He was in your line of business. And he turned up on one of those islands in the Gulf of Meermond recently. Found drowned, according to the official report. I happen to know that because I wanted to ask him some questions in connection with other activities of his." Cardinal decided not to mention that he and Major Tarpigan had intended to take action against a generous contributor to PSF funds, but they had been beaten to the punch. "Duncan was knocked on the head and tipped into the sea. I caught a whisper he was suspected of being an informer but his closest colleagues denied it vigorously."

"Are you suggesting there's some sort of conspiracy going on?" Sovershend asked. "Someone trying to set up a nation-wide protection scheme for the importing trade?"

"I don't have anything as specific as that," said Cardinal. "Just a few



odd facts, But there have been discussions in official police circles about something as lucrative as importing contraband goods attracting hardened criminals."

"What about that business with Les Talbot a couple of weeks ago?" said Dorry. "She had a breakdown on the expressway with a load," he explained to Cardinal. "And when the Prots turned up, someone started shooting at them."

"Art Summers," added Lillith Mellbury. "Blown up with his cargo a few months back. He was supposed to have been ambushed by 'lensters."

"Every death isn't necessarily suspicious," Cardinal warned.

"Just same," said Sovershend, "I don't think there's any doubt someone's had a go at Lilly and me. And Tish."

"If you want a job, you could do some digging for me," said Lillith Mellbury. "And I could use a reliable intermediary to pay off my husband's fine."

"I'm sure we can come to an arrangement." Cardinal handed her one of his business cards. He would have to contract out some of the work in view of his commitment to the Refuse Barons but Lillith Mellbury looked financially sound enough to accept *Class 4* or even *Class 5* charges without protest. "As there appears to be an information link between the people who tried to sell protection to your husband and the people Vr. Sovershend was working with," Cardinal added, "I think we can start with them. I'll need every scrap of information you can give me about them – names, descriptions, accents, likes and dislikes. The most trivial things are often the most useful."

Cardinal, Sovershend and Lillith Mellbury went into a huddle around Cardinal's pocket memory, leaving Dorry and Katuishann to sit and yawn, and exchange a few remarks about nothing in particular.

"Right," said Cardinal after ten minutes. "I think that's enough for a start. And I have a plane waiting for me." He glanced across the room at the electric clock. "Ten to one. I hope the pilot's still awake."

"Before you go," said Lillith Mellbury, "how did you get on to me? Was I really so obvious?"

"Well," said Cardinal with a hint of a smile, "at the risk of disillusioning a client, it tended to be by leaping to conclusions rather than slogging the problem out by pure elimination. But a little luck and a little specialized knowledge can smooth the path of any investigation wonderfully."

"Let's hope you're even luckier with my case," remarked Lillith Mellbury.

"Time I was getting home to bed," Dorry hinted. "And time I was letting the others know it's safe to head for theirs."

"I'll see you out," said Sovershend. "Good night, Lilly. I'd like to say it was a pleasure meeting you again, but . . ."

"We're very alike, Devrel," returned Lillith Mellbury with a wry smile. "I'm sure you understand how it was for me."

"I'd like to think I'm not so trigger-happy. But I hope I don't get the chance to find out," said Sovershend.

He sent Katuishann up to their suite with instructions not to open the door for anyone other than himself, hoping that a display of concern would smother thoughts of sneaking back to suite 1220 to start a fight.

After escorting Dorry and Cardinal to street level, he took the fast lift to the thirteenth floor, feeling rather worn out from the excitement of the last two hours. When he closed the door of their suite, he found Katuishann hiding behind it, marivodka bottle raised to a clobbering position.

"So that's where you are!" Sovershend remarked.

"Just being careful," Katuishann told him. "It might have been that double of yours."

"I'll say this for you, Tish. You're taking this very well. When you think what could have happened."

"I know," shivered Katuishann. "But when you think about it, very little did. And you're always saying there's no point in being frightened of things that might have happened. Even so, it's a pity they don't have bigger bottles in this place. You might be friends with that woman now, but I still feel like splitting her skull."

"Yes," laughed Sovershend, rubbing the back of his head, "I know how handy you are with a bottle, Remember that one you chucked at me?"

"I didn't chuck it," protested Katuishann. "It was all wet from the cooler. It slipped out of my hand. Anyway, I missed you."

"But I didn't miss that wall when I dodged. Neither did the bottle."

"I warned you that chair was unsafe."

"You don't tend to think of things like that when there's a bottle zooming towards you, korolan. And I still think I should have sued the hotel for having defective furniture."

"I spent five minutes picking glass out of your hair before you came round," Katuishann remembered.

"Tidying me up before the doctor arrived."

"And the look on his face when you told him that story about how the cork came out with a rush and you fell over because of the chair."

"Well, if I'd told him the truth, the hotel would have made a charge for his services. And we wouldn't have been presented with that demi-case of very drinkable wine. Not that it was any of his business what really happened. And it kept you out of gaol for common assault."

"I seem to remember a certain person telling me he wanted to keep me handy for when he'd plotted his revenge."

"I don't think I ever got even with you for that," mused Sovershend.

"I'll get that nice private investigator back to protect me," said Katuishann with a provocative smile.

"Fancy him, do you?"

"I'm sure he's very nice when he's not busy investigating."

"He'll be half way to Leviton now, so you're on your own."

"Want to try something, maccar?" Katuishann adopted a defensive pose, the marivodka bottle held in her left hand, her right hand ready to deliver an outward chop.

"You wouldn't hit an unarmed man, would you?" Sovershend took a step forward, just into range of the bottle.

"Don't bet on it." Katuishann tried to take a step backwards, but she came up against the wall. Sovershend took another step forward. Katuishann tapped him on the head gently. "Consider yourself bonked."

Sovershend sagged at the knees and collapsed onto the green and black tufted carpet without a sound. Katuishann prodded him in the ribs with a toe. "Come on, get up."

The inert body stayed up.

"Dev?" Katuishann dropped to her knees beside him. "Dev?"

Sovershend opened his left eye. "I'm waiting for you to come down here and give me the kiss of life to revive me." The eye closed again.

"That sounds like fun," laughed Katuishann. "What is it?"

"Come a bit closer and I'll show you," offered Sovershend.

#### *45. Defrayment and Expectation*

Alex Cardinal made the effort to afford real coffee. His supplier was the enormous Martin, trader and car constructor of Strode Street, which lay just over half a mile to the east of Cardinal's office. But the first brew of the day came from a supply provided by Devrel Sovershend as his fee. As he was sipping the dark brown liquid, wondering whether to take another waker tablet, Cardinal's videolink buzzed discreetly and diverted his attention.

"A call for you on three, Vr. Cardinal. Lillith Mellbury," said his secretary in her velvet voice.

"Thank you, Va. Bedworthy," replied Cardinal. It was a working name, chosen by his secretary, but he indulged it for its effect on clients. People remembered a security consultant whose secretary had such a provocative name.

"Good morning, Alex," said Lillith Mellbury when she appeared on the screen. "Is that really her name?"

"Good morning, Lilly," returned Cardinal, following the client's preference for informality. "So she tells me."

"And is she?"

"I'll ask her, if you're really interested." Cardinal assumed a business-like expression. "I've made inquiries about your husband."

"And how does it hit the floor?"

"The authorities consider his offence a serious one. They're thinking in terms of a ten-year sentence plus full costs. And the obligatory bankruptcy, of course."

"And what's the buy-off rate?"

"I was able to arrive at a firm figure of fifty thousand pounds per year."

"Fifty thousand!?" Lillith Mellbury drew her black brows together in an ominous scowl. "The madky soboks want what? Half a million? And they call *us* crooks?"

"That seems to be the going rate these days. For non-violent offences. And it includes the usual pardon for all past misdeeds of a similar nature, of course. Unless they include the odd murder. And there's a guarantee the Tax Department won't ask where the money came from." Cardinal decided not to inject a note of sympathy into his voice, judging that it was not expected of him.

"I suppose we could stick the taxpayer with the bill for keeping Ambrose in gaol for about three years, which is all he'd actually do. But I don't suppose we have much choice." Lillith Mellbury resigned herself to the inevitable. "What do I have to do?"

"When you've raised the money, you can pay it to me as your nominated intermediary. Or I will arrange for it to be paid directly from your account into an official account. As soon as the fine has been paid, the extradition proceedings will be dropped and your husband will be free to return to Camerland any time he likes."

"If I pay you, the source remains confidential?"

"All transactions between us are subject to the normal client confidentiality," nodded Cardinal. "How long will it take you to raise the money?" His tone suggested that he expected a time scale of days, if not weeks.

"It's ready now," said Lillith Mellbury in a tone of faint surprise. Her raised eyebrows asked why there should be any problem in scraping together the odd half-million pounds.

"Is it?" said Cardinal, mentally confirming *Class 5* charges for the client. He had not doubted that the Mellburys had the money – only the fact that it was so readily to hand surprised him. "Are you ready to make the transfer?"

"Set up your account number, and it's all yours, Alex."

Electronic impulses travelled along wires. Memory devices became remagnetized with alternative information. Ambrose and Lillith Mellbury became poorer by half a million pounds, which they had never seen and were unlikely to miss. Alex Cardinal acquired enough money to pay his rent for the rest of his life, were he allowed to keep it.

"And your fee?" asked Lillith Mellbury. "Shall I add the retainer we agreed?"

"If you would." Cardinal kept his tone at an impersonal level during a discussion about money. "I'll get on to the CustEx and pay your fine now."

"How long will that take?"

"It all depends on how much bureaucratic delay I run into. You know, the usual deliberate obstruction."

"I'll call you back about eleven. Anything happening on the other matter?"

"I've been up all night on that."

"I thought I detected a little roughness around the edges. I didn't expect so much hammer."

"There's rather more to your spot of trouble than any of us could have imagined last night. There's a link to another case I'm working on, which should mean pretty rapid progress. I'll be in touch when I have something concrete to report."

"Right," nodded Lillith Mellbury. "I'll leave you to it."

The videolink screen cascaded into a random swirl of pastel colours instead of the usual mirror. Cardinal disliked someone watching him while he was working – even if it was himself. He took a cigar from the storage box on his desk and dipped the end into the flame of his desk lighter. Having tried more expensive cigars, lighting them with wooden matches and smoking them with and without the band, he had come to the conclusion that he was missing very little. Alex Cardinal was quite happy with his cheap ones.

Coffee, however, was something that he could appreciate. When he reached a few dark grains in the bottom of his cup, he touched the

intercom key. "I think I'll risk another cup, Doris," he announced.

"I had a feeling you might," laughed his secretary.

Doris Bedworthy breezed into the office with the coffee pot. She was quite tall, in her early twenties and she improved average looks with a ready smile. She was wearing a smart, dark green business suit and her hair colour of the week was light blonde. After filling Cardinal's cup she gave him a conspiratorial wink, the product of diligent practice in front of her videolink's mirror.

"Real krovan, eh, boss?" she remarked.

Cardinal responded with inscrutability, but he managed only a blank look. He could never decide whether his secretary meant the client's looks or her willingness to pay. Doris Bedworthy gave him another demonstration of her wink, with the right eye this time, and slid back to her own office.

Cardinal decided that she was referring to the fee, which paid her wages, rather than Ambrose Mellbury's choice of wife. Lilly's dark, Northern looks would never fade completely. Cardinal judged that she was a strong, capable companion, intensely loyal and skilled in the art of getting her own way. Ambrose of Nottridge was a lucky man.

After savouring the first half of his second cup of coffee, Cardinal called the Department of Revenue office in the city centre. It took a mere five minutes to make contact with a Senior Inspector in Revenue Offences, Fines Division, Major Settlements Section. The country's civil servants were reluctant to accept videolink calls during their ten o'clock coffee break.

The inspector was young, which meant less than twenty-five to thirty-one-year-old Cardinal and not terribly attractive. She had bright red hair with off-white stripes and eye shadow to match, and she seemed to be carrying the cares of the whole world on her narrow shoulders. The glowing green letters at the foot of the screen read: 'Senior Inspector Jane M. Offord'.

"Good morning," said Cardinal – then he realized that he had made a serious mistake.

"Name of offender?" said Offord, ignoring his ridiculous statement. The lines of strain around her dark eyes showed quite clearly that the morning was anything but good and that the afternoon was likely to be worse.

"Ambrose Mellbury," said Cardinal, coming down to bare basics along with the inspector.

A change of focus of her eyes told Cardinal that Offord was reading data superimposed on his face. "Ambrose Bertram Mellbury," she read

aloud. "Citizen ID card number 7M-L4-61239." Her voice rose in a questioning inflection at the end of the number.

"That's my client," nodded Cardinal. He attempted a pleasant smile but the dead eyes on his screen killed it.

"Provisional sentence ten years at fifty kay. Nett fine five hundred kay. Ready for transfer."

Cardinal pecked at his keyboard, then touched the *REL* key. A sheet of paper emerged from the copyslot.

"Ambrose Bertram Mellbury, CIC number 7M-L4-61239, is hereby discharged of liability in respect of Revenue evasion prior to this date," gabbled Offord. She paused for breath. "With the exception of offences which fall outside Section 2 of the Revenue Evasion Act, Optional Fines Amendment Current." Another pause to take in air. "You should now have in your possession a receipt for the fine, which is also an immunity from prosecution, as indicated."

"Yes, I have it." Cardinal checked through the document. "All in order."

"Have you any further business?" asked the inspector.

"No, that's it," replied Cardinal.

His screen became a random colour swirl again after a curt farewell.

*Whatever happened to civility?* Cardinal asked himself. But at least the exchange had been rapid. He had been expecting a good half an hour of extension-shunting and office-hopping. The intercom chirped as he was finishing his coffee.

"Sir Nigel Grantby for you on four," said his secretary. She used the four channels of the office videolink in rotation, as if to avoid wearing out any one of them.

"Just a minute." Cardinal pushed his empty cup aside and switched his screen to a mirror for a few seconds to check his appearance. "Right, Doris, put him through."

"Scrambled contact," a large face ordered before blurring into mush.

"Good morning, Vr. Grantby," Cardinal said to the reformed image. It was unusually large because the owner had an aggressive habit of leaning in to the camera. Cardinal imagined that he could count the light hairs projecting from the nose and the wrinkles around the eyes.

"Morning, Cardinal," returned Grantby. "You look rough. Been up all night?"

"As a matter of fact, I have," nodded Cardinal.

"Oh! Do you have anything new for me?" Grantby used the curt manner of a client who had seen very little progress. The chairman of the Refuse Barons believed that the approach spurred contract

employees to greater efforts.

"Yes, I think I do." Cardinal noted with pleasure, a slight mellowing of the tough expression. "Others have been having troubles similar to yours."

"Tell me more." Grantby's expression of interest and anticipation, plus the difficulty of the task ahead, raised him to the next level on Cardinal's scale of charges.

"I've just found out that importing revenue-free liquor into this country has become even more hazardous of late. At least eight importers have gone out of business since the beginning of the year – due to either accidents or informers. In fact, the number almost became ten last night. I'm sure you can see all the parallels with your own position."

"You have contacts among these smugglers?" frowned Grantby.

"In the line of business, yes," nodded Cardinal.

"Business?" frowned Grantby. "I thought we had your exclusive services?"

"The cases are linked," said Cardinal hurriedly. "The name Demirell came up in connection with the importers' case. And when I checked immigration records, I found that Charles Demirell of the Williamson Organization has been a frequent visitor to this country for the best part of a year. And so have quite a number of members of the Williamson security staff."

"You mean Demirell's going into the smuggling business?" said Grantby, amazed.

"Has gone into it," corrected Cardinal. "One of the people who almost went out of business last night was working with a team of Williamson security staff. And you remember I mentioned two men with a van supplying the PSF? The descriptions we have match other members of the Williamson security staff."

Grantby stared at Cardinal, lost for words.

"The Major and I are both working on this new line," added Cardinal, projecting optimism. "We should have quiet a lot to tell you after the weekend."

"But how can this Demirell be getting away with this?" protested Grantby. "Piracy and smuggling right under Norm's nose? And what good's it doing him to set the PSF against us?"

"That hasn't become clear yet," Cardinal admitted.

"Oh, well. Carry on with it. I'll vid you again on Monday. Same time." Grantby seemed to be struggling with a decision.

"Is there something else?" invited Cardinal.



"You couldn't get hold of a couple of cases of *Uisge Hyrane Grand Malt* by any chance?" Grantby asked with a certain embarrassment. "A Tombrian colleague gave me a bottle recently, but it doesn't seem to be on sale in this country. Export only, I believe."

"I'll see what I can do," promised Cardinal.

"Good. Put it on the bill."

The videolink screen dissolved into pastel colours. Cardinal touched the key of the intercom.

"Vr. Grantby is now on *Class Seven* charges instead of six, Doris."

"Right, boss." His secretary sensed that there was a real possibility of a bonus in time for her summer holiday. "Chris Fox just called. To say thanks for that job you steered his way."

"One of the advantages of working full-time for a big employer – you can plant favours on friendly colleagues. Let's hope they return a few when we're struggling."

"Want to finish the coffee, boss? To keep you awake?"

"Good idea," approved Cardinal. "I think I need it."

## Saturday, Halgary 27th

### 46. *Rossiter Strikes*

After their eventful night at the Mitton Gardens Hotel, Sovershend and Katuishann moved on to Sovershend's second home in the district of Greater Dungard charmingly known as Great Hovarks. Although Katuishann had asked him frequently what was so great about the area, Sovershend had been unable to come up with a satisfactory answer.

Katuishann was preparing a special lunch and, in order to obtain the peace necessary for complete concentration, she had sent Sovershend to the city centre on a shopping expedition. He had been instructed to acquire anything that looked as if it needed buying, and not to report back before thirteen. He had an hour and a half still to fill.

After some aimless wandering, Sovershend reached the steps to what the citizens of Dungard called *The Raft*. The walkway in the sky at first-floor level was designed to separate pedestrians and traffic. But, as if to spite the planners, the obstinate public insisted on using street-level pavements as well.

Sovershend bounded up the steps to a landing, where he paused. His eyes, nose and throat felt desiccated and raw. No matter what scientists in the pay of government departments and motor manufacturers said, a majority of the population remained convinced that the new, high-efficiency Brandisford engine 'put something' into the air. The rest blamed the Clinton 'Jungle Juice' petrol, which looked set to dominate the market. Not that anyone in authority was prepared to do anything about the situation. The twin gods of fuel economy and availability had the transport industry by the throat.

A couple of quick squirts with his pocket humidifier bathed his face in an invisible water-mist and made Sovershend feel much more comfortable. The landing seemed to be a popular place for that activity. Ready to brave the shops, and with something to buy in mind, Sovershend continued up the left-hand flight of steps. Six from the top:

"Cop for this, you sobok!"

Sovershend looked up to see an arm between the guard rails of the walkway and a face distorted by a fiendish grimace behind a huge, bushy beard. He was already in motion when the arm swung towards

him. He reached the guard rail on the street side of the steps as the hand opened. The expanding, almost invisible spider web was floating towards him as he grasped the rail and vaulted over.

Confused shouts and staring eyes followed him down four yards to pavement level. He landed on his feet, right in front of a family group. One of the children began to yell. The parents had just begun to protest by the time Sovershend reached the steps again.

He raced upwards, selecting the right-hand flight at the landing. The liquid scrunchings from the misshapen bundle on the left-hand flight had stopped. A trickle of something red and thick dripped onto scuffed concrete. The woman whose shopping trolley had become the victim of the tangleweb intended for Sovershend was staring at the contracted wreckage with an expression of mingled shock and outrage.

Rossiter dragged his eyes away from his mistake in time to see Sovershend approaching the top of the steps. He began to run. Satisfied that the threat had passed, Sovershend let him go. The knowledge that Rossiter had failed yet again in their lethal game was satisfaction enough.

Suddenly, Rossiter found himself face to muzzle with a Boulton riot gun.

Swearing violently, a woman of about thirty trotted up to him, trailing another uniformed policeman. "You bockan 'lenster!" she hurled at Rossiter in a penetrating shriek, taking a swing at her with her umbrella.

"Calmly now, vreitan," soothed one of the policemen, catching the umbrella on its back-swing.

"Smashed up all my shopping, he did."

"Calm down, vreitan," repeated the policeman. "We'll call a car and we can all go over to the station to sort this out."

"I don't want to go to no Prot shop," protested the woman. "I haven't got time for that. I've got to do all my shopping again. And I've got a husband and three kids at home. What about their bockan lunch?"

"It was an accident," said Rossiter, testing the temperature of the water. "I'll pay for the damage."

"I should bockan well think so," the woman told him, tugging angrily at a strand of limp, mousey hair.

