

**DOCTOR™
WHO
NOVELLAS**

CITADEL OF DREAMS

DAVE STONE

DOCTORTM WHO NOVELLAS

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FOREWORD

Dreamweaver

Andrew Cartmel

When considering this introduction for *Citadel of Dreams* by Dave Stone, I was faced with an immediate quandary. Which to discuss, Dave or his story?

Well, first the story. This is the second in an ambitious new series of novellas or short novels from Telos Publishing that aims to expand the already sprawling saga of *Doctor Who*. For the last four decades the adventures of the Doctor have spread across the globe like an inexorable ice sheet, advancing in the form of films, comics, audio adventures, a vast wealth of television dramas and an impressive body of prose fiction.

Paperback *Doctor Who* novelisations, based on the original TV scripts, have been around since 1973 when Universal Tandem started publishing them, and original novels were given life under the aegis of Peter Darvill-Evans at Virgin Publishing in the 1990s. But the idea of *Doctor Who* novellas, permanently preserved between hard covers, is new and should whet the appetite of any enthusiast.

However, the short novel can be a tricky form. There isn't sufficient space to give deep characterisation to any but the smallest group of characters. Nor is there sufficient duration to impart an epic feel by taking the reader on a long journey (as in *Moby Dick* or *The Lord of the Rings* or one of Larry McMurtry's epic westerns). Equally there isn't sufficient brevity to achieve the snappy impact or surprise of the classic short story, as exemplified in the fiendish delights of Robert Sheckley, Fredric Brown or Roald Dahl.

The demands of the novella are compounded by the additional

challenge of the Doctor being a slippery character to write about. To convey that massive and mysterious alien intelligence in all its complexity, while maintaining an engaging surface persona, is quite tricky to pull off on the printed page. On screen it's easy when you've got the charisma of a star like Tom Baker, Patrick Troughton or Sylvester McCoy working for you.

When writing *Doctor Who* prose I've often advocated the tactic of using the seventh Doctor sparingly or concealing his presence, thereby to add to his mystique and enhance the potency of his presence when he finally does appear.

As you will see in *Citadel of Dreams*, Dave Stone pursues this policy to telling effect, and balances the abstraction and mystery of the seventh Doctor with the earthy immediacy of his companion, Ace. I particularly savoured her air of resigned disgust at those selfsame mysterioso tactics. *Affectionate* resigned disgust. You can sense her fondness for the Doctor. In his treatment of the partnership of the Doctor and Ace, Dave shows a sure command of characterisation that evokes other such great fictional partnerships as Modesty Blaise and Willie Garvin: two extraordinary loners thrown together in adversity, forming a common front against a complex and dangerous universe.

While giving life to the Doctor and Ace, Dave also animates his own creation, Joey Quine, moving him through a grotesque world to a startling destiny.

He even manages to thwart some of the supposed limitations of the novella. *Citadel of Dreams* leaves the reader with a sense of the epic, despite the brevity of the story. The writer achieves this effect through the density and complexity of the scenes and situations he presents. Of note is the way the structure of the writing starts to break down when time and speech become fragmented as the City starts to decay. In his baroque evocation of an alien world, and elsewhere, Dave's writing brings to mind the spirit of Mervyn Peake, in particular Old Man Srescht's flophouse and a beautiful throw-away line from an early draft (which was subsequently thrown away but which I'd like to preserve here): 'He drew the line in selling of the bodies for pies. The Hokesch sanitary laws were quite strict in this regard.'

More than that, the author conjures up the spirit of Russel Hoban's *Ridley Walker* when he wields a phrase like 'on distant Erth' or the writings of Jack Vance when he evokes the Hokeshi dock workers, 'and the multicoloured bandannas that denoted their status in the Guild'. Not to mention the echoes of vintage Stephen King as Dave vividly writes of Joey's awakening psychic powers, giving a gooseflesh tremble reminiscent of King's *Firestarter*.

