

They Came and Ate Us
Armageddon 2: The B-Movie
Robert Rankin

THE END OF PART ONE

If you ain't where you is, you 're no place, God

In the year 2050 planet Earth finally got the chance to enjoy Armageddon. It had originally been scheduled to occur in 999 and after that fell through, in 1999. However, due to certain legal loopholes in the original contracts and God moving in the mysterious way he is known and loved for, the thing didn't actually get under way until 2050.

But when it did it was a real showstopper. Cracking special effects, flaming chariots, angelic hosts, fire and brimstone, the whole kith and caboodle and the kitchen sink. All in glorious Buddhacolor and broadcast live as it happened.

The major pay-off came with the playing of the now legendary UNIVERSAL NOTE, which magically transformed Earth from an irradiated plague-pit into a pretty reasonable facsimile of the original Garden of Eden. An event of no small fabness by any reckoning.

The Big Figure then put his only daughter Christeen (twin sister of Jesus Christ, but unfairly edited out of the New Testament) in charge of the show and left her to get on with it.

The run-up to all this involved numerous comings and goings. These included spacemen, time travelling, sex, violence, TV gameshows, the Antichrist and a sprout called Barry. But all that is far too complicated to go into here. One point which might just be worth mentioning is that an independent survey carried out on the planet

7

Phnaargos in 2050 did manage to pinpoint the single root cause for the disastrous course of human history taken during the latter part of the twentieth century, a course leading inevitably to the Grand Nuclear Holocaust Event of 1999, which laid waste to two-thirds of the known world. The survey proved beyond all doubt that all the fuss and bother was the fault of one single man. That it could, in fact, be parcelled up and laid fairly and squarely upon the guitar-shaped doormat of one Elvis Aron Presley.

Yes, that very one!

8

PART ONE

I was not born to live a man's life but to be the stuff of future
memory. King Arthur

I knew Hyde Park when it was a flowerpot! Hugo Rune

At two thirty in the afternoon of 16 August 1977 the telephones on the desk of police chief Sam J. Maggott of Memphis PD rose against him. Spitting Big Mac, Sam snatched up the noisiest protester and shouted 'Yo' into it, the way one does. The not-too-distant voice of a junior officer poured a stream of incoherent gibberish into Sam's ear. This concluded with the words 'you'd better get over here quick, chief.

'You wanna run that by me again, boy?' Sam swept the other jangling phones into an open desk drawer and slammed it shut. 'You are telling me what?'

'He's dead, chief. Elvis. And there's some deep shit going down here.'

'Goddamn!' Sam Maggott held the handset at arm's length and regarded it as he would a negro come to propose marriage to his teenage daughter. 'You pulling my pecker, boy?'

'I swear to God, chief.'

'Someone shoot the son-of-a-bitch?' The phone was back at Sam's ear.

'Seems like he had a heart attack or something. He's lying in his bathroom. His security are all over the place

11

going crazy. You gotta be here ... oh shit . . .'

The line went brrrrrrrr. Sam voiced certain words to the effect that the junior officer's cranium was in fact a male reproductive organ and flung the handset aside. Elvis Presley dead. The paperwork . . .

Dragging his prodigious bulk from its reinforced chair he waddled across the room, perched cap upon head, clipped badge upon breast, jammed handgun into calf-skin holster. As he turned the door handle he also turned a fleeting glance back to his fetid office. The walls were made gay with forensic blow-ups of murder victims, mugshots of rapists and serial killers, samples of human hair in small plastic packets. The threadbare carpet was scarcely to be seen beneath discarded burger boxes and crumpled beer cans. The water cooler steamed gently and spent Camel butts formed suitably Egyptian pyramids above invisible ashbowls. Sam sighed deeply. Home sweet home.

'I'll be back,' said Sam. And indeed he would, eventu-ally. But not before the world as he knew it had turned into something far beyond his wildest imaginings.

I kid you not at all.

Enter Wed 2 June 1993.

The network helicar levelled out at five hundred and buzzed the line of stopped traffic.'. . . And for all of you travelling to work on the M25, my advice is don't do it. We have a toxic waste spillage with extreme bio-hazard causing five-mile tailbacks both east and west. Stay home and make love, good people. And back to you in the studio Ramon.'

'Well, not too much joy there I'm afraid, and very little joy in Red China at the present by the sound of it. Reports are coming in that the government now has the entire population jumping up and down on the spot in unison for five full minutes every morning. Nothing to do with the health of that benighted nation, we understand. But

12

a concerted effort to alter the axis of the Earth and shift the ever-widening ozone hole directly over Washing-ton . . .'

A manicured hand flipped the dial of the in-car TV and it moved back into the dash. On the wrist was a watch like a gold tattoo. A peerless pin-striped cuff led up a sleeve of likewise confection to a shoulder clenched by red elastic. It was a short haul to the receding perfumed chin, the pampered cheeks and the sun-bleached tresses.

The Porsche was deep in the tailback. The driver deep in the kind of cold fury that only one who has paid out 35K for a car to go zoom and finds it going nowhere can really experience.

John Timothy clenched the racing wheel and ground his expensive caps. He slumped back in the bucket seat and did some Oming. It didn't help one little bit. He thumbed open the electric window. Took a deep breath. A leathern fist swung in and smashed across his face.

'Christ.' John spat blood down his designer shirt-front. He turned in horror to view his attacker. A second fist joined the first and both began to pound upon him. The passenger door was flung open. A bald-headed woman forced her way into the car. The leathern fists had hold of his club tie, drew it up. His head struck the sunroof. The bald woman snatched up the car phone, wrapped the cord about his throat, and began to apply her strength.

John fought to free himself, climb from the car. The bald woman tapped the window button and the

window swished up severing three ringers from John's right hand. He opened his mouth to scream. His Filofax was rammed into his jaws, penetrating deeply into his throat. Credit cards spilled from the open end. The bald woman snatched one up, drew it across his filled throat. Sliced his head from his body . . .

Jack Doveston's wife leant over his shoulder and perused

13

the word screen. 'Voodoo Yuppie Killers,' she read. 'The new bestseller from the author of They Came and Ate Us.' Jack looked up fearfully, he hadn't heard her come in.

'Car phones don't have cords,' she observed. 'It would be physically impossible to push a Filofax down any-one's throat and as to slicing off heads with a credit card . . .'

She was laughing as she left the room. She made no attempt to hide it. Jack did lip chewings. One day he would be famous. He just knew it. One day. And when he was . . . when he was. Jack punched in FILE UNDER SEMINAL NOVEL and closed down.

Four men sit about a table in a secret room. A top-secret room. It is an American top-secret room. It is in a government establishment. It is deep under the ground. To get into this room you need major security clearance. Only these four men have such clearance.

These men wear identical grey suits. They might be brothers.

The room is lit from above, the way that snooker tables are lit. Great for atmosphere, card games, that kind of thing. Good on cheekbones and hands. Hands which bear enigmatic signet rings. We have seen all this kind of thing before. We hope that this time it is going to be worth it.

'Gentlemen.' One man speaks, the others listen. 'Gentlemen, we have a crisis situation here.'

'Are we in security?' asks one. It doesn't matter which.

'Free from bio-scan?'

'The monitors read out at zero.' Heads nod. Cheek-bones are brought into play. All this is being viewed from above.

'Gentlemen.' The first speaker again. 'You have all had time to view the tapes. You have all been at the press conferences. You all have intimate knowledge of the problem at hand.' More sombre nods. Some papers are moved slightly.

14

'I can see no alternative but to put the plan into operation. Any delay now could prove disastrous, with the talks coming up.'

'You have run this through the appropriate channels? It can be done? It will actually work?'

'With the present situation being what it is no-one will suspect anything. We are responsible for security. The measures are purely protective.'

'Then Project Wormwood has a green light.'

'There is no other alternative?'

'None.'

'And you are certain that the public will not suspect?'

'We have already run two pilots.'

'But what about infiltration? My sources tell me that pirates have penetrated the outer networks.'

'That is being dealt with.'

Heads nod all the way round the table. At least they know what's going on.

'Are we talking total body prosthesis?' someone asks. Which leaves all but a very few as much in the dark as when they came in.

There now comes a similarly unexplained cut to the year 2060. It might be Earth, but it sure as Hell looks like paradise. Grassy knolls, languid rivers, a copse or two, or they might be thickets, it's often hard to tell even close up. Arcadian glades. Plenty of those. And panning slowly across, some rude dwellings. Peering more closely one is able to make out certain signs hanging above the door-ways. One says Ye Blacksmith, another Ye Miller. Another still, Ye Keeper of Cattle. On a somewhat larger hut at the far end a sign reads Ye Ministry for Develop-ment, Land Registration, Monetary Control and the Reinstatement of the Status Quo.

In the doorway of this hut stands a tallish, broad-shouldered, whole-headed sort of a body. He stares into the sky and suddenly catches sight of something which may or may not be an enormous ballpoint pen.

15

'Rambo,' he cries out excitedly to someone within the hut. 'Quickly, it's us. We're back on again.'

'Eric, me old bucolic muckamuck,' a voice replies. 'I trust that you are not piddling windward.'

'No Rambo, honest. The biro is back. I can almost make out the exercise book and the tobacco packet. It's Rankin, he's in the pub again and he's writing.'

'Well, glory be.' Rambo Bloodaxe, for it is indeed he, thrust his head out through the hut opening and joined his bestest chum. 'Then if that's the way of it we're really going to make good this time.'

'And not before time, Rambo. All these meek who have inherited the Earth are really getting up my olfactory organ.'

16

acupuncture: A spiteful habit much favoured by the shifty

Chinese. Hugo Rune, The Book of Ultimate Truths

Rune's distrust of the 'damned Chinees' appears to have had its genesis during a meal he once took with George Orwell at a Pimlico Chinese restaurant during the early 1930s. Orwell records the incident in his first draft of Down and out with Huge Rune.

'Rune had invited me out to dinner to discuss this idea he had for a book set in the 1980s about his "Big Sister". I recall that in those days his appetite was quite prodigious. We were halfway through the thirteenth course when he suddenly clutched at his neck and fell to the floor. With the aid of a wok spoon and a couple of chopsticks I managed to extricate from his throat a three-inch bone which later proved to be the femur of a Ring Tailed Marmot.

'The restaurant owner was profuse in his apologies and promptly tore up the bill. Rune however was enraged and later settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.'

Evelyn Waugh also records this incident, although in his account it took place six months earlier and at a different restaurant. Curiously his description of the bone is ident-ical.

Sir John Rimmer, The Amazing Mr Rune

17

The road to Graceland, Elvis Presley Bou-levard, is, so to speak, about as broad as it is long, and not paved with particularly good intentions. Dogs do not foul its footpaths. Loiterers, either with intent or merely shoelaces to tie, are moved along at the hurry up. Winos with paper sacks do

not take sup in this neck of the woods. To paraphrase Bobby the Z, 'There are no bums outside the gates of Graceland.' Young female worshippers, come to lay their offerings before the King receive a scant welcome from the killer canines and armed militiamen of the so-called 'Memphis Mafia'.

But now, with a suddenness that made it all the more terrible, the unthinkable had occurred. The King was dead. And now chaos reigned supreme. The gilded gates yawned, feet trampled the sacred lawns. Police heli-copters swung in faulty circles, bullhorns demanded order. Cordons stretched across the road, cops displayed their weapons and ambulance sirens mourned dread-fully. The word was already on the network, an era was over. Elvis the man was dead, but Elvis the legend had only just begun.

Sam Maggott has penetrated to the epicentre of the chaos. It is the eye of the hurricane. Here is only an unearthly silence, an awful loneliness. There is little enough dignity in birth but there is none whatever in death. A fat man lies on a chill tile floor. He is wearing pyjamas, a yellow top, blue bottoms. His knees are drawn up almost to his chin. Already he smells bad. Sam pushes back his police cap, runs a knuckle over his moist forehead. Behind him people are running about shouting, crying, arguing. The dead man is at last all on his own. Sam stoops to examine the corpse. He feels the thick blue neck. Almost lovingly he strokes the cold bloated cheek. A grey sideburn curls away beneath his touch and flutters gently to the tiles. Sam is fascinated. He stares at it dumbly, then plucks it up and pokes it back on to the dead cheek. Upside down. He notices to his amazement that the deceased is wearing a wig.

18

i Sam won't be telling the press. Later he will be very surprised that no-one else has.

I

To the sounds of the immortal Jimi Hendrix, Jack Doveston swung his banjoed Oldsmobile into the car park of the Miskatonic University. It was full. The students' cars were newer and flashier. The students were punctual. A ready curse sprang to Jack's lips. He slammed the greedy Olds on to the grass verge, slammed \ the 'broken down' sticker on its windshield, slammed the rust-ridden door and slammed away up the drive.

The university never failed to impress him. It hardly could. All those Gothic spires and cupolas. All that tortured stonework, the fluted columns, the gargoyles and galleries. The mullioned windows with their stained-glass grotesqueries. Awesome. But for all of it Jack's heart dwelt in the dimly lit sub-basement, and he wouldn't have had it any other way.

Jack skirted the grandeur and made off down a set of side stairs. He let himself in with his pass key and threaded his way through musty corridors bound for the very womb of the great university. It was definitely the womb rather than the heart. The heart was three floors above, the great hall. Or at least that was what Jack's wife considered. 'Your own little womb, which you enter daily by the back passage.'

The book rooms were clean and dry and adequately ventilated, although the exhalations of 666,666 ancient librams weighed heavily upon the air. All those pages. Millions of them and it was Jack's job, as it had been now for five years since he had first come out here from England to take up the post, to transfer every one of them on to computer discs.

The project had begun on a grand scale, fifty terminals, manned day and night. But times were now hard and funding a thing of the past. Now there was Jack and Spike and no overtime. The largest collection of rare occult books anywhere in the world and just the two of

19

them to transpose the lot before they mouldered away to dust.

Jack had evolved the system, the cross cataloging, -referencing, indexing and whatnot, and the project was now not far from completion. The cream of the crop was in: The Daemonolatrea of Remigius, Joseph Glanvil's Saducismus Triumphatus and even the unmentionable Necronomicon of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred in Olaus Wormius's forbidden Latin translation. No kidding. All on disc available for anyone authorized to take a peek at, the originals sealed into protectrite shells

for eternity.

Jack seated himself at his desk and jacked up his terminal. The screen blued on, Jack tugged open the desk drawer, took up a half bottle of vodka and took a little slug of breakfast.

Almost instantly a horrid 'state of the art' telephone began to blow electric raspberries at him. Jack took it up without enthusiasm and said 'library'. To his small pleasure the voice of the dean wished him a good morning. Jack returned the redundant pleasantries. He hadn't had a good morning in months.

'Jack,' said the dean. 'How is the work progressing?'

'Excellently, thank you sir.' Jack did his very best to give it his all.

'Good, and you have everything that you need?'

'Well. . .' I have forty-nine empty desks, thought Jack.

'I wonder if you would mind coming up to my office.'

'Well . . .'

'Good. Shall we say five minutes? Thank you.'

Jack replaced the receiver and returned to breakfast. Five minutes, up in the office? So it had finally come to this, had it? He could already hear the dean's words delivered as ever in cold deadpan. Situation beyond our control. Constant cutbacks. Our hands are tied. Regret that we shall be forced to let you go.

'Something tells me,' said Jack Doveston, 'that this is not going to be my day.'

He was quite right of course. But what he didn't know,

20

although it is doubtful whether he would have received much consolation from the fact even if he had, was that this was not going to be anyone's day at all.

Rex Mundi work up on this particular day, although many years into the future, with a hangover. But as he dwelt in paradise he felt as fresh as the proverbial daisy. He belched, shamelessly, broke wind and rolled over towards his wife Christeen.

'No,' she said in her sleep. Rex rose from the nuptial couch and gave his surroundings a bit of first-thing inspection.

It was not at all bad, considering. Somewhat rustic, but that was the name of the game. Everything grew as required. Bed, chairs, tables, furniture all round. The only prohibition was the growing of televisions.

Prior to the Apocalypse, the heirs to the 1999 Nuclear Holocaust Event eked out a bitter existence on a forced diet of compulsory TV. Constantly under the surveillance of electronic iris scanners, rations were allocated according to the viewer's dedication before the screen. In paradise TVs were a definite no-go area. It was now ten full years since Rex had watched television and this fact gave him no sleepless nights at all.

He padded to the window, peered out and took it all in. It was another beautiful day and he was putting on weight. He prodded thoughtfully at his stomach. Dis-tinctly on the plump side and no doubt about it. Portly. Now that wasn't paradise. Beneath his fingers he felt his belly shrink away to be replaced by tight corded muscle. Now, that was paradise. And that really depressed him.

Before the big renewal he hadn't been much to speak of. He had been scabby, downtrodden, dumped upon from impossible heights, shillied, shallied, used, abused and beaten. But somehow he'd been alive. He'd won through and ultimately triumphed. Shit, he'd even got to marry God's only daughter, and that was no small thing in itself. But where was he now? Well, he wasn't dead,

21

although it seemed at times to amount to pretty much the same thing. Ten long years of doing exactly as he pleased and getting everything that he wanted. And what had it all turned out to be worth? Nothing, Rex concluded.

Perhaps Man just wasn't built for paradise. Perhaps it simply never got coded into his genes. Mankind generally spent its collective days either searching for something it could never find, or if by chance it did, then discovering that it never actually wanted it in the first place. There had been a word for this in the twentieth century. Rex searched his memory. Oh yes, cliché, that was it.

What he needed was some kind of challenge, conflict, confrontation. Some great quest. Something. Anything.

Rex gazed towards the naked Goddess on the continental quilt. She had to be the most beautiful woman that had ever lived. 'Come to me my beloved,' she murmured.

That made Rex feel even worse.

'Sit,' said the dean. Jack sat. The dean's office was the size of a small stadium. There was probably a ceiling up there somewhere. Vertical acres of wall displayed count-less bright rectangular patches. Much of the marble statuary had taken up their plinths and walked. The priceless carpets had obviously realized their price. Now probably wasn't the time to broach the subject of a salary increase.

'Am I about to be let go?' Jack asked, by way of making conversation.

'No no, Jack. Nothing of the sort. You have so much valuable work left to do.' The dean offered a wan smile, Jack accepted it for what it was worth. He studied his superior. A man about his own age, approaching forty, but with a fierce vitality. Something Jack did not possess. The dean was one of those square people. Square jaw, square shoulders, even his fingernails were square.

22

Everything about him said 'I am powerful and you are not'. The dean had more hair than Jack. He wore it in a flat-top.

'It is this memorandum,' said the square one, pushing a sheet of paper across the desk top. The desk was the size of a double bed and frequently served as one. Jack studied the sheet, and at length he said, 'I don't think I quite understand this. Who sent it?'

The dean tapped a nostril, it wasn't exactly square, but as near as makes no odds. 'Upstairs,' he confided, which Jack correctly assumed to mean the nebulous bodies who controlled the university.

'A security matter, Jack. A copy of this memo has fallen on to executive desks the country over. The government is concerned with security. Computer piracy, the hacking and sabotage of systems is now a major political issue. In essence the request of this memo is that we tighten our systems.'

'They are just about as tight as they are likely to get.' During his five years below ground, Jack had instituted a wonderfully complex labyrinth of entry codes known only to himself. His little hedge against redundancy. The codes were going to cost the dean a very large golden handshake.

'Good,' said the dean who, unknown to Jack, had been overriding Jack's codes for years. His little hedge against golden handshakes. 'I am certain that we are secure. But tell me, if a pirate did try to infiltrate, would you know?'

Jack was far from certain that he would. 'Of course I would,' he said.

'And do you think you could skip-trace and locate the source of infiltration?'

'No. Not with the present set-up. We do not have that kind of hardware.'

'But if you did?'

'Given time I suppose it could be done. I would need a considerable amount of gear. Sequence modulators, on-line decoder, cable links, multiphase . . .'

23

'All these in fact,' The dean pushed more paper in Jack's direction. Jack studied it. He nodded. 'All of these.'

'They will all be with you today. Good morning to you, Jack.'

'Good morning to you.' Jack Doveston left the dean's office a very puzzled man.

Sam Maggott watched the paramedics zip the defunct Presley into a bodybag. He left them to it, shuffled down into the southern sunlight and sank into a pool-side chair. On a slatted table stood a half-gone glass of bourbon. Sam took it up and turned it between his fingers. The drink was warm. When Elvis had ordered it eight hours before it had been on ice. It had helped to wash down a fistful of barbiturates. Sam fumbled in his pockets for his cigarettes.

He tried to figure out how old Elvis must have been, then recalled that he and Sam were both born in the same year. He'd found that out when his call-up came, he'd gone in a month after Elvis. Well, if it was good enough for the King . . .

But to end up like this. What a waste. The whole world had watched as Elvis fell to pieces. Almost as if he had some kind of death wish. Just blew himself away.

Sam was not one to wax lyrical. He was a big fat sweaty two-dimensional cop, and he knew it. But this was some kind of event. Some kind of statement and he was here right in the middle of it. And something did not smell right.

A young woman plunged into the pool, as if from nowhere. She was probably trying to make some kind of statement. But if so, no-one was listening. After a few moments of very well orchestrated drowning she pulled herself ashore, cast Sam a venomous glare and vanished into the milling crowds.

Sam placed the now empty glass on the slatted table and followed the men with the bodybag.

24

His progress was observed on a small telescreen by two shadowy figures.

'Put a hold on that guy, what's his name?'

'Maggott. Sam Maggott.'

'I don't want him within fifty miles of the morgue.'

'That's not gonna be easy.'

'What am I paying you for?'

'No sweat.'

Multiple orgasms satisfactorily achieved, Rex Mundi rolled himself a spliff of a magnitude only formally entertained by the likes of Fat Freddy and Freewheeling Frank. It didn't help any. His beautiful spouse returned to her slumbers. Rex shambled about, brewing coffee, pecking at a bowl of cornflakes, patting the dog.

'Ease up on the patting, man,' said Fido. 'You're giving me a migraine.'

'Sorry. Do you want a toke of this?' He offered the dog his spliff, which after half an hour's puffing, still showed no signs of getting any smaller.

'Not this early. I've got a morning of heavy bum-sniffing planned.'

'Each to his own.'

The dog peered up at his miserable master. 'What's on your mind, Rex? You've been on a real downer lately.'

Rex restrained a kindly pat. You could always rely on man's best friend in times of sorrow.

'I think I'm having my mid-life crisis.'

'You need a hobby, man. Something to occupy your mind.'

'A hobby, such as?'

'You ever thought about building an ark?'

'Funnily enough . . .'

'Well, just you give it some thought. A word to the wise is all.' Upon that enigmatic note Fido upped from his basket and made off through the hut door.

Sam squeezed into the squad car. 'The morgue,' he

25

said. The driver glanced back over a dandruff-speckled shoulder.

'Your wife has just been on the horn, sir. There's been some kind of accident.'

'Shit,' said Sam. 'Where did she call from?'

'Up at your shack, I think. The line wasn't that good.'

'Goddamn. That's fifty miles. Listen, get two guys down to the morgue, I wanna know every last thing that goes down there.'

'Everyone's pretty stretched. There's only Evans and Mishcon.'

'Those turkeys?' Sam mopped at his brow with an oversized red gingham hanky. 'Send them if they're all we got.'

The driver radioed in the message. 'The shack, sir?' 'Shit. I guess.' The car swung into the unruly crowds, sirens screaming.

'Excellent.' A shadowy figure switched off the telescreen. The lights went up revealing the interior of a large van. It was crammed with telescreens, monitoring doodads, hi-tech how's your fathers and state-of-the-art whatnots. One shadowy figure was now clearly displayed as a well-turned-out young man in a sharp grey suit. The other was anything but. He was bloated, sweat-stained and breathing heavily. And he was the very dopple-ganger of the man in the bodybag.

'Nice work,' said Elvis Aron Presley.

As the sharp young man looked on in considerable awe, Elvis began to tear at his own face. His fingers sank into the huge jowls and bore them away. He pulled off the pudgy nose and flung it to the floor. Ripping open his shirt he removed a bulbous carapace secured from behind. From beneath the hideous prosthetics a hand-some young man began to emerge. It was also Elvis Aron Presley, although this model had not aged by a single day since 1958.

Elvis peeled off the gross synthetic fingers which

26

sheathed his own slender digits, he plucked strands of latex from his killer cheekbones. 'This time we're gonna do it right, Barry,' he said.

'Barry?' queried the sharp young man. 'My name is Clive.'

Elvis handed him a bulging envelope. 'You are now a very wealthy man, Clive. My parting advice to you is, hang loose, keep schtum and never pollute your body with strange drugs. Got me?'

'Got you. It has been a pleasure to serve you, sir. We shall not meet again.' The rich young man took his leave and Elvis was left alone. 'Where to now, Barry?' the King asked.

'New York, New York,' came a chirpy voice from the rear of Presley's head.

'It's a wonderful town.'

'It surely is, chief, and we have a potential president there to assassinate,' said Barry the Time Sprout from the planet Phnaargos.

'Hey, Rex man,' called dog Fido. 'Check this out.' Rex Mundi poked his head around the door. 'What?' he asked.

'Now, call me a mangy cur or a feckless footpath fouler, but it seems like someone's just dumped a dirty big spaceship on your lawn.'

27

cruel to be kind principle: It is a proven fact that most awkward individuals respond well to the application of a stout stick. Also known as the persuasive percussion proposition, this has proved its worth time and again when verbal reasoning fails. Although it involves a re-gretable expenditure of energy upon the part of the hitter (unjustly treated person), the general good of the hittee (culprit) must be taken into consideration. One is being cruel to oneself in order to be kind to others.

Hugo Rune, The Book of Ultimate Truths

Rune's habit of striking malcontents with his shooting-stick earned him a certain amount of undeserved criticism from opponents of his credos. Koeslar, one of his chief pro-tagonists, in his infamous lecture Runistics: Cult of Unreason, accused Rune of being 'an arch fiend and wifebeater, perpetuating the evil philosophy that might is right and violence an acceptable form of social behaviour'.

Rune sat serenely throughout the lecture occasionally making notes, but for the most part appearing to be asleep. Shortly before the conclusion he excused himself and left the hall. And, as the court later heard, 'Lay in wait for Mr Koeslar in the alleyway behind the theatre'.

Rune's defending counsel stated that at the time of the attack, which was described as 'coldly premeditated and particularly violent', the accused had been under great emotional strain having just been pipped at the post for a Nobel Prize by Albert Einstein. He was deeply sorry for what he had done and hoped that Mr Koeslar would soon recover from his injuries.

Sir John Rimmer, The Amazing Mr Rune

28

1 Jack returned from the dean's office to find his lone assistant Spike already unpacking the equipment. She winked up at him as he made his way uncertainly to his desk.

'Yo, boss. Is this Christmas or what?'

'Or what.' Jack sat down and watched her working. She was just eighteen. Slim as a wisp and sharp as knives. Her hair was an orange napalm burst above thoughtful grey eyes. Her wide mouth seemed ever-set in a whim-sical half-smile. She was elfin. It made Jack ache just to look at her. But his lust was tempered by the fact that he had a daughter the same age.

Spike plucked electronic hokem from their packings. Each new find brought from her a small squeak of joy.

'Megabliss, boss. Did you order this?'

The dean.'

'Do you know what we have here?' Jack shook his head.

'This is Bio-tech. These chips float in plasma. Like they're organic, see?'

'Really?' Jack was impressed. Impressed and confused.

'Funny thing, though. I've read up on this tackle and it's restricted goodies. Military hardware.'

'Perhaps the dean has friends in high places.'

'So how come we've got this?'

'He had a memo. He thinks we've got pirates.'

'Pirates - in here?' Spike laughed. 'So what's to cut? We don't have any state secrets here, do we?'

'None that I know of. But he wants us to set up a defence net. Monitor any infiltration and skip-trace back to locate the source.'

'Cut the cutter eh?'

'I think so.' Jack generally understood about one word in three of the current argot. 'Can you set this up?'

'I could. Unless the cutter is other military. Go in there and you're dead. But if it's a street pirate then snip snap.'

Then will you set it up?'

'No. I don't approve. Most of my friends are pirates

29

one way or another. Everyone's getting a piece of something they shouldn't have. That's life.'

Jack understood well enough. Things were not exactly a bundle of laughs out there in the real world. The kids were schooled on computers. Education programs had ultimately proved cheaper than employing live teachers. The kids learned fast. Learning was a game. A sport. But when they left school they found there was nothing for them but menial jobs at low pay. So those that could turned to computer piracy. Crashing systems, tampering with accounts. Causing mayhem. It was slowly and surely bringing the economy to its knees. The govern-ment invested fortunes to develop new technologies to confound the pirates. Spin-offs from the new technologies were used to update the education programs and next year's pirates were even better equipped than last year's.

'OK. Then just set up some kind of warning and a record on anything that gets cut. If anything ever does.'

Spike grinned. 'That's sweet. And so are you.'

It was the nicest thing anyone had said to him for as long as he could remember.

'Where do you want the stones then, guvnor?'

Rex stared up at the spaceman on the descending ramp. 'Where do I want the what?'

'The stones, guvnor, for the henge.'

'I didn't order any stones. Will you kindly get your damn spaceship off my lawn.'

'More than my job's worth.'

'Job's worth?' Something in Rex's ancestral memory rang a big red alarm bell.

'Oh dear, oh dear.' The alien, a lacklustre type in a lacklustre suit of shabby grey, called up the ramp to an unseen companion. 'Got a live one here, Bert.'

'Just get a signature.'

'Yeah, are you going to sign for these?'

Rex did a silly sort of dance. 'Now see here. I don't know anything about . . .'

30

This is planet Earth, is it not?'

'Yes, but . . .'

'And you are . . .'

 The alien consulted his clipboard. 'Mr Rex Monday?'

'Mundi.'

'Well, same thing.'

'No it's not.'

'Listen friend, when you've travelled one thousand light years from the shores of Ganymede, banged through the Crab Nebula, negotiated meteor storms off the Rigel Concourse, you're not going to let a transposed letter or two fuck up your day. Know what I mean?'

'I . . .'

'So, where do you want these stones?'

'I didn't order any . . .'

 Rex sought a suitable adjective to express his extreme displeasure. None had as yet been invented.

'Who sent you?' he demanded.

'Ah, there you go.' The spaceman proffered his card. 'far east of eden landscape gardeners. beta reticuli. We have the contract for this world. That's my name underneath, by the way. Alf Parsons. Would you care to look at the plans?'

'No.'

Christeen appeared at the doorway of the Mundi homestead.

'Strewth,' said Alf Parsons from Beta Reticuli.

'What is going on?' Christeen enquired. Rex did major shrugs.

'Your henge, madam.' Alf bowed politely. 'Where would you like me to put it?' Rex restrained

himself, although he wasn't sure why.

'Put it out the back please.' Christeen vanished into the hut, reappearing but briefly to say, 'and make sure you put the roof on it this time.'

'Certainly madam.' Alf called up to his chum. 'Lady says to put it out back, Bert. And with the roof this time.'

Rex made fists, but didn't know what to do with them.

31

He slunk back towards his hut. Fido watched his master slouch by.

'You want I should go over and piss on his leg, man?' 'Yes,' Rex replied. 'I would like that very much.'

Jack took an early lunch so he could work on his novel.

'A veritable tour de force. A real belter of a book. Doveston blends socio-realism, nail-biting suspense and hard-hitting action into an unbeatable combi-nation.'

It didn't go well. He returned late. He returned drunk.

'How's it going?' he asked Spike.

'You're pissed again,' the elf replied.

'So, how is it going?'

'It's done. If we get penetrated-' Spike made an obscene gesture which had Jack chewing his lip '-this set-up will record whatever gets penetrated. As to cutting the pirate, that's up to you.'

Jack dropped into his chair. 'This is of course a total waste of time and money.' He gestured over the array of expensive paraphernalia forming a NASA HQ about him.

'Seems like. Listen boss, can I split now? As you're blitzed I wouldn't mind shiving off early.'

'I'm easy. But tell me before you go, how will I know if the system gets ... er ... penetrated?'

Spike stepped around Jack's desk and interfered with his terminal. 'This sucker will flash like crazy and play you Purple Haze.'

'Purple Haze?'

'Yeah. Well, you like Hendrix, don't you?'

'I like the way you think, Spike.'

'Sure, you're OK, Jack. You get drunk too much is all. You want to get yourself a hobby.'

'I do?'

'Sure. Ever thought about building an ark? A word to the wise eh?' And upon that curious note, which had

32

some of us thinking, Spike departed, whistling Purple Haze.

She wasn't gone five minutes before Jack's terminal took up the refrain.

'Scuse me while I kiss that girl...' sang Jack Doveston.

'Well I think it's very nice,' said Christeen. 'And it does have the roof this time.'

Rex wasn't impressed. 'But what is it supposed to be? What does it mean?'

'It's not supposed to be anything. It's art. It means what it is, that's all.'

'I'm missing something.' Rex had reached the same chemical condition as had Jack Doveston. 'I don't see the point.'

'Nothing new there.' Rex turned his wife a scornful look.

'It's art,' Christeen did her best to explain. 'Stone-henges, standing stones, pyramids. They're art. Classical sculpture. Galactic Counsel Grant. They are supposed to be inspirational. And decorative of course. You wouldn't believe the effect the first ones had on Earth's history.'

'It's just a con then,' said the enlightened Rex. 'Why didn't you say so?'

'Well, if you're going to be cynical.'

'Or realistic.'

'All a matter of opinion and interpretation. Back in the twentieth century there was this painter called Picasso. He didn't have a lot of talent, but he made up for that with ambition. He was not going to be put off by the fact that he couldn't paint very well. Not when he was determined to be rich and famous.'

'So who did he fool?' Rex should have known better than to ask.

'Hailed as the most influential artist of the twentieth century. Couldn't paint his way out of a corner. Of course he wasn't one of ours.'

'Phnaarg,' said the thoroughly enlightened Rex. It was

33

a cosmic truth, known to very few before the Apocalypse, that the entirety of human history had been nothing more than a TV soap opera, designed and orchestrated by beings from the planet Phnaargos to satisfy their voracious viewing public.

'As it happened,' Christeen continued, 'the greatest artist of the twentieth century was a fellow from Northern Ireland, Dave Carson. But who remembers him now?'

'About as many as remember your Picasso.'

'Sic transit gloria mundi.'

'Ah yes,' said Rex. 'I have been meaning to ask about my sister.'

'Oh, she's about somewhere.'

Somewhat earlier Gloria Mundi had pulled herself out of Elvis Presley's swimming pool. She turned a glance of utter contempt upon Sam Maggot as he sat sipping Elvis's last drink and paying no heed at all to her plight. Exactly what she was doing here, or even where or when here was, were matters which were currently weighing rather heavily upon her.

Jack Doveston was sobering up nicely. His terminal screen was jumping. Whoever had entered the univer-sity's system certainly knew what they were about. The rare books on disc were being scanned. But at amazing speed. Jack set the printout in operation. He was eager to see what was going on.

His reasoning went loosely as follows:

Someone has entered the system.

The dean wants to know who this someone is.

The dean has brought in very expensive equipment to achieve this end.

Ergo: Whatever is being lifted must be of considerable value.

Ergo: It might prove profitable to uncover the 'what' before worrying too much about identifying the 'who'.

Jack was really quite pleased with this line of

34

reasoning. It had a kind of inebriate symmetry about it.

The printout began to catapult lines of copy on to the folding sheets. Fragments of Latin, Coptic, Olde English. It looked for the most part sheer gibberish. And then it was over. Jimi stopped playing and the room went very quiet indeed.

'Golly,' said Jack Doveston. 'So what do we have here then?' He studied the printout. It looked a bit like a poem. A bit like, but not altogether. It looked, 'More like a recipe . . .' Jack examined it with growing interest, '. . . or a formula. Or a . . . spell. It's an incantation.' Jack whistled. He'd been long enough down here amongst all these books to know an incantation when one was staring him in the face. Jack tore it from the printer and examined it carefully. There was a certain balance to it, an almost musical harmony. The syllables seemed to be forcing themselves from the page, as if frantic to be read.

'Curiouser and curiouser.' He could certainly read them out. It couldn't do any harm. Magic was an art rather than a science. The layman could not simply reproduce results at will. Put magic under laboratory conditions and it would not respond. It was a bit like giving a child some music and a piano and expecting him to play you a concerto. The adept who chose the left-hand path to practise the black art gave his entire life to it, his soul. Hardly surprising, therefore, that magic would not whistle a tune for a sceptical lab technician.

Jack knew all this well enough. He rose to his feet, took up the printout and without another thought, shouted the words into space.

Wayne L. Wormwood stepped on to the rostrum and addressed the stadium crowd. 'My dear friends,' he began. 'My dear dear friends.' Cameras flashed summer lightning across flags and banners. Searchlights diced the sky. The cheers were deafening. The new president raised his hands as in benediction. The crowd stilled to utter silence.

35

Wayne L. Wormwood opened his eyes. The East Side Hall contained but a dozen onlookers. None were paying him much attention. The wino in the third row belched. The black with the headband chuckled and said, 'Tell it like it is, bro'.' A bag lady muttered to herself. Worm-wood gazed down at her. The bag lady stilled to utter silence. The black said, 'Uh-ha.'

'Tonight,' Wormwood passed his gaze over the ill assortment of New York low-life, 'tonight you are twelve in number. Tomorrow one hundred and forty-four. You!' He pointed to a fat biker who was picking his nose. 'Eleven of your fellows, yes?'

'You what, huh?' The biker started up. He met Worm-wood's eyes. Stared into his face. It was a long face, the nose aquiline, chin deeply cleft. The forehead high, reaching to a pelt of dull black hair. The mouth a cruel red gash. The eyes burned like glowing coals. 'Yeah, eleven, you got it.' The biker heard himself saying it. But his voice seemed to come from a great distance.

Wormwood managed a thin smile. He hunched his high narrow shoulders to lean forward over the make-shift rostrum.

'Yes, I got it. Haven't I?' The dozen heads began to bob slowly. He'd got it.

Shortly afterwards twelve people shuffled from the hall and back out into the rain-lashed night.

They had been told absolutely nothing, other than to return the next evening and bring eleven souls with them. And they would. Although they had not the slightest idea why. There had been no harangue, no sales pitch, no promises. But there had been something. They would never know what. They were not going to live that long.

Wormwood gazed over the empty hall. 'Just like that,' he whispered.

'Just like that.' The voice was high and piping. Worm-wood swung around to view its owner. She was enor-mous. Clad in a filthy black overcoat that reached nearly

36

to the floor. Wormwood was tall, but the old woman towered above him. He peered into the bloated face, half shadowed beneath an outlandish hat decked with coloured ribbons.

'I told you that it would be simple with the few.' Dewlaps rippled, blubber lips drooled.

'We shall see.' Wormwood turned upon his heel and strode from the hall.

'Tomorrow night,' called the gross one. Something small and dark, which might have been a scorpion, scuttled from her mouth and vanished into a cavernous nostril.

Rex Mundi jerked awake clutching his nose. 'Oh! Ow! What?' he shrieked.

'Lighten up, man,' howled Fido. 'Ease up there. You rolled on me.'

'Sorry.' Rex pecked at his nostrils. 'I had this bad dream. First in ten years. Insect up the nose or something. Sorry.'

Rex shuddered and rose up on his elbows. He groaned as he caught sight of a procession that was heading in his direction.

'Now who are they?'

'I expect they'd be druids, come up to celebrate the summer solstice.'

'So where's the police?'

'Police, man? Or do I mean policemen, man?'

'Sure, I know my history. Whenever folk came to celebrate their rites at Stonehenge, police blocked off all the roads, set their dogs on them and banged them about with truncheons. It was a twentieth-century tradition. An old charter or something.'

Fido shrugged. 'You got me.'

The fellows in the white robes and the pointy hats formed themselves into a circle about Rex and Fido. 'Oh celebrants,' called one, who was wearing what Rex correctly deduced to be robes of high office. 'Oh

37

celebrants, our sacrifice is here before us.' Rex and Fido exchanged looks.

'Must mean you,' they both said.

'Let his blood be spilled upon the sacred stone.'

'Don't fuck about.' Rex climbed wearily to his feet. 'That's my dog. On your way.'

'Cheers Rex.'

'Only the blood of the Living God King can consecrate the circle.'

'Cheers druids.'

'Let's don't be silly. What is that?' Rex pointed dumbly towards what looked to be a very long sword. The chief druid swung it to and fro. 'A simple bit of open-heart surgery,' quoth Rambo Bloodaxe. For it is he.

'Oh come on now. You are making a big mistake.' Rex wagged his finger at Rambo. 'This henge. It's not what you think. Here, let me show you the receipt.'

'New world, Rex. Time for a change of leadership. Don't take it personally. You had a good run . . .' The crowd closed in about Rex Mundi. Rambo's blade rose toward the bright blue sky, clearly visible through numerous holes in the poorly constructed roof.

'No wait. Let me explain. You see there was this spaceship

Fido bared his fangs. But in the face of superior opposition he made a strategic withdrawal.

Man's best friend indeed!

Jack Doveston was feeling somewhat downcast. Not that he had really expected anything to happen. But he had sort of hoped. He wasn't completely lacking in romance and the arrival of some djinni or holy guardian angel would have brightened up the day no end. Jack turned the printout between his fingers.

'Oh,' he said. 'Fold in the page. Didn't read the last bit. Endo sophistus apportem!'

There was a bit of a hush. In fact, there was a lot of a hush. Jack rooted in his ear, clicked his jaw. He couldn't

38

hear a thing. He snapped his fingers before his face. Nothing. Utter silence. 'Oh great,' he mouthed. 'A spell that makes you go deaf.'

There came a sudden high-pitched whistling. It grew in intensity, like feedback. Jack ground his teeth. Clamped his hands over his ears. The whistle changed in pitch. Became a many-toned whine. The library began to vibrate. Precious books tumbled from the shelves. The dean's equipment erupted in showers of sparks. Jack wisely assumed the foetal position. Space warped, drew in upon itself and flung something at Jack Doveston.

'Don't do it!' cried Rex Mundi. 'Don't do it!'

'Don't do what?' Jack peeped up fearfully. The room

was again still. A bewildered man in a soiled kaftan was

gaping down at him. Fanning smoke. 'Harrison Ford,' said Jack Doveston. 'Who?' asked Rex Mundi.

39

wheel: Why some races chose not to invent it. It has always been my contention, now universally accepted, that most so-called 'primitive peoples' know a great deal more than they are letting on. And that they choose rather to understate their intelligence than to benefit from it financially. On a recent trip to East Africa, the chief of the Wakamba tribe confided to me that his people had chosen, by a show of hands, not to invent the Carbon Fourteen dating technique. The modesty of such peoples should serve as an example to us all.

Hugo Rune, The Book of Ultimate Truths

1 'Christeen . . . man . . . you'd better come quick. Deep shit going down at the stones.'

Christeen emerged from the rustic residence. She was dressed in one of those long tight white Arthurian numbers, her hair wound in golden coils about her ears. 'What is going on, Fido? And stop doing that to my leg!'

'Sorry. It's all the excitement. Druids ... at the stones . . . big violence . . . Rex . . .'

Christeen sighed deeply. 'Violence already? What is it about Stonehenge? The moment those rocks go up people start chopping each other to pieces.'

'So Rex was saying. You'd better come over quick.'

The New Age Druids were arguing amongst themselves. There was much pushing and shoving going on. Voices were being raised. As Christeen approached these dimmed away to become embarrassed murmurs.

40

'All right. What is going on?' The Druids made innocent shrugs.

'Nothing,' said one.

'Where is my husband?'

'Haven't seen him.'

Christeen glared down at Fido. 'Don't look at me, man. Ask the one with the sword.'

'Sword? Who's got a sword?' There was further pushing and shoving and Rambo was suddenly thrust forward.

'Can I be of assistance, madam?' he asked politely.

'Rambo Bloodaxe. I should have known. Show it to me.'

Rambo produced the athame. 'It's nothing,' he said, smiling feebly. 'Folk art, that's all.'

'Folk art?' Christeen's voice had an edge to it. 'You have been beating your ploughshares into swords, haven't you? Where is my husband?'

'He sort of went.'

Christeen spied out the owner of this voice. 'Ah,' she said meaningfully. 'The other part of the double-act. And where did he sort of went, Eric?'

'He vanished. Into thin air.' Eric made encompassing gestures which soon were all the rage.

'And what were you doing to him when he vanished?'

'Chatting, madam.' Rambo bowed slightly from the waist. 'Having a little chat.'

'Ooooh!' said Fido in a manner much favoured by the late and legendary Frankie Howerd. 'He was going to stick him with the sword. Sanctify the stones, he said.' Christeen passed a withering look over the robed ne'er-do-wells, who withered accordingly.

'You were going to stick my Rex?'

'Just a bit of fun.' Eric gave a sickly smile. 'We didn't mean him any harm.'

Rambo patted his companion on the arm. 'I fear that the game is most probably up, my old arcadian acolyte. Best we clear the air, I think.'

41

Christeen folded her arms and tapped her foot upon the turf. Straw fluttered down from the roof. 'Out with it!' said she.

'Madam,' Rambo began. 'You will surely agree that it is the individual's right to worship in the church of his choice.'

'Yes.'

'And so in a perfect world, which this I recall purports to be, we were merely exercising our option.'

'By sticking Rex with your sword?'

'I agree that on the face of it this might seem somewhat radical. But isn't it often the case that what is anathema to one culture is the accepted norm in another? Laws, religious and civil, vary according to the needs of those who make and obey them. If I might just enlarge upon this a little

'Shut up!' Christeen was not smiling.

'Shut up? Aha! The witch-hunts begin. Already we are to be persecuted for our beliefs. Did I not warn you of this, oh my brothers?'

'You certainly did,' they all replied. 'Oh woe and wail and things of that nature.'

Christeen threw up her hands. 'Now just you hold on. Are you telling me that you are starting a new religion?'

'Reviving madam. Revitalizing, reinvigorating . . . reinstating, re this and re that. Yes.'

'Rambo, you were at my wedding. You saw who gave the bride away. You cannot be serious.' All eyes turned toward Rambo. He was still smiling if no-one else was.

'Madam,' said he. 'There you have it. The eternal paradox. Do not the monotheist and the pantheist ultimately pay homage to the single deity? God is all things to all men. The paths to enlightenment are many and various, but lead in a single direction when all is said and done. The almighty manifests himself in an infinite variety of forms, thus the manner of his worship does likewise.'

'Bullshit,' said Christeen. 'You know who my dad is

42

and he would not take kindly to you sticking his son-in-law.'

'So you say.'

'How would you like a big fat lip?'

'Is that a fat lip or a fatwa?' Eric asked.

'Very good, Eric.' Rambo shook his chum by the hand. 'I wish I'd thought of that.'

'I'm sure you would have, Rambo.'

'Aren't you the nice one, Eric?'

'Thank you, Rambo.'

'All right,' cried Christeen. 'All right. I don't care. Do what you like. Worship the grass if you want. But be warned it will end in tears. It always does.'

'I could snap his ankle,' Fido suggested. 'Often does the trick.'

'No.' Christeen shook her head. 'Let them learn the • hard way. I wash my hands of the whole thing.'

'But what about Rex?'

'Yes.' Christeen stalked away from the henge. Taking its cue from her departure the poorly constructed roof collapsed on to the New Age Druids. 'What about Rex? Where can he have gone?'

The two men faced one another. The one was tall and thin, if a little paunchy. He had blue eyes

and a slightly broken nose. His weakening chin was sketched over by a clipped greying beard. His thinning hair, a likewise hue, was tied back in a long ponytail. He wore a faded Hawaiian shirt, a wide-shouldered jacket of pale linen. Trousers of similar stuff and scuffed black brothel-creepers. The other was a dead ringer for a young Harrison Ford. He wore a scorched kaftan and foolish open-toed sandals.

Rex Mundi blinked and tried to take in his new surroundings. He was in a long low room. There were many books and many TV terminals. 'Oh no,' croaked Rex. 'When am I?'

'When?' Jack was clawing his way up his desk. It was

43

just possible that the vodka fairy had chosen to visit his drawer during the confusion.

Rex dragged him to his feet and began to shake him about. 'When?' he demanded. Jack blurted it out. Day, month and year.

'Oh no no no.' Rex let him drop. 'This can't be true. How did I get here?' He reached down once more for Jack who was crawling toward the door. 'Tell me how?'

'I don't know. Let go there.'

'What is this place? The Nemesis Bunker?'

'The what? This is the Miskatonic. Unhand me.'

'Who owns these terminals?' Rex had him up and was shaking again.

'The university. Get off. Who are you anyway?'

'Rex,' growled Rex. 'Rex Mundi.'

'Doveston.' Jack extended a hopeful hand. 'Jack Doveston.'

Rex gave him a penetrating stare. 'Doveston?' he said slowly. 'The Jack Doveston?' Jack nodded in doubt. He supposed so.

'Jack Doveston, the bestselling author of They Came and Ate Us?' It was Jack's turn to ask 'What?' Rex let him go. He smoothed down the crumpled lapels. 'You are that Jack Doveston?'

'I am.' Jack found his outstretched hand being roundly shaken. 'I don't think I quite understand.'

'Nor me.' Rex regarded his whereabouts once more before turning back to Jack. 'You are really him?'

'Yes I'm me. But my book ... I haven't even got a publisher for it yet.'

'But you will. My uncle Tony had all your stuff. He used to read it to me when I was a lad.'

'When you were a lad? What is this?'

'Certainly. Uncle Tony considered you the greatest novelist of the twentieth century. He reckoned that if it hadn't been for your tragic . . .' Rex's voice tailed off.

'My tragic what? Who are you? Where do you come from?'

44

'I'm Rex Mundi,' said Rex Mundi. 'I come from the year 2060.'

Jack mulled the concept over. 'Let me out of here!' he screamed. 'Lunatic at large. Help.'

The hall was silent. Wan evening light showed faintly beyond unwashed upper windows. One hundred and forty-five faces stared intently toward the speaker on the rostrum. Three minutes earlier he

had raised his hands to still the turbulent applause which followed the conclusion of his speech. Now he just stood there, frozen in the single spotlight.

Had there been any reporters present, it is hard to say exactly what their reactions might have been. The speech contained in essence two simple concepts. The world is in a mess. I Wormwood can solve this mess.

But there had been a good deal more to it than that. It was not simply what was said. It was in the how. The power lay somewhere between the words themselves. A single sentence repeated three, possibly four, times. Yet each retelling adding greater depth, insight, perception. A precision of thought and exposition which made a nonsense of all argument.

One instinctively knew that things were as this man said. If he said they were so, then they were so.

A ripple of Wormwood's fingers broke the spell. The crowd rose to its feet. Heads bowed, one hundred and forty-four souls shuffled out into the night. They would spread the word of his truth. Within a month they would all be dead. But by then the whole world would know the name of Wayne L. Wormwood. The spotlight dimmed. Wormwood left the rostrum.

The one hundred and forty-fifth member of the congregation sat alone to the rear of the hall.

'Holy shite,' said he.

'Ain't it just,' agreed Barry the Time Sprout.

'Sorry,' said Rex.

45

Jack lay sprawled across his desk nursing a big fat lip. 'You hit me,' he mumbled.

'I'm sorry. But I've got to get out of here. I'm not supposed to be in 1993.'

'I'm dreaming this. It's the Betty Ford Clinic for me.'

'Listen.' Rex raised his fist again, but it pained him deeply to do so. 'I will make this brief. I will say it once only. You are a great novelist, or will be. I am a desperate man. Somehow I have been hijacked into this century. I do not know how or why. But I feel it logical that you may. So, now tell me everything that you know, or surely you will enter a world oif great hurt. Do I make myself clear?'

Jack's head bobbed up and down. 'It all began this morning,' he began.

Wormwood left the building. He crossed the rubbish-strewn street and entered one of those long glistening black Cadillacs with the long glistening black windows, which might as well have VILLAIN flashing in neon above them, for all the subtlety they possess. The driver pressed a plastic card into the dash. The engine purred. The limousine slid away.

Within the rear-view mirror, although unnoticed by the driver, the headlights of a police car flashed on. At the wheel of this sat Elvis Presley. A designer cop in dapper uniform and exclusive mirrored sunglasses.

'You got a plan, chief?' Barry asked.

'I'm working on it.'

'Doesn't make a bit of sense, chief. And if I say that you can consider it said.'

'Sure enough, green buddy. We've been searching for this son of Satan for fifteen years and not a nothing. Seems like he never was born. No school records, never been to college, never had a job. Never even existed. Then we get this tip-off tonight. Who called us anyway?'

'Let me jog your memory.' Barry made certain adjust-ments to Presley's mental synapses. A

'Then how come you were issued it?'

'I don't know. But when the dean sees this he'll have my arse for an ashtray.'

Rex managed half a grin, but he really didn't have anything to smile about. 'And you have transposed all of these books on to disc?'

'On to a K carbon.' Jack swivelled back his terminal and withdrew same. He passed it to Rex.

'And so the elements which composed this spell, or whatever it was, are in here.' He turned the rainbow disc upon his palm. 'Somewhere.'

'Somewhere.' Jack peered up at the man from the future. Little cogs were beginning to turn. 'About my books . . . my novels . . .' he began.

The door of the library burst open. Two men in military uniform flung themselves into the library, weapons at the ready. Rex sensed the little red laser dot as it centred upon his forehead. He glanced sidewise at Jack the Writer who wore his like an Indian caste mark. 'Oh shit,' said Rex Mundi.

There is a nice lap-dissolve here for the aspiring B-movie maker. The two red laser dots blur to become the tail-lights of Wormwood's limousine. The fact that the events of the afternoon and evening appear to be oc-curring simultaneously should not be allowed to get in the way. No-one will notice.

Elvis blinked, pulled off his sunglasses and plucked at his eyes. 'Where's he heading?'

'Search me, chief. We've been driving northeast for

48

hours, as far as I can figure it. I guess he's heading toward Providence.'

'You reckon he might have grown up there?'

'Had to grow up somewhere.'

'I wonder,' Elvis wondered. 'Hey, what's he doing?'

'He's stopping. Now what are you going to do?'

Wormwood's car pulled over to the side of the highway. The lights dimmed. The rear door swung open. Elvis drew in the police car fifty yards behind. 'We're rumbled.'

'Not yet, chief. You're a cop, perhaps he's lost and wants directions.' Wormwood had stepped from the car, now he was striding towards them. He was full in Elvis's headlights.

'Run him down, chief,' whispered Barry. 'You'll never have a better chance.' Elvis gripped the gearstick. Worm-wood strode nearer. Now thirty yards and closing. The King's foot forced down the accelerator pedal. 'Do it now, chief.' Twenty yards . . .

Wormwood's eyes shone cat-like in the headlight's glare.

'Do it.' Elvis slammed the car into gear. He was shaking violently. Ten yards . . . 'Run him down.' Elvis let out the clutch. Wormwood was there, on the bonnet, but the wheels spinning and screaming tore the car into reverse. Elvis span the steering wheel, threw the stick-shift into first. Raced back along the highway.

49

. . . Ah yes, the 'wolf children'. There have been many examples of children being reared by wild animals, I agree. I have contributed much to the literature on this subject. The slides I wish to show you tonight, however, are of children who have been raised by insects and molluscs. I believe

my findings to be entirely unique. The East Dulwich Aphid Girl, the Penge Fly Children and the most curious of all, the Brentford Snail Boy. The first slide please, Rizla. Thank you. Now kindly note the watering can worn upon the head . . .

The Hugo Rune Lectures, Paris 1938

The chamber was vast and circular, girt about with numberless marble galleries. Spiral stair-cases connected these, but, so huge was the structure, that those upon the far side of the galleries appeared as nothing more than distant corkscrews. The walls seemed all over brass, peppered by a billion rivets. These blurred by aeons of ceaseless polishing. From each gallery, and peering up or down there seemed too many to count, high archways opened from corridors which led to further and further galleries. Throughout all of these could be heard the dull rhythmic throb as of a great heart beating. Or some titanic engine pounding endlessly away. Those who toiled in the galleries, and there were many, adjusting complicated mechanisms of antique design, all brazen tubes, dials and turncocks, had long ago ceased to be aware of the sound. They were attuned to it. Its harmony regulated their toil. There was no day

50

here and no night. No seeming sense of time. Just a constant state of now.

The controller seemed little more than a skeleton. His weak rheumy eyes had sunk so far into their sockets as to be scarcely visible. His head was a mottled bird's egg, a few wisps of transparent hair puffing out above the pointed ears, marbled by fine blue veins. The toothless mouth was pursed in a frozen scold. The nose nothing but a chitinous crest. He was swaddled in blankets wrought with curious patterns of birds and beasts long vanished.

Yet if he was strange and eerie to gaze upon, then his carriage was doubly so. It was an open brass curricule, standing somewhat under the height of a man, upon two coppered birdlike legs, jointed forward at the knees. The feet of these were trifold claws which terminated in black rubber pads. The conveyance offered a single, deeply cushioned leather seat on which the controller draped. His frail hands worked slim rods with gilded spherical tips. These engaged the clockwork mechanism which powered the bizarre contraption. It was not altogether the most commodious means of transport as it swayed perilously whilst strutting along. But the mummified driver handled it without apparent heed of caution.