"If that's all right with you, vreitan?" The policeman guarding Rossiter shifted his Boulton riot gun to a high port. He was willing to forego the paperwork.

"That shopping trolley cost me thirty pounds," the woman insisted. "And I had a whole week's shopping in it."

Rossiter thrust violet notes at her.

The woman counted up to four, then stared at him coldly. "When did

you last shop for a family?"

Rossiter parted with another £20 note.

"We'll be getting on, then," said one of the policemen. "Just watch your step in future," he added to Rossiter.

Grateful that the policemen had not realized that he had been using tangleweb, Rossiter accepted the caution without comment and hurried away. What had seemed like a perfect way of winning his bet and doing away with Sovershend had ended in disaster. But there was always the next time.

"Thanks, lads," the woman said to the policemen in genuine gratitude, on their side for a while.

"Good morning, vreitan." The policemen saluted gravely and resumed their patrols.

Stuffing money into her wallet, the woman turned back to the steps. Her crushed trolley had disappeared already. Some scavenger had found a use for it.

Sovershend lit a strawberry-flavoured cigarette as the crowd blended from clumps to a smooth flow. He looked down at his grey suedes with a worried frown. When he became aware of people staring at him, he smoothed away the frown and walked slowly along the line of shops, awaiting the arrival of inspiration. In all the excitement, he had forgotten what he had decided to buy.

## IV / RESOLUTION

## Monday, Halgary 29th

### *47. New Allies For The Refuse Barons*

Ambrose Mellbury of Nottridge had returned to his native land. The ordeal of his temporary exile and incarceration in a VIP cell on Lesten Island had made a lasting impression on him. Even four days after the event, his wife still had to threaten him with violence to dam a torrent of threats against whomever had informed on him. Such threats had been among his first words to the proprietor of Cardinal Security and Investigation Services.

They had been interrupted only by the joint efforts of Lillith Mellbury and the arrival of coffee brought by Alex Cardinal's secretary, who had decided to start the month as a brunette to match her hazel eyes.

"Thank you, Va. Bedworthy," said Cardinal, producing the expected reaction from Ambrose. Lillith Mellbury dug Ambrose in the ribs when he started to ask the obvious question.

Doris Bedworthy gave the clients a maternal smile apiece then retired to the comfort of her own smaller office to listen in on the intercom.

"As I was saying," Cardinal resumed, skating over Ambrose Mellbury's concentrated rant, "this character Demirell seems to be the root of your troubles. But he's also been treading on some very powerful toes and he's going to come unstuck in the very near future. One way you can hasten that day is to hit him in the pocket.

"As Lilly will have told you, Ambrose, others in your profession have been put out of business by accidents or informers in recent months. Vr. Sovershend was an atypical near miss. Of course, we can't be sure that everyone who takes advantage of a convenient vacuum is working for friend Demirell, but I'd recommend you persuade your suppliers and distributors not to do business with these people."

Cardinal passed a list across the desk. "Of course, what happens to the people named is none of my business. And I'll deny having heard of any of these people you manage to catch up with," he added, maintaining a discreet distance between himself and the deeds of others.

"Rivaud!" exploded Ambrose. "Armand Rivaud!"

"I thought that name would come as a surprise to you," nodded Cardinal.

"I'll kill bockan him!" yelled Ambrose.

Doris Bedworthy turned down the volume at her end of the intercom.

"Yes, dear." Lillith Mellbury patted her husband's arm. "Now shut up and listen to what Alex has to tell us."

Ambrose subsided to a mutter.

"Rivaud was quite clever about it, but he was followed to the pay-off on Thursday afternoon," said Cardinal, withholding the information that a member of the Duke of Atmain's security staff, a young woman with a very deep tan, had made the payment. "He dodged about a lot, looking for familiar faces, but we had a good team on the job."

"Just how big is your organization?" asked Ambrose in surprise. He had marked Cardinal down as someone with just a secretary and a fancy company name.

"As I told your wife," said Cardinal with an enigmatic smile, "your case is tied up with another. My other client can afford a lot of hired help. I'm not at liberty to tell you anything about the other client other than, as I mentioned, he has first claim on Demirell."

"That's understood," nodded Lillith Mellbury. "We can take a hint. He can have Demirell – as long as someone does."

"What made him do it?" Ambrose frowned down at the list. "Armand? Just what did he get out of it? He didn't need the money, surely."

"Young Rivaud comes from Western Heitain," said Cardinal. "And he probably resents the way some of your Belldan colleagues laugh at his accent. The way they whistle at him. I'd suggest a case of injured pride mixed with a desire to show them who's best combined with a seasoning of greed."

"And very little loyalty," added Ambrose bitterly.

"Well, there's not much more to tell you today," Cardinal added, bringing the session to a close. He was expecting a videolink call shortly. "I'd recommend fast but cautious action against the infiltrators. They have friends who don't work for Demirell, and they may get warnings for friendship's sake."

"They'll never know what hit them," Ambrose promised grimly. He read the list into his pocket memory, then handed the sheet of paper back to Cardinal. Doris Bedworthy charmed into the office to show the Mellburys out. Ambrose had an abstracted air. He allowed his wife to steer his body while his mind worked on plans of revenge.

Alex Cardinal switched the random pattern of coloured shapes on his videolink screen to a mirror. Having made sure that he was looking fairly respectable, he sat back to wait for his Refuse Baron employer to call. The call came through at 11:05 hours.

"Sir Nigel Grantby for you on two, Vr. Cardinal," said Doris Bedworthy in her best formal voice.

Cardinal touched the scramble panel and the glowing 2 panel simultaneously. An enlarged large face appeared in the screen, contorted into an inquisitive scowl.

"Right, what do you have, Cardinal?" demanded Grantby.

*Whatever happened to preliminary pleasantries?* Cardinal asked himself. "Well," he began aloud, dragging his thoughts together, "last time we spoke, it was about the part of the Chatelle Organization's security staff under Charles Demirell's control. As Major Tarpigan has probably told you, we suspect he's been using some of his profits from smuggling to finance PSF attacks on your reclamation centres."

"Yes, yes, and?" prodded Grantby.

"I've set in motion a scheme to deprive him of that income," said Cardinal with quiet pride.

"Have you, indeed?" Grantby drew back from the screen slightly and smoothed out some of his frown. "I suppose it'll be expensive?" he added drily.

"I think you'll be surprised how reasonable this particular account will be."

A familiar laugh reached the videolink from off-camera.

"Give my regards to Major Tarpigan," Cardinal added.

Grantby's face receded even further, allowing Tarpigan to enter a corner of the pick-up field.

"Hello, yourself," the mercenary said through a broad grin.

"But what's the point of getting the PSF to attack us?" resumed Grantby, sensing that the well had not run dry.

"I put a series of colleagues onto Demirell-watching after we caught up with him," replied Cardinal. "He's been spending a lot of time in the South-East – at an independent reclamation centre a few miles from Duddling. It could be your former colleague is expanding across the Straits of Atmain."

"It must be a rather small operation by Norm's standards," said Grantby dismissively.

"I've been talking small quantities all along," countered Cardinal. "What if he's acquired all the independents that have changed hands recently? Or most of them?"

"Can you prove that?" Grantby demanded eagerly.

"Not yet," Cardinal admitted. "The layers of concealment covering the transactions are many and tough to penetrate. But the reclamation centre I mentioned was taken over a few months ago. As was an



independent in Leviton, where you've been having so much trouble."

"The one that grabbed some of my contracts," growled Grantby. "How much is Norm likely to know about that this Demirell is up to?"

"That's difficult to say," said Cardinal. "It could be he knows nothing. After all, they've got ten miles of water and an international border between them. It could be Demirell's doing his best to make a success of the reclamation centres to justify having a large security staff – who also help out with smuggling and protection on the side."

"That's possible," nodded Grantby. "In any case, what are we going to do about the situation?"

"Are you still thinking about a group security executive to co-ordinate the activities of your own organization with the other Refuse Barons?" Cardinal asked, apparently veering away from Grantby's question.

"You have somebody in mind?" rumbled Grantby.

"I've heard one of the best of the top ten is not too happy at the moment," said Cardinal. "And a security audit by someone of her standing would be of great value to your group."

"That Dortmann woman you mentioned the other day." Grantby's lack of enthusiasm was plain. "She might be up to her neck in Demirell's tricks."

"Not a chance," Cardinal said firmly.

"I agree," added Major Tarpigan over the Refuse Baron's shoulder. "She'd never get involved in something like this. She suffers from basic honesty. But if she were to leave the Chatelle Group," he mused, a thoughtful gleam in his hooded, brown eyes. "That could be very useful to us, Sir Nigel."

"How useful?" prompted Grantby, feeling left out of an unspoken exchange of agreement between mercenary and security consultant.

"With Dortmann gone, and working for you," Cardinal told him, "Demirell and the rest of the Chatelle security staff won't dare show their faces over here because we'd be able to roll them up with her inside knowledge. That would sabotage Demirell's plans pretty thoroughly. And where Dortmann can make decisions rapidly and have the confidence to act on them, Demirell prefers a more empirical approach."

"Meaning?" said Grantby.

"He's a dabbler," said Tarpigan. "If he takes over as the Chatelle Organization's security executive, he's likely to play around to get the feel of his command. That breathing spell could be very useful to us."

Cardinal detected an undercurrent but he failed to pin down anything significant. Grantby, too, could tell that the mercenary had something

in mind – but not what it was.

“A human computer, eh?” remarked Grantby, changing the subject with suspicious speed.

“Sometimes, it’s the only approach available to a woman with a certain type of employer,” Cardinal observed.

“Well, if both of you think it’s a good idea, we must have her,” Grantby decided, going against his personal inclination. “Can you contact her discreetly, Cardinal?”

“I know how to get a message to her through a rather special channel,” nodded the investigator. “She should get it early this afternoon. I’ll suggest a meeting. What’s today? Monday. I’ll say Wednesday. But I think I’d better warn you. She won’t be interested unless she’s given complete control over all aspects of security. If you won’t let her do a proper job, she’ll give you the sack.”

“Just get her,” ordered Grantby. “We should be able to keep her long enough to do something about the Demirell situation.”

“Anyone who gives Ilse Dortmann the push is about as flat as a squashed fish,” remarked Major Tarpigan.

Grantby darted a frown at him, not familiar with the expression but recognizing a proto-insult.

“How about I take a contract when I see her?” suggested Cardinal, surprised at how cheerful the prospect of meeting Herta Dortmann again made him feel. “That might speed things up.”

“Good thinking.” Grantby bobbed his large head in approval. “See my personnel manager about that. He’s called Persimmon. I’ll expect to hear from you on Wednesday, if not before.”

“Luck, Alex,” and a wink from Tarpigan escaped from the videolink just before the screen swirled into a random colour shift.

*Those two are up to something*, thought Cardinal. *Something it’s probably better I don’t know about.* He touched the intercom key.

“Vr. Grantby is on *Class Eight* charges, Doris,” he told his secretary. “Now that foreign travel is involved.”

“Check, boss. Soon get the old sobok up to *Class Ten*, won’t we?” was Doris Bedworthy’s irreverent reply. She had managed to take over a deeply discounted late cancellation of a rather expensive holiday in Heitain on the strength of the Refuse Baron’s business.

“And don’t call our clients ‘old soboks’, Vreitan Bedworthy,” Cardinal returned, stiffly but through an unseen grin.

“Of course not, boss,” agreed his secretary. “It’s usually much worse. Especially if they won’t pay their bill.”

“And deprive you of a week in a romantic hotel on the banks of the

Zinder Valley?"

"I don't even want to *think* about something like that," shuddered Bedworthy. "Do you mind if I go for an early lunch when I've fixed you up with an appointment with Vr. Persimmon of Grantby's?"

"Lunch? It's not quarter past eleven yet, Doris."

"Well, we don't exactly have much to do till the afternoon," replied Bedworthy, putting a very reasonable argument. "And I could do with getting a bit of shopping done."

"All right," surrendered Cardinal. "As long as it doesn't become a habit. I suppose we can allow a little flexibility."

"Pity you're not a dirty old man," chuckled his secretary. "I could have put in some overtime to make up."

Cardinal broke the connection with a sigh. He clung with difficulty to a strict rule never to become involved with his secretary. In Doris Bedworthy's case, however, he had to resist a whole army of women. Her regular changes of hair colour, make-up and style of dress left him wondering just who would be sitting at the desk in the other office when he descended from his flat on the floor above.

A glowing panel on the control complex built in to his prosperous desk told Cardinal that his secretary had gone and that he had control of the outer door. He lit a cigar, then he examined the small amount of genuine paperwork in his in-tray and the electronic message unit of his videolink. Most of the visible paper was just ballast to create a busy impression. None of the genuine material was of any great interest. The world was full of people trying to sell expensive gadgets to people who couldn't afford them.

After talking contracts with the personnel manager of Grantby Disposal and Reclamation Industries, Cardinal made a brief videolink call to a café in Ouistrelle, a yachting centre on the Belldan coast near the border between the Departments of Atmain and Brivauche. Then he decided to follow his secretary's example.

Cardinal slipped a remote controller into his jacket pocket and climbed out onto the fire escape. An hour or so on his lounger in the roof garden in the late morning sun would do wonders for his thought processes. A monitor camera tracked him up the fire escape. When his intentions became clear to the building's security staff, a muffled, "Lazy sobok!" seeped from the pocket containing his controller. Cardinal made a rude gesture in the general direction of the nearest camera and closed his eyes.

Ilse Dortmann, known to close friends as Herta, filled his thoughts. The pet name had been given to her by her grandfather, a tough old

bird who had been a polar explorer in his younger days. Cardinal remembered his student days and a small, blonde girl with very pale blue eyes, who had always been in the top three at exam time. She had combined the traditional Heitainan capacity for hard work with a well-developed sense of fun in leisure moments. It would be nice to see her again.

*48. An Invitation From Alex*

Atmain was enjoying a pleasant, sunny afternoon in the middle of summer. The tops of the highest trees were shivering energetically but the breeze helped to keep the temperature down to a comfortable level. An enormous pollen count was causing suffering to those who went in fear of needles and hyposprays, but Ilse Dortmann was not among their ranks. The grounds of the Duke of Atmain's castle offered enjoyable surroundings for a stroll after a late lunch.

Although not expecting trouble, she was prepared for it. She wore a twin needler clipped to the close-fitting right sleeve of her dark green uniform. Additional ammunition tracks ran up her sleeve from mid-forearm to shoulder.

The woods to the south of the castle filtered out granite-textured concrete walls as Dortmann followed a path metallised in dark sinter-stone. Her destination was the stream that the Duke's landscapers had created in a matter of weeks. It managed to look as though it had been winding through the trees for several centuries.

There were said to be some large fish in the stream, trapped between the waterfall of its origin and the pumping station which carried the waters in a pipe under the main approach road after their circuit of the grounds. Clive Westwood, the Captain of the castle guard, had told her once that he had caught a fish as long as his arm. Dortmann had never seen anything bigger than a tiddler and she was far too busy to take the time to look.

A movement in the bushes across the stream alerted her but Dortmann continued along the path without checking her stride. The faint rustling passed her, heading for the stone bridge about one hundred yards away. A dark shape began to creep towards the bridge, following the shadow of a fallen and decaying tree.

Dortmann waited until it was clear of the brush, then she burst the wild dog's heart with a well-aimed group of solid shot. The beast took one more uncertain step, then it collapsed. The condition of its coat told Dortmann that the animal had been running wild for some time, and it

had probably acquired the desperate madness which prompted wild dogs to attack humans.

The communicator slung from her belt chimed twice, then a voice said, "Attention! Personnel in Sector D5. Shots fired in the area of the stone bridge. Investigate with caution."

"This is Dortmann," responded the security executive. "I've just had to kill a wild dog. Call off the alert."

"Yes, sir, Identity confirmation, please?"

Dortmann keyed a series of digits and letters into the communicator.

"Thank you, sir. Sector D5, alert cancelled."

*We are on our toes!* thought Dortmann. *Still recovering from the shocks handed out last month after the emergency drills. Memo to self: re-check the perimeter animal defences.*

She continued on to the bridge and perched on the bluish-grey stone parapet. Her watch told her that she was half-way through the third hour of the afternoon, and entitled to a cigarette under her rationing system. When she took it from its pocket, her lighter threw a soft, green glow onto her fingers from one of the crystal chips which made up the design on the body. The red chip at the centre was lifeless. She learned that her private mail box contained messages and that she was not under electronic surveillance.

She hurried past the dead dog to a massive eichen tree. She poked a magnetic keycard into a split in the bark to unlock a camouflaged door and plugged the base of her communicator into a socket at waist height. High-speed impulses carried coded messages into the memory unit in just a fraction of a second.

Dortmann returned to the bridge and touched the *Read* key on the communicator. Green letters flowed across a small screen. Two of the messages were routine job offers from expected sources. The third was completely different. It read:

'Best offer topped. Meet me at the 'Madrigal', Trentec, Brivauche on 2nd (Wed). I'll be there all afternoon from 13. Dying to see you again. Lots of love, Alex.'

*Alex who?* thought Dortmann. She didn't know anyone called Alex.

She decided to accept the invitation – if only to find out who thought he was on such good terms with her. She committed the other messages to her own memory, just in case, then she touched the *erase* key three times.

The sound of an engine reached her as she flicked her cigarette end into the water. A dark green Range Rider with a trailer bounced along the track and stopped beside the body of the dog. Two security guards

threw rapid salutes at Dortmann, then pulled on rubber gloves before bundling the dog into a plastic sack.

"Give you a lift, sir?" offered the driver when they had loaded the sack into the trailer.

Dortmann checked her watch. "Yes, I think it's time I was getting back."

The other guard climbed into the back of the Range Rider, leaving the front passenger seat free for the security executive. They drove along the track in silence. Dortmann's thoughts were on the future. Her subordinates were thinking that they wouldn't mind trying to thaw out a lady as attractive as the Ice Queen. Opinions were evenly divided on whether Ilse Dortmann ever unfroze.

## Wednesday, July 02nd

### *49. Tidying Up And Packing Up*

The holovision newsreader put on a more serious expression for the next item in the nine o'clock morning news round-up. "Police recovered the naked body of a man from the River Barton this morning," he announced in a detached tone. "The victim, who had been stabbed to death, possibly with a duelling sword, was found on the outskirts of Nottridge."

At his home in the expensive part of the city, waiting for a late breakfast to be served, Ambrose Mellbury remarked, "They've found Rivaud."

"What's that, dear?" called Lillith Mellbury from the kitchen.

"I said they've found our contribution to Nottridge's floating population," Ambrose repeated.

"Took them long enough," his wife called. "One egg or two?"

"Yes, please," said Ambrose.

Lillith Mellbury cracked three eggs into the frying pan.



The Camerlish holovision newsreader was trying, without much success, to suppress an envious expression as he added, "A number of district councils in Norland have voted a reduction in local taxes. The move has been dismissed as a purely seasonal effect following the recent coronation."

"Sounds a good place to be, Norland," remarked Gary Mortlake.

"Anywhere's better than here," said Neil Pinder. "What do you think, Louise?"

"I'm glad we're going home today," said Liston, struggling to move one of Mortlake's cases out of the doorway of their tiny kitchen. "How about doing something with this, Gary?"

"It's too bockan big to stick it where you'd like him to," cackled Pinder.

"Pr'yam!" said Mortlake, agreeing with Liston's first statement and ignoring Pinder. He heaved the case onto a chair, then tugged at an itch

at the considerable end of his nose. "We're not safe here with the ganar PSF and the sobokandar Lawsonites after us. And those CHASM freaks. You notice bockan Demirell shot back to Atmain last week and hasn't been seen since."

"He's too important to leave at risk," sneered Liston. She was still annoyed by Terry Bleiler's promotion over her head to commander of the Duke of Atmain's Camerlish army. Bleiler had also been shocked. His first official act had been to contact Liston to tell her that he had not sought the appointment.

"Talking about our maccars the Lawsonites," said Mortlake, veering away from an uncomfortable topic, "how are we fixed for javon?"

"Plenty left." Pinder pushed away from the breakfast table to dig the coffee tin out of a drawer beside the food cupboard. "About enough for another week or so," he estimated, counting yellow-wrapped cylinders. "Are we having one before we go?"

"Save them," said Liston. "You're driving and you know what the Camerlish police are like about drugged drivers."

"I suppose you're right," decided Pinder. "Hey, did you hear that?" He pointed at the holovision set. "About the Minister visiting the Ferrogyn Fusion Project. Sounded like he said the *Energy Humorist*."

"All politicians are bockan comedians," offered Mortlake.

"Are you two politicians all packed and ready to go now?" Liston interrupted.

"Have been for ages," Pinder assured her. "Just think – we'll be able to get a decent lunch at the castle."