As for the man himself, it is a cliché to refer to an author's traditional patchwork history of jobs, preferably emphasising romantic stints as a rum runner or dynamite truck driver. But Dave Stone is a far more exotic creature, a working writer, creating his own worlds vividly in prose and offering them to us to visit.

So let's join Joey Quine as he starts to unravel the mysteries lurking in the Citadel of Dreams.

Andrew Cartmel

Doctor Who Script Editor 1987 – 1989

December 2001



Citadel of Dreams

Perspective – or the lack of it – is important if one is to move and function in the world. On some cerebral level we are aware that our world is merely the tectonically solidified scrim on a glob of molten pig-iron falling toward a naturally occurring hydrogen bomb, the planar relationship between them such that it will be quite some time before it hits – but if we knew that, deep in our bones, we would creep across that crust on all fours, perpetually expecting it to heave and fragment.

We don't. Even in those places where a nearby fault line gives us periodic intimations of just how fragile our hold on the world really is, we believe that the natural state of the ground is to remain solid under our feet, that it is the job of buildings to stay upright and of mountains to be there. And when the Big One hits or the tsunami blasts those buildings away or the top of the mountain blows off, the shift in perspective is so great – amongst those who might survive – that the mind is quite often, flatly, unable to cope.

The crimes committed, on the human scale of things, in the wake of disaster can be, if not excused, in some sense explained by this. The looting in the wreckage of an earthquake, the escalating atrocities of a civil war, the mass ritual sacrifices in the city under the volcano — those involved, if not entirely blameless, are at the very least Not Guilty by reason of insanity. For this reason, a war crime is judged on a different level than, for example, a domestic murder — there is a recognition, simply, that when the house in which the murder is committed is a pile of smoking rubble, the context has changed and a large number of mental bets are suddenly off.

All in all, on the human scale of things, it is fortunate that our world exists far down on the ragged edge of a galactic spiral arm, far enough

from the singularity that forms our galaxy's core to remain unaffected by its more pronounced metatemporal effects. The effect, for the most part, follows the cause.

We have enough to contend with when the ground slips from under our feet, let alone when time slips from under our minds —

IN THE BEGINNING

It is time, now, child. After all these years, you are sufficiently grown and rested. Time to take your place. Make the City yours.

Time to wake up and be born.

BEFORE



Joey Quine woke from the Jackal Dream. He'd had it before, enough times to give it a name.

The dream was distinct and visceral, not merely visual. He had the physical and wordless sensations and experience of actually being there: out on the plains beyond the walls of Hokesh City, baking in the heat of a sun redder and older – or possibly younger – than the one he knew, the thorns of vegetation (turned in the dream from that of fogbound marshland to sparse desert scrub) prickling into his flank as he lay there, breath hitching and rasping in his lungs, desiccated insides spilled across the ground before him.

The sloughed and sliding feeling of his sun-blistered pelt. The sense of the fractured bones of the ribcage grating together, the shattered bones of his foreleg. Strangely little pain. The awareness – an awareness he could remember and articulate only later, in a waking state – that here and now his body was not human, not himself, but that of some animal, pulled down by some predator and partially gutted but still, in some tenacious manner, clinging to the last vestiges of life.

Awareness of the other, smaller shapes now moving stealthily towards him.

In a waking state, he would recognise these shapes as creatures from the Old Days, before men had come to the world, which now existed only in the private menageries of the rich who were so inclined to keep them. They were known as 'jackals', in response to a general similarity in form and behaviour to an animal that had, apparently, once been found on distant Erth.

Like so much else surviving from the Old Days there was a certain *wrongness* about them to human eyes. A set to their gait, their jaws and eyes, an unnatural sense of otherness that made the human stomach slightly sick with a fear it could not quite name.