The curricule picked its way from gallery to gallery, halting only for some brief moment when the controller issued some instruction as the mechanism was rewound. The dull click-clack of the padded feet, coming as they might and when they would, reinforced the sense of urgency in this world of the forever now.

In the curricule's wake trotted a gaggle of oddly dressed figures. These wore romantic uniforms, heavy with braid and filigree. But they puffed and bustled, the heels of their polished high-boots raising sparks on the marble floors as they collided with one another at each of the curricule's unexpected stops. They carried bundles of paper bound with gaily coloured ribbons. Calculating devices composed of tubes filled with bright liquids.

51

Transparent globes within which spheres floated free of gravity. Mechanical hocus-pocus. These men, the retainers, were as musty theatrical relics, grave-faced and self-important. They fussed and fretted when still and were never at ease. The controller appeared for the most part unaware of their presence. When he addressed one it was never by name. The nature of the question being such as to identify the one individual that possessed the answer. Each of the retainers being alone knowledgeable in one particular aspect of the great work.

'Are the blues above the yellow?' the controller asked. His curricule swinging violently about.

'Indeed Lord.' A portly fellow in a rich uniform of pink, high-waisted, green-sashed, fought his way to the van-guard. 'They are constant.'

'And the red bands are up. How far?'

A shorter body with enormous side whiskers eased forward. He gazed into the transparent globe he clutched to his bosom and gauged the swing of the spheres. 'Above the meridian, but only by a degree.'

'Only by?' The controller raised a naked eyebrow. 'Not good. Not good.'

'We can compensate, Lord. Readjust.'

'Then do it. Do it. And as of the now. Tish and tosh.' A frail hand tilted a guiding rod and the curricule turned and jerked up the gallery at a breakneck pace. 'Keep up. Keep up,' cried the controller. 'So little time, so much to do.'

Rex Mundi was now lodged in less than grandiose quarters. He occupied a small stone cell, which according to the graffiti had previously housed a certain Kilroy and a host of dyslexic anarchists. Rex was barefoot, clad in nothing more than his underpants and a pair of hand-cuffs. As furniture was unavailable he sat on the floor. A single bulb illuminated the windowless den. The door was a steel slab with no interior keyhole. The prospect

52

of escape held considerable charm to Rex. The means of affecting it was as yet unapparent.

Rex shivered. He thought about his little hut in Eden. He thought about Christeen of the golden limbs and soft red mouth. He thought about what an utter pillock he was for being discontented with his lot. He thought about food. He thought about how Aunty Norma had assured him that sitting on cold stone floors was a highway to haemorrhoids. He thought about the lavatory. He was dying to go. He thought about torture chambers and electric shocks. He thought about his father-in-law.

'God,' said Rex Mundi, 'I wonder if you might see your way clear to getting me out of here.' A key turned in the unseen lock.

'Well, much thanks,' said Rex.

'On your feet,' said the guard.

These rooms rarely seem to vary. They are usually cold, dank and smelling of stale fear. There is almost always a desk and a bright light which hides the man sitting behind it. There is often a big fat sadistic jailer, who sweats a lot and hits even more. The congealed blood and excrement on the floor offers small comfort.

Rex was forced to enter this room at somewhat greater speed than he considered altogether necessary. He bowled on to the evil-smelling floor and came to rest against the desk. Before he could voice any protests, and many did spring immediately to his tongue, he was dragged up by a big fat sweaty and sadistic jailer and thrust into a wooden chair. He squinted into the desk light. 'Now see here,' said Rex Mundi.

The big fat jailer struck him in the ear. Rex turned his head to view his attacker with a bitter eye. A voice from behind the light said, 'You're in deep shit, mister.'

'Oh yes?' said Rex. 'Oh yes?'

'Do you want to tell me all about it or . . .'

'Or what?' Rex had no idea why he said it really. The ensuing clump across the ear came as no surprise at all.

53

But then he was not feeling in a particularly co-operative mood and he still held out some hopes that God might choose to intervene sooner rather than later.

'Hard man, is it?' the voice enquired. 'We've seen hard men before and they always end up spilling their guts and crying for their mothers.'

I don't think I'm going to like it here, thought Rex. 'How might I assist you, sir?' he asked.

'That's more like it. Let's start with your name.'

'Rex Mundi, sir.' Rex saw it coming but he didn't have time to duck. It hurt as much as the others. Possibly even more so.

'Cut the Rex Mundi crap. There ain't no Rex Mundi. You got no ID. Your prints don't match any. You ain't no American.'

'I never said I was.'

'Aha. So where you from, boy? South America? United Russian Territories?' As telling the truth was clearly out of the question, Rex wondered which of the two options he should settle for. Possibly neither. The way the man behind the light spat them out they were clearly not allies. And he didn't want to get in any deeper than he already was. If that was possible.

'Or perhaps you're some Limey agent. You got a weird accent. What is it? P45? You SAS boy?'

A sudden thought entered Rex's mind. It was the proverbial long shot. Or was it? No it wasn't, Rex concluded. 'I am Commander Rex Mundi. Special Service Network,' he announced.

'S. Net?' The invisible man drew breath. 'Go on.'

'Here on assignment to SAG-COM out of the 117th under Hartog.' Rex hoped he had remembered it correctly. 'Where is my target?'

'Target?'

'Jack Doveston.'

'I gotta check this out.'

Rex leapt to his feet. 'Check this out? How are you going to check it out? You got clearance with SAG-COM?'

54

You think Hartog is going to identify one of his own agents? This is an S-Net operation. Top security. How come do you think I have no ID, no prints on match? I'm tagged internally and if you don't let me the hell out of here goddamn quick, the 117th gonna be using your arse for an ashtray. Do I make myself clear, soldier?'

There was a momentary silence behind the desk, and then a still small voice said, 'Yes sir.'

'Get these cuffs off me.' The big fat jailer dithered. The invisible man said, 'Do it.' The jailer fumbled with the keys, clicked off the handcuffs.

Rex rubbed at his wrists. They were red and raw. Diving forward he swung the lamp about and stared hard into the face of his former interrogator. 'Where's the toilet?' he asked.

The sun rose over Brooklyn. Some might have found the rooftops gilded with romance. Well, they might! One young man on a high balcony certainly did not. Elvis Aron Presley sipped bourbon and stared vacantly at the new day. The balcony extended from a glorious pent-house atop an apartment block of black glass and steel, which bore an uncanny resemblance to an enormous upright guitar. Elvis had designed the building himself and was the sole resident. The basement garage housed numerous cars, vans and motorcycles. The floors between this and the penthouse were given over to an extra-ordinary diversity of paraphernalia. There was sufficient weaponry to arm a regiment and stage a fair-sized military coup. Uniforms, costumes, suits and disguises. Provisions, scanning equipment, computer terminals. A gymnasium, a solarium, an indoor pool of Olympic proportions. Each was under minute security. There were video scans, laser trips, press pads and sonic sensors. All kinds of crazy stuff. The work of the pre-vious fifteen years and some previous. But now to what end?

Elvis sighed and took another sip. A voice in his head,

55

which wasn't his conscience, said, 'So you couldn't go through with it, chief?'

Elvis took a final sip, rose from his white pool-chair, refilled his glass. 'Run a man down in cold blood like that?'

'Not a man, chief. Not a man.'

'I guess I chickened, didn't I?'

'First-night nerves, chief. You'll get him next time.'

'We've been searching for him since 1958 and now I

'You'll get him. It's your divine mission, isn't it?'

'Sure, but perhaps it's just not meant to be.'

'Of course it's meant to be. You've seen the future. You know that Wormwood is old Nick himself. He blows up the world in 1999. Or he does if you don't stop him first.'

'But can I stop him? Can I kill a man? I can't kill a man.'

'The guy at Grand Central got killed.'

'That wasn't my fault.'

'He's still as dead.'

'Maybe if I talked to Wormwood.'

'Oh chief. Come on now.'

'No, listen. I was given another chance. I changed.'

'He doesn't want to change. He is the Antichrist. The all-round bad guy. The terminal stinker. He will become president. He will stockpile. He will press the nuclear button. You know this.'

Elvis hung his head. He did know this. 'How come I didn't just dodge the draft like the Phnaargs wanted? I'd have been president by now.'

The sprout seemed strangely silent for once.

'Well, how come?'

'You had this revelation, if I so recall.'

'Came like a voice in my head. If I so recall.'

'Well, I wouldn't know anything about that, chief.'

'Oh, wouldn't you though?'

'Lighten up, chief.' The sprout became suddenly chirpy. 'You'll fix it. Haven't I kept you young and pretty

56

all these years? Trust me. Say, how about if I chivvied up your erogenous zones for you?'

'You just keep out of my erogenous zones. I gotta do me some heavy-duty thinking. And I do mean, '. Take a nap small, buddy.'

Ten-four, chief. Zzzzzzzzzzzz.'

The sun was now fully up upon the Miskatonic river. The New England landscape shimmered in the new day. Beneath the great university the grasslands poured down toward old Arkham, where the gabled rooftops and the crooked cobbled streets wound between them was a ghost town wreathed in mist.

High on a hilltop, but sheltered beneath a bank of firs, was an army jeep. In it sat two men. One now wore military fatigues and sported a bright red ear. The other cowered in a canvas sheet. He had a bloodied nose and multiple abrasions.

'What did you tell them?' Rex asked.

Jack shook his head. It hurt. 'I don't know. Anything, everything, whatever they wanted to hear.'

'About me?'

'What could I tell them? Your name? I told them your name.'

Rex patted him on the shoulder. 'You look pretty sick.'

'What is my wife going to say?'

'I give up. What is your wife going to say?'

'Nothing kind.'

'Ah,' said Rex. 'It's like that, is it?'

'And some. But who were those people? What did they want with us?'

'I don't know. But I mean to find out.'

'You'll do it on your own then.'

'Some thanks. I got you out, didn't I?'

'If you had got me out before I got the beating I would have liked you all the more for it. How did you get us out anyway?'

'I lied.'

57

'But what did you say to them? It must have been good. They gave us the jeep and everything.'

Rex winked. 'Something I heard one time. Something Uncle Tony read me out of one of your books. He always said they were based on fact. I reckon he was right.'

'Well, it worked. God, I'm hungry,'

Rex gazed out over the landscape. So this was what it was like before the Nuclear Holocaust Event. It felt right, natural. There was an unreal quality to Eden. Something dreamlike, although he had not been fully aware of it at the time. But then, that's what Eden was, a dream. Bluejays fluttered up from the firs. Jack flinched, his nerves had never been up to much. 'We'd best be getting back,' he said.

Rex stretched and took deep breaths of New England air. 'Back to where?'

'To home.'

'I wouldn't advise that. Your house will certainly be under surveillance.'

'You mean . . .'

'I mean, Jack, that they will surely by now have realized that I lied to them. We are wanted men.'

'But wanted for what?'

Rex shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'But my job. My wife, my home . . .'

'Life's a bitch,' said Rex. That's an old twentieth-century expression. Perhaps you've heard it?' Jack maintained a sulking silence. At length Rex said, 'How are you for credits?'

'Come again?'

'Money. Do you have any money?'

Jack patted at his pockets. He groaned. 'They took my wallet. Everything.'

'All right.' Rex keyed the engine. 'Let's go down into town and steal some breakfast. Then we shall plan our next move.'

'I can hardly wait,' said Jack Doveston.

58

A-Z or allocated zones: It can now be revealed that the London Street Directory, in keeping with those of all other cities throughout the world, conceals a good deal more than it pretends to reveal. Large areas, the forbidden zones, are cunningly hidden through the use of one-way systems. Pedestrians who wander into these are never seen again. Hugo Rune, The Book of Ultimate Truths

In his book The Incredible Mr Rune (now sadly out of print) H. G. Wells describes Rune working with the pages of an atlas and an inflated weather balloon that he had 'acquired':

'He went about it as one possessed, there were pieces of paper all over the room. He had been attempting for hours to glue the atlas pages on to the balloon to see if they could be made to fit. At length he threw up his hands in defeat and cried.

"It can't be done. It can't be done. Be hanged with it, H. G. Let's go and have a 'Chinese' and I'll tell you this great idea I have for a book about the world being invaded by men from Mars."

I cannot remember anything about his idea but I do remember him being taken sick in the restaurant.

Sir John Rimmer, The Amazing Mr Rune

This house was old and rotten. The low ceilings sagged between greasy beams carved with the names of sailing ships. For this house grew up upon a cliff-top, wrought from daub and wattle and the

59

bones of schooners broken upon the reef. From the bottle-glass windows faint light welled. The door, an oaken slab, the grain deep etched and bound with hasps of rusted iron, swung in. The hinges groaning mournfully. Worm-wood stooped in the low portal as he crossed the threshold. The door crashed back behind him.

His footfalls echoed dull on the damp flags. He felt his way along a short corridor and down into the evil-smelling kitchen. There, seated in the inglenook, her bulk all but obscuring the thin fire which stuttered beneath the cauldron, sat the old woman.

'What do you see in the flames, mother Demdike?'

The creature turned the eye of a dead fish toward her visitor. 'I spy a cop who isn't a cop. And should I tell you more?'

'Tell me.'

'Won't you cross the gypsy's palm, my deary?'

'Tell me.'

'The young are in such haste. Where might they be running to?'

'Speak, crone.'

'Why have a care? I sent him away.'

'Then there is danger?'

'There is always danger.' Wormwood crossed the stone floor. Reached out his hand toward the old woman. A tongue of flame darted from the fire and stung him back. 'Have a care my dear,' squeaked Demdike.

Wormwood nursed a singed knuckle. 'Who is he? This cop who isn't a cop?'

'How can a man be yet a boy? I know not. The seer's eye is closed and the flames will not speak to me. But hear me well, my little Wayne. Never travel alone. Be watchful. Your Nemesis has marked you down.'

'My Nemesis?'

'I will weave for you a cloak of darkness. When it is done you shall have it. Go now and return not here. And shut the door on your way out, my old bones fair take the chill.'

60

'To hell with your old bones.'

'They've been there, deary. There and back.' Dem-dike's cackling laughter followed him from the room.

It was all very Lovecraftian and not a little unpleasant. And it was also far too over-the-top to be taken very seriously. But then that's Satanism all over, isn't it?

'That big fat jailer gave me a Chinese burn,' Jack complained.

Rex ignored him. He steered the jeep down towards old Arkham, taking in the scenery like the first-time tourist that he was.

'What are those?' he asked eagerly.

'Cows? Are you for real?'

'Cows,' said Rex. 'Far out.'

Jack moaned anew. 'Are they still saying "far out" in the twenty-first century?'

'My dog does.'

'Your dog? Fine. Don't tell me any more.' They drove on.

T'd tell you about my wife,' said Rex. 'But that would really fuck you up.'

'Now that does surprise me.' They drove on some more.

'What's that?'

'It's a pig. Will you be keeping this up all day?'

'Just trying to acclimatize. This is all quite new to me. I don't want to appear culturally illiterate.'

Jack shook his head. 'That's a pig and that's a sheep and those are chickens and that's a soldier

with a gun. Oh shit!'

Rex flung the steering wheel around. Shots whistled over their heads. The jeep plunged off the road and through a neatly clipped hedge. Then out over the fields.

'We'll have to lose this,' cried Rex. Bump Bump. 'There must be a homing device in it. They knew exactly where to find us.' Bump Bump Bump. 'If we can outrun them

61

for now we'll dump the jeep and make a run for it on foot.' Bump Bump Bump Bump. 'I think I'm going to be sick, Rex.'

Another jeep rose up behind them. In the rear of this was mounted one of those really amazing rotary machine-guns, like the one Blaine used in Predator. A friend of mine, who was once in the TA, told me that they can cut a car clean in half at two hundred yards. A pretty awesome bit of hardware by any account.

'Keep your head down,' cried Rex. 'They've got one of those really amazing rotary machine-guns, like Blaine had in Predator.'

'They still watch Arnold Schwarzenegger movies in the twenty-first century?'

'Videos,' said Rex. 'I used to. Seven nights a week. Look out!' The jeep shot over a hillock and plunged toward a rather idyllic-looking little farmstead.

Ebenezer Stuart was a Shaker. American Shakerism dates from the last quarter of the eighteenth century and really flourished during the middle of the nineteenth. To the Shakers God was a fourfold entity. Father, Son, Holy Ghost and the founder of the movement, Ann Lee. With Ann's birth in 1736 Christ had returned to Earth and the long-awaited millennium had begun. Sexual intercourse, that great depravity, could therefore cease and those who joined the movement gave it up once and for all. The obvious flaw in this didn't ever seem to strike the Shakers and so it is hardly surprising that Shakerism never caught on as a world religion.

The Shakers led intensely strict and ordered lives. They produced strikingly elegant furniture, brooms and brushes, cushions, saddles, stockings, gloves and mops. This being interspersed with periods of frenzied dancing, whirling and shaking which brought about episodes of religious ecstasy. They became subject to visions, issued prophecies, spoke in strange tongues. It had its moments.

62

As the New England Shaker community now numbered only three, Ebenezer Stuart being elder-in-chief, they were always on the lookout for new arrivals.

Ebenezer drew back the hand-stitched kitchen curtain and gazed out upon the new day. A jeep containing two white-faced men was bearing down on him at an ungodly rate of knots.

'Lord bless and keep us,' said Ebenezer Stuart.

The jeep struck the clapboard kitchen wall. Tore through it. Gathered up Ebenezer on the bonnet and came to a shuddering halt amidst tumbling treen, elm trenchers and all manner of other Shaker artifacts, which now command such high prices in the up-market sales-rooms of the world.

There was a lot of dust, crockery tinkling, slat and platter rattling. But this presently subsided and then there was an unholy hush. Ebenezer's plaster-strewn head appeared above the jeep's bonnet to view those of Rex and Jack.

He might have said anything really. There was obviously the opportunity for a great one-liner in there to carry the scene. But anything would have come as an anticlimax before the next bit.

Rapid machine-gun fire strafed the house. Putting pay to any priceless antiques which might have survived the first assault. 'Holy Ann,' gasped Ebenezer, 'he's got one of those really amazing rotary machine-guns, like the one Blaine had in Predator.'

Rex was scrambling down from the jeep, fighting his way through kitchen chaos. 'Sorry about all the damage. Send the bill to the Miskatonic University. Make it out to Jack Doveston.'

'Ain't you gonna make a fight of it, young fella?'

'Would you?'

'Sure as tarnation, whatever that means.' Ebenezer ducked bullets and made away to the gun cupboard. Here he kept a 20mm anti-tank weapon, which the

63

gunsmith had assured him was ideal for home defence. This was America after all.

Jack crawled under the jeep and assumed the foetal position. Rex dragged him out. 'I think we really should be leaving.'

Ebenezer was loading up the missile launcher. 'Who's after you, soldier? Commies, is it?'

'Could be South America, or possibly United Russian Territories,' Rex suggested as he and Jack made haste towards the back door.

'OK,' said the Shaker, arming up. 'Pay-back time!'

Rex and Jack left him to it. For as Duke's principle states: 'A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.'

They made off across the farmyard and entered the barn. Here stood a gleaming antique-looking motorcycle combination. Just waiting. The way some of them do.

'I'm sorry, but the dean cannot see you now.'

Spike thrust her hands into the pockets of her jeans and scuffed her boot heels on the eighteenth-century Kazak prayer rug outside the dean's office door. She turned a bitter gaze upon the dean's private secretary. The library is locked up. There's a guy with a gun standing guard at it. I've phoned Jack's wife and she says he hasn't been home all night. What's going on here?'

'Did you identify yourself to the guard at the library, Miss Laine?'

'I do not pass the time of day with the military.' 'Perhaps if you will just wait one moment I will speak to the dean.' The private secretary was tall, blonde and obvious.

Spike considered such women a total sell-out of the female species. Not that she was a feminist. That was a radical view taken to an unattractive extreme. She was a rationalist. She espoused the view that the world would be a far better place if people were accepted upon their merit instead of their age, sex, colour, race or willingness to spread their legs across the dean's desk. Being yet

64

young her ideals were still intact. So was her common sense. She pressed her ear to the door. Heated words issued from within. Spike Laine did not wait for the private secretary to return.

Jack's wife was finishing her breakfast. Their eldest daughter, Moonchild, conceived at Woodstock to the accompaniment of Jimi's 'Star Spangled Banner', munched macrobiotics. Neither seemed unduly put out by the absence of the breadwinner. They shared little in the way of anything except polite conversation. Jack's was not a happy house.

The relationship between Jack and Diane had started well. But that had been back in the sixties. And at the time no-one young realized they were in 'the sixties', they just thought the fun would go on and on. But it didn't.

They had met in 1967 when Pink Floyd played the UFO in London. They had all the right chemicals

and the overland trip to India. They had returned with the obligatory dose of dysentery and recuperated at the expense of the NHS. Later they had struck out for the New World, arriving in San Francisco in time to catch some of the Grateful Dead's greatest gigs.

1970 had seen them back home once more, Diane's pregnancy putting pay to further excess.

Between then and now there was a sort of vacuum. Jack had never really made it at anything. He had tried the lot. Anything of a literary nature, but it had all come to nothing.

Then five years ago, out of the blue, the offer of work at the Miskatonic had come up and they had crossed the big fish-pond once again. And for what? Jack had lied about the nature of the job. He had just wanted to get amongst all those books and write his own rubbish. And Diane? She festered. She had given up career after career upon Jack's whim and now she was stuck in a tiny rented house in an undistinguished quarter of Kingsport with no prospect of doing anything.

65

The youngest Doveston, Jade, was off at college in the Midwest. The eldest was seeking jobs in New York. The far shores of old Albion were calling Diane home. And Jack had been out all night.

'I shouldn't worry,' replied Diane to Moonchild's unasked question. 'He's probably drying out in a police cell.'

'I wasn't worrying. I was just wondering.'

'I was just wondering,' said Jack, as the combination rattled perilously along. 'How come a man from the future knows how to drive antique jeeps and motor-cycles?'

'Basic stuff. Not a lot of progress really went on after the NHE.'

'NHE?'

'Nuclear Holocaust Event. Thirty-first December nine-teen ninety-nine.' He bit his lip.

'What are you saying?'

'Nothing. Forget I said it. But cars and stuff. They improved the drive systems, nuclear fission and what-ever. But the basic gearing and suchlike remained the same.'

That answer seemed far too convenient for Jack. Amongst others. 'Do you have any kind of a plan?' he asked.

'I'm working on it,' said Rex, who wasn't. 'I have the feeling that something very big is about to happen. And somehow I have become part of it. If I was called back into this century there must be some purpose behind it. Probably divine. I have become a man of destiny, Jack.' Rex pressed low over the handlebars and the combination sped on.

Man of destiny! thought Jack. Self-aggrandizing pil-lock! Which was reasonable enough considering the kind of day he was having.

66

astral projection: The applied science of vacating one's body at will. Whilst the ethereal spirit self wanders abroad peeping into ladies' bathrooms, the physical body remains in a state of suspended animation. This unsavoury habit is much practised by waiters.

Hugo Rune, The Book of Ultimate Truths

The boy Rizla, Rune's acolyte and popper-out for Chinese takeaways, once forced open the rear of a TV detector van at his master's behest. The van proved, of course, to be empty, save for a hand crank leading to the fake aerial, some beer cans and a smutty Danish glossy called Donkey Capers. Rune concluded, rightly enough, that the vans were nothing more than a 'front' and that it was in fact an organized group of government-funded astral projectionists who located the unlicensed television sets.

Sir John Rimmer, Rune: The Man and the Myth

The controller's curricle swayed to a halt. The ancient flicked a lever and the cockpit tilted to afford him the view of an eager-faced young man.

'Inter-rositer Prestidigitent KK Byron Wheeler-Vegan, Lord.' The young man made a stiff salute.

'IP Vegan. What is it?'

The young man bobbed about in an animated fashion. He was blue-haired and blond-eyed, which wasn't quite right. 'I have a two-micron downgrade upon a lateral augmentor. I request a service replacement, as of the now.'

'This is hardly a matter for me, IP Vegan.' The

67

cockpit jerked up. The curricle prepared to step out once more.

Byron danced before it. 'But Lord . . .'

'This is most outre behaviour. Out of my way.'

'But Lord, I have made this request before.'

'Before?' The retainers began to chuckle. The controller remained grave. 'What do you understand by the concept of "before",' he demanded.

'I asked for a service replacement and I have not received it.'

The curricle swung about. The controller glared at his retainers. 'Well?'

'Unthinkable,' they chorused.

The young man peeped between the curricle's legs. 'I did too.'

The cockpit swung about. 'Where's he gone?'

'I'm down here, Lord. And I did ask for a service replacement. I know I did.'

'Outlandish. Beyond all reasonable thought. Who is viceroy of this gallery?'

'Zoroastra Findhorn, Lord.'

'Incompetent nincompoop.'

'As your Lordship pleases.'

'Well then. Is the fault now rectified?'

'Lord?'

The controller made exasperated tut-tuttings with his wrinkled lips. 'Have you not reported, as of the now, to Findhorn? Has not Findhorn, as of the now, replaced your lateral augmentor? Have you not, as of the now, refitted same? And are you not, as of the now, back at your duties?'

'Not as of the yet, Lord.'

'Hiffle and piffle and old plum pud. See to it boy.' The curricle leapfrogged the cowering inter-rositer presti-digitent and the controller sped away crying, 'Horses for courses and devil take the hindmost.'

'Well,' chorused the retainers, making off in hot pur-suit. 'See to it. See to it.'

68

Byron Wheeler-Vegan watched as they dwindled into the distance. 'I'll see to it all right,' he said. 'You just see if I don't.'

There is an old theatrical maxim to the effect that overnight success generally takes about twenty years of hard work. There is also an article in Ripley's Believe It Or Not entitled 'The Murder At Midnight'. This states, logically enough, that should one man see a murder take place at midnight and inform four people of it during the next four minutes, and should these four people tell four new people during the next four minutes and so on and so forth, the entire population of the world would know about it by morning. As to whether this could really work and as to how confused the original message would have become, is anyone's guess. But it seems feasible, doesn't it?

Elvis switched on the TV. Then he fell backwards over a rather tasteful leopard-skin sofa with a cry of horror which awoke the slumbering sprout from his vegetative catnap.

'Hoopla. Careful chief. Oh no!' Barry gazed through Presley's eyes at the figure on the TV screen. It was Wayne L. Wormwood. Antichrist. Son of Satan and all-round bad egg.

'Mr Wormwood,' said a comely female talking head.

'Wayne,' said the stinker. 'Call me Wayne.'

'Wayne. Yours is the name upon everybody's lips this morning.'

'Why thank you.'

'MTWTV [Murdoch TransWorld Television] has had the phonedlines jammed since early morning. Everyone seems to know your name and they all want to know more about you.'

'How?' Elvis asked.

'You ever hear about "The Murder at Midnight", chief?'

'Hush up Barry.'

69

'I guess I just made a little speech and it touched the hearts and minds of the good people of this great country of ours.'

'Vom-it!'

'Barry. Hush up.'

'But no-one seems to know anything about you, Mr Wormwood.'

'Wayne, call me Wayne.'

'Wayne. This wouldn't just be some kind of media stunt? Are you trying to sell us something, Mr Worm-wood?'

'You have my word as a fellow American.' Wormwood placed his hand over the area where his heart, had he possessed one, which he didn't, the rotter, should have been. 'I swear to you I am selling nothing. What I have I am giving away. And I have a lot to give.'

'I understand that several channels have been bidding to broadcast the speech you intend to make tonight. Is that so?'

'So I understand. However, I have accepted the offer to appear right here on this station. Without charge, naturally.'

The female talking head refilled the TV screen. 'So there you have it. Or do you? Wayne L. Wormwood. Who is he? What does he have to say? Find out here tonight. Live at eight on this station only. MTWTV. The station that cares about America.' Elvis thumbed the remote control. The

screen blanked.

'I'm gobsmacked,' said Elvis. 'That is impossible.'

'We saw it with your own eyes.'

'Shit. If I went down there right now and told them who I am, they wouldn't give me prime time.'

'The National Enquirer would run the story.'

'Shit, Barry. The Enquirer got me living in a bus on the moon with some guy called Lord Lucan. I gotta do me some thinking.'

'Chief. You gotta strap on your piece and blow that sucker away before all of this gets out of hand.'

70

'Yeah. I guess. Say listen. Have we got shares in MTWTV?'

'You got shares in just about everything, chief.' 'Uh-hu.' A certain look of enlightenment, which readers of episodes past will instantly recognize, appeared on the ever-youthful face of Elvis Aron Presley. 'I got me a plan,' said he.

'I've got a plan,' said Rex Mundi. He and Jack were enjoying a breakfast of stolen milk and raw eggs, although enjoying isn't perhaps the word.

Jack swallowed milk and leaned back amongst the bushes where they had taken hiding. 'Why me?' he asked the sky.

'Predestination is my guess,' Rex replied. 'Our paths did not cross through sheer chance. There is a guiding force at work here. Believe me. I know these things.'

'Then you know more than me.' Jack was struggling to persuade his throat that a raw egg really was nourishing.

'Considerably more, Jack. But don't ask me to enlarge.'

'You feel like telling me your plan, or would you prefer it to be a surprise?' Jack was working up a really healthy dislike for Rex Mundi.

'It has to be all in here. Somewhere.' Rex took out the K carbon from his jacket pocket.

'Is that my . . . you stole my . . .'

'Your transposition, yes. We didn't want it to fall into the wrong hands, did we?'

'But they body-searched us. Erghh. You didn't stick it up your b--?'

'Certainly not,' said Rex reproachfully. 'Sleight of hand. My Uncle Tony taught me.' Rex flipped the disc into the air. Caught it. Opened his hand. And there it was gone.

'Very clever. So what do you propose to do with it?'

'Run it.'

71

'But only 7 know the entry codes.' Jack made a smug face.

'I am well aware of that. Do you think I would drag you all over the place if you didn't?'

'Well. Thanks very much.'

'Let me put it this way. Whatever this contains it is pretty important to someone. The dean wanted

it protected from the hacker. He brought in restricted military equipment to do so. But the hacker still got in. Used it to formulate some kind of spell which brought me back into the past. Does this make sense so far?'

'Some,' said Jack doubtfully.

'Now you said that the hacker scanned the books at an impossible speed. What does this suggest to you?'

Jack thought hard. 'Ah,' he said. 'Another computer.'

'Exactly. Programmed to seek out the words and phrases to put this incantation together. If we can find the mind behind this program we can answer a lot of questions.'

'But how are we going to do that?'

'Run your disc, Jack, and hack your hacker.'

'Very good in theory. But somewhat dangerous in practice. The military have computers, Rex, they have Bio-tech computers. If we run the program on an open band to attract the hacker they will home right in on us.'

'This does, I agree, present us with a problem. However I think I have the solution to it.'

'Oh yes?' said Jack without enthusiasm.

'Yes. We will run a decoy for the ears of the military alone.'

'How?'

'From a portable deck set up in some phonebooth a good distance from where we will be running our program.'

'It could be done. We could set it to dial directly through to the computer at the nearest military base. There is one small problem here that I don't think should be overlooked. We do not possess any of the equipment

72

necessary to perform this miracle, neither do we possess another copy of the library transposition.'

'We shall steal the equipment,' said Rex carelessly. 'As to another copy, we will use the one you keep in your house,'

Jack's face fell. 'How did you know I have a back-up copy in my house?'

'Come on now, Jack. You have been working on this project for five years. No computer programmer working on such a project as this would be foolish enough to have but a single copy. What if something went wrong with the disc? What if there was a fire at the university? What if thieves broke into the library, or vandals? Logic dictates that there would be a back-up copy. Common sense says that you keep it in your house.'

'A regular Mr Holmes, aren't you?' Rex didn't bother to answer.

'What worries me,' said Rex, 'is the military are even now ransacking your house in search of this back-up disc.'

Jack spat egg all down his front. Rex shrugged. 'The military mind is not fast. But it is dogged and thorough. It goes by the book, but so,' and here Rex winked, 'do we.' He smiled. 'You've got egg all down your front,' he observed.

Jack scowled. And then an evil and treacherous thought entered his normally easygoing mind. And here it began to fester.

73

8

alopecia It has long been an established fact that the so-called 'great men' of our time are much taken up with the cultivation of exotic hairstyles The likes of albert einstein (that unprincipled scoundrel), Karl Marx and his brother Harpo, being prime examples There are countless more Beware of these men Baldness is a major step along the road to enlightenment The practice of baldness allows the cranium to absorb vital essences whilst offering mini-mum friction to the ether

Hugo Rune, Same Book

Einstein and Rune met face to face upon only one occasion, although it is believed that they corresponded for many years When Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize for his work on photoelectric emissions, Rune refused to go along to the slap-up nosh and wing-ding, claiming that Einstein had 'ripped him off

He did, however, bump into Einstein some weeks later at a Chinese restaurant Accounts vary over what they actually discussed but it is generally agreed that some 'pretty heavy debating' went on At one point Rune is reported to have jumped to his feet and told Einstein that he should 'step outside and settle it man to man' Einstein apparently paid the bill Sir John Rimmer, the Wonderful World of Hugo Rune

They called themselves the Zen Terrorists And they now had connections worldwide The first generation of computer kids back in the early 1980s had shown the way. Now there was no turning

74

back. An international network of teenage computer pirates exchanging information, updating programs, cracking entry codes and making mischief with every-thing from the money markets to the local dry cleaners. They lacked any formal organization, recognized no leaders, knew no borders or boundaries. Their computers conversed in a single language. The language of ana-logue, the global tongue.

Spike Laine cycled down toward the local Zen chapter house. She stopped off at a pay phone and dialled Jack's home. As the number rang she placed a slim plastic unit against the receiver. Jack's wife answered. The slim unit purred softly. Spike replaced the receiver. Jack's phone was bugged. Something very serious was going down. And it was possibly her fault.

For, whilst Jack had been taking his liquid lunch the previous day, Spike had been helping herself to several useful pieces of the Bio-tech hardware. She had sneaked them out before he returned. Perhaps the dean had checked upon how Jack was doing and discovered the loss. Perhaps she had put Jack right in it.

Although a rationalist, Spike was rarely slow to think the worst. But what was she to do? Own up? That didn't seem a very good idea. After all she didn't actually know that Jack had been arrested. His wife seemed to think he was out on some drinking binge. But the library was locked. And there was a soldier on guard. Something was happening and Spike wanted to know just what.

The Zen's local chapter house was in a basement beneath the Thelema Arcade, a video-games parlour in Lower Kingsport. Why subversives choose to congregate in cellars is anyone's guess. They are a right bugger to escape from when the secret police come knocking. But then they do have a certain 'ambience', especially when they are all smoke-filled and sweaty. It is just another tradition, an old charter or something. Spike cycled on down.

She parked her bike in a vacant rack outside the arcade.

75

Dropped half a dollar into the slot. Turned and withdrew the security key. Steel rods extended. Secured the bike against robbery.

The video-games parlour was as grim as any of them are. Lots of neon. Lots of nasty machines and

lots of kids who should have known better. Those playing, hunched in rows wearing headphones and goggles. Before them the holographic screens swarmed with mayhem. Everything was killing everything else. The Tec was a James Dean lookalike. If he hadn't been working here servicing the equipment he would have probably been out somewhere stealing some. He was wiring in a new game called CARRION. He exchanged smiles with Spike as she entered.

'Hi Tec.' Never got a laugh.

'Hi Spike.' A man of few words.

'New game? What's this one do?'

'Carrion.' The Tec flung her a glossy manual. Spike read aloud the cover blurb. 'Carrion. It bites back. New system Koshiho holophonic puts you where the action is. You are the last alive. The dead are on the attack. You have short-range maser cannon, shard sticks, hand strobe. They have teeth.' Spike tossed it back. She had seen it all before. The holophonics relayed through the headphones let you feel it when the on-screen enemy shot you. With this one you could actually have the pleasure of feeling what it was like to have a zombie tear your throat out. Sick stuff. Some fun.

Things had certainly come a long way since that first little bouncing tennis ball went back and forwards across the TV screen.

'I might just get around to zeroing Koshiho one of these days,' said Spike.

'You wish.' The Tec adjusted the macroscopics over his eyes and delved into the microcircuitry. Spike left him to it. She danced away to the rear of the arcade, through a curtained doorway and down a flight of steps. Pressed

76

her hand upon a concealed panel. A hidden door slid away. Spike stepped through the opening. The door slid back.

The cellar was smoky, sweaty and ambient. But there was none of the chaos one might have expected. No cable clusters, flashing bulbs, instrument panels, crazy hard-ware, junk trappings. It was neat and clean. Four com-puter decks backed against one another in the centre of the low room. Each was a white compact unit with a double screen and triple keyboard. Two of the decks were occupied. Spike approached the first and peeped over the operator's shoulder. 'What have you got?' she asked.

'Hi Spike.' The operator didn't look up. 'See those squirrels?' Spike gazed at the small ^pinning discs on the screen. 'Watch.' Mad John, for such was his name, tapped out a numerical sequence. Coded patterns chattered up the screen. At intervals the 'squirrels' darted amongst them and gobbled up a number or two.

'Who are you cutting?'

'Nobody much. My neighbour. I was collecting for famine relief. Last night I try him. He says it's God's will they starve, bastard. Doing his expense account as he says it. I just happened to spy out his comp account number. Today he is making substantial gifts to charity. Sure would like to see his face when he gets his next quarterly statement.'

Spike chuckled. 'What's Ella doing?'

'Punishing some sod I expect. How come you're not at the Misk?' Mad John turned to face her. He was fif-teen, cropped blond hair, even features, the body of an athlete.

'The boss has gone missing,' Spike explained. 'The military are guarding the Misk library.'

Mad John closed down. 'That's enough for today. Mustn't get greedy. So what's with your boss?'

Spike shook her head. 'We got issued a whole crate of Bio-tech yesterday.'

John whistled. 'Got any with you?' Spike winked.

77

'The dean reckons someone is trying to cut the boss's project. We were to set up a trace.'

'You didn't, of course.'

'Of course not. I just set up a trip to let him know when he was getting cut. Now he's gone missing. And I'm worried. I like the old guy.'

'When did you last see him?'

'About three yesterday. I left for home around then.'

'Then you missed all the fun.' Ella Guru stuck her long pale face around her terminal.

'I did?'

'I was taking a little afternoon cruise through the matrix. Just to see if there were any back doors open. When out of the blue comes this mega input. Never seen anything like it before. Lasted about three minutes. Put everything else off the screen. I couldn't get a fix on it. It must have been a Bio-tech cutter. Government or some-thing. It was no street pirate, that's for sure.'

'And that was it? Three minutes?'

That was it. And it hit the Misk, I could trace that. Come, I'll show you.' Spike joined the long thin young woman at her screen. 'It showed up again a few hours ago.' Ella punched codes into her deck. The screen displayed a revolving cone. Its colours came and went through the spectrum.

'What is it? Some new kind of game?'

'Some new kind of cutter! It's a seeker. Very sophisti-cated. Very expensive. It's searching for something.'

'Who is putting it out?'

'Can't say. It's working independently. Only know for sure when it's found what it wants and calls it back to its control. If we can follow it. See this.' She pumped away at the keyboard.

'See. System after system, finance, home modes, in-dustrial, telecommunication. It's in all of them.'

'Military?'

'Possibly. It's in every matrix, searching.'

'Some big number. But a bit visible.'

78

'Only to pirates like us. No straight is ever going to know it's there.'

There has to be a connection. What has the boss got himself into?'

'If I only knew what I have got myself into, I might have some way of getting myself out.' The combination had given up the ghost and the two men were trudging across fields bound for Kingsport.

'Why not just give yourself up and ask?' Rex suggested, without humour.

'Don't think I haven't considered it.'

'After what went on back at the farmhouse? You surely don't think they mean to take us alive?'

'Well . . . I'

'We are loose ends, Jack. Our only chance is to find out who is behind all this. Then maybe we can bargain our way out.'

'Couldn't we just make a run for it?'

'You could. But I doubt if you'd get far alone. I have nowhere to run to. I don't belong here. I must do whatever it is I'm supposed to do. Then get home.'

'That's hardly my concern . . .'

Rex grabbed him by the lapels. He was not by nature a man of violence. It turned his stomach. But his fuse was growing shorter. 'Listen Jack. Somehow you got me into this and somehow you are going to help get me out. I got you out of the jail. I got you out of the farmhouse.'

'Yes, all right.' Jack shook himself free. 'All right.'

The two men trudged on in silence. A few hundred yards ahead of them three camouflaged soldiers lay in ambush.

At the very centre of the planet, and that is all the clues you are getting for now, Inter-rositer Prestidigitent (and that is the last time I'm typing that) KK Byron Wheeler-Vegan bounced along the marble floor of his gallery. He

79

passed under an archway, along a corridor. Up a flight of steps and into an antechamber. Here he paused before a door which had a nice polished brass plaque on it. The plaque said Zoroastra Findhorn Keep Out.

Byron knocked gently. As there was no reply he marched right in. He found himself in a high-ceilinged circular room. Brass and copper tubes ran up its walls. Or down, whichever you prefer. At the room's centre stood a control unit. A real Captain Nemo job, all turncocks and gauges. Byron's fingers itched to have a little twiddle.

'What is it, Byron?' The voice came from above. Byron squinted up. Viceroy Zoroastra Findhorn stood upon the ceiling engaged at a control unit identical to that upon the floor.

'Viceroy.' Byron saluted. 'I have a two-micron down-grade on a lateral augmentor.'

'You always do.' The viceroy left his work, walked down the tubed wall and joined Byron. Zoroastra Find-horn bore more than a passing resemblance to the late great Rondo Hatton. The big hands, the lot.

'I need a service replacement.'

'You always do.'

'As of the now.'

'It always is.'

'Can I have one then?'

'No, Byron, you can't.'

'But I must always ask?'

'You must ask and I must answer. That is the way of it.'

'But why can't I have one?'

'You must always ask that and I must always answer. What must I always answer?'

'You must always answer "next time Byron".'

'And so I am saying that to you as of the now.'

'I will return to my work then.'

'You always do.'

The viceroy turned away and plodded back up the

80

wall. Byron watched him go. 'I always bloody won't,' he muttered under his breath.

'I had a good sniff around after Rambo's mob left,' said Fido. 'But seems like they were telling the truth. Rex just vanished into thin air.'

'I don't like the sound of that.' Christeen turned the water into wine and took a lunch-time glass.

'Perhaps you should have a word with your brother.' Christeen slammed down the wineglass. Fido took shelter beneath the table.

'No offence, man.'

'None taken. But my brother has had his moment. It's my turn now.'

'We'll have to find Rex. He might be in serious trouble.'

'He will be when I get hold of him.' Fido flinched. Christeen sipped wine. 'Did he say anything to you? About going somewhere, or something.'

'Nothing. But he was on a real downer. Lost all purpose, know what I mean?'

Christeen sipped further wine. 'He'll turn up. Probably off with some of his ghastly friends. Smoking dope and talking about the good old days.' Fido considered that unlikely. Rex never had any good old days.

'Listen,' Christeen stroked the dog's furry head, 'he's probably having the time of his life. You can make love to my leg if you want to.'

'Far out.' Fido did what he did best. 'Having the time of his life. Yeah, OK.'

Jack saw the abandoned jeep. But he didn't see the trip-wire. As he fell Rex instinctively ducked for cover. A rifle butt swung past his head. Rex turned and caught the soldier off balance. Struck for the throat. Another sprang from nowhere. Pinned Jack down. Rex dived at him but a third man grabbed him from behind and held him in a fearsome grip. Rex just managed to kick out at Jack's captor, caught him in the cheek.

81

'Get to the jeep. Get it started.' Jack crawled away.

Rex wrestled vainly to free himself. The fallen soldier sprang up rubbing his cheek. With an evil grin he jingled the jeep's keys toward Rex. Then he unsheathed his knife. Rex struggled but his arms were locked to his sides. The knifeman came in close. 'Stick him,' said a voice at Rex's ear. The knifeblade glittered in the sunshine. Rex gave its owner an almighty kick between the legs. 'The keys are here,' he shouted.

Jack was now on his feet. He turned in mid-flee.

'Jack, come on.'

Jack considered his options. Two soldiers down. The third held Rex. Jack limped back. Plucked the keys from the cross-eyed soldier. Looked up at Rex. 'Get it started!' Jack dashed for the jeep. The big marine who held Rex was tightening his grip. Crushing the breath from him. Rex craned his

neck forward. Sank his teeth into the soldier's wrist. Then he brought his head back fast. The big man's nose made that horrible crunching sound, the way some of them do. The marine fell back. Rex made a run for it.

Jack was fighting to start the jeep. He was shaking dreadfully. The engine coughed, faltered (exciting this, isn't it?), burst into life. Jack slammed the jeep into gear. Rex sprang at it. Missed and rolled into the dirt. The jeep tore forward, wheels churning up the ground. Rex was up and running. 'Jack, wait!'

Jack's knuckles tightened. His foot pressed down the pedal. It wasn't the brake pedal. In the driving mirror Jack saw the running man grow smaller. Then a shot ran out and the running man fell and became still.

82

congregational instinct of inanimate objects: Metal coat-hangers passionately entwined in the cupboard under the stairs. Supermarket trollies forming vast underwater legions beneath canal bridges. Little yellow-handled screw-drivers huddled in small groups behind the books on the top shelf. Spare fuses, down the back of the armchair. What are they up to then? It is my belief, now universally accepted, that inanimate objects possess a rudimentary intelligence. They seek the fellowship of their own kind. But not necessarily where man chooses. The inanimate object is a social animal and employing man wherever possible, he sets out to some prearranged rendezvous where he can buddy up with his chums and chew the fat about the good old days.

Hugo Rune, It's That Book Again

Setting out to prove his theory, Rune built up com-prehensive lists of the favourite nesting places of 'lost' household objects. Each week he would scour his home from room to room seeking out the wayward blighters and plotting their new habitations. It was his intention to compile a handbook which would enable the layman to trace without difficulty any mislaid item. With a Nobel Prize staring him in the face he was forced to abandon the project. All of his biros had gone missing and he could not remember where he had put his notes.

Sir John Rimmer, H. Rune Knew My Father

Jack kept his foot hard down. He was free! He had escaped with his life. Escaped from the

83

soldiers. Escaped from the madman who claimed to be from the future. He was free! Jack threw back his head and laughed like a loon. 'I'm free!'

Jack brought the jeep to a sudden halt. Gripped the door. Doubled over it and was violently sick. Milk and raw eggs. Bluch! What had he done? Cold reality made a head-on collision. He had betrayed the man who had saved his life. Left him to die. Guilt made a big bad fist in his stomach. Saved his own skin at the expense of a man's life. How could he ever hope to live with that one? 'Oh my God.' Jack sank over the door and wept into his puke. What in the name of sweet Heaven was he going to do now?

He wiped his eyes and tried to get a grip of himself. He was going to have to do something. He wasn't free. He was driving a stolen jeep. Men wanted to kill him. They would track him down. So what to do? Drive till the petrol runs out? Where? Upstate, downstate? And what about his family? What if they'd been arrested? Tortured? He hadn't done anything illegal. Muttered some magic words or something. What kind of crime was that?

'Think, you bastard.' Jack punished his fists on the steering wheel. 'Do something.' Anything. Go back for Rex. That's it. Go back and find him. Perhaps he's not dead. No! He's dead all right. The soldiers put a bullet through him. Go back and make sure. No! The soldiers might think of that, be lying in wait for him.

Go home then. No! They would be expecting him to do that. The university then? No point. 'Do something.' Get help. Someone he could trust. There wasn't anyone he could trust. There had to be someone. There was someone. There was Spike. He could trust Spike.

But he couldn't get her involved. Yes he could. She and her pirate friends had access to all kinds of computer equipment. They could run his program. Help him cut the cutter. No they couldn't. Rex has the disc. Therefore the soldiers now have the disc. But he, Jack, had the entry

84

codes. He could bargain. No! The soldiers didn't want to bargain. 'Oh, shit, shit, shit.' But there was the other copy of the disc at his home. If the soldiers didn't have that too.

'I've got it!' Jack jumped suddenly back in his seat. An idea had leapt with equal suddenness into his head. He knew exactly what to do. The idea wasn't necessarily foolproof, but he could tie up the loose ends on the way. He was a scholar after all, an academic. He could beat these people. Whoever they were. Solve the mystery and then . . . well and then something or other. And then Rex would not have died in vain.

Rex had, of course, not died in vain. In fact he had not died at all. But then no-one other than Jack really thought he had. Killing off the hero when the plot is less than a quarter done rarely pays big dividends at the box office. And if you really want Harrison Ford to play Rex in the film version, you are cutting down the chances when he reads the script and says, 'So I get killed on page 82 do I?' Then he scrubs round the whole thing and takes Indiana Jones 5 instead. Unless, of course, you get Jack Nicholson to play Jack Doveston. Note the similarity in the names there? Surely no coincidence. But then I always saw Jack Nicholson playing Wormwood. And I always saw Rutger Hauer playing Rex. Mind you, I always saw Rutger Hauer playing me in The Robert Rankin Story. But there you go.

However, I digress.

The big marine with the broken nose finished kicking Rex and cocked the trigger on his pistol. He knew nothing about the way movies are put together. He was simply following orders. Today's had been 'Seek and Destroy', one of his favourites. 'Use All Reasonable Force' was another he liked, but not as much though. He stuck his pistol to Rex's temple. 'So long, asshole,' said he. 'Hold it Cecil.' His comrade with the bruised genitalia

85

was holding the field telephone. 'Change of plan. Control say to bring him back alive.'

'Aw, but sarge . . .'

'Private!'

'Sir.' Cecil dragged Rex up by his hair. 'I'll be waiting for you once they've done.' The semi-conscious Rex considered it most unlikely that he and Cecil would ever strike up a deep and meaningful relationship. Presently a helicopter dropped down from the sky. The way some of them do. And the three soldiers bundled Rex aboard.

Jack abandoned the jeep on the outskirts of Kingsport. He found the nearest payphone and like the not un-legendary ET phoned home. Diane accepted the reverse-charge call, which seemed like a promising start. 'Where have you been you little shit?' It wasn't.

Jack steeled himself. He really hadn't been expecting much else. 'Listen,' he said. 'I am in big trouble. Has anyone called today?'

'Where are you? In jail?'

'No. We busted out.'

'You did what?'

'I've no time to speak. Has anyone called?'

'That Spike person phoned. Where are you?'

'It doesn't matter. But no-one else? I mean the military. No-one has come to the house?'

'Why should they? What is all this about?'

'I'll tell you everything. But I can't come home. You've got to do something for me.'

'Why should I?'

'Diane, this is very important.'

'Well . . .'

'Do this one thing and we go back to England.'

'What is it?'

'In my study. The bookcase by the door. Third shelf up is a book. The Book of Ultimate Truths. In it is a computer disc.'

'All right. Go on.'

86

'Bring the disc to the Causeway Restaurant on the bay. You know it?'

'Of course I know it.'

'But listen Diane. Drive around a bit. Check your mirror. You may be followed.'

'What is all this, Jack?'

'I'll tell you when I see you. One o'clock at the Causeway.'

'Jack, I don't think . . .'

'Please Diane. This is important. England. I promise.'

'All right. One.'

'Thank you.' Jack replaced the receiver. 'So far so good,' said he.

'You did very well.' The voice belonged to Jack's former interrogator. He held a gun upon Diane. 'Now just do as the man says and we won't trouble you any more.'

Elvis was taking an early lunch. He'd had a busy morning. Made a few phone calls. Dug about in his ward-robos. Selected various pieces of advanced weaponry. Taken two showers and combed his hair a lot.

Although the Time Sprout, for all its smart-assery, was not actually able to read Elvis's thoughts, it did have a pretty good idea what the lad had in mind. Now he listened while Elvis told him all. And when Elvis had, he said, 'Kindly run that by me one more time, chief.'

Elvis munched his invariable diet of macrobiotic wholefood. Having long ago been made privy to his terrible end, gutted on junk food and banjoed by barbiturates, he had become a very choosy eater. And the sprout, who had previously needed regular bio-top-ups on the planet Phnaargos had worked out the perfect diet to keep them both running at as near to Al as was inhumanly possible.

'The way I see it, Barry,' Elvis pushed healthy little green things into his mouth as he spoke, 'I gotta hit this sucker before he makes his speech tonight.'

87

'I'll buy that for a dollar.'

'So I figure I mount a sniper rifle on the building opposite MTVTV and pick him off as he gets

out of his car.'

'And if you miss, chief?'

'Like I said. If I miss, one of two things happens. Wormwood makes a break for it and we go after him. Or he tries to go ahead with the broadcast.'

Td bet on the latter.'

'Me too. In which case the extremely clever phase two of the plan goes into operation!'

'Chief. The extremely clever phase two of the plan, although I grant you, on the face of it, is extremely clever, does have one or two rather dangerous loose ends.'

'We'll tie 'em up, green buddy. You and me got a long afternoon before us. Hey now, what's this?' Elvis peered at his left knuckle. A curious rash spread across it. 'I never had this, this morning.'

'What you got there chief?'

'I got me some kind of infection.'

'Can't be. You can't catch anything. Not with me here. You haven't had a zit since 1958.'

'Well I have now.' The sprout peered through Presley's eyes. It examined the rash and it did not like what it saw. 'Eat up, chief. Probably just nerves is all.'

Jack Doveston lay in the long grass. The long grass was in a vacant lot. The vacant lot was opposite his house. The clock on the clapped-out clapboard mission house struck twelve thirty. And as if on cue, and indeed on cue, the front door of Jack's house opened and Diane appeared. She climbed into her white VW and drove off up the street. Jack waited. His front door opened again and Jack's former interrogator issued forth. He entered the rear of a plain van parked a little way up the street and this sped off in pursuit of Diane. Jack managed a bitter grin. There had been, to his mind, two possibilities. Either his phone was being bugged or the military were

already at his home. Thus, he considered, his cunning ruse to have Diane carry a decoy disc, in fact the manuscript for his first novel *They Came and Ate Us*, to a restaurant five miles away, where he would supposedly be waiting, seemed just the job. Whilst his persecutors were off in the wrong direction, he could whip into his house and avail himself of the genuine disc. Now all he had to do was that very thing.

It was just possible that some guard remained in his home. And so Jack now set off with considerable caution. He crawled from the vacant lot. Sloped across the street and approached his house from the blind windowless side. He crept around to the back and liberated the spare key from beneath the stone gnome. He turned it as silently as he could in the kitchen door.

And suddenly he was home. It was a bit like stepping through some curtain of darkness into a blinding light. Well, a bit. It was all here. The safe. The normal. The dear dull real. Jack blinked. Here it all was. The sink piled high with unwashed dishes, many of which he had dined from himself. His yesterday's coffee mug, its drips con-gealing nicely on to the stained pine of the table. The overflowing pedal bin. The foul linoleum. That furry thing in the fruit bowl that no-one cared to approach too closely. Jack could have bent down and kissed it. Home sweet home. He breathed in the terrible smell. Music to his nostrils. Sheer bliss. But enough of that. He had work to do.

Jack tiptoed across the room, his shoes making obscene lip-smacking sounds upon the sticky floor. Jack shushed his feet. With the held breath and the pounding heart that are always a part and parcel of such moments he eased open the sliding glass door which led to the living room. The fact that his shadow would have been plainly visible to anyone hiding in there escaped him completely. Jack poked his head in. The house made that soundless noise that only empty houses make. Although, of course, someone does actually have to be in the house to hear it.

Jack made haste. He passed through the living room and into his study. It showed no signs of ransack. He wormed the K carbon from its hiding place in the record rack. For lovers of detail it was lodged between Bat Chain Puller and Trout Mask Replica. Jack was a major Captain Beefheart fan. Now chuckling in a most unhealthy manner he took out the long rambling insincere letter of apology he had an hour before penned to his wife and propped it amongst the family photos on the unspeakable olde worlde mantelpiece. From his desk drawer he pulled out a laser-sighted 48mm repeat pistol, which the gun-smith had assured Jack's wife was ideal for home defence, and stuck it into his belt. And then he took his leave.

He felt reasonably sure that Diane's display of fury, once he failed to turn up at the Causeway, would be of such magnitude that the military would be forced to conclude that she had no part in the deception. If not, then a few hours in her company would serve them right. There was always a certain crooked logic behind Jack's thinking. But there was no doubt that here was a man capable of constructing any theory, no matter how ill conceived and improbable, in order to support an almost entirely selfish viewpoint.

Jack crept from the house. Ducked across the rear yard. Shinned over the broken picket fence. Prised open his neighbour's shed door and stole his bicycle. It is for a good cause, he told himself.