"Better than the rubbish you'd have dished up," laughed Mortlake. "Which is another good reason for shaking the dust of this dump off our boots."

#### 50. *A New Job For Ilse Dortmann*

A hired car rolled slowly past the bar called *The Madrigal* and continued along the sea front of Trentec to the flattish area of rocky ground which serves as the town's public car park. An ancient mariner, sunning himself on a wooden bench, struggled to a position of approximate attention then the driver approached. Even out of uniform and wearing a most un-Dortmann curly wig, the Duke of Atmain's security executive was unquestionably military – ortho- or para-.

"Your car will be quite safe here, sir," promised the old man in passable Belldan for a native of Brivauche.

"Thank you," Dortmann said with an easy smile. "Is that *The Madri-*



*gal?*" She pointed down the street to the collection of tables. The name board of the establishment had suffered from the abrasive effect of many years of violent weathering.

"A very respectable place," nodded the old man. "The owner is the nephew of my cousin's oldest daughter."

"Thank you again." Dortmann acknowledged a creaking salute with a nod and a smile.

As she walked along the cracked, dusty pavement towards the bar, Ilse Dortmann tried to work out which, if any, of the loungers was Alex. Heads turned towards her, partly because she was a woman heading into male territory. The stares switched on and off in rapidly, she noted. The loungers seemed very preoccupied with their toy-like laser pistols and the collections of small, black objects on the tables.

Dortmann pushed open the door of the bar unchallenged and stepped into the cool, faded but scrubbed interior. Her sunglasses bleached instantly, giving her perfect vision in the darker room. There was an elderly man behind the bar, looking as if he was on the point of dropping off. Six pairs of eyes inspected her. Dortmann ended her scan of the room at a man of her own age. He was sitting at a table on her right, sprawled casually on a bench which ran the full length of the wall. The dark-haired man met her eyes and rose to his feet.

"Hello, Herta," he said with a welcoming smile. "I was all set for a long wait."

Dortmann looked at him for a moment longer, then responded to his smile. "Alex Cardinal! It is you!"

"That sounds like you've been playing guessing games," laughed Cardinal.

"I could only think of one other Alex, and he runs a small publishing firm."

"I'm flattered you remember me."

"I don't think I've met too many people who lived at a pub, Alex."

"Uncle Ben's pub, right," grinned Cardinal. He took her outstretched left hand in his right and touched it to his lips.

Dortmann blinked in surprise, then remembered that Cardinal wore a sleeve gun on his left arm. "That's one way of solving the problem of leaving your gun-hand free," she murmured, moving round the table to sit on his right.

"As far as women are concerned," agreed Cardinal.

The grey, slightly tubby man behind the bar came to life and brought a bottle of imported Zinder wine and two glasses to their table. He slumped into his former torpor the instant his rump touched his chair

again. The other customer had returned to his newspaper. Cardinal took an orange and black striped box from his jacket and placed it in the centre of the table, under the ashtray.

"We're on our own now," he announced.

Dortmann's electronic sensor package and her own human senses confirmed that he had activated a combination jumbler and hush screen. Cardinal filled the glasses from the dew-covered bottle and pushed one over to Dortmann.

"Student days and Uncle Ben's pub," he said, raising his glass to a toasting position.

"And all those parties you gave," added Dortmann. "Nice to know you remember my favourite wine. It's a wig, Alex."

"I thought it was," said Cardinal, dragging his eyes from her hair. "You look quite different black and curly. But your face is the same."

"What a good memory you have," laughed Dortmann. "Now it's my turn to be flattered."

"I always fancied you a lot in the good old days. But you were always involved with someone else. Or I was. We never seemed to be unattached at the same time."

"And then we went our own ways after we graduated. The last time we met was in Meermond, four years ago. At a trade fair. I'm sure your hair wasn't grey then. Is that real?"

"A little something for clients," Cardinal said apologetically. "Enough to hint at long experience, I hope, but not enough to make them think I'm past it. Meermond, yes. We had about five minutes together before my client dragged me away. And when I managed to get rid of him, you'd disappeared. I felt like sticking a hand grenade down the back of his neck."

"The Duke met a man from Mecklen-Sieberg, who insisted on showing him their factory. And then it was time for dinner and a club. You know the routine. I'd much rather have spent the time catching up with you."

"Not a routine I know as well as I'd like to. And I was disappointed we didn't have more time together. Perhaps we can make up for it now, if you're not in a hurry to get back?"

"I have the rest of the afternoon," said Dortmann, a shade bitterly. The Duke had been quite happy to let Demirell take charge of his empire in her absence. A couple of days' leave in Beldon for her second-in-command seemed to be lengthening into a permanent home posting.

"Sounds like what's his name, Demirell, he's making a play for your job," Cardinal remarked casually. "Surely that's not why you're thinking

of a move?"

"Regrettably, I'm not in complete control of security. I have an employer who knows better," Dortmann said angrily.

"Sounds bad," nodded Cardinal. "So you're really serious about moving? And you haven't accepted another offer?"

"Yours was the most interesting, Alex."

"Good! How do you fancy the idea of working as a group security co-ordinator for the Camerlish Refuse Barons?"

"I should have guessed," said Dortmann, trying to be casual but looking stunned. "They're your clients?"

"You know what's going on across the Straits?" probed Cardinal. "What Charlie boy's up to?"

"Not in any detail. But I do have strong suspicions."

"So you're not involved in Demirell's antics?"

"I suppose you're asking that for the benefit of your clients? No, of course not."

"I know you're not. But it had to be asked." Cardinal softened the intrusion of business with a smile. "Here's a copy of the contract. I think you'll find it gives you complete control of everything to do with security. You'll be working for Grantby's nominally, but there's also a consultancy covering the rest of the Refuse Barons. Apart from the usual corruption and medical clauses, you could be made for life in what has to be the top job in the private security field. You'll have everyone in the business hating you. That blank space on page two is for your salary."

Dortmann scanned the familiar four-page document in silence. Everything was set out very clearly, without the dishonesty of obscurity and legal deadfalls. "I don't think I could do much better than this," she admitted.

"The Chairman of the Barons told me to get you, so I thought the easiest way was to offer you everything you'd expect to get out of tough negotiating."

Cardinal topped up the glasses and accepted one of Dortmann's cigarettes. She sensed that he was wielding a very free hand – perhaps going beyond what his clients would approve as an initial offer, but reaching a fair settlement without haggling. She felt flattered. But she was also shrewd enough to recognize that Cardinal could be trying to make an investment for the future on his own account.

"I hope you realize this isn't going to buy you any favours, Alex," she told him.

"Perish the thought," protested Cardinal, managing to sound shocked

and a little hurt. "I'm just trying to lure you back to Camerland. But if you need any little jobs doing, remember I have a shockingly extravagant secretary."

"Fur coats and an expensive flat?" asked Dortmann in a neutral tone.

"Chance would be a fine thing," laughed Cardinal. "More she expects to be paid every so often. And she expects to share my very expensive real coffee."

"No favours, Alex. There can't be." Dortmann fixed her morning blue eyes on him.

Cardinal noticed indications of strain and frustration, which had not been there four years earlier, among Dortmann's laughter lines. "Another test passed with honours," he told her. "I'm sorry to keep springing them on you, Herta. Orders from the client. Well, what do you think of the offer? It's for a minimum of five years. A top job with lots of security."

"You've convinced me" Dortmann wrote in a salary figure and signed the contract and a duplicate on page four. In the space for the date, she wrote: 'On termination of existing contract.' "I trust your clients will pay that much?"

Cardinal boggled at the salary figure, which fell just within his negotiating limits, then he stored his client's copy in his briefcase. "It could help to convince them they're employing the best. I won't be offended if you insist on taking me to dinner after you start your new job."

"What about your secretary?" prodded Dortmann.

"She has a fiancé called Jimmy to buy her dinners. And I never get involved with my secretary. That's rule number one. What about this termination?"

"That's going to take some careful arranging," Dortmann said thoughtfully. "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep both copies of the contract somewhere safe for the moment."

"Can I tell my clients you've signed?"

"Again, I'd rather you didn't, Alex. In case someone talks before I get to Camerland. Demirell might make things difficult if he finds out."

"Can't think why, if he wants to take over from you," frowned Cardinal. "All right, I'll tell Grantby you're thinking it over. That might make him a bit more eager." He was disappointed at not being able to give him client the good news immediately, but he had detected a note of urgency in Dortmann's voice. "Call this number when you're ready to leave and I'll make the arrangements at this end."

Dortmann committed the videolink number on his business card to

memory, then nodded. "I'll try to make it as soon as possible, Alex."

"Right, that's that." Cardinal switched off the hush screen. "You know, I've just noticed something else. You speak Ferran with a Belldan accent now. It used to be sort of Heitainan-Ferran."

"Belldan is the language of the castle, Alex."

"That makes sense. I hope you don't mind me staring at you so much, by the way, I was looking at some old photographs on Monday. It's a bit like talking to your older sister. Oh, bock! I didn't mean..,"

"It's all right, Alex," laughed Dortmann. "We can't change the fact that we're both ten years older. Let's not pretend we're still twenty-one."

"Would you like some more wine? Or would you like to go for a walk by the sea?" asked Cardinal, changing the subject.

"I enjoy a walk on a nice day."

"Right, Moushe!"

Having attracted the attention of the man at the bar, Cardinal asked him if he knew where Xavier was lurking. The grey-haired man raised one heavy eyelid and replied in the almost impenetrable local dialect, turning a wrist through a leisurely half circle to aim his right forefinger at the ceiling.

"Tell him I'm not going back till this evening, will you?" said Cardinal.

Moushe responded with a heavy grunt and a grave nod, then he came to life sufficiently to fill three glasses with cider for some of the outside loungers. Cardinal and Dortmann drained their glasses and headed for the door. The elderly Moushe drifted over to their table to re-cork the bottle before returning it to the cooler.

"How did you get here, Alex?" Dortmann asked as they stepped out into the fierce sunshine on a dusty street.

"By boat. With Xavier – who seems to be gambling the fare away with his cronies upstairs."

"Remember the time we went boating? The canoe class in the swimming pool?"

"The time Cliff Ashton nearly drowned himself?"

"And Jenny Cross jumped in to save him – then found herself at the deep end."

"And she had to be rescued too."

"We did some silly thing in those days," laughed Dortmann. "But they were fun."

"And no one got hurt," added Cardinal reflectively. "Are you involved with anyone at the moment? Ties that have to be severed?" he added as they paused at the landing stage. The South Channel looked grey and rather uninviting, even on a sunny afternoon.

Dortmann tilted her head to look up at him, trying to maintain a serious expression. "Trying to find out how much of a wrench it will be for me to leave Atmain, Alex?"

"What do you think?" Cardinal said, looking out to sea across a ribbon of silvery sand.

"I think it would be nice to have some of the nights out we never got round to when we were students. I take it you're not married or anything?"

"I had a near miss once," Cardinal admitted. "But I don't have to tell you how unreliable the likes of you and me are. We have keep having to dash off at all sorts of inconvenient moments."

Dortmann nodded. "And the other people get fed with all the waiting."

"Ten years ago, we'd have leapt into Xavier's boat and shot over to Camerland. I wish life were that simple today. Can you stay for dinner tonight as our first bit of catching up?"

"Love to. I can stay until about eight. It shouldn't take more than an hour to drive back to Briauche. Then a quick flight back to Cavenne."

"I bet that's in one of the firm's planes," remarked Cardinal. "You've done very well for yourself."

"It's all become rather hollow lately," admitted Dortmann. "But things seem to be looking up."

"For both of us," agreed Cardinal. "Have you noticed? We could hold hands like a couple of romantic idiots and still keep our sleeve-gun arms free."

"How very convenient!" laughed Dortmann. "What more could the ideal security consultant couple ask for?"

#### *51. Ambrose Exterminates An Infiltrator*

Towards sunset on a July evening, a pearl-grey transiter rumbled up to a pair of dark blue gates labelled *Easton Security Products* in large, white letters.

The gates parted, allowing the vehicle to cross the uneven, metalled surface of a receiving yard to the gloom of a spacious unloading bay in a functional concrete building. A steel door hummed downwards, cutting off long shadows and the red sunlight. Artificial light, blinding at first, burst into life as the door began to enter the groove at floor level.

The transiter's driver climbed out of his cab and took off his driving gloves. "Right on time," he called to the two-man reception committee.

"In your case, punctuality is a vice," remarked one of them. "If not a perversion."

"Is that any worse than saying the same boring things all the time?" asked the driver. "Like you do, Billy?"

"Best not be cheeky till you've been paid, Johnny," grinned the driver's mate.

"Yeah, talking of getting paid," hinted the driver. "Where is it? In the office?"

"No, it's here," said a voice from behind him. A needler caught the light as the owner of the voice limped into view.

"Come on, that's this?" protested the driver. "Are you hi-jacking me, Ambrose?"

"No, I've come to settle a debt," replied Mellbury grimly.

"A debt?" repeated the driver. "What are you going on about? I don't owe you nothing." He put his hands on his hips and stared at the manager of the Easton depot. "Are you in on this too, Charlie?" he asked in an aggrieved tone.

"A debt you owe Art Summers," Ambrose Mellbury added. "Who you turned over to the CustEx on Demirell's orders."

The driver's left hand slipped behind his back casually. Mellbury's needle gun whistled twice. His victim shuddered through a violent and painful convulsion as the sound of a modest explosion leaked from his chest. A small automatic pistol clattered to oil-stained concrete behind him. The transiter driver toppled backwards, his face contorted in agony, bounced from the wing of his vehicle and met the floor heavily.

"You'll never make it, Dave," Mellbury warned the driver's mate, who stopped in mid-draw.

"I suppose I'm next?" he asked bitterly. "I never thought I'd see the day you started 'jacking your maccars."

Ambrose Mellbury returned his needler to its holster and took his combined sword stick and walking stick from the retaining loop on his belt. "We're not hi-jacking, Dave. We're exterminating a rat. That's all. Quite a few people in our line of work have had not very accidental accidents recently, thanks to Johnny and others like him. Art Summers was one of them. Let's go and sit down in the office while I tell you about it. My bockan leg's not very good tonight."

Warily, Dave followed Ambrose Mellbury to the office. Charlie and Billy got busy with the task of stuffing Dave's former colleague into a large plastic sack. A nearby firm had a contract to fill abandoned coal mines with waste from the local Refuse Reclamation Centre's power generation plant. The shaft made a convenient burial ground.

52. *Dortmann Forces The Issue*

Sunset in Atmain was still a few minutes away. The speaker on the back of the Duke of Atmain's office door emitted thumping noises. His monitor screen showed a dark-blond head which could belong only to his security executive. She was not in uniform, having only just arrived back at the castle after her day out. The Duke touched the door release panel and sat back in his chair.

"Well, Herta?" he asked in a neutral tone.

"I'd like to see you about the guard placements, sir," said Dortmann grimly.

The Duke frowned at her "Demirell showed them to me earlier today. They seemed quite satisfactory to me."

"With respect, sir, it's not Demirell's job to post the castle guards. As head of security, I am responsible for the defence of the castle, and I have delegated guard placement to Westwood, who knows the local risks and exactly how to manage them. We just cannot do our jobs efficiently if you permit interference without notice by a third party. Especially someone who's been out of the area and who isn't current on our risk assessments."

"I thought the new arrangements made things less complex, Herta," said the Duke mildly. "They reduce the distance some people have to travel to reach their posts."

"With respect, sir," growled Dortmann, "they also leave gaping holes in our perimeter."

"Well, speak to Charles and close them up," returned the Duke impatiently. "I'm a busy man, Herta. I can't be expected to act as a referee for every petty squabble over your war games."

"With respect, sir," Dortmann took a deep breath. "The matter is not petty. Not when the wrong decision could endanger the lives of people living in and around the castle. There can be only one commander here. The smooth *and safe* running of my Department depends on it. I must respectfully request you do not approve any more changes dreamed up by Demirell without consulting me first. And I would remind you that the terms of my contract give me complete control over all aspects of security."

"Now don't be silly, Herta," chided the Duke. "I want you to learn to work with young Demirell. He's a bright lad. Remember, no one is indispensable, or even indestructible. And I notice that even you take time off." The Duke offered her a benign smile. "So don't take things so much to heart. You do a good job here. But I'm quite prepared to



terminate your contract any time you like if you can't fall in with the way I want things done."

The Duke made his final statement in a jocular tone – telling Dortmann that her employer would be quite happy to see Demirell sitting behind her desk if she was unwilling to work with him. Dortmann controlled herself with a mighty effort of will, maintaining her professional mask. She knew that if she were to resign on the spot, then there was every chance that she would have an unfortunate accident before she was able to leave the castle. Demirell would take speedy action to protect himself, unsure of just how much his commander knew of his illegal activities.

"Is there anything else, Herta?" prompted the Duke.

"I think we've covered quite enough, sir," said Dortmann in a tight voice. "And I have the guard to sort out." She nodded grimly to the Duke, then she turned and left the office.

"Stupid woman," muttered the Duke when the door had closed. He returned to Demirell's reports on the situation in Camerland and forgot his security executive's problems within seconds.

During the walk back to her office, along a corridor on the eastern side of the top floor of the keep, Dortmann burned with inner triumph. She had forced matters beyond the crossroads. The way ahead had become reasonably clear – as long as she kept her head. That she would was a matter of simple fact and not false pride.

The surveillance camera watched her drop into the chair at her desk and turn her back. The office's holowindow became a plan of the castle and its grounds. Dortmann's fingers roved over the remote console in her lap as she reviewed guard placements, patrol areas and the locations of reserves. She seemed to be conducting a re-assessment of Demirell's plans.

While she had her back to the surveillance camera, she interspersed other commands to the castle's computer systems. A section of a monitor tape of the Duke's office was copied elsewhere. The tape was then erased prematurely, leaving no record of the security executive's visit to her employer's office.

Symbols on the plan flickered as Dortmann experimented with her command in consultation with the castle's tactical computer. Just as she was deciding that she was satisfied with her efforts, the printer on her desk hummed for a few moments and several sheets of paper dropped into the basket. Dortmann turned back to her desk to examine them, shuffling the thin sheets of paper until the text of her last conversation with the Duke reached the bottom. Apparently satisfied, she dropped

the papers into the middle drawer of her desk and switched the holowindow off. She lit a cigarette and touched a panel on her desk control unit.

"Communications," responded a voice at once.

"Is Demirell in the castle?" asked Dortmann.

"Yes, sir," replied the duty officer. "In his quarters."

"He'll report to me immediately."

"I don't think he's alone, sir," said the voice delicately.

"I believe my order was quite clear," snapped Dortmann.

"Yes, sir." The duty officer severed the connection, cutting off the beginnings of a laugh from somebody else in the monitor room.

After making a videolink call to Clive Westwood to warn him of more changes, Dortmann sat back to wait. Demirell arrived five minutes later, radiating ill-concealed hostility. As ever, he looked cool and well-groomed. Every dark hair was in its appointed place to disguise its retreat. His dark green uniform looked crisp and new.

Demirell often boasted that he could go from bed to battle-readiness in one minute. His quarters were four minutes' brisk walk, with favourable lift connections, from Dortmann's office. She allowed herself to wonder whether he had been forced to put theory into practice.

"I suppose you know why you're here?" Dortmann faced her subordinate with a tall glass of white wine in her hand, but she made no move to offer him hospitality.

"That, I suppose." Demirell nodded to the display on her holowindow.

"In particular, these." Dortmann rose to her feet and indicated red areas on the diagram. She was almost a head shorter than her subordinate, but she dominated him without effort. "What I want to know is how you managed to leave these holes in our defences. And more to the point, how did you get them through the tactical computer?"

"The TacCom was down briefly for a fault trace," Demirell admitted sullenly.

"What about the reserve facilities on the main computer?"

"TacCom was going to be down for about half an hour. I was going to run them through when it was back on line."

"And?" prompted Dortmann.

"I was diverted by other things."

Dortmann resumed her seat and dropped her head to her hand theatrically. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, then she took a sip of wine. "I know you'd like to take over this chair, Charles," she began in a gentle tone. "But I think I'm going to be polishing it for a long time

to come if this latest display of your 'competence' is anything to go by." The shadow of a smile, directed at herself for the lie, slipped through. Demirell assumed that it was aimed at him, but a tightening of his mouth was the only outward sign of the emotions boiling within him.

"Not only did you exceed your authority by changing the guard placements, you failing to check them with the tactical computer and then you went one better than that by not discussing them with Clive Westwood, our resident expert on the local situation." Dortmann deliberately spoke like a teacher correcting a naughty schoolboy. "We're supposed to be a team here, Charles. Still, we're also supposed to learn from our mistakes. But I won't tolerate any more blunders of this magnitude, especially when you're putting other people's lives at risk. Clear?"