Here and now, as they circled slowly in, as the bravest of them took its first nip, teeth flicking lightly at a still and exposed throat, they seemed perfectly natural –

– the dream had hold of him so completely that, for an instant, as he surfaced into wakefulness, some part of Joey Quine believed that it had merely shifted in the way that dreams so often do. Then the survival dictates of reality – a reality that in the here and now might be physically lethal – slammed into place. The stink and darkness of the flophouse. The hunched, rag-bedecked forms that lay immobile on the pallet bunks: asleep, insensate, dead in the night and disintegrating – or merely keeping very still and quiet in the hope that it would not be their turn next.

The hand clasped around his throat, the nails digging in. They felt a little like the teeth of the ‘jackals’ in his dream.

A face resolved before him, pressed itself closer: a boy of maybe seventeen years, barely a few years older than Joey himself, but wasted to the point of decrepitude. Brittle scrags of hair sprouted from a pockmarked scalp. A collection of sores clustered on one side of the mouth. Fevered eyes. The effect was that of accumulated, chronic illness rather than of some actual disease. There was a mark of some final extremis upon him, Joey thought: the sense of a life lived long past the point of running out and containing nothing whatsoever to lose. The state he was in, even the Outmarsh wouldn’t have him.

A hand, presumably the twin of the one around his throat, insinuated itself through the layers of Joey’s clothing, searching for anything portable that might be of value.

‘You lie there still, yes?’ the mouth in the face said, the sickly reek of half-chewed *kamo* leaf wafting from it. ‘You be nice.’

The hand became increasingly personal. This had gone on long enough.

For all the fifteen years of his own life spent scavenging on the streets of Hokesch, Joey still possessed most of his faculties and a certain wiry strength. This nocturnal assailant, wasted as he was, was no match. Without bothering to snarl, grunt or make any other sound at all, Joey simply raised his own hands to grasp the boy by the ears and, heedless of what he might catch, wrench the sickly face down to smash it into his own forehead. There was the crack and wetness of a nose breaking – at least, Joey hoped the wetness was from a nose and not some bursting sore. His would-be assailant whimpered.

Joey shoved the stunned boy away from him. ‘You get away from me. Touch me again, I’ll kill you.’ A veteran of any number of such surreptitious attempts at robbery, from both sides, he knew that matters should now have been settled. It was the job of the sickly-looking boy to slink off now (rather like a beaten ‘jackal’) and leave Joey to go back to sleep again, albeit with only one eye closed.

Indeed, that might have been the case, had not the sickly-looking boy brought along a friend.

Something smacked into the side of Joey’s face, hard enough to loosen several teeth. Head spinning, he saw another form resolve itself from the yellow and purple splotches detonating behind his eyes. A Dracori, he realised dispiritedly, and wasn’t that just his luck?

The Dracori, Joey remembered, vaguely, when he ever thought about such things, had been the original people of the world, before men had come from distant Erth. In the past, apparently, there had been any number of conflicts between human and Dracori, as one faction or the other busily attempted to wipe the other or the one out. These days – in the living memory of Joey Quine, at least – there tended to be no particular distinction between the breeds on any other level than, say, the colour of a human man’s hair or whether or not he wore spectacles.

Of course, spectacles for a being with several hundred eyes plastered over its upper promontory like suppurating frog spawn had to be thought of in terms of a *multiplicity* rather than a pair, and were a major piece of optical engineering. And clothing in the human sense was more or less optional for Dracori, whose tentacular mass was more suited to a variety

of complicated leather harness that no human being would ever wear, at least in public. And the fact that even the weakest Dracori was, physically, twice as strong again as the strongest human man, was something of a given.

This Dracori appeared to be as unhealthy as its human associate; several eyes and pseudopodia were missing and there was a general sense of *rotteness* about it as opposed to the more usual mucoid sheen. All the same, as several more-or-less intact tentacles whipped down, pinning Joey to his bunk, he knew that there was no way he'd be getting up again.

'Hold him down,' said the pale boy. He grinned, as though recalling something quite delightful that had been momentarily forgotten.