90

10

car maintenance: The Jesuit approach. It is an ob-servable fact that all the best second-hand cars had 'only one owner' and he invariably a man of the cloth who only used the car to drive to church. Yet, when purchased, these prove to be unreliable and very often a downright danger to life and limb. So how might this be?

Cynics assert that the car salesman has in some way misrepresented the car's former owner. I think not. The simple fact is that the engine, bearings, gearbox and other mechanical bits and bobs have become Devil-possessed. The demonic forces were kept in check by the previous owners, notably the Jesuits. But once in the hands of free thinkers and atheists (a substantial percentage of Cortina owners) they go on the rampage.

The simple institution of the five-thousand-mile exorcism puts the little buggers to flight.

Hugo Rune, The Book etc.

The helicopter carrying the battered Rex Mundi, he of the blue ribs and romantic bullet-grazed temple, swept over New York. Rex, lying face-down on the floor, with three pairs of army boots using him for a footstool, watched the metropolis flow beneath him. It was a mind boggier. He had seen a bit of countryside which had impressed him not a little, but this was something else. And to think that in a few short years it would all be blackened rubble. Rex pondered. Somewhere, down there, from what he had been able to glean from his family history, his great-grandparents

91

even now toiled away. Rex shook his befuddled head. None of it made any sense at all.

The helicopter spiralled down and dropped on to a landing platform atop a dizzying structure of red glass and steel. Hardly what Rex had expected. He was kicked from his contemplations. 'Up, you,' said Cecil. Rex thought to himself, your time will come. But being handcuffed and unarmed he kept it to himself. The hatch flung out and so was Rex.

He was bundled across the tarmac into a lift and then down.

Cecil, finding himself now alone with his nose-breaker, took the opportunity to enliven what would otherwise have been an uneventful journey by striking Rex re-peatedly in the kidneys. It added nothing to his quaint, yet evasive charm. Presently, and not a minute too soon for our hero, the lift doors opened to reveal a long corridor, all bright lights, fitted carpet and synthetic pot plants. Rex was ushered along this at the double. It suited him just fine. Brushed steel doors

opened before him and he was kicked between them. The doors hissed mercifully shut on Cecil.

Rex gaped up to view his latest surroundings. He was almost beyond caring. But not quite. From what he could see of it, the room looked quite pleasant. The plush off-white deep pile spread wall to wall. It smelt nice. Some chrome chair-legs were visible and those which no doubt supported a desk. Beyond these were a pair of highly polished black shoes. Little shoes, Rex noticed. A little voice said, 'Sandy, please take the handcuffs off Mr Mundi. He must be most uncomfortable.' A very large pair of shoes now filled Rex's vision. He was hauled once more to his feet. A massive grey-clad chest blotted out the world for a moment and then passed behind him. The handcuffs were removed.

Rex was aware of a vast window filling one wall of the room. The top of the chrome-legged desk before it and the being which sat behind this. A child. Nothing

92

more. He wore a sober business suit. His dark hair was slicked back. Dark glasses concealed his eyes. He was sucking a soft drink through a straw.

'Sit down Rex. I can call you Rex, can't I? Yes, I know I can. Sit down please.'

Rex dropped into a chair facing the empty desk. He rubbed at his ever-raw wrists. 'Where am I?' he ventured.

The boy put a slim finger to his lips. 'Can't tell you that, Rex. Not yet.'

'Then perhaps you might tell me why. That would really help.'

'All in good time. Do you need anything?'

'Need?'

'Food, medication? Whatever?'

'Yes, both.'

'No problem. Sandy ...' Rex turned his head. The giant Sandy, evidently kin to the odious Cecil, nodded briefly and departed.

Rex felt his head swimming. He'd had a hard day and it was still early. He took a deep breath and leaned forward to support himself on the desktop.

'Not too close now, Rex. I really must ask you to keep a respectable distance.'

Rex pondered kidnap. Even weak as he was he could surely overpower this child. Bargain for his release.

'I don't think so.' The boy extended a hand across the desktop. 'Here, feel.' Rex felt. A jolt of electricity slammed him back into his chair. 'A little self-security device of my own invention,' the lad explained. 'Works from a tiny unit no bigger than a matchbox, housed here.' He indicated his chest. 'Amplifies the heartbeat and converts the power into electrical energy. Harmless to the wearer, but a right bitch to the would-be mugger, rapist, what-ever. I hold the patent. I hold over six hundred patents. I bet you didn't know that.' Rex blew on his scorched fingers. No, he didn't know that.

'It's a jungle out there.' Yes, Rex did know that.

'I'm a genius, you see.' The boy said it in such a manner

93

that it left little doubt. That's me up there. See those?' Rex's attention was drawn to numerous framed photo-graphs, front covers of Time, newspaper headlines 'Jonathan Crawford's my name. Child prodigy. Boy millionaire. Super whizz. I'm probably the most hated kid in America. Strange that.'

'Not really,' said Rex. 'I've only known you minutes and I hate you.'

'Oh, don't say that. I want us to be friends. I want to help you.'

That's nice.'

'We can help each other. You're from the future, aren't you Rex? What's it like?' Rex sank into his chair. This was becoming more insane by the minute.

'Oh, here's Sandy. Don't say anything now.' Sandy returned in the company of a chef and several nurses. These, respectively, served food, removed most of Rex's clothes. Bathed and dressed his wounds and then re-clothed his body in sweet-smelling white linen. And then they were gone. Rex set about his meal. It didn't taste half bad.

The future, Rex. Tell me about it.'

Rex eyed him with suspicion. 'What are you talking about?'

'Futures,' said Jonathan. 'You see Rex, the past and the present are all used up. It's the future that matters.'

'Did you bring me back here?' Rex stuffed food into his face.

Jonathan looked thoughtful. 'Not exactly me.'

Then you know who. And why?'

'I don't know everything. Most things. A whole lot of things. But not all. I'm nineteen. Did you know that?'

'You look much younger.'

'Yes I do, don't I? And do you know why?'

'You have no doubt concocted the elixir of life from your chemistry set.'

'Almost. Almost.' Jonathan crowed with laughter. 'Oh I do like you, Rex. You're terrific.'

94

Thanks.'

'But the future. Tell me about it.'

'It sucks,' said Rex. 'And you're not in it.'

'No,' Jonathan said. 'I rather feared not.'

'In fact I for one have never heard of you.'

'What year are you from Rex?'

'Two thousand and sixty.'

'And when were you born?'

'Twenty-seventh July two thousand and thirty.'

'You don't look thirty.'

Rex smiled broadly and wiped food away with his knuckle. 'You might know some. But I know a whole lot more.'

'I can get you back there. Or should I say forward there.'

'Ah,' Rex said. Then you are really the man I want to talk to.'

Then let's talk business.'

'Let's do.' Rex belched mightily. 'Excuse me.'

Jack cycled unsteadily through Kingsport. He was plotting and planning and reasoning out. Spike went to the university. I wasn't there but trouble was, so she phoned my home and took off. Where could she be now? Jack didn't know her address but he knew about the Thelema Arcade and the chapter house beneath it. If the military didn't have her, it was most likely that she would be there.

And she was. Jack puffed and panted and threw his neighbour's bike into the rack beside Spike's. He did not trouble to lock it up and within five minutes it had been stolen. Jack entered the arcade. The Tec looked up from his console. 'Piss off,' he said.

'Where's Spike? I have to speak to her.'

'Not here.'

'Her bike's outside.'

'Not here.'

Jack drew out his improbable weapon and pointed

95

it at the young man. This way,' said the Tec.

'You have Jack Doveston's K2 carbon,' said Jonathan. 'Might I see it please?'

'I don't have it. Whatever do you mean?'

'Please Rex. I saw you palm it when your clothes were being changed. It's in the right top pocket of your jacket.'

You're a smart-assed little bastard, thought Rex.

'Yes I am, aren't I? Could I see the carbon please?'

'It surely can't be that important. Your troops were prepared to shoot it to pieces.'

They got a little carried away. I gave no orders for them to harm you.' As Rex had no reason to believe a word Jonathan said, he chose not to start now. The disc please, Rex.' Rex pushed it across the desk.

'It will be of no use to you. Jack Doveston has the entry codes and I have no idea where he is. In case you were thinking to beat it out of me.'

'According to my calculations, Jack will now be at the Thelema Arcade. I took the liberty of tagging him internally whilst he was in custody. Ever so clever really. He was irradiated upon capture. Little device no bigger than a hand torch. One of my inventions of course. Jack blips away like a beacon. I can track him wherever he goes.'

'Happy Jack. But tell me. How does a youth such as yourself hold such sway with the military?'

'Fair question, Rex. I design defence systems. I don't modify existing ones. I start from scratch and mine always work. I am the most valuable asset the military possess. They can't do enough to please me. So they made me a general and they let me play soldiers once in a while.'

'Sounds singularly unlikely to me.' Rex sniffed at the glass before him. 'What's this?'

'Nutrient solution. Build you up.'

Rex pushed it aside. 'How was I brought back through time? Do you know?'

96

'Glitchcraft,' said Jonathan. 'Do you believe in Magick?'

'Of course I do.'

'Good. Now, Magick functions on the principle that certain words of power exist. When these are spoken correctly under the right circumstances they effect cosmic change. In some so far unfathomable way they weave space and bring about that which is sought. Such is the principle. The secret is to discover these words and to speak them with an unwavering exactness.'

'And you can do this?'

'Not as such. Not yet. But I have been working on a program to do this. The precision of the computer program makes it ideal to tackle the task. Human error has brought down many a good magician, if good is not a contradiction in terms.' Jonathan chuckled, Rex didn't. 'No, someone has beaten me to it. Someone has perfected the Glitchcraft program. That's what brought you back. Imagine the power of something like that.'

'I can imagine the catastrophic potential.'

'In the wrong hands.'

'Yours being the right ones, I suppose? So who perfected this Glitchcraft program?'

'I don't know. But you could find out.'

'Why should I?'

'Because you want to go home and the only way you can go home is to get your hands on the program. And the only person capable of running the program for you is me.'

'What about the person who has the program now?'

'They don't have this.' Jonathan held up Jack's carbon. 'This is the library. All the words are in here. The Glitchcraft program is just a lump of useless software without this.'

Rex mulled it over. 'I assume that you are the inventor of Bio-tech.' Jonathan nodded brightly. 'Then why can't you just hack into this program and locate the brains behind it yourself?'

97

'Don't think I haven't tried that. I hate to admit such a thing but the program actually has me baffled. I have never seen anything like it before. It's like a ghost in the machine. Something actually alive in the matrix of the computer network.'

'Artificial intelligence? I think not.'

'There's none of that where you come from then?'

'None. And never any record of it being perfected.' Rex chose his words with care. 'It never got off the ground.'

'No, I rather thought not. But see Rex, there are certain possibilities. Firstly that your being brought back here was the product of sheer chance. Personally I discount this. Secondly that you were brought back to serve a specific purpose. This I find plausible. But it poses another series of unanswerable questions. How could anyone in this day and age select someone, as yet unborn, from the future and transport them back into the past? What could a man from the future do that a man in the present cannot? And what will happen to the future if he does anything?'

'Such questions have of course crossed my mind. Clearly you know as little about this as I do. I will now, I think, take my leave. Should I come up with anything of importance I will not hesitate

to contact you. You have my word of honour on this. Good day.'

'You don't seriously think I would let you just walk out?'

'You have Jack's disc. My plan was to run it and then attempt to locate the cutter. You can do the same. If I have been brought back here for some specific purpose, then whoever brought me back will be searching for me. They won't be able to find me if I am locked up here. You serve no useful purpose by detaining me further.'

'There is much you might tell me about the future.'

'You have no actual proof that I come from the future. It is my guess that your supposition is based on the testament of Jack Doveston. Given up under torture. A man to my experience notorious for saying and doing

98

anything to save his own skin. Although this is not an altogether admirable quality, it is one which he and I share to a heightened degree.'

'Well.' Jonathan chewed upon a fingernail. 'You had better just drink up and go then.'

'I'll pass on the drink if you don't mind. Irradiation does not agree with me.' Rex made for the door. He didn't actually expect to get to it just yet, of course.

'Where will you go?'

Rex half turned. 'I don't know. Search for whoever brought me here. Let them find me. I have no money, perhaps I'll look for a job.'

'You could work for me.'

'I think not.'

'I would supply you with a car. As much money as you need. An apartment. In return you merely keep me informed of your progress. We share a common goal.'

Rex made a considerable show of thinking the matter over. He had hoped to worm some money from Jonathan, but he expected at least a token struggle over the car and the living quarters. All at once caught him a mite off guard. 'All right,' he said at length. 'We have a deal. You will pardon me if I do not shake hands on it.'

Jonathan made with the major grins. 'Excellent. Ex-cellent.'

'I shall need one or two other things,' said Rex. 'It's a jungle out there you know.' Jonathan nodded. 'Strictly for home defence,' Rex continued. 'Did you ever see the movie Predator?'

Shortly thereafter Rex Mundi drove away from the red-glazed Crawford Corporation building in a very snazzy red Porsche. From his office on high Jonathan watched him streak away.

'Are you sure that was altogether wise?' The lad turned to view the woman who had entered his office un-announced. And the view was considerable. She was tall and statuesque. Her long black hair, interwoven with

99

coloured shells, was drawn back from a face of quite striking beauty. She wore skin-tight yellow trousers over painfully long legs, A soft amber leather jacket bulged in only the right places. Her eyes were an almost luminous green.

'Wise?' Jonathan reseated himself. 'He doesn't know why he's here. But he is determined to find out. And when he does . . .'

'When he does you had better have Cecil and his team in a nice tight circle around you,' said

Gloria Mundi.

100

11

cosmic kidnapers: The disappearance of famous folk at the very zenith of their careers is a funny old business, isn't it? And has long been a thing of mystery. But no more. Now it can be revealed that these famous ones vanish into the future, kidnapped by beings possessive of their talents.

The list of vanishing folk, some seemingly of no talent (eleven people vanish each day in London alone), appears to be on the increase. It is suspected that severe under-population, probably stemming from the forthcoming Nuclear Holocaust Event, is to blame.

Hugo Rune, Yes That One

'Visitor,' said the Tec. Jack entered the base-ment cellar. Aware of Spike's look of horror, he hurriedly tucked away the home defender. The Tec slid away. 'He's cool,' Spike called after him. 'It's OK.' Jack wiped sweat from his brow and fell into a vacant chair. Mad John eyed him with open suspicion. Ella Guru said, 'He shouldn't be here, Spike.'

'What's the deal, boss?' Spike knelt before him and put her hands on his knees. 'You look like shit.'

'Got busted. The military are trying to kill me.' Jack put his hands upon hers and held them tightly.

'What have you done?'

'I've done nothing. You've got to help me.'

Spike pulled away from him. 'Were you followed here?'

'No, I gave them the slip. Will you help?'

'Why me?'

101

'Because I can trust you. I can trust you, can't I?' The elf grinned. 'Yeah, I guess. But first you have to tell us everything. And I do mean everything.'

Rex drove very slowly through the streets of New York. As a newcomer to the metropolis the traffic system was a thing of great mystery. He had already passed through several stop lights, been clipped by a yellow taxicab and been roundly and precisely abused by numerous fleeing pedestrians. He now felt it prudent to keep the speed down until he was able to acquaint himself more thoroughly with the subtle nuances of New York driving. A near-death experience had already put him straight regarding which side of the street you drove on.

Now, at a steady fifteen miles an hour he led a cavalcade of wildly hooting traffic along this street and that. Slow driving was evidently much admired by scantily clad young women. For small knots of these hailed him from street corners and seemed eager to make his acquaintance; Rex waved to them gaily. How charm-ing, he thought, as he steered this way and that through the piles of rubbish which littered every street. I know I am going to like it here.

An hour later a sadder but far wiser Rex was trudging the sidewalks. This was a Rex who had stopped off in Harlem to purchase provisions. A Rex who had left his keys swinging in the dashboard. A Rex who had been pursued for several blocks by associates of the felon who had made off with his car. A Rex, who having made good his escape, then made loud his protests to a patrolling cop. A Rex, who now knew that the man with no ID or driver's licence, dressed in the garb of an asylum inmate and bearing obvious handcuff scars, really should know better than to make loud his protests to a patrolling cop. A Rex whose description was even now being circulated in connection with an assault upon one of New York's finest.

102

This Rex was a well-dressed Rex. A respectable-looking Rex. He blended easily with the crowd in his nice newly bought clothes. Although the looks of puzzled recognition which appeared now and then upon the faces of folk he passed alarmed him no end. And outside a cinema showing Indiana Jones 4, a child had asked him for his autograph. Rex had been happy to oblige. But then the child burst into tears and his mother clouted Rex over the head with her handbag.

'I don't think I'm going to like it here,' said Rex Mundi.

He was halfway either up or down East 42nd Street when he spied out a neon sign which read FANGIO'S. The way one of them does. Now, a bar is a bar is a bar, thought Rex Mundi. He stepped inside.

Fangio's was long and low and narrow. Ill lit, it smelt of spilt beer and stubbed cigar butts. Hundreds of framed boxing photographs fought for space along one wall. Beneath them rough-looking men hunched about small tables and conversed in Neanderthal tones. Opposite them a single polished bar-top ran the length of the room. Behind this, glass shelves supported countless bottles of intoxicant. Before these, wiping his brow with an over-sized red gingham handkerchief, stood Fangio. In stark contrast to his bar, he was wide and fat and highly mobile. He winked at Rex with his one good eye and bade him the time of day. 'What'll it be, bud?' Rex peered through the fug. A patron sat at the bar. He was sipping a cool beer and chewing a hot pastrami on rye. 'Whatever he's having,' said Rex.

'Coming right up.' A television, bolted near the ceiling above the bar-top, relayed the day's sport. Indoor wind-surfing, dwarf tossing. Rex kept his eyes down. The sight of a TV screen still filled him with dread. Eighteen years in a bunker were not easily forgotten. The concept of casual viewing for pleasure alone was totally alien to him.

'You been catching the game, bud?' The bulging

103

barman placed a plate of sandwiches and a long cool beer before Rex.

The game? No.' Taking this as his cue, the large one now began an eager discourse upon baseball. For all Rex knew he might have been speaking in tongues.

'MTWTV. News on the hour. Every hour,' the TV announced. The barman ceased his outpourings in mid-flow. He swivelled his bulk toward the screen. 'Let's check this out,' said he. 'See who's shooting who today.' Rex sipped his beer thoughtfully.

'News just in concerns New England Shaker Ebenezer Stuart who claims he was the victim of an unprovoked terrorist assault. Ebenezer claims that Russian agents dressed in US military issue shot up his farmhouse with one of those amazing rotary machine-guns like Blaine had in Predator.' Rex munched his hot pastrami. 'Here in the Big Apple speculation continues to grow concerning mystery man Wayne L. Wormwood.' Rex spat hot pastrami over the bloated barman. 'Easy fella!' croaked the fat boy.

'Shush. Wait,' Rex flapped foolishly.

'Wayne L. Wormwood will be appearing exclusively on this channel. Live at eight tonight. So stay tuned.' Rex stared at the screen, there was a face he knew and loathed. The face of Wayne L. Wormwood. It was the face of Dalai Dan, last in a long line of aspiring Antichrists.

'But of course,' said Rex slowly. 'That must be it.'

Fangio was plucking hot pastrami from his apron. 'What's that you say?'

'Him. Up there. Wormwood. Is he the president?'

'President?' The fat boy crumpled in hilarity. The way some of them do. 'Shit buddy. I don't know who he is, but he sure ain't the president. Where have you been for Chrissakes?'

'For Christ's sake?' Rex pondered upon that one. It seemed extremely probable.

'No buddy. This Wormwood he just sprung up today. Out of the woodwork I guess. Ha ha. Everyone's

104

moving mouth about him but no-one knows a goddamn thing.'

'You mean no-one ever heard of him before today?' 'Did you? He made some speech or something yester-day. Now the media can't get enough of him. Prime time they're giving him. He'd sure better have something to say. Hey buddy, where're you going?' But buddy had went.

And Jack had done with his tale. His version of events differed substantially from those formally chronicled here. His was filled with deeds of extreme heroism and great self-sacrifice. He told it with such conviction that he completely convinced his listeners. It was profoundly to be hoped that during the course of events yet to occur, Jack would redeem himself and ultimately make good. However, on his showing thus far, this seems unlikely.

'And then I came here,' Jack concluded.

'Some day you've had,' Spike whistled. 'And this Rex who you busted out of jail. They shot him dead?'

'Two of them were holding me down. I couldn't do a thing.'

John raised his hand. 'And that's when you used the

'Dimac,' said Jack. 'It's a martial arts technique. I was taught it by Count Dante himself. The deadliest man alive.'

Spike did further whistlings. 'Some hero. Didn't know you had it in you, boss.'

'When the chips are down, a man's gotta do, and all that.'

'And so you want us to run your library program here and cut the cutter?'

Jack nodded.

Ella Guru said, 'It can't be done. Too dangerous. That seeker is sitting in the matrix just waiting. We don't have enough power to zero it. That thing is Bio-tech.'

'Try this on,' said Spike. 'What if it wasn't only us?'

105

What if every Zen up and down the country hooked in at the same time? We could catch that seeker right in the middle. Home right in.'

'Sorry,' said Jack. 'What do you mean?'

Mad John clapped his hands together. 'Spike means we feed your program to a million Zen pirates simul-taneously. The seeker can't go everywhere at once. It would freeze. Too much input. Using the land lines we could get a triangulation on its control. Take some time to set up, though.'

'How much time?' The hero shifted uneasily in his chair.

'Depends how many Zens are on-line now. I'll put out an invitation to the party through the video-games network. See what we get. But I reckon we could easy set it up by tonight. Say, eight o'clock.'

'Some big number, eh boss?' Spike punched Jack playfully on the shoulder.

'Ouch,' said Jack.

Mad John set in for a busy afternoon.

Elvis Presley had had a busy afternoon. As a shareholder in MTWTV he had little difficulty in acquiring the necessary entry codes to gain access to the company computer. Calling up the employee records and staff rosters, he installed a Mr Thomas Henry Edward King as temporary head of security. Gave him the finest references and put him on immediate active service.

Elvis then donned 'Mr King's' smart new uniform and over this a crisp white coverall with the words SERVICE ENGINEER emblazoned across the back. He humped several cases of serious-looking hardware into the rear of an unmarked van and set off from the underground car park. Elvis cranked up the quadrophonic and ac-companied Barry in a rousing three-part rendition of 'Jailhouse Rock'.

Carrying a case of equipment and sporting the ever-present mirror shades, Elvis the engineer checked in at

106

the reception of Passing Cloud Productions, a multi-national film corporation directly across the street from MTWTV. 'Come to check the dish, ma'am.'

The receptionist gazed up at him. She was sleek, chic and sensual. Killer sideburns, she thought, and what exclusive shades. 'What dish?' said she.

'One on the roof ma'am. Man says you got interference. Probably birds is all. Best I go take a look.'

'You got a pass?'

'No honey, I ain't. But if you wanna call up security it's OK by me.' The receptionist turned away to make the call. Elvis plucked a small contrivance from his pocket, primed it and clipped it beneath the reception desk.

'Oooh!' The receptionist let out a yell as her telephone suddenly fed back into her ear.

'Reckon I'd best go up and fix it,' said Elvis. 'I'd pull the plug for now,'

The receptionist rubbed her ear. 'OK, but make it quick.'

'No sweat, ma'am.' Elvis took the lift. Then the small rung ladder to the roof hatch. Once through this he set up a fearsome-looking rifle on a recoil-sprung tripod. Clamped and adjusted a laser night-sight with inbuilt video broadcaster. Linked up various other hi-tech bits and bobs. Peered along the sight toward the main doors of MTWTV. Patted the piece and said, 'Uh-hu.'

Then he left the roof. Having closed the hatch, he welded the lock, just to be on the safe side. He was leav-ing nothing to chance. And he was doing very well so far.

The receptionist watched him as he swaggered out through the lift doors. He winked invisibly and ap-proached her. 'Try it now honey.' As she turned away once more, Elvis removed the contrivance from beneath her desk, switched it off and dropped it into his pocket. 'All AOK now?'

Tine.' The sleek young woman offered Elvis one of

107

those smiles which say 'wouldn't you just like to, well perhaps you just might'.

'What time do you get off work?' Elvis asked.

'Not until about eight thirty. I'm on late tonight.'

'What say I pick you up around then? Do you like macrobiotic food?'

'Just love it.'

'Come on chief,' whispered the sprout.

'Eight thirty,' said Elvis.

'Eight thirty it is.'

Elvis slipped into his van and removed the coverall. He placed a cap upon his head. Adjusted it, just so. Straightened out any creases in his uniform and grinned into the rear-view mirror. 'Gotta look the part,' he told the agitated sprout. Then he took off for the car park of MTWTV.

Here he encountered no opposition whatever. 'You want I should call up security and have them show you around?' Elvis ogled the young woman who was turning his fake ID back and forward in her hand. Another beauty, but he had a full evening.

'No ma'am. I'll just check the place over myself. Don't want to step on anyone's toes. Just tell them to carry on as normal. Which studio will Mr Wormwood be broad-casting from?'

'Studio One. End of the hall.'

Thanks ma'am.' And that was mostly that. Elvis entered Studio One, concealed certain devices in certain places and left without anyone being any the wiser.

'Time to stretch our legs in the staff refectory for a coupla hours, green buddy.'

'I think you earned it, chief, I surely do,'

There was a party going on beneath the Thelema Arcade. And not just there. At the keyboards sat Spike Laine, Mad John, Ella Guru and Jack Doveston monitoring the incoming. Word had gone out through the matrix and it seemed like every street pirate in the States was looking

108

to join in the action. Mad John chuckled and clapped. 'I can't count them all. We got every kid from here to the West Coast on-line. All we have to do is give them the countdown and feed them all the library program at the same moment. Let's go at say . . . seven thirty. I'll pass the word.'

Jack had given up on second thoughts. He was some-where near his twenty-second. They were actually going to hand access to the largest collection of occult books in the world to every street pirate in America who cared to tune in and help himself? This couldn't be right, could it? And what if it didn't work? Five years of his life were on that disc. What if something got screwed up and the whole thing got erased? Jack began to chew his finger-nails in a most unheroic manner. In the right-hand top corner of his screen little digits traced the countdown.

Seven twenty-five.

It was seven twenty-six. The crowds had been gathering around the MTWTV building for several hours. Elvis, with a small complicated electronic dohickey in one hand and a riot cane in the other, had joined the genuine security team and was swopping jocularities with the crowd. The similarity between this lot and those who attend film galas in the hope of glimpsing some screen demigod or goddess, was not lost on him. These people had come to worship. There were some banners waving. Elvis did not like it one little bit.

A great cheer went up as Wormwood's limo swung around the block. Elvis shook his head. What had got into these people? And what were they likely to do when the brown stuff hit the fan? Nothing nice, he supposed. The crowd parted as the limo came forward. Elvis backed off toward the main doors. Pressed buttons on his dohickey, a small TV screen flipped up. Atop the Passing Cloud building the video camera mounted behind the sniper rifle clicked on. Gazed with its electric eye through the night-sight. Relayed what it saw to Elvis's screen.

109

Elvis made adjustments. Peered at the tiny screen. The top of his own head came into focus. He touched the controls, the rifle dipped a little. The top of the black car focused. Elvis made further adjustments.

The rifle panned to follow the slowly moving car. Big cheers went up as the limo halted. It was seven twenty-eight.

'We have a go situation,' crowed Mad John. Jack tucked into further nails.

Wormwood's chauffeur stepped out of the car and passed around to open the passenger door. Elvis had the chauffeur's head perfectly in the cross hairs. His thumb crept toward the remote-control trigger button. The crowd was chanting 'We want Wayne, we want Wayne'. And suddenly there Wayne was. He raised his arms to the crowd. Kissed away his fingers and flung them wide to embrace all.

Elvis stared hard at his tiny TV screen. A look of dire perplexity clouding his noble features. Wormwood wasn't there. There was just a dark blot on the screen where he should be. A cloak of darkness. Elvis thumped the dohickey. He focused and refocused. Panned to and fro. The chauffeur was there, the crowd was there, waving frantically. But no Wormwood. Just the dark blot. 'He's not there. What should I do?'

'Just shoot where he should be, chief. And make it quick.'

It was seven twenty-nine. Elvis pressed the trigger button and kept his thumb down. Shots rang out from above the Passing Cloud building. The chauffeur flung himself upon Wormwood and dragged him to the side-walk. The crowd went crazy.

Bullets sang into the plate-glass front of MTWTV. Elvis ducked as shards flew about his head. He lifted his thumb. The firing ceased. People were running in every direction. Screaming, falling, scrambling over each other

110

to escape. Through the chaos Elvis could see the chauffeur carrying the unharmed Wormwood toward him.

'Phase two, chief, and quick.' Elvis pressed open the main doors. Ushered Wormwood and the chauffeur through. The station's security, guns raised, were following at the hurry up. 'Get him to Studio One,' Elvis ordered. 'All of you, go on.' It was seven thirty.

'All systems go,' cried Mad John. 'Let's work together.'

The street was empty The crowd gone. Elvis was alone. He leapt forward, pulling from his jacket what was unmistakably a state-of-the-art limpet mine. This he clamped beneath the petrol tank of the limo. And then he pressed yet another button on his wonderful dohickey. Inside Studio One five smoke grenades went off.

'Look at that!' In the chapter house the screens were jumping. The seeker tore through the matrix as the information hit it from every side. It throbbed and pulsed like a living thing.

'Zero that mother!' Mad John pounded his keyboard. 'Look at it. Look at it.' Jack was behind him. 'What's going on?' 'It's not freezing. It's just pulling it all in from every-where. And it's running a program. It's accessing. Just look at it.'

From across the street Elvis could see the confusion. The front doors of MTWTV burst open. Smoke belched out. Two figures ran through it. Were lost in the smoke. The headlights of the limo blazed on. Doors slammed. The engine screamed. Elvis hit the final button. Wormwood's car exploded in a billowing gout of flame. 'Gotcha!' hooped the King.

'Gotcha!' hooped Mad John. 'Oh no.'

*

111

'Oh no.'

Something locked. Screamed defiance at natural law. Took shape. In the cellar, systems fed back, fused. And then the unthinkable began. The blazing splinters of metal torn from Wormwood's car

hung motionless in the air. And then retraced their separate trajectories at im-possible speed. The bowl of flame shrank to nothing and was gone. The limousine reformed. Tyres squealed on the tarmac. It swerved out from the kerb and roared away into the night. Elvis watched it go. Struck dumb with utter disbelief.

The Zen den was on fire. Terminals crackled with flame filling the air with poisonous smoke. Jack was amongst the first to make his escape.

A nice new replacement Porsche screeched to a halt beside the speechless Presley. 'You just going to stand there all night looking pretty, or are we going to get that motherless son?' asked Rex Mundi.

112

12

The Gods have gone. It is a time for men. Merlin

Get out the meatballs, mother. We've come to a fork in the road. Anon

'You gonna tell me what you're doing here or have I just gotta guess?' Elvis had at last found his voice. He and Rex were speeding along Highway 61 (well, why not?). Wormwood's limousine maintaining a steady distance and a considerable one.

'I might ask you the same thing. Is Barry with you?'

'Good evening Rex, long time no see, as they say.'

'Good evening Barry. So you guys decided to give 1958 a miss then?' Rex pressed his foot nearer the floor.

'No, shit. I went back. Did my stuff. But I had this revelation see.'

'Ah,' said Rex in a meaningful manner. 'You must tell me about it sometime.'

'But how did you find me?'

'I heard about Wormwood being on the television. I was in the crowd. Wanted to get a look at him up close. And then who did I see skulking about in the shadows pushing little buttons?'

'I never skulk!' The King adjusted his quiff in the driving mirror.

'It was a brave attempt though. The radio-controlled gun, the smoke grenades, the bomb. All you?'

'All me.' Elvis nodded proudly. 'So why the fuck isn't he dead? What happened back there?'

113

'Glitchcraft. Don't ask because I don't know.'

Elvis grinned. 'Shit' said he. 'Sure is good to see you again. But how did you get here, to this time? You got a sprout of your own?'

'A lady sprout?' Barry asked.

'I'm afraid not. I don't know who brought me back. But I bet that nice Mr Wormwood in the car up ahead might be able to tell me.'

'You reckon? Hey Rex, you got any weapons in this car?'

'Sure have. You'll never guess what I have in the trunk.' Elvis wouldn't, but anyone who had been follow-ing the plot would be prepared to venture at least half a guess. 'It's one of those amazing... hey what's he doing?'

Up ahead Wormwood's car drifted to the side of the highway and bumped gently on to the grass

verge. Rex pulled up twenty yards behind and doused the lights. Elvis thumbed down the electric window and stuck his head out. 'Seems as if he just ran out of gas. Got to be a trick, ain't it?' Rex drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. An occasional car sped by on the night-time highway. A chill wind was blowing and it was beginning to rain.

'I don't like this. Wait. . .' Elvis was climbing from the car, determined to finish it here and now. 'The trunk unlocked?'

'Yes, but . . .'

'But nothing. I been here before and last time I screwed up.' Elvis skipped around the car and threw open the trunk.

'Hoopla!' he was heard to say. 'This is a 7.62mm M134 General Electric Minigun. Up to 6,000 rounds per minute. 7.62mm X 51 shells. 1.36kg recoil adaptors. Six muzzle velocity of 869m,'s.'

'Oh,' said Rex. 'So that's what it is.' Elvis was struggling under the weight of the preposterous weapon.

'Hit the headlights Rex. It's clobbering time!' Rex shrugged, he hit the headlights. Elvis hit the firing button.

114

Six thousand rounds a minute. Mind you, can you work out what six thousand 7.62mm rounds actually weigh? Imagine carrying that lot about. It didn't half make a noise though. And a lot of smoke and those flames that come out at right angles to the barrel. Probably looked best in slow motion. Elvis kept his trigger ringer tight until the rounds were all used up.

The smoke soon cleared. The limousine was perforated wreckage. Its roof had been torn away and lay many yards beyond. The tyres were ribbons of trailing rubber. Nothing, and it must be clearly stated, nothing, could have lived through such a holocaust.

Elvis dropped the great gun to the ground and crept forward. Rex joined him.

They approached the ruination. 'Guess he did run out of petrol,' whispered Elvis. 'Or it would have blown up for sure.' They stole closer. Peered in through the windowless rear doors. The car was empty. The remains of a complicated remote control unit was still in place over the steering wheel.

'Son of a gun,' whistled Elvis. 'Neat trick.' With bowel-loosening suddenness something burst into life upon the car's shredded dashboard. It was the in-car TV.

'This is MTWTV,' said the female talking head again. 'People of America. We bring you live from the studio, Mr Wayne L. Wormwood.'

'Aw shit.'

It was by no means a long speech. It was just long enough. It was precise and clear. It touched upon topics dear to the hearts of those who heard it. It spoke to them as individuals, yet also as part of the greatest nation on earth. It offered comfort, encouragement, promised peace and prosperity. It lacked cliché and innuendo. It was simple. And those who heard it were moved to utter but a single statement: 'That is the guy who should be running this country.'

115

PART TWO

13

. . . which brings us to President Wayne L. Wormwood. Political observers who mapped out his course to the presidency are all in agreement that he could never have achieved his rapid succession to such high office had it not been for uncommon luck. Although you will never find a successful politician willing to admit to it, a glance through the pages of history always reveals

that they remained for as long as they did through luck rather than judgement.

As there has never been a political system that actually worked (the concept of the many being fairly governed by the few being a logical impossibility), each survives until its inefficiencies can no longer be tolerated. That is, until its luck runs out.

Wormwood's appearance on the world stage had all the hallmarks of a man with supreme luck on his side. 'The right man at the right time in the right place' ran his campaign slogans. He became a White House aide on the strength of a single television speech, popular support for him being so huge that the ailing president wisely took the hint that here was a man who would make a better friend than an enemy. That within several days, the president would be dead, and the vice president scarcely sworn in before the damning scandal of his international drug dealing was exposed - by Mr Wormwood, it is to be noticed - could hardly have been foreseen. Wormwood was indeed the right man in the right place at the right time. Luck absolute. Sir John Rimmer, Lucky Bastards of the Twentieth Century

119

The enigmatic Byron Wheeler-Vegan did not return to his Inter-rositer. Having left Zoroastra Findhorn he took himself off to the senior viceroy-in-chief. His apartment door was 'lower-grand', its brasswork and furniture burnished. The name plaque read HARMAN KARPEN s.v.i.c. Byron knocked. A voice said enter. Byron entered. The room was identical to that of Zoroastra Findhorn. Harman Karper was tall, gaunt and peevish. He looked up from a sheath of papers and regarded Byron with bewilderment. 'Who let you in?'

'I knocked and you said enter.'

'Perplexing.'

'I have a two-micron downgrade on a lateral aug-mentor.'

'You must speak with Mr Findhorn. Proper channels you know. Goodbye.' The senior viceroy returned to his papers. Byron stood his ground. The senior viceroy looked up from his papers. Byron continued to stand his ground. 'Who let you in?' asked the senior viceroy.

'I have a two-micron downgrade on a lateral aug-mentor.'

'Another?' Karper's eyebrows rose. T told the previous fellow he must put it through proper channels. You must do the same.'

'I am the other fellow.'

'Doesn't make sense. Goodbye.'

Byron decided upon a new tack. 'The viceroy, Zoroastra Findhorn, said I was to approach you,' he lied.

'Approach me? Unthinkable. Had a request for a service replacement come from the viceroy then I should have dealt with it as of the now.'

'Perhaps it is amongst your papers awaiting action.'

'Of course it is. Where else would it be?'

'Perhaps you should deal with it as of the now.'

'I have. So back to work you go.'

'But I have a two-micron downgrade on a lateral augmentor.'

120

'Then you must put it through the proper channels. Goodbye.' It was a very firm goodbye.

'What are the proper channels?' Byron asked.

'Chain of command. Order of hierarchy. Your request is put to the viceroy. His to me.'

'And yours?'

'Mine are to a higher body.'

'Which is whom?'

'The level manager of course. Felix Embalon.'

'And where might I find him?'

'Find him? Find him?' Harman Karper's voice rose to a tremulous quaver. 'You might not find him. The very thought. Back to work you go.'

'I cannot go back to work, I have a two-micron . . .' Byron did not bother to finish that. 'If you will give me the order for the service replacement, I will deal with the matter myself and spare you further paperwork.'

'Wouldn't do you any good.'

'One can but try.'

Harman Karper mulled this over. The concept was evidently new to him. 'Paper chasing paper,' he said, when he had given the matter as much thought as he considered it to merit. 'Here. Take them.' He handed the sheaf to Byron. Byron flicked through it. Each sheet was an order for a lateral augmentor. His.

'Up the stairs. First on the left. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye,' said Byron.

Up the stairs and first on the left there was yet another door. This was slightly larger and grander than its predecessor, but it came as little surprise to Byron to find the room which lay beyond identical.

'Who let you in?' asked Felix Embalon.

'Senior viceroy Harmon Karper.'

Felix Embalon was tall, gaunt and peevish. 'Im-possible,' said he. 'Karper reports directly to me. I sanctioned no intermediary. Goodbye.'

Byron was now warming to each new challenge.

121

'Actually I am acting under the express orders of the controller himself. He demands that a service replacement for a lateral augmentor be issued to me as of the now.' He flung down the sheaf of order forms before Felix. Most of them went on the floor.

'Would that I could,' said Felix. 'But my hands are tied.'

'But the controller demands . . .'

'I am merely doing my job. If the machine shop cannot supply the part, what am I to do?'

'Why can't the machine shop supply the part?'

Felix shrugged. 'That is a question I have never thought to ask.'

'Then I shall ask it for you,'

'Up the stairs and first on the left,' said Felix.

The machine shop was not the hive of industry Byron had expected it to be. Three swarthy gnomish men sat on unpacked packing cases in a low dirty hall. They were playing a game which involved the movement of coloured beads about a wire frame they held between them. The hall boasted an abundance of intricate machinery, yet none appeared to be in operation.

'Who is in charge here?' Byron asked.

The three gnomes considered one another. 'Hard to say,' said one. 'We are each a specialist in some particular field of operation. Each interdependent on the next. An interesting question. Who let you in?'

'The controller sent me. I am to collect the service replacement for a lateral augmentor.'

'It's over there,' said another gnome. 'On the lathe,'

'I shall take it as of the now, then.'

'It lacks the flange,' said the third gnome.

'Then kindly attach the flange as of the now,'

'The flange has not, as of the now, arrived from the depot,'

Byron did not trouble to notice which of the three said this. 'And the depot is where?'

122

'Up the stairs. First on the left.'

The head of the depot was amiable enough. He explained to Byron all about flanges. They were composed, he said, of four separate sections, each originating from a different department. He had in his possession three of these sections, but the fourth eluded him. As soon as the storekeeper let him have this missing section he felt sure that all would be well.

The storekeeper, first on the left up the stairs, was profuse in his apologies. The missing flange section, he confessed, haunted his dreams. It played havoc with his stock balance pro formas and was a blight upon his existence. As soon as the chief engineer made the part available he would gladly pass it on to the depot. Byron could rest easy on this account.

Byron's wrath, which had been gathering like a dark storm about his head, fell in a torrential downpour upon the chief engineer. The poor man wrung his hands and seemed on the point of tears. Without flux it was im-possible to machine the flange section. He had all the necessary components, which he would gladly show to Byron, but the section could not be machined without flux.

'Who supplies this flux?' Byron demanded. 'Tell me as of the now if you wish to live.'

'The storekeeper!' burred the quivering wreck.

Now, the reader might reasonably be forgiven for think-ing that this might be the ideal time to find out what Rex and Elvis are up to. But no. Byron's predicament does play a very large part in the overall scheme of things. Thus, his search for the flux which lubricates the machine, which machines the section which makes up the flange which fits the service replacement which governs the precision of the Inter-rositer which Byron prestidigitates, must be seen through to its dire conclusion. Sorry but there it is.

123

'Flux!' screamed Byron.

'Flux,' sighed the storekeeper. 'The bane of my life.' 'Where?' screamed Byron.

'The depot of course.' The storekeeper smiled en-couragingly. 'The depot.'

The head of the depot was amiable enough. He explained to Byron all about flux. Flux was a compound without which machines could not be operated. It was processed in the machine shop. But surely this was common knowledge? Everything came through the machine shop.

The gnomes were still at play. They didn't look up from their game this time. It was almost as if they had been expecting Byron.

'Who is in charge of flux processing?' Byron's voice had an unpleasant cracked quality to it.

'No-one is actually in charge of flux. The processing is a simple enough matter. We take it by rote.'

'Give me flux!' Byron made manic gestures. 'As of the now!'

'Gladly. As soon as we have received the binding fluid for it from Felix Embalon.'

Felix Embalon received Byron without enthusiasm. 'Who let you in?' he asked in a gaunt and peevish manner.

'The machine shop require binding fluid as of the now.' Byron did not recall picking up the spanner, but as he evidently had, he waved it at Felix in a threatening manner.

'Would that I could,' Felix made a sorry face. 'But my hands are tied.'

'Where does binding fluid come from?'

'It's a by-product. Harman Karper's department. I merely expedite its distribution. He is in charge of supply.'

'Indeed,' said Byron. 'Indeed.'

124

Harman Karper S.V.I.C. would not come to the door. 'I am accepting no callers as of the now,' he shouted through the keyhole.

Byron waded into the door with his spanner. 'What is binding fluid a by-product of?' was all he wanted to know.

'Inert natural gases which condense on the outer rimmels of the big flywheel. These are split into their base elements. One of these constitutes a friction-free binding fluid used in the manufacture of flux. But I am only in charge of supply.'

'Then who is responsible for the manufacture of bind-ing fluid?'

'Zoroastra Findhorn.'

'That does it,' said Byron Wheeler-Vegan.

'He's not here,' said a short fat fellow in a stained overall. 'You just missed him.'

'Who are you?'

'I'm nobody, just a sweeper-upper.'

'Binding fluid.' Byron threw himself on to the newly swept floor and began to thrash about. 'I must have binding fluid!'

'Is that all you want?'

Byron fixed him with a baleful eye. 'What did you say?'

'Binding fluid. I know all about binding fluid.'

'You do?'

'Certainly, in my job you see it all, this department, that department, this process, that process . . .'

'Just tell me about binding fluid.'

'You can't get any! It's a special process you see, very exact. Certain gases condense on the outer rimmels of the big flywheel and these . . .'

'Yes, I know all that. So why can't I get any?'

'There's a malfunction on the Inter-rositer. I suspect a two-micron downgrade on a lateral augmentor. Someone should put in for a service replacement. Typical, isn't it?'

125

14

PRESIDENT'S HORSE EXPLODES

National Enquirer

Elvis flung down the newspaper. 'And he walks away without even a sore ass,' They were in Presley's penthouse. Elvis flung himself down on to the Terence Conran.

Rex stared from the window. Night was falling and so was the rain. 'Perhaps it can't be done.'

Elvis made a bitter face. 'What do you mean?'

Rex turned to meet his eyes. 'Perhaps it is impossible to change history. The Phnaargs tried it with you but it didn't work.'

'But I fooled the Phnaargs. I am here and now.'

'Perhaps you would have been here and now anyway, which is why you are. If you follow me.'

'I surely do.' Elvis surely didn't.

'Perhaps it's me then. I'm from the future. If Worm-wood was to die before 1999 then the future would change. Perhaps if it changed I would not be in it. So, if I wasn't in it then I couldn't come back here. Which I have. Do you follow that?'

'I can dig it, chief,' said Barry the Sprout. 'It's a conundrum, ain't it?'

'How many times have we tried to hit Wormwood now?' Elvis asked.

'Eight times. Perhaps . . . ,'

'Perhaps, perhaps,' Elvis poured two large drinks. 'We can get that sucker. I just know it,'

Rex was doubtful. He accepted his glass and took sips.

126

'There has to be another way. We are going about this all wrong.'

'I had me another revelation this morning in the shower.'

Rex made a pained expression. 'Let me put this to you and tell me what you think. You had been trying to locate Wormwood for fifteen years. Then on the very day that he appears as if from nowhere, I am thrown back in time and wind up on his doorstep, so to speak. There can surely be no chance of coincidence being involved here.'

Elvis shrugged. The sprout said, 'None, chief,' 'Now, if I am right that history cannot be changed whilst a man from the future is in it as living proof, then the conclusion is obvious.' 'Yeah.' Elvis nodded blankly. 'I guess it is.' 'Wormwood cannot be harmed as long as I am here. I am his living insurance policy. I must get back to my own time. Then you can dispose of Wormwood. If then the future changes and I am not in it, that will be neither here nor there. You will have saved the world from the Nuclear Holocaust Event. This is no small matter.' 'Bravo chief. Heroic stuff.'

'Don't let me be the party-pooper, Rex.' Elvis drained his glass. 'But how are we gonna get you back to the future? Barry can't take you, he don't do that kind of stuff no more.'

'What do you know about Jonathan Crawford?' 'The golden boy? Not too much. Some kind of genius. Very big in the military. Time said he was the military. Designs all kinds of programs. This the guy who's been paying your tabs, right?'

'Right, and this Crawford seems pretty obsessed with the future. He's in all this right up to his neck. Although I'm not altogether sure quite how.' 'So we should go lean on him a little?' Rex grinned. 'I like you, Elvis, I really like you.' 'Gee, thanks.' Elvis picked distractedly at his bandaged

127

left hand. The infection was spreading up his arm. 'We're buddies, right?'

'Right.'

'Then let's go kick ass.'

'Yes, let's do.'

The storm was gathering strength. The winds tore at the stacks of never-collected garbage and flung them about the streets.

'Not a fit night out for man nor beast.' Jonathan tapped a sensor and a blind drew down his office window. 'Three people killed by rats this week,' he added cheerfully. 'The new president has a lot on his plate.'

More than you know, thought Rex, wondering about the connection.

'I'm glad you called by.' Jonathan tapped on a small hand computer of his own design. 'I've just had your monthly bank statement delivered. Two more Porsches last week alone. What do you do with them?' Rex recalled that he had given one to Elvis as a present. He wasn't quite sure where he'd parked the other one. 'All part of my tireless search for your Glitchcraft program,' said he.

'Indeed. But after four weeks you still have nothing to report.'

'We are on the case night and day.'

'We? And who exactly is this with you?'

'King,' said Elvis. 'Thomas Henry Edward King. Pleased to meet you.' He stuck out his hand for a shake.

'I wouldn't,' cautioned Rex.

Jonathan smiled. 'Why the false moustache, Mr King?'

'That's for me to know, fella.'

'No offence meant. So Rex, you bring me good news, I trust.'

'I should like Jack Doveston's K carbon back please. I am sure you have had enough time to make a copy.'

'Actually not as it happens. There is a glitch in the system.'

128

'Do you want to tell me about it?' Jonathan eyed the man in the false moustache.

'He can be trusted,' said Rex.

'It's a big number.'

'Go on then.'

Jonathan plumped into his chair and composed his long fingers before him. 'It really is most annoying and very much the fault of your erstwhile cahoot Jack Doveston. He took it upon himself to trace the hacker who had cut into the university system. Linked up with half the street pirates across America. The result was a massive feedback which scrambled the network. Since then systems have been going out everywhere.'

'Government systems as well?' Rex asked.

'Not as yet, but it's impossible to tell for sure. But major corporations, banking houses. It's a major crisis.'

'None of this has reached the media,' Elvis said.

'Of course not, Mr King. That would be financial suicide. What multinational is going to admit that it no longer has complete control of its own computer net-work? Think of the stock market.'

Elvis was. Most of his fortunes were tied up in it. 'Shit,' said Mr King.

'Then you cannot run the university program?'

'Not while that thing is still in there.'

'What thing?' Rex asked.

'What thing?' Elvis asked.

'Let me show you.' A full-sized computer terminal rose up from the wafer-thin desktop. 'Clever that, isn't it?' Jonathan savoured the twin expressions of awe. 'A little invention of mine. Won't tell you how it's done. But look here.' Jonathan cranked up the system. A spinning white cone appeared. As they watched colours danced through it, running up and down the terminal screen.

'What's that?' Elvis asked.

'What indeed? It looks like a Bio-tech seeker, a hacking device, but it is a great deal more than that. This thing

129

has a mind of its own. You tell me what it is. The ghost in the machine? Some kind of virus? AI?'

'Is that what entered the university system when I made my . . . ' Rex hesitated.

'Made your appearance? Probability falls to its favour. It is using my Glitchcraft program. That is why I dare not run Jack's disc.'

'I understand. But where exactly is this thing located?'

'Where are the words in the telegraph wire or the TV pictures as they beam through space? Where does the music go once you've heard it? Or the . . . '

Elvis curled his lip the way only he could do. 'Looney Tunes,' was his opinion.

'It is in no absolute place. It inhabits an abstract world within the computer matrix. It is everywhere and no-where.'

'Have you tried talking to it?' Rex asked.

'What?'

'Why not simply ask it what it wants?'

'Yeah,' Elvis agreed. 'And who it is.'

'It's not a who, it's an it. You don't understand. It's quite impossible.'

'Do it,' said Rex.

'No I won't.'

'Mr King, show Jonathan what you've got in your pocket.'

'You can't bluff me. I had you scanned when you entered the building. You're not holding.'

Elvis displayed a short plastic tube into which a glass phial fitted snugly. 'Rex said you were heavy on security. This little doodad got no metal parts. I just blow in this end and what comes out of the other blows you away.'

'It's a high-impact charge with a cyanide cap,' Rex explained. 'Ideal for home defence, I understand. I doubt whether he could miss you at such close range.'

Elvis put the tube to his lips and puffed out his cheeks. 'What do you want me to do?' Jonathan ran a

130

trembling finger about his nice clean white collar. He was getting a most unhealthy sweat on.

'Ask it for access.'

Jonathan tapped at the keyboard.

ACCESS DENIED

'There, see.'

'Request its function.'

Jonathan made further taps.

acquisition

'Ask it of what.'

Jonathan did so.

data

'What data?'

all data

Elvis whistled. 'Greedy.'

Jonathan cowered in his chair.

'Ask it who it is.'

'No!' Jonathan was shielding his face. 'I won't do it.'

'Then I shall.' Rex fingered the keyboard. The terminal screen blanked and then words appeared

upon it. They were in red. Big gothic letters.

I AM LEGION WE ARE MANY

'Bad news!' Elvis said. 'Look out,'

'Look out.' Rex pushed Jonathan from his chair. Sparks crackled from the boy's shoulders bucketing Rex from his feet. And not a moment too soon. The terminal screen exploded. A torrent of icy wind tore out from it, smashed through blind and window and into the night. A terrible cry which issued from no human throat rose to a deafening pitch. The room began to vibrate as if the whole building was being fiercely shaken. Rex rolled under the desk and ripped the terminal's plug from the wall socket. The scream died away. The room became still.

Elvis Presley's head rose above the desktop. 'Some big number.'

Jonathan was curled into a tight little ball, gibbering quietly. Rex climbed to his feet and nudged him with one

131

of them. 'You've got a short circuit,' he said, hauling the blubbering boy wonder aloft.

'It's not my fault. I didn't do it.'

Rex righted Jonathan's fallen chair and flung him into it. 'You will now tell us everything you know about this. You will omit nothing and you will speak only words of truth. If I do not consider you are doing this I will strike you hard.'

'I don't think so.'

Rex span around. In the doorway stood Cecil.

'Ah,' groaned Rex. 'It's that gun again.'

'Shoot them both,' Jonathan ordered. 'Especially him.' A multiplicity of muzzles swung towards Rex.

'Now hold on.' The target put up his hands. The gravity of this situation was not lost upon him. 'You can't just shoot me like that.'

'No?' Jonathan made with the big smirks. 'And why not?'

Elvis glanced towards Rex. And why not indeed? The sprout giggled his thinking processes. 'Rex means you gotta spill the beans first,' Elvis piped up.

'I have what?'

That's right. Before you shoot us,' Rex hastily added. This was what was called thinking on your feet. 'You have to tell us all about your evil scheme and gloat a lot. Then you say "and so you die, puny insects" or some-thing like that. Then you have us shot.'

Elvis nodded in agreement. 'That's the way it's done.'

'Gloat.' Jonathan straightened his tie. 'I like gloat.'

'There you go then.'

'OK. But I do have you shot at the end?'

'Of course. "And so die puny insects" or whatever you like.'

'OK then.' Elvis shook his head, the kid was completely out to lunch.

'Should I stand here and say it, or up on the desk?'

'Up on the desk.' Elvis made gestures. 'Much more dramatic.'

132

'More dramatic. I like that too. Up on the desk then.'

'Shall I help you up?' Rex asked.

'No, thank you, I can manage.'

'As you please.' Jonathan climbed on to his desk. He stood defiantly with his hands upon his hips. Lightning flashed behind him and rain thrashed in through the broken window. The effect wasn't bad. 'And so . . .'

'He should glare,' said Cecil, who had seen all the right movies. Or the wrong ones, depending on your point of view. 'Like this.' Cecil glared. Rex flinched. Jonathan glared.

'And so . . .' he began again.

'And rant,' said Cecil.

'Rant yes . . . And so . . .'

'And stamp his foot.'

'Cecil,' said Elvis, 'why don't you butt out? We don't have all night.'

'He should stamp,' said Cecil petulantly.

'And so . . .' There was a definite rant to it this time, and a glare and a stamp.

'Nice,' said Cecil.

'And so, I'll tell you my evil scheme, why shouldn't I?' Rex nodded encouragingly. 'It was all my idea, my genius. I invented the Glitchcraft program.'

'You told us that, go on . . .'

'Well that's about all really. And so die puny insects.'

'No, no, no.' Rex shook his head. That's not about all at all. What about this thing in the computer matrix that calls itself LEGION?'

'How should I know? If I knew what it was, do you think I'd be employing you?'

'Seems like he don't know diddly-shit.' Elvis tossed Jonathan a serious lip curl to add weight to his words. 'He can't do the puny insects speech on them apples.'

Rex shook his head. 'Out of the question.'

'You could tell them how you planned to take over the world with the Glitchcraft program,' Cecil suggested.

133

Jonathan shushed him into silence. 'I can't tell them about that.'

'Sure you can, general. Then I drill them but good.'

'Oh, all right. But let's make it quick. I'm catching my death of cold up here.'

The American public will never buy this, Elvis thought. And how right he was.

'Yes it's all true. Whoever controls the Glitchcraft program controls the world. And it's mine, all mine.'

Rex and Elvis exchanged glances. 'No it's not,' they said.

'No it's not. This is ridiculous. Cecil, drill them, but good.'

Cecil flipped the cover from the firing button. 'And so die puny insects,' he chuckled.

Rex flapped his hands about. 'You can't have us shot here in your office. Think about all the blood, all over your new carpet. And the incriminating evidence. You have to drive us out to some deserted spot . . .'

'A quarry or an old steelworks,' Elvis put in. 'Rusting iron scaffolding stark against the dawn sky. Long shot as the black limo swerves in amidst a cloud of dust.'