"Clear," said Demirell with a remote nod.

"Here are the necessary revisions." Dortmann took several sheets of paper from the middle drawer of her desk. "You will report back to me in half an hour to tell me that our perimeter is secure." She initialled each page, then passed them across the desk.

"Actually, I'm off duty at the moment," Demirell mentioned, requesting, indirectly, permission to delegate.

"I gave you an order, Demirell," said Dortmann in the same gentle tone. "And I expect it to be obeyed by the man who created this mess."

"Yes, sir," muttered Demirell. He picked up the sheets of paper and left the office, towing a trailer of reluctance.

"After all," Dortmann added to the unseen monitor camera when the door had closed, "castle security is not run as a democracy."

It was the first time that she had ever acknowledged openly the existence of the automatic monitoring system. Dortmann wondered briefly whether anyone would ever replay the tape before it was re-recorded with more pictures showing her at work, and whether her adaptation of one of the Duke's favourite sayings would be noted. Then she turned her attention to the day's accumulation of business.

Some time later, after Demirell had made his report of his mission accomplished, it occurred to Dortmann to pay a visit to the language laboratory. Her Camerlish-Ferran program had not received a booster for over a year, Belldan being the working language of the castle. Ilse Dortmann did not think that her future employers would appreciate a security executive with an Atmain-Belldan accent.

## Thursday, July 03rd

### 53. *Ilse Dortmann Decamps*

The Duke of Atmain met his security executive at five minutes to noon in one of the corridors of his castle. "We'll be leaving in an hour, Herta," he told Dortmann. He was taking his wife to a business luncheon and then to the races.

"Yes, sir," nodded Dortmann. "Your escort has been detailed and the flitter is fuelled and ready to go."

"Good," said the Duke, smoothing his neat moustache with finger and thumb. "I'd like to see you when I get back. I have one or two matters to discuss about the security budget."

"I had arranged to meet some friends later," murmured Dortmann. "But I could put them off."

"Well, the matter isn't actually pressing," said the Duke, but meaning the opposite.

"I also thought leaving Demirell in charge would give him a chance to get more to grips with the problems of securing the grounds. We've had some poachers probing our outer defences. They could give him useful practice."

"Ah, yes," nodded the Duke. Dortmann had pressed the right button. "Excellent idea. It's good to see you getting on better with Charles. We can always have our chat tomorrow."

"Yes, sir. Is there anything further?"

"Not at the moment, thanks."

Dortmann saluted with faultless precision just before the Duke turned away. Her employer appreciated such military courtesies. She was in full uniform, having just completed an unscheduled tour of the castle's perimeter. The Duke made for his ground-floor map room. His security executive took a lift up to the top of the keep and her office.

When she had seen her employer and his escorts off on the trip to the races, Dortmann she turned her command over to Charles Demirell. Half an hour later, she summoned one of the castle's service staff and a power loader. Struggling slightly, they lifted a large carton onto the loader and trundled it to the lift.

The box was a yard square and two feet deep. A mass of instructions

surrounding the picture on the front related to unpacking a combined holovision set and music centre. It had been Dortmann's sole contribution to the furnishings of her sitting room. She had inherited an extensive library from her predecessor and an account with a bookshop in Cavenne, but most of her alleged leisure time had been spent reading business papers to a background of contemporary music. She had devoted a great deal of her life to the security of Norman Chatelle's business empire.

As the lift took them down to the car park, Dortmann felt an urge to explain her mission to the technician. But reason told her that she was not required to discuss her conduct with service staff. Her companion seemed to find the lift's control panel a source of fascination and he spent the descent staring at it. He didn't care why the security executive was taking her holovision set back to the supplier. A surveillance camera swung towards them when the lift doors opened.

"Green Watch on surveillance, sir," whispered from a wall speaker when Dortmann looked up at the camera. "All quiet."

"Thank you, Hersten. Carry on," said Dortmann with a nod.

"Sir!" whispered efficiently from the speaker.

As anticipated, the camera found something of interest at the far end of the underground garage. Dortmann and her helper loaded the carton through the hatch at the back of car. The first skitterings of nervous tension arrived as she slid onto the driving seat. Dortmann fought a tightening excitement and started the engine. Every sense seemed to be reporting twice as much, twice as fast.

The steel door split apart as she drove up the ramp to ground level – one half rising into the ceiling the other part sinking into the floor. Dortmann turned right, towards the north gate. Guards at the inner bailey gatehouse snapped to attention and saluted, The road dropped downhill through the killing ground between massive walls to the outer bailey. More salutes followed her across the moat.

*I am the Security Executive, Dortmann told herself. It's normal for people to look at me. It's also normal for them to avoid catching my eye. I affect their lives, so they like to know where I am and what I'm doing.*

She imagined the castle relaxing in a rolling wave as the news of her departure spread. Then she forced herself to ease her foot on the accelerator. It was well known that she never drove through the grounds at speed – so that she could use one eye to check on patrols and the other for the road.

Five minutes after leaving the castle grounds, she reached her company flat on the outskirts of Cavenne. Transferring her load to a

hired car presented a problem, but she solved it by backing the company car up to her hired car and applying some muscle power.

When she left the company flat for the last time, she was wearing the sort of peasant smock currently favoured by the fashionable middle-class housewife, and her hair was tied up neatly in a plain blue headscarf.

The staff at the haulage and transport depot gave her the impression that they were doing her an enormous favour when they heaved the carton out of her car. A short, plump, rather plain woman attracts few willing slaves. The bulk of her personal possessions ended up in the warehouse to await transport to the home of Alex Cardinal on the other side of the Straits of Atmain.

Dortmann surrendered her hired car, holding her face in a demi-frown of concentration to discourage conversation. She had her two suitcases strapped to a small trolley. Five minutes of towing through the crowded streets of a summer afternoon brought her to the northern sweep of the city's ring road.

The railway station lay 150 yards further on, on the other side of an inconvenient pedestrian bridge. The dumpy housewife coped bravely with the stairs. Blending with the crowds, Dortmann bought a ticket to Morency, the main gateway to Camerland, then she dragged her luggage over to a coffee stall. She felt in need of refreshment.

Apparently intent on a magazine article which covered recent advances in nuclear fusion technology, she felt some of the tension draining from her body as the train began its electric dash to the northern coast. An hour and a half had elapsed since her departure from the castle. Demirell would be enjoying his authority – and hoping that his boss decided not to return in the morning. But his reaction would not be entirely joyful when his wish was granted.

A sudden shower gave Dortmann a reason to hide her padded dress under a light raincoat as the train neared the end of its thirty mile-journey. She exchanged her blue headscarf for a plastic rainhood, putting her curly, black wig on display.

Trying to look as Camerlish as possible, and painted with ill-chosen make-up, she showed a Camerlish identity card – taken from the stock created by Demirell for his agents abroad – and bought a ticket for the shuttle-train. The credit card with which she completed the transaction drew on one of Demirell's Camerlish accounts.

Dortmann struggled to bite back a smile as muttered Belldan sneers passed between the clerks as she turned away. Despite the convenience of language programmers, which could insinuate the rudiments of the

more common tongues into a person's memory painlessly and with very little effort on the student's part, the Beldans clung to their belief that the Camerlish had a genetic bias against attempting more than their own barbaric mutterings.

A bored Customs official whipped her identity card through a verification slot without bothering to look at the picture. Its owner was clearly Camerlish – every Belldan male knows that the women from the northern island dress like impoverished scarecrows.

The weapons snooper raised no objections when her cases were passed through it. Dortmann had taken the precaution of dismantling her sleeve gun and distributing the component parts near metal reinforcements. Right on time, the train hissed out of the station and onto the first of five monumental bridges which link the mainlands via the four islands in the Straits of Atmain.

Joan Mary Spencer's identity and credit cards spun out of a window between the second and third islands to plunge into the chilly waters of the Southbound Deep-Water Channel. Dortmann shed her black wig and the padded peasant smock, and washed away the uncomplimentary make up. By the time the train had completed its ten mile journey to Duddling, her dark blonde hair had been restored to its usual riot helmet style and she was wearing a smart, dark blue business suit.

Dortmann had expected a few question when she reached the Customs hall, but she was not prepared for suspicion that amounted almost to hostility. Before she could explain that she had a permit valid in any country in the continent of Ferrogyne, the official who had found the holster for her sleeve gun had called a superior and rushed her into a side office. The senior official took control of the problem.

"We seem to have a slight irregularity here, Vreitan," he began, behaving like a policeman who had stumbled across a master criminal. "Your identity card has an entry code for Belldan but not an exit code."

"Yes," nodded Dortmann.

"That is somewhat irregular," frowned the Customs official.

"But not an offence under Camerlish law," Dortmann returned patiently.

"And you appear to be travelling armed."

"As a licensed security consultant, I have an international permit for the weapon. Which your officer has verified."

"I see!" said the Customs official significantly. "And what is the purpose of your visit to this country?"

"To take up a post as a security executive," Dortmann said patiently. "The occupation stated on my identity card."

"I see. Do you have a letter of appointment and the necessary documentation?"

"Not with me. But I can produce proof of my appointment if you'll let me make a videolink call."

"And who might your prospective employer be?" frowned the official, prepared to cast doubt on the tale.

"Grantby Disposal and Reclamation Industries," said Dortmann calmly.

"I see!" The Customs official had been confronted with a name big enough to make checking advisable. He began to realize that the *problem* had an unsettling air of authority, and that he was tampering with forces powerful enough to crush him. The Refuse Barons wielded considerable influence in official circles, and upsetting a senior employee of GD&RI could have an adverse affect on his future promotion if someone dropped a wrong word in the right ear. It was unfair, but that remains the nature of life.

"Shall I make the vid call?" Dortmann suggested.

"Yes, I think that's the sensible thing to do," agreed the Customs official, implying that he was carving a path through tedious routine.

Ilse Dortmann's watch was showing 17.09. She had been sitting in the VIP lounge reading a discarded newsheet for fifty minutes. The empty coffee cup on the table at her side had been filled twice and the ashtray contained five cigarette ends. She had formed the impression that the attendant at the service counter was also there to keep an eye on some of the patrons. Her resignation had popped out of the castle's computer message system onto the Duke of Atmain's desk nine minutes earlier. What would happen when he found it was anybody's guess.

"Hello, Herta." Alex Cardinal breezed into the room just as Dortmann's watch was changing to 17.10. "Sorry to keep you hanging around here, but I was expecting you to contact me before you left Belldan. But it's amazing what you can achieve if you can throw a Refuse Baron's name around."

"Hello, Alex," Dortmann said with a smile of welcome and relief. She was glad to see a familiar face. "It seemed better to do it this way."

"Oh, well, you're here and that's all that matters. I must say you look quite different without that curly wig. In fact, if you'd done something different with your eyes, I don't think I'd have recognized you." Cardinal reached into an inside pocket. "Your Heitainan ID card, visitor ID card, GD&RI employee's card, company UniCredit card and a key-card for your new empire. Your luggage is on the flitter, ready to go



when you are.”

“No more hanging around?” asked Dortmann in surprise.

“No more,” agreed Cardinal.

They left the lounge and travelled by electric cart to the helipad. The helicopter waiting for them was jade green, striped in gold and it featured prominent *GD&RI* logos. It bore a certain resemblance to a police helicopter, which could prove useful at times.

“Why all the mystery, anyway?” asked Cardinal when they were in the air. “There was a story floating round down there that the Customs had caught either an important spy or a major smuggler.”

“Demirell’s reaction to my resignation might not be rational. So I wanted to be safely out of the way,” Dortmann told him.

“Surely he couldn’t get away with cancelling your ticket?” protested Cardinal.

“It would be a very convincing and convenient accident, Alex. Charles would see to that. And I doubt anyone would realize anything was wrong.”

“Hmm, yes,” nodded Cardinal, admitting to himself that Major Tarpigan would not have the monopoly on convenient accidents. “But you were a bit too clever for Charles. How do you like the flitter, by the way? It’s yours.”

“It looks very splendid and new,” approved Dortmann.

The machine staggered through an updraught. “So’s the pilot,” added Cardinal, tightening his seat harness. “When they find out you’ve gone, are you going to need a guard for the rest of your life? I’m not doing much at the moment.”

“Only until Charles starts thinking,” smiled Dortmann. “Say an hour or two. You’re looking disappointed, Alex.”

“I can dream, can’t I?” laughed Cardinal. “Tell me a bit more about His Dukeship. I’ve never had much to do with the nobility before, even phoney nobility. Just how seriously does he take himself?”

“Well, he’s a very shrewd businessman,” Dortmann began thoughtfully. “But he has his blind spots.”

#### *54. Demirell Triumphant*

The Duke of Atmain was both annoyed and surprised. His security executive’s massive disloyalty had wounded him deeply – as well as doing serious damage to his campaign in Camerland. Charles Demirell had recalled his network of agents on the other side of the Straits between bursts of violent language at the waste of time, resources and

sheer energy spent planning operations that had been junked. And then Demirell had calmed down.

After ordering a team of service personnel to transfer his personal possessions to the quarters of the security executive, Demirell took over Dortmann's office. Despite the set-backs in Camerland, he had achieved his main ambition. He was in charge of the security of not only the castle but also of the Duke of Atmain's entire chain of refuse reclamation centres.

Demirell opened a cupboard and took a bottle of wine from the rack. He drew the cork and filled a glass, then he moved over to the desk and took a cigarette from the box. The holowindow was showing a view of number three firing range. Duke Norman of Atmain was working off some of his anger by blasting away at dummies dressed in Dortmann's discarded uniforms.

Sipping white Heitainan wine, Demirell began to feel almost grateful to Dortmann. In her letter of resignation, she had stressed that an efficient security department could have only one commander – which could only serve to strengthen Demirell's position. Of course, Demirell told himself, there would have to be a number of staff changes to weed out unreliable elements. And one of his first official functions would be an intimate dinner with Jenna Lindstrom, the communications chief, to reinforce cordial relations with his chosen second-in-command.

#### *55. Alex Cardinal At Work And At Home*

The jade green helicopter deposited Alex Cardinal and Ilse Dortmann on the roof of an office building to the north-west of the business heart of Leviton, then fluttered away. Cardinal showed his guest the roof garden before he took her down the fire escape to his office on the sixteenth floor.

"Here we are," he remarked, lifting cases through the office window. He looked up as Dortmann slipped inside, to see a surveillance camera tracking mournfully away in search of something else worth watching.

"Hello, boss." Cardinal's secretary strolled into the main office as if the working day had just begun.

"Hello, yourself," replied Cardinal. "I didn't expect to see you here at nearly eighteen."

"I'm standing by, boss."

Cardinal assumed an expression of bafflement.

"Remember?" continued Doris Bedworthy. "You told me the Major was going to call, and to stand by to make sure the sobok didn't run off

with the coffee.”

“And did he? Call, I mean, not run off with the coffee.”

“About an hour ago. I gave him the reports.”

“So how come you’re on overtime?”

“Jimmy’s going to pick me up here. And I had one or two things to do.”

“Such as getting your hair done. Sorry, Herta.” Cardinal realized that he had been ignoring his guest. “This is Doris Bedworthy, my secretary.”

“And you must be Va. Dortmann, the SecEx the boss had to spirit away from under the nose of the Duck of Atmain,” said Bedworthy. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Good evening, Va. Bedworthy,” Dortmann returned with a slight questioning inflection.

“A little something to help people remember us,” laughed Doris Bedworthy. Even in flat heels, she was a good four inches taller than the visitor. “That’s Jimmy,” she added when the videolink in her office began to chime. “See you in the morning.”

“On time, I hope,” remarked Cardinal, picking up two suitcases. “Would you care to join me in the cupboard, Herta?”

“You’re not one of these Camerlish eccentrics, are you?” Dortmann asked uncertainly.

“A cupboard-freak?” laughed Cardinal. “No, nothing like that. As a matter of fact, it’s a lift.”

Double door peeled apart on the floor above to show a comfortable lounge/dining room. The rooms of his flat had the same lay-out as his office suite but, apart from the toilet/bathroom, different functions. Behind the lift was a kitchen instead of a combined storeroom and photographic darkroom. Bedrooms took the place of Doris Bedworthy’s office and the storeroom on its left. Windows, double-glazed with unbreakable laminate on the outside, looked out from the kitchen and the lounge onto rooftops across Liston Grove.

“I thought you might be safer hiding out in the offices of Julian Legion And Company instead of a hotel,” explained Cardinal. “Even the best ones can be breached, if you know how to go about it. Just till you get yourself organized.”

“You mean you live in an office suite?” marvelled Dortmann.

“Very convenient for work,” Cardinal told her. “And there’s all sorts of shops, restaurants and so on on the first couple of floors of this place. And before you warn me to behave myself, I remember you always did well in the unarmed combat classes.”

“I do respond to a reasoned argument, Alex,” said Dortmann, fighting

to keep a straight face,

"I was thinking about plying you with drink if you were doubtful about staying here," Cardinal admitted. "So it's all right?"

"It's fine by me, Alex," Dortmann told him with a smile.

"That's great! Are you hungry, by the way?"

"Come to think of it, I am. I only had a sandwich for lunch. I could do with a shower and a change too."

"Right, I'll show you your room and where everything is. You know, I keep assuming we know each other so well. But we're virtually strangers really. To each other, and to who we were ten years ago."

"Yes, we have a lot of catching up to do. You might not fancy who I am now," Dortmann added with a smile.

"It should be fun finding out," said Cardinal. "But if you come to the conclusion this is a mistake, don't be too polite to tell me."

"My eyes are wide open, Alex," Dortmann assured him. "And I'm hardly a wide-eyed innocent. Let's not worry about making mistakes. We're both old enough to know it wouldn't be the end of the world if things didn't work out for us."

After a meal, sitting in an incredibly comfortable lounge with a piece called *Midsummer Dreams* whispering all around her, coffee and a glass of orange liqueur on a low table within easy reach of her left hand, Ilse Dortmann realized that the orange-flavoured cigarette balanced on the ashtray was her first since Cardinal had rescued her from the clutches of the Customs and Immigration Department at Duddling – her first in over two hours.

#### *56. Bleiler And Pnight Return To Atmain*

Terry Bleiler roared into the senior staff bar at the Duke of Atmain's castle and gave Louise Liston a friendly slap on her well-padded bottom. "Hello, Lulu! How's my favourite spy? Hello, you two," he added to Gary Mortlake and Neil Pinder.

"Terry!" squealed Liston, beaming joyfully. "And Brian too. You're still in one piece?"

"And obeying orders from our illustrious leader with a smile," grinned Pnight, very cheerful now that he had castle walls around him again. "You can't beat the ones that say: 'Drop everything and run for home.'"

"Where's that flash kid you had with you?" asked Mortlake. "What was his name? Richmore?"

"Ritchie?" said Bleiler. "Oh, he was recalled ages ago. They gave us a

very pneumatic brunette instead."

"All right, there's she, then? Can't stand your company?"

"A hit-and-run driver got her," said Pnight angrily. "He tried to get all three of us. Came right up on the bockan pavement, he did."

"Anything in it, Terry?" Liston asked Bleiler.

"Probably not." Bleiler shrugged vaguely. "Wiping each other out seems to be their favourite pastime across the ditch. Anyhow, the panic burst upon us before we had a chance to find out. Sounds like disaster has struck from on high. In fact, I'm surprised to see the castle still standing." He slurred the final words, showing that he had been celebrating his return thoroughly.

"You mean you haven't heard?" Mortlake asked in open disbelief. "I thought the news was all over the world."

"Not our bit of it," laughed Pnight. "A certain person was dragging me in the direction of the bar almost before my baggage had hit the floor. And the driver didn't say anything. But those ganar kerlen never tell you bock all."

"Go on, then," invited Bleiler, concluding his negotiations with the steward for more drinks. "Tell us the sky's fallen in. The Duke's dropped dead of a heart attack. Demirell's beaten his brains out with an egg whisk. The Ice Queen's broken a fingernail. Then get this round in. I've only got Camerlish money."

"It's about Dortmann," said Mortlake.

"Don't tell me," interrupted Bleiler. "Let me guess which finger it was."

"She's gone," said Liston.

"Gone?" Bleiler blinked then staring down at Liston with total incomprehension plastered across his flushed face.

"Resigned," added Liston. "hence your recall – and everyone else she knows. She got fed up of wrestling for control with Demirell. She's in Camerland now. And contracted to Grantby's."

"Marvellous!" breathed Bleiler. "Who says irony's dead?"

"I don't see what you're so happy about, Tex," remarked Pnight. "She's gone over to the other side."