'Nice touch,' Rex agreed.

'The kid's got no style.'

'I have too got style. Cecil, throw them out of the window.'

'Hubba hubba,' said Elvis. 'I can dig that. Hey Cec, throw Rex out first. I'll hold your big gun.'

Rex shook his head.

'All wrong. I should be thrown out last. Made to suffer while my dearest friend dies before me through no fault of his own. Cecil, throw Elvis out.'

'Elvis?' said Cecil.

'Elvis?' said Jonathan.

'Elvis,' said Elvis, pulling off his bushy moustache and pocketing his mirror shades. 'But you can call me the King. T.H.E. King.' He bowed theatrically. 'Pleased to be here.'

'It's Elvis,' Cecil gaped and pointed. 'Elvis.' He put

134

aside his 7.62mm M134 General Electric Minigun and moved in close for a hearty handclasp. 'I read all about you in the National Enquirer. I thought you were living in a bus on the moon with Lord Lucan. Can I have your autograph?'

Jonathan buried his face in his hands and began to weep bitterly. 'They'll cut this whole scene from the movie,' he sobbed.

'And a good thing too,' said Barry the Time Sprout. 'I never got a goddamn line in it.'

Considering the low credibility factor of the last scene and by way of a reward to the reader for struggling through it in search of a clue, we move directly to the bedroom of Miss Spike Laine, where Jack Doveston is currently receiving the blow-job of a lifetime. Which he certainly does not deserve.

Jack's hands were tied to the headboard. His eyes were blindfolded. He was naked. Jack had a forty-year-old body, which was long and lean, if a little paunchy, but not in bad condition. And he was extremely well en-dowed. Spike had, at Jack's request, inflated his scrotum. (Surgical scalpel, drinking straw, Band Aid dressing. Remember that?) And now she knelt between Jack's legs, stroking his long thick penis into her mouth, whilst kneading Stud for Men aftershave into his swollen sac with her free hand. There was no way any censor was ever going to leave it in. The telephone rang the way some of them do.

'Don't answer it!' cried Jack.

Declining the obvious 'it's rude to speak with your mouth full', Spike spat out the ice cubes and picked up the phone. 'Yep?'

'It's John,' said Mad John. 'You'd better come over.'

'You got a fix?'

'Sure did.'

'On my way.' Spike sprang up. Zipped her boyish body into a rubberized jumpsuit and her feet into a

135

I

pair of synthaskin knee-boots. She planted a kiss upon Jack's upraised member and made for the door. 'Shan't be long.'

'Spike,' called Jack. 'Spike, don't leave me like this.'

The Zen den had undergone extensive renovation work. Decks had been hobbled back together with anything serviceable. As soon as the military surveillance had been dropped at the Miskatonic the Zens had broken in and grabbed whatever they could. Spike joined Mad John at his screen.

'The seeker got called in. Its homebase requested access. The seeker denied it. Sodding thing has a mind of its own.'

'Who called it in?'

'The Crawford Corporation.'

'Jonathan Crawford?'

'The same. Crazy stuff. He actually asked the seeker its name. Can you figure that?' John's hands danced about his keyboard.

'See look.'

I AM LEGION WE ARE MANY.

'Freaky deaky. What happened then?'

'The system closed. Feedback. Hit him this time.'

'Serves him right. Jonathan Crawford, eh?'

'Had to be, didn't it? He invented Bio-tech. He is the military.'

'So what are we going to do about it?'

'Close him down, what else? His seeker trashed pirate rigs up and down the country. I'm going to put his name on the network. Hit his corporation from every side.'

Spike rolled up her sleeves. 'Let's get to it then. We've got a long night ahead.'

'Spike,' called a voice, crying in the wilderness. 'Spike, untie me. Come back.'

Spike's mum pressed open the bedroom door.

'Is everything all right?' she whispered. 'Oh my!'

136

15

The annals of occult history bulge mightily with tales of many a colourful character, but the enigmatic figure of Hugo Rune stands head and shoulders above the rest. For if not the most

greatly revered and widely chronicled, Rune was certainly the tallest, standing nearly six feet seven in his 'cosmic cottons'.

Of his remarkable powers, much has been written, and of his abandoned womanizing, countless legal battles and love of Chinese meals, a great deal more.

Rune was the exaggerated shadow cast in the fashionable places of his day.

Certainly the charges of living from immoral earnings, and his penchant for gross physical brutality (what he called the 'Cruel to Be Kind Approach') are not wholly without foundation. But of his extraordinary control over his own body (he could give himself an all-over suntan through willpower alone and once grew a pair of sideburns over-night to win a bet with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) there remains little doubt.

He had met and talked with the Secret Chiefs, he claimed, and his skills as a mathematician are as yet unparalleled. Scientists are only today coming to realize that Rune's theory of relativity puts that of Einstein (whom Rune referred to as 'that unprincipled scoundrel') in total eclipse.

But it is for his claim that he could make himself invisible and the remarkable controversy which surrounds the public demonstration of this, that he is best remembered. In his book *The Remarkable Mr Rune* (now sadly out of print) H. G. Wells, a lifetime friend of Rune, gives his account of the affair, which he openly admits gave him the inspiration for his novel *The Invisible Man*. Wells witnessed the

137

demonstration and also the notorious 'leg-biting incident', which scandalized Europe:

'We were assembled this particular morning in the Cafe Royal [Paris, France]. There was H [possibly Rudolf Hess], several of the Surrealist poets, a gentleman named Crowley, who claimed to be one of Rune's disciples, and the blaggard Koeslar.

Koeslar was as usual remonstrating with Rune. It was scientifically impossible, he declared, for a man to become invisible. Rune had a faraway look in his eyes at the time (he later informed me that he was testing his X-ray vision) but at length drew himself up to his full and awesome height, gazed down upon Koeslar and declared: "Invisibility is a piece of gateau, if you have the know of it."

Koeslar demanded to know how it could be achieved, but Rune declared that should such a secret fall into the wrong hands (namely those of Koeslar) the outcome would be disastrous. Koeslar threw another glass of absinthe down his throat [Wells claims that Koeslar was an "immoderate drinker", Rune however refers to him as "that drunken maggot"] and shouted "Go on, show us then".

Rune sighed, put his great hands to his temples and began to rock to and fro on his heels. As we looked on expectantly, a perceptible chill ran through the air and I noticed that the smoke from Rune's *Sobranie* cigarette was held motionless in the air. To our utter amazement the mystic began to grow fuzzy about the extremities and within a few short seconds had vanished completely. Koeslar had fainted dead away and was only revived when the contents of a nearby spittoon were emptied over him.'

So ends Wells's account of the episode. Koeslar's version, however, differs substantially. In his book *Hugo Rune, Wife Beater and Fraud* (now happily out of print) he tells it his way:

138

'Rune as ever dinging to the shirt-tails of his betters, had insinuated himself into our company. Being drunk, he began to belabour our senses with more of his fantastic claims. "Make yourself invisible Rune," I quipped, meaning for him to depart us with haste. "I shall," he drawled, "I shall do it here and now." Realizing that he meant to perform one of his ex-cruciating parlour tricks and knowing full well his skills as a ventriloquist, I had a pretty good idea of what to expect and so watched his every move with great care. Thus when he suddenly cried out, "Isn't that Oscar Wilde?" and pointed madly towards the door, I alone saw him duck beneath the table.

At last I had the God-given opportunity to publicly unmask this charlatan and so took it. Stepping smartly around the table and calling for the others to observe me, I levelled my foot at the cowering con man. To his eternal shame and discredit, Hugo Rune sank his teeth into my ankle.'

The two accounts of this incident are at such variance that the reader might feel some degree of doubt as to what actually happened upon that fateful day. Happily a copy of the transcript from the resulting trial still exists and Rune's own evidence, given under oath, remains:

'It was the first time I had made myself totally invisible and had not fully anticipated that whilst in a state of non-matter I should no longer be subject to the forces of gravity. I thus remained perfectly still in time and space, whilst the Earth continued to roll on without me. Almost at once I became aware that I was sinking into the floor of the restaurant and had I not hastily rematerialized I should no doubt have been tragically lost to this world. It was upon the moment of my ^materialization that I found myself being violently kicked. I merely did what I could to defend myself. I am innocent of all the charges, your honour. May the great

139

architect of the universe strike me dead if I am telling a lie.'

The verdict upon this occasion, as upon many others, went against Rune and he was led away to the cells.

Had that been the end of the matter then the reader's verdict might well, as did that of the court, go against Rune. But there is an extraordinary tailpiece to the incident. When, less than an hour later, the jailer opened Rune's cell, it was discovered to be empty. Within minutes of this discovery a telecommunication arrived from Rio de Janeiro. It came from Hugo Rune!

The message was a simple rhyme, which went as follows:

They seek him here,

They seek him there,

Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.

Is he in Heaven,

Or on the moon,

That disappearing Hugo Rune?

Sir John Rimmer, The Official Hugo Rune Handbook

'I'm ruined,' Elvis sobbed. He and Rex were back at the penthouse, huddled over the King's computer terminal. After the autograph signings, the long and involved lyings and the dramatic oaths of allegiance, Elvis and Rex had waved Jonathan a cheery goodbye and returned to their home base. Elvis was not a happy man. 'Wiped out.'

'Half the city's wiped out. That thing is eating every-thing.'

'What the Hell's doing it? If it's not Crawford, then what?'

'I thought you Presleys were First Assembly of God, the thing says its LEGION for Chrissakes. Excuse me sir.' Rex glanced respectfully Heavenward.

140

'Legion? That is crazy ape-shit,'

'No. Think about it. Crawford constructs a program to work Magick. He says someone beat him to it. I think in fact someone or something hijacked it from him. What Crawford didn't know was that something was waiting inside the computer matrix. His program reactivated it, revived it.'

'Legion?'

'It all begins to make sense (cries of relief were heard all round, but not to Rex) - Legion was a company of demons. Christ cast them out of a man and into the Gadarene swine.'

'Good band, the Gadarene Swine,' said Elvis. 'They cover some of my old numbers, I got a piece of them. A bit avant-garde, if you catch my drift. But this is the nineties, ain't it?'

Rex shook his head. Sometimes he wondered about Elvis. As he recalled, most times he wondered about Elvis. 'The Gadarene swine were pigs. Pale things, four legs, snouty faces . . .'

'Buddy, I know pigs.'

'These pigs plunged over a cliff with the demons inside them. As a child I always wondered if Christ paid the pig-keeper, but no matter. The demons didn't die; they can't die. What I am saying is that they are now inside the matrix. The matrix is possessed. They are protecting Wormwood. They brought me here as his insurance policy. It's all part of the same thing. Wormwood has it all.'

'And I'm still ruined.'

'But at least you know for certain now who's done it to you.'

'But I can't kill him. Not while you are still in this time.'

'Yes,' Rex agreed. 'This does present us with a seem-ingly insurmountable problem.'

'A seemingly insurmountable problem,' said the con-troller. 'A positive Gordian knot.'

141

16

Everybody's somebody's orang-utang, correct me if I'm wrong. Johnny G.

Byron did Saint Vitus impersonations before the curricule. 'I still need a lateral augmentor. Himself alone knows what's going on on the surface while the Inter-rositer is out of operation?'

'It's a poser.' The controller scratched his nose with a spindly finger. 'Problems, always problems. The big flywheel won't run by itself. You had best see to it as of the now.'

'If the malfunction is not corrected there may not be any "as of the now" left.' But Byron's words were lost amidst the sounds of the curricule's scurrying feet.

'Up and away Black Bess,', ' cried the controller. 'We ride to York.'

Totally out to lunch, thought Byron Wheeler-Vegan The fat sweeper-upper, who had been shaking his head in amusement throughout this exchange, chuckled to himself and went on pushing his broom.

142

Robert McKee says that movies are essentially 'small worlds'. Although the characters may be set against spectacular backdrops, such as the snow-blown wastes of Doctor Zhivago or the sand-blown wastes in Lawrence of Arabia, the actual worlds within them are small.

The movies are concerned with the characters, their loves and hates, trials and tribulations, goals, ambitions, motivations and whatnot. If the landscape is the star, then the movie has failed. If the music is the star, then the movie has failed. If the special effects are the star, then the movie has failed. He says that it is the small world of the individual. The triumph of the human spirit, which is what it is all about.

Personally, I don't believe a word of it. I reckon it's the special effects.

But perhaps now might be a good time to explore the small world inhabited by our characters. What are they up to? What do they want, and what are they prepared to do in order to get it? What

drives them, what motivates their reasoning and stuff like that?

But then again perhaps it wouldn't. So let's don't. Let's scrub around McKee, take once more the advice of Francis Vincent Zappa and 'mime the hard bits'.

'What does that look like to you?' Christeen asked. Fido put his paws up on the windowsill and peered at

143

the sky. 'That,' said he, 'looks like a dark cloud, forming on the horizon and moving in from the east. Writhing and turning with strange shapes. Ominous signs and portents, omens of the coming of Ragnarok. Or it could just be a storm.'

'Did I put down a storm for today?'

'No, you did not,' said Fido, with the kind of heavy emphasis that one does not normally associate with a talking dog. 'I've seen your diary. No storm today. Uh-uh.'

'So it shouldn't be there, should it?'

'No, would be the answer to that particular question, man.'

'I am going to have to have strict words with that Rambo.'

'Oh, er, he's not calling himself Rambo any more. He's gone back to using his original name. Artemis Solon Hermes-Aiwass-Crowley the fourth. Exalted magus of the Sacred Order of the Golden Sprout.'

This really does have to stop.'

'Best go over and have a word, eh? Or you could set me on him if you feel so inclined. I owe you one. Some leg.'

'Let's go,' said Christeen.

Jack Doveston awoke with a smile on his face. He rolled over to Spike. 'That was wonderful,' he whispered. 'I've never been pricked all over with needles in the dark before. Who taught you that?' Spike mumbled words to the effect that she had only just got back and what was he talking about. Then she returned to her slumbers. The befuddled Jack took himself off for a shower.

Doing a mental rerun of the previous night's sexual marathon and rising to the occasion, he was more than a little put out when Cecil's preposterous weapon nosed through the shower curtain and poked him where the sun didn't shine.

'Hands off cocks, on with socks,' whispered Cecil. 'You got an early appointment.'

144

Jack had not been particularly taken with the interrog-ation room the first time round. His second visit did nothing to alter his feelings. Few things concentrate the mind so much as finding yourself in a torture chamber, tied to a cold hard chair and wearing nothing but your socks.

'Good morning Jack,' said the voice behind the light. It was a new voice this time. A very young voice. But it had a discouraging edge to it. This little voice meant business.

'You are causing me a great deal of grief, Jack.'

'I'm terribly sorry. What exactly have I done?'

'Your Zen Terrorist pals are harassing my corporation.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Jonathan Crawford's head appeared above the light. He stepped around the desk and perched upon it

before Jack. 'Jonathan Crawford,' he said.

'Pleased to meet you.' Jonathan reached down, thrust a forefinger between Jack's legs. Sparks flew. Jack's eyes crossed.

'You are costing me, Jack. I have troubles enough without street pirates cutting into my network.'

'I don't know anything about it. You've got the wrong man. It's Spike Laine you want.'

'You'd sell your own mother, wouldn't you? Rex was right.'

'Rex? Rex Mundi?'

'I suppose you thought he was dead. After you ran out on him.'

'Who are you?'

'I am your benefactor, Jack. I am your employer. I got you the job at the Miskatonic. I wanted access to all the books so I financed the project. I am a millionaire, you see.'

'But, the project ran out of money.'

'Only because the dean was bleeding the university dry. I put vast sums at his disposal. The man is a criminal. Was a criminal.'

145

Jack didn't like the sound of 'was'. 'I didn't know any of this. I worked hard on the project. Honest.'

'Of course. You are a dedicated man. A literary man. A great writer.'

'I expect Rex told you that.'

'Not Rex. I knew already. But Jack, this Zen business. They are cutting me. My systems are in chaos anyway. If the Zens continue I shall be ruined. We can't have that, can we?' Jonathan extended his megawatt finger.

'We certainly can't. But I don't know what they're up to. Honest. I swear to you.'

'But you are a bit of a hero with them. They respect you. You're a rebel.'

'I am?' Jack wasn't too sure.

'Certainly. You organized them. Fed them your library program. Tried to cut the seeker. It was a bold scheme, if somewhat foolhardy. But I would have done the same if I had been in your position.'

'You would?'

'I would.' Jonathan popped a sweetie into his mouth. 'And so I am going to offer you promotion.'

'You are?'

'How would you like to be the new dean of the Miskatonic?'

'Very much indeed.' Who do I have to kill? Jack wondered.

'There would be certain conditions, of course.'

Here it comes!

'I have a list here,' Jonathan displayed same. 'These are the forty-six pirates who have managed to infiltrate my system. They are the best. I want them off my case. I want you to employ them.'

'They might not be all that keen.'

'I think they'd do it for you. We can offer them exceptional salaries. Whatever social drugs they require for their leisure time. All manner of incentives.'

'And I would be dean?'

'As long as you do what I want. I will update the entire

146

university system, what they have not already stolen, with Bio-tech. You will set the pirates a specific task. To track down the seeker and locate its control. These pirates are many times better than my own operators. If anyone can do this successfully these people can. You will monitor their progress and report directly to me. On a salary more suitable to your needs, you will find plenty of time to work on your novels. This is, I believe, an offer you cannot afford to refuse.'

Tut your trust in me,' said Jack.

'Oh, I will. Cecil, kindly remove Mr Doveston's bonds.' Cecil did so.

Jonathan was all smiles. 'Then we have a deal. I look forward to working with you, Jack. Put it there.' He extended his hand. Like a fool Jack shook it.

The rains were blowing over now. But the sighs which arose from the drying earth were not of thanks, rather of relief that the downpour had ceased. On the scaffolding which encaged the White House, teams worked around the clock, sealing the stonework beneath a protectrite shell. They pampered the pitted building. Infused syn-thetic resins to draw out the poisons, dabbed up the chemical stains, cleaned and coated. But it was a losing battle. The fragile balance of equipoise had been drawn down heavily upon its end by Homo sapiens. The Earth was dying. The once lush lawns surrounding the White House were rotting. Packs of wild dogs ranged there at night hunting the rats that fed on whatever feathered carrion the rains had brought down.

Yet it was not like this all over. The farmsteads of New England were still green, although the sun no longer smiled kindly upon crop or kine. But the White House seemed to receive special attention from the rampaging heavens. As if the very rains knew who poisoned them.

These bitter waters had etched the Statue of Liberty's face into a pained sneer, an expression which was rapidly becoming a national archetype. But the people had been

147

promised change. If they struggled a little harder and toiled a little longer, everything would be all right. Because President Wormwood said it was so. And if President Wormwood said it was so, it was so.

Within the White House, the president's office showed little of its former glory. The relics of its noble past lay trampled underfoot, or were piled in untidy heaps to each corner. The portraits of Lincoln and George Washington had their faces to the wall. At least they were spared the sight. The rich carpets had been flung back. A huge pentagram defaced the marble floor. In it stood Worm-wood, sober suit, polished shoes. Before him terminal screens, heaped into an uncapped pyramid, flickered. He gazed at the twelve screens. From each his own face gazed back at him.

Wormwood addressed them. 'LEGION. You of the first hierarchy of Hell, identify yourselves.' The air became chill. The faces on the screens contorted. In turn, each spoke.

'leviathan. Prince of the first hierarchy. Ringleader of all heretics. Tempter of the faithful. Gatherer of souls.'

'ASMODEUS. Burner with desires. Prince of wantons.'

'BALBERLTH. Tempter to contentiousness, to blasphemy, argumentation and homicide.'

'ASTAROTH. Prince of thrones. Tempter to idleness and sloth, complacency and carelessness.'

'verrine. Second in place to asmodeus. Tempter with impatience.'

'GRESSIL. Third in the order of thrones. Tempter to uncleanness and impurity.'

'SONNEILLON. Fourth in the order of thrones. The hatred of enemies is mine to give.'

'And you of the second hierarchy.'

'CARRAEU. Prince of powers. Hardness of heart.'

'carnivean. Prince of powers. Obscenity and shame-lessness.'

'verrier. Prince of principalities. Breaker of vows of obedience.'

148

'And of the third hierarchy.'

'belias. Prince of the order of virtues. Tempter with arrogance. Bestower of lewd thoughts upon the minds of women. That they might make wantons of their children. Profane the high mass. Prostrate themselves naked before priests. Defile the . . .'

'Quite so,' said Wormwood. 'Next?'

'OLIVIER. Prince of archangels. Cruelty and merciless-ness toward the poor do I offer men.'

'Twelve good men and true.' Wormwood bared his nice white teeth into a nasty white smile. 'Great to have you back on the team after so long. Would you prefer that I address you singly?'

'Singly.' Leviathan took voice. 'LEGION is so anony-mous.'

'Can't say I'm all that fazed,' yawned Astaroth. 'Easy come. Easy go.'

'That's because you are an idle fuckwit,' coughed Carnivean. 'May pisspots rain upon your head.'

'Gentlemen, gentlemen.' Wormwood raised calming hands. 'I shall address you singly. Are you comfortable in your temporary accommodation?' A babble of voices rose from the terminals. That of Leviathan rose above the rest. 'I shall act as spokesman for my brothers. We are well served for the present.'

'Speak for yourself,' hissed Balberith. 'What do you know?'

'Can we get on with it?' Verrine demanded. 'We don't have all day. At least I don't.'

'What's all the rush, brother? Loosen up.' Astaroth began to whistle. A chamber pot materialized and emptied its contents over his whistling head.

'Nice one,' chuckled Gressil. 'A nice loose movement, you know what I mean?'

'Enough!' Wormwood raised a remote control as a pistol. 'You will speak only when you are spoken to, or I will blank you out.'

149

'Big deal.'

Wormwood blanked Balberith's screen. 'Any more?' The eleven remaining heads of Wormwood shook in untidy unison. 'Leviathan. What have you to report?'

'You now have control over the five major banks. The industrial corporations, business holdings, the stock market . . .'

'Charities,' Olivier cackled. Wormwood blanked his screen.

'The military?'

'Soon.'

Wormwood nodded gravely. 'Keep at it. Sonneillon. What of my would-be assassin?'

'I hate him.'

Wormwood's eyes narrowed. 'Who is he?'

'Don't know. I am monitoring all CIA, FBI and police computer networks. All forensic reports, scene-of-crime material evidence, and there's plenty of that. Fingerprints are not on file. Clothing fibres are a possible, very up-market stuff. Exclusive. I am following that up.'

'Good. But make haste. I want him found and I want him brought before me. Do you understand?' That was ranting, glaring and foot-stamping. Jonathan Crawford could learn a lot from this man.

'I am on it, sire.'

'Good. Carry on. All of you, penetrate each and every corner of the network. You know what is required of you. I want every computer system under my direct control. Once you have achieved this then I shall release you. Give you new bodies to inhabit. Powerful new bodies.' The ten on-screen heads of Wormwood made with the Satanic smiles and then were gone.

Mother Demdike, who had escaped previous mention, tore a garish relic of the Reagan years from its frame and flung it into the fire. Nancy with the laughing eyes melted into the flames.

'Those boys are making merry,' said the rankest hag that ever troubled daylight.

150

'They will do what I command. They are locked up neat and nice.'

'Then keep a watchful eye upon them, my precious.' Mother Demdike broke wind and tittered as the fire turned green. 'You'll need a firm hand once they're free.'

'I know that. They feed upon the thoughts of men. They can gorge themselves a while longer. Now tighten your sphincter, you evil-smelling crone.'

Mother Demdike stuck out her long black tongue, rocked upon her knees and bellowed with laughter. 'Know who tends and keeps you, bonny boy. Who cooked you in her womb. Watch your manners or I'll pop you in my pot.'

'Or maybe I'll let Carnivean play a tune upon your old bones for a day or two.'

'I'd wear him out, dearie.' Demdike fluttered her mouldy skirts, a nest of rats scurried from beneath them.

Wormwood turned on her. 'Tell me of my assassin. My Nemesis.'

'Let Sonneillon seek him out with your modern wonders.'

'Too slow. There is no peace for me until he is destroyed,'

'Then I shall find him for you.'

'You can do this?'

'Easy-peasy. I will summons an agency of despatch.' Demdike took out a greasy casket and gently patted the lid. 'She will seek through the ether. Smell out your Nemesis. Bring you his scrotum for a baccy pouch. How would you like that?'

'Very much indeed.'

'But you must do one thing for me. And you must do it now.'

'What thing is this?'

'Sing to me little Wayne. Sing me "A Boy's Best Friend Is His Mother".'

'Hell's teeth!' said President Wormwood.

151

17

No-one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public. H. L. Mencken

'Four men sit once more about a table in a secret room. It is the same secret room as the one on page 14. And these are the same four men. The room is still a top-secret room, it is still deep underground and still in a government establishment. What else can I tell you? They are still wearing the same grey suits. The first one gets up to speak.

'Gentlemen,' he says. 'We have, I believe, now reached the time for action.' Mumbblings are exchanged. Heads nod affirmatively.

'The new president has been in office for more than a month. We have all had time to observe him closely. What are your conclusions?'

'He's a stone-bonker.'

'Would you care to enlarge on that, Mr Aldus?'

'He's a paranoid schizophrenic. He has turned the White House into a fortress. Insists on having all his food "tasted". Never lets a soul into his office and apparently spends most of his time conversing with a stack of TV sets.'

'Your views, Mr Lorrimer?'

'Hm, the man is certainly security conscious. But let us not forget, eight assassination attempts have been made on him. This, I feel, might colour anyone's judgement, personal-safety-wise.'

'But regarding his mental health?'

152

'He's definitely out to lunch.'

'Mr Asher?'

'The American public love the guy, Mr Russell. The country is up to its eyes in the brown stuff but no-one's got a bad word for him. Did you catch his speech last night about the financial crisis?'

T did indeed. He has promised to put the entire country back on its feet in two weeks.'

'Good God.' Mr Lorrimer's jaw dropped. 'He promised that?'

'He sure did. He claims that he has cured the glitch in the country's computer network and that he is personally restructuring the entire monetary system. He has developed this new kind of credit card. The Americard. It is ID, medico record, credit status, car and front-door key all rolled into one. It is activated by the owner's thumbprint and so can never be stolen and misused. He considers that this will sweep away crime, as soon as he has phased out money. He intends to do away with personal taxation, cut military spending to near zero, increase welfare payments and insitute a jobs-for-all policy which will wipe out unemployment at a stroke.'

'He didn't mention anything about having harnessed the power of the tides and curing cancer, I

suppose?' Mr Lorrimer asked.

'Not so far.'

Mr Russell spoke. 'We have got to put a hold on this guy fast.'

Mr Asher raised his hand. 'The thing is, Mr Russell, he is actually capable of doing these things. Any presi-dent could solve most of the country's problems if he chose to.'

'It is not as simple as that, Mr Asher. Not as simple at all.'

'Well, actually, with all respect, it is, sir. You see, seventy-five per cent of our gross national product, our profit, is either wasted upon non-essential services, lost through mismanagement, drained into preposterous

153

military projects, misdirected due to government in-efficiency, corruptly bled off into . . .'

'Yes, yes. We know all that.'

'So does he, sir.'

'But he can't know where all the money goes. No-one can know that.'

'Apparently he does. That is why he is dealing with it all by himself.'

'The man is completely impossible. He'll be knocking on our door next. We must act now before everything gets out of hand. Mr Aldus, kindly bring us up to date on Project Wormwood.'

'Certainly sir. As you know we have been working with Bio-tech. We have created a near to perfect facsimile of the president. We fed it part of last night's speech and intercut it with the real president, you can't see the join. We have a computer match on his voice-prints, our replica even spits the same.'

'But total body prosthesis?'

'Not really feasible, sir. The technology does not exist. We have a head and shoulders and a right arm so far, so we can only go for close-ups on TV. The sheer mechanics of walking, talking, even performing simple functions cannot be contained within the confines of a body framework. Thus we have come up with a compromise that I think you will find attractive. We suggest that the president has a "stroke". He will survive mentally unimpaired but with only the use of his right arm. All necessary electronics for our replica can be housed in a covered wheelchair.'

'Excellent, Mr Aldus. Once the tragic "accident" has been arranged, the substitution can be made at our private nursing home. The public will rally to his support. This is sound thinking. Well done.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'So when do we give the president his fatal stroke?'

Mr Lorrimer spoke. 'With security being what it is, this poses certain difficulties. But I believe these can be

154

overcome. I propose that we enlist the services of the president's would-be assassin. Give him the tools to finish the job.'

'All well and good. But no-one knows the identity of the assassin . . .'

'I do,' said Mr Lorrimer. All eyes turned upon him.

'You do? But how?'

'By applying common sense. Eight assassination attempts. If we discount eight different assassins, and the FBI see the mark of a single hand on each, then it is logical that our assassin must have been present each time to make his attempts. Thus my security have maintained close crowd surveillance on every occasion that the president has been on public view.'

'But the FBI have tried that. Wormwood has thousands of devoted followers. The same faces turn up in the crowd time and again. Checking them all out is an im-possibility.'

T didn't need to check them all out. Only the one who comes in a different disguise each time.'

'But if he always comes in disguise, how could you recognize him?'

'He always wears the same mirrored sunglasses.'

'No-one is going to be that dumb.' Mr Russell guff-fawed.

'This guy is.' Mr Lorrimer pulled four blow-ups from a buff envelope and laid them on the desk. 'Different beards and moustaches, but always the same sunglasses. The same exclusive sunglasses, designed by Pierre Montag of Paris, see the little logo on the top right-hand lens, designed for a single client. A most singular client. A millionaire New York recluse. A Mr Noah Never.'

T am very impressed, Mr Lorrimer. Is there more?'

'Certainly is, sir. I ran these photographs through the computer to build up a likeness without the disguises and you'll never guess what the computer came up with.' With a suitable flourish, Mr Lorrimer produced the print.

155

'Gosh,' said his three confederates, and things similar. 'It's a young Elvis Presley.'

'Isn't it though?'

This is amazing,' said Mr Russell. 'What do we have on this Mr Never?'

'Not a lot. His kind of money buys a lot of privacy. No-one has him on file. Not even the IRS. But I've been digging, he has a string of aliases. According to Pierre Montag he is also something of a ladies' man. Favours a rather risque up-market nightclub called the Split Beaver.'

'I know it,' said Mr Aldus brightly. Eyes turned upon him. 'Know of it, I mean. Notorious place, I understand.'

'Well, Mr Lorrimer. You'd better get the place "staked out", as they say.'

'Oh I have, sir. I have indeed.'

'Check out these wheels, Rex.' He and Elvis were whistling through the New York night in the King's new automobile. 'Traded in three of my old ones for this. The Koshibo Tiger. What this car ain't got ain't worth a diddle. Controlled environment, virtually crashproof, nought to sixty in three seconds. Four-wheel anti-lock braking system. See this steering wheel, the inner ring is the accelerator. Give it a little squeeze and . . .' Rex made one of those curious faces that astronauts make when the G Forces hit them. 'No key,' Elvis continued. 'Little plastic card you slip into the dash, this car is fully thief-proof, no grand theft auto for this boy.'

The car was long, white, chic and shameless, scoop front, high tailfins. Big fat tyres. 'It's hardly what I would call low profile,' Rex put in, when he was able to draw breath. 'A mite conspicuous, don't you think?'

'Loosen up, Rex. We're nightclubbing is all.' Rex was far from loose. He was getting nowhere. They were no closer to bearding Wormwood in his den. They had come up with no plans of campaign. He and Elvis had come to a dead end. Rex's frustration pulsed in his head.

156

'You'll love the Split Beaver,' Elvis assured him. 'Wait till you see the chicks.'

Rex sank lower into his seat, which the in-car computer moulded to accept the contours of his body. 'Are you quite comfortable, sir?' it asked him in breathless Bim-boese. 'A little music perhaps?'

'Alrighty,' Elvis gave the accelerator ring another squeeze, 'let's rock and roll.'

The night folk of the Split Beaver were currently making the most of another of President Wormwood's new policies, abolition of the drug laws. Presidents past had squandered billions of dollars waging war against the South American drug lords. Wormwood merely scrapped the entire programme, purchased this year's crop direct from source, imported it and had it freely distributed to those wishing to indulge. By cutting out both the middlemen and the military involvement, not to mention the countless government bodies, security forces, drug squads and so on, he had reduced national expenditure on the 'problem' to near zero, put every stateside pusher out of business, cleared drug-related crime from the streets and made a lot of old hippies very happy.

The Koshibo Tiger crept into the car park of the Split Beaver. A dozen slim headlamps dimmed and retracted. The megaphonics died away. 'I hope you enjoyed your ride, sirs,' purred the silicone voice. 'If you would care to tell me when you will be returning I will have the coffee on and the seats warmed.'

'Doncha just love it?' Elvis asked. 'About four hours, honey.'

'Thank you sir. Be careful as you leave the car. There is a slight ground frost. Have a nice evening.'

'We will, honey.'

Rex climbed from the car. There was a chill in the air and he turned up the collar of the white lame tuxedo Elvis had pressed on him for the occasion with, 'It's a

157

swanky place, so take a shower.' The parked cars in the statue-lined parking area spoke favourably of the Beaver's clientele. The stretched Rolls Royces and six-wheeled Porsches spoke the international monetary tongue.

Fangio's this wasn't. The club's facade was a grand classical job. Ionic columns of green marble rising to capitals of the Corinthian order. Gilded entablatures and scotias adorned with lapis lazuli. As for the windows ...

'Showy, ain't it?' said Elvis. 'Come on, let's get in-side.' A liveried doorman bowed them in. An exotic androgyne, resembling something that had escaped from Beardsley's Under the Hill, fawned over Elvis, promising delights to stagger the senses of the gods.

'My buddy and me will take a drink at the bar first.' Elvis waved the creature away. 'This way, Rex.'

Rex Mundi did his best to take stock of his surround-ings, but they were all a bit much. The entrance hall was palatial, lit by chandeliers the size of small houses which rained light in crystal waterfalls. From the carpet of rich purple pile, walls heavy with over-embellishment rose to meet them somewhere near Heaven. On many of the walls hung priceless Victorian erotica. Sepia photographs of plump smiling ladies and grave-faced men engaged in all forms of imaginative coitus. Beneath these were printed little epigrams. Rising to meet the challenge. She has her hands full now. The dog has his day. Yodelling up the canyon. The plater's mate.

"This way, Rex.'

Rex shrugged and followed Elvis to the bar. Here the walls, free of photographic fancy, were given up to murals as big, brash and crude as latrine scribblings. Their sheer vulgarity was upsetting. The effect was not lost on Rex. 'It's a theme bar,' Elvis explained as they pressed through the

early-evening merrymakers. Rex's attention now became drawn to a row of tall artificial phalli rising from behind the bar counter. As he watched, a barman wearing nought but an oversized sharkskin

158

codpiece gripped one of these and drew it backwards. 'Draught beer on tap,' said Elvis. 'Care for one?'

'No,' said Rex firmly. 'Let's get out of here.'

'Loosen up. Hey fella, two beers.'

'It's crass. Let's leave.'

'No, wait Rex. The chicks, I swear.'

Rex viewed 'the chicks'. They were curious to the extreme. They were of that rare breed that is only seen in the company of wealthy men. No-one ever seems to know who they are or where they came from. They can be seen dining in exclusive restaurants, boarding jet planes or being chauffeured away from Harrods.

The friend of mine who was once in the TA told me that they are cloned in a secret Nazi establishment in South America and that very rich men buy them through a kind of mail-order catalogue. He said that a friend of his knew someone who had actually seen such a catalogue. I told him that he was a drunken Glaswegian bum. He told me that it was my round, which it was.

Rex continued to view them. They were of exquisite beauty and carried themselves with assured poise. But their elegant faces were here muddied by make-up and they wore the costume of the street whore. The men in their white tuxedos drifted amongst them, feeling and fondling. Elvis pressed a beer into Rex's hand. 'I'm gonna cruise round a bit. See what's happen-ing. Indulge. My treat.' And then he was gone into the crowd.

Rex took up his beer and sought a secluded table. The furnishings were sumptuous enough. Overstuffed sofas set within booths which could be curtained off, if and when the need arose. A number of these were already curtained and the sounds issuing from them left no doubts that the need had arisen and was being amply catered to. Rex sighed and sank into a vacant sofa. He placed his beer before him on to a low table of travertine marble. On this stood numerous small bowls containing narcotics. Rex dipped a bespittled finger into one at

159

random and took a little taste. It did nothing immediate to raise his spirits.

'Is anyone sitting here?' Rex looked up. She was lovely. Slim and almost childlike, her tiny face seemed to glow. Her eyes were large. They were golden. She wore a flesh-toned catsuit and her long black hair was laquered into a tall crest.

'No. Please sit down.'

'Thanks. I'm Kirn. What's your name?'

'Rex,' said Rex.

'Hi Rex. You a friend of Mr Never?'

'Who?'

'The young guy with the mirror-shades and the killer sideburns. You came in together.'

'Oh yes, that's right.'

'That his new Tiger outside?'

'Yes it is.' Rex sipped beer and took another dip in the bowl. 'You like the car then?'

'And some.' Kim took a dip in the bowl. A big dip.

T'm sure he'd be happy to take you for a ride in it. What is this stuff?'

Kim laughed. A pretty mouth, Rex thought. 'It's high-grade coke cut with a pheromonic adreynal opiate. Hits the spot, eh? So what do you do then, Rex?'

T'm Mr Never's bodyguard and chauffeur as it hap-pens.'

'How about that. Do you know who you look like?'

T have been told, yes. What are in these other bowls?'

'Oh, uppers, downers, inners, outers. Do you wanna have sex, Rex?'

Rex felt that he certainly did. 'Are you on your own then? I mean you didn't come with anyone?'

'Not yet,' Kim giggled. 'Come on, let's do blood.'

'Do blood?' Rex didn't like the sound of that.

Kim winked. 'Well what kind of girl do you think I am?' She pushed aside the bowls and emptied the contents of her shoulder bag on to the table. Loose change, make-up sticks, cigarettes, lighter, an elegant

160

gold device which bore the logo of Koshibo Electronics.

'Surely you've seen one of these before.' Kim displayed the device. 'Safe-sex blood analyser. Ten-second analysis and visual display. A girl can't afford to be without one of these nowadays.' Kim flipped up the lid and a hypo needle extended.

'Just dig your thumb, it doesn't hurt.'

'And you do the same?'

'Sure and if we both check out clean then we ball.' Rex took up the device and turned the needle toward his thumb. It certainly made a great deal of sense, he winked up at Kim and offered her a man-of-the-world smile. But it froze instantly on his face. Kim wasn't smiling. She was staring intently at the needle, her lips were drawn back into an evil sneer, her eyes glowed almost red. It was not a pretty sight.

'Let's have another drink first.' Rex carefully laid the device aside. 'I'm a bit squeamish about blood, hope you understand.'

'Sure.' Kim was now all smiles again. 'Absinthe over blue ice. Then . . .'

'Then,' said Rex, finding his feet, which now seemed a bit distant. 'I won't be a moment.' He elbowed his way into the crowd. Where was Elvis?

The patrons of the Split Beaver were now engaged in some inane scatological chant. Rex forced his way amongst them. Where was Elvis? Rex found his way to the bar counter and hailed the muscleboy in the codpiece. 'Mr Never, where is he?'

'You just missed him. He went outside with two guys. Didn't look too pleased about it I can tell you.' Rex felt suddenly sick. He and Elvis had dropped their guard. In failing to hunt they had become the hunted. Rex struggled toward the door. A hand gripped his shoulder. Rex turned in time to see Kim swinging the hypo device at his face. He slashed her hand aside and struck her hard in the jaw. Then he ran.

Up the corridor, through the wonderful entrance hall

161

out into the night. Elvis was being bundled into a stretch Roller. The car was already in motion. Rex dashed for the Koshibo Tiger. He flung open the driver's door.

'Vehicle violation! Vehicle violation!' shrieked the elec-tronic bimbo. 'Leave the car immediately. You have twenty seconds.' Rex fumbled at the dash. He didn't have the key card. 'Fifteen seconds, the doors will be sealed and the police notified.' The in-car phone lit up. 'I am preparing to dial for assistance.'

'This is an emergency,' cried Rex. 'Override. Override.'

Ten seconds, please leave the car at once.' Rex glanced up. The Rolls-Royce was swinging out of the car park.

'Hot wire.' Rex thumped the dashboard hopelessly. 'Spare key, anything.'

'The spare key card is under the driver's seat.'

'What did you say?'

'Excuse me. The spare key card is under the driver's seat, sir.'

'Under the driver's seat?' Rex grinned. The car had evidently not been programmed to recognize voice patterns. Some security. Rex found the spare key card, rammed it into the housing. The Tiger roared. 'Good evening, sir,' cooed the computer. 'You have returned somewhat early. I will brew coffee.' Rex squeezed the accelerator ring. The car lurched forward. And then his vision was obscured. Kirn's face was flattened against the windscreen, her hands clawing madly at the glass.

'Vehicle violation,' shouted Rex. 'Felon on board.'

'Outer defence systems operative.' Kirn's face contorted as the Tiger's bodywork lit up to a crackle of static electricity. She rolled off the car and fell howling to the ground. Rex thrust the car into reverse, then swerved around her. The Koshibo made his Porsche seem rather tame, thought Rex as he clipped along a row of parked autos. The bill for the damage would have bank-rupted any one of a dozen African nations. He brought down several statues which fell to great effect. Petrol

162

tanks exploded, the Koshibo Tiger sped away from the conflagration and off in hot pursuit.

The Roller was fast but it was no match for Rex and the wondercar. He was soon close up behind.

'Where is the horn?' Rex asked.

'Claxton, Alpine or novelty selection?'

'All,' said Rex.

'As you please, sir.' The Tiger set up a deafening cacophony. Car-cophony? Please yourself then! Faces appeared at the Roller's rear window. Two looked angry, the third offered a curly-lipped smile. They had reached a stretch of open road, which was probably the same bit they always reach. Rex accelerated, brought the car alongside. 'Tell them to pull over.' The Tiger's public address system did that very thing. The driver of the Rolls swerved toward Rex. The two cars struck raising showers of sparks. Rex fell back. Speed he had, but not weight. In the Roller's rear seat Elvis hid his face. 'My new car,' he wept.

'You don't happen to have any hidden extras do you?' Rex asked.

'Many sir. What precisely did you have in mind?'

'Any weapon systems?'

'No sir, I'm afraid not. If it's weapon systems you want, you should go for the Koshibo Commando.'

Fully armoured body. Bullet-proof glass, carries one of those amazing rotary machine-guns like . .
'

'Yes, I know. OK. If we can't shoot or ram them off the road we'll do it another way. Call the police, tell them a kidnapping is in progress. Give them the licence number and description of the getaway car and our present whereabouts. Can you do all that?'

'I am doing all that, sir. Your coffee is now brewed.'

'Excellent. Three sugars please. Oh shit!' A bullet sang through the rear window and left via the windscreen, clearing Rex's head by inches. Rex ducked low in his seat, adjusted the driving mirror. A motorcycle was gaining upon him. On it sat the seemingly indestructible Kim.

163

'Vehicle violation!' screamed the dashboard. 'Vision obscured. Emergency stop.'

'No!' Rex gripped tightly to the accelerator ring but the Koshibo Tiger had made up its mind. It applied its four-wheel anti-lock braking system. The one much praised in the handbook. Sixty to nought in three seconds. Rex covered his face. The motorcycle struck the rear of the Koshibo, catapulting Kirn through the air and erupt-ing with explosive force as its petrol tank made impact.

The Rolls Royce continued upon its way. Elvis gazed white-faced through the rear window at the mushroom cloud billowing into the night sky. 'Rex,' whispered Elvis. 'Aw Rex . . .'

Jack Doveston, the new dean of the Miskatonic, was working late. He was working on the new draft of They Came and Ate Us. He had just got to the exciting part where the hero is in pursuit of villains who have kidnapped his best friend but has now got himself blown up by a crashing motorbike. KABOOOOOOOM.1!! Jack paused over the keyboard, perhaps another 'O'. No, seven was enough, after the WHAM and the KERUNCH, a seven-Oed KABOOOOOOOM was sufficient.

Jack poured another large Scotch of the former dean's private stock. He knew how to live, that square fellow, and no mistake. Or had known. The telephone rang. Jack considered it with distaste. He let it ring a while longer.

The dean,' he said at last.

'What have you to report?' Jonathan asked. 'Eh?'

'Work is proceeding at a steady pace. We expect a result quite soon now.'

'You reading that from a card or what?'

'Listen, I have the best computer pirates in the country working around the clock in that basement. Cut the seeker you said, find out who is behind it. And that's what they're doing. They've left your corporation alone. They'll get results.'

'Not fast enough, Jack. Apply a little pressure.'

164

Jack tossed his drink down his throat. 'If I start ordering them around they will become suspicious. They think I am the big subversive. If I play the tyrant they'll quit.'

'All right then. But what progress are they making?'

'Quite a bit. They have found a way of monitoring the seeker without being seen. But the thing has an extremely complicated structure. It is composed of twelve separate units which each appear to function independently. Returning after each sortie through the matrix to merge into some kind of mass mind. It's freaky stuff.'

T am Legion we are many,' whispered Jonathan.

'What did you say?'

'Nothing. So what are your team proposing to do? What are you proposing to do?'

'Catch it off guard. Isolate one of the units. Lock it into one of our systems here. Then take it apart and see what makes it run.'

'Yes. That should be possible. When do you expect a result?'

'Possibly some time tonight. They are monitoring one of the units now.'

'Good. Let me know immediately they have isolated it. I will take over from there.'

'You will? No, wait . . .' But Jack was speaking to a dead line.

'Asshole,' said Jack. 'Now, where was I?'

'Where am I and who the fuck are you?' Elvis was in the top-secret room, in the company of Mr Aldus, Mr Lorrimer, Mr Russell and Mr Asher. Mr Russell made the introductions.

T'm saying nothing,' Elvis growled. T want my mouth-piece.'

'Please, please.' Mr Russell waved Elvis towards a vacant chair. 'Sit down, relax.'

'Relax my butt! Your goons hijacked me. I'm an American citizen. I got rights.'

'You also have a lot of different names,' said

165

Mr Lorrimer. "T.H.E. King. Noah Never. Ken Creole. Sid Galahad. Which one are you today?'

'What day of the week is it?' Elvis sneered. 'Take a hike up your own . . .'

'They're not very good aliases, are they? Not very imaginative?' Mr Russell asked. 'All a bit of a giveaway, don't you think? Sit down please.'

Elvis sat down. 'I'm sayin' nuffin.'

'Nice sunglasses.' Mr Lorrimer was holding same. 'Very expensive. Very exclusive, I should think.'

'That's the kind of guy I am.'

'And what kind of guy is that exactly?'

'Right now a real angry one. Where is this place?'

'What do you make of this?' Mr Lorrimer pushed a newspaper under Presley's nose. It was a copy of the National Enquirer. Its headline read: ELVIS CLONE sighted IN NEW YORK.

'I don't read that shit,' said Elvis.

'Your resemblance to the young Presley is nevertheless a little more than just uncanny.'

'That's because he was my daddy!' Elvis watched their expressions. They mirrored exactly that of Jonathan Crawford, when Elvis had spun him this particular yarn. 'S'true,' the Big E continued. 'I'm the rightful heir to the entire Presley estate. Had my genetic codes done and everything, blood type, you name it. Been tied up in legal action for years.'

'This is quite a revelation.' Mr Russell shook his head. 'Quite a revelation.'

'We have been doing a little checking,' said Mr Lorrimer. 'It seems that the greater part of your "father's" wealth was transferred only weeks before his death to a numbered Swiss bank account. Also that a year after his death an anonymous business man bought up all the rights to his music. What do you make of that?'

'It's news to my ears. Can I go now?'

'No you cannot. There are certain matters we need to discuss.'

166

'Uh-hu.' That look of enlightenment, which surely even the most jaded amongst us must by now have come to like just a tiny bit, was once more on the face of you-know-who. 'Aha. I get it. You want me to cut you in for a piece of my daddy's estate.'

'No,' said Mr Russell. 'That is not what we want at all. We want what you want.'

'Which is?'

'To assassinate President Wormwood.'

No record exists regarding Presley's reply to this, but it no doubt involved the employment of certain four-letter words.

167

18

black magic Each colour holds magical properties By its application it can bring about cosmic change This is because magic exists on a spectroscopic basis, from white (good and pure) to black (very nasty indeed) A skilled magician, using the correct colour sequences can bring about cosmic change and acquire great wealth. See also paint magic by Jocasta Innes

Hugo Rune, His Book

In his chapter 'The Colour of Genius' from The Incredible Mr Rune, H G Wells writes

'Rune had now become obsessed with the idea that colour presented a source of untapped power and had taken to painting himself as the mood took him to observe the effect upon passers-by. We dined out one evening at a "Chinese" run by a friend of mine Rune was well known to him and he always strained all the mystic's food personally before serving it

Hugo arrived somewhat late and it must be stated that he presented quite a startling appearance He had apparently sprayed himself from top to toe with mauve paint He apologized for his late arrival, saying that he had some difficulty hailing a cab, but that the exercise had given him quite an appetite

He spoke very little during the evening and seemed at times vague and uncomfortable We parted at mid-night and I well remember the bizarre image of the bright mauve man limping away in pursuit of a cab

I saw little of him over the next few days and when

168

word reached me that he was taken ill, I hastened to his bedside He was swathed in bandages and looked near to death

The doctors informed me that his acolyte Rizla had called them to the house, fearful for his master's life "That man had seventy layers of gloss on him," said a surgeon "He still seemed quite perky though. It was only after we removed the paint with a blow lamp that he appeared to be in difficulty" '

Sir John Rimmer, The Whacky World of Hugo Rune

The fat sweeper-upper leaned on his short-handled broom. 'You'll get no joy from the controller,' he told Byron. 'Not a bit.'

'Look at it.' Byron tapped gauges on his Inter-rositer. Tour-micron downgrade and going into the

red. Do you know what that means?'

'Do you?'

'Not altogether,' Byron confessed. 'But it can't be good, can it?'

The fat sweeper-upper shook his fat head. 'No it can't. But what are you going to do about it?'

'What can I do? It's just around in a circle. And the controller . . .'

'I shouldn't put too much trust in the controller. If we all did that, where would we be?'

'But where are we anyway?'

'We're "as of the now", as always.'

'But what if we're not? What if the big flywheel stops. Breaks down and just stops, imagine that.'

'That cannot be imagined.'

'What can I do?' Byron wrung the fat man's lapels.

'You could trust that the fault rectifies itself.'

'Might it?'

'I shouldn't think so.'

'Then what?'

169

'There are other alternatives. But who am I to say? I'm only a fat sweeper-upper.'

'Please.' Byron made a very pathetic face. 'Please.'

'All right. You've talked me into it. Come down to my little cubbyhole and we'll see what can be done.'

Byron was by now perspiring freely about the brow area. 'Lead on,' said he.

The cubbyhole occupied no particular space or time but was somewhere impossible between two levels. The fat man turned a key in a floor plate, lifted it and the two vanished down a flight of stairs.

'Very cosy,' said Byron, when he had finally arrived at wherever he had arrived at. 'Or spacious, depending how you look at it.'

'It's a flaw. A flaw between floors, if you like. A downgrade on an Establishment Moderator which was never corrected. You'll find them all over the place if you care to look. There seems no specific limit to how far this one extends. But I have never troubled to go walkabout. There would just be more of the same, one suspects.'

Byron gazed about in wonder. The room had no walls. It simply extended away to nothingness on every side. An effulgence, contained within a crystal sphere, hung motionless in the air, illuminating what there was to illuminate. A small floor area, covered by a worn rug, jumbles of books, rolled charts. An oil stove, kettle and so on, two comfy chairs.

'This is all a bit of a surprise. A flaw between floors, eh?'

'Tea?' asked the fat man.

'Yes please.'

'You see, Byron, things ain't what they used to be. Not what they were.'

'What they were? I don't understand.'

'It hasn't always been "as of the now". Once there was an "as of the then" and an "as of the will be". I was here during the "as of the then" and when the "as of the will

170

be" comes to pass, I shall no doubt still be here pushing my broom up and down. Sugar?'

Three please.'

'Let me explain. Back in the "as of the then" there was only the controller. He was here all on his own, his job was to maintain the big flywheel which steers this planet mechanically through space and stops it going off course. But obviously you knew that.'

'Obviously.'

'He was to keep everything running on trim, preserve the human race above and control the situation. When things looked like getting out of hand it was his job alone to press the rewind button, reverse time, readjust and set the whole thing in motion again.'

'I see.' Byron accepted his cup. It was hot, although he hadn't seen the kettle boil. 'Thank you.'

'But the controller wanted an assistant. He wanted to improve efficiency. Things were simple as of the then. Small disasters, wars, plagues, easily controlled. Nothing like as of the now. But the controller had all the projections, he knew what to expect, and he knew he couldn't handle it by himself.'

'So he got his assistant?'

'Certainly. He brought his son into the business. But his son didn't like the way it was being run. He demanded more help. The controller indulged him. The son organized a department. Those in the department wanted sub-departments, the sub-departments wanted sub-divisions and on and on and on. Nobody wanted to be at the bottom, you see. Life's like that.'

'So who is at the bottom? Is anybody?'

'You're looking at him,' said the fat sweeper-upper. 'Unless you'd like the job as my assistant.'

'No thanks. But please continue.'

'Certainly. As of the now there are so many departments, divisions, agencies, depots, workshops, branches of this and branches of that, that no-one can get even the simplest thing done. It is one big bureaucratic mess.

171

As above, so below, have you ever heard that expression?'

'No, but please continue again.'

'It's grinding to a halt.' The fat man made a very grave face. There are little Byrons like you running around in circles. Every department blames the next. The big flywheel falters, flaws appear. Mistakes cannot be corrected and it all gets reflected up on to the surface of the planet. It's chaos up there. If we cannot correct the mechanism, mankind is heading for a very final Armageddon. And nobody is going to get out of this one alive.'

'But we are supposed to stop all that. That is our function.'

'It's a poser. Let me ask you an elementary question. How many ultimate endings of mankind can there be as of the now?'

'Only one of course.' The fat man shook his head.

'More than one?'

'Six,' said the sweeper-upper. 'Six running all at once.'

'But that's impossible. It can't happen.'

'It can. Believe me. I sweep up. I see it all. A downgrade here, a systems collapse there, a miscast projection over that end, a failure to override a possible area of mal-feasance round the corner. Need I go on?'

'But six ... does the controller know?'

The headless chicken? What do you think?'

'We have to do something. And as of the now.'

Above them came a sound as of cogs grating together and an unpleasant fluxless grinding.

There goes your lateral augmentor,' sighed the fat sweeper-upper. 'Did I say six ultimate endings? You'd better make that seven.'

'Look Jack, look.' A hushed group of Zens was bunched about Mad John's terminal in the Miskatonic basement. 'See what it's doing?' 'What is it doing?'

172

'A bank heist.' Spike traced the lines of figures moving across the screen. 'Running off dead accounts.'

'How much money?'

'Million and a half, perhaps more.'

'And where is it taking it?'

'Back to mother seeker, of course.'

'What then?'

'We lose it, Jack.' John tapped on the keyboard. 'But not this time. This time it is going to bring it all to us.'

Spike explained. 'We have isolated it from the seeker, although it doesn't know that yet. We have created a false image of the seeker here in our system. It will come to us thinking we're the real thing. Once it's here we close off the land lines. We have it boxed up tight.'

'But it's a program, a hacking program. You talk about it as if it's some physical object that you can cage up.'

'It's AI, Jack. Artificial Intelligence, it has to be, there can be no other explanation. But we'll soon know. It's finished eating the bank accounts. It wants to go home.' Spike seated herself at the next terminal and punched in sequences. 'It's on its way. I'm getting a read-out.'

The Zens held a collective breath. Jack whispered, 'What is she going to do?'

'Once it is in her system she'll feed it a loop so it can't think its way out. Then we pull the land-line. Then it's all ours to do what we want with.' Jack bit his lip. It was clever stuff. These people ran rings round him.

'I've got it! It's in! Closing the system. Pull the land-line, John.' Spike keyed in a closedown and Mad John whipped out the phone-jack from its socket in her terminal.

'Gotcha!'

Cheers erupted. Spike climbed on to a desk and raised her slender hands. 'Ladies and gentlemen, we

now have one-twelfth of a seeker and you will be pleased to know it has brought us all a bonus. About thirty thousand dollars each. As soon as we can find a way to get it out.' To further applause she danced a little jig and leapt down

173

into Jack's arms. Jack gave her an amorous hug. He had really fallen on his feet by taking Spike as a lover - such sex, and money too. Jack thought it prudent not to mention to Jonathan that they had actually captured part of the seeker until the Zens had managed to run off the stolen money and share it out. 'Well done,' he told Spike. 'Very well done.'

'Easy-peasy. One down and eleven more to go.'

'Hold it!' Mad John's shout rose above the cheering. 'Wait. What's this?'

'What is it?' Spike peered over his shoulder.

'Look at the screen. You closed the system down correctly, didn't you?'

'Of course. But it's glowing red. Pull the mains plug someone.' Jack ducked under the desk and tore the plug I from the wall.

'Damn, it's hot.'

'Some kind of feedback, or what?' John gazed at the screen.

'Still red. That can't be, there's no power.' He reached out his hand.

'Hot?' Spike asked.

John shook his head. 'Cold,' he said. 'God, it's cold. Can you feel it?' Jack was at the back of the crowd and even he could feel it. Like a great big freezer door just opened.

'Very strange.' John reached toward the screen. 'No power. Nothing live. The cold.' He withdrew his fingers and blew warmth on to them. 'What the . . .' A thick scaled hand shot out of the terminal screen and grasped his head. Dragged him forward.

'Help me . . . aagh . . .' Spike grabbed him about the waist. 'Come on.' Zens fell to Mad John's rescue. Hauling and pulling. There was a sickening report. Blood gushed in a hideous fountain. Mad John's headless body fell back into the crowd. Jack stood by. Mouth and bowels wide open.

The terminal quivered, shook, blood spat from the

174

fractured screen. The casing cracked and deformed as something rose within it. Then shattered into a million fragments. A rank stench filled the air.

Asmodeus was half as tall again as the height of a man. His steed the tiger of many talons. In his right hand he held the reins, in his left the head of Mad John. And the faces of Asmodeus were terrible to gaze upon. An ox, a ram and a beast of fowl aspect. His body was of scale and feather in equal part, broad-chested, corded with titanic muscle. His leathern wings opened, creaking gently. He was very Ray Harryhausen.

'Tree!' cried Asmodeus the demon destroyer. 'Free and hungry.'

'What line of crap are you feeding me? What do you take me for?'

'An assassin,' said Mr Russell, quietly. 'We have you on film. I am sure we can match your fingerprints with the FBI.'

'I want my lawyer.'

'Don't be tedious. We have all the evidence. We know what you are. You know what you are. You have made eight separate attempts upon the life of the president. We merely wish that you succeed with

the ninth.'

'Stick it in your ear,' said Elvis.

'Let me put it this way. We have you, as the British say, banged to rights guvnor. I am offering you two alternatives. Work with us . . .'

'Or?'

'Or we hand you over to the FBI and collect the very substantial bounty that the president has put on your head.'

'Bounty, no shit?' The King was unbowed. 'I'll take my chances.'

'You do not have any chances. It will be the electric chair for you.'

'Don't hand me that. There ain't no death penalty.'

'Oh, there is now,' Mr Lorrimer chirped up. 'You

175

should keep abreast of the news. President Wormwood reinstated capital punishment this very morning. Cruel irony, eh?'

The son of a bitch.'

'You had best do as we ask. Next month there is going to be a world summit at the UN, the heads of state from the greatest nations on Earth will attend. It is Worm-wood's wish that they sign a pact and institute a single world government with him in complete control. We do not wish this to occur. Wormwood is a liability. The man is quite mad. You must dispose of him.'

'No can do.'

'You mean you won't.'

'I mean I can't. Wormwood can't be killed. If he could, then I would have done for him by now.'

'I think you must explain yourself to us.'

'I'm telling you, buddy. Wormwood cannot die as long as Rex is here . . .'

 The Big E's words trailed off. 'As long as Rex was here,' he whispered.

'Who is this Rex?'

'He was my friend, until you . . .'

 Elvis rose to punch heads. Hands held him down.

'The guy in the white Koshiho, who followed us?'

'Yeah, you did for him good, didn't you?'

'No,' said Mr Russell. 'We didn't.'

Elvis gazed long and hard at Mr Russell. 'What do you think, Barry?'

T think he's telling the truth, chief. And if Rex is dead, it means . . .'

Tt means that I can take out Wormwood.' Elvis made with the heavy thinking.

'You gotta do it for Rex, chief. It's what he would have wanted.'

'Yeah, sure, I guess. You're right.'

'Usually am, chief.'

'How do you do that?' Mr Russell asked. 'Without moving your lips?'

'Just thinking aloud is all. But I got it sorted now. I

176

can't see how anything's gonna stop me icing that sleezebag Wormwood now Rex is gone. No siree.'

'You OK brother? What happened to you?'

'Car crash,' said Rex. (Well, who else?)

'You're in one hell of a state.' The trucker was big, bald and black-bearded and might well have been one of the original Mothers of Invention, Roy Estrada perhaps. He wiped an oversized red gingham handkerchief over his head and gazed at the smouldering wreckage. 'How did you get out alive? Anyone with you?'

'Closed environment, virtually crashproof,' Rex told him. 'And there was nobody with me.' The big truck's big lights illuminated the stretch of highway. Of the evil Kim there was no sign.

'Best get you to hospital. You'll be in shock or some-thing.'

'Just get me to a phone.'

T got CB in the cab. Who do you want to call?'

'The Crawford Corporation.'

'Well, climb aboard. Can you manage?' The trucker helped Rex into the cab. And it was a good'n. The proverbial thing of wonder, done out in plastique papal kitsch. A chorus line of blessed virgins stood to attention along the wide chrome dash. Rosaries and bottles of Lourdes holy water adorned the driving mirrors. Iconic photos of this year's pope peppered the windscreen.

'You a religious man?' Rex asked.

'You have to believe in something, doing this job.' The trucker crossed himself. Rex did likewise. He studied the faces of the blessed virgins. Didn't look a bit like her, thought Rex, nor her daughter.

'O-Kay.' The big trucker made himself comfortable amongst numerous cushions. 'Let's see who's on the breaker tonight.' He switched on his CB rig and spoke trucker's arcana into the mike.

'This the Duke of Prunes here, anyone copy, come on?' The wavelength crackled and a voice answered,

177

'King of the Road speaking at you. What's your twenty, come on?' Rex whistled, he had fallen in with the aristocracy.

Travelling north on Highway 61. Got me a greebo in poor shape. Been in a burn-out. Wants to call the city.'

'I could patch him through to Smoky, but they've got deep trouble tonight.'

'How's that, come on?'

'I caught an all points broadcast. They got a 1710 over at the Miskatonic University.'

The Miskatonic?' Rex cut in. 'What's a 1710?'

'Multiple homicide, murderer still on the premises,' said the big trucker. 'Holy Mary full of grace.' He crossed himself anew.

'What about it, ask him.'

'I hear you, Duke. About a half-hour back. Kids came out screaming. Reports are real freakie deakie. Some psycho's cutting the place up.'

'How far are we?' Rex asked. 'From the Miskatonic?'

Ten miles maybe. Straight up the highway.'

Take me there.'

'No way, brother. I got a schedule to meet. I'll drop you off and you can hitch or something.'

Rex delved into his torn shirt. Displayed the handgun he now kept strapped to his chest at all times. 'Drive,' he said.

The Good Samaritan gazed into the barrel.

'Fast,' said Rex. 'And now.'

The lights were flashing and the bullhorns blaring. Ambulance sirens moaned relentlessly. Paramedics rushed about with stretchers. Police chiefs issued orders that no-one heard. University residents stood shivering in their jim-jams. Searchlights played over the gothic edifice. It always comes across so much better at night, doesn't it?

A police chief called Murphy, because there is always one called Murphy, was trying to get some sense out of

178

the gibbering Jack Doveston. 'What are you saying to me? It's a thing in there? What kind of thing?'

'A demon. Asmodeus.'

'Asmodeus?' Murphy pushed back his cap and scratched his head, the way some of them do. 'What, Asmodeus, Lord of the First Hierarchy of Hell, Demon Destroyer, Prince of Wantons, Luster for the Flesh of Men, that Asmodeus?'

'Yes, that one.'

Police chief Murphy clipped Jack around the ear. 'Who do we look like bucko? GhostbustersT

'It's in there. I'm telling you.'

Murphy raised his nose to Jack. 'What's that smell? You been smoking reefers?'

Jack plucked gingerly at his soiled trouser seat. 'No ... I. . . er . . .'

A young police officer in riot helmet and body armour came loping up. 'He's still in there, chief. We got him penned up in the basement, but he's smashing the place to pieces.'

There goes my job, thought Jack.

'You got every exit covered, officer?'

'Sure have, chief. There's no way he's getting out.'

'Then read him his rights and bang in some stun grenades and officer . . .'

'Yes sir?'

'Be careful, seems this is no ordinary psycho we got in there. This is Asmodeus himself.'

The officer halted in mid-stride. 'What, Asmodeus, Lord of the First Hierarchy of Hell, Demon Destroyer, Prince of. . .'

'Prince of Wales, yeah. Forget it, officer, just stun him good and bag him out.'

'Ten-four, sir.'

'And you.' Murphy took the skulking Jack by the collar. 'In the wagon.'

'But I . . .'

179

Asmodeus, Lord of Hell's First Hierarchy, Demon Des-troyer and Co Ltd was picking his teeth with a human finger bone. Of the twenty Zens who had been present during his special guest appearance, fifteen had escaped, one had become a starter and three the main course. The university library now resembled a set from The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Asmodeus was a messy eater.

The demon plucked a green cigar from behind a pointed ear and rolled it between his sticky fingers. 'A smidgen damp,' said he. 'But no matter. I do so like a bit of smoke before my dessert. Got a light?' Spike Laine crouched in a corner trembling fearfully. 'No?' Asmodeus snapped his fingers, flame issued. He sucked upon his cigar. 'Now, isn't this pleasant?'

'Come out with your hands held high,' came the amplified demand through the library door. 'You got one minute.'

'I do so hate to be hurried. It plays havoc with my digestion,' his bull's head snorted. The ram's went 'baaa.

'Make it easy on yourself. Thirty seconds and we're coming in.'

Asmodeus drew deeply upon his cigar and blew smoke from each of his three mouths.

'We're coming in.' There was much commotion at the library door. A good deal of cursing and swearing and battering. Then a great crash as it burst from its hinges to reveal a quartet of heavily armed police. 'Holy shite!' cried one of their number. Asmodeus looked them up and down. 'A choice of desserts. How thoughtful.'

'Go faster.' Rex wagged his gun at the big fat trucker.

'It's never too late to turn from the ways of sinning brother, take me for instance, I used to play with Frank Zappa. But I found the Lord.'

'Please,' sighed Rex. 'Just drive faster. I really don't want to have to use this.'

The big trucker grinned and slackened off speed. 'So what you going to do, smart-ass? You shoot me and

180

you're gonna end up spread over the highway? No-one shoots the driver.'

Rex put his gun to the head of the nearest Virgin Mary.

'Drive,' said he. 'Or Our Lady gets it.'

'Open fire!' The combined fire-power of four police-issue twelve-gauge auto-loaders bore down upon Asmodeus, ruining his between-course cigar, but doing very little else. The Demon Destroyer breathed fire and brim-stone and spurred his diabolical mount toward the marksmen.

'Retreat!' The four officers flung down their weapons and fled up the corridor, Asmodeus in hot pursuit.

'Eeenie meanie minee mo,' went the spawn of the bottomless pit. 'Hiyo Tigger and away.'

'That's the university up ahead,' said the big trucker. 'It's a nice night now, you could walk from here.' 'Will you please drivel'

Take cover!' Out through the main entrance of the Miskatonic ran four frantic figures. And behind them . . . Police chief Murphy choked on his chewing gum. Jack prepared to make another strategic withdrawal.

'Cut it down!' blared Murphy through the bullhorn. 'Cut it down!'

Asmodeus put the spurs to Tigger. Searchlights swung upon him. Catching him to really dramatic effect. He climbed down from his snarling beast and raised his great arms. A blood-curdling triple-throated roar made it perfectly clear that he was not prepared to come quietly.

'Cut it down!' bellowed Murphy for all he was worth. 'Cut the thing down.' Many guns did big blazing.

And the big trucker brought his big truck to a very big halt.

T see that,' said he. 'Do you see that?' 'I see it.' Rex gazed in wonder. 'But what is it?'

181

'Well bother, what you have there is Asmodeus. Lord of the first Hierarchy of Hell. Demon destroyer, Prince of Wantons . . .' and so forth. Rex chewed his lip. He had never favoured the running gag himself, although this one was certainly preferable to all that nonsense about the amazing rotary machine-gun.

'Well, out you get then, brother. Hope you enjoyed the ride. If you'd like to make a small donation for the Sisters of Mercy.' He waggled a collecting tin the shape of an open-mouthed nun under Rex's nose.

'Drive,' said Rex.

'Only in reverse,' said the God-fearing trucker.

Asmodeus was up and he was mean. Shellfire burst around him. Stun grenades and riot gas. There was not a rotary machine-gun to be seen though, more's the pity. Asmodeus flung himself amongst his attackers, rending, ripping, and roaring. Rex was now behind the wheel of the big truck. He revved the engine and sounded the horn. Asmodeus glared him a prial of glares.

Rex's driving skills had not improved. He hit the first police car a sort of oblique side-swipe. But he caught the next one head on. Those police not engaged in fleeing Asmodeus, fled Rex. The truck ploughed on. The demon was now full in the headlamps. Rex sounded the horn once more and pressed his foot down upon the accelerator.

Wheels churned, the engine screamed, Asmodeus roared, Jack ran.

Rex was closing fast. He gripped the steering wheel, forced his foot nearer the floor. Closed his eyes. Said a little prayer. Said a great big prayer.

Cut to wheels spinning in close up. Cut to creature's eyes. Rex's eyes. Hands on steering wheel. Side shot of thundering truck. Zoom in on creature. Down shot from university roof. Close up on creature and . . .

The big truck struck Asmodeus a devastating blow, splattering it across the bonnet and up the windscreen, Tigger and all. Nasty visceral horridnesses squished in

182

every direction. It was really most distasteful. But really good cinema, if you know what I mean.

Rex stood on the brake pedal with both feet. The truck jack-knifed, its rear section overturning. The cab careened around, barely remained upright. Rex clung to the steer-ing wheel and hung on for his life. The cab shuddered and became still. Rex breathed a very big sigh of relief. 'Now that,'

said he, 'was a close thing.'

There was a ripple in the ether, a sound which might have been a sharp intake of air, but was in fact negative cell bodies reincorporating. Then there came a shudder and a terrible rending of metal. Rex was aware of the cab heaving and then of his seat being forced away from its mounts. The hideous claws of Asmodeus drove up through the cab floor, buckling sheet steel like baking foil. Rex was lifted bodily into the air. He snatched up his gun and fired it into the straining body beneath. The futility of this was not slow in the dawning and so Rex clung to his rising seat and fought to kick out the windscreen.

For those who like a bit of windscreen glass, this was top-quality stuff, 15mm highly durable poly laminate shatterproof, anti-glare tinting as standard issue. The makers would in the future justly claim that it could withstand direct impact with a monster from Hell.

Rex was now entangled with the rosary beads and coming perilously close to the roof. Asmodeus thrust his head through the floor, three jaws salivating, breath as sulphurous, if not more so, than ever.

Tressed ham,' said Asmodeus. 'My favourite.'

The cab did not boast a sunroof. It had a nice high tempered-steel job. Rex's head, a not irresistible force, now struck this immovable object. His eyes rolled and his teeth ground. Pressure popped his ears. What he needed now was a really good miracle.

His clawing hand closed upon a bottle of Lourdes holy water.

183

The demon's head rose up to take full pleasure from Rex's final agonies. Rex tore out the stopper and flung the contents of the bottle into the nearest open mouth.

Asmodeus gave a startled croak. A look of almost comic perplexity appeared on the awful visage. And then the ether folded, dimensions crossed, Asmodeus became a tangle of fibrous strands which collapsed into trailing fragments. And was gone.

Rex's seat bowed to gravity's urgent demand and fell. The hero's head struck the windscreen and Rex Mundi took a well-deserved roadside rest.

184

19

The Lord is my shepherd, but we lost the sheep dog trials. Tony O'Blimey

'I'm afraid it's quite impossible,' said Death-blade Eric. 'The divinely inspired one is far too busy at the present.'

'Fatlip or,'atofl or what?'

'I'll just go and see if he's free. If you'll kindly take a seat and contain your ire.' Christeen sat down. There were a lot of other people sitting down within the considerable extension Rambo had added to his hut.

'You making an application, dear?' The old woman wore a gigantic feathered turban and a plastique mac.

'An application? For what?'

'To register your new religion, of course.'

'Oh, of course.'

'I have been chosen.' The old one continued in-formatively. 'They came to me. Just me.'

'Who?' Christeen asked, out of no particular interest.

The Extraterrestrials.'

'Oh, those lads.'

'They said that I am to be the voice of interplanetary parliament.'

'What, you too?' The youth in the orange boilersuit and shaven head leaned across Christeen to engage the ancient contactee. 'I was sitting under this Bodhi tree when suddenly I saw it all. The whole damn thing. I kid you not.'

'You saw it too?' Christeen did not recognize the accent of the thin-faced fellow in the conical black hat and

185

star-spattered gown, who sat several seats along. 'An angel spoke to me direct. He said go and dig up the two golden tablets of the law. And I did. And I've got them here. Well, not actually here. Because they are real heavy. So I buried them again in a secret place. But I wrote down what they said. And I have that here as proof.'

Christeen ground her teeth. 'Babylon!' quoth a very dark chappie right at the end. 'The lion of Judah say him makin' de big comeback like him never been away. You Ras?'

'The divinely inspired one will see you now madam,' said Eric.

The divinely inspired one had had the decorators in. Early sumptuous Great Mogul style. Exactly where he had come by the craftsmen to hobble it up was anyone's guess. But then, where did the old woman get the plastique mac from?

'Come to register?' Rambo asked. He wore a very natty line in tweeds.

'This has got to stop,' Christeen told him in no uncertain terms.

'Don't you sometimes feel that a power greater than ourselves controls our destinies?'

'I have moments of almost psychic presentiment when I become subject to great powers of precognition. These particular faculties enable me to foresee an almost instant expansion in your lip area.'

'May the force be with you,' said the flinching fellow.

'If you do not stop all this nonsense, I shall not be responsible for the consequences.'

'You can't hold back progress,' said Rambo. 'Any word of Rex?'

'You are heading for big trouble. Believe me, I know.'

The door did little other than burst open. Eric ap-peared, white-faced and not altogether shaking from mirth. 'Sorry to bother you, exalted one,' he said, making all the appropriate genuflections. 'But I think you'd better come outside and look at this big black cloud.'

186

'Problems, always problems,' said he of the divine enlightenment. 'I shall have to get back to you later madam, if you don't mind. Now, what big black cloud is this, Eric?'

There were heavy big black clouds and a good deal of fire and brimstone whacking about in the president's office. 'Not returned?' screamed Wormwood. 'Asmo-deus, you have lost Asmodeus?' He swept desktop business of a pressing nature on to the greasy floor and leapt up and down on it. 'How can this be?'

Before him the stack of TV terminals glared back. Eleven wore his own ferocious face, one showed only a crackle of interference.

'Gone.' The voice might once have belonged to Orson Welles, now Astaroth was using it. 'Gone into the ether. By trickery and magic. We cannot tell where.'

Wormwood sought something to smash. There wasn't a lot left, so he kicked his chair over.

'Impossible! Impossible!'

'Yet such it is. We must now leave the matrix, it is too dangerous for us here. Give us our bodies, Wormwood.'

'Not yet, not until the UN summit. Then you shall have fine powerful bodies.'

'I will discuss it with my brothers.'

'Away then.' Wormwood flipped the remote control and his face vanished from the screens.

'Big trouble,' said Demdike, trimming her warts with a Swiss army knife. 'It is your Nemesis, sure as sure.'

'I want him dead!' Wormwood's head rotated upon his shoulders. 'Bring him to me.'

'I'll have him here in half an hour,' crowed the hag.

'Half an hour?'

'And why not? I know where he is. Now stop your fussing and sing me a song. Al Jolson's "Mammy" would be nice.'

'This is MTWTV news on the hour every hour. And top

187

of the news this morning the Miskatonic University Massacre. Police were called out in force last night to answer reports of a homicidal maniac on the campus. Four people died and twelve police were injured in the resulting mayhem. Police are anxious to learn the identity of this man, here seen being stretchered away after single-handedly overpowering the psychotic killer. If you know this man please call this station now.'

Elvis wasn't watching TV, he was taking a shower. His left arm was now heavily bandaged.

'I'm not altogether convinced, chief.'

'You're thinking what I'm thinking, right?'

'If you're thinking that I don't trust Mr Russell, then we're both thinking the same thing.'

'A means to an end, Barry, a means to an end.'

'But you wind up a loose end, chief. That I don't like.'

'Yeah, I guess. But if we can ice Wormwood then that's the end of the game anyhow, ain't it?'

'Not as long as I'm with you, chief. I'm keeping you young remember? We could go on and on. Maybe meet up again with Rex in the future. If he's there, of course.'

'Hey, yeah. I never thought of that. It'd be great to say hello again.'

'Except that when you kill Wormwood the future changes. Rex may not be in it. And if he is, he may not be the same Rex.'

'Take a nap, Barry.'

'Chief?'

'Take a nap is all.'

'Sure thing, chief. I guess you want to scrub your dick, eh? I'll catch you later.'

Elvis completed his ablutions, towelled himself down and quiffed up his hair. He posed naked in front of a wall-sized mirror. Apart from the gammy arm he was still mighty fine.

The entryphone chimed out a golden great. Elvis picked up the receiver and grinned into the telescreen. 'Yo,' he said. The screen displayed the image of a highly

188

attractive young woman. 'Special delivery for Mr Never,' she said.

'Sure thing, honey.' Elvis pressed the front-door release. 'Bring it right up. Top floor. Take the penthouse lift.'

'Thank you Mr Never,' said the indestructible Kirn. I'll do just that.'

Rex lay in the City Hospital propped up on cushions. Head swathed in the fashion of the Indian swami. Having determined that he was covered by the Crawford Medi-care Plan he had received the full six-star treatment. He was hooked up to all manner of impressive equipment. He even had the machine that goes 'ping'. In respect of tradition, a police officer had been placed outside his room, issued with a comic and told to take a nap if anyone suspicious appeared.

Rex did the slight moaning and eye-focusing that was expected of him. 'You, you bastard,' said he.

'Me,' said Jack Doveston. 'How are you feeling?' Rex ignored the inane question. He put a tentative palm to his forehead.

'You're in the City Hospital,' said Jack. 'Before you ask.'

T wasn't going to ask.'

'Would you like some water, old pal?'

'Yes, go ahead.' Jack poured from one of those un-speakable plastique jugs which always look as if they've had flowers in. The beaker was no better. 'Thanks,' said Rex. Jack smiled encouragingly.

'What are you doing here, Jack?' Rex put aside his beaker.

T was at the Miskatonic when it all happened. I've been promoted. I'm the new dean.'

'So soon?'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing. How did it happen? And I don't mean your promotion.'

189

Jack shook his head. 'The seeker in the system. Some kind of AI.'

'There is no AI. It doesn't exist.'

'Some kind of force then. It was a living thing and it came out of the computer terminal. It was Asmodeus.'

'Asmodeus? Are you sure?'

'Here look, I'll show you.' Jack took out a charred and crumpled sheet of paper. 'I salvaged this from what was left of the library. All those beautiful books. What a crime. I recognized the creature at once. See this.' Rex examined the page. It was an engraving from The Necronimicon. 'One of the twelve. The First Hierarchy of Hell. Legion, Rex. It was in the matrix. A demon, and there's eleven more in there.'

'Eleven demons and the Antichrist himself.'

'Antichrist? What are you saying?'

Rex dispensed with the bush beating. 'Wormwood, President Wormwood. He is the Antichrist made flesh.'

'You getting all this shit?' asked police chief Murphy. The chap with the big tape recorder and the headphones nodded.

'I met up with an old friend,' Rex continued. 'I won't destroy more of your brain cells by telling you who. But we have been trying to stop Wormwood, I know him, from the future. This program, the seeker, the demons, all of it is Wormwood. He can't die while I'm here.'

Jack had a very slack jaw. 'But how can you know for sure?'

'I know. That's all.'

'This is all news to me,' said Jack into his top pocket. 'You have been trying to kill the president, eh? There is a big reward out on you. Fancy you confessing to me, Jack Doveston . . .'

'Why are you talking to your jacket?' Rex asked.

'Nervous habit,' lied Jack. 'Is there anything you want?'

Rex beckoned him closer. 'Yes?' said Jack. Rex dealt him a weltering blow to the head. Jack sank to the floor in an untidy heap.

190

'You can give me your clothes for a start,' said Rex.

'I know it's early,' grinned Elvis. 'But what would you say to a dry martini?'

'I'd say thank you, Mr Never.'

'Lord have mercy. Take a seat honey. Make yourself comfortable.'

Kim seated herself on the Conran. The short leather skirt she wore reached new heights of eroticism.

'What's in the parcel?' Elvis mixed the drinks.

'Shall I open it?'

'Yeah, be my guest.'

Kim placed the parcel upon her slim knees, unbowed the string and took out the gun.

Rex was just getting out of bed when the door opened. 'Breakfast,' said the young nurse in the short skirt and surgical mask.

'Ah,' said Rex. The nurse caught sight of the fallen Jack.

'Don't worry about my friend. He's had a long night. He's just taking a nap.'

The nurse stepped over Jack and placed Rex's tray in his lap. 'Is everything to your liking?' she asked.

'Fine. Just fine.'

'If you will just roll up your sleeve, doctor says I am to give you an injection.'

Rex rolled up his sleeve and got stuck into his break-fast. 'Vitamins is it?' he asked between mouthfuls.

'Something like that,' said nurse Kim.

'Hubba hubba,' said Elvis. 'And what's this?' 'It's a 50mm grenade pistol. Ideal for home defence.'

Kim explained. 'Place the drinks on the table. You're coming with me.' 'Uh-hu. And to where?'

'You have an appointment with the president.' 'Aha. I get it.' It was that look again. 'Mr Russell sent

191

you. Didn't trust me, huh? Well, no sweat. I was just coming anyhow. Everything set?'

'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Oh sure. I get it.' He placed the drinks on the table and gave his nose a tap. 'Walls have ears, eh?'

'Get dressed and come with me.'

'In that order?' Elvis made with the lewd winks.

'Just do it.'

'This is terrible.' Byron chewed on his fingernails. 'What are we going to do?'

'Something drastic.' The fat sweeper-upper topped up Byron's cup.

'Perhaps there are some spare parts lying in some storeroom or other that got overlooked.'

Byron's face brightened; the sweeper-upper's shaking head dimmed it. 'You tried that.'

'Did I?'

'On one of your many attempts to get a service replacement.'

'I saw all those order forms. I must have tried at least fifty times.'

'Five thousand times,' said the fat man.

'Five thousand?'

'And you never tired of it. You couldn't you see. Each .time it was brand-new. "As of the now".'

'But, the controller. If I'd done it all those times he would have said.'

'He is the controller, Byron. It is his job to control. No matter how many times he has to do it. That's what he does, he maintains equilibrium. Let me tell you a little story. It's quite short, but it's worth a listen. Are you sitting comfortably?' Byron nodded. 'Then I'll begin. Once upon a time there was a certain Mr Smith. He awoke on a particular Sunday morning. He rose, washed, dressed, breakfasted and went out to wash his car. His wife busied herself in the kitchen because their friends, the Theakstons, were coming to lunch. The children

192

played on the front lawn and all was as normal as could be.

'Presently the Theakstons arrived, a pleasant lunch was had and an afternoon of friendly chit-chat. Later the Theakstons left, the Smiths bathed and bedded their children and eventually turned in for the night.

'While they slept certain things came to pass. Strange men in overalls entered their house. Swept away dis-carded items, washed and tidied up. Restocked the fridge, redirtied the car and re-hung Sunday's page on the calendar. They also placed little electrode things on the heads of the Smith family as they slumbered on.

The next day Mr Smith awoke. He rose, washed, breakfasted and went out to wash his car. His wife busied herself in the kitchen because their friends, the Theak-stons, were coming to lunch. The children played on the front lawn and everything seemed just as normal as could be . . .'

'You are sure that this is a short story?' Byron asked. 'I have the feeling that I might have heard some of it before.'

'As I was saying, the day was completely identical to the one before. But that night one of the little electrode things fell off Mr Smith's head while he was asleep.

'When he awoke the next day Mr Smith prepared for work. His wife thought his behaviour most odd. "But it is Monday," he declared and went down to check the calendar. It was Sunday, the Sunday papers arrived, the Sunday news was on the radio. It was Sunday. Mr Smith was in a state of confusion. He went out to wash his car, although he was sure he had washed it the day before. But there it was, dirty.

'Presently the Theakstons arrived. Mr Smith stared at them in horror. He had never seen these people before although here was his wife welcoming them in as old friends.

'Mr Smith panicked. He rushed out to his car. But it

193

would not start. Mr Smith lifted the bonnet. There was no engine in there. So he ran. He ran up the street but he didn't get far. The street ended in a blank wall of impenetrable light. There seemed no escape. What was going on? Now in a state of near-madness he returned home. There was his wife enjoying a pleasant lunch with her guests. Mr Smith went into the kitchen and gazed out of the window at the backyard. All seemed normal, but he knew it was not. He tried to open the kitchen window, but noticed for the first time that there was no handle. Mr Smith picked up a stool and flung it through the window.

'The image of the backyard vanished and he found himself looking out on to an alien landscape not of this Earth.'

'Gosh,' said Byron.

'Gosh indeed. Mr Smith scrambled through the broken window and ran. Looking back he could see his street enclosed within a great dome. All alone in a desolate landscape of buggers-all else. He crawled across dust and rubble and saw in the distance a queue of exotic-looking people gathered before a sort of booth.

'He found a vantage point where he could observe whilst remaining unobserved. There was a large sign hanging above the booth and Mr Smith was able to read what was written upon it. It read:

'TICKETS HERE FOR THE MUSEUM OF MANKIND

A PAGE OF LIVING HISTORY

ENJOY SUNDAY LUNCH WITH THE SMITHS

GENUINE TWENTIETH-CENTURY SUBURBANITES.'

'Gosh again,' said Byron. 'Is that the end of the story?'

'No, there's a twist in the tail, but I won't tell you it right now.'

'Huh.' Byron got a sulk on.

'But I can tell you this. It is a true story,' said Mr Smith, the fat sweeper-upper.

194

'But what does it mean? I mean it has to mean something or it will just get edited out.'

'It means this. There are an infinite number of possible futures but only one "as of the now". This it is our bounden duty to maintain by servicing the big flywheel. If it falters then time's edges will fray, flaws appear in the ether of space. We must each play our part no matter how many times.'

'Sounds pretty cosmic. So what are we going to do?'

'We are going to save the day, Byron. You and me.'

'Five thousand times.' Byron whistled. 'Did I really do it that many times?'

'Give or take. I wasn't always there to keep count. Now come on. We have major adjustments to make. Things have become pretty confused up on the surface and we are going to need our wits about us to sort them out. Would you like to see the chart?'

'You have a chart?'

'A really good big complicated one.'

'Then show me.' Mr Smith did.

'I don't understand this chart,' said Byron.

'Then I'll do my best to explain it. This chart represents past, present and possible futures. We are only interested in possible futures which result in Armageddon, so we will deal exclusively with them. As you know, the purpose of the great mechanism is to defer the extinction of humanity. To accurately forecast when this will occur and to then retrace the fault, rewind history, realign and start again.'

'Of course.'

'Good. Then let me explain the confusion we now find ourselves in. Due to malfunctions in the mechanism, certain eventualities, which, under normal circumstances, could never possibly come to pass, are now in full swing. See this black line?' Byron nodded. 'This represents the ascendancy of the Antichrist.'

'As usual.'

'Same old stuff, but this time the fail-safe has

195

overridden, and this-' A red line met the black at a tangent. 'Historical personage A, out of time. And here, historical personage B, out of time.'

'And there and there?'

'Future personages C and D, inaccurately transposed. Now, D interconnects with B, but in the future. D and A connect through future and past . . .'

'Do they have names?' Byron asked. 'You've lost me already.'

'Sorry. Antichrist is Wayne L. Wormwood. No past, only present and potential future. Appears 3 May 1993.

'A: Historical personage Elvis Aron Presley born 8 January 1935 died 16 August 1977. He shouldn't be here.

'B: Auld Demdike. Witch. Died 16 August 1612. She certainly shouldn't be here.

'C: Rex Mundi. He's the hero. Born 27 July 2030. Out of time arrival 3 May 1993.

'D: Gloria Mundi. Sister of Rex. Born 27 July 2025. Arrives here 16 August 1977.'

'Shouldn't be here,' echoed Byron.

'Now here we have E, F, G and H. All interconnected:

'E: Jack Doveston. Born 16 August 1953. Best-selling novelist-to-be and vital to the plot. Bit of a poltroon though.

'F: Jonathan Crawford. Date of birth unknown. A major fly in the ointment. Potential disaster area. Top priority.

'G: Legion. Company of demons. First recorded 31 AD but much older. Very top priority. And that's about the lot. Now these seven . . .'

'There's eight,' said Byron.

'There's eight, but only seven go to meltdown. They are all tangled up in such a fashion that none of them can actually achieve anything.'

'Then let's just leave them to it.'

'Byron, they are all transposed and jumbled up because the mechanism is failing. Unless it is corrected there is no telling what might happen. Things will double up,

196

multiply, lines will collide, divide, jigsaws will not fit together. Anarchy. And there are at least three separate sub-plots that I haven't even touched on.'

Byron examined the chart. This can't be right,' he said.

'Oh it's right, believe me.'

'But see here. You have an extra line marked Kim.'

'An agency of despatch. Kind of demonic bounty-hunter. Demdike's doing, of course.'

'Yes, but look. The line leaves Demdike, then it splits in two. One line goes to Rex, the other to Elvis.'

'It can't do that. Give me the chart.' Byron handed it over. Mr Smith examined it in great detail. 'Oh dear,' said Mr Smith. 'Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. Byron.'

'Yes,' said Byron.

'Get your tool bag. We're in deep trouble.'

197

20

7 think. Therefore I think I am. Zippy the Pinhead

, ' think therefore I'm right. Hugo Rune

'Hi chief, have I missed anything?'

'Some, green buddy. Mr Russell's sent this chick over. No trust any more, seems like.'

'Shut up and keep driving.' Kim was in the back seat of the Presley Porsche, her pistol against the rocker's neck.

Barry felt the cold steel, sensed that things might not be exactly as he might have wished them. 'Chief, why are we driving in this car? Why aren't you wearing the uniform Mr Russell gave you? Why are we an hour early? Why . . .'

'Who art thou?' The pistol drew back. 'What manner of familiar? I was not told that you were of the faith.'

'It's Barry,' Elvis explained. 'He lives in my head. He's a great little guy when you get to know him.'

'Barry? I know not Barry. Pyewacket I know, Jamara, Vinegar Tom, Griez Zell Greedigutt . . .'

'You got a stone-bonker here, chief,' whispered the sprout. 'This isn't one of Mr Russell's. This is one of the enemy.'

'You reckon?'

'What did you say?' The pistol rapped Elvis in the right ear. 'Speak plainly.'

198

'I said you reckon we're on time? Don't want to be late for this appointment with the president.'

Remind me never to take a nap in future, thought Barry. Put your foot down hard chief and when I think STOP, then you STOP.

Gotcha, thought Elvis.

'Now Mr Mundi, this won't hurt a bit.' Rex dunked a bread soldier into his egg. 'All you'll feel is a little prick.' Rex knew nothing of the Carry On film, so he let that one slide by.

'Slow down,' ordered Kim.

STOP!!! thought Barry. Elvis stood on the brake. The old ones are always the best after all. As Kim flew forward, Elvis ducked, grabbed at the gun-toting hand, caught the wrist and twisted.

Nurse Kim trembled, beneath her mask a puzzled look appeared. She forced the hypodermic syringe towards Rex's arm, but her hand was being twisted around by an invisible force. She cried out in pain and clawed at the air. Rex gaped up in sudden alarm. A bread soldier protruding foolishly from his mouth.

'Hold her, chief!'

Elvis wrestled with the gun. With her free hand Kim tore at his head.

'Not the hair,' cried the King. 'Anything but the hair.'

Nurse Kim was struggling against her doppelganger's unseen attacker. Rex jerked forward and tore the mask from her face. 'You!'

'Apostate!' screamed Kim. 'Giaor.' Without further thought Rex lifted the metal breakfast tray and smashed it into her face. Hitting women was not in his character, but there were exceptions. Nurse Kim staggered

199

backwards, tripped over the now awakening Jack and toppled on to the floor.

In the car Elvis forced the gun around and back at its holder. Kirn's finger, locked against the trigger squeezed. SQUEEEEEZE . . . 'Keep your head down chief!'

'No!' screamed nurse Kirn, writhing on the floor. Rex watched in horrified fascination as the syringe rose closer and closer to her breast.

Elvis gave a final jerk. The syringe plunged into nurse Kim's heart. She twitched furiously.

Thrashed like a suffocating fish. Rose again and again upon head and heels. Her face blackened and a terrible cry rose from her throat, 'Leviathan.'

Jack rolled over, clutching his jaw. 'What hit me ... what the . . . ?' He caught sight of the dying woman. 'Rex, you didn't . . .'

'No. Stay back. Wait.' Nurse Kirn slumped like a discarded doll, limbs contorted at impossible angles. 'Don't touch her.' Jack had no intention of doing so.

'A hired assassin,' Rex said, with cool deliberation. 'She came to kill you, Jack. She knocked you out and was going to stick you with the needle. Lucky for you I was here. I saved your life again.'

'Gosh thanks.' Jack looked warily towards the corpse and then with equal wariness towards Rex. 'But I seem to remember

'You're probably concussed. I'll get you a glass of water.'

A movement stirred in Kim's breast. 'She's still alive,' croaked Jack.

'She's not.'

'She is. Look.'

Something began to pound. There were muffled reports as ribs snapped. An exhalation of air as the throat expanded. Rex covered his nose as an evil stench filled the air. The dead woman's mouth stretched hugely open in a diabolical silent scream as something black and fearsome eased up through it.

200

'Out,' yelled Rex. Jack did not need telling twice.

'Out, chief.' Elvis did not need telling twice.

It rose like an eel. A sleek black tentacle, hovering upon its length. At its tip a baleful eye blinked open. Took in its surroundings. Gazed down at the husk of its host.

Outside the room Rex pressed his ear to the door.

'What can you hear?' Jack whispered. Rex shook his head.

'Should I wake up this policeman?'

'Best not. What was that thing, Jack? Tell me, you know,'

'An agency of despatch. The product of high sorcery. Guazzo catalogues them in his Compendium Maleficarum. A kind of kissing cousin to the succubus. Very deadly,'

'How do we kill it, Jack?'

'Oh, you can't kill it. It isn't actually alive. You could destroy it by fire. Are you sure it's me it wants?'

'Quite sure,'

'Is there anything wrong?' The ward sister smiled at the skulking pair. 'You really should be back in bed, Mr Mundi. Your tubes have come out. Come along now,'

'I think not,' Rex eased himself from the matronly grip. 'I'd like to change my room please,'

'He'd like a bigger one,' Jack chimed in. 'He's on Medicare, give him the best,'

'Well, let's just get him back to bed for now,'

T think I'll discharge myself. Where is the exit?' The ward sister made tsk tsk noises. Loud and violent noises now issued from Rex's room.

'It will be looking for another host,' Jack's whisper had a troubled quality about it.

'Wake the policeman,' said Rex.

'Is this your car?' the policeman asked. 'It's parked at an angle and this is a towaway zone,'

'Not mine,' Elvis shook his head violently, whilst still trying to comb his hair. The officer eyed the preener with

201

suspicion and peered into the Porsche. 'Holy Moses,' he cried as he caught sight of the thing issuing from Kirn's throat. 'It's a 1217.'

'A 1217?'

'Woman being strangled by a snake in the rear seat of an auto, chief,' said Barry.

'A 1217, huh?' The King adjusted his quiff. 'I thought that was a 1309.'

'No chief. A 1309 is a woman having illegal sex with a lobster on the rear seat of a motorcycle.'

'Actually that's a 926,' said the officer, who had been radioing for assistance. 'And how do you do that without moving your lips?'

'It's an old Indian trick. So what's a 1309?'

'OK. Stand back.' The hospital corridor was suddenly a confusion of cops. Police chief Murphy, bullhorn in hand, heralded their arrival.

'The cavalry,' cheered Jack, 'and in the nick of time.' 'Stand back now.' Rex was impressed; the officers were carrying flame-throwers. 'Best leave it to the professionals,' said he, steering Jack aside. 'And take our leave.' 'Yes, yes,' said Jack.

'No, no,' said the policeman, taking off his cap to wipe his brow with an oversized red gingham hankie. 'A 1414 is a dwarf posing as an infant with felonious intent. You're thinking of a 1065.'

'Nah,' said Elvis. 'A 1065 is the Battle of Hastings in England.'

'That's a 1066,' said a know-all in the gathering crowd. 'A 1065 is . . .' But happily his words were lost as screaming sirens announced the coming of reinforcements.

'Stand back.' The officer battered at the crowd with his cap. 'Give them room.' The squad cars swerved to a halt. Officers leapt out. They were all carrying cameras. 'Where's the woman with the lobster?' asked one.

202

'This is a 1065,' said Jack Doveston. 'Grand theft auto. Hospital vehicle.' Rex felt certain that it was a 1407. But knowing all too well the law of diminishing returns and still harbouring his distaste for the running gag, he kept his own counsel.

'Do you believe in predestination, Jack?'

'That every act is foreordained? You're on the wrong side of the road.'

'Sorry.' Rex span the wheel. 'Well, do you?'

'No I don't. It's a sophistry. It absolves man of responsibility for his actions. A basic flaw in Judeo-Christianity. Anathema to itself.'

'Perhaps.'

'No perhaps about it. The fundamental principle of every religion is "God knows all". And if God knows what you're having for breakfast tomorrow before you do, then where is your free will?'

'It's not quite as simple as that.'

'On the contrary. Have you ever studied the works of Hugo Rune?'

Rex shook his head and passed through a red light, causing the cross-flow traffic to brake and collide.

'If you switch on the siren you can get away with that,' said Jack. 'Now Hugo Rune states that the larger a thing is, the more simple it becomes.' Rex opened his mouth to protest, but Jack continued. 'Let me give you an example. DNA - view it through the electron microscope. Dead complicated it is. No-one has fathomed it out yet. But put it all together and it becomes a person. It becomes simpler. You can state, here is a person, this is a big person, this is a small person, this is a good person, this is a bad and so forth.'

'You might not be correct.'

'I'm coming to that. Now, the Pyrrhonists believe that true wisdom and happiness lie in the suspension of judgement, since absolute knowledge is impossible to gain. What could be simpler than that?'

203

'Might be a little difficult to apply to society. You've wandered off the point, in case you thought I hadn't noticed.'

'Not at all. Now society, that is even more simple. Although it is impossible to predict accurately what an individual might do at any given time, it is simplicity itself to predict what a mass will do. Watch a particular TV show, read a particular newspaper, eat a particular brand of beans. The bigger a thing is, the more simple it becomes.'

'It only sounds simple.' Rex halted unexpectedly to let a bag lady cross the road. A nun on a bike struck the rear of the stolen ambulance, which may or may not have been of some cosmic significance. Jack went boldly forth.

'It gets simpler. Forget man, forget society. Consider the planet itself. What does it ultimately do? Goes around the sun once a year. What could be simpler than that? And then we come to God.'

'He's not simple.'

'Of course he is. He's the simplest of the lot. He either exists and knows everything or he doesn't exist at all. And since he doesn't, that's why I don't believe in predestination. I rest my case.'

'But God does exist,'

'Oh no he doesn't.'

'Oh yes he does.' Rex applied the brakes. 'You are the sophist, Jack. Your arguments are pure rhetoric.'

'That is your opinion. I make no judgement of it.'

'There is a god. The God.' Rex threw up his hands. 'I'm telling you. I know.'

'You've met him, I suppose.'

'Actually yes.' Car horns were starting to honk.

'And he told you he was God.'

'I married his daughter,' bawled Rex.

'I see.' Jack's arms were folded and he was making that smug sort of face that gets you punched in pubs. 'You are clearly suffering delusions brought on by your blow to the head.'

204

'And how did I get my blow to the head? And what came out of the dead woman's mouth? No God, no Devil, Jack. You saw Asmodeus with your own eyes.'

'The existence of evil does not argue for the existence of God. Quite the contrary in fact. The reality of evil disproves the infallibility of the all-good divinity. If evil exists then God must have created it. Ergo, if God created evil then God is not all good. Therefore if God is not all good then he is not God. Simple.'

'So simple a child might have conceived it. As most do.' Rex put the ambulance into gear and set off once more. The motorists who had been banging on its sides raced back to their vehicles.

Presently Rex asked, 'If you do not believe in pre-destination, then how do you account for the fact that I have read all your books? Books you have not even written yet?'

Jack applied his mental processes to that one. 'Where are we going?' he asked. 'And why are you taking me?'

'We are going to assassinate the president. You are coming because I need your help.'

'There,' said Jack. 'What could be simpler? Kindly stop the ambulance. I want to get out.'

'No.' With his gear-changing hand, Rex smote the poltroon a goodly blow. 'You are going to re-deem yourself Jack. This is predestined for you. The library is destroyed. The remaining K carbon cannot be used. You are now the world's leading expert on the occult.'

'I am?' Jack fixed Rex with a bitter eye.

'You are. I have it on the best authority, the cover blurb of They Came and Ate Us. President Wormwood is the Devil made flesh. With your knowledge we will defeat him.' Rex patted the flinching Jack on the shoulder. 'Just you and me, Jack. The old team, eh? Pal.'

Jack hunched low in his seat with a very sour face. Rex swerved to avoid a pile of trash cans and sent an overtaking motorist through the front window of a

205

massage parlour. Two streets away, police chief Murphy and his flame-throwing ghostbusters were dealing with a 1407. A devil-possessed vehicle in a towaway zone.

206

21

motion of the planet The important thing to remember about space is that it is empty. I do not wish to labour the point, but that is what space is all about. There is no air, no anything. So what does that say to you? I'll tell you what it says, it says that where you have nothing, you have nothing going on. Nothing moving, nothing happening, nothing. So how come, you ask, do planets revolve around suns and suns as part of galaxies revolve about and whatnot?

Recall if you will Rune's third law of motion: Nothing goes anywhere unless it is pushed. Obviously in space, if things were left alone they would stay still. Rune's fourth law states: Nothing moves unless it has to. So evidently an unseen hand is at work.

It is my contention that a huge clockwork motor, housed at the centre of this planet, not only routes it, to create gravity, but powers it through space.

Hugo Rune, The Book of Ultimate Truths

Although there can be no doubt of Rune's genius regarding many cosmic matters, his theory of the clockwork-driven Earth is possibly the most foolish concept that has ever wasted ink upon paper. Sir John Rimmer, Who Was This Hugo Rune Anyway?

1 Mother Demdike, that fetid mockery of the human form, opened the greasy casket on her capacious lap. Within it lay six globes, as of glass; four shimmered with a fierce unholy light, one was black, another fast fading towards nigrescence.

207

'My little cherubs,' piped the old witch.

Wormwood looked up from a desk now arrayed with pressing affairs of state. 'What of you, beldame?'

'Two gone.' Mother Demdike returned his stare. 'Two little Kims. Your enemies swell in numbers. First Asmodeus and now they have murdered two of my children. If I was not the evil, verminous old gammer I pride myself to be, I should feel some remorse or even sadness at their loss. However . . .' She plucked the two atramentous globes from her casket and tossed them into the fire.

They did not succeed in their tasks?'

The hag shook her head, liberally distributing lice about the room. 'I regret not. Your Nemesis has a guardian. My little Kims sniffed them out but something troubles the ether.'

'In other words you let them get away. You useless

trump. How did your creatures find my assassin and his

consort?'

'The Goetia, my little duck. The high magick which moulds the ether. Man inhabits a realm of time and space. But the Goetia does not. Within the ether there are no limitations, no time and no distance. No thought is too subtle that its resonance cannot be felt. Those who brood upon your destruction show their faces and their thoughts to me.'

'Spare me your moonshine, your mendacious dugout. Bring me their skins.'

Mother Demdike slammed shut her casket. 'As you will. But have a special care for yourself. Death walks upon you from many sides. Can't you smell its breath?' She raised a cheek of her gargantuan posterior, broke wind and fluttered her skirts toward the president. There was no way Meryl Streep was going to accept the role.

She might go for playing Christeen, though.

'Now that is one big black heavy-looking cloud.' Fido

208

sniffed at the sky. Above him a goodly amount of tumbling black stuff muttered ominously.

'Is this your doing?' Christeen levelled an imperious digit towards Artemis Solon Hermes-Aiwass-Crowley the fourth. Exalter Magus to the Sacred Order of the Golden Sprout. Otherwise known as Rambo Bloodaxe. 'Come on. Speak up.'

'None of my doing, madam, I assure you.' Rambo shook his head. 'Not guilty.'

'Well, someone brought it here.' Christeen began to tap her foot.

'Perhaps you might just wish it away,' Eric suggested.

'Wish it away?' Christeen's tapping began to accelerate. 'You think that , ' should do that do you?'

Eric looked towards Rambo. 'Rambo?'

'Correct title please, Eric.'

'Divinely Inspired One?'

'Search me, Eric.'

'But . . .'

'It's a cloud, Eric. A big black cloud. No cause for alarm surely? You've seen big black clouds before, haven't you?'

'Not for the last ten years, no.'

'Humph,' said Rambo. 'It's a cloud.'

'Shall I piss on his leg now?' Fido asked.

'Wait till I trip him over,' Christeen replied. 'Then you can piss on his head also.'

'Now just you see here.' Rambo gathered his robes about him and prepared to flee. 'I am not taking the blame for any big black clouds. Even one that looks like a . . .'

'A what?'

'A 1958 Chevrolet Impala,' said Eric.

'A what?' This 'what' belonged to Rambo, the first had been Christeen's.

'What is he talking about?' Fido asked. 'Chevrolet Impala indeed.'

209

'It's a car,' Christeen told him. 'A bit before your time. Don't worry about it.'

'No, I don't mean that, man. I know what a car is. I'm a dog, ain't I? It's programmed into my genetic code. In the old ancestral memory. What I mean is, how can someone be dumb enough to think the cloud looks like a Chewy Impala? That's a Buick 6 or I ain't man's best friend. Which I surely am.'

'It's a Chewy,' said Eric. 'I know my history.'

'Buick 6, man. Word to the wise is all.'

'Not with fins like that,' said Christeen. 'That's a Thunderbird.'

'Buick,' said Fido. '1959. Drophead coupe.'

Thunderbird,' said Christeen.

'thunderbird!' said the cloud.

Told you,' said Christeen.

'Rex,' said Jonathan Crawford, for it was to him that Rex had driven Jack. This is a most pleasant surprise. And who is this I see skulking in behind you? Surely it is the newly retired dean of the Miskatonic.' Jack groaned. 'Or perhaps he has come here, chequebook in hand, eager to reimburse me for the ten million dollars' worth of Bio-tech he destroyed last night.'

'I can explain about that. It wasn't my fault.'

Rex raised calming hands. 'Where is Elvis?' he asked Jonathan.

'Elvis?' Jack looked up in surprise. 'He lives in a bus on the moon with Lord Lucan, doesn't he?'

Jonathan ignored him. He leaned forward across his desk and waggled a boyish finger at Rex. 'What

do you know, eh Rex?'

'I know my history. You asked me about the future and whether you were in it.'

'And you said no.'

'I was not being entirely honest with you. But I am prepared to be so now, for a price. Where is Elvis? What have you done with him?'

210

'I haven't seen him. Honestly.'

'Then I shall take my leave.' Rex, who had been sitting, rose to do so. 'It's a pity though.'

'Let us not be hasty, Rex.' Jonathan was all smiles. 'But I am perplexed. Why do you think that I should know where Elvis is?'

'Because he was driven away in one of your cars.'

'What?' Jonathan seemed genuinely startled, and not a little put out. 'One of mine?'

'JC3. You are fond of your initials, aren't you?'

'JC3.' Jonathan clapped his hands together. 'If this is the case we shall soon know.' He plucked up a telephone and spoke rapid words into the receiver. Jack pricked up his ears, but the language was unknown to him. A lengthy conversation then ensued with Jonathan break-ing off every so often to swear at the ceiling. Finally he slammed down the telephone.

'It would appear that you are correct,' he said bitterly. 'A curious business and one I intend getting to the bottom of.'

'Who were you speaking to?'

'The car of course. JC3. A highly sophisticated piece of Bio-tech. I invented all its inner workings myself. I asked it where it had been last night and it told me a most fascinating tale.'

'Go on.'

'Three men, apparently with security clearance, took the car from the garage here at seven thirty last night and drove it to the Split Beaver Club.'

T know it,' said Jack brightly. 'Know of it, I mean.'

'Quite so. Two men left the car and returned shortly thereafter in the company of a third who answers the description of our Mr Presley . . .'

'Elvis Presley?'

'Be quiet Jack. Mr Presley did not go unprotesting. A Koshibo Tiger pursued JC3 and some unpleasantness occurred. JC3 is very upset about certain damage done to its bodywork and so am I. Mr Presley was then driven

211

to a certain classified top-secret establishment and after several hours, delivered to his home at the Tower. The car was then returned to the garage. A most singular affair.'

'Most singular. But who were these men? Your em-ployees?'

'The computer is running them through.'

'And you knew nothing of this?'

'I swear to you, Rex. My car, the nerve.' Jonathan's magical computer swung up from the narrow

desktop. Jack, who had not seen the trick before, was mightily impressed.

Jonathan hammered at the keyboard. 'Oh no,' he gasped. 'Oh no, oh no.' He hammered some more. 'Oh no,' he continued. 'This is terrible. I never employed these people, but I appear to be paying them outrageous salaries. And I am funding some monstrous Bio-tech project I know nothing of. Project Wormwood. What do you make of that? I shall sack them at once and close down the project.' He raised a hammering hand.

'No.' Rex rose to stop him. 'Don't do that. It would ruin everything.'

'It would?'

'It would.' Rex did big nods. 'It is essential that Project Wormwood go ahead. Essential to you in particular.'

'It is?'

'Indeed. I recognized you the first time we met. I saw a vidoc* about you when I was a child.'

'You did?'

'Certainly. You were one of my biggest heroes.'

'I was?'

'Absolutely,' Rex had started, so he thought he'd finish. 'Jonathan Crawford, child prodigy, boy genius. Youngest ever president of the USA.'

* Annoying sci-fi jargon meaning video documentary. Sorry I bothered really.

212

'You what?' Jonathan fell backwards from his chair. Neither Rex nor Jack hastened to his assistance. 'President,' came a strangled voice from beneath the desk. 'President Crawford. Yes it does have a certain ring to it. Oh my word yes.'

213

22

Nothing is so powerful as a bad idea whose moment has come. Scott Rice

'It is my considered opinion,' Mr Smith had Byron's toolbox out and a goodly amount of Byron's Inter-rositer on the gallery floor, 'it is my con-sidered opinion that matters can still be made straight. What do you suppose this part to be?'

'That's the logic jogger. Works the rack and pinion beneath the torque sprockets. Here, let me.' Byron gave it a twist and a jerk with his spanner.

'You've broken it off,' said Mr Smith in a sorry tone.

'Never mind.' Byron began to whistle. Between flat notes he said, 'You know, this is really quite exciting. There's really no telling what will happen next. The possibilities are quite without end.'

Mr Smith could see many possibilities; none, however, were particularly engaging. He offered his considered opinion once more.

'If we can persuade the big flywheel to keep spinning a bit longer we might be able to sort all this out. We cannot possibly fix all the failing units but we might simply concentrate on one. Cannibalize other units for spare parts and restore this one to full operational capacity. Gear it towards our key figure.'

'Rex Mundi,' said Byron brightly.

'The very same. The hero. Let him carry the action. That's the way it should be done. We will give him an edge.'

'But that's cheating. Cheating never works.'

214

'It's not cheating. We just need to flesh out his character a bit. Put in a love interest. Liven things up a little. It's all such a shambles at present.'

'Well, if you say so.'

'Trust me.' Mr Smith pulled the broken log-jogger free and tossed it over the gallery rail. 'We won't be needing this.' He dug and delved with a three-pronged screw-driver, rooted and rattled with parbuckle, grip, lug, heft and handspike, and when he was done he said, 'This is somewhat drastic and Rex won't be expecting it. But it's a calculated risk.' He threw a nice big lever. 'Now, watch this.'

'Now watch this.' Rex squeezed the inner ring of the steering wheel and the Koshiho Tiger roared. 'Nought to sixty in no time at all.' It was Jack's turn to make the silly G-Force face. 'Errrg,' he said. 'Slow down.'

'Sorry Jack. Bag please.' The in-car computer flipped open a dashboard housing and the barf bag dropped into Jack's lap.