"My dear Brian," said Bleiler expansively, "one can always admire excellence wherever one finds it. But you wouldn't understand that. Just as Louise and I are fit only to polish Ilse Dortmann's boots, you three are fit only to polish ours."

"How many has he had?" laughed Liston.

"Bock knows," grinned Pnight. "I lost count on the train. You know what he's like when he's celebrating coming home."

"You know," said Bleiler, "I've got a good mind to take an anti-alc,

become as sober as a duke, then start all over again. But first, let's all drink a toast to the best SecEx this place will ever have. To Ilse the Ice Queen."

"You'd better have that anti-alc," said Liston after the toast. "If you keep raving like this, Demirell's going to revoke your ticket for treason."

"Why don't we retire to a friendly battlement to watch the sunset?" suggested Mortlake. "We might even let you try the javon some nice Lawsonites gave us."

"I bet they're not too friendly now," said Pnight. "It's quite a relief coming back here where the natives are a bit less homicidal."

"I know what you mean," agreed Pinder. "And life's much more civilized in a castle."

"Civilization as we know it is doomed," Bleiler pronounced darkly. "Christophe!" he called to the steward. "A large anti-alc. Gary's javon require a clean slate."

Paul Auberne, one of the duty surveillance crew, remarked, "Tex Bleiler's out of his skull again," as his videolink screen provided a ten-second, soundless sample of events in the senior staff bar.

"Surprise!" returned Lisa Spirelli, frowning at her own screen, which showed a view of part of the castle grounds. "What in bock is that? Look, there's two of them."

Auberne leaned over to examine the section of screen just above Spirelli's finger. "Don't you know?" he grinned. "It's Westwood, our noble Captain of the guard. And Alison March from Blue Watch."

"But what are they doing?"

"Playing at rocks," chuckled Auberne.

"Oh, get back to your own screen," said Spirelli in disgust, giving him a push.

"Pr'yam gestr," Auberne assured her. "They're lurking in those hides with crossbows. Any fish that come near the surface get zapped. If they're big enough."

"And do they ever catch anything?"

"March caught a cold once."

"Idiot!" said Spirelli, refusing to laugh. "Well, do they?"

"When there's fresh river-fish on the menu, there do you think it comes from?" returned Auberne.

"I never realized we were that self-sustaining," said Spirelli.

## Friday, July 04th

### *57. Dortmann Meets The Refuse Barons*

Sir Nigel Grantby, chairman of the Camerlish Refuse Barons, tapped on the table with a knuckle and called, "If we can get on, vreitei."

His colleagues, basking in the mellow glow of a decent lunch, stopped chatting among themselves and gave their attention to the chair.

"I'd like you to meet Ilse Dortmann," resumed Grantby. "My new Security Executive. She's also the former Chatelle Group Security Executive."

A brief flurry of hostile mutterings ran round the meeting as eyes turned to the new arrival to the third-floor conference room at their Camer headquarters. The buzz subsided then Grantby rapped on the table again with the full set of large knuckles. Dortmann was wearing a safari-blue business suit which had absolutely no military pretensions. She looked relatively harmless – but so does a sleeping tiger.

"Good afternoon," said Dortmann, meeting each set of eyes in turn. "In case any of you are still in doubt, I am not responsible for inciting attacks on your Refuse Reclamation Centres. They were, however, organized by people trained by myself, as far as I can determine from the reports of your investigators."

"And a bockan good job you did on them," growled Sir Miles Dunstan, remembering the fate of his Mirbank Centre.

Dortmann aimed herself at the seventy-year-old Refuse Baron, apparently unmoved by his utterly preposterous blond wig. "It's a rather unfortunate recommendation, Sir Miles. But I hope to bring your staff up to the same level."

"That's telling him," cackled the skeletal Sir Simon Lake. "I, for one, think Va. Dortmann would make an ideal Security Co-ordinator for our group."

"Could we have a final decision on that?" suggested Grantby. Having written the consultancies into Dortmann's contract, he was liable for payment for any that were not taken up. "We've discussed the profile submitted by Cardinal. Does anyone have any more comments, questions for Va. Dortmann, anything?"

"I think we've been discussing this long enough," hinted Sir Arthur Crane. "I know I've made my mind up."

"If there are no further questions," said Grantby, "would all those who want to take advantage of the consultancies please indicate."

Eight right hands lifted from the table.

"Saves evicting the doubters," remarked Sir George Braben, the red-headed youngest Baron.

"Thank you, Vreitei," said Dortmann when Grantby indicated that she had the floor. "Hiring me on my reputation is a compliment that I appreciate. I hope I'm not too much of a disappointment in the flesh. I shall be visiting each of your areas over the next few weeks. We should be in for a quiet spell now that the threat from the Popular Socialist Front has been neutralized. But I'm sure you'll all agree they've shown the way to others."

"The cult of the NeoKirlan seems to be growing, and this country has its fair share of social and political malcontents. A hardening of your security is the only safe response until we can demonstrate to every terrorist groups that wants to inconvenience the public to put their message across that attacking a RecCen is not the right way. Or even a safe and simple option."

"Not a very cheerful picture in the short term," remarked the flame-suited Baron.

"But factual, Sir John," returned Dortmann.

"Been telling them that for years," remarked Arthur Crane, pleased that the new consultant's views agreed with his own and those of his company's security executive. "And it can be set off against tax. Perhaps we can think again about a common research fund for the development of new security systems?"

"I'm sure that's something we can discuss at a later date," said Grantby, speeding the meeting on. "Thank you, Va. Dortmann, I know you have a lot to get on with."

"Good afternoon, Vreitei." Dortmann gave a collective nod to the meeting and took the hint to make herself scarce.

"Not very big, is she?" commented the skeletal Simon Lake, resting his elbows on the imitation eichan conference table. "Not bad looking, though."

"I suppose being seven feet tall would help her do her job that much better?" sighed Lady Mary Thorne.

"No," remarked Christopher Lees, the host Baron, through a cloud of cactus-scented javo smoke. "It's just that Simon likes to be able to see people without his glasses."



"Bit on the young side?" said George Braben, the youngest Baron.

"I think you'll find that women tend to make a little more effort to prove themselves able to keep up with you men, George," returned Lady Mary Thorne.

"I hear she's shackled up with our private investigator," Lady Amy Tynsdale remarked to her flame-suited neighbour.

John Nash's generous mouth slipped into a wide smile but before he could say anything, Grantby rapped on the table with his heavy-bottomed glass.

"If we can get on," he hinted. "Arthur, you had something to say on the subject of the pay talks."

"Yes, I do," nodded Crane. He was beginning to develop feelings of superiority over Grantby. The process of polishing his speech was over. A slightly rough Norton accent had acquired the silky slickness of a senior Civil Servant. "I've had Syd Greenwood of the Union making noises to me about his members not standing for such a large productivity-based component in the new pay deal. What do you make of that?"

"Isn't Sobok Syd up for re-election?" said George Braben.

"In October," nodded Norlish Lady Mary Thorne.

"Most of my people seem quite happy with the new deal," remarked John Nash, his flame suit spilling blue and green in response to a sudden lance of sunlight.

"Sobok Syd's got a bit of genuine opposition this time too," added Simon Lake, adjusting his glasses for comfort.

"I don't think Greenwood's going to be much of a problem to us," decided Grantby.

"Don't count on that," said Crane. "A trouble-maker, if ever there was one, is bockan Greenwood."

"No," returned Grantby very positively, "he'll behave. And oddly enough, it's our present troubles that are at the back of it. Apparently, the Union has been having to make quite heavy payments from its 'Lay-Off and Unemployment Fund' recently. And it seems to be running into trouble. Some of their funds have been diverted into non-interest loans to certain union officials. Learning from their Ferran counterparts, no doubt. I shouldn't think any of these people stand a hope in Heitain of getting re-elected if that becomes public. They'd end up exchanging the gravy train for a prison cell, most likely."

"Bockan marvellous!" cackled Crane. "The look on Sobok Syd's face if I mention loans and interest rates. He'll have a heart attack."

"Let's not shout too loudly," Grantby warned. "We can't lean on

Greenwood and his colleagues if they lose their jobs. We'll have to appear to give some ground to help them get re-elected, but it'll be worth the sacrifice in the long run."

"I hear the Union's stopped contributing to PSF funds," remarked the youngest Baron. "What's the state of the other enemy? Have they really been neutralized?"

"The visible enemy is in total disarray," said Grantby. "The PSF have become a target for the self-appointed 'Law And Order' vigilante groups as well as ourselves and the police. They've gone deep underground for the moment."

"Good riddance," muttered Arthur Crane. "What about the invisible enemy?"

"That's not quite so clear," said Grantby. "Demirell and his colleagues seem to have returned to Atmain. Cardinal and the Major debriefed Dortmann . . .,"

"Sounds like fun," chuckled Miles Dunstan.

"Apparently, Demirell and Norm Chatelle are as thick as thieves," continued Grantby, "but Dortmann wasn't able to say for sure that Norm knows the full extent of what Demirell's been up to over here."

"Why don't we tell him, then he'd know," suggested Simon! Lake. "Which he probably does anyway."

"The Major advises against that," replied Grantby.

"We're not going to just sit still and do nothing?" demanded Crane. "He's cost us a hell of a lot of money, time and equipment."

"The Major advises patience," said Grantby. "His opinion is that Norm knows at least the outline of what Demirell has been up to. And now that he's lost Dortmann, he'll approach us for talks to discuss his position over here. I suggest we all count up our losses and prepare a bill for him."

"Not enough," decided Lady Tynsdale. "We ought to ram the point home. How about dropping a few bombs on his precious castle?"

"I agree," rumbled Arthur Crane.

"Nice to think about but impossible to put into practice," said Grantby. "We can't afford to become involved in something like that. And I can't see bombing raids across the Straits going down too well with the Beldan Government. Or ours."

"Rubbish!" snapped Lady Tynsdale. Then a subtle emphasis caught up with her. "What do you mean by *we*, Nigel?"

"Norm's people have made other enemies," Grantby told her with a suspicion of a smile on his large face. "And the Major did hint that some of them were thinking of settling a few scores. He wasn't very

forthcoming after that.”

“Did he, indeed!” beamed Lady Tynsdale, cracking her face into an evocation of a weathered chalk cliff.

Sir Nigel Grantby poured more coffee from an earthenware thermojug as the meeting dissolved into a chaos of speculation. He had told his colleagues enough to ensure their co-operation, but very little in fact. His hints had generated a satisfying identification with a conspiracy, but their lack of knowledge would hold the group clear of involvement when plans blossomed into action.

### *58. Major Tarpigan Contacts CHASM*

Darkness had brought a blaze of lights to the expressway service stations. Traffic was still fairly heavy, and it would get worse when the pubs started to close. A pale Corona, yellow in the sodium lights, turned off the slip-road and into a car park. Surveillance cameras covered the whole service station site to watch for damage to company property and customers. One of them had a blind spot, thanks to a little electronic interference with its scan controls. The car stopped in this dead area.

“Nice night for it,” the driver remarked to a man leaning on the white rail fence. “Are you Vreitar X?”

“That’s right,” the shadowy figure said with a nod. “What are you calling yourself?”

“Vreitar Y will do.” The other man smiled. “Would you prefer Major X?”

“Suit yourself.” Major Rufus Tarpigan shrugged. “I thought your lot had numbers?”

“A letter will do equally well. Oh, thank you.” Supreme Two of the national ruling body of the Church of His Aweful Satanic Majesty accepted a plastic cup of synth-café in a thermowrap. “I believe you can help us?”

“A case of co-operation for mutual benefit.”

“As long as it falls within our guiding principle.”

“A jump a day keeps the mind-mangler at bay?” grinned Tarpigan.

“It has been expressed in those terms,” admitted Two, a small, slightly shrivelled man, those nose reached Tarpigan’s shoulder. He had a set of darts in the breast pocket of his jacket.

“To business,” said the Major, becoming briskly efficient. “I understand your organization is interested in getting even with whoever got some of your members mixed up in a scrap with the NTF and various others last week?”

"We don't like being used," growled Two, his face twisting into a mask of total malevolence.

"Good! The thing is, there could well be a punitive raid on the people responsible. Using NeoKirlans as troops. And as it might be a rather big operation, word of it is bound to leak out. Which means we'll have to screen our recruits to find out which are genuine and which are police plants after information. There's going to be a lot of doubtfuls. And this is where your organization comes in."

"To do what?" frowned Supreme Two.

"You could act as controllers for the doubtfuls until it's time for them to attack. I gather you've had some experience in that field?"

"A lot more than some," admitted Two. "You can count on our assistance and co-operation on those terms, Major X."

"Good!" said Tarpigan. "We're still considering alternatives at the moment, but your organization's involvement will help to crystallize things. We'll be in touch again after the weekend. To arrange another meeting."

"I'll look forward to it eagerly, Major X," Supreme Two assured him.

They shook hands and returned to their vehicles. Supreme Two sped off into the distance. Rufus Tarpigan dragged round the bridge to the opposite carriageway. The surveillance camera at the south-west corner of the car park began to respond fully to commands from the control room. A puzzled repair crew ran several checks, milked a cup each of synth-café from the machine in the control room, then retired to their ready room to play cards until the next call.

## Tuesday, July 08th

### 59. *Dinsdale And Devil Dust*

Doris Bedworthy interrupted a discussion on which old films would be revived for the coming autumn season on holovision when she activated the intercom and said, "Sir Nigel Grantby is here, Vr. Cardinal."

"Show him in, please," replied Alex Cardinal. *Class 8* clients were not to be kept hanging around in his secretary's office.

"Good to get indoors," sighed Grantby, planting himself in the well-padded comfort of the visitor's chair in front of Cardinal's desk. He mopped his wide brow with a huge, gleaming white handkerchief. "It's hot as Hallidan out there."

"Probably because the forecast was showers," said Cardinal. "Could we have some coffee, please, Va. Bedworthy?"

"Of course." Doris Bedworthy slithered back to her own office.

"How's your new security chief working out?" Cardinal added to his client.

"Very well," Grantby admitted. "Certainly better than I expected. But talking to her's a bit like talking to a machine. Cold as chastity, she is, when's she's on duty. And not much warmer off."

"A security executive is never off duty when the boss is around, Vr. Grantby," Cardinal pointed out.

"But she could relax a little. I get the feeling she's made of glass. One smile, and she'd crack into a million pieces."

"She will in time. Relax. Once she's established. Her last employer insisted on being on first name terms with her, and then shot her authority to pieces. That sort of thing breeds caution. But she's a definite asset?"

"Very much. Morale's up twelve points in Security. You don't have to tell me it's worth getting the best."

"S'vo, shev," remarked the other visitor, catching Grantby's eye for the first time.

"Hello," said Grantby uncertainly. The round young man's casual sprawl in his chair and the cheerful wave that accompanied the lazy greeting did not endear him to the Refuse Baron.

"Just ignore him for the moment," advised Cardinal.

Doris Bedworthy appeared with two mugs and a cup and saucer. Grantby received her best smile and the good china. Cardinal's mug celebrated the recent Norlish coronation. Bedworthy placed a similar mug beside the mysterious stranger, dexterously evaded a chubby, queesting hand, and retired to the other end of the intercom.

"Zacrast' 've javo, shev," ordered the plump sprawler.

"Nei 'khven hachoi'," replied Cardinal, throwing him a cigar. "Here, chew on that instead."

"Ven javon!?" marvelled the sprawler as if he had just been assured that up is down.

"Not a one," confirmed Cardinal, who did not believe in smoking Class M drugs during working hours, and especially not in front of a *Class 8* client.

"Does he only speak Heitainan?" said Grantby.

"Oh, no. He can speak Ferran when it suits him," said Cardinal. "He's called Dinsdale, by the way. The Major will be telling you about him."

"Priyam," agreed Dinsdale round a mouthful of cigar.

"A military gentleman on his way down the fire escape, Vr. Cardinal," his secretary warned over the intercom.

"Thank you, Va. Bedworthy," replied Cardinal. "I'd better open the bar."

Dinsdale sat up in his chair and tugged at the neat tuft of hole-black beard on his chin. He watched with interest as Cardinal produced a half-empty bottle of revenue-free uisge and three glasses from his safe. Dinsdale's dark eyebrows shot into his fringe when Major Tarpigan climbed into the office through the window. Dinsdale showed his approval of Tarpigan's unconventional arrival by rediscovering Ferran.

"I'll leave you to it, vreitei," said Cardinal. He turned his chair over to the tanned mercenary and joined his secretary in her office.

Tarpigan set a yellow and black striped box on the desk. When he touched a white panel on the side of the pocket dictionary-sized device, the air in the office seemed to become flat and heavy, and the room acquired an eerie, anechoic, smothered feel. The mercenary lit a long, thin cigar and blew a reflective thread of smoke at the hush-screen controller.

"We've got something rather interesting on the way, Sir Nigel," he began. "Drink?"

"Thank you," nodded Grantby. "Interesting in what way?"

Tarpigan splashed amber liquid into two of the glasses. Dinsdale held out his coffee mug for his ration.

"Dinsdale here is an analytical chemist. He did an analysis job for Alex

the other week. Briefly, his job was to identify the war gas used in a case of attempted murder. One of the principals was supposed to inhale it and murder the other, not knowing what he was doing. Which set me thinking. Dinsdale?"

"Yeah, have you ever heard of *Devil Dust*?" asked the plump, dark, chemist.

Grantby responded with a blank stare and a frown.

"Thought not," grinned Dinsdale. "It's pretty evil stuff, but not too much talked about. You must have heard of *Magic Dust*. There was all that trouble about it in Ferron, oh, must be ten or more years ago, when it was fashionable."

Grantby tried to cast his mind back ten years – and failed. Dinsdale, he judged, had been at school still at the time in question.

"It's a pretty simple one-cyclohexylpiperidine derivative," explained the chemist. "A schoolkid could make it. *Devil Dust* is about ten thousand times more powerful, and a bit more complicated to synthesize. It's basically just a chlorophenylcyclohexanone derivative, but . . ."

"Let's not waste each other's time, lad," interrupted Grantby. "What does it do?"

"It's a hallucinogen. Those exposed to it can be induced to react violently and irrationally, and have bizarre hallucinations stimulated by normal, harmless things going on around them. Beyond a certain threshold of exposure, they go to sleep. But there's another hallucinatory period after they wake up again."

"And the point is," added Tarpigan, "if one is going to move against a heavily-fortified building, such as a castle, dusting something like that from the air just beforehand could keep the security staff busy for a vital few minutes. Especially if the weather's nice and they've got the windows open."

"It would be a military variant, of course," added Dinsdale. "In a microfine powder form. And a derivative that reacts with water vapour and various pollutants in the atmosphere to turn it from a harmless form to something with an active lifetime of about ten minutes – so the attackers don't run into it."

"You have an almost frighteningly diabolic imagination, Major." Grantby's rather forbidding frown of concentration relaxed into a craggy smile. "You haven't discussed this with Cardinal? Or Dortmann?"

"No." Tarpigan shook his head. "Alex wouldn't want to know. And Ilse would drop a warning to some of her former colleagues, no matter what the risk to her current contract."

"Hmm, yes," agreed Grantby. He glanced at the chronowafer on the

back of his left wrist.

"Everything else is proceeding according to plan," added Tarpigan, bringing the report to a close. "I think you'll be well satisfied with the end product."

"Good, good," beamed Grantby. "I'll be getting on, then."

Sir Nigel Grantby shook Major Tarpigan's hand and nodded to Dinsdale, who replied with a mock salute. Tarpigan switched off the hush screen as the Refuse Baron reached the door of the office, producing a reflex shiver of his broad shoulders. The room seemed slightly larger when Grantby had gone.

"What a flat!" muttered Dinsdale.

"He may look like a squashed fish to you," Tarpigan warned, "but he's the one paying for your services."

"He wasn't here very long. Hardly worth coming across town."

"Long enough for a cup of Alex's excellent coffee and a quick belt of smuggled uisge. And he likes to keep his finger on the pulse of events. I suppose he gets a vicarious thrill from associating with the likes of us. He can be in on something deep, dark and devious while maintaining a lily-white image. Involved, yet isolated at the same time."

"Very profound," scoffed Dinsdale. "I'd better be off too. I've got some bits and pieces to buy."

Tarpigan passed him two red £100 notes. Dinsdale met Cardinal at the door and flashed a quick smile of farewell. "Bye, korolan," he leered at Doris Bedworthy, who retreated behind her desk, out of reach.

"I don't mind men slapping my bottom," she told him as the communicating door was closing. "As long as you don't mind me slapping your face."

"Quite a girl you've got there, Alex," laughed Tarpigan. "Whatever happened to Samantha?"

"She disappeared off to some fancy job in Ferron about six months ago," said Cardinal. "I got a guilty postcard from Astarn a couple of days later. Telling me where to send the fortnight's wages she had coming. That went straight into the rubbish bin without touching the sides."