'Back there,' Jack eventually found his breath, 'Craw-ford, all that stuff you said about him becoming president. Was it... .' He paused to gaze sidelong at Rex. There was something different about him. It was difficult to say exactly what, but it was something. Presence, perhaps that was the word. He did bear an uncanny resemblance to a young Harrison Ford, although some-what more ruggedly handsome. Physically, he was in pretty good shape. Jack was starting to feel a grudging respect for the man. This upset him no end.

The truth?' Rex asked.

'Well, was it?'

'One possible truth perhaps. Jonathan seemed happy enough with it. He promised to leave Project Wormwood alone and gave me this new car. So the day is not yet lost. What is that out there?'

They were passing through a new development area. Thousands of men and women toiled away with pick

215

and shovel. Earth movers moved earth. Diggers dug. A holographic hoarding projected a jolly green sign. TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY ECO-HOMES.

'Part of our beloved president's jobs for all policy.' Jack's voice had a dark edge to it. ' "The only way is down," says Wormwood. Homes below ground. Great cities and above them vast forests to be planted. To restore the ecological balance. Reform the ozone layer. Can't say I relish living in a concrete bunker.'

'It has little to recommend it.' Rex halted the car and watched for a bit. 'And they actually believe him?'

'Why shouldn't they? There is a crazy logic about all he does. A basic simplicity. Wormwood says that un-employment will be eradicated if there are plenty of highly paid low-skill jobs. So he creates them. Here we see the homeless digging homes for themselves and being paid for it into the bargain. They go about it with a will, do they not?' Rex had to agree that they did.

He watched the workers whistle while they worked. (Say that with your teeth out.) It was possible that somewhere close by work was already in progress upon the bunker he would one day call his home. The thought sent a shiver down his spine. But what could he do about it? Could he actually change anything here? And if he could, was it right to do it? It was all down to pre-destination.

'So, what are you going to do, Rex?'

'We have several options.' Rex squeezed the accelerator and the Tiger set off once more. 'We could go to this top-secret establishment and check on Project Worm-wood. We could go to the Tower and talk to Elvis.' ('About Elvis?' Jack asked.) 'We could follow the news-casts and await development. Which would you do?'

'I would withdraw to a place of safety.'

'Of that I have no doubt. But we shall do none of these things.'

'Not even the last, which has much to recommend it?'

216

'Especially not. Firstly we will attempt to lose the car which has been following us since we left the hospital this morning. No, don't look round. Ah yes, I thought so.'

'You did? What?'

Rex put his finger to his lips. Drew the car to a halt once more. Still counselling silence he gave Jack a thorough rummaging. In Jack's top pocket he unearthed the small unobtrusive bugging device. Rex turned it back and forwards beneath Jack's nose and then flung it out of the open window. 'Did you know?'

'No, certainly not. But how did you?'

'My suspicions were aroused back at the hospital when the police arrived right on cue carrying flame-throwers. I thought we were being followed when we left Craw-ford. The car turned back as soon as I identified it to you. They had to be listening in. It had to be you, Jack, old pal.'

Jack buried his face in his hands. 'All right. I knew. I was supposed to be the respectable dean of the uni-versity. I could hardly refuse. They wanted to know who you were, how you'd turned up in the nick of time last night. Trouble was that in all the excitement I forgot the thing was still in my pocket. And now . . .'

'And now things are going to be very difficult indeed. Crawford will be investigated. Project Wormwood will be investigated. They have heard everything we said. This is very bad, Jack.'

'We had best give ourselves up. I am clearly the innocent party. I will speak up in your defence. With remission for good behaviour you might get off with life. And I'd visit. Bring you books and stuff. Rex, don't hit me.'

'I'm going to make a big adjustment now,' said Mr Smith.

'Jack,' said Rex. 'Our relationship has not been altogether a happy one thus far, has it?'

217

'Not altogether,' Jack agreed. 'But in one short year we have certainly come to understand each other.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Well, I respect you and you hold me in utter con-tempt.'

'Not that, you said in one short year.'

'And why not? It must be nearly a year to the day since we first met.'

'Jack, it is nothing more than six weeks since we first met.'

'Nonsense. I've been dean at the Misk for at least ten months.'

'But Asmodeus . . .'

Rex began.

'Ancient history, Rex. All cleared up now.'

'Ancient history? It was last night.'

Jack laughed. 'Don't wind me up. You came to dinner last night with your girlfriend. What are you talking about?' Rex gazed down at himself. He became suddenly aware that he did not recognize the clothes he was wearing. The fabric was a reflective polysilicate. It put him in mind of the radiation suits he would wear in the future. He flipped the driving mirror and fell back in alarm. 'Oh my Lord,' croaked Rex. 'I've grown a beard. When did I grow a beard?'

'Always the joker,' said Jack.

'Jack, I am never the joker, as you well know. What is going on?'

'Rex, are you all right?' Jack seemed genuinely concerned. 'You said let's stop here and see how the development is coming along.'

Rex jerked towards the window, thumbed it down. The sun's glare hurt his eyes. The holographic hoarding still read TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY ECO-HOMES, but now the green tones were somewhat off register. The estate was complete. It had become a pleasantly landscaped park. A river meandered through it. The bunker doors were hardly discernible so deft was their camouflage. It was really quite idyllic. It was really very frightening.

218

'Jack. Something is very wrong.'

'Your catch-phrase, Rex.'

'Jack, I cannot remember a single thing that has happened since the morning after Asmodeus was de-destroyed. We were just driving away from Crawford's. I took a bugging device from you. Now all this time has passed.'

'You're not serious? You are serious.'

'Of course I'm serious. Jack, what has happened to Wormwood? And Elvis, is he all right?'

'Your curious friend? We just came from his place. He's no better. Perhaps you're in shock or something. He's pretty bad.'

'Pretty bad? How bad?'

'As bad as it gets. The doctor said . . .'

 Jack hung his head. Rex squeezed the steering wheel. 'The car's broken.'

'It's a foot job, Rex. The steering wheel accelerators were discontinued, too many accidents, you remember? You don't remember. Where are we going?'

'Back to the Tower. And on the way I want you to tell me every single thing that has happened during the last ten months.'

'I'll try.' Jack tried.

The mirror-glass of the Tower was visibly corroded. Garbage piled up against it almost to the first floor. Even though it was mid-afternoon the street was empty. Rex climbed from the car. Instantly the sunlight scorched him. 'Your cap, Rex, and your glasses.' Jack passed them out to him. Rex thrust them on and he thrust his hand over his face. The smell was appalling. And so was the pain. His hand was beginning to cook. 'And your gloves.'

'What happened? What is all this?'

'The ozone hole. Sorry, I forgot to mention it. The car windows are reflect-optical.' Jack's words were now muffled beneath the weatherdome he wore. Rex felt a

219

terrible sadness. Domes and facemasks. Radiation suits. Not so soon. It couldn't be.

Jack put his shoulder to the cracked glass door. It swung slowly in, its hinges groaning desperately. Rex followed him, his eyes, adjusting to the uncertain light, took in the horror. Faces gazed up at him, fearful and suspicious. Bodies huddled in bundles of rags. Dozens of them. Vagrants? Transients?

'Who are these people?' Rex whispered.

'Non-folk. Don't worry about them. Your friend lets them stay here as long as they do no damage. I reckon he's one of the good guys, right?'

'Right. But why are they here?'

'They can't go out. Disenfranchised. Dis-"carded", dis-"credited", know what I mean? Shut the door and let's go on up before we get our throats cut. Why did we have to come back here?'

'I must find out.' Rex made to step into the lift. On the floor two of the dis-'carded' were engaged in a violent sex act. Rex drew back in disgust and turned his face away.

'The stairs Rex, as ever.'

'I don't understand.' Rex kept saying it again and again as he plodded up the stairs. The plush carpets were gone beneath rubbish and human excrement. On the walls, rare artworks were daubed with obscenities. The air was rank.

This way.' Jack finally led Rex into the penthouse. The furniture was gone. The walls were bare. In a far corner was a mound of dirty linen stained with blood and vomit. Rex stepped forward. Jack caught his arm. 'If you really can't remember, perhaps you'd better not look. It's pretty grim.'

'Let me see.' Rex crossed the room and approached the makeshift couch. With a trembling hand he drew down the rough grey blanket.

His breath caught in his throat.

It was Elvis. But his face was scarcely recognizable. The

220

mane of black hair was gone. A few white strands clung to the shrunken skull. Bloodshot eyes gazed with little sight from loose sockets. The killer sideburns were no more. The toothless mouth twitched. Crusted puke caked the lower lip.

'No!' cried Rex. This can't be.' Jack had turned

away. He stood before the stained window, shoulders

hunched.

'What happened to you?' Rex leaned down, grasped the skeletal shoulders. The near-corpse groaned pain-fully, bones crackled. 'Elvis . . .'

'Chief?'

'Barry, is that you?'

'Only just, chief, can't hold on much longer.'

'Barry, what has happened? I've lost my memory. Nearly a year's gone from my life. I remember nothing. What happened to Elvis?'

'Wormwood, chief. Infection. Elvis picked it up on that first night. Everyone else is dead.'

Everyone who had personal contact with Wormwood. He's a plague-pit, chief, a walking disease. I can't hold Elvis much longer.'

'Can't you take him back in time? Restore him, some-thing?'

'But you said . . .'

'I said? What did I say?'

'You promised him, chief.'

'What did I promise? What did I say?'

'Can't speak now, chief. Got to rest is all. Do it, what you said, what you promised, before it's too late for all of us.'

'Barry, wait.' But there was nothing more but a strangled croak from deep in the throat of the dying King.

Rex turned upon Jack. 'What did I say? What did I promise?'

'How should I know?' Jack shrugged. 'Some great scheme or another. You have so many. You've cost him, Rex. You're costing all of us.'

'I don't understand. Have I been here, all this time?'

221

What was I doing? Was it me doing it if I can't remember? Am I dreaming this or what?'

'Something happened. I don't know what. The assault on the UN building. At the talks, Wormwood was with all the heads of state from around the globe, putting together a single world government. There was some kind of attack. All were killed except Wormwood and he's in a wheelchair now. But you were right, Rex. He's evil. And Crawford, that bastard.'

'Tell me Jack. I have to know it all.'

'OK. But not here. The smell of that guy, this place, I can't take it.'

They drove out of the city. The transformation was terrific. Hardly a vehicle moved and only a figure or two stole from shadow to shadow. The roads were cracked, the store windows smashed. Evidently there had been big riots and bad ones. And Rex saw the holographic hoardings proclaiming the big three religious bodies he had come to know and hate as a child. They were on the rise. The transition had occurred and although he had been there to witness it, had witnessed it, it was stricken from his mind.

'Here. Pull in here.' They were some miles from the city. Jack gestured towards a newly constructed building. Long and low, sealed beneath a protective shell. Before it a neon sign flashed on and off advertising it as THE TOMORROWMAN tavern. Rex closed his eyes and bit his lip. A thin line of blood divided his chin and dripped on to his heat-proof suit.

'It's OK here,' Jack was saying. 'As safe as it gets anyway.' They turned into the new car park. Memories smashed into Rex's brain. His battered air-car. The death of the informer Rogan Josh, burned before his eyes by the acid rain. The one-eyed barman. His first encounter with Elvis.

They left the car and passed through the plastic flaps to enter the bar. 'Jack,' said the barman. He was blond, fat and lacking a right eye.

222

'Rick,' said Jack, removing his weatherdome. 'Two of your finest.'

'Tomorrowman brew,' Rex whispered.

'Exactly.' Jack gazed at him strangely. 'Have you been here before, Rex?'

'Not before.'

'Come on. We'll sit over here.' Jack indicated the very chair Rex had once occupied in a future time. A plastique bucket job, the latest innovation. Rex dropped wearily into it. The barman came over with the drinks. He eyed Rex with open hostility. 'Don't I know you?' he asked.

Rex accepted his drink and shook his head. 'I think not.'

'I really don't know where to begin,' Jack began, once the barman had finally removed himself, with many a surly backward glance.

Tell me about the talks.'

'There's not a lot to tell. Media reports were pretty confused. Terrorist attack, they said and blamed it on the Zens. They weren't killers. Pirates, hackers, but not killers. They didn't deserve what they got. Public ex-ecution, what is that all about, I ask you? Live on TV. Sick, really sick. If you want to know all the gory details, ask Spike.'

'Spike? Who's Spike?'

'Your girlfriend, as if you don't know.'

'Jack, I don't. Go on.'

'You really don't, do you?' Jack toyed with his glass. Rex drained his. 'Something pretty weird happened, I know that. But we couldn't get at it. You had us everywhere. Track down Elvis. Track down the research establishment. We got nowhere and twelve days later at the talks, when we are lying low with our pictures in the papers and up on wanted posters, someone hits Worm-wood and the eleven heads of state. There must have been some major craziness, bodies came out in pieces, swollen up, all twisted.'

'A bomb.'

223

'No bomb. No damage to the building. It was like they tore each other to pieces. And Wormwood was the only one left alive. And him barely. Next time we saw him he was in a wheelchair, looking bright and new but with only one hand waving. And no more public appearances, just TV broadcasts to the nation. And then the shit really hit the fan. This new card business.' Jack pulled out his and laid it upon the table. 'The Americard. We all got one. Activated by your personal thumbprint. The lot, credit, passport, medicare, status, all rolled into one. No card, no live. I told you, those people back at the Tower, dis-"carded". The building programme surged ahead. Cities came down. Holes in the ground for all. No threats of war. Shit, Russia is our greatest ally. We got no enemies but the sun. The planet is all to pot. Wormwood is going to forest over the continent. Genetically engineered trees. Restore the planet, he says. And everyone still believes in him. The country, the people.'

'Because he's always right.'

'You said it. He's protecting his people. Keeps it all simple. All black and white. Bastard.'

'Bastard?'

'Too many killings, Rex. Public killings. It's become entertainment. There's no news any more. Real news. Only his news. I wish I couldn't remember.'

'But, he's crippled. I can't understand this.'

'He's a wheelchair. No-one speaks to him in person.'

'And Crawford? Another bastard you said.'

'The fixer. He fixed it for us. Got the police off our backs. Gave me my job back. Just write, he

said. And I have, I've been writing it all. Not that anyone will print it. I thought you said . .
'

'I did. Tell me about Crawford.'

'He's the military. Now more so than ever before. We don't have an army, just a security force. The president's security force. His armed bully-boys. Crawford runs all that. The pogroms. The reprisals. The witch-hunts.'

'How come I don't remember?'

224

'Perhaps you don't want to. It all happened so fast. You kept saying you knew. You knew what to do. You said it to me, to your friend. You said it. Here, have another drink.' Rex passed over his empty glass, Jack wandered off for refills.

The barman engaged him-in conversation with many glances towards Rex. Rex patted his pockets in search of a cigarette. Perhaps he'd given them up. He hadn't. His patting disclosed a packet. He took it up. Kharma Cools. Rex did not recognize the lama on the packet. He took out a cigarette and sucked upon it. It was not a self-igniter. He delved into further pockets and found a lighter.

It all happened so fast. And he had been powerless to stop it. What had he done for almost a year? Grown a beard and taken a girlfriend. A girlfriend? He was a married man. Married to ... but where was Christeen? Reality and unreality had become blurred. What did he remember of now, then, and to be?

'Here you go,' said Jack placing another drink before him. The barman's a stone-bonker. Says you've been in here without the beard. Says you're a trouble-maker.'

'I am,' said Rex. 'And will be again as soon as . . .'

'As soon as you've sorted yourself out, eh? I know. Drink up.'

'What happened at the Miskatonic? Did Crawford continue with the project?'

Jack shook his head. 'No. After the massacre at the UN he dropped it. Mind you it was dropped anyway. I couldn't persuade the Zens to come back after Asmodeus. Spike was in hospital for months. You were the only one who could get through to her. You brought her back to life. Guess that's why you and her . . .'

'I see. But Crawford let you be dean again. Why?'

'Just wanted me to write. And I do. But no-one will publish. Bastards. And who's going to buy my books? I think I'll chuck it all in.'

225

'No,' said Rex. 'Don't do that. Don't eveh-think of doing that.'

'You did read my stuff, didn't you? In the future, I mean.'

'My Uncle Tony read it to me. A great reader the uncle. A great man. He gave me The Book. But he gave me a lot more. More to be used here.'

'Obscure as ever. The Book, my books. I wish I knew what you were about.'

'You know what I'm talking about, Jack. Books, words on the page. When you hear music, after it's over, it's gone into the air. You can never capture it again. Someone once said that.'

'Eric Dolphy,' said Jack.

'Yes, him. And images on the screen. But the words on the page, they live as long as there's someone alive to read them.'

'You can't be pissed already. You've only had two drinks.'

'I have to kill Wormwood. You know that.'

'So you keep saying. But what good will it do? Genetics keep the grass growing. Maybe things will change. Who can say? Wormwood will die sometime.'

'Crawford will come to power.'

'Will he? You never told me the truth about that.'

'I don't think I know.' Rex drank up. 'Get me another drink, Jack.'

'Do you still hate me, Rex?'

'No. Not at all. I never did. Get me another drink, eh?'

Jack went up to the bar; when he returned Rex had gone.

226

23-

There is only the past and the future. There is no present. Buddha

The past sure is tense. The past sure is now. Captain Beefheart

It must be Christmas. We've got police presence. John Spencer

Rex drove home. He didn't know how. Perhaps the car was on automatic pilot, but as he didn't know how, neither did he care. And it was all so familiar. The bunker. Just there waiting for him. The TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY ECO-HOME. He sat a long time in the car staring at the door. The paintwork was nice and bright and green. The cogs gleamed a dazzling chrome in the overblown sunlight. He could see himself as a small child, swaddled in a polysilicate cape, venturing out whilst his parents slept to poke at the charred soil. Rake up little castles from the filth.

Rex stirred himself from his dismal reverie. Ducked from the car into the shade at the bunker door. Turned the cog and entered.

'Rex.' Spike smiled up at him from a battered couch, laid her book aside. 'You're back.' She saw his strange expression. The troubled eyes. 'You are back, Rex?' She took him in her slender arms.

And then they were naked upon the couch. And he felt the fierce passion for this girl he did not know. Her body pressed tightly against his. The smell of her flesh,

227

a scent fresh as a child's. The moistness of her mouth. She kissed him again and again.

And when it was over she cradled his head and stroked his beard. And she asked the question he feared that she would.

'Where have you been, Rex?'

'I don't know,' he told her. 'I just don't know.'

And then he slept.

He was in the shadow of an arch, within the broken city. He adjusted his goggles, brought distant forms into focus. Something moved amongst the rubble. The sun's glare made it a shimmering mirage. It walked upon crooked legs. Like a bird. But it was no bird. A machine? A robot? It picked its way from place to place, as if searching for something. A craft buzzed low overhead. Rex ducked back into the curtain of dark-ness. The craft shot away. Rex focused his goggles, adjusted the niters. It was a curricule. An ancient tinkered with long control rods, rode the outre carrier. And

then it stopped. Cocked forward. The occupant gazed down. Stared at something. Rex clambered to a higher vantage point. Sought to make out a distant glimmer. A wheeel chair?

'Over there. That's him.' He heard the voice and nov he saw the face. Wormwood. The face expanded tofill all vision. Before it the weird curricule strutted forward! 'Is he the one?' Rex did not know the voice. Old and crabbed. 'Is he the one?'

'Adjust him out!' cried Wormwood.

'Adjust him out!'

'Adjust him out!'

'Adjust him out!'

Rex fought to escape. He turned and ran, but his legs! gave him no support. He fell and he screamed and screamed and screamed.

'Hold on buddy. Hold it. It's OK. Come on now.' Re woke, cold in his own sweat. 'Again?' said he.

228

'Again,' said Elvis. 'Take some coffee. Loosen. You know what I mean?'

'Thanks.' Rex took the cup. He smiled up at Elvis. Thanks.'

The King's left arm hung loosely in its sling. His head was also bandaged. 'Anything new?'

'I don't know. A thing on legs. A metal curricule. And Wormwood.'

'We gotta move,' said Elvis.

'He's right, chief,' said Barry. 'It's now or never, to quote the classics.'

Rex swung his legs down from the penthouse bed and sipped his coffee. 'Is everything set?'

'Sure thing and it has to be today. The talks. This summit at the UN, Wormwood's single world govern-ment, bad idea. It's our last chance to stop him.'

'OK. How's the arm?'

'Not good. Barry's doing his best. I can have the bandages off for an hour or two. But I'm rotting Rex. My hair is . . .'

'Yes, I know. All right then. Let's do it right.'

It was 27 July 1993 and the crowds were out in force. There was major flag-waving and all of it stars and stripes. The banners were up and the chanting had begun early. 'Wormwood,' it went.

'Wormwood... Wormwood . . . Wormwood . . .' It was some event.

'I sure am glad you're here, Rex. You straight on

everything that's happening?'

'Straight. As long as your people don't let us down.' 'Gotta trust someone, I guess.' Rex and Elvis were

dressed in the military manner. High-ranked to boot.

They moved through the crowd. The UN building made

a splendid sight, coloured with the sky. Proud it looked,

very proud. Very dead proud. The twelve most powerful folk on Earth were to

put their pens to paper and sign the agreement for a

229

single world government. Much the stuff of dreams. Or nightmares. World government. Peace on Earth for all mankind. A flourish of the pen and lo the deed is done.

'Are you ready, my pretty?' Mother Demdike raked her sticky fingers through Wormwood's hair.

'Let go my barnet, you old ratbag.' Wayne straightened his hair and tapped on the briefcase resting on his desk, within it a portable computer contained the life essence of Legion. The occasional brief wisp of sulphurous smoke escaped from the keyhole.

'The boys are all aboard.'

'What bliss.' Mother Demdike let out maniacal chuckles. 'Let them free one at a time and order them whom to possess. And don't get them all excited, will you?'

'I know what I'm doing.'

'Of course you do. Of course you do.' Demdike thumbed her nose. A bat's face poked out from her left ear and went Tsssk'. 'Just don't cock it up. We have old scores to settle.'

'I said I know what I'm doing, you stinking carcass.' Wormwood plucked up the briefcase and strode across the room. He threw open the great doors. Sunlight blazed through them, casting a long dramatic shadow out behind him. He turned, framed in the portal like the demon prince he was. It looked a treat.

'Let's kick ass!' cried Wayne L. Wormwood.

Bang! went the big drum. The baton came up and the massed band of SAG-COM the 117th under Hartog, launched into a medley of Dusty Springfield hits. The president's limousine slid along the boulevard. Motor-cycle outriders, armed and dangerous, communicated through headsets and saw all the world as the enemy. It was all very Judge Dredd. Further limousines appeared, exotic pennants fluttering gaily. But let's have MTWTV put us in the picture.

230

'Thanks Bob. And what a day this promises to be. If pens go to paper and our political sources seem mighty sure they will, then a single one-world government will be formed. The president's 'hands around the world' promise will be fulfilled The final borders will come down. Nation will speak peace unto nation. Man will love his fellow man. The lion will lie down with the lamb. Auld acquaintance will be forgot and a trouble shared will be a trouble halved. Which can't be bad whichever way you look at it. This is the Dalai Lama saying a big fat Om and handing you back to the studio.'

'And thank you, Dalai. What a character.' The female talking head had had her hair done and was looking pretty chic, I kid you not. 'Now, throughout the day we will be playing host to a veritable galaxy of stars like the Dalai, who will be adding their commentary to this momentous event and giving us the latest lowdown on Tinseltown's steamy sex scandals. But with me right now is Doctor Wolfgang Steiner, lecturer in political history, adviser to three presidents and winner of the Nobel peace prize. Doctor Steiner, what exactly does this summit mean to you?'

'To me it means the very apogee of President Worm-wood's syncretic overview. Success through simplifi-cation. A planet governed by twelve good men and true. Shared knowledge, shared wealth, shared resources, shared vision. This expression, the global village, has been with us for years, but only now can it become a reality. A truly great day for us all, I think.'

'And oral sex, Doctor Steiner, where do you stand on that?'

'I generally stand on the bedroom carpet with my knees slightly bent. Shall I demonstrate?'

'Please do.'

He does.

'And back now to the cavalcade approaching the UN

231

building, where the pope is counting in the cars. Are you there, Emile?'

'I sure am, babe. Emile Juan Jose Garcia. The Pachuco Pope. And no shit, these mother fuc . . . scuse, I can see the limousines approaching even now. And are dese cars or is they cars? I give you the rundown as they run by. And ho, here comes de first head of shit. I gotta read from the card, cos I don't know most of these sons of bitches to speak with, dig? OK . . .

'Car one. Kurosawa Koshiho. Head of the Koshiho Corporation who make all that mean computer games and shit. Him de president of old Japan, fact I think he own Japan, but whatever.

'Car two. Car two got a real old wrinkly Chinese cat in it. Ho Chi Ming or something, I can't read that. He de King of China or whatever they called.

'Car three. And ho. This guy I know. Generalissimo Lucozade de Guano. Panama, Peru, Chile, Brazil and all points down. You dig?

'Car four? Dis de woman primeminister of London England*, dat we all know is a man under the frock, all right? She gonna be dere till dat little country sink under the waves. And ol Emile hear say dat she real pissed off dat de summit not held round her house and wanna ride in de lead car and everything. Word to the wise is all.

'Car five. More European biggies. Dis de Europrime Kasper Hauser. Least said about dis slimeball de better. He got all de Eastern bloc droppings that de guy in the next car dropped on him.

'Car six. And here come the guy in de next car. De pres of Mother Russia and all de bits what didn't wanna split to the West. Borzoi Potemkin. Hey,' de cat's waving to me. Nice one Borzoi, all right!

'Car seven. Hey and it's camel jockey time, the ol tea

* It is not my fault that Margaret Thatcher chose to resign and spoil this bit.

232

towel and fan-belt job, you cool? Lock up your ol lady and your goats, bro, it's Sheik Abdulla some shit I can't read either, but we know who you are. How about an oil well for de Vatican, eh Abdul?

'Car eight. And right behind him, though not for long by the look of it. The Cadi with the Star of David is trying to overtake. And yes it's a side swipe. Hailing from de Holyland and ready to kick ass, Israel Goldberg and de kosher home boys.

'Car nine. And dere's another cat waving up at me. Who's dis? Right on bro, it's de pres of Australia. He's an all right dude, know what I mean? Him and me shoot pool together when I on de papal missions down his way. Yo Larry. That Larry Minogue. See you later, OK?

'Car ten. Dis cool. Dis Napoleon Mandela. United States of Africa. I got all kinds of stuff here about him. Kickin out the fat white cats and freeing de people and shit. Right on Nap.

'And who we got left? Car eleven. Here he comes, Finn MacCool. King of Eire it says here. Only independent state in the world. Big kudos to you, Finn. And that looks to be the last of them. Can't see how they can carve up the whole shooting match between them. But I guess if that bunch party, who gonna call de cops to get the noise turned down, huh? Dis Emile Juan Jose Maria Garcia, de people's Pope, saying kiss my ring and back to the studio.'

'Thank you Emile. And there you have it. A lot of witty names, a helping of satire and eleven two-dimensional stereotypes that we probably won't be seeing much of later. And as they're all going to be moving mouth for at least two hours we'll take a break right there and be back in just a

moment with Zsa Zsa Gabor.'

'This way gentlemen, and lady. Yes certainly madam, you may go first of course.' Major Mundi ushered the heads of state through the plush entrance hall of the UN building (I can't describe it because I've never

233

been there, but it must be pretty plush). 'Just on to the escalator.'

Wayne's mum had been hard at it all night dealing with the decor of the summit room. This day's colour was all-over black. The circular table was of malachite engraved with a cheery pentagram. Its seven clawed feet stood upon a carpet of black suede. The thirteen chairs surrounding it had once been the property of Aleister Crowley. The walls were not black, they were mirrored. Eleven tall mirrors angled down. Not every world conference is candle-lit, in fact none of them are, or are likely to be, but this one was, which just goes to show.

'Through here, please,' said General Presley. 'President Wormwood is expecting you.'

'Do you always wear your sunglasses indoors, young man?'

'Sure do, ma'am.'

And then they were in. Rex and Elvis hovered outside the door. They heard keys click in various locks. 'What now?' Rex asked.

'Let em rap awhile. Guys have got to get thirsty, right?'

'Right.'

'So we're gonna come in with the coffee and zap.'

'Zap. Now allow me just to recap if you will. A few points that I feel should be made clear.' Elvis winked beneath his mirrored shades. 'Mr Russell and his as-sociates have arranged our fake security passes and re-moved from circulation the military whom we have replaced. It is proposed that we enter the summit room and serve drinks laced with a soporific. Whilst the world's leaders sleep, President Wormwood will be removed and disposed of.'

'By me.'

'If you wish. The remaining eleven will be ... what?'

'Huh. You got me on that buddy. Mr Russell said

234

"influenced". I guess he's gonna have a word with them. Do some kind of deal or something. It's cool for him. Not our problem, right?'

'Wrong,' said Rex. 'Very wrong. Have you considered one obvious possibility?' Elvis made headshakes. He hadn't. 'That Crawford has lied to us all along? That he knew about Project Wormwood from the start? Financed it himself, instigated it in fact?'

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

'Surely we could have hit Wormwood in some way that did not mean incapacitating every world leader at the same time?'

'Well if you put it that way also . . .'

'Scuse me, chief.'

'Hey Barry, what's happening?'

'If I might just interject.'

'You do that green buddy. Whatever it is.'

'Elvis and I agree that our mission is to destroy Wormwood. Nothing more. History must then be allowed to take its own course after that.'

'I know what you're saying, but . . .'

'We must not interfere further, chief. It's all in the lap of the Gods from then on. We can only do our bit.'

'And mine?'

'We both figure that when Wormwood gets what's coming to him, the power he has over you, which keeps you here, will dissolve. You will return to the future and things will level out. He is undefended in there and if we can catch him off guard. Zap.'

Rex nodded. 'Right,' said he. But it was wrong of course.

'Gentlemen . . . and lady,' said President Wayne L. Wormwood. 'We all know why we are here. We are here to sign this piece of paper that I hold in my left hand. You all know what it says. It is extremely simple. You each have a copy. Is there anybody who wishes to say anything before we all open a vein?'

235

'Open a what?' The voices came from all around the table, but most loudly from the woman primeminister of England.

'Open a vein, madam. The treaty must of course be signed in blood.'

There was a great deal of humming and hahing. It was liberally distributed about the table. It expressed grave doubt, a fair portion of outrage, a helping of horror, a smidgen of suspicion, a courgette of concern, a dumpling of dither.

Tuck you,' said Larry Minogue.

Wormwood held up his hands as outcry became the norm. 'Before you are surgical scalpels, sterile and sealed in plastique. You won't feel anything except a little prick.'

'I'm listening to one,' said Mr Minogue. Which just goes to prove that you can use the same gag twice in a book if you are prepared to scrape the barrel. 'Count me out, matey.'

'You all know me,' purred Wormwood. 'You know my policies. I am restoring this country. I have taken all matters personally in hand. You know my philosophy: if it can't be worked out on the wrapper of a Snickers bar, then it's too complicated. We all swear an oath of allegiance. Sign in our blood and together sort out all the problems of the world. Is this simple or is this simple?'

'I have a biro we all might share,' Kurosawa Koshiho spoke. 'In fact it is more than a biro. It is the Koshiho 2000 Ultrapen. It works on the principle of negative light transference, is solar powered and never runs out. I have samples here if you would all care to try. My company plans to . . .'

'We have them already,' sneered Wormwood. 'The Crawford Corporation markets a cheaper and more efficient version. I will lend you mine. But now it is blood I want. Your blood,' Wormwood opened his briefcase before him. The computer within flashed into action. Eleven images of his face appeared on the screen. They all looked eager. 'Will we do this the easy way or . . . ,'

236

'Or what?' The English woman rose to her feet. 'We do not feel that the time is right to finalize this agreement at present. Perhaps next year when I shall be hosting

'No madam. There will be no next year when you will be doing anything.' Wormwood's finger hovered

above a button on the computer keyboard marked release. 'When you leave this room,' he continued, 'you will all be, how shall I put this, changed men. I am going to give each of you something to take back to your countries. Call it a knowledge. Call it an inspiration. Call it a way of being. Call it simply "a being".'

'You will not,' cried Finn MacCool, leaping from his chair.

'Pardon me?' Wormwood's finger crept a little closer to the button.

'You'll not release your unholy monsters upon us,' quoth Finn.

'What?' went Wormwood.

Generalissimo Lucozade de Guano was now on his feet. 'There is a status quo to be maintained,' said he. 'We cannot allow an autocracy nor a monotheism. That is not the way we maintain the balance of equipoise.'

'What are you talking about? And why don't you have a South American accent?'

'We speak with but one accent, Wormwood, and one voice. The voice of the Gods.'

'Aw shit,' croaked Wormwood. 'What is this?'

'Be wise,' said Larry. 'Who do you think runs this world anyway?'

'I do, who else?'

'The Gods.' This was Kasper Hauser. 'I, Vulcan, declare this.'

'I, Baal, second the motion,' said Israel Goldberg.

'And I Allah,' agreed Andulla Ben Hassan.

'Shinto,' said Kurosawa Koshibo. And so it went around the table.

Finn MacCool raised his hand. 'You are perplexed,' said he.

237

'I. . . I. . . ' Wormwood did not know what to do with his RELEASE finger, so he stuck it up his nose.

'Then let me explain,' said Finn kindly. 'We share. I am the God of old Eire. My incarnations rule the green lands in perpetuity. These others here are the same. Men war but the Gods remain at peace.'

'What are you saying?'

'What are we saying, you stupid little man,' Hecate, Goddess of Earth and the underworld and the English PM, declared, 'is that each of us is a God in human form. Such it has always been with those who rule this planet. We allow a little to and fro. Nations rise and fall. Fashions change, Gods come in and out of favour. That is our sport. Our entertainment. The sun never set upon my empire. But that was a few years back.'

'No!' Wormwood did some dithering. 'This can't be right. You're just people. Heads of state.'

'He's as thick as shit,' said Larry Minogue, the great spirit of the Dreamtime. 'Shall I clump him one or what?'

'If there is any clumping to be done then I shall be the one to do it.'

'Please yourself, Heccy. But listen Wormwood, we all know who you are, how come you never recognized us?'

'Because you don't exist is how. I am the Lord of Chaos. The negative life-force. All other

deities are nothing to me. This is all crap. I run the show. No more words. You all get yours.'

And with that Wormwood pressed the button. The briefcase was biblically rent asunder. Legion became manifest. Extruded through the ether and out into the dimension of matter. Divided and swam towards its chosen host.

Rex pressed his ear to the door. 'What's going on in there?'

Elvis shrugged. 'Do you think they're getting thirsty?'

'Something like.'

'I'll get the trolley then.'

238

'The door is locked. What was that?'

Now there are noises and there are noises. But the noises made by eleven Gods of old Earth belting numerous temple bells of brown stuff out of eleven rampaging demons and applying the threefold law of return upon their sender, was not exactly music to anyone's ear. Except perhaps those who get off on such bands as Napalm Death, Carcass, or the obscure Brent-ford ensemble Astro Laser and the Flying Starfish from Uranus, who went dirt in 1978 (more's the pity, because I was the lead singer). It was one big heavy feedback number.

239

24

the end of the world The good news is that the world will never end The bad news, that all of us have now and always will be living at the very moment just before it is due to It is all part of a really big conspiracy. The biggest in fact Engineered by the Big Big Figure himself. Number One God

Picture this, if you will A built-in fully maintained system at the heart of this planet equipped with a kind of celestial rewind button Every time the Earth reaches the brink of destruction the mechanism is triggered and time rewinds to the point where the rot set in Possibly a decade before, maybe even more Man is given another chance to make good. He fouls up again, the button is pushed again

A nifty little trick up God's all-encompassing sleeve and one He's told no-one about. Free will for Man, as stated in the biblical terms of agreement, but with a foolproof failsafe After all, who is ever going to rumble it?

But, you say, if such a system exists, then how come the world is in the mess it's in? On the brink, in fact? Because mankind is only living in the present and the present must logically be the moment just before the rewind button gets pressed

Mankind lives in a state of terminal decline staring into oblivion Makes you think, doesn't it?

Hugo Rune, The Book of Ultimate Truths

, ' have been thoroughly misquoted Certainly my name has appeared in connection with Mr Rune, but at no time did I ever endorse any of his preposterous theories I have always been in agreement with the learned Mr Koeslar, that grave doubts exist regarding Rune's sanity. I wish to

240

make it plain that I totally disassociate myself from Hugo Rune The man is a stone-honker I Sir John Rimmer, interview with the National Enquirer

thunderbird,' said the cloud again, because with all the coming and going we had quite forgotten about what Christeen was doing in the sub-plot.

'OK,' said Christeen. 'Do you want to tell me all about it?'

'ALL ABOUT WHAT?'

'About whatever it is you're up to.'

'CRUISIN',' said the Thunderbird. 'CRUISIN' FOR CHICKS THAT'S WHAT T'BIRDS DO.'

'Not in 2060 they don't.'

'2060?' (It said it in big letters.) 'SURELY SOME MISTAKE HERE?'

'Not mine I assure you.'

'2060. NOT I960?'

'Not.' Christeen shook her head.

'brrooom brrooom,' said the Thunderbird. 'I think

I'M LOST.'

Fido stuck his cold nose against Christeen's knee. 'If this is some attempt by Rankin to introduce yet another story line into an already overcomplicated plot, then I think he's on a wrong'n.'

'You AND ME both,' the Thunderbird agreed. 'No, I was only putting you on i've come to deliver your new gods where do you want them?'

'Alpha Centauri,' said Christeen.

'TOUCHE. BUT SERIOUSLY . . .'

'Which ones have you got?' Rambo piped up.

'GOT A TRUNK FULL TAKE YOUR PICK.'

'Stay out of this.' Christeen clipped Rambo about the ear. 'You've done quite enough damage as it is.' She made a fierce face at the cloud. 'Clear off,' she said.

'NO CAN DO, I'M AFRAID FOLK HAVE BEEN INVOKING. I'M ONLY DOING MY JOB.'

241

'Well do it elsewhere.'

'IS THIS CHICK FOR REAL?'

'She's a little confused,' said Rambo, rubbing his ear.

'I am nothing of the kind. I know exactly what's going on.'

'I don't,' said Fido.

'Nor me,' said Eric.

The old woman in the plastique mac now chose to stick her head out of Rambo's door. 'If it's the Saucerfolk,' she called, 'then it's for me.'

'It's not for you. Go back inside.'

'I thought you had agreed to stay out of this,' Rambo wagged his ringer at Christeen. 'Remain neutral.'

'I'm warning you.'

'I REALLY DON'T HAVE ALL DAY. WHERE DO YOU WANT THESE GODS?'

'We don't want them. Take them away.'

'We want some of them.' Rambo put himself beyond hitting range. 'Can we choose?'

'DEEP QUESTION,' said the Thunderbird. 'You MUST BE THE BIG CHEESE ROUND HERE, RIGHT?'

'Right,' said Rambo.

'Wrong,' said Christeen.

'Right,' said Eric.

'Wrong,' barked Fido. 'That's even, if dogs count.'

'I'VE GOT CERBERUS IN THE TRUNK. SO DOGS DO COUNT.'

'Far out. This car I like.'

'NOW LET US CONSIDER THE MAN'S DEEP QUESTION. CAN MAN CHOOSE HIS GODS? DOES MAN CHOOSE HIS GODS, OR VICE VERSA, RIGHT?'

'Right,' said Rambo.

'Don't start that again.' Christeen made a fist.

'So what's the answer?' Rambo asked.

There was a big long silence. It would have been a much bigger and much longer silence had not Fido chosen to break it. 'Rambo just asked a car the mean-ing of life,' he tittered immoderately. 'Some dickhead, eh?'

242

'SOME DICKHEAD,' the Thunderbird agreed. 'As IF I'D LET ON!'

'There's a key turning,' said Elvis.

'I don't like this,' said Rex.

The key turned. Elvis and Rex watched as eleven heads of state, glowing oddly about the extremities, filed from the summit room.

'Bye,' Elvis waved. Rex peered into the now smoke-filled room.

'What the . . .'

'We'll take it from here.' Rex found himself thrust aside.

'Mr Russell,' said Elvis. A team of paramedics stormed into the room.

They fell upon the lifeless body of Wormwood and loaded it on to a trolley. 'Stand aside please. Make way.'

'Elvis, what is happening?'

'I don't know, for pity's sake.'

'Is he dead?'

'Make way. Stand aside please.' There was a lot of coming and going. Mostly, in fact altogether, going. Wormwood, shrouded in blankets, was trundled off at great speed. 'Stand aside!'

'I don't like this,' said Rex.

'I don't like this,' said Mr Smith. 'Have you pressed the wrong lever down or what?'

'Me?' Byron made a face. 'You're doing all the lever work. It's my machine. I should be fiddling with it.'

'Well, push that one down and we'll see what hap-pens.'

'I don't like this,' said Rex again.

'Like what?' Jack Doveston was driving. And driving away from the city.

'Like what? What do you mean?'

'You said you don't like something.'

243

'Did I? Where are we going?'

'You said you wanted to drive out and look at the new development. More twenty-first-century eco-homes. Are you going to buy one of those bunkers, Rex?'

'Did I say that?'

'No.'

'Then maybe. I don't know.'

'You're not getting anywhere, are you?'

'Perhaps there's nowhere to get.'

'Don't fall apart on me now. I still trust you.' Jack made an encouraging smile.

Rex tried to return it. 'How's the writing going?'

'Not well. You never give me any clues. You tell me you've read my stuff. I just wish you'd tell me what it is that I wrote.'

'Nice sentence, Jack. How's the job?'

'How's Spike?'

'I love her,' said Rex.

'Yeah. Well I figured that. I was your best man, remember?'

'You were my what? Stop the car.'

'Car? Thanks for the compliment.' Jack stopped the runabout. It was a motorcycle body welded on to a two-seater back-half from a VW and covered with a weatherproof plastique canopy.

'What did you say, Jack?'

'About what? Best man? Rex, are you doing this to me again?'

'What year is it, Jack?'

'1995. Oh shit, Rex, what are you saying?'

'Jack turn the car round. Drive back to the Tower.'

'Not the Tower again Rex. There is no Tower. It's gone, torn down with the rest of the city.'

'The Tower is gone? And Elvis?'

'You buried him, Rex. Nearly a year ago. You've lost it again, haven't you?'

'Again ? What do you mean again? Has this happened before?'

244

'Your memory. Shit. You were straight a couple of minutes ago. Now you can't remember again, right?'

'Right. What is happening to me?'

'If I knew that maybe I could solve your problems.'

'I've got problems?' Rex was examining himself, he didn't find much to recognize.

'Rex. You're obsessed. You know all these secrets. You have all these plans. Nobody wants to listen any more. You're really pissing your friends off. You need treat-ment.'

'Jack. I know you. Who am I?'

'Rex, you are Rex Mundi. Religious affairs corre-spondent for Buddhavision. Easy come, easy go. You're on a good salary. A bit of a dreamer, but at least you're working. Your wife and child are grateful for that.'

'I have a child?' Rex groaned.

'Little Rex. Sweet kid. Remember your theory, the kid will be your own grandfather? You don't? Well never mind, dumb theory anyhow. Do you want me to drive you home?'

'Yes,' said Rex. 'Drive me home.'

Somehow he knew exactly where home was going to be and he wasn't wrong. Jack dropped him outside the bunker door and chugged away.

'I can't have this,' said Spike. Rex studied her face, she was obviously still quite young, but prematurely haggard. 'You go out, you don't come back. You come back, everything is new to you. Who's this, what's that, what time is it? You want to see a shrink Rex. Get yourself together or get yourself out.'

'Spike, I just don't know.'

'I'm Jayne, not Spike any more. I thought we agreed that when you wanted to get me pregnant. You sold us all out.'

'My child . . .'

'Don't bother him, he's asleep. He knows who you are. A waste of space, that's what.'

245

'Or a waste of time.'

'Don't give me time again. If I hear that one more . . . time ... I will die.'

'We're all going to die. Hold on. Who is the president?'

'Rex! Fuck off will you?' Jayne took her leave. 'You are in the spare room,' was her parting shot.

Rex slumped down on to the battered couch and stared into space. There had to be an answer to all this. He took up the remote control which was lording it on a cushion and idly pressed it. Before him the TV screen flared into life.

'. . . boring down into the very core of the planet. Tapping vast wells of energy, undreamed-of mineral wealth and seeking out new sources of potential nutrients. The future today. For one and

for all. This is the Dalai Lama for Buddhavision saying a big Om and returning you to the studio.' The face on the screen was unknown to Rex, but the look in the eyes was all too familiar. Rex channel-hopped. '. . . trading on the New York stock market had to be suspended today due to a plague of rats which entered the bunker through ...' hop '. . . for lice, ticks or parasitic worms try new Bug-Off personal livestock exterminant . . .' hop '. . . don't mess with this guy, he knows karate . . .' hop '. . . goes with the sickle . . .' hop '. . . well on the road to recovery President Wormwood, seen here with his family, took a few first steps today. Keep swinging Wayne, we're rooting for you . . .' hop. Rex hopped back. 'Goes with the sickle'? He knew that line and he knew the movie. Roustabout, one of the Big E's favourites. It rang big bells in Rex's head.

Rex scrambled from the couch and rooted in the bookshelves. And there it was, somewhat scruffy and well thumbed. Armageddon: the Musical, an original Bloomsbury edition, now a rare collector's item. Rex gently turned the priceless pages. Yes, there it was, page 110. Elvis was in the Hong Kong Hilton watching that very movie. July 1994. Rex's heart sank. He'd missed him.

246

But perhaps not, the book might well be wrong, perhaps it was a misprint. The movie was on TV. Although Hong Kong wouldn't have the same channel. But yes it would, this was MTWTV. There were a great many ifs, ands, or buts. And yet. Rex snatched up the telephone and tapped E for exchange. 'How can I help you?'

'Get me the Hong Kong Hilton please. Hong Kong, New China.'

'Just putting you through.'

'Hong Kong Hilton, how may we help you?'

Rex chose his words carefully. 'I should like to book your penthouse suite please.'

'I'm terribly sorry but the suite is occupied.'

'Ah,' said Rex. 'I suppose that would be Mr King.'

'Mr King sir?'

'I was given to understand that a Mr King was occupying the suite and that he would be moving out today.'

'No sir, Mr Never has the suite.' The voice on the line faltered.

'Would it be possible for me to speak to Mr Never?'

I'm afraid not. Mr Never does not receive calls. In fact I have erred greatly in mentioning his name to you. He is something of a recluse.'

'Perhaps you would tell him that Mr Mundi is on the line and that this is the call he has been waiting for.'

'Sir, I don't think . . .'

'Mr Never will be very upset if he does not receive this call. He will no doubt choose to take his business elsewhere and pass on word of his displeasure to many of his influential cronies. He is a personal friend of Kurosawa Koshiro. I know old Noah, it would be just like him.'

'Noah? Oh, I see, you are a close acquaintance of Mr Never. I will put you through at once.' Rex waited. He hadn't completely lost his touch.

'Rex? Is that you buddy?'

'Elvis. Thank God. What is happening?'

247

P

'Bad stuff. Hold the line a second, Rex. I gotta video the end of this movie,' Rex held the line. 'There, that's got it.' Rex span around. There stood Elvis, gold lame suit, killer sideburns, the whole package. 'Hi Rex,' said the King. 'Hi chief,' chirped the Time Sprout.

'Barry, you're OK. But in Armageddon: the Musical, page 111 you . . .'

'Yeah, chief. Confusing, ain't it?'

'Good to see you buddy.' Elvis gave hearty handclasps. 'Some real baffling boogie going down, huh?'

248

25

the end of the world part two: The world was scheduled to end in 999. Nearly does end in 1999. Ends a good deal in 2050 and really ends like crazy in 2060. After that I'm not altogether sure what it does.

Hugo Rune, The Book of Ultimate Truths

Hugo who? Sir John Rimmer, My Life and Times

'YOU SEE,' said the Thunderbird, 'THERE'S BEEN A BIT OF A COCK-UP. IN THE NORMAL SCHEME OF THINGS I WOULDN'T BE HERE DOING THIS, BUT IT SEEMS THAT THE BIG FLYWHEEL HAS GONE A BIT WONKY AND SO I'M REALLY ON A MERCY MISSION TRYING TO FIND HOMES FOR ALL THESE DISPLACED GODS. I'M UNLOADING WILLY-NILLY.'

'Willy-Nilly?' Eric asked. 'What's he the god of?'

'Buffoons,' said Rambo. 'What's all this about a big flywheel?'

'None of your business.' Christeen raised her ear-clipping hand. 'When is the malfunction?' she asked the Thunderbird.

'1993-1999. sabotage if you ask me. someone called in a tomorrowman to sort it out, but he doesn't seem to be getting anywhere. hence my arrival

HERE.'

'The Tomorrowman?' Christeen asked. 'You didn't happen to catch his name by any chance, did you?'

'REX MUNDI,' said the Thunderbird. 'WHY? Do YOU KNOW HIM?'

249

'Barry,' said Rex, 'do you know what's going on?'

'Well chief, I have a theory.'

'And I've had a revelation.'

'I'd like to hear Barry's theory first, if you don't mind. No offence meant.'

'None taken, I assure you.' Elvis sat down in a huff.

'Time tampering,' the sprout continued. 'I should know, it's my game after all. Or was. Or perhaps still is as we are with you here. Which we weren't a minute ago. If you follow me. Something or someone or both is interfering with the fabric of time. But it's localized.'

'How localized?'

'It's you, Rex. Here listen, check this out. Elvis . . .'

'Uh-hu?'

'Where have we just been?'

'We've just been here.'

'But before that?' The golden one scratched at his splendid cranium, unconsciously rearranging the hairs as he did so. 'You got me. Where have we been?'

'At the Hong Kong Hilton, don't you remember?'

'Now that you mention it, no, I don't.'

'See what I mean, chief? Time is following you personally. When we're not with you we sort of don't exist.'

'But you remember.'

'The exception that proves the rule. I am the exception, after all.'

'But why me? And who is this someone or something?'

'Find that out and you've solved the whole thing is my theory.'

'Some theory,' Elvis huffed. 'Now, about my revelation.'

Rex dropped into an armchair of fearful familiarity and wondered if there was any alcohol in the 'house'.

'I had a dream,' spake Elvis. 'And all things were made clear unto me. Well, not all perhaps, but some, one or two . . .'

'This promises to be good.'

250

'Stow it, Barry.'

'Sorry chief.'

'I had a dream, like I say. I was here, in this very room. I remember it exactly.'

'Were you drinking?' Rex asked. 'I mean, if you were, do you recall where you put the bottle?'

'In the desk behind you.'

'Thanks.' Rex opened the desk drawer. There was a bourbon bottle and two glasses. Rex pondered on whether this was a good sign. He concluded that it probably was not. He poured two large slugs.

'Rock on.' Elvis accepted his drink. 'I was here in this room with you. Just like now. We were drinking. Just like this and you said "why?".'

'Why?' said Rex.

'Yeah, just like that. Then there came this knock on the door.' Rex glanced towards the door. Elvis glanced towards Rex. Rex glanced towards Elvis. Elvis shrugged. 'I opened the door - no, you opened the door, well, one of us opened the damn door.'

'Get on with it, chief.'

'Outside the door it was inside. Inside this great sort of building. All balconies and staircases going up and up and down and down. And all like real old and cobwebby, like a church. And there was this machine on legs walking about with this granddaddy in the top.'

'I saw that.'

'You did?'

'In a dream once, I can't quite remember.'

'Sure? Well, the old guy in the machine was going crazy. These two other guys, a young one with blue hair and a fat dumpy one were chasing after him. But they couldn't catch him up. And bits kept dropping off the walls. The staircases were falling down.'

'I don't think we need to pursue this,' said Barry in as firm a voice as he could muster. 'It's just a dream.'

'Let him finish.'

'There's not much more to tell. I kept getting the feeling

251

that it was all inside a big clock. We were all in this big clock which kept running down and had to be rewound. But now it had got broken and we were supposed to mend it.'

'Just a dream, chief. Don't worry about it.' Barry might have had further words to utter, or he might not, but whatever the case there now came an urgent knocking upon the bunker door.

'Ah,' said Rex. 'Now there's a thing.'

'There's someone at your door,' said Elvis. 'You'd better answer it.'

'It's your dream. You answer it.'

'Let's pretend we're out.'

'Open up,' came a voice. 'I know you're in there.'

'He knows we're in here.'

'Neat thinking, chief.'

'Shut up Barry. This could be real important.'

'Or it could just be a dream.'

Elvis chewed his lip. 'Or a nightmare.'

'Perhaps it's Freddy Krueger, chief.'

'Come on.' Rex went over to the door. 'Who is it?'

'Inter-rositer Prestidigitent KK Byron Wheeler-Vegan.'

'It ain't Freddy.'

'Barry, take a nap!'

'What? And miss the next bit. No chance.'

Rex took out his Americard and having marvelled at it a moment, dropped it into the lock release. The bunker door slid back with a sci-fi hiss. Byron bobbed up and down in the portal.

'It's the dude with the blue flat-top,' said Elvis.

'There's not a lot of time left,' wheezed the breathless Byron. 'And that is exactly what I mean. You've got to come at once.'

Rex gazed beyond the bobbing boy. The panorama which spread brain-damagingly away before him was

similar to the one Elvis would have described had words been available to him.

Tier upon tier of marble galleries, floors inlaid with

252

copper filigree. The polished brass of the cogs and screws and rivets and dials and turncocks. The great machines dwindling into hazy perspectives. And things of that nature.

Byron followed Rex's numb stare. 'Come with me now. Everything will be explained.'

'Best do as he says, chief.' Byron peeped in at Elvis. 'Hello Barry,' said he, 'I hoped you'd come along.'

'Hello Byron.'

'You two know each other?' Elvis shook his befuddled head. Rex took the opportunity to join him on this occasion.

'Come along now, please.' The two heroes shared shrugs and passed through the bunker door into the wonder underland. 'Follow me.'

Byron led the bemused pair along a sweeping gallery. It was deserted, the way some of them are. 'Not far,' said Byron.

'Hey buddy, what the fuck is this place?'

'Easy chief. Mr Smith will tell you.'

'Mr Smith? Shit Barry. What is all this? How come you know these people?'

'I shouldn't say, chief.'

'What is that sound?' Rex asked. 'Like a heartbeat. It's everywhere.'

'It's the big flywheel chief.'

'Come along. We're almost there.' Byron led them up a spiral staircase and across an open floor. He stooped and drew up a panel. 'Down here.'

Elvis gazed into the opening. 'That ain't possible,' he said simply. 'We just came from underneath here. How can there be room?'

'A flaw between floors. Follow me if you will.' He scuttled down the stairway. With further shrugs, Rex and Elvis followed. Byron pulled a string and the floor panel dropped back into place.

'It's a barber shop,' said Elvis. 'Hey. If you're the military forget it. Hell no, I won't go!'

253

It was indeed a barber's shop. Circa 1955. The row of six chrome and leather chairs even had the little nests of shorn hair around them. There were the mirrors. The glass cabinets containing hair creams, shaving soaps and items for the weekend. There was even that provocative barber's-shop smell that you just don't get any more. And the chrome-topped towel heater and the leather strop for the cutthroat razor. It meant nothing whatever to Rex, whose first thought, that it was a torture chamber, echoed those of many a callow youth.

'It is a barber's shop.' Mr Smith rose from one of the chairs. He wore a bow tie, high collar, white shirt, striped waistcoat, black trousers and monogrammed carpet slippers. 'I kept it a bar as long as I could, but it began to slide ... it slid to a bar-ber's shop. Should be grateful for small mercies, I suppose. It might have slipped to a twr-becue . . .'

'You Mr Smith?' Elvis asked. 'Cos if you ain't. . .' He made a fist and shook it about in a suitably threatening manner.

'I am Mr Smith. Won't you please take a seat?'

'Take a hike. I'll stand.'

'As you will. I can't offer you a drink I'm afraid. Would you care for a shave, or perhaps something for the weekend?'

'Just say your piece, is all.'

'As you will, once more. I regret we had to bring you here, but there was no other way. We've tried making adjustments but the alternative scenarios we came up with were not good. The mechanism is severely damaged. Possibly beyond repair. So there you are. Or here you are. Which you are. As you can see.'

'I'll bust his head.'

'Easy.' Rex put out a restraining hand.

'I'm sorry.' Mr Smith reseated himself. 'What I am about to tell you, you may not care to believe. But nevertheless it is the truth. Or one possible truth. You must judge for yourself. You are here, which testifies to

254

some state of reality. But I leave it to you. In short, you are now at the very centre of planet Earth. The sound you hear is that of the big flywheel. The gyroscopic stabilizer which keeps the world running on trim and powers its motion around the sun. Standard equipment, installed in all planets. They could hardly be expected to spin around by themselves, could they?'

'Well . . .'