"She always was a bit of a cheeky dobok."

"She left me in a proper mess, I can tell you. And you should have *seen* some of the idiots the agency sent round. Doris turned up at half-sixteen on the Friday at the end of an addle of a week. She'd heard about the job from one of the rejects, and she turned up on the off-chance. I don't think she expected to get the job. But I was on her way home. She ended up making me some coffee, then she stopped till mid-night to help me get things straight."



"Quite a krovan," grinned Tarpigan. "Bet she makes you wish you were twenty-five again."

"She's a very nice girl," agreed Cardinal. "But I told her at the start I never get involved with my secretary."

"Was she relieved?" laughed Tarpigan.

"A little surprised. I didn't put it as bluntly as that, of course. But I think it's best to get everything on a proper professional basis right from the start. She has a positively amazing talent for finding perfectly reasonable ways of misinterpreting thing on forms not written in plain Ferran. Drives the tax mob right up the wall."

"Still, I bet you're not chasing her round the office with Ilse around. I take it she's not found somewhere suitable of her own yet?"

"Not yet," grinned Cardinal. "But who's counting days?"

"Oh, well," grinned Tarpigan. "I hope she can stand you. Someone with your amount of grey in his hair should be thinking of settling down. Time I was going too. Cheers, Alex."

"See you, Rufus."

Doris Bedworthy entered the inner office as Major Tarpigan was making his way up the fire escape to the helipad on the roof.

"I hope you disposed of the body discreetly?" remarked Cardinal.

"What?" Bedworthy paused in the act of collecting glasses and crockery.

"Dinsdale. Or didn't you break his neck?"

"What a sobok, boss. Thinks he's irresistible. He told me I owe it to myself to go out with him tonight."

"And what did you say to that?"

"Nothing," grinned his secretary. "I just threw him out. I don't think I broke anything, though. He's so horribly podgy, he must have bounced all the way down the corridor to the lift."

"As long as you don't give clients the same treatment."

"If they're clients, that's your job, boss. If you're not too busy chasing me round the office."

"Have you been listening in on private conversations again?"

"Like you told me when you were putting things on a proper professional basis, private means hush screen. Otherwise, I can keep half an ear open for a scream for help. Besides, it's very interesting to hear what people really think about you."

"As long as it's complimentary?"

"No, it's good to know your enemies as well, boss."

"That's very true," agreed Cardinal.

"Think I could charge my self-defence classes off to tax as a necessary

business expense, now I've had to use them in the line of duty, boss?" asked Bedworthy, treating Cardinal to another demonstration of her wink.

"It's worth a try," laughed Cardinal. "You'll have to remember to mention it to our tame accountant next time he cooks the books."

"Who knows? He might be able to come up with something else I missed."

"The only thing you're missing is a conscience."

"Must be catching, boss." Doris Bedworthy winked again, then she retired to her own office with a collection of glass and china.

## Thursday, July 10th

### 60. *The Big One*

Detective Inspector Mike Forrest assumed an expression of deep disgust and demanded, "What's all this madek?" Roaring traffic sounds from Park Road and Rossmore Road flooded into his sphere of awareness when something broke his concentration. Camer, like all capital cities, was never quiet by day.

"Don't ask me, Chief, I'm just the messenger boy," said Fred Drew, one of his sergeants. "It's come down from the higher zones to Vr. Ryland, and from the boss to you via me." He dumped the green folder on Forrest's waste-paper-yard of a desk.

"Well, that's it all about? Don't they know I've got enough to keep me going for a couple of months in the bockan in-tray? And bock knows how long in the overflow?" Forrest waved an ink-shadowed hand at the mountain. "So what's this latest panic?"

"It's addressed to you, Chief," Drew pointed out.

"Don't give me that, Fred," sighed Forrest. "But you can give me a smoke. I've run out." He crumpled an empty packet and dropped it onto the floor beside his desk. His waste paper bin was full to overflowing.

Drew pulled up a chair and took a drink from his plastic cup of synth-café. Forrest snapped his fingers impatiently, and received a battered cigarette from an equally battered packet.

"Cheers, Fred." Forrest looked enviously at the cup of synth-café. "Well?"

The young sergeant lit a cigarette. Then: "It's about these NeoKirlans, Chief."

"Yogar, Fred!" groaned Forrest. "Not those soboks."

Fred Drew suddenly realized that the thirty-four-year-old inspector did indeed look forty-four when he was wearing his pained expression.

"Listen to me, young Fred," Forrest continued. "Never have anything to do with nut cases. They addle everything. Especially your chances of promotion. And they make your hair fall out."

"Oh, I don't know," grinned Drew. "There's still a bit left. No, listen, Chief. There's a whisper going round they're planning something

they're calling *The Big One*. Something to shade out everything they've ever done before."

"You ought to try listening to yourself occasionally, Fred," Forrest said, disgust turning to disbelief. "NeoKirlans don't plan things, son. They don't have the brains. That's why they're NeoKirlans. All they're good for is getting themselves killed and giving the CSP terminal headaches."

"That's not what they think in the Higher Zones."

"Tell you what," decided Forrest, "you take this folder, go up two floors in the lift, slip it under the second door on the right, then scoot off out of it double quick. It's Intelligence work, Fred, not Investigation. The PSF is their problem. What does Ryland think we are?"

"It's not the PSF organizing it, Chief. It's another lot. That's what they reckon in the Higher Zones."

"Since when did they know bock about anything? All right." Forrest resigned himself to having to do something. "Have a stroll round the usual places, see what's being said. No! Yoge' vars! I'll come with you. The more of this ganar paperwork you do, the more they send you. I think it only encourages them." He pushed the top onto his ball point and clipped it into an inside pocket. "I'll even let you buy me a pint. It's almost lunchtime."

"You're so good to me, Chief," simpered Fred Drew in mock admiration.

"Cheeky sobok," grinned Forrest. "You ready for out?" he added, taking a Noiseless from the middle drawer of his desk.

Drew lifted the left side of his jacket to show a stunner in a waist holster. He was tall and dark, with deep-set eyes and a black-shaded chin which prevented him from looking clean-shaven for more than a few hours. His success as a detective was due, in part, to the fact that he looked more like a villain than a policeman. Guardians of the Law were not treated with due respect in many of the circles in which he moved.

## Friday, July 11th

### *61. The Duke Decides To Negotiate*

Since the abrupt resignation of his security executive, the Duke of Atmain had been experiencing a period of frustration. His expansion program in Camerland had come to a dead stop. The castle guard at his home seemed to have lost an indefinable something and the 'lensters of the Cavenne area had stepped up their probing raids on the castle grounds, playing dangerous games for the excitement of the challenge.

The doors and windows on the ground floor of the castle's keep were closed on a windy Friday morning, which meant that the dominant smell in the Duke's map room was his pipe rather than the rose garden. Charles Demirell, now confirmed as the new security executive, and Clive Westwood were present at an end-of-the-week discussion on security.

"I'm particularly concerned about these attacks on the grounds." The Duke frowned and tugged at his moustache. "They're a nuisance and they're causing a fair amount of damage."

"We've had one or two problems," Westwood admitted, "but we're doing our best to sort them out." He glanced across the map table at Demirell, who had been busy with more experimental patrol patterns. "We gave the last lot a very nasty fright, which should discourage them to a certain extent."

"Perhaps we ought to be doing more than frightening them," sniffed the Duke.

"The situation is pretty well under control," offered Westwood. "And the civil authorities would jump on us if we did more than frighten." As mere Captain of the guard, it was not for him to say that the head of security had been playing soldiers, using the 'lensters as opponents in war games.

"They came quite close last time," the Duke persisted.

"Not in terms of our defence system," Demirell assured him. "They penetrated the grounds to a depth of less than three hundred yards."

"Well, I want it stopped. The wife's getting worried."

"There's no cause for alarm, sir," Demirell said in a level voice, knowing that the Duke had full confidence in him. He just needed to be

reassured from time to time. "They've got to get right through the grounds, cross a stretch of open ground at least two hundred yards wide and then get across the moat before they even come to the walls. And there's two of them. We have eight defence towers and two fortified gate houses in the outer bailey. And six larger towers and two more fortified gate houses in the inner bailey. The combined fire-power could stand off every 'lenster in Atmain."

"I know, I know," said the Duke impatiently. "It's the wife who's worried, silly woman. If she could see a bit more training going on, that would set her mind at rest."

"Yes, sir," said Westwood, knowing that the problem was not lack of training but Demirell's refusal to retain Ilse Dortmann's chain of command. The guard had been turned almost upside down by Demirell's playing favourites.

"I'll discuss the new training schedule with you after lunch, Westwood," the Duke decided.

"Yes, sir," Westwood recognized a dismissal. He saluted and glided across the rush-weave carpet to the door.

"What about our campaign across the Straits?" resumed the Duke when Westwood was out of the room. "What can *That Woman* tell Nige Grantby and his colleagues?" Ilse Dortmann's name did not come easily to the Duke's lips.

"She can tell them we're expanding across the Straits, of course," replied Demirell. "That follows from the way I've been using our personnel and equipment. And in view of all the trouble the Camerlish Refuse Barons have been having, it makes sense for us to have a strong security force at our Camerlish RecCens.

"Now that we've withdrawn everyone she knows, they won't be able to set a watch on our people to learn the full extent of the operation. Security is now entirely in the hands of staff recruited locally, and there's a reasonable correlation between the size of our operation and the quantities of equipment we took across the Straits."

"What about the importing operations?" prompted the Duke.

"Dortmann doesn't know about them." Demirell glossed over Dortmann's suspicions. "And the profits from those operations paid for the equipment we supplied to the PSF."

"I understand we're having trouble in the importing area as well?" frowned the Duke.

Demirell shrugged. "A temporary problem. And the need for the revenue is no longer there. We can move back whenever we want. Like refuse reclamation, the market for revenue-free liquor is an expanding

one. Reports from Camerland indicate that the Refuse Barons are concentrating on rebuilding and repairing damage to their RecCens." Demirell shifted the conversation to a more cheerful area.

"Putting their businesses back in order," nodded the Duke.

"I understand they're having a few liquidity problems," Demirell added. "And their building contractors are having one or two problems with their labour forces."

"Things not going as smoothly as they might?" asked the Duke with evident satisfaction.

"The usual strikes over nothing much," said Demirell with mock sympathy. "Delays, inter-union disputes. Every time they get rid of one trouble-maker, two more crawl out from under a stone. And with surprising little prompting from ourselves. The Camerlish seem to have an infinite capacity for self-destruction. One good saboteur equals hundreds laid off."

"I hear there are still attacks on RecCens, though."

"Purely imitative. They'll go out of fashion in a few months. But I think it would be good general policy to harden the defences at our Centres over here. They tend to be slightly softer because of our higher good-will rating with the locals. But that could change."

"As we know from experience," nodded the Duke. "Well, now that Nige Grantby and his lot know I'm back in Camerland, I suppose I'd better talk to them. Negotiate a few franchises while we retain the initiative. That's something to think about over the weekend. Carry on with the good work, Charles."

"Yes, sir." The security executive took note of a dismissal. He snapped off a smart salute then retired to his office at the top of the south-eastern tower of the keep.

## Tuesday, July 15th

### *62. Shedding The Load*

Detective Sergeant Fred Drew flopped onto a chair beside Detective Inspector Mike Forrest's desk in the new police station on Rossmore Road in Camer.

He helped himself to a cigarette from the open packet and remarked, "Here, Chief."

"Just crawled out of bed, have you?" asked his superior without looking up.

The digital clock on the wall to his left showed 09:41.

"I've been having a word with Sniffin' Billy," explained Drew. "You know this NeoKirlan thing?"

"Forget it, Fred," advised Forrest. "Ryland was down here last night, after you'd gone. It's gone to Intelligence, where it should have gone in the first place."

"Oh! Well, anyway, Billy reckons he knows something. But he wants two reds for it."

"Two hundred pounds!" laughed Forrest, looking up from his mass of paper. "He's got a bockan nerve! Since when was he in that league? Five for twenty cigs and a couple of pints, that's more his style."

"That's what he wants, Chief." The sergeant shrugged. He was just passing on a message.

"Well, it's Charlie Fisher's worry now."

"You reckon I should tell him?"

"Why not? He probably needs a good laugh. What's happening about that farce yesterday afternoon?"

"We're still waiting for a report from the lab, Chief."

"Well go and chase Sheila up. Make a bockan nuisance of yourself if you have to. Ryland is getting asked a lot of awkward questions and he wants it sorted, and fast."

"Anyone'd think they'd put the bomb in his car." Drew heaved himself to his feet, throwing a large shadow across the desk.

"And Fred," added Forrest.

"Yes, Chief?"

"Never have anything to do with NeoKirlans, son. They'll drive you



round the bockan twist trying to figure out what they're doing. Or why." Drew shrugged again. "Right, Chief."

Intelligence Inspector Charles Fisher, glancing up at his clock as his videolink chimed for attention. "Yes?" he said in a discouraging tone as he took in the information that the time was 12:59 hours. He was about to escape for lunch. "Hello, Fred," he added, recognizing the face on the screen.

"It's all right, I know you're just about to dash off for a liquid lunch," Drew told him with a grin, acknowledging the note of impatience in the greeting. "I just wanted to tell you Sniffin' Billy reckons he knows something about this NeoKirlan thing. The Chief says it's yours now."

"That's right. Sniffin' Billy, eh?"

"Right. And he wants two reds for the information."

"Two hundred?" laughed Fisher.

"Mike said you'd laugh. Anyway, he does know something. You can tell by that shifty look he gets. And now I've told you. A present from our floor to yours."

"Right, thanks, Fred. I'll buy you a pint if there's anything in it. If not, you can buy me one." Fisher broke the connection just as the clock changed to 13:00. He fought a brief battle with his conscience, then he called his superior.

"You still here, Charlie?" remarked Intelligence Chief Inspector Raymond Aldred, who was dark, blue-eyed, running slightly to seed, married with two daughters, and thirty-six years old. This description also fitted Fisher, apart from the colour of his eyes. "Is my watch fast?" Aldred added.

"Very funny." Fisher scowled at his camera. "Listen, I've just been told a miserable worm called Sniffin' Billy has something on the NeoKirlans."

"Let's hope he knows more than the other so-called insiders we've been wasting our time on. Where does he do his lurking?"

"This time of day, it'll be the *Perran Cheese*."

"That sports ground? It would be. Well, at least we can put a working lunch on expenses."

"You going to?" said Fisher.

"One must never allow oneself to become too remote from the enemy, Charlie," replied his superior.

"I wouldn't mind staying remote from places like the *Perran Cheese*," muttered Fisher.

"We'll go in your car," Aldred decided, bringing the discussion to a close.

## Wednesday, July 16th

### *63. Intimations Of A Reckoning*

It was raining in the South. The county of Neal had been unlucky enough to catch a fringe of ill-natured weather from the mainland. Even though a liquid torrent was lashing the self-cleaning synthetic marble finish of the headquarters of the Crane Group, the holowindow in the managing director's office showed clear skies and sun-bathed countryside.

Sir Arthur Crane had more than the weather on his mind. Over coffee, he was reviewing an estimate of the losses of his group during The Troubles and comparing the totals with a valuation of the assets of the independent Refuse Reclamation Centres in his area.

His intercom buzzed for attention. Crane touched the *ACC* key absently. "Yes, Margaret?"

"Sir Nigel Grantby on the vid for you, Sir Arthur," replied his secretary.

"I wonder what he wants? Put him through, please."

The columns of figures on Crane's videolink dissolved into Grantby's over-large holographic projection. There was a hint of a devilish grin creasing the face.

"Good news, Nigel?" Crane remarked by way of greeting.

"And amusing," nodded Grantby. "As the Major predicted, Norm Chatelle wants to talk to us."

"I'd like to talk to him," growled Crane. "With a loaded shotgun."

"Norm thinks it would be useful if the ten of us got together. I suggest Camer, a week today."

"I'm not sure I want to talk to him. Unless he's brought an open bank draft," snarled Crane.

"Calm down, Arthur," laughed Grantby, who had just won a bet with himself as to Crane's reaction. "The Major assures me this fits in with certain plans. I promise you, Norm won't go home with a smile on his face."

"That's different." Crane switched from hostility to glee. "I didn't realize we were so close."

"He wants to discuss franchises," continued Grantby. "Not a word about reparations. So we'll talk to him about franchises. But a word of

warning, Arthur. Don't be too nice to him. He might suspect something."

"There's no danger of that!" scoffed Crane.

"If everyone else is agreeable, I thought we'd give him lunch, then spend the afternoon arguing around in circles. He has a daughter living in the Starbank area, a few miles away. He'll probably carry on there in the evening to see his grandchildren. He'll still be over here when the fun starts. We can discuss reparations when the shock's had a chance to wear off."

"I can hardly wait to see him again," growled Sir Arthur Crane through a predatory beam.

## Thursday, July 17th

### *64. Interim Report From The Major*

There were two trees in the grounds of the *Five Eichen Guest House* – both of them to be found in the car park. One was a sturdy buhn, and the other a simbel which was infested with creatures that resembled small, red spiders. Set in a rural area, thanks to extensive clearance of derelict buildings, the guest house had enjoyed an elegant past, it existed in a break-even present, and it had very little future.

Room 319 was better than representative of current standards. Major Rufus Tarpigan, who was sprawled full-length on the bed with his shoes on, had no complaints. His dark-skinned colleague, Captain Sam Smith, was sitting on the more comfortable of the room's two easy chairs and resting his feet on the other.

"How's the vetting going?" asked Tarpigan, blowing cigar smoke towards the greying ceiling to gas a passing fly.

"The freaks are easiest to check on," replied Smith. "It's the respectable ones that give you the problems. Mind you, we'd be absolutely lost without the entry codes supplied by our employer. Going through so many 'access denied' labels in the nation's computer files give you a sense of enormous power."

"Turning into a proper computer-worshipper, Sam?" laughed Tarpigan.

"It's not that difficult. All these stories of sacrifices and naked orgies round the Central Tax Computer at midnight on the night of a full moon sound quite fun."

"Don't you have to be a fully paid up member of the Civil Service for that?" remarked Tarpigan, consulting his diary. "The next full moon's a week on Tuesday," he added helpfully. "If you want to get into training."

"I'll have to find out if they can invite friends," grinned Smith. "Oh, yes. We had one of your pals trying to sign up. Charlie Fisher, Prot Intelligence. Works just round the corner from Alex Cardinal."

"How did he get into the act?"

"A minor mouth called something Billy. He can make himself fairly invisible at times. He hears things. This time, it was a couple of potential

recruits discussing *The Big One*."

"That's what they're calling it?"

"Very apt, if you ask me," said Smith. "Anyway, this Billy was able to give Fisher the vid number of one of our recruiting posts. He called in about a couple of minutes before we dropped it. Had quite a nice cover story worked out in the more accessible computer files. Not a bad effort for a rush job."

"I suppose you're giving poor old Charlie the blue-arsed fly treatment?" Tarpigan swung a fist at the fly, catching it in the slipstream.

"We've sent him rushing off to Norland," laughed Smith.

"Keeps him off the streets. He might even meet Alex."

"Is that there he is?"

"Doing a quick job for Sir Nigel," nodded Tarpigan. "He has to maintain a professional ignorance of what we're up to. As he said, it's all right for us, we can dash off to foreign parts if it all blows up in our faces. He's got roots and a private investigator's licence to think of."

"Well, it's not illegal to follow the letter of the law and not the spirit, as a candidate in a county election once told me," returned Smith. "The other lot are ignoring both. And we've got right on our side."

Tarpigan turned his head to look at his colleague. "You know, you've got a strange habit of saying things like that as if you could mean them."

"Keep a straight face and you can get away with murder," laughed Smith. "What does his little friend Dortmann know about what's going on?"

"Nothing, officially," said Tarpigan. "But why Grantby thinks that's going to stop her finding out anything she wants to know is beyond me. I don't think he trusts her fully yet. Probably because Security's such a basic corner-stone of a business these days. Worried about residual loyalty to his disgrace the Duck of Atmain, I should think."

"Can't think why Alex didn't look her up years ago."

"Fear," decided Tarpigan. "That the past isn't really the way he remembers it. That Ilse might not be glad to see him and make him look an idiot. It's always a chancy business, digging up the past."

"Our Sir Nigel isn't afraid of digging," remarked Smith. "Keeps his public hands clean but he keeps sneaking to these meetings for reports. Perhaps there's a lot to be said for vicarious thrills."

"The trouble is, you have to be seriously rich before you can indulge in them. I doubt we'll ever have that problem."

"You mean we're doomed to an ignominious end?" grinned Smith. "Shot to pieces in some swamp over nothing much?"

"Well, I don't have to tell you how many people in our line have

decided to do one last job – and found it one too many.” Tarpigan turned back his cuff and showed his watch to Smith. “Is he really that late, or am I fast?”

“Sure it’s the right day?” asked Smith.

“A man of many contradictions, our Sir Nigel,” observed Tarpigan. He blasted another cloud of cigar smoke at the orbiting fly. “Insists on punctuality, then keeps us waiting. I think that entitles us to lunch on him.”

“Suits me,” agreed Captain Smith, punching up the menu on the videolink. “I’m starving.”

## Friday, July 18th

### *65. Major Tarpigan Contacts The NTF*

Major Rufus Tarpigan rested his elbows on a well-worn table and asked, "So it's all fixed, then?"

"Bockan right, it is!" agreed his pale, bearded companion.

They toasted the success of the venture in synth-café. A constant muttering of expressway traffic seeped through the closed café window on their left.

"Your lads can pick the stuff up any time after Monday, but no action till Wednesday night at the earliest, right?" Dark shadows under his eyes from lack of sleep and his well-cut but crumpled business suit in marine stripe made Tarpigan look more like a dedicated reveller than a soldier.

"Fine by us," nodded the vital, leisure-suited young man at his side. "This should even the score for our people in that ambush in Neal. We don't like being used."

"Right! Nobody does," agreed Tarpigan, repressing an urge to smile at the irony of the situation. "You'd better leave first."

"Right. And thanks from all of us."

"A pleasure," smiled the mercenary.

Major Tarpigan gave the representative of the National Temperance Front a five minute start, then he left the café for a warm summer evening. There was a decent pub about two miles beyond the next exit from the expressway. A meeting with a member of the NTF always generated a raging psychological thirst in Tarpigan. The pub could also offer a basic but excellent evening meal.

He had arranged for a carefully selected NTF group to be supplied with plans and sufficient equipment to attack three of the Duke of Atmain's more important Refuse Reclamation Centres. It was only fair that another victim of Demirell's war with the importers be allowed revenge. The group in question had strong PSF connections. Anything that the remnants of the Popular Socialist Front, which was no longer as popular as it had been, could manage would be a bonus.

## Sunday, July 20th

### *66. Convenience And Compromise*

Intelligence Chief Inspector Raymond Aldred laughed openly at the apparition perched on the visitor's chair in his fifth floor office and asked, "That's your best suit, is it?"

"It's my NeoKirlan suit," protested Intelligence Inspector Charlie Fisher. "Don't you like it?" He spread his arms to show off his crumpled brown, green and yellow mottled safari suit and black knee-boots.

"You look like you've been lynched by 'lensters, maccar," his superior assured him.

"You think this looks buckle, you should have seen some of the others. They looked like they'd been dragged through a saw-wire fence a couple of times. Any coffee going?"

"Help yourself. Well, what brings you in on a Sunday, Charlie? And so early. It's only just after ten."

Fisher became serious. "It's this NeoKirlan thing. It just doesn't smell right."

"In what way?" invited Aldred.

"Well, it's nothing I can put my finger on." Fisher frowned as he poured synth-café into a Norlish coronation mug. "But I'm bockan sure I'm getting the runaround, Ray."

"I suppose this had to happen sooner or later."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Fisher produced a packet of Norlish uisge-flavoured cigarettes.

"There's something very political going on, Charlie. I keep meeting a disturbing lack of interest, stone walls and sometimes active discouragement when I try to discuss this whole NeoKirlan thing in the Higher Zones. The attitude seems to be: 'It won't be our problem when it breaks.'"

"You mean they know what's going on round at Great Wrytal Street?" frowned Fisher. "And they're not saying?"

"Some might. And the rest are trying to give the impression they're in the know too."

"Not our problem, eh?" said Fisher slowly. "Do you reckon they are going to storm that Norlish castle for the film we've been hearing about?"



One take only? And with real bodies?"

"It would be a pretty huge *Big One*."

"So where does this leave me?"

"As I see it, we can do one of two things," decided Aldred. "Pretend we're a pair of vid cops and batter away at the wall in the hope of finding a loose brick – and take the risk of the whole bockan lot falling on us. Or we can move on and tackle something more potentially productive. In the first case, success will bring us enormous feelings of personal satisfaction, if the vid is to be trusted, plus the ingratitude of the Higher Zones and a blight on our careers. In the second case, a decent level of achievement will bring us esteem, promotion and an eventual mention in the honours list if we can claw our way high enough up the ladder."

"Such a difficult choice," grinned Fisher.

"Isn't it just?" agreed Aldred. "You know, Charlie, I think I must be getting old. I can't remember what you're working on at the moment. Can't be all that important, can it?"

"You know," said Fisher, reappraising his safari suit, "I won't be too sorry to see the back of this horror. They nearly wouldn't let me into the lift. And the wife laughed her head off when she got over the shock."

"I'm sure you're in a rush to get home for a shave and a shower," grinned Aldred, pretending to hold his nose.

"You can laugh," returned Fisher. "But who's going to get a proper Sunday dinner and who's stuck here writing reports?"

## Sunday, July 20th

### *67. Alex Cardinal Tapers Off*

Ilse Dortmann emerged from the entry porch of the offices of Julian Legion & Company and called, "Alex, are you home?"

"In the kitchen, korolan," replied Cardinal.

Dortmann moved from the hall to the lounge. She reached to the left without looking and deposited her attaché case on a neat table topped with sand-gold plastic laminate. A right turn brought her to the swing door to the flat's kitchen. She found Cardinal standing beside the fridge, tasting a dry Tombrian white wine. "Been busy today?" she asked.

Cardinal treated her to a wine-flavoured kiss of greeting. "Not especially. Hungry?"

"Starving. What's the nice smell?"

"I had most of it sent up from the Belldan restaurant on the second floor," Cardinal admitted. "You take the wine through. The rest should be ready by the time you've changed."

Dortmann pushed through the other swing door and put the bottle on the dining table. The seventeenth floor windows gave her a view of Liston Grove that was becoming familiar and friendly. She was feeling quite at home in Camerland.

"It's rather like being in a restaurant with your special ambience tape playing," she remarked later to a background of murmured conversation and cutlery on china merged with gentle, swirling music.

"Eating out at home, as long as you keep looking out of the window," agreed Cardinal. "A way of getting away without going anywhere."

"I could have done with something like this at the castle, if there'd been anyone to share it with."

"The loneliness of command, Herta?"

"You tend not to become aware of it when things are going well, and I had quite a few friends in Cavenne. But it's difficult for a security executive to form strong attachments. Like the police, we're unreliable socially. And your authority goes if you become involved with a junior member of your staff. And the Belldans tend to be very old-fashioned about working wives."

"Is that a warning to me?" scoffed Cardinal.

"I'm sorry, Alex. I was going on a bit."

"We're friends, so it's perfectly all right to go on a lot."

"I think that's what I've needed more than anything. A friendly ear attached to a mouth that knows when to stay closed."

"So you're glad of the change?"

"Fishing for compliments, Alex?" laughed Dortmann.

"I'd be offended if I didn't know you don't mean that," replied Cardinal, contriving to look hurt just the same.

"He said from behind his multiple negatives," chuckled Dortmann.

"The last two weeks have been a marvellous tonic."

"Even though you keep dashing all over the country?"

"It's nice to come home to find the dinner's ready, Alex. I mean a proper meal, not something you can order up from the canteen. You'd make someone a good wife."

"Volunteering to be the someone?" asked Cardinal with a side-long glance of invitation.

"I might. When you've had a chance to find out all my bad habits."

"Bet they're not as bad as mine. Oh, yes – I'm going to Marn Bay with you tomorrow."

"That's nice. For a day out at the seaside?"

"A small investigation job. Some undesirable is trifling with the affections of the teenage daughter of Sir George Braben. He's being very mysterious about his past. My job is to dig into his background to find out if he's after her body or her money. Or both."

"Rather a change from what you've been doing lately."

"A little less risky, too. Unless the young sobok's part of a crime syndicate. Actually, I think I'm being tapered off now the Refuse Barons' new security consultant is getting into the swing of things. I expect a handshake and a final payment on Friday. So does Doris. She's off on holiday next week."

"Are you glad it's over? This job?"

"High risks for big rewards and a long life don't go together so it'll be rather a relief to get back to tracing missing persons and slipping a summons to some elusive sobok. Not that the little jobs are always so safe. You can get your head beaten in as easily for ten pounds as ten thousand. Still, I've got a couple of decent security consultancies promised for the middle of next month. Sorry, I seem to be going on a bit now myself."

"Where's Doris going?" Dortmann asked with a smile.

"A place called Boppard, half-way up a mountain in Tombria. Very elegant, if the brochures can be believed."

"Have you had a holiday yet, Alex?"

"Me? No, not yet."

"My grandparents want me to visit them at the end of September. I could show you Meermond and some Heitainan seaside."

"As long as they're not shocked at you dragging a strange man along."

"It might make them realize I'm not a little girl any more." laughed Dortmann. "And we went to college together. And here you are with grey hair. You're obviously no passing fancy."

"Would you like me to shave a few bald patches as well?" offered Cardinal. "To make them think I'm old and harmless?"

"I don't want them thinking I can only get a man who's too feeble to resist!" laughed Dortmann.

## Wednesday, July 23rd

### 69. *A NeoKirlan Vacuum*

Detective Sergeant Fred Drew, parking himself beside his superior's desk in their open-plan squad room and stared at him until Detective Inspector Mike Forrest looked up. "Want to hear something funny, Chief?" Drew asked.

"I'm just dying for a good laugh," Forrest assured him, energetically tearing pieces of paper in half and dropping them onto the heap that overflowed from his waste paper bin.

"I've just seen Charlie Fisher in the canteen."

"Not exactly hysterical, was it, Fred?"

"Ha, ha!" groaned Drew. "No, listen. When I told him about all those potential NeoKirlans who've gone missing, you know what he said?"

"Not being a mind reader, no," replied Forrest, pointing to an unoccupied desk. "Kick us that bin over, son."

"He didn't seem all that bothered at first. Then he said he hopes they remember to put film or tape in the cameras."

"Oh, yeah?" frowned Forrest, pausing with paper in each hand. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

Drew shrugged. "Search me, Chief. I thought you might know, being clever an' all."

"All I know is no one in his right mind wants to know about NeoKirlans," decided Forrest. "And now they've gone, we know for sure they're not holding their *Big One* around here. Just think of all the paperwork that'll save," he added with a dreamy smile.

"And the strain on the bins," added Drew.

"Do you know?" continued Forrest, accepting a cigarette. "Cheers! Some of this bockan stuff is two years old!" He ripped up another batch of blue, white and green paper. "I've got memos about memos here. Asking about memos about letters asking why I've not replied to some other bockan memo. It's at times like this I begin to think it might have been me that stuck that bomb in the Commander's car last week. And they wonder why we've not caught him yet! Who was it said the videolink and all the stuff that goes with it would free us from the paper jungle?"

"Not the bloke that put the printer attachment on them."

"They say every great invention has a fatal flaw," nodded Forrest. "Here, go and stick this lot in Don's bin while he's lurking somewhere else. Let's spread it around a bit so they don't work out where it's all come from."

"Or everyone might start getting rid of the junk?" laughed Drew, accepting a wad of waste paper.

*69. The Duke Of Atmain Returns To Camerland*

The Duke of Atmain and his pair of aides received a cautious welcome when their helicopter landed at the heart of Camer's business district, on the roof of Refuse House. Norman Chatelle had left the senior members of his security staff at home, judging that he would be quite safe in the company of his Camerlish counterparts.

Several helicopters belonging to the various news services fluttered around the building, capturing a piece of history and trying to spot VIPs among the concentration of security personnel. Ilse Dortmann was tactfully elsewhere.

When their discussions began, the Duke attributed an atmosphere bordering on good-will to the wines and liqueurs which had accompanied an excellent lunch. He felt certain that he was negotiating from a position of strength.

During an amicable if unproductive afternoon, the Camerlish Refuse Barons gave no sign of knowing that the Duke's firm if scattered position in what had become their traditional refuse reclamation market was due to anything other than normal commercial expertise. His wife, who had spent the day shopping, rejoined the Duke at the end of the session. They travelled four miles to the east, to the growing suburb of Starbank, to visit their daughter and grandchildren . . .

*70. A Fine, Red Evening or NeoKirlan Sunset*

Juggernauts were on the march. From every direction, along every road that led to Cavenne, wheeled monsters were closing in. Two tiers of warriors with plumed helmets sat quietly in the back of each heavy lorry, swaying gently with the motion of their vehicle. Servants of the Church of His Aweful Satanic Majesty occupied each cab – a driver and a mate, whose job it was to monitor the bio-functions of his platoon of NeoKirlans and to add a touch of control gas to the air if they showed signs of waking from a drugged torpor. These NeoKirlans were all

doubtfuls. The mercenary Captain Sam Smith's screening had shown them up as potential security leaks or lacking in proper suicidal conviction.

The remainder of the NeoKirlan army had already assembled on the outskirts of Cavenne. A flood of summer tourists from the other side of the Straits and Brivauche had been swallowed up by the woods to the south and east of the grounds of the Duke of Atmain's castle. The army received reinforcements to its wings when the juggernauts began to unload. Mock breakdowns of homeward-bound vehicles blocked routes other than those to be used by later arrivals. Traffic police helicopters arrived to attempt to direct impatient road users onto uncongested side roads.

An issue of weapons began. Each NeoKirlan had expressed his or her personal preference before the event, and they had been divided into preference groups. Human bombs mingled with machine gunners. Some of the warriors had opted for automatic rifles or light machine-guns, others for hand guns and grenades. Traditionalists carried swords, axes, maces and sharp-toothed flails in case they managed to come to close quarters with the enemy.

An atmosphere of nerveless calm hung over the speedy preparations. All those who would be taking an active part in the *Great Adventure* were under the influence of CHASM control drugs. The organizers of the *Big One* had no specific targets to achieve, and they were therefore taking a very cool, wait-and-see approach to the whole affair.

Half an hour from setting, the summer sun looked down on furious jams on the roads around Cavenne. Helicopters still dotted the sky, trying to work out routes round the trouble spots. When several aerial units from news services arrived, no one in authority took much notice.

Violations of their air space had been so common that the duty surveillance team at the Duke's castle ignored two newcomers when they flew right over the castle. A barely visible cloud of microfine particles drifted with the wind into open doors and windows. Minor irritations began to overflow.

A guard at the southern gatehouse of the outer bailey decided that he wanted a smoke and lit a strawberry-flavoured cigarette. His immediate superior ordered him to put it out. The dispute became a free fight.

One of the staff in the kitchen behind the Green Watch mess in the inner bailey dropped a cup. Another swore at her. Within seconds, the air of the kitchen was full of flying utensils, crockery, and hot and cold liquid and solid food.

Two members of the service staff decided that they wanted a particular parking space in the half-empty underground garage beneath the keep. They smashed up their own and several other cars in the butting contest that followed.

A tide of NeoKirlans swept slowly to the edge of the woods. Radios spoke in the helmets of a selected few. They relayed a command to the incommunicado majority. Every left hand lifted to its mouth. Every mouth opened. Every set of teeth crunched on a small antidote capsule. Every NeoKirlan swallowed.

The leader of the duty surveillance team in the aerial-infested building on the roof of the keep was screaming that the castle was besieged by giant helicopter-sized bats with huge, dripping fangs. Another of the team was just screaming. A third was staring placidly at a screen filled with plume-helmeted shapes, who were pouring over a wall in a never-ending flood.

NeoKirlans surged into the grounds of the castle. Patrols managed to report before being overrun. Nobody received their desperate alarms and calls for assistance. Yells of wordless joy, cries of *Kir-Laan!* and approaching wild screams of pleasure mixed with converging manic laughter were the first indications that many of the still-active members of the guard received that all was not well.

The last traces of the cloud of Devil Dust decayed to harmless by-products as the NeoKirlan horde reached the moat. Those on the southern side of the castle stormed across the bridge. Those on the eastern side displayed a rare co-operation by fitting together sections of prefabricated bridges with inflatable supports.

Charles Demirell, who had been fortunate enough to be in his windowless office when the cloud of Devil Dust had smothered the castle, marshalled the remainder of his army with panic-stricken haste. Alarms blared all over the castle, along with warnings to those still in possession of their senses to stop breathing until they had found a riot helmet fitted with a gas-filter.

The southern gatehouse shuddered as explosive charges lifted the steel portals from their hinges, crashing them to the ground with deafening metal clangs.

Closed-up in riot helmets, the defenders concentrated on intercepting the rockets aimed at the eastern wall. The rabble army took heavy casualties when sections of a concrete wall between the towers collapsed, spraying steel-reinforced shrapnel at the attackers, but allowing survivors to charge in. Automatic weapons laid a blizzard of death in the killing ground between the walls, until a hail of rockets



smashed the southern and eastern towers to flying rubble.

Triumphant NeoKirlans surged onward, crouching instinctively as more rockets raced over their heads to blast holes in the inner bailey wall. Buildings gaped open to receive the horde. Shouting, screaming, helmet plumes dancing, the warriors flooded through holes with projecting rusty steel-reinforcement fangs in the concrete inner bailey, racing into barracks, store rooms, offices, public rooms, private rooms. The castle's staff withdrew to the system of concealed corridors or the shelter of the keep with their bewildered or unconscious colleagues.

In a mad orgy of destruction, NeoKirlans rampaged into bars, grabbing bottles to drain and smash. In the absence of opposition, they turned on one another, acting out scenes recalled from films and holovision plays, fencing up and down stairs, lurking in ambush, burning and breaking wherever they went.

Neil Finder sat on a concrete floor, staring at a minute, dark grey chip of stone in an off-white concrete wall, waiting for a revelation.

Invaders who ventured into the open space between the inner bailey and the keep were cut down immediately. Those who remained in the cover of the buildings met a stiffening resistance as Demirell began to gain control of the situation.

Order returned when Demirell cleared the monitor room of the drugged duty crew and gathered a nucleus of his general staff. Assault squads dashed along stone and concrete tunnels, leaping out to ambush roaring NeoKirlans, then ducking back into the shelter of parallel passages.

Louise Liston trailed to the castle's small hospital, clutching desperately at the bone-deep sword-cut in her left arm.

NeoKirlans blew holes in walls with mines in their attempts to gain access to the network of concealed passages and the enemy. Those who located passages that led to the keep found themselves without a floor as traps opened beneath their feet. Impaling steel spikes broke their fall. Flame throwers blackened walls and bodies alike. Heavy duty lasers set at knee-height carved first through legs, then ripped through falling bodies.

Structures weakened by rockets failed to withstand the impulsive stresses of explosives or the sudden loss of supports and fell onto plumed helmets. Death waited everywhere for the intruders, but that was why the NeoKirlans were in the castle.

Inert forms, sedated to keep the horrors away, filled the hospital at the heart of the keep. The lucky ones had beds. The rest had to make do with the floor. A scratch medical staff could do no more than leave

them to metabolize their dose of Devil Dust. Wounded in need of immediate attention kept the doctor and his staff at full stretch.

Clive Westwood, lightly Devil-Dusted, sniped at the invaders from the ruins of a defence tower, picking off only those wearing a particular shade of blue.

Sweat-drenched castle guards pounded up spirals of concealed stairs to operate manual overrides on paralysed automatic equipment as power failures cut off vital defensive positions.

Terry Bleiler threw away his riot helmet, now sadly dented after having stopped a sword-cut fractions of an inch from his scalp. He collected a golden-plumed helmet and a flail on the run. Swinging the studded bar in a figure of eight pattern with his left hand and firing continuously with the needler in his right, he led a small squad out of a concealed passage to ambush a pack of drunken NeoKirlans.

Gradually, such sallies and their own internal conflicts wore down the number of invaders. Brian Pnight lost his footing in a dark pool of thick, congealing blood and crashed down a public staircase. A singing, howling mob surged round a corner twenty yards away. Pnight started to run. Sheer terror cast aside the pain of a broken ankle.

"Down!" yelled a voice from somewhere ahead of him.

Without lifting his head to see who had shouted, Pnight dropped flat. Deafening noise boiled over his inert form. Choking propellant fumes filled the air. An explosion of agony burst from his ankle as two of his colleagues seized his arms and dragged him into the safe haven of a parallel passage.

Fire surrounded the keep. The inhabitants of Cavenne stared in wonder at the thick smoke and leaping flames to the south. Holovision teams had switched their cameras from traffic jams to the battle. Bars overflowed as customers crowded in to watch the free show. The streets emptied as residents and bona fide tourists headed for homes and hotels to watch their holovision sets.