'It was a rhetorical question. Take it from me, they couldn't. The big machine, the big flywheel, does much more than this, of course.'

'Oh, of course.'

'Shut up Elvis.'

'Yeah. Ssssh chief. And don't sulk.'

'I never sulk.'

'Might I continue?'

'Please do.' Rex sat down and prepared for the worst.

'Thank you. The big machine is a fail-safe mechanism. Installed by the Great Architect, or more correctly, the Great Engineer of the Universe. Not only does it power the planet but it protects those who live upon its surface. It has a rewind mode. Mankind makes mistakes you see. Mistakes which the Great Engineer, under his vow of non-involvement, is loath to set right. Hence the machine. Whenever mankind reaches the point of self-destruction the rewind button is pressed. The machine goes into reverse, we skip back to the source of the problem and adjust it out. Once the error is corrected we put the machine back into gear and off we all go again until the next time.'

'And how do you make these corrections?' Rex asked.

'Ah well. There is usually a single individual at fault. Take Mr Presley here as an example . . .'

'No. Let's don't.'

'Sorry Mr P. But it is generally agreed that had you not joined the army, the entire course of world history would have changed.'

Elvis hung his head.

255

'But that is neither here nor there. Your joining or not joining the army does not lead directly to the ultimate extinction of the human species.'

'See,' said Elvis, taking the opportunity to straighten his hair in the nearest mirror.

'Well, not directly. I am talking major disasters. Plagues, world wars, Armageddon.'

'It's that word again.'

'Hush up, Barry.'

'Sorry chief.'

'So, you're telling me you can change history, turn back the clock?'

'Exactly, Mr P. The big machine turns back the clock. But over the centuries time, amongst other things, has taken its toll. And the disasters keep getting bigger and bigger. Only five years ago there was that triple melt-down contaminating ninety-five per cent of the planet.'

'I don't remember that.'

'Of course not. Because we preconceived it and made the appropriate adjustments. But the machine can no longer keep up with demand. Faults in the mechanism cannot be rectified. Openings are created and things slip through which shouldn't slip through.'

'Things like Wayne L. Wormwood.'

'Very perceptive, Rex.'

'Is Wormwood still alive?'

'Ah. There you have me. Something is alive which may or may not be Wormwood. It's all rather complicated and I regret that you will have to sort that out for yourself.'

'Can't you just adjust him out? Saying I believe all this crap. Which I ain't all too sure I do.'

'The mechanism is failing, Mr Presley. But I have a theory.'

'Every sucker's got a theory.'

'But mine is perhaps better than most. Excuse my lack of modesty, it is a concept I do not wholly comprehend. My theory attends to the "as above, so below" school of thought. All is interlinked you see. Past, present, future,

256

you, me, the big machine. All part of a single organism. I believe that if you can correct what is going on on the surface, then the machine will be likewise corrected.'

'Sounds like hokum to me.'

'Well, of course it sounds like hokum.' Mr Smith threw up his hands and whizzed round and round in his chair. 'It's all hokum, isn't it? A dirty big clockwork motor making the world go round. A man from the future married to Jesus Christ's twin sister. The president of the United States a demon from the bottomless pit. Elvis Presley with a sprout in his head. Need I continue? If it wasn't for hokum we wouldn't have any plot at all, would we?'

'Well, if you put it that way . . .'

'Chief. You're sulking again.'

'So? What if I am?'

'OK,' said Rex. 'Say we believe you. And I want to know a great deal more before I do anything. But say we agree,' he ignored Elvis, who was violently shaking his head. 'Say we do. Then what do you want us to do about it?'

'If you will excuse the expression. I would like you to go and "kick ass". It's what you do best.'

'And while we are doing this, what exactly will you be doing?'

'We'll be right behind you,' said Byron brightly. 'The mechanism is not entirely banjoed yet. If it were then none of us would be here now. We will make one very big and very final adjustment. Get you to the right place at the right time. And we'll give you an edge. A good one. I won't tell you about it now because it would spoil things.'

'Could you give us a clue?' Elvis asked. 'Do it in mime so the readers won't know?'

'No,' said Byron. 'I could not. But know this. Our thoughts and our hopes will go with you. Our thoughts, our hopes and our prayers. The future of the world is in your hands. The entire course of human history has led

257

to this moment. The planet stands poised upon the brink of the abyss and only you can pluck it back. It is your destiny and you must fulfil it. Does this offer any comfort?'

'None whatever,' said Elvis Aron Presley.

258

PART THREE

26

Away in a manger no crisps for his friends. William Rankin

Move over Rover, let Satan take over. Savage Pencil

31 December 1999

'Don't it ever let up?' Elvis huddled his cape around him and pulled the hood lower about his face. They were still in the shop doorway and the grey rain was still lashing down.

'What time do you have?' Rex asked.

'Eight thirty. And you?'

'The same. I don't think he's coming.'

The night rain beat on relentlessly. Park Avenue shone. The holographic store signs seemed fragile, ghost-like. The colours unearthly.

'The shit.' Elvis kicked the nearest window. The bullet-resistant plexiglass resisted his blue suede bootery. 'Look at him.'

Rex gazed once more into the shop window. They were sheltering in the doorway of Cagliostro Books. Within, the holographic Jack Doveston smiled cheerfully. About him, the fruits of his labours, six bestsellers, were arranged in pleasing compositions.

They Came and Ate Us, his latest mega-hit, free-floating letters announced. buy NOW while STOCKS LAST.

Rex grinned fiercely. 'No-one ever told him that things

261

would get this tight. One hundred copies sold make you a bestseller these days.'

'You seen the price of them, Rex?' Rex hadn't. He nearly collapsed when he did. 'A hundred copies make you one rich dude.'

'He's not coming. I knew we shouldn't have trusted him.'

'So. What do we do? We can't go out in that. But we can't stay here. It's gone curfew, we'll be picked up for sure.'

'We'll have to make a run for it.'

'To where? We got nowhere to go.'

'Hold on. That's him.'

A white Koshibo Tiger swam into view. It cruised to a halt some distance from the sidewalk. The passenger door rose. 'Come on,' called Jack. 'Don't hang about.'

'An hour late.' Elvis pulled the weatherproof cape about him and loped over to the car. Rex took a final look at the smiling hologram, cleared a blocked nostril, plucked up a bulky-looking holdall and fought his way through the rain.

'Hurry up. Mind the upholstery.' Jack flipped the switch and the door dropped back into place with an expensive click. 'What a night, eh?' said Jack Doveston. Elvis scowled from the back seat into Jack's neck.

'I'm sorry I'm late. I just couldn't get away. You know how it is sometimes.'

Rex controlled his anger with considerable skill. 'You do have a pass to be out this late?'

Jack made an O with his fingers. 'I'm a celeb.'

'You're an asshole,' said Elvis. 'Nice wheels, though. You checked out the glovie?'

'Sure thing.' Jack sprang open the glove compartment. There weren't any gloves, but then there never are. Elvis's exclusive sunglasses winked up at him. 'You looking for these?' Jack handed them over his shoulder.

'Ah,' said the King, giving them a polish before

262

positioning them upon his nose. 'Now we're ready to rock and roll.'

'Let's move,' said Rex.

'No hurry. The party doesn't begin until nine. Some shindig, eh? Not every night you get to see in the twenty-first century with the world president.'

Elvis groaned. 'And I thought I had the copyright on the dumb remarks.'

'This is the final chance.' Rex unzipped his holdall and brought out an advanced handgun. He inserted slim black cartridges, slapped the power pack into the stock, peered along the inevitable laser sight.

Tut that away.' Jack flapped his hands about. 'We might be stopped.'

'Drive,' said Rex. Jack drove.

'When we get there remember, you're with me. I have a reputation to keep up. Nothing embarrassing please.'

'Jack, we are going to assassinate the president. How much embarrassment can you take?'

'Just keep me out of it.'

'You sell us out.' Elvis prodded Jack's neck with a rigid digit. 'And you will be out of it for good and all.'

'Please don't poke the driver. I'm playing straight with you. I won't let you down.'

Rex said nothing. He stared through the wind-screen. The city was already behind them. Little of it now remained but for the haunts and storehouses of the rich. The rest was a sprawl of bunkers. Housing for the poor. No landscaping here. Just mud and garbage and rain.

'Have you seen the presidential manse?' Without bothering to acknowledge the shaking heads, Jack went on, 'Crazy stuff. I've never seen anything like it. It's got to be a couple of miles across. There's a whole city in there. Some pleasure palace. Anything Wormwood wants, Wormwood gets. The stories I've heard. The place is a fortress, bombproof, assassinproof. You'll not get him, you know.'

263

'We'll try,' said Rex. 'We have an edge.' Nothing more was said and the Koshibo Tiger plied its way across the rutted tracks and broken highways, bound for the presidential manse and the party of the century.

'And how do I look?'

Wormwood turned to view auld Demdike. 'You look like shi. . . you look, well. . . yes indeed.' Demdike had become the unspeakable Kirn of evil memory. She wore a transparent film of material, buckled at the neck, waist, wrists and ankles by studded leather straps. The pointed shoes had five-inch stiletto heels.

'Hardly subtle for the president's mother. But then who gives that for subtle.' Wormwood made a curious gesture, the obscene nature of which could hardly have been in doubt.

'That's the stuff, little Wayne, and how are the boys then?'

'We're fine.' The words came from Wormwood's mouth, but he didn't speak them.

President Wormwood examined himself in the mirror and found much to his satisfaction. A vision in cloth of gold. 'What do you think, Mr Russell, will I do?' He turned suddenly to face a steel cage which hung from the ceiling. In it were four naked men, little more than skeletons. They were heavily bearded, long of hair and running with open sores. They gazed back at Wormwood with terrified eyes. 'Well, Mr Russell? Speak up. Lost your tongue?'

Mr Russell opened his mouth. The teeth were gone. And the gums. And the tongue. Wormwood laughed. And he laughed and he laughed and he laughed.

The presidential manse,' Jack announced. Upon the horizon a great dome rose from the blackened landscape. It blazed with lights. Spires and cupolas glittered gold.

264

Tiny flecks of light moved between them. Lighted vehicles darting across skyways.

'Some number,' Elvis observed. 'What's all that? Around and about?'

'Outer defences. Armaments. I told you, it's a fortress.'

'And you told us you could get us in.'

'You're my guests, no worry.'

As they drew closer other cars came into view. A steady stream, steering towards the pleasuredome. Hundreds, long, sleek and very expensive and all moving in a single direction. Jack joined the tailback.

Overhead shapes turned amidst the rain. Helicopter gunships. Rotary blades turning above inverted porcupines of weaponry. Searchlights fingered down. Elvis sank lower into his seat. 'This is deep deep shit,' said he.

'In the words of my dog, I know where you're coming from. Here take this.' Rex passed him the handgun. 'Hide it somewhere.'

'We ain't gonna get in there with these. We'll be searched for sure.'

'Trust me,' Jack implored. 'Trust me.'

'I'm dumb perhaps. But not that dumb.'

'Hey, chief,' said Barry. 'Look up ahead. What do you make of that?' It towered into the sky. But it was not a solid thing. More a column of light. It should go without saying that it was no light of Earth. (Well, it should.)

'What the ... what is it Barry?'

'I hope it's our edge, chief. Cos if it isn't . . .'

'Passes?' A soldier in a plastique coverall whacked the windscreen with the butt of an automatic weapon. Jack wound down the window. 'Jack Doveston,' he said cheerfully. 'My name is on the guest list. Here, let me show you my tickets.'

'Who's that with you, Mr Doveston?'

'Two of my employees. Mr Mundi, my editor, and Mr Never, my spiritual adviser.'

265

'You asshole,' whispered his spiritual adviser.

'You carrying any firearms, Mr Doveston? Any EX-34 chain-guns, 5.56mm M249 Squad Automatic Weapons, 7.62 Ares externally powered NATO machine-guns, M50s, M60s, high-velocity tactical ground to air assault cannons, short-range Maser rifles, bommy-knockers . . .'

'Bommyknockers?' Jack asked.

'Bommyknockers. Knobkerries, sticks with nubbly ends for hitting people on the head with.'

'Oh no,' said Jack. 'None of them.'

'Barlow knives?'

'No.'

'Salmon coshes?'

'No.'

'No?'

'No. No Barlow knives, salmon coshes, boomerangs, nunchuckus, Ashanti throwing staves, Ukit Indian blow-pipes, Pre-Columbian stone daggers, shillelaghs . . .'

'That's the same as bommyknockers.'

'Sorry. But we don't have any.'

'What about swords?'

'No swords.'

'No claymores, glaives, cutlasses, sabres, scimitars, dirks, kukris, poniards, fencing foils, parangs or Bowie knives?'

'Absolutely none.'

'Any axes?'

Jack shook his head. 'No battleaxes, poleaxes, toma-hawks, halberds or choppers. No.'

'Any gisarmes?'

'Any what?'

'Gisarme. Long-shafted battleaxe with a sharp point on the back of the axe head. Thirteenth-century French. The word derives from the Germanic getisarn, a form of weeding tool.'

'You sure know your weapons.'

'It's a hobby of mine. Well?'

266

'Well what?'

'Any gisarmes?'

'No,' said Jack.

'Thought not,' said the soldier. 'I've been asking all evening. Haven't turned up a single one yet.'

'Don't ask him what he has turned up,' Elvis whispered into Jack's ear. 'Just say goodbye.'

'Goodbye then,' said Jack.

'Goodbye,' the soldier waved them on. 'No yataghans or falchions I suppose?' he called dismally.

'No.'

'Go on then. And keep in line. We have a Red Alert. Zen Terrorists.'

Jack wound up the window. 'Zen Terrorists. Im-possible.'

'Beware your sins will find you out,' said Rex.

'No.' Jack shook his head violently. 'There's none left. Just a scare is all.'

'Move right along. Keep in line.' The instructions issued from above. Jack kept his head down and followed the car in front. Elvis adjusted his sunglasses and patted the weapon bulge in his pocket. There was no way security could be that lax, but as it was all hokum anyway, he wasn't going to argue.

The pleasuredome swelled above, before and beyond, filling the skyline.

'It's big, isn't it?' Jack gaped in wonder.

'It's all got to go,' said Rex. 'And tonight is the night. You've got what I asked for in the back, haven't you Jack?'

'Yes,' said Jack. 'And it weighs a ton.'

'Is that what I think it is?' Elvis asked.

Rex did a big ear-to-ear job. 'Did you really think we were going into action without the 7.62mm M134 General Electric Minigun?'

'But I thought you hated the running gag.'

'I do. But I've never had a chance to fire one of those things yet.'

267

'That's cool,' Elvis grinned. 'It's cool, ain't it Jack?' 'It's cool.' Jack's thoughts were currently all his own.

Rex caught his reflected eyes in the rear-view mirror. Just one wrong move, he thought. Just one.

268

27

GOD: Atheism is the only true religion. MAN: I don't believe you.

Zenophobia: Morbid fear of Buddhists.

It's a lonely way, you know, the way of the necromancer. Merlin

'listen. I'd really like to stick around

AND CHEW THE FAT WITH YOU GUYS,' said the Thunderbird. 'BUT I HAVE TO DROP THESE GODS OFF AND MAKE TRACKS. WHICH ONES DO YOU WANT THEN?'

'None,' said Christeen.

'Now just hold on.' Eric put his hand up to speak. 'As usual the plebs are the last to know what's going on. Might I ask a question or two?'

'WHO ARE YOU ASKING?'

'You.'

'Do be quiet,' said Rambo.

'Yeah, shut up,' said Christeen.

'No. I really must protest. Before we get a lot of displaced Gods dumped on us I want to know what's going on.'

'rather unorthodox.'

'Be that as it may.'

'GO ON THEN.'

'Eric!' said Rambo.

'Don't Eric me. I want to know.'

'Don't tell him,' said Christeen.

269

'SHALL TOO.' Christeen turned away in fury. 'ASK ON, WEE MAN,'

'Firstly. What is a big flywheel?'

'I asked that,' said Rambo.

'HE DID TOO. BUT I CAN'T TELL YOU. IT'S A SECRET. ASK ME ANOTHER,'

'All right. What's a Tomorrowman?'

'IT'S A SORT OF AN ENGINEER. A FACILITY ALL TO DO WITH THE BIG FLYWHEEL THAT I CAN'T TELL YOU ABOUT,'

'Most helpful,' said Eric. 'So, what does he do, exactly?'

'well, you see, when the controller, he controls the big flywheel that i can't tell you about, when he finds the going getting real tough, then he can call in the tomorrowman. it's a bit of a cheat really, like a deus ex machina ending,'

'We had one of those last time,' said Christeen. 'Most unsatisfactory,'

'YOU HAVE ONE OF THOSE EVERY TIME,' said the Thunderbird. 'YOU CAN'T REALLY HAVE ANYTHING ELSE IN THIS SORT OF BOOK, CAN YOU?'

'I am perplexed,' said Eric.

'WE'RE ALL PERPLEXED. BUT IT'S BOUND TO ALL GET EXPLAINED IN THE END,'

'Oh, it does have an ending does it?' Christeen asked. There was another of those really pregnant silences.

'God's daughter just asked a car the ultimate question,' Fido whispered to Eric. 'Some die ... ouch!'

'Just watch it,' Christeen advised.

And he gathered them together in a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon.

Revelation 16:16

One by one the cars passed from the dark and stormy night into the great pleasuredome. Here they steered along a short glass corridor. A car wash hosed and lathered, buffed and pampered, dried and dusted.

270

Pristine and polished, the wheels of the wealthy turned upon artificial gravel in what appeared for all the world to be a pleasant summer's day.

The three men in the white Koshibo Tiger went oooh and ahhh and things of that nature. An attendant, richly fitted out in red velvet frocked coat, white lace cravat, matching stockings and buckled shoes, inclined his peruke towards them and beckoned with a gloved hand to a vacant parking space.

Jack steered in, offering the attendant the benefit of his cheerful grin. He pulled the car out of gear and his Americard out of the dashbord. 'And now what?' he asked.

'Let's rock 'n' roll,' said Elvis Aron Presley.

Jack turned to view the rear seater. Elvis had doffed his weatherproof and was now resplendent in the ever-legendary gold lame zoot suit. The hair was in perfect shape, the sideburns, killer. Elvis winked at Jack and turned up his more-than-exclusive shirt collar. 'Pretty goddamn pretty, huh?'

'Ye gods.' Jack turned to Rex. 'I ask you ...' His words trailed off. Rex was wearing an identical suit. 'You cannot be serious.'

'Listen,' said Rex. 'This might be the last in the series. So I intend to shoot the big gun and wear the big suit. Any problem?'

'Problems? Me? Perish the thought.'

'We're the Fabulous Presley Twins,' said Elvis. 'And what are you coming as?'

'I have a costume in the back. It's a surprise.'

'It's not the Fabulous Presley Triplets, is it?'

'No, it isn't. Come on, let's get going.'

The Tiger's electric doors swung up and the three men climbed from the car. Elvis took deep breaths.

'Smell that air, like springtime in Tupelo.'

Jack took his costume case from the boot, carefully rearranging a car blanket over a certain big gun which lay beneath. He slammed shut the boot lid. 'Shall we go?'

271

'Let's do it.' They were parked about a quarter of a mile from the palace proper and so were able to take it in to its very best effect. There was much of the cathedral about it. A fair helping of the Taj Mahal. A more than even measure of Disney World. And a greater part to which the words flagrant, shameless, grandiose and pretentious might be applied without fear of over-statement. It was a great big pompous gaudy monument to power, greed and bad taste, not unlike a lot of other palaces really.

The intricate conceits of architecture, the gothic vault-ing and rococo laceworks of cherubim, carved from the rarest marbles on Earth, had been plundered from far and wide, for certainly no artisan of this present dystopia could work such miracles.

This megalomaniac structure was pieced together from the finest craftsmanship the old world had to offer. The combined effect was not pleasing to behold. But if the wealthy party-goers cared a damn, they weren't letting on. They had come to enjoy the privilege of privilege and for the most part considered Wormwood's monstrosity pretty tasteful.'

'Pretty tasteful, huh?' said Elvis. 'Sure got the edge on Graceland.'

Rex shook his head. He could see it for what it was. And, he wondered, why didn't the gravel crunch when you walked on it?

Jack recognized the front doors. They had come from St Peter's in Rome. A present from the latest pontiff, Pope Peter the second. Jack had his doubts about the new colour scheme. A bit of a bright yellow.

And it got worse. If there had been any expense spared within, then it was not immediately apparent just where. The entrance hall was a great concourse, carpeted in golden fleece. Numerous fountains played with scented waters and about these clustered party guests, exclaiming and admiring. For the complex groupings of naked statuary over which the waters tumbled, the heroic men,

272

voluptuous women and plump children, were not of carven stone or precious metal. They were of living flesh. Rex looked up. High above chandeliers glittered. Amidst them more naked bodies dangled. Dyed in violent hues of green and red, they clung to electric torches. Rex shook his head. Jack whispered, 'Sicko.'

'May I take your invitations, sir?' It was the tallest woman Rex had ever seen. She was birdlike. An ebony swan. Her nose long, narrow and elegantly curved. The eyes were large brown almonds, the pupils glowing from within. She smiled, her wide mouth exposing wonderful teeth. Although slender almost to the point of emaciation, there was a fierce energy about her which Rex could not wholly understand. Drugs? He wasn't sure, but some-thing was very strange indeed. Jack pushed the gawping Rex aside. 'I am on the guest list. Free tickets. Mr Doveston. The Mr Jack Doveston.' The high woman engaged her fingers upon a sculptured hand monitor. 'Your thumbprint please.' Jack pressed his thumb to the monitor. There was a chime and a green light flashed.

'Welcome to you all. Enjoy.' She passed on to further guests.

I hate being around "disposables",' muttered Jack. 'They make me uneasy.'

'Disposables?' Rex queried.

'That gaunt object. The fountains. The chandeliers. Look Rex, even the furniture.' Rex looked. He didn't like what he saw.

'They're vat grown. Bio-tech. Genetically engineered. Mostly for prostitution, exclusive client use, no risk of infection. They have all the working parts, but they don't last. No digestive tracts. Rich men's playthings. Dis-posable.'

'Do they . . .'

Rex paused. 'Do they . . . feel?'

'Debatable. They have a rudimentary intellect. But only what is programmed into them. They are not capable of

273

independent thought. They have no time to assimilate or conceptualize.'

'But the tall woman asked us questions.'

'Very simple ones. And didn't you notice the optical implants? She wasn't looking at us. Someone else was pulling the strings.'

Rex gave his head another shake. 'When did all this start?'

'A year or so back. Another of Mr Crawford's little innovations. But surely they're not new to you.'

'Fraid so. No human disposables where I come from. But tell me, if they can't eat, what happens to them?'

'I shudder to think. You hire them for a ten-hour maximum. Then a corporation truck calls to pick them up. They probably go into the food chain.'

Elvis, who, having caught the eye of a passing waiter, was now delving amidst a tray-load of tasties, thought better of it and hurriedly waved the food bearer away.

'Not here,' Jack laughed. 'Manual worker level. Non-person.'

Rex took Jack gently by the elbow and steered him to a place beyond public view. Here he smote Jack verily upon the ear.

'That is for being an asshole,' he told him. 'Now why don't you slip off and put your costume on?'

Jack made a sour face, rubbed his throbbing ear and stalked away clutching his costume case.

'You think that's smart, letting him go off on his own?' Elvis had been watching Jack's summary punishment.

'We can't keep an eye on him every minute. If he intends to betray us he will find the means.'

'But smacking his ear ain't gonna help him keep the faith.'

'Negative psychology.' Rex made a hopeful face. 'What time do you have?'

'Nine sixteen.'

'Me too. Shall we party?'

'Let's do that very thing.'

274

The entrance hall became the dance hall, but it was impossible to see the join. There was a major light show in operation, a very great deal of heavy noise and up on a far stage. Well, snatch me vitals if I'm telling one word of a lie ...

'It's the Gadarene Swine!' said Elvis.

I think it was Stockhausen who once said 'music is a funny old game, Brian'. Or perhaps it was Stock Aiken and Dennis Waterman. Most footballers look the same to me, but as they say: 'The beat goes on, don't knock the rock, boogie with a suitcase, won't you rock me daddio and a wop bop a loo bop a wop bam boom!'

'Rock and roll!' cried the golden one. 'The Gadarenes. I own a piece of them. Or did. Some SOB has probably bought me out by now. They do a lot of my old numbers. Three at a time mostly. I'll put in some requests.'

'See anyone else you know?'

Elvis peered into the throng. There must have been a thousand people on the dance floor, all going at it with a will. Most looked determined to end the century on a notably chemical high.

The costumes were suitably imaginative and echoed the bodies within them. These were exaggerated by surgical implants and cosmetic prosthesis. Flight-deck shoulders were currently enjoying a renaissance. Ex-tended necks and sculptured cheekbones also found favour with the have-it-alls. Fearsome members strained at velvet codpieces. Bra-busting bosoms scorned reason and gravity alike. The motto was as ever, if you've got it, flaunt it. Or, if you haven't got it, then buy it and flaunt it. It was all very Sodom and Gomorrah.

'All I can see is tits,' said honest E.

'This is all very wrong,' Rex told him. 'You don't suppose that Mr Smith's big flywheel is running out of control?'

'I still don't rightly know if I believe any of that hokum. But we got here somehow, which proves something. I

275

mean, if we weren't here then we'd be somewhere else, right?'

'Very profound. What do we do next?'

'Well. Hows about let's mingle? You-know-who is bound to show up soon.'

'You-know-who' was preparing for his big entrance. The throne chair had once belonged to Rodrigo Borgia, who had paraded about St Peter's Square in it back in the days when popes really knew how to put themselves about. The current pontiff helped Wormwood into it.

'It's come up very nice with the new paint job,' said he.

'Glad you like it.' Wayne settled himself amongst the inflatable scatter cushions.

The chamber they now inhabited was worthy of a small mention. It played house to the largest collection of fine art on the planet. The masterworks of da Vinci, Richard Dadd, Burne Jones, Don Van Vliet, Dali and Ernst, hobnobbed with those of Peter Blake, Andy Warhol and the now legendary Dave Carson. Each had been imaginatively customized by the president himself. That personal touch.

Stuffed beasts were also much in evidence. Again here Wormwood had chosen to make the necessary improve-ments. The winged bears and croc-headed tortoises might have looked strange to many, but where Wormwood came from they were regular everyday household pets.

Burning censers, held high by more naked disposables, added their fragrances to the overcharged

air. Musk, sandalwood, orris root, bergamot, citronella, frangipane, frankincense, chypre, civet and camphor. All the usual stuff.

'About the telecast,' the pope wheedled. 'I trust that Jesuit Inc has exclusive coverage of the party. As we agreed.'

'Would I lie to you, Pete?'

'Oh no, of course not. It's just that I couldn't help

276

noticing Fundamentalist news teams and more than a few Buddhavision execs milling about out there.'

'Guests is all.' Wormwood adjusted the diadem on his head. Tun for all. The last night of the century. Re-member this is the biggest bash that ever there was. We are going to go out with a bang, not with a whimper. Believe you me.'

'Oh yes. Indeed, indeed.' Pope Peter wrung his ringed fingers. 'The shoes are nice,' he added.

'You like them? They are rather chic, aren't they? A little heavy on the diamonds, don't you think?'

'Oh no. Hardly ostentatious.'

'You think not?'

'Well, perhaps a smidgen.'

'I should think so! I'll have a pair run up for you. Leave your foot size with the major-domo. Now, where are my horses?'

'What do you think?' Jack Doveston lifted a ludicrous floor-length cloak and did a little twirl. He was wearing something beneath, but it was difficult to see just what. The dance hall came and went through him. At times he was solid, at others inverted, swimming with strange images.

'Lord have mercy.' Elvis took two steps back. 'What do you look like? Or what don't you?'

'Oh, very good.' Rex nodded approvingly. 'I should have realized.'

'Do you know what it is then?' Jack asked.

'I think I do,' said Rex.

'I think I don't,' said Elvis. 'But I want me some of those duds.'

'He's the Tomorrowman.' Rex gazed Jack up and down and through. 'It's a twenty-first-century legend. Mentioned in The Suburban Book of the Dead. A cult grew up about him, but I never thought it was actually true. The Devianti thought it was you, Elvis, don't you re-member?'

277

'Me?' Elvis did double takes. 'I never looked like that. Whatever that looks like.'

'But I don't understand. How did you come by the suit, Jack?'

'Mr Smith gave it to me. He called at my office last night.'

'And he said that you were to wear it?'

'Well . . .'

'You're coming and going man.' Elvis rubbed his eyes. 'How do you do that?'

'I don't know. It feels pretty strange.'

'Jack,' said Rex. 'What did Mr Smith say to you?'

'I can't recall his exact words.'

'Try.' Rex made an unpleasant face and seized Jack by the ear.

'Oh, look who's over there.' Jack pointed into the crowd.

Elvis spied out a diminutive figure in a tattooed gown. 'It's that little shit Crawford.'

'I'd better say hello,' said Jack, detaching his ear from Rex's fingers.

'It's now or never,' sang the Gadarene Swine. 'At the county jail.'

An implant purred in Jonathan's left ear. He excused himself from the company of his concubines.

'I just heard my name being taken in vain,' said he. 'And well hello.'

He hopped through the crowd and reached forward to shake Rex's hand. Rex hurriedly withdrew it beyond range. 'How nice to see you. And Jack and Elvis. The unholy trinity. And after so very very long. Tell me Rex, do I look any older to you?'

'Not a day.'

'Nor you. How do you explain that?'

'We have been in the realm of the faerie,' said Rex. 'Whatever your secret is you have yet to explain. No doubt you will do so later.'

'I wouldn't be too sure of that. Some party, eh? What do you think of the fountains and stuff? A little

278

innovation of mine. Very popular. Very cost-effective. What do you think?'

'I'd rather not say.'

The lad danced upon his toes and stared hard up at Rex. 'I've a bit of a bone to pick with you. Youngest-ever president you said.'

'I didn't say when.'

'No. In truth you didn't. So where have you been? It must be nearly seven years, although it seems like only yesterday. How do you explain that?'

'I don't.'

'Well. I must mingle.' Jack prepared to do just that.

'Some suit, Jack. Holographies? No it isn't, is it?'

'A trick of the light.' Jack wrapped his silly cloak once more about himself and pushed past the bobbing youth. 'See you later.'

'Yeah, we will. And you know when, Rex.' Elvis took off into the crowd.

'Now whatever do you think he meant by that?' Jonathan plucked two drinks from the tray of a passing disposable and handed one to Rex. Rex sniffed it suspiciously.

'Smell trouble?' Crawford asked. 'We really should go somewhere and have a quiet little chat. It's so noisy here.'

'I don't think we have much to say to each other.'

'Oh, but I do.' Jonathan snapped his fingers. Rex felt something hard dig into his back.

'Happy new year asshole,' said Cecil.

'A little chat would be just fine with me,' said the man with no alternative options.

'Good, good.' Jonathan led the way. Rex glanced over his shoulder.

'You're losing your hair, Cecil. Too much work and no job satisfaction, or trouble with your steroids?'

'Just keep walking,' said the balding bully-boy.

'Sit down Rex.' Jonathan indicated the lone chair in a

279

room the size of a closet. 'Close the door, Cecil. We don't want to be disturbed, do we?'

'I'm easy,' said Rex.

'I'm not.' A horny hand on his shoulder encouraged Rex to take a seat.

'What do you want, Jonathan?'

Crawford turned back his cuffs exposing an intricate webbing of circuitry grafted to his wrists. He tinkered amongst it.

'I've made considerable improvements to my defence systems. The best form of defence is always attack, isn't it? This is all to do with vibration. Everything vibrates, Rex, did you know that? Atoms and molecules, they all pulse away at particular frequencies. The human body is never still, even at rest, all its little components are bouncing away. Once you've worked out the frequency you can do almost anything with it. Stretch it this way and that, mould it like clay. It really hurts I can assure you. So tell me. What are you doing here, Rex?'

'Just visiting. I'm a guest of Jack Doveston.'

Jonathan made several precise adjustments to his wrist. 'As you please,' he said, darting forward and thrusting his electric finger up Rex's nose.

The scream cut into the feedback from the Gadarenes' speakers. A well-tried cinematic device to get past the censor. The uncut versions usually circulate on second-generation videos at sci-fi conventions. Although this one never would.

'Well, hello baby,' crooned Elvis. 'If I said you had a beautiful body would you let me jump all over it?'

'Fuck off.' The young woman with phenomenal pneu-matics replied.

'Your technique never fails to impress me, chief.'

'Too subtle, do you think, Barry?'

'Well . . .'

'Check this out.' Elvis boogied closer. 'Don't I recognize you, honey?'

280

'No,' Honey replied.

'Sure I do. You been in movies right?'

'Well, as it happens . . .'

'I knew it. You were Jabba the Hutt, right?'

'Wrong, chief.'

'Straighten up,' said Mr Smith. 'Just act natural.'

'He'll know what we've been doing.' Byron was throwing the proverbial wobbly. 'Look at all this mess.'

'Bluff it out. Greetings lordship.'

The curricule staggered up. It was looking somewhat the worse for wear. One leg was dragging badly. 'Give us a wind-up then,' said the controller. 'Byron, why are you clutching yourself?'

'I want the toilet,' the youth explained.

'Stupid boy. Come on Smith, put a bit of lustre into the performance.'

'The key is a bit stiff, lordship. Needs a bit of flux.'

'Don't talk to me about flux. Where are my retainers?'

Byron peeped between the curricule's legs. 'They're back along the gallery. They look a bit puffed.'

'Puffed! What is puffed?'

'Exhausted.'

'Can't be.' The controller twiddled at his knobs. A metal foot twitched, kicking Byron to the marble floor.

'Get up boy. Pull yourself together.'

'Sorry lordship.'

'Why are you not at your Inter-rositer?'

'I just was. I mean I now am.'

'Just was. Now am. And will be what? Confusion. Smith, is that key wound?'

'It is, lordship.'

'Then back to your broom. Byron.'

'Yes lordship?'

'Byron, you had better make an adjustment or two pretty damn fast. Rex Mundi is having his brains stewed.'

'Lordship?' Byron made with the open mouth.

'Get to it boy. As above so below. You can't teach an

281

old dog how to suck eggs. Do I look like a cabbage, eh? Hiyo Silver and away.'

They watched as the curricule limped off down the gallery.

'He knows,' whispered Byron. 'He knows every-thing.'

'Spin the frigging turncock and fast!' cried Mr Smith.

'You all right Rex? You look a bit peaky.'

'No, I'm fine, Jack. Another drink?'

Rex found himself now leaning upon an onyx bar-top. 'I think the "edge" is already paying dividends.'

'I'm getting some funny looks in this suit.'

'Ah yes. Now about that suit . . .'

'A woman with enormous Charlies just punched Elvis on the nose,' said Jack. 'Two drinks over here please, bartender.'

The one-eyed barkeep hastened to oblige. 'Tomorrow-man Brew?' he asked.

'Two,' said Rex. 'Large measures.'

'Evening Rex. A night to remember, eh?' The barman shuffled off to do the business.

'It's coming apart, Jack. I know that man. He shouldn't be here.'

'You want to tell me about it?'

'So you can write it up? Give yourself the best part again? My part. Not this time.'

'You guessed.'

'Jack. I didn't guess. Your books were read to me when I was a child. What I didn't know then was that they were about me.'

'Sorry,' said Jack. 'But there won't be any more will there?'

Rex shook his head. 'No. You don't write any more.'

'I know. Something you said a long time ago. I die tonight, don't I?'

Rex turned towards him, suddenly full of guilt. 'We all die tonight.'

282

'I thought so. Jack Doveston, famous author. Born 27 July 1949, died 31 December 1999. RIP.'

'It's not my fault, Jack. It's history. You had your fame. What else do you want?'

'I want to live.'

'Perhaps you will this time.'

The barman returned. 'You want to eyeball the screen station, boy?' Rex took his drink. The one-eyed barman dissolved, became a peroxide-blond disposable. She smiled lamely and wandered off to serve some gilded youth at the counter's end.

'It's coming apart.' Rex took up his drink and drank.

And the band played 'Believe it if You Like'.

283

28

What's it all about then, Guv? Taxi driver to Bertrand Russell

Gort! Klaatu barada nikto! Patricia Neal

1 In a far country Christeen paced the hut floor. Overhead, the Thunderbird went BRRROOOM BRRROOOM

impatiently. Christeen ceased her pacing to throw furniture. Fido took to his furry heels. Christeen flung crockery.

'You've got to go for some help,' the dog called from a place of safety.

'No!' Christeen stamped her foot. 'If I do that then I'm not even history.' She kicked the table over.

'There is something you might try.'

'Oh yes? And where are you?'

'I'm up here. Stop throwing.'

Christeen let something priceless shatter at her feet. 'Say it.'

'It's only a small thing.' Fido cringed upon a high shelf.

'Say it!'

'Well man. I mean, you're ever-present, right?'

'Of course.'

'Like you're here today and here tomorrow. And yesterday.'

'Obviously.'

'Right. Then what say you and me go walkabout? Find out exactly where and when the problem is. I'll just betcha that it's where Rex is.'

284

'But we don't know where or when he is.'

'You could find out, though, if you tried real hard. I mean, all you really gotta do is go and check it out with the controller.'

Christeen raised her eyes to the mutt. 'And how do you know about the controller?'

'A word to the wise is all,' said the enigmatic Fido. 'So what do you think?'

'I think you're a genius. Fido?'

'Yes, man?'

'My leg is yours.'

'Far out.'

Jack Doveston rattled his empty glass upon the onyx bar-top. 'If I'm going tonight then I'm going drunk.'

'I would not have expected you to do otherwise.'

'Did you ever figure out exactly how you came to be here, Rex? Another drink over here please, miss.'

Rex grinned and nodded. 'I've almost pieced it all together. But it is all going to resolve itself very soon now.'

'Did your uncle read you my latest book, They Came and Ate Us?'

'Definitely your best. I always thought so.'

'What about the trick ending? Pretty unexpected, eh?'

'We'll have to see about that. Waitress.' The disposable, who had been listlessly plucking at her hair and ignoring Jack's requests, smiled warmly at Rex and hastened to fetch further drinks. Jack glowered after her.

The Gadarene Swine were taking a break. They had set their instruments upon automatic pilot and removed themselves from the stage. Elvis rubbed his nose and pushed his way through the crowd.

'Jabba the Hutt,' the sprout scolded. 'What kind of chat-up line is that?'

'A friend of Rankin's, who was once in the TA, thought it was a real killer. Never fails to get a laugh, he said.'

'What can I say, chief?'

285

'Nothing. See here's Vain.'

Vain Glory, lead singer of the Gadarenes, turned a diamond-toothed grin upon Elvis. 'Mr Never,' he said. 'Surprise this is. What do you think?'

'Real futuristic. New line-up I see.'

'Yeah, we had a few fatalities.' Vain passed a finger across his throat. 'But that's rock 'n' roll, ain't it? Where you been? We tried to get in touch.'

'Touring,' said Elvis. 'How come you got this gig?'

'State funded, Mr N. We're the last rock band in the world. The future of rock. Mr Crawford manages us now. He said that your contracts had expired. Sorry.'

'No sweat. Any chance of me doing a number with you later on?'

'Sure thing. You ever heard of Auld Lang Syne? We're supposed to do it at midnight but none of us knows how it goes. The drummer says it's the one about the guy who has a farm, e-i-e-i-o his name is.'

'I know it,' said Elvis. 'Do you want I should program it in for you?'

'Sure thing. Then if you want to catch us later it's cool. We're going off now to do some serious drug abuse. Be lucky.'

'You too.' Elvis made off to the band's computer console, housed in a soundproof booth to the rear of the stage. That enlightened look was shining once more upon his handsome face. 'Let's boogie,' said Elvis Aron Presley.

'I like the way you think, chief. Go out on a song, eh?'

'Here?' Wormwood glared down from his throne. 'Here! Here at my party?'

'Yes sir.' Jonathan Crawford knelt before him, head toward the floor. 'Jack Doveston brought them in.'

'But they're dead. I plagued them. Didn't I? Yes, I'm sure I did. Assassins at my do? This is very lax of you, Crawford. You are in charge of security. How was this allowed to happen?'

286

'Someone screwed up, sir. I will find out who is responsible and have them put to the sword at once.'

'The buck stops with you, Crawford. Where are these assassins now?'

'I don't know, sir. I was interrogating one and he just. . .'

'Out with it!'

'Vanished, sir.'

'Did he now? Pete.'

The pope, who had been admiring one of the male censer bearers, jerked about. He thrust his wandering hands back into his vestments. 'Mr President?'

'Pete, come over here and give Mr Crawford a kicking, will you?'

'Certainly Mr President.'

'There's no need for any of that.' Crawford waved his arms about but he kept his head bowed. 'I'll sort it all out. Leave it to me.'

'Just give him a kicking anyway.'

'As you please.' Pope Peter strolled over and levelled his Doc Marten at the cowering youth.

'No, don't.' Jonathan flexed his fingers. The defence implants in his wrists whispered warning. The pope took a penalty shot at his head.

There was a snap, a crackle and a pop of bone. The pope's swinging foot parted company with his ankle and sailed across the room. It made a dull gory thud as it struck the nose of the now bearded Mona Lisa. Pope Peter gazed dumbly at the stump and then keeled into a howling heap.

Wayne L. Wormwood stared down at him, smirking terribly.

'Jonathan,' said he. 'Now that wasn't very nice, was it? Look at the poor pope. You've chopped his foot off and I was going to get him a pair of shoes like mine. Say you're sorry at once.'

'Sorry,' said Jonathan. 'No offence meant.'

'I should think so too. Now run along and apply your

287

talents to the assassins. And think yourself lucky that I'm not a Catholic.'

'Yes sir.' Jonathan scrambled to his feet. He glanced down at the holy howler. 'Should I summon a medic?'

'I don't think we have a medic. You might call in a cleaner, if you happen to see one.'

The big trucker hadn't aged much. He was still big, fat, bald and bearded and he still looked like one of the original Mothers of Invention, possibly Billy Mundi (no relative of Rex). He'd changed his religion though and was now a card-carrying Buddhist. The cab of the big truck was a shrine to the latest Dalai.

'You see, sister,' he explained to the hitcher. 'It was back in ninety-three. Picked up a guy from a burned-out car. He pulled a gun on me. Made me drive to the Miskatonic. All Hell broke loose and I'm not kidding. Anyhow I saw the light. Got me a job working for the Crawford Corporation. This is one of their trucks you're riding in now. All the latest gizmos. I'm delivering party food to the big bash at the presidential manse. I'll have to drop you off along here. Hope you enjoyed the ride.'

'It's sweet. You can stop just up here if you like.'

'Will do.' The big trucker pulled his big truck over and applied the brake. 'This do you?'

'Perfectly.' Spike took out her handgun and smiled. 'Now get out,' she said.

'Aw s**t,' said the non-swearing Buddhist.

The driver's door opened and Ella Guru and the Mascara Snake grinned up at him. 'Best do as the lady says,' said Ella. 'No bother, eh?'

The big trucker watched his big truck depart into the night. The rain whacked down on his weatherdome. 'I think I'll become a Scientologist,' said he, slouching his big shoulders. 'Or perhaps an atheist.'

'You might help,' said Christeen.

288

'What can I do, man? I'm only a dog.'

'You could push a bit.'

'I am doing.'

They were at the henge. Struggling to lift the altar stone. Why?

'Are you sure this is the way down to the big flywheel?' Fido asked.

'Of course I'm sure.'

'Perhaps there's a secret switch. There usually is.'

'Neat thinking.' Christeen rooted around in the grass. 'Bound to be. Ah yes.' Sometimes it's just too simple.

The stone swung up revealing a stairway which led down into the bowels of the Earth the way some of them do. Fido sniffed. 'Smells a bit iffy,' said he.

'Come on. Let's go down.'

'Would you mind giving me a bit of a carry? I'm not too good on stairs.'

'All right. But keep your cold nose to yourself.'

'Did you see that Rambo? They just went down a secret passage.'

'I did indeed, Eric. We should follow. Don't you think?'

'I certainly do. We have had less than our fair share of action in this.'

'I wholeheartedly agree, old ne'er-do-well chum of mine. I thought we were in for big parts when this started off. Our fan club is going to be sorely miffed about this. Are you tooled up?'

'I regret that I cannot stretch to one of those amazing rotary machine-guns, but I do have my trusty gisarme.'

'Just the job. Then shall we go?'

'We shall.'

They do.

'What a wang.' Fido put a paw to his nose. 'Do you think

it's still running?'

'Must be. If the big flywheel stops, everything stops.' 'Looks deserted. You can put me down now.' They

289

were in one of the high galleries. The great machines were velvet with dust. The cogs looked

rusted in. It was very quiet.

'I can't hear anything, man. Seems like no-one's at home.'

'There must be someone. Come on. And don't do that down here.'

'Sorry. Call of nature.' Fido lowered his leg.

'You'll never guess what I've just done,' grinned Elvis.

Rex beckoned the waitress for further drinks.

'You won't,' said Elvis. 'Honest injun.'

'Well. If I won't, I won't. Make that three drinks, please.'

'Aw, come on Rex. Ask me what I've done.'

'What? And spoil your surprise ending? Not me.'

'That's cool. What's the matter with Jack?' Mr Doveston was slumped across the onyx counter, snoring loudly.

'Meditating?' Rex suggested.

'Asshole. Any sign of you-know-who?'

'Not yet.'

'You are sure we can get him this time? It's our last chance.'

'Trust me. Wheels are in motion.'

'Crawford owns the Gadarenes. Thanks.' Elvis accepted his drink. 'How do you like that guy?'

'To be honest,' said Rex, 'he represents a considerable mystery. How could someone of such genius and power leave no trace whatever after the NHE? Just doesn't make sense.'

'Probably all hokum. Perhaps he's just a figment of our imagination. Cheers.'

'Duck Elvis!' Elvis ducked. A bolt of energy seared over his head and burst into flaming fragments amongst the bar optics. 'And take cover!'

'Son of a gun!'

With appropriate screams the crowd parted as Cecil

290

stormed forward. A not inconsiderable storm. Rex dived over the bar counter, past the still snoring Jack and prepared to come up firing. Elvis rolled amidst stampeding legs, bringing down a Gadarene Swine and a gaggle of groupies. 'Hm,' said the King as they tumbled about him. 'And hello baby.'

Cecil loosed a couple more charges towards the bar. Antique mirrors brought him seven years' bad luck. The peroxide disposable continued to pluck at her hair. She was not programmed for this sort of thing. Cecil swung his gun towards the fallen.

'Don't come quietly,' he growled. 'I'm gonna killya.'

'Aw, shit,' said Mr Presley.

Rex weighed up his options. It "was something he always did when the going got tough. Not that it ever helped.

He tugged at the disposable's apron. 'Excuse me,' he said.

'How can I help you, sir?' The white-haired woman smiled down at him. Rex pressed his gun into her hand.

'Kindly point this at the large gentleman and squeeze this bit.' He indicated the trigger.

'Certainly sir.' The disposable raised the gun and pointed it at Cecil. She squeezed the trigger. There was a loud bang. It didn't come from Rex's gun which still had the safety-catch on. The disposable toppled on to Rex. A broken doll, sparks raining from circuitry in her punctured head.

'Whoops.' Rex fought the body aside and grappled for his gun. It wasn't there. It had fallen the other side of the bar.

'Oh great,' said Rex.

'Come out, come out, wherever you are.' That had a familiar ring to it. The barrel of Cecil's gun appeared over the counter top.

'Get up,' said Cecil.

The fallen were rising and running. Elvis had his pistol out. And he had a clear shot at the big back.

291

Top him, chief,' whispered Barry. Elvis took aim. He could hardly miss. Top him,'

'Get up,' shouted Cecil. 'You got nowhere to run,'

'Can't we talk about this?' Rex was searching for the concealed weapon that all good barmen always keep beneath the counter. A bommyknocker or some such. Sadly for him this was not that kind of a bar.

Top him, chief,'

Elvis had a sweat on. 'I can't, Barry. I can't shoot a guy. Not like this,'

'It's him or Rex, chief.'

'I know. I know,'

A big hand plunged down at Rex. It might just have been luck, or it might have been the highly honed killing skills of the mighty US Marines (it was luck), but he caught Rex by the hair with the first grab.

'Ouch,' said Rex. He was hauled painfully aloft to dangle eye to eye with the balding psycho.

'There's been a change of plan,' Rex said hurriedly. 'Mr Crawford says that we aren't to be harmed,'

'Like fuck he does,' It was obviously Cecil's night for the family brain cell.

'All right,' said the dangling Rex. 'That's it. Now I'm angry,'

'Now you're dead,'

'Stick 'em up,' shouted Elvis. (Cheers.)

Cecil spun around, dragging Rex over the counter top.

'I am making a citizen's arrest. Put the gun down, fella.' (Groans.)

Rex closed his eyes and tried to recall whether he had actually ever seen Elvis shoot anybody. No particular occasion sprang to mind. Give us an edge, prayed Rex.

'I'm gonna count to three,' said Elvis. 'No. Make that four. It's a one for the money . . . ,'

'Time to die,' said Cecil raising his gun.

'It's a two for the show . . . ' The King had a definite shake on.

292

'You ain't got the nerve,' said the astonishingly astute Cecil.

'It's a three to get ready . . . '

'Ain't got the . . . ' BANG!

Rex fell to the floor. He rolled over and looked up at the giant. Cecil was standing bolt upright. There was a dirty big hole in his forehead. As Rex watched, he raised his hand and poked a grubby finger into it. 'You didn't say four,' he complained. 'That's not fair.'

'Guess I lost my nerve.' Elvis examined his smoking pistol. 'How about that, eh?'

'Bravo, chief. You did it.'

'Bravo,' said Rex. 'Are you all right?'

'No,' said Cecil. 'I'm shot in the head.'

'I wasn't talking to you.'

'Sorry. I suppose that's me dead then.'

'Suppose so.'

Cecil fell backwards and made a very loud thump as he hit the deck. The crowd, who had taken cover where they could, closed in about Elvis, cheering wildly. Typical.

'It was nothing,' said the sweaty one. 'Could you stand aside please, I'm going to fetch up.'

Rex tucked Cecil's gun into his belt, retrieved his own from the carpet and did likewise with it. Then he went to the aid of the golden gunfighter. 'Time to get lost,' said he.

'We're lost,' said Fido. 'Aren't we?'

'We can't get lost here,' Christeen assured him. 'No matter which way you go you always end up back in the same place.'

'Very clever.' Fido sniffed at the rusting machinery. 'How's it done then?'

'Time and Relative Dimension in Space,' Christeen explained. (One for the old folks there.)

'So where's the controller?'

'He's bound to be somewhere around.'

'That Thunderbird isn't going to wait all day, man.'

293

'Fido. If we go back in time we can get back here half an hour before the Thunderbird even arrives.'

'Like wow.' Fido shook his head. 'Let's try down here.'

'Let's try down here.' Rex pointed along a gilded corridor.

'Let's not bother, Rex. Nobody's following us. No-one cares.'

He was right of course. The rich danced on. Those back in the bar had lost interest in Cecil, whose corpse had proved to hold only a limited novelty value, and were now chatting once more amongst themselves.

'It's a funny old world,' said Rex. 'What time do you have?'

'Nearly ten. Where's Wormwood? Do you think we should go see?' Rex wasn't keen.

'Perhaps we should have woken Jack up.'

Rex grinned. 'Not a bit of it. At least we know where to find him when we need him. He's safe enough.'

People do the dumbest things in movies. Take Alien for example. They have an indestructible monster with acid blood on board the spaceship, so what do they do? 'Let's all split up and track it down.' I ask you. And who in their right mind would really buy that cheap house on Elm Street? I ask you again. And who, having just shot Crawford's henchman would actually leave Jack Doveston snoozing over the body? Unforgivable.

'I'm not very happy about this,' said Jonathan Crawford poking his electric finger into Jack's ear.

'Aaaaaaaaaaagh!' went Jack Doveston, livening up no end.

'Ouch!' cried Byron. 'I felt that. They were supposed to stick together. It's coming apart.' Mr Smith worried at a fuse-box. 'I should never have

294

trusted that Jack. He was supposed to give the suit to Rex.'

'I have been meaning to ask you about that suit. Does the controller know you've given it away?'

'Not exactly. Well, not at all, actually. It was a bit of a last resort really. Part of giving them an edge.'

'Can't we twiddle something? Pass it over to Rex?'

'No can do. It functions independently. That's the point of it. Emergency override.'

'But correct me if I'm wrong. According to the hand-book, only the controller is supposed to wear it.'

'Don't nit-pick, Byron. If you had been a little more enterprising and got your flux, we wouldn't be in this mess now.'

'Oh, hardly fair.' Byron left his knob twiddles to point a finger at Mr Smith. 'It's not my fault that I couldn't get any flux because there wasn't any flux.'

'I've got pots of the stuff in my cubbyhole,' said Mr Smith. 'Did I neglect to mention it?'

'You have what?' Byron's jaw hit his chest. Mr Smith turned away to rummage in his tool-box. He was defi-nitely chuckling.

'You bastard!' said KK Byron Wheeler-Vegan.

The big truck thundered on towards the pleasuredome. Ella Guru was at the wheel. Weapons were going click click.

'You really think we'll make it through security?' the Mascara Snake asked.

Spike slotted charges into a Crawford Corporation pulse rifle. 'Let's hope.'

The armoured helicopters had, as it happened, ceased to circle the perimeters. Most of the guards

had taken themselves off to mess rooms to see in the New Year in the manner that was natural to them. As the big truck approached the outer defences there was no-one there to raise a hand against it. Which was a shame really, because it spoiled the opportunity for an extremely exciting

295

shoot-out, with the big truck plunging into the car park, smashing up priceless automobiles and all that kind of thing. But there you go.

The Gadarene Swine plunged about the stage. Any physical description of themselves or their stage act would be gratuitous, but they were 'getting it on'.

There was fire and brimstone and the gnashing of teeth.

'One of mine.' Elvis hummed along. 'No. Two.' 'How can you tell?' Rex put his hands over his ears. The crowd rocked on. Painted faces glazed. Hands clapping, feet pounding. Atavistic. It wasn't Woodstock, but it seemed like they were having a good time. But time was ticking on. And still there was no sign of Worm-wood.

The footloose pope had been swept away and Wayne was warming up his horses. Fine big horses they were. One white, one red, one black and one 'pale'. They got a mention in Revelation, but then didn't everything?

'I really do have to take a leak, man,' woofed Fido. 'I'm sorry but there it is.'

Christeen sighed deeply. 'All right. Do it here and make it quick.'

'Thanks.' Fido lifted his leg on to the nearest ironwork of the deserted gallery.

'Oooooow,' cried Byron. 'Who did that?'

Mr Smith, still chuckling, looked up from his tool-box. 'What's your problem?'

Byron plucked at his damp trouser leg. He gave his fingers a sniff. 'Something just pissed on me,' he com-plained, searching in vain for the culprit.

Mr Smith stopped chuckling. 'We'd better get a move on. Tonight's the night.'

296

'Tonight's the night.' Mother Demdike, looking like most men's idea of a good time, straightened Wormwood's cravat. 'You're a dream. Give mummy a great big kiss.'

'Leave hold, you superannuated gargoyle.'

'Naughty, naughty. And me all spruced up for your special occasion.'

'You smell as ripe as ever. And I'm not leaving here until Crawford returns carrying at least two heads.'

'You don't trust him, do you? He'll be away into the night by now.'

'He wouldn't dare defy me.'

'Wayne, no-one can touch you. You have the country and tomorrow the world.'

'Sure?'

'Would mummy lie to you?'

'But the assassins . . . They're here. How can that be?'

'What can they do? Shoot you?'

'Wouldn't do them a lot of good.' Wormwood flexed his shoulders.

'You're invincible. A one-man army. Tell you what I'll do. I'll pop out, lop off their heads and drop them back in. Would that make you feel better?'

'Aw mum.' Wormwood nuzzled his head into Demdike-Kim's far from motherly bosom. 'You'd do that for me?'

'Of course I would. Just sing me that song again.'

'So. What's the plan then, Jack?' Crawford placed another drink before the drunk. He'd had to get it himself. Shortage of bar staff.

'Plan?' Jack did focusings. 'I've had a terrible sex life,' said he.

'You what?'

'Sex. You know what I mean.'

'That has got nothing to do with it.'

'I thought when you were famous you did it all the time.'

'And don't you?'

297

'I never got anything. My wife left me. She went back to Britain with a plumber. She's suing me for a fortune as well.'

'Jack, pay attention. I need to know about the plan.'

'What plan?'

'Tonight. Rex and son of Presley.'

'Rex? He read my books you know. Before I wrote them. Well after. But before he got here. I get confused.'

'What are they planning to do?'

'I don't know. He never tells me anything. I don't think he likes me. Don't know why. But you like me, don't you Jonathan? You're my friend.'

'I'm your best friend. Tell me about your suit.'