A comradeship of bewilderment bound strangers clustered around the same holovision set, which gave a much better view than they could hope to obtain with their own eyes of the events just over a mile beyond the city limits. Those in the south who opened their windows acquired a five second echo between explosions on their screens and real life at the Duke's castle.

A tall, black-skinned Centraller who called himself Captain Sam Smith raised thick eyebrows at Major Rufus Tarpigan. They were jammed into a corner of what had seemed a decent-sized bar until a few minutes earlier.

"Going rather well, isn't it?" muttered Captain Smith through a white-toothed grin.

"Our Satanist friends always did have a flair for theatre," returned Tarpigan without taking his eyes from the screen of the thirty inch holovision set.

Traffic police and holovision units zoomed around the castle, trying to make sense of the spectacle. The holovision picture failed for a moment when a stray rocket smashed into the camera helicopter over the keep. The rest pulled back to a safer distance and concentrated on long shots and zooms.

Supreme One of the Church of His Aweful Satanic Majesty took his eyes from a holovision screen long enough to find out why Supreme Five was nudging him. He accepted a generous glass of Brivauche cider and returned his eyes to the entertainment. Supreme Two handed him a fat cigar and clicked his lighter into life.

"You know, vreitei," remarked Supreme One, expelling a jet of smoke, "it's times like this that reaffirm my faith in what we do."

There was a general rumble of agreement from the other eight Supremes, who were packed into a room at the aptly named *Hotel Kirlan* in the expensive district of Cavenne.

Huge transport helicopters arrived, bringing troops, more police and the Civil Guard to the scene. All roads leading to the castle were jammed solid. The surviving NeoKirlans found themselves trapped. Demirell's security force had established itself in parts of the inner bailey and was on the advance. Fire swept through much of the wreckage. The invaders could only advance to the keep, retreat towards the uniformed tide boiling up the hill towards the castle, or stay where they were and burn.

"*Kir-Laaan!*" Screaming their battle cry, three hundred smoke-blackened, blood-stained, mind-blown, plume-helmeted NeoKirlans exploded from the shelter of the buildings lining the inner bailey to the climax of their first and last *Big One*.

Swearing continuously but without passion, Gary Mortlake crouched on broken glass behind a window of the Duke's map room and fired track after track of explosive shot at the last remnant of the invading army. Colleagues opened fire with every available weapon, spraying whole magazines without thought of aim. They cast aside over-heated and jammed weapons as they failed. Those without riot helmets began to succumb to asphyxia as the air filled with raw propellant fumes. Until there was no one left to kill.

The Great Adventure, the storming of an ancient castle in modern

times, ended there, in the open space between the inner bailey and the keep of the Duke of Atmain's castle. Dead and near to death sprawled gracelessly where they had been cut down. Not a one had penetrated to within ten yards of the keep. Half an hour had passed since sunset.

Intermittent shots still coughed from the battlefield as injured NeoKirlans suicided, or were given summary justice by the forces of law and order. Troops and police streamed into the castle to assist with fire fighting and the removal of the dead.

The night was long and unpleasant. A smell of roasting meat clung to the city of Cavenne until cleansing rain came, several days later.

### *71. Information And Anticipation*

It had been an odd sort of day in Camer – overcast since first light, but uncomfortably muggy and clinging out of doors. It was unpleasant physically and disturbing because of the strangeness of greenhouse warmth and humidity on a dull day. Devrel Sovershend had been travelling all day and he was feeling worn out. The day's importing venture had been a success. He had placed five samples of illegally imported wines in his refrigerator. A sixth stood corkless on a small table beside him, within easy reach of his pouring hand.

Katuishann was curled up beside him on the two-person lounge. They were half-watching the holovision news. Despite Katuishann's fears, Sovershend had met neither the Duke of Atmain's employees nor any members of the fringe groups which formed their allies, witting and unwitting, during his travels. Thus he had not fulfilled her prediction of appearing on the News At 22.

"Just who do the PSF think they're fooling anyway?" remarked Sovershend. "Apart from themselves, that is."

"Are you going to preach at me?" scoffed Katuishann.

"Sarcasm is the lowest form of twit, korolan."

"Is that right?" Katuishann asked with a worried frown. "That wasn't how my Ferran program put it."

"Only in our filthy, fractured patois. But look at them!" Sovershend gestured towards the holovision set, which was showing a taped report shot at a 'secret location'.

Two of representatives of the Popular Socialist Front were trying to convince the nation that their members were not mindless terrorists, and that they had had nothing to do with recent attacks on Refuse Reclamation Centres – either in Camerland or at Cavenne, half an hour earlier.

The fact that two members of their organization had been captured just after the explosion at Cavenne had been dismissed as irrelevant and a plot to discredit the PSF. Both spokesmen had denied individually and in chorus that the prisoners in Belldon were members of the official PSF or in any way connected with their movement.

"I mean," said Sovershend, "take him in the mask and the shades. The district chapter leader, or whatever. Can you imagine him as the Prime Monster if his 'popular revolution' comes off. How would he look in a morning suit at the airport, waiting to meet foreign dignitaries?"

"With his red scarf tied to one arm and a sub-machine gun under the other?" laughed Katuishann.

"Exactly!" nodded Sovershend.

"He'd be different, Dev. You have to give him that."

"That's it. Different. Too bockan different. Did you know, most people still see the Prime Monster as a respectably dressed man or woman of about fifty or sixty?"

"I don't think he'd be comfortable in a suit, Dev. Not enough pockets for his spare magazines and gas grenades. And the rest of the stuff that makes him bulge like that."

"Not that he'd ever get the job, anyway. The first thing his maccars would do after the revolution is cancel his membership for this plane of existence in case he started another revolution and got rid of them. Did you notice how many times he used the word 'democracy'?"

"Surprise me," invited Katuishann.

"Nine times in two minutes. Of course, what he means by 'democracy' is doing what he says in his capacity as self-elected representative of the people. Anyone who disagrees with him is automatically undemocratic and therefore a festering blot on the landscape. And a fair target for anyone with a gun and time on his hands. Beware of people who spout about democracy, Tish. It's usually one of its enemies speaking."

"Don't you approve of the PSF?" laughed Katuishann.

"Does anyone? They're just a bunch of 'lensters. But because they're flying a political flag, the bunch of soboks we call a government are too scared to dig them out and get rid of them. Scared of disapproving noises from our enemies in the rest of the world. They want to change the system for everyone's benefit, so they say. Get their grubby hands on a lot of well-paid jobs, more like."

"You're taking it very personally, Dev," said Katuishann. "What have they ever done to you?"

"They cost me money," returned Sovershend. "The taxes I pay are

wasted on tracking them down, repairing the damage they cause when they blow something up and keeping them in gaol for years on end.”

“Oh, you pay taxes?” scoffed Katuishann. “Since when?”

“Watch it!” growled Sovershend.

“I’m not afraid of you, pal. I’m no jelly, maccar.”

“Bet that wasn’t in your programming.”

“Creative verbal construction, it’s called.”

“Tell ’em anything as long as it sounds good,” laughed Sovershend. “Oh, I don’t think we need this.”

The news program had extended into the inevitable discussion. A group of talking heads, which included a psychologist, a military historian, Camer’s Chief Director of Police and a celebrity professor, was busy trotting out pet theories on the NeoKirlan Syndrome, the challenge of storming a castle and necessary modifications to tactics when modern weapons of offence and defence were available. It was all very academic and detached, and it seemed to bear little relation to the events of a little more than an hour earlier and 125 miles distant.

Three and a half minutes later, everything stopped for a commercial break. Sovershend switched his attention away from the holovision set but he retained a thread of contact. Some of the commercials for fort-beer and carpets were fairly entertaining.

“That’s fifty pounds I owe you,” remarked Katuishann.

“Oh, yes. Your insurance bet,” laughed Sovershend.

“It works, doesn’t it? Every time I bet you’ll get caught, you come home safely.” Katuishann was having increasingly frequent doubts about Sovershend’s route to an early retirement and she planned to make him change his ways – if that was humanly possible.

“Safe, thanks to your rotten luck.”

“Or until it changes. Or until my money runs out. I don’t have any in my pockets. Do you trust me?” Katuishann added with a dishonest smirk.

“Tell you what, let’s change the bet. You do me a small favour like getting another bottle out of the fridge and we’ll call it straight.”

“A simple thing like that isn’t worth fifty pounds, Dev.” Katuishann struggled to her feet, taking care not to knock her glass from the wide arm of the chair.

“You can have the rest as a tip.”

“Such generosity!” Katuishann disappeared into the kitchen. Glass scraped on a metal shelf. A muted humming noise began. Katuishann returned with a rapidly frosting bottle. “Watch out, it’s slippery,” she told Sovershend over a buzzing noise.

"Front door," said Sovershend. "Will you have a look while you're on your feet, korolan?"

Katuishann looked around for her shoes but failed to spot them. With a small shrug, she headed for the intercom. The screen showed a man in a red-biased flame suit and a strawberry blonde woman against a background of part of the mews.

"Flat two, Sovershend," said Katuishann, giving the standard identification and asking a question.

"Is that Tish?" beamed the man in the flame suit. "It's Cal and Lynn."

"Who is it, korolan?" called Sovershend, busy with the bottle. The cork had a tendency to break apart and it required careful handling.

"Someone called Cal. I think he's a Ferran."

"Better let him in or he'll kick the door down."

Katuishann checked the rest of the mews automatically before she pressed the door release. The outer door opened. Calvin Laurence and his wife Lynn advanced into the entry porch. The outer steel door closed behind them. Katuishann released the inner door. Footsteps sounded on the concrete floor. Then there was a click and a humming noise rising towards the room.

"Just like a Ferran," shouted Sovershend. "Too lazy to use the stairs."

Two heads came into view, looking for the source of the insult. The cork popped from the wine bottle.

"Could we have a couple more glasses while you're over there, please, Tish?" asked Sovershend.

"Yes, Master." Katuishann changed course.

"Nice to have a slave running after you," remarked Cal. "Whatever happened to that little redhead?" He began to drag another two-person lounge across the room. "And when are you going to do something about this lot?" He gave the room's impossible object décor a general nod.

"Feel free to rearrange the furniture," Sovershend invited, ignoring the penultimate question. "Actually, I was thinking of getting some flame walls put in."

"Hell in a bucket!" moaned Cal. "That would be even worse."

"That's great!" laughed Sovershend. "Coming from a bloke in a flame suit."

"What redhead?" asked Katuishann, holding out glasses to be filled.

"Just ignore him, korolan," advised Sovershend. "He's just mixing things. Ferries are well known for it. Even ones born in Norland. She was long before our time, anyway."

"Lynn, meet Tish, which is short for something I can't get my teeth

round properly," said Cal. "And I see Dev still hasn't learned how to fill a glass properly."

"Barbarian," muttered Sovershend, topping Cal's glass to within an eighth of an inch of the rim. "Cal's also known as Cool Cal – for a reason that escapes me for the moment."

Katuishann handed over the glasses with smiles of welcome. The women weighed each other up with typical wary, female caution deciding that neither posed a threat to the other. Katuishann reclaimed her place beside Sovershend.

"Have we met before?" she asked Cal with a frown. "I'm sure your face is familiar."

"No, he only stays over here during the football season," said Sovershend. "But you've probably seen the odd picture of him in my photograph collection."

"Known him long enough to find out all his disgusting and despicable habits, Tish?" remarked Cal.

"Only most of them," said Katuishann innocently.

"Thanks!" said Sovershend indignantly. "How the cradle of civilization, you two? Still there?"

"Santana is," replied Lynn. "We've been down south to the hills visiting some of Cal's relatives. Most of them seem to be female."

"Nothing to do with me," laughed Cal. "One of them's thinking of coming over here. Fed up of going to other people's weddings and all the heavy hints about when she's going to take her turn. Remember Diana, Lynn?"

"She's the one mad on flying, isn't she?" replied his wife. "And she was in that science fiction film, *Hermes*."

"Correct," nodded Cal. "The nurse and part-time film star."

"We saw that film," said Katuishann. "Who was she?"

"She was one of the passengers on the shuttle," grinned Cal. "They found themselves with an empty seat and she was handy. She only appears for a couple of minutes. Blink and you've missed her."

"So we've got another of the Laurence clan invading us, have we?" remarked Sovershend.

"Nope, a Kilvey," replied Cal. "One of the Springfield Kilveys. We have a mutual uncle who's supposed to be worth about a hundred million lobrons. I think Diana's about fourteenth in line. I'm seventeenth."

"You'll have to get some of your disreputable maccars to arrange a few assassinations," laughed Sovershend. "And what does Ferran Intelligence want with me? Or is this a purely social visit?"



Katuishann frowned at Cal. "Are you really a spy? Or is it just Dev being Dev?"

"Not particularly," laughed Cal.

"He *says* he works for an airline that no one's ever heard of," remarked Sovershend.

"We both do," explained Cal, giving his wife an affectionate squeeze. "And part of our job is keeping an eye on the competition to see what they come up with. But certain of my so-called friends like to think I'm a spy to make them glamorous by association."

He chose not to mention that he was indeed a part-time agent for the Ferran Overseas Intelligence Agency. Part of the strength of his cover lay in the fact that so many people called him a spy that logic demanded that he could be nothing other than an ordinary citizen.

"Just don't tell him anything, Tish," warned Sovershend.

"I dropped in partly to see if you knew anything about what happened across the Straits," insisted Gal. "The travel business doesn't like waves of that magnitude. And I heard a whisper that you importers are involved somehow. So here we are, ears agog."

"He was also muttering something about spoiling your evening, Dev," added Lynn. Her Norlish accent had a distinct South-Ferron shading. Cal's accent was very much that of a holovision detective from the streets of Yortan, the capital.

"I suppose I could always spoil his evening by keeping my trap shut," decided Sovershend.

"We also brought something to help the party along," Cal added, producing a bottle of marivodka from a flight bag and dumping it on the table, beside the wine bottle. Then he nodded towards a holographic projection of a burning castle. "Well?"

"Let's just say someone isn't the innocent victim he appears to be," said Sovershend guardedly. "He had it coming to him."

"If you don't want to talk in front of witnesses, we can always go into the kitchen," Cal suggested.

"Oh, no!" said Katuishann firmly, clinging to Sovershend's arm. "If you can tell a Ferran spy, you can tell me too."

"I agree," Lynn chipped in. "I want to hear it first-hand."

"Well, I heard it was CHASM," surrendered Sovershend. "That's a sort of secret society over here. They call it a church as a sort of tax dodge, but their real interests are assessing the potential of the human mind and having a good time. They're behind a lot of surveys of psionic potential. Trying to spot telekinetics, and so on . . ."

"Yes, they've got gangs of them like that where Cal comes from,"

Lynn remarked.

As yet another showing of the Duke of Atmain's personal tragedy began on the holovision set, Devrel Sovershend launched into a web of fact interwoven with conjecture and sheer invention.

## *72. Afterwards*

The Duke of Atmain's castle burned through the night. Over five thousand bodies were recovered from the wreckage, a mere handful of them the fallen of the defenders. The Belldan authorities decided not to take the time and trouble to identify the dead of the invading army. Live NeoKirlans were a curse, dead ones a costly nuisance. A plan to use Cavenne's Refuse Reclamation Centre as a crematorium came to nothing when a massive explosion destroyed the incinerator plant half an hour after the conclusion of the battle.

Two men were arrested at Morency as they were about to board a train for Camerland. They remained silent when questioned but they were identified as members of the PSF by the Fingerprint Section of the Camerlish Civilian Security Police. There were more explosions at Reclamation Centres at Virren, Ilseux and Valgarne. No arrests followed these outrages. The perpetrators made their way to the neighbouring department of Brivauche and the coastal town of Trentec. After toasting the success of their operation in real coffee at the town's most popular bar, they boarded a unit of Ambrose of Nottridge's new fleet for their journey of eighty-five miles back to a quiet spot on the south coast of Camerland.

Having returned from Camerland in haste, the Duke of Atmain and Mrs. Chatelle took up residence on the top floor of the Hotel Atmain, an imposing modern building in the southern quarter of Cavenne. Elsewhere in the city, the management of the Hotel Kirlan met to decide whether to change the name of their establishment. Shocked beyond emotion by the sight of his home being destroyed over and over on the small screen, the Duke listened to a preliminary report from his security executive, puffing mechanically at his pipe. Charles Demirell's uniform was artfully disarrayed and there was a larger than necessary dressing on his right cheek. He was enjoying being the hero of the hour.

Among the messages of sympathy came one from the Camerlish Refuse Barons. Their chairman called the Duke to tell him that his troubles resembled those being experienced by his colleagues across the Straits. With a hint of a smirk on his large face, Sir Nigel Grantby suggested that all of them were victims of a ruthless gang of inter-

national terrorist, who had an interest in halting refuse reclamation.

The Duke could only agree as Grantby called him 'Norm' in an excessively friendly fashion and suggested that a bright lad like his security executive ought to be able to tell the Duke why his castle had been attacked and by whom. Grantby concluded his call by hoping that the terrorists had achieved their targets, or that they would have to go into hiding for a long time. Then he suggested that 'Norm' would be too busy to leave Belldon for some considerable time.

When the videolink screen had swirled into a mirror after the call, the Duke borrowed Demirell's sidearm. He demolished the offending instrument with a well-aimed burst of explosive shot. Then he borrowed one of his wife's sleeping pills and retired to bed.

Acknowledging messages of sympathy, receiving visits from friends and colleagues and the eternal hoverings of the world's news media kept the Chatelles occupied for several days. The loyal citizens of Atmain could not do enough for their wronged Duke. Their gratitude knew no bounds as holiday hordes flooded into the area, pockets full of money, to view a modern battlefield.

The Adventure of the Century became firmly woven into the fabric of history by an industry spawned to cash in on public fascination with the hopeless, foolhardy courage of the NeoKirlan. Every age needs its heroes – no matter how misguided. The original Kirlans had sailed from Kraagen as warriors in search of loot. Many of them had settled in new lands to become farmers and traders, and they had died peaceful deaths in average old age. Their modern imitators sought only death, but that fact was never stressed.

Film companies, publishing houses, magazines – all leapt into the race to be the first to bring the story and the spectacle to a waiting world, to glorify the concept of throwing oneself into a battle which one cannot hope to survive as an alternative to an empty existence. A beach of fiction swamped a few sand-grains of fact.

NeoKirlan badges, fan magazines, board games, tee-shirts, ice lollies, posters, stickers, helmets, jackets, socks, NeoKirlanburgers, and fizzy, blood-red NeoKirlanade – every cashing-in imaginable flooded onto the market.

Tourists flocked to Cavenne to stand on the borders of the castle's grounds to see what they could of the battlefield and the rebuilding work, bringing with them reminders of the *Big One*. Much as he would have liked to, the Duke of Atmain was not allowed to escape the holovision eyes of the world, or those of children wearing NeoKirlan

tee-shirts and helmets with brilliant, dancing plumes.

Charles Demirell received a photograph of a bullet through the post, which prompted him to retire to distant parts with the contents of two secret Camerlish bank accounts. Terry Bleiler took over the role of the Duke's security executive on the strict understanding that he would be deposed by Louise Liston when she had recovered from her wound.

Neil Pinder found that the sight of white concrete wearing a limestone facing wound him up to a state of unbearable tension. He moved to the grey stone of a conference castle on the River Zinder, near Ostag. Life continued very much as before for the other survivors, but in different living quarters.

When the initial pressures had ebbed, the Duke of Atmain found himself beginning to enjoy being a celebrity, almost a national hero in his adopted homeland. He learned that appearing on holovision to express carefully rehearsed views could be quite exhilarating. But with the arrogance of fame, and the caution of a guilty conscience, he fought off a plague of writers, all offering to ghost his life story for a very modest share of the profits.

The rich and famous of Belldan society, elevated beings who had refused previously to have anything to do with a glorified dustman, no matter how far he was removed from actual contact with their cast-offs, flocked to Cavenne to be seen and photographed with the most important man of the moment. Following the instincts of a true politician, the Belldan President joined the parade and, at a magnificent banquet at his summer retreat, he created the Duke of Atmain a Commander of the Order of Belldon as a tribute to a public benefactor and a private contributor to his party's funds.

But Norman Chatelle's happy smile was forced occasionally when he accepted the respect and adulation due a person of his standing. On the afternoon before his glorious occasion at the president's summer home, he received a message from the Camerlish Refuse Barons. Honour would be satisfied and Demirell's misdeeds excused, he learned, if he dissolved and surrendered his Camerlish empire. The Duke could only agree to the terms on offer and accept that reparations were the price of peace – of an end to a struggle that could no longer bring commercial advantage to either side.

Thus the war ended, as most do, having touched many lives at great cost, and having achieved very little.



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