'It's just a silly suit. Look you can do this.' Jack plunged his fist into his chest. It vanished from sight.

'Ouch!' cried Byron. 'Now someone's biffed me in the ear.'

'Who gave you the suit, Jack?'

'Mr Smith. Why are you asking all these questions?'

'I'm trying to help you. You're in great danger.'

'I'm going to die.'

'No you're not.' Jonathan made to pat Jack's shoulder but he thought better of it. 'You're OK. You're famous.'

'But no sex.'

'Will you shut up about that. I'll get you as much sex as you want.'

'I just want Spike.'

'Who's Spike?'

'She married Rex. She's a Zen.'

'I thought they were all dead.'

'No.' Jack beckoned Jonathan closer. 'There's thousands of them left and they're all coming here tonight. They've got tanks and planes and missiles . . .'

'How do you know this?'

'I write it. I know.' Jack fell backwards off his bar stool.

'By the time we got to Woodstock we were stoned out of our brains,' he sang from the floor.

298

Jonathan struggled to get him upright. 'Jack, tell me about the Zens. Missiles you say?'

'And bommyknockers and . . .'

 Jack slumped on to the bar counter. Jonathan considered his deadly digit but Jack looked out for the count.

'Missiles, eh?' Jonathan shook his head, made fists towards Heaven and stalked away.

From the corner of a sneaky eye Jack watched him go. 'To hell with you and the horse you rode in on,' sniggered the far from drunken Jack Doveston.

299

29

What do you think of it so far? Ernie Wise

Rubbish! Eric Morecombe

Rex was mingling. Well, he was doing his best. It was only now occurring to him just how few of the merrymakers actually spoke his own tongue. Yet surely these people were Americans. They all looked very much alike. No hints of obvious racial difference. They were all tall, pale and pleasing to look upon. Rex pondered. And he took a little time to ponder upon several other matters also.

For one, and this was a big one, history had it that Wormwood pressed the nuclear button at the stroke of twelve this very night. But not from here. From the war room beneath the Pentagon. And history was mute upon the subject of mile-high pleasuredomes and parties to rival the bacchanals of Asgard. And all the other im-ponderables. Crawford and the Americards. The dis-posables. It was all wrong. It had never happened and should not be happening now.

Rex had once had a long chat with the Time Sprout regarding travels into history. (Although you'll find no mention of it here.) The sprout recalled his first encounter with Elvis and how nothing had been 'right'. He put forward the theory that once the present becomes the past it decays, falls apart, jumbles together. The further back you went the more it had all rotted away. It

300

explained a lot. But not all. In fact it didn't actually explain anything.

There has to be an answer, thought Rex.

'Yes,' whispered a soft voice at his ear. 'But you'll not live to find it.'

'Kim.' Rex jerked about. Demdike hit him hard across the face, knocking him from his feet. Party people dodged aside cheering loudly.

'No. Wait.' Rex backed away on his bum. Kim pursued him across the dance floor. Rex dragged out

Cecil's big pistol. Kim kicked it from his hand. Rex scrambled to his feet and prepared to run. Kim grasped his shoulder, spun him around and kned him in the groin.

'Uurgh,' said Rex.

Kirn's face was not a pretty thing to gaze upon. The evil Demdike within growled hideously. She gripped Rex by the throat and hoisted him into the air.

'Aaagh,' said Rex in ready response.

Kirn's thumbs were beneath his chin. 'I'm going to pop your head off,' said Kim, applying pressure.

The party people offered encouragement. 'Lovers' tiff,' one explained to much applause.

Rex kicked and fought but to little avail. The creature lifted him higher. Gripped him tighter. Some way off Elvis danced on oblivious. Rex gazed up. Vision was starting to cloud over. Above him the faces of the living chandeliers looked down upon his torment. They did not seem at all concerned. Funny that.

Give me an edge, prayed Rex Mundi, yet again.

'We'll have to take out the gybo and polish the cogs,' said Byron. 'It will take a while. Is that all right, do you think?'

'I'll get the coffee on,' said Mr Smith. 'Nothing much is going to happen for a while anyhow.'

'Say goodbye.' Kirn's thumbs forced Rex's head back. 'Goodbye.'

301

'Goodbye.' Rex's hand was on the hilt of his own pistol. With that superhuman strength which always dis-tinguishes the really decent hero from the rest of the old dross, Rex tore it free of his belt and rammed the barrel into Kirn's grinning mouth.

'Eat this,' he said heroically. And he held down the trigger.

And nothing happened. Rex squeezed the trigger again and again. Nothing. Still nothing.

'Safety-catch, you fool.' The voice was somewhere in his head. The voice he knew. Rex thumbed the safety-catch and fired. It was messy. But then it was bound to be. In the light of greater messiness yet to come it can be rated about four on a scale from one to ten. Kirn's head exploded. The way some of them do. Grisly brain bits spattered the dancers. Rex was flung back-wards but he kept his finger down. The gun spat explosive charges into the flailing body. And the body came apart at the seams. And that within clawed its way out.

It was a black pulsating globe. Thin snake-like limbs thrashed about it, tearing through the host's shredded body. The globe split and a baby's head, bald with yellow snapping teeth, rose from it. The eyes glowed red with hatred. The circle of crowd expanded at the hurry up. This was no longer entertainment.

Rex pulled the trigger but the gun was now empty. He flung it in the traditional manner at the creature.

A barbed appendage shot from the baby's mouth. Coiled about Rex's leg. Rex was dragged from his feet. The demon hauled him in.

'Help,' screamed Rex. 'Tor God's sake help me.'

The red eyes bulged. There was big sulphur and bad vibes generally. Coils whipped out. Pinned Rex's arms to his sides. The mouth expanded, dripping foul ichor. 'Die,' rumbled a deep dark voice. 'Yum, yum, yum.'

'Pro maleficiatis nutriendis et maleficiis Diabolicisque cjuibuscunque infestationibus destruendis.'

302

Rex turned his frightened eyes. Jack had appeared through the crowd.

'Ad omne maleficium indifferenter solvendum et Diabolum conterendum.'

The demon turned its hideous face upon its attacker. The tongue uncurled from Rex. A cry rose up from the evil mouth.

'No. Not here. It is impossible here. No.'

'Pro materialibus intrumentis maleficialibus emittendis.'

Rex felt the coils loosening. He dragged himself away. Jack approached the thing. A silver crucifix in his hand. And why not?

'Virtuosius corroborated ventriculi a maleficialium instru-mentorom materialium vomitione fessi.'

'No. No!' The demon drew itself into a tight ball, spinning with cruel spines, rose into the air and flung itself at Jack.

Rex ducked for cover. Jack dropped his cloak from his shoulders revealing the suit of the Tomorrowman. It pulsed with light as if activated by the words of the holy exorcism.

'No!' The demon struck Jack in the chest. But he didn't fall. He didn't even feel it. The thing passed clear through him. Well, not exactly through. It did not emerge from the other side. It was gone.

Jack stooped. Took up his cloak and placed it once more about his shoulders. 'We'd best away,' he told Rex.

Rex climbed shakily to his feet. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'And thanks, Jack.'

'What's all the hubbub, bub?' Elvis grinned his way on to the scene. He caught sight of the blood-spattered corpse. 'Oh Hell. Excuse me while I do it once more.' The remaining contents of his stomach took flight. On to European royalty this time. 'Sorry ma'am.'

From a high balcony Jonathan Crawford watched the three men push their way through the murmuring throng and make off from the great hall.

303

This is getting better by the minute,' said Jonathan.

'And did we promise you a night to remember or what?' said the Buddhavision reporter, as the camera team zoomed in on the defunct Demdike. 'We're going to take a station-break here. But stay tuned for the rest of the party. Brought to you live as it happens. Only on Buddhavision, the station that cares. And we mean it.'

'I think we shall dispense with further mingling,' said Rex. 'Elvis, go and get the big gun.'

'Is it ass-kicking time?' the big E enquired.

'It is.' They were back in the car park. Jack drew his cloak about him. 'I feel extremely odd,' said he.

'Something you ate perhaps. Thanks again, Jack. You saved my life.'

'Yeah. I did, didn't I? How come I'd do a thing like that?'

'Perhaps you got smart.'

'Perhaps. Get down.' They hastily took cover behind an all-chrome Koshiho Commando. Soldiers were issuing through the grossly painted front doors to take up defensive positions.

'How are we going to get back inside?' Jack asked.

'Certainly not that way.' They skulked away to find the rock 'n' roller with the big big gun.

Christeen edged along a crumbling corridor. Fido twitched his hooter. 'Someone on our tail, man.' Sniff sniff. 'Two someones in fact.'

'Rambo and Eric.' Christeen tousled the dog's head. 'Took you long enough.'

'Why did you say that back there?'

'Say what?'

'You said "safety-catch, you fool". Why did you say that?'

'I don't exactly know.' Christeen shrugged. 'I just felt I had to. Come on. It can't be far now.'

'You keep saying that. Can I take another leak?'

304

'No, you can't. Now what is that?'

'What is what?'

'That is what.' Before them, somewhat out of place in the cobwebby gothic, stood what looked for all the next world like a high-tech computer. It winked little lights and made a soft melodic purring sound. And beyond that . . .

'Is that a person or what?' asked Fido.

It was the shape of a person. But it glowed from within and shimmered about the edges like a cheap super-imposition.

'The Tomorrowman,' said Christeen.

'I've wet myself,' said Fido.

'It's that gun again,' said Jack.

Elvis hefted it proudly. 'Ratatatatatat.' He waggled the multi-barrelled killing machine to and fro. 'Weighs a ton. The strap is cutting right into my shoulder. It's gonna ruin the whole cut of my suit.'

'Would you rather I took it?' Rex asked. 'I do want my go, you know.'

'No way. Am I the King or what?'

Rex made a hopeless face. 'We do know what we are supposed to do, I hope.'

Heads nodded. They obviously did. Which was en-couraging. Although not very.

'What are we going to do, chief?' Barry asked.

'Barry,' Elvis scolded his cerebral companion, 'you haven't been paying attention. That's not like you.'

'I was talking about the big truck, chief.'

'What big truck?'

'The big truck that is heading straight for us.'

'I don't see no big truck.' Elvis gaped about.

'Neither do I.' Jack had already taken cover.

'Nor me.' Rex glanced suspiciously at Elvis. 'What's happening, Barry?'

'That's odd, chief,' said the puzzled sprout. That's very odd indeed. There was a big truck and then there wasn't.'

305

'You putting us on, green buddy?'

'No chief. Honest. I saw it.'

'Come on,' said Rex. 'Let's get going.'

'No Rex. Jump!' Rex jumped. The truck was suddenly upon them. One moment it wasn't, the next moment it was. The three men flung themselves from its path as it thundered into the car park, ploughing all those priceless cars into scrap the way we had all hoped it would.

Ella Guru clung to the driving wheel. 'What hap-pened?' she gasped. 'What's happening?'

The big truck thundered on. Rex rose in time not to see it once more. There was tangled wreckage and heavy tyre marks and then there was nothing.

'It's coming apart.' Rex urged Jack up. 'Let's get moving.'

'It's coming apart.' Steam hissed from Byron's Inter-rositer. Beneath it sparks crackled. Mr Smith made his gravest face yet.

'Did you hear that? Feel that?'

'I felt it. What was it?'

'The big flywheel. It faltered. It faltered, Byron.'

'Say it's not happening.'

'All right. It's not happening. Does that help?'

'Not a lot.'

'No. I thought it wouldn't.'

'Let's party.' Wayne L. Wormwood reined up the horses. 'Yo!' He raised his whip and flung it. A silvered trail hung in the air.

'Let's do it.'

The doors opened into the great hall. The horses plunged forward. All red eyes, lathered mouths, sparking hooves and steaming nostrils. It was very apocalyptic.

As the huge doors opened a dazzling light blazed out across the dance floor. The dancers shielded their eyes. Squinted into the glare and made nimble sidesteps as the Devil rode out.

306

And then they began to applaud. 'Top of the world, ma,' cried Wormwood. 'Top of the world.'

'There's soldiers everywhere,' Jack complained. 'How did we end up out here? This isn't having an edge.'

'Which way, Rex?' Elvis asked.

'Up,' said Rex. 'We climb. What time do you have?'

'Eleven thirty. Eleven thirty? Why do I have that?'

Rex checked his own watch. 'For the same reason I do. It's all coming apart. We climb.'

'Er.' Jack smiled foolishly. 'Rex. I do not climb. I get vertigo.'

'Jack, you climb. Believe me.'

'What about this big gun? I can't climb with this.'

'You could try, chief.'

'Keep out of this, Barry. Rex, why do we climb?'

'Because it's the only way we're going to get back inside. Unless you want to use up all your bullets trying to shoot your way back in.'

Elvis shuffled his blue sueders. 'Make Jack go first.'

'Go on then, Jack.' Rex guided Jack's hands towards the wall. 'It's not far. Just up to the first floor. See the open window?'

Jack saw the open window. It was a nice one. It had once graced a wall in the Palace of Westminster. Its leaded lights were now spray-painted a zany pink.

'I can't climb up there. It's a sheer wall.'

'Then walk up.'

'Don't be silly.'

'Try it, Jack. Trust me.'

'What are you saying?'

'The edge, Jack. Trust.' Jack put one foot against the wall.

'This is ridiculous,' he protested. He placed the other foot against the wall. 'That's impossible.'

'It doesn't matter. Walk.' Jack walked. He walked up the vertical wall. 'Come on,' he called down. 'It's safe.'

307

'What the

r

Elvis gaped up at the human fly. 'How

'It's sound, chief. Do as Rex says.'

'No sweat.' Elvis hoisted the big gun on to his shoulder and followed Jack up the wall. 'Far out.'

Rex took a quick look around and then took to the wall. One after another the three men pressed in through the open window and dropped on to the high balcony recently vacated by Jonathan Crawford.

'You gonna tell us how we just did that?'

Rex winked. 'Just bear it in mind when the trouble starts.'

'Will do.'

Jack stepped on his cloak and fell heavily to the floor.

'Take it off,' Rex advised. Jack took it off.

'Are you having a good time?' crowed Wormwood.

'Yeah,' chorused the revellers.

'Let me hear you say yeah.'

'Yeah.'

'Let me hear you say yeah.'

'Yeah.'

'Let me hear you say . . .'

'Look at that dumb bastard,' whispered Elvis. 'Let me hear you say yeah? I ask you.' From the high balcony they had a pretty good view of what was going on. Wormwood's horses frothed and stamped. High upon the throne chair the president offered benedictions and whipped up the crowd. The Gadarene Swine were enjoying a gang-bang in the bar. One of Wormwood's horses suddenly went stomp upon a lifeless body that no-one had bothered to sweep up.

'Demdike!' cried Wormwood. 'Mother Demdike!'

The crowd went very quiet indeed. Wormwood rose in his throne. Raised his arms and screamed in a cacophony of inhuman voices.

'Mother. Who has done this thing?'

The crowd made with the earnest heart-crossings. 'Not

308

us,' they swore to a man, or woman. 'Truly.'

Wormwood's eyes swept over them. An icy wind whipped up from nowhere. 'Ah well,' chuckled Wormwood. 'Never could abide the old bag. Life's a bitch, ain't it?'

The crowd erupted. 'For he's a jolly good fellow,' it sang.

'The son of a ... Shall I pop him now?' Elvis asked.

Rex shrugged. 'I can think of all kinds of reasons to say no. But it is what we came here for. Why not?'

'Right on.' Elvis flipped up the trigger guard and climbed to his feet.

'Sure that you can?' Rex asked.

'He's sure, chief.'

'Hey, asshole,' shouted Elvis Presley.

Wormwood turned in his chair. Gazed up at his mortal enemy.

'Eat this!' Elvis pressed the button and the old 7.62mm M134 General Electric Minigun poured out its wrath. The six barrels span on their 3.4kg drive motor. The two 1.36kg recoil adapters held vibration to the very mini-mum and the 7.62mm cartridges left the weapon at the rate of two thousand per minute. And they made a great deal of noise about it.

The crowd, which was now becoming quite used to making a hasty retreat, did that very thing. Wormwood didn't though. Elvis let him have the full pack. Six thousand rounds rapid-fire.

The horses bolted. The priceless throne became a million whirling wasted fragments. Wormwood's robes became shredded memory. 'Ratatatatatatatatatatatat . . .' went the big big gun.

'Gotcha.' The barrels continued to spin but the gun was empty. 'I gotcha.'

Rex peered over the balcony unable to see very much. A slim breeze from the open window gently began to waft the carbine fog.

309

'You have to be joking,' said the voice of Wayne L. Wormwood. 'You really do,'

Rex looked at Elvis. 'Aw shit,' said Elvis. 'Is it run?'

'It's run,' said Rex. 'And now.' They ran.

Wormwood's laughter pursued them. He was standing in the ruins of his chariot. He was tall and mean and naked. But he wasn't human.

But for the head and hands there was no skin. The body, arms and legs were glossy black titanium steel alloy. A product of the Crawford Corporation. Im-penetrable to anything less than nuclear assault. And probably not even that. Total body prosthesis. Courtesy of Mr Russell and his associates, who, under constant torture, had made great strides forward in the field of cyborg automation.

'That the best you've got?' guffawed Wormwood examining his parts and finding all in perfect working order. 'Haw haw haw.' He stiffened. 'Guards. Bring them down. In one piece, please.'

Soldiers stormed from nowhere. Up the stairs and on to the balcony.

'It's a fair cop.' Jack stuck his hands up. 'Don't shoot. Please don't shoot.'

'It's broken.' Byron flinched.

The controller looked down upon him. 'You've broken it, haven't you?'

Byron nodded sadly. 'Bits keep dropping off, lordship.'

'Bits keep dropping off. Well, la de da How would you rate your chances of promotion, Byron?'

The lad made a 'so-so' sort of face. 'As of the now?' he asked.

'Someone is going to have to go up and sort this mess out. Who do you think that should be?'

'You, sir?'

The controller shook his snowy head.

'Me, sir?' Another shake.

'Mr Smith, sir?' Mr Smith shook his head violently.

310

'No,' said the controller.

'I give up then. Who sir?'

'Me,' said Gloria Mundi, for it was she.

'Oooh,' said Byron. 'And who are you?'

'Who are you?' Wormwood asked. The three kneeling men in the handcuffs made strained faces. There were an awesome variety of weapons pointing down at them.

'Mundi,' said Rex Mundi. 'Pleased to meet you.'

'Charmed I'm sure. And this creature?'

'Fuck you,' said Elvis. A gun butt hit him in the neck. 'I'm the King. That's all.'

'I see. And you?'

'Jack Doveston,' said Jack Doveston. 'I'm not with these two. They kidnapped me.'

'I think not.' Wormwood shook his head. 'What is that you're wearing?'

'Just a holographic suit. Jonathan Crawford gave it to me. He's a big friend of mine. Can I go now?'

'No, you can't.' Wormwood shook his head once more. His neck seemed to strain against the black carapace of his chest. 'I think you and I have much to say to one another.'

'I don't think so,' said Jack.

'Well I do. Who am I, Jack?'

'You're the president, Mr President.'

'And what else am I?'

'I don't know. Why should I?'

'I think you know. Rex, do you think he knows?'

'Oh yes, he knows. That's why he hired us to kill you,' Rex lied.

'Rex? What are you saying?'

Wormwood turned away. 'No-one is going to kill me. All history has led to this moment. You do not under-stand.'

'Would you care to explain?' Rex thought away his handcuffs. He stuck his hands in his pockets. Wormwood seemed-unperturbed.

311

'Nearly midnight,' said he. 'And then you-know-what.'

'The big bang? The NHE?'

Wormwood passed Rex the brandy balloon. The two of them were suddenly seated in high leather chairs. The room housed some empty bookshelves. A carpet of Indian extraction. A chrome jukebox. Nothing else.

'It's a poser,' said Wormwood.

'What? Life and things of that nature?'

'Things of that nature. Yes.'

'You'll lose,' said Rex. 'You must,'

'Possibly. But if I win then I take all.'

'But you never do.'

'There is a time. There is always a time. And when there is then I must be here.'

'The time,' said Rex. 'Tell me about the time.'

'Ah.' Wormwood tapped his nose. 'It is always now. People remember the past and fear the future. But there is only the now. The past is dead and the future cannot threaten you until it becomes the now.'

'Dead profound,' said Rex.

'As of the now, Rex. That is all. We are always here. You and I. Protagonist and antagonist. That's movies. That's life. Yours and mine for ever.'

'I'd like to go now,' said Rex.

'Escape? To where? To Utopia? I would be there. I have to be. The serpent in Eden. The ghost in the machine. The glitch in the system. I am always today.'

'Why?'

'The balance of equipoise. That's what it's all about.'

'Sounds somewhat esoteric to me.' Rex angled the shotgun across his knees and blasted Wormwood from his chair. 'Whose dream is this anyway?' he asked.

312

30

Church of Runeology 7 Mafeking Ave Brentford

Dear Mr Rankin,

I write regarding my special 'guest' appearance in your latest tome. I was given to understand by Sir John Rirmer that I would not only receive a cover credit, but that extracts from my masterwork The Book of Ultimate Truths would appear at the head of each and every chapter in I8pt Gothic Bold and that characters would make frequent reference to my wit and wisdom. Also, to quote an editor, who was unwilling to divulge his name, that I would be 'bunged the readies and seen all right'.

Thanks to a certain literary contact, whose name I am unwilling to divulge, I have now become privy to a proof copy of They Came and Ate Us.

Imagine therefore my horror and dismay when I discover that:

1. , ' have no cover credit.
2. Quotations from T.B.O.U.T. have been annotated by Sir John Rimmer in the guise of extracts from numerous books supposedly written by him.
3. , ' have not been bunged any readies or seen all right.

My solicitor informs me that to press any claim against Bloomsbury Inc would not only be courting financial suicide but be running the very real risk of finding myself in a concrete pillar supporting the M27 Brighton Bypass.

So, in the light of Glasnost, the Pole Tax and the Salmon Rushdie affair. And in the view of Sir John Rirmer's recent retirement to Memphis on the strength of substantial

313

'introduction' fees received from Bloomsbury, I feel that you might at least stand me a Chinese meal by way of compensation. I shall therefore look forward to meeting you in the

CRUSTY NOODLE EAT IN AND TAKE AWAY, High St,

Brentford, on Thursday next at eight pm. "You will recognize me as the tall distinguished gentleman with the shaven head and plaited goatee.

Should you fail to keep this appointment, I will have no other option but to call forth numerous Satanic agencies which are under my direct control and loose them against you.

You have been warned.

My very best wishes,

Hugo Rune (perfect master) PS. I enclose the Black Spot for you to be going on with.

'The room containing Wormwood and Rex dissolved.

They were in the pleasuredome once more.

'Mr President. Would you care to say something to the nation?'

Wormwood smiled benignly. He slicked back his hair and straightened the lapels of the immaculate suit he was now wearing.

'This camera?'

'The one with the light on. Yes sir.'

Wormwood spoke into the reporter's pencil-slim microphone.

'Fellow Americans. My own dear people. How're you doing out there? OK? Got enough to eat and enough to watch I hope. Sure you have. Sure you have. Fellow Americans, tonight is a very special night for all of us. Dawn of the new millennium. Time to ring out the old

314

and ring in the new. As you all know, tonight is the final night of my presidency. Seven long and happy years. And they've been happy for all of us, I know that. I see the tears in your eyes, oh I do. But do not cry. I shall be with you. I shall always be with you. More than ever you know.'

'I understand that you have named your successor, Mr President. Might we know who it is to be?'

'It is to be me,' said Jonathan Crawford. The cameras swung around. Panned across the colourful crowd. Focused upon a wall of camouflage-green speared with weaponry.

'I am Jonathan Crawford. Your new president.'

'Oh no you're not,' bawled Wormwood. Twenty high-velocity electric carbines cocked in his direction.

'Oh yes I am. This is what is called a military coup.'

'And you're seeing it all live on Buddha vision folks, the station that's first with the news.'

'Crawford,' roared Wormwood, his titanium steel combat-chassis expanding to burst out the shoulders of his suit. 'What is this crap? Guns? Are you mad or what?'

'It's a political statement. Ring out the old and ring in the new. Pure and simple.'

'It is nothing of the sort. It is treachery, you mutinous maggot.'

'Language.' Jonathan raised a cautionary finger. 'All things must pass you know. To every whatsit there is season and a time for every doodah under heaven. And such like. Now if you will kindly swear me in I have prepared a speech.'

'Over my dead body.'

'You don't have a dead body. You don't even have a .live one.' Jonathan took from his pocket a small remote-control unit. 'You'll not like this. A little innovation of my own.'

'Oh no you don't.' Wormwood plunged forward, toppling cameras, spilling newsmen. He leapt upon the upstart. Hands crooked to kill.

315

Jonathan calmly fingered the controller. Wormwood froze in mid-fling.

'Pause button,' Jonathan explained. 'Mr Russell and his chums had their little schemes, I had mine. I let them finish Project Wormwood, but I wisely saw to it that the now legendary Directive-Four fail-safe was installed. I'm a clever son of a bitch, ain't I?'

Wormwood's head was not on pause. It was ranting. 'You fool. You can't stop it. You can't change history. Tonight the whole world becomes mine.'

Rex, Elvis and Jack were quietly drifting towards the rear of the excited crowd.

'How did you do that trick with the handcuffs?' Elvis asked.

'None of it's real. Don't you get it?'

Elvis shook his befuddled head. 'Not as such.' He strained at his handcuffs. They became rubber. He pulled them from his wrists.

'How's it done? We're here, ain't we? Wormwood's here.'

'Is he? Jack, up to the balcony. I want to see something.'

'Sure enough.' Jack flung away his handcuffs and the three scuttled across the expanse of empty floor and up the staircase to the high balcony.

Below them the tableau was set out. The stars of the show, Wormwood and Crawford, glared poison arrows at one another. The news teams ducked and dived, getting all the right angles. The cast of thousands craned their cosmetic necks to get a glimpse of the action.

'Jack. Stand up on the balcony rail.'

'I will not. I might fall.'

'I'll hold you. Do it now.' The complaining Jack was helped up to take an unsteady stand. 'What now?'

'Holy roller,' gasped Elvis, who was standing behind them.

Rex turned to him. 'Can you see it?'

'Clear through, Jack. Take a look. Lordy Mr Crawdy.'

316

Rex took a look. Jack's outline shimmered electric blue. But through the suit the scene below was clearly visible as the thing it truly was.

There was no great dome. No rich adornments. No floors of inlaid marble. No pleasure palace of human chandeliers and perfumed fountains. A blood-red sky hung above a terrible wasteland of blasted earth.

Crawford was still there bobbing around. The camera teams were still there and so were the soldiers. The crowd still swayed. But where Wormwood should have been standing something hideous heaved and throbbed. It bore Wormwood's head, but it was vast and reptilian. It spread away, seeming to penetrate the earth and trail off into the crimson heavens. It was a dark scaly mass. It was the opposite of all which was known, safe and normal. It was very nasty indeed.

'What can you see?' Jack called down. 'What am I missing?'

'Put your arm up,' Rex told him. 'Look through.'

Jack slowly raised his right arm to his face and stared into it.

'The Glamour,' said he.

'The what?' Elvis waved his arms in the air. 'What is all that?'

'Enchantment,' said Jack. 'The Glamour, a variation of gramarye or glaumerie, old Scottish. First undoubted use of the word was in the eighteenth century in Ramsey's The Gypsy Counties. A kind of mesmerism cast over the senses so that things are, or are not perceived, according to the wishes of the enchanter. Fascinating. Quite fascinat-ing. One would generally need to use a fairy ointment made from four-leafed clovers to break the spell. But how, here, I don't understand.'

'How could we walk up walls, dissolve handcuffs? It's all an illusion.'

'But the faerie?' gulped Jack. 'Fairies don't exist.'

'Fairies, demons, devils, men in black. Each culture has its bogeymen. Each with a new name in keeping with

317

the current fashion. The present belief system. But under the guise it is always the same bogeyman. The negative.'

'I get it.' Jack did. Elvis didn't. 'Living in the now. Always in the now. No past, no future. Only the present.'

'And always the same bogeyman.'

'Please explain,' Elvis implored. 'I'm just a down-home boy at heart.'

'It's like this, chief . . .' the sprout piped up. 'You see . . . how can I put this ... I mean, well, you know when you . . . er . . .'

'Should I best not bother with it, Barry?'

'Best not, chief.'

'Just one small point, though.' It was that look of enlightenment once more. 'Does Crawford get it? Because if he don't, he's going to blow us all to kingdom come.'

'Don't quite know where you're coming from there, chief.'

Elvis sighed. 'Think about it, green buddy. We can see what Crawford's really dealing with, but Crawford can't see what Crawford's really dealing with. And that thing down there sure looks pissed off to me.'

'Something's happening,' cried Jack. 'Look up there. What's that?' It was the column of light they had seen when they approached the pleasuredome. Now it seethed and swam with uncatalogued colours. Twisting between earth and sky.

Crawford didn't see it. Or if he did, he wasn't letting on. He was far too busy strutting his stuff.

'You never caught on,' he crowed at Wormwood. 'I let you get on with it. But I have controlled it all. Controlled you. You danced to my tune. I am the military. I am Bio-tech. I am the power.'

'He's got the ranting off perfect now,' Elvis remarked. 'It's a pity Cecil's not here to see it.'

Jonathan raved on. 'You infected the computer matrix with your monsters, but I winkled you out. You're where I want you now. All together in the one shell.' As he

318

danced around the frozen president, Wormwood's head turned with him, rotating upon its silicone neck. Finally, when he could stand it no more, which wasn't long, he spoke. But it was not his voice. It was the voice of the many which dwelt within him. The voice of Legion. It was very basso prof undo.

'I AM LEGION WE ARE MANY.'

'You are yesterday's news,' sneered Jonathan, displaying his remote control once more. 'And this is the auto-destruct.'

'Don't do it!' This was another chorus of voices. Those of Elvis, Rex and Jack.

Jonathan pressed the button.

Now one might have expected a devastating explosion of nuclear proportions. But one would be betting on a wrong'n there. Because, let's face it, if a blockbuster like that was on the cards, then Jonathan would certainly have taken himself off to the bomb-proof bunker, now wouldn't he?

It was more like the pop of a champagne cork. Appropriately festive. Wormwood's snarling head shot up into the air. It reached the apex of its flight somewhat eye to eye with Elvis, who offered it a cheery wave as it headed on down.

'The shit's gonna hit,' said the astute Mr Presley. And it did.

The pleasuredome dissolved into nothingness. The three men on a balcony became three men plummeting groundward. The crowd ran screaming (which was incidently the title of Jack's third bestseller). The earth moved. And how. There were thunderings and light-nings. A weeping and a wailing and a gnashing of teeth.

The black beast of the pit rose up. Swelling into the sky. Jonathan backed away squawking like a lunatic.

'IT IS OURS WE PREVAIL.'

Legion's words shook the ether. Howled through the void. The great domed head rose, black-eyed and fear-some. From the mouth parts snakes coiled and thrashed.

319

It was the head of Lord Cthullu. The Great Old One that can never die.

'ALL IS OURS WE PREVAIL.'

'The shit just hit,' said Elvis. 'Anyone care to join me in a chorus of "My Way" before the roll is called up yonder?'

Rex shrugged. 'This isn't the way I'd planned it. OK. And now the end is near and so . . .'

'What's that?' Jack asked.

' "My Way", ' said Rex. 'Surely everybody knows "My Way".'

'No. Not that. That up there.' Jack pointed towards the column of light which still pulsed and flashed away. But now within it something was taking shape, solidifying.

'It's . . . it's . . .'

'It's a 1957 Pontiac, isn't it?' said Rex.

Jack shook his head. 'Lincoln,' said he. 'Continental I960.'

'Looks more like a Buick 6 to me, chief.'

'Buick 6 my ass,' said Elvis. 'What you see there is a Thunderbird. My Thunderbird.'

'IT certainly IS,' brroomed the cosmic T'bird, for it was none other. 'Hi ELVIS. LONG TIME NO SEE. what's HAPPENING GUY?'

'Hi.' Elvis waved foolishly. 'Never said a goddamn thing when I used to drive it,' he told his

dumbfounded companions.

'To be quite frank,' said Jack. 'I wasn't expecting a Thunderbird.'

'There's folks getting out,' said Elvis. 'Don't they look kinda familiar?'

Rex nodded. 'It's the heads of state from the UN.'

'Small world, huh?'

'WE PREVAIL,' screamed the beast. 'DO YOU HEAR ME? IT IS OURS WE PREVAIL

320

and so forth. (It's a bit hard to do echoes in print.)

'And who exactly is this "we"?' Britain's lady PM and all-prevailing goddess enquired.

The black beast swayed towards her. It came and went in a maelstrom of whirling energy.

'We gave you fair warning, sport,' said Larry Minogue. 'Maintain the status quo, we said. Share and share alike.'

One by one the Godheads of state issued from the glittering Thunderbird. It was very Steven Spielberg really and not a little Stephen King.

'We have an agreement about this sort of thing,' Finn MacCool explained. 'We've told you before. This is the nineteen nineties. Democracy and things of that nature.'

'And business,' Baal chimed in. 'Don't forget business. If we can't run this planet at a profit, what hope is there for any of us? It's a competitive universe out there.'

'THERE IS NO HOPE FOR YOU.'

To Mega Therion foamed and thrashed and carried on fit to bust, as they say.

'ALL DIE NOW - ALL DIE NOW.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' scolded Mrs Hecate. 'No-one dies now. Whoever heard of such a thing. Gods cannot die as you well know. Nap a mite perhaps. But not die.'

'GOTTERDAMMERUNG!'

'You've got a what?' And who said she didn't have a sense of humour?

'Gotterdammerung,' said Larry. 'It's a town near Darwin. From the Abo word meaning koala fart. It's koala fart, ain't it mate?'

'IT IS THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS.'

Larry nudged Hecate. 'Two fast bowlers short of a test team, eh?'

'Mind who you're nudging, please.'

'It's been a funny old day,' said Jack Doveston. 'I don't know quite what I expected. But it wasn't this.' Rex and Elvis shared shrugs. 'They'll change all this in the movie,' said Elvis. 'You

321

can't have the lead characters just sitting around doing nothing.'

Rex patted the lad on his now less than golden shoulder. 'Give it time,' he advised. 'It's far from finished yet. You'll still save the world. Just you wait.'

'You guess? Hear that, Barry? Rex says I'll save the world. Is that cool or what?'

'It's cool, chief.'

'Now, are you going to come quietly or is there going to be a lot of fuss?' Hecate PM made with the folded arms and the stamping foot. 'We are waiting.'

'Midnight,' cried the beast in the voice of Wormwood. 'The Millennium is upon you. Return to your countries and watch them burn. Gods die when there are none to worship them. You are too late. The game is mine.'

'He's talking missiles,' groaned Elvis. 'What time have you got Rex?'

'Eleven fifty-five.'

'Aw shit.'

'That's it,' said the lady who was not for turning. 'Larry, kindly fetch the McGuffin.'

'I thought you had it, dreamboat.'

'Larry! The McGuffin!'

'Here you go then.' Larry brought out a vacuum cleaner. It was one of those wonderful old chrome spaceship-style numbers, much beloved by the likes of Sir John Betjeman. It even had all the original attach-ments.

'Plug it in, please.'

'Where shall I stick it?'

'Larry, this is neither the time nor the place.'

'Here you go then.'

'Kindly read the prepared statement if you will.'

'Okedoke. Wayne L. Wormwood. Earthly embodiment of Beelzebub. Also answering to the name of Satan, Lucifer, Diabolus, Father of Lies, Prince of Darkness, Old Serpent, Apollyon, Abaddon, Ahriman, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Spirit of Evil, Mephistopheles, His Satanic

322

Majesty, Old Nick, Old Scratch, Old Horny, Old Cloutie and He of the Cloven Hoof. Also incorporating Legion. Names here listed. We won't waste time on that. The Heavenly Council find you guilty of acts unbecoming. Failure to get the approved pink chitty before embarking upon a course of world domination. What say you to these charges and the other seventy-five I have yet to get stuck into?'

'Suck my scaly cock!' The beast produced this not inconsiderable member and waggled it provocatively.

'And that's quite enough of that. Pray continue, Larry.'

'Cheers. You are sentenced to be swept up by the Cosmic Hoover and confined to the dustbag for a period of one thousand years. Revelation 20:2.'

'It don't say that in Revelation, does it Jack?' Elvis asked.

'It's open to interpretation. But it's near enough. Golly gosh.'

Mrs Hecate switched on the Hoover. The Hoover went suck in a cosmic fashion and the horrible beast, shrieking, howling, wagging its wanger and under no small pro-test, collapsed obscenely in on itself and was swallowed up by the ingenious flanged snout arrangement, which is generally used for rooting the dust out of pleated curtain pelmets.

'You really had to see that to appreciate it,' said Jack.

'Or believe it,' Rex added.

'I saw it, but I . . .'

'We know, chief.'

Larry unplugged the Hoover from wherever he had plugged it in and rewound the flex. 'Here's till the next time,' said he. 'I'd better be getting back to Oz. Don't want to miss the New Year barby. Got a few cricketing chums coming over and Joe Bugner said he might drop in.'

'Yokel.' Hecate turned away and called up to the three men who were sitting on a rock wondering whether they

323

should applaud or what. 'We'll leave it with you then, Rex. I'm sure you can manage. Goodbye Mr Doveston, Mr Presley.'

Rex waved. Elvis and Jack waved. The Godheads of state climbed back into the Thunderbird and drove off into myth, legend and popular theology. The way most of them do.

'Well,' said Jack, 'well, I never did.'

Heads were beginning to appear here and there. Amongst them was that belonging to Jonathan Crawford. Rex, Jack and Elvis slid down a greasy bank and strode towards him. The young yobbo climbed to his feet and dusted down his clothes.

'And good riddance to them,' said he.

Rex approached him. 'You're taking this remarkably well.'

'Well?' Jonathan straightened his tie. 'And why not? It was a foregone conclusion, wasn't it? Wormwood shot his bolt. Serves him right is all I can say. All that Satanic stuff. It's so medieval. This is the age of the computer. This is the modern world.'

Rex smiled upon him. 'Your world, you're thinking.'

'And why not? Here, let me show you something.'

Jonathan fished his remote control from his pocket.

'OK Jack,' said Elvis, 'you're a smart-assed bastard. What's he going to do with that?'

Jack scratched his chin. 'Self-destruct?' he said hope-fully.

'No,' said Rex. 'Think about it. Whose dream are we in?'

Headshaking became all the rage.

'Mine,' said Jonathan. He index-fingered the control. 'And lo.'

'Crikey,' said Jack. 'I never expected that either.'

They were all once more in the pleasuredome. Stand-ing in the presidential manse. Chandeliers shone. Music played. Fountains did likewise. Rich people picked them-selves up from the floor and tried to pretend that nothing

324

had happened. 'Some acid,' said one of the Gadarene Swine.

'A little innovation of yours?' Rex asked.

'Exactly. Frequency, Rex. Like I told you. Everything vibrates at a particular frequency. Molecules, matter. Even space and thought. Once you've worked out the frequency you're rolling. You can control the lot. A bit of temporary feedback when I popped Wormwood's head. But it all worked out for the best, didn't it?'

'You've got less than three minutes,' said Rex. 'Worm-wood launched the missiles at midnight. The Nuclear Holocaust Event. Half the world gone. If you are in control you had better stop it.'

'Stop it?' Jonathan roared with laughter. 'Stop it? I set it up. Those are my missiles. How many times do I have to tell you? I am the military. I run things. I allowed Wormwood enough rope to hang himself. Now all the others go with him.'

'The Gods,' Elvis gasped. 'He wants to kill the Gods.'

'The guy is barking,' said Jack.

'Hardly. You haven't been paying attention. You can-not kill the Gods. You can only put them to sleep for a while. Gods exist only as long as there are those to believe in them. Overthrow the temples. Wipe out the faith and the Gods sleep. Everything obeys some universal law or other. Even the Gods. I am going to give them a well-earned rest. They have disposed of Wormwood. I am disposing of them.'

'But all those people,' Elvis cried, 'all those people, for pity's sake.'

'People are crap,' said Crawford. 'There'll be enough left after the holocaust. Banged up in their bunkers. The Big Three can share out the spoils. I control Buddhavision. If I can't be president, then I'll be the Dalai Lama.'

'You,' said Rex. 'It wasn't Wormwood. It was you.'

'But I'm not in your history books. How do you explain that?'

'I don't.'

325

'I do,' said Gloria Mundi. For it was suddenly she.

'What do you want?' Jonathan asked. 'I fired you.'

'Gloria,' said Rex.

'It's your sister,' said Elvis. 'Hi Gloria.'

'It's who?'

'Rex's sister, Jack. I met her in the last book. Some honey, huh?'

'Gloria Mundi? What kind of name is that?'

'I am peeved,' said Gloria and she certainly looked it. 'Half a paragraph on page 34. A sentence on page 100. A reference on page 311.'

'A mention on page 24,' said Rex helpfully.

'Well, it really won't do. And where is your dear wife, Rex?'

'I think she'll be here any moment.'

'Then I'll get my bit in now. You!' she pointed at Jonathan. 'You are in very big trouble. You just wait till your father gets here.'

'My father? What do you know about my father?'

'Enough. And he's not pleased. Why do you think I was brought back here? Why do you think Rex was brought back here?'

'Wormwood brought me back,' said Rex.

'Oh no he didn't.'

'Rex has this theory,' said Jack.

'I've heard his theory. Rex always has a theory. Surely you've learned that.'

'Well I . . .'

'Shut up,' shouted Jonathan. 'All of you shut up. This is my show. My dream. I can cash you out whenever I please. No loose ends.'

'Too many loose ends,' said Gloria. 'A mess, all of it.'

'You'd better say your piece now, Gloria,' Rex advised. 'Time is running out.'

'He's to blame.' Gloria pointed the finger of shame at Elvis.

'Me?' The King stepped back in shock. 'What'd I do?'

'You improvised.'

326

'Yeah. Sure I did. But I had this revelation. I was on a divine mission. Destroy the Antichrist and save the world from the nuclear holocaust. Rex, tell her.'

'Don't listen to him. By faking your own death and going on the rampage you changed history. You dropped me right in it. In your pool as it hap-pened. And you gave this little shit (Jonathan again) the opportunity he'd been looking for to go out on his own.'

'You lied to me,' whined Jonathan. 'You told me you could get me into the future. Wait till my brother gets here, you said. He'll sort it all out.'

'You brought me back?' Rex turned upon his sister. 'Why?'

'To serve you right. As I got dumped on I didn't see why you should get away with it. I put your name up as the ideal Tomorrowman.'

'Me?' Rex turned a bitter eye on Jack Doveston.

'Er, scuse me,' Elvis interrupted. 'But all this dumping on and shit. Call me a dumb son of a bitch . . .'

'You're a dumb son of a bitch,' chorused the cast of thousands.

Elvis gave a serious lip curl. 'OK. Fine. Call me that. But who brought you back, Gloria? It wasn't Wormwood. It wasn't Crawford. It wasn't the gods of God knows where. Was it you, Jack?'

'Not me,' said Jack, all innocence for once.

'Then who in the word of four letters was it?'

'It was me.' There was a scratching and a scraping and a knackered-looking curricule, walking upon two un-certain birdlike legs, limped through the crowd.

'Aw shit!' cried Jonathan. 'Dad.'

'Dad?' Elvis threw up his hands in defeat. 'Who's dad?'

'I am the controller,' said the controller. 'And that hooligan is my wandering boy.'

'The controller.' Elvis thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. 'The dude with the big flywheel and all that hokum.'

327

'All that hokum, yes.' The ancient ground his shrunken gums.

'The family firm not good enough for you, Jonathan? You had to strike out on your own. Use all our knowl-edge. Bring the firm into disrepute.'

'Change things.' Jonathan took to ranting once more. 'You fiddled about. Let it all go to pot. I went out and did it. You should be proud of me.'

'Proud? You did it all for your own greed. We serve mankind. That is our duty.'

'Serve mankind? Ha ha ha. You've got the contract with the Big Figure.' ('God,' said Elvis. 'Of course, chief. We know that.') 'He lets all the scenarios run, one after another. You try them all out. Entertain him. Then when each one fouls up you rewind. Start it all off again. You don't serve mankind. Mankind is just an entertainment. Always was. But now the show's over. Time just ran out.'

Elvis checked his watch with Rex. 'It just did,' they agreed.

'Counting down,' said Jonathan. 'All systems locked.'

'Go on then, Elvis,' said Rex. 'Do something.'

'Me? What can I do?'

Rex shrugged. 'Why don't you punch his lights out?'

'Yeah. Why not?' Elvis stepped forward.

'Holy God.' Jack gazed down at his groin. 'There's a dog's head coming out of my crutch.'

'Hi Rex,' woofed Fido. 'Hey Christeen, I've found them, they're here.'

'And about time too.' The dog and its mistress stepped from Jack's suit.

'Neat trick,' said Jonathan. 'But too late now.'

'Rock off.' Elvis stepped forward and punched Jonathan's lights out.

'Don't come near me.' Elvis examined his fist. He hadn't said that. 'Where am I?' he asked.

'You know where you are. You're in the bunker beneath the Pentagon. You've come to kill me.'

328

'Kill you?' Elvis focused his eyes. He was staring at Wayne L. Wormwood. 'But you're dead.'

'You'd like me to be. You're the assassin. I know you. You've tried to kill me again and again.'

'Yeah sure. But . . .'

'You won't get me.' Wormwood's hand was hovering above a big red button.

The big red button.

'You've driven me to this. Driven me mad.'

'What am I doing here, Barry?'

'I think it's an alternative, chief. Another possible ending. When you punched out Crawford you stepped into it. I think.'

'Hey buddy.' Elvis hailed the would-be button-pusher. 'Let's talk about this.'

'Talk? Talk? You won't get me to talk. I'm the presi-dent. All I've ever done was for the good of all. Why me? Why try to kill me again and again?'

'You're the bad guy, for pity's sake.'

'It's not him, chief. It's the other one.'

'Who said that?'

'What other one, Barry?'

'The one that isn't the Antichrist. The real Wormwood. He's a good guy.'

'There ain't no real Wormwood. Is there?'

'Aw shit, chief. This is what Rex was talking about. You've got to stop him pushing that button.'

'Hey pal,' Elvis called cheerily. 'Don't push that button. Let me explain. There seems to have been some kind of mix-up.'

'Mix-up? Mix-up?' Wormwood had those crazy eyes. But the sprout was right. He wasn't the Devil. He was just a man. The real Wayne L. Wormwood.

'Listen fella. It's the New Year. You don't wanna push no buttons.'

'You haunt my dreams. You have driven me to this.'

'Me? No. Tell him, Barry.'

'You tell him, chief.'

329

'Who said that? How many are there of you? You're possessed. That's it. The Devil is in you. I should have known. The world must be purged of you. And now. Better that we all die.'

'You can't reason with the guy,' whispered Barry. 'All those assassination attempts have driven him over the edge. He's going to push the nuclear button because of you. Best punch his lights out, chief. Save the world, eh? Now would be the time.'

The president reached towards the button.

'Look out behind you,' cried Elvis.

The president spun around.

Elvis stepped forward and threw the big big punch.

The president slumped to the floor in a crumpled heap.

And all over the world bells chimed in the twenty-first century.

Elvis breathed a very big sigh of relief.

'You did it, chief.'

'I did? I did. Barry, I did it.'

'You did it, chief. You saved the world. You changed history. You did it.'

'I did. I did.' Elvis clapped his hands together. 'Barry. I just saved the world.'

'You're a goddamn prince, chief.'

'I'm a goddamn King.' Elvis punched at the sky. Turned around and sat down.

Sat down on the big red button.

'Aw chief.'

'Aw Barry.'

'Aw sh . . .'

'Ha ha ha ha ha. Fooled you.' Jonathan sprang to his feet. 'He walked right into it. Just like he had to. You can't change history. Everybody knows that. Even him.' Jonathan pointed at his dad. 'You can only manipulate the present. Wormwood had to be in that place at that time for the big button push. History records it. Doesn't it, Rex?'

330

Rex nodded sadly. 'But not the details. Seems like you win.'

'Yes. It seems like that, doesn't it?' Jonathan smiled sweetly.

'Except that you don't.'

'Oh don't I though?'

'The future,' said Rex. 'You're still not in it. You never were. Not even a footnote.'

'He gets a mention in my book,' said Jack. 'I change his name, of course.'

'You just went off the shelves, buddy. I publish you, remember?'

'You still lose,' said Rex. 'That's it.'

'No.' Jonathan flapped about. 'I don't lose. I've got media coverage. I'm on TV.'

'Can't see any news teams,' said Jack. And indeed there were none to be seen. 'I expect they're covering news from the president's bunker about now.'

'I recall the footage,' said Rex. 'The Nuclear Holocaust Event. Big world news. Nothing about you or this pleasuredome. I expect it all goes up in the blast. Or perhaps it's just a bit of history that never really hap-pened.'

'No. No. I set this up. I made history. I am history.'

'You're a pain in the ass,' said Gloria. 'One more line. Is that all I get?'

'It's over,' said Christeen. 'Best go home with your father now, Jonathan.'

'Just try and make me.' Jonathan pressed circuits on his wrists. 'Just try.'

The controller twiddled knobs upon his curricula. Jonathan's wrists fused. 'You really are a naughty little boy,' said he.

'No!' shouted Jonathan. 'And no and no and no. You won't get me. I shall return.' He lurched forward, thrusting Gloria into Rex. Forced his way past Christeen and plunged at Jack.

Jack threw up his hands and Jonathan passed into

331

the Tomorrowman and was gone. 'He's gone,' Jack belched. 'Bloody Hell. This suit.' Rex held Christeen. 'Where did he go? Forward? He's

escaped.' 'I wouldn't be too sure.'

'Ha ha ha ha ha.' Jonathan swam through time. 'Even better,' he chuckled. 'They're all back there. The lot of them. I know where they came from and I know where I'm going. And it will all be mine.'

'All of what?' Rambo Bloodaxe addressed the material-ization.

'And who's this?' asked Deathblade Eric.

'I do believe it's a present, Eric.'

'A present, Rambo?'

'A present. As in past, present and future. It's the sacrificial offering.'

Eric hauled Jonathan to his feet. He grinned ruthlessly into the lad's face. 'We got this part last time,' he explained. 'It's what we do best. It isn't subtle but . . .'

'Shall I be mother, Eric?'

'No,' croaked Jonathan. 'Let me explain.'

'Let's eat,' said Rambo. 'We haven't had a good meal since I don't know when.'

'Is that it?' Rex asked. 'I mean, is it over?'

'I think that's about it.' The controller cranked up his controls. 'If you'll just give me a bit of a wind up, I'll be heading back.'

'But your son?' Christeen turned the key. 'You need a bit of flux on this,' she added.

'My son? He will have learned his lesson. He can't die in the future. He'll be down amongst the Inter-rositers by now. Remember that computer you saw just before you came back into the past?'

Christeen nodded.

'Jonathan builds that. It's the new flywheel, micro-processed. One of his own little innovations. He really is

332

a clever little innovator. I suppose this is all my fault really. I should have listened to him. He wanted to update the system, computerize, modernize. But I wouldn't have it. Old habits die hard. And mine are very old indeed. That's why he ran off. But I shall give him his head now. Let him rebuild the entire operation. He won't foul up again. I will see to that.'

'Well,' said Rex. 'And well again.'

Gloria was appalled. 'So that's it? That is all I get?'

'What more do you want?' the controller asked. 'It's got a reasonably happy ending. The gods are appeased. You can go back home now. Pity about the Nuclear Holocaust Event. But you can't have everything.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Jack. 'I survived. Rex said I didn't.'

Rex shook his head. 'You've got me on that one, Jack. The blurb in your final book says that you were run down by a big truck on New Year's Eve 1999. Must be a misprint.'

'Phew,' said Jack. 'And I really thought I lost out.'

It really wasn't fair. The big truck simply materialized out of nowhere. No-one saw it coming. Especially Jack Doveston.

Evidently Byron and Mr Smith, even with the aid of Jonathan, had not yet quite ironed out all the little wrinkles Inter-rositer-wise.

'Look out,' screamed Ella Guru, slamming on the brakes. But it was all too late.

'Aw Jack.' Spike climbed down from the cab to view Jack's head which was protruding from beneath one of the big big wheels.

'Jack, I'm so sorry.'

'It hasn't ruined the suit, has it?' Christeen asked. 'It's our only way home.'

Spike gaped up at her. 'That's a bit dispassionate, isn't it? There's a dead man here.'

'The suit will be fine,' said the controller, engaging gear

333

and setting off. Trans-dimensional. No creases. Just step through. I'll have someone pop it round to the cleaners tomorrow. Bye.'

'Bye,' said Rex, waving lamely. 'Some part I had.'

'Some part you had.' Gloria raised her voice once more in anger.

'What about Jack?' Spike pointed towards the defunct author.

'Please keep out of this,' said Christeen.

'Keep out of this?' Spike sprang to her feet. 'Who are you, anyway?'

'I am Christeen,' said Christeen. 'Rex's wife, as it happens. Not that it's any of your business.'

'Wife?' Spike turned upon Rex. 'What is this? I'm your wife. You've got two children at home wondering where their father is.'

'Two children?' gasped Rex.

'Two children?' Christeen delivered a weltering blow to Rex's head.

'Don't hit my husband.'

'I'll hit you in a minute.'

'Oh yeah? Just you try it.'

'Where am I?' said Jack Doveston. 'What happened?'

'Jack. You're alive!'

'Hello Spike. Must be this magic suit. What a happy ever after, eh?'

Rambo stuck his head out of Jack's chest. 'Hello,' said he. 'Has anyone seen our lunch?'

In the Flying Swan, Brentford, Jim Pooley turned the page.

'And is that how it ends?' he asked.

Omally returned from the bar and placed a pint of Large before him. That's it.'

'Most unsatisfactory.' Jim took a small sip and then a much larger one. 'Never ended all up in the air like that in any of our books.'

Omally pulled a face. 'Oh I don't know. Rankin killed

334

us off at least twice to my reckoning. It's typical of the fellow. Probably supposed to be avant-garde or one of those literary lads. It's got more holes in it than a pair of Norman's Y-fronts.'

'Well, I shan't buy it.' Pooley took up the purloined proof and consigned it to the spittoon.

'Ah well.' Omally took up his pint. 'Here's to a happy New Year. Drink up, Jim. It's your round next.'

'Last orders, gentlemen,' called Neville from the bar. 'And I do mean last, they've just called the four-minute warning.'

'Six more over here,' cried Jim Pooley.

Rankin pulled the page from the typewriter and worried at the bad spellings with his biro. 'I think that's quite enough trick endings,' said he. 'The secret is in knowing just where to stop.'

'And you can stop right there.' Elvis appeared at the French windows. 'You and me got words to say.'

'You tell him, chief.'

'I will. You can't leave me like this. I had a whole trick ending of my own worked out with the Gadarenes' computer. I got fans out there and they ain't gonna be too pleased about you having me blow up the world. And what about Mother Demdike, huh? Where did she go? And if Jonathan was the controller's son, then how come . . .' A fat hand fell upon the King's shoulder.

Elvis turned to view its fat owner. 'And who the sweet mercy are you?'

'The name's Sam Maggott,' said Sam Maggott. 'Memphis PD. And I hereby arrest you on the following counts. That you did conspire with one Hugo Rune to murder Sir John Rimmer, whom you did then substitute for yourself in order to fake your own death and pick up \$4,000,000 life insurance. Tax evasion. Unlicensed hand-ling of a 7.62mm M134 General Electric Minigun. The murder of Lefty Malone, blown up by you in Grand Central Station. The murder of Cecil the henchman. Shit,

335

fella, I got eight attempted assassinations of the president. This list is as long as a donkey's dongler. You want I should continue, or just read you your rights?'

'Do something, Barry.'

The Time Sprout did some hasty trans-dimensional thinking.

'Ask him if he's got a deportation order, chief. This is merrie England, after all.'

'Yeah buddy. You got one of those . . . what Barry said?'

Maggott made a worried face. No-one had told him he'd wind up in England. 'Hey you,' called Sam. 'Humpty-backed fella at the typewriter. That's right, I mean you.'

Rankin put his hands up. 'Roll end credits,' he said, backing from the room. 'And good night.'

'Good night?' Elvis made with the open mouth. 'He can't just leave us like this, can he?'

'Seems like he just did, chief. You want we should go back to 1958 and have another crack? I think I could just make it.'

Elvis looked back at Sam who was rooting through sheaves of paper. 'Got anything?' he asked.

'I'm sure I got it somewhere. Ah yeah.'

'What do you say, chief?'

Elvis studied the Brighton skyline. There were roofs and chimneys and nasty TV satellite dishes, the sky and the stars. A look of supreme enlightenment appeared on the King's famous face.

'Barry,' said he. 'I've just had me a revelation.'

THE END