'Got someone to show you,' he said to Joey in a quietly friendly if rather clotted manner, blood still bubbling from one nostril of his injured nose. 'Say hello to my girl Kari.'

If the dagger he produced had actually been a girl, thought Joey, then she would probably not have been the best of company, the blade being dull and entirely missing the point. As a weapon it seemed far less useful as a slicing implement than as a saw. As the sickly boy advanced once more, Joey heaved against unyielding Dracori tentacles and pitched his head from side to side, casting around desperately for any means of escape and finding none.

And then —

There was no sense of revelation, no sense of relief. There was merely — recollection. The sense of idly remembering some vaguely interesting fact that had momentarily slipped one's mind. Of noticing some small but precious item amongst one's personal possessions, long fallen into the disuse of familiarity, and testing the compact weight of it, once again contemplating its use.

Joey Quine recalled, simply, without feeling much about it either way, that he was looking for escape in the wrong direction entirely —

— and the light of predawn cast its nimbus on the Hokesk skyline as

Joey fled the flophouse. The flophouse was ostensibly a charitable concern funded by the estate of the late City Alderman Crarahi ta lek Mamonan as a Hostel for the Aid and Succour of Deserving Itinerant Youth, but in fact was merely a tract of hastily converted wharfside warehouse space. Said conversion had consisted of dragging in pallets and the occasional consignment of straw, leaving the balance of the late City Alderman's funding to settle in the pocketbooks of the estate's trustees. Amongst such Deserving Itinerant Youth as it purported to shelter and serve, it was known merely as the Hole.

Behind him, through the door before it swung itself shut, Joey caught the flicker of gaslight. This said something in itself. If Old Man Srescht — who ran the flophouse, after a certain fashion — thought it was worth expending so much as a penny on illumination, then it must be lighting some major occurrence indeed.

Despite their immediacy, the events of the past short while were becoming, in some quiet but not entirely natural manner, increasingly distant. Without making much of a connection with himself, Joey now noted the shouts that were coming from within, the muffled sounds of struggling bodies, a constant and terrified screaming from one particular mouth. In the confusion, he thought vaguely, nobody was going to notice that one Joseph Quine was missing. Nobody had ever cared enough to notice he was there in the first place, after all.

The fortified hulks of trading vessels loomed off the quay, dark and dormant, still asleep for the night. Joey knew better than so much as to think of disturbing them; who knew what they might eat to break their fast on being woken?

Cautiously, aware that the Hokesh wharfside was itself the night-time haunt of those too derelict or degenerate even to find a place in Old Man Srescht's Hole, Joey avoided the dark alleyways between the warehouses and picked his way along the rope-strewn dockside. Even the buildings themselves could not be entirely trusted. Once, when he was small, Joey had seen someone being eaten by a wall — flailing, mouth working in soundless and extruded agony as her loosened flesh was sucked to it and absorbed, leaving nothing but a pile of clothing.

Or perhaps he had dreamed it.

He kept away from the walls in any case, heading for the main and permanently open gateway that would take him into the hinterland, where the stevedores and porters would in some small while be stirring, and then out into the City itself.

AFTER

They do say that it was a Golden Age, in those days of the Radiant City that had once, in the common tongue of more barbarous times, been called Hokesch. The mean gutter-streets and slums of that time had long since been swept clean and swept away, and in its place was built a positive marvel of jade and porphyry, of ivory inset with tourmaline, of rose-veined marble and of gold transmuted, by alchemical procedure, expressly for the purposes of load-bearing architectural construction.

Such was the glory of it, it is said, that in hours of sunlight it would dazzle the eyes fit to blind them without the protection of smoked-glass spectacles, and that at night it was as though the stars themselves had come from the sky to congregate and dance for the delight of human eyes.

Indeed, the people of the Radiant City themselves seemed to shine, as though lit inside by some variety of secular effulgence. Such great ladies there were, and gentlemen, too, and of such stately and courtly manners that it seemed that the world entire might be a formal dance, the measure of it marking out the very divisions of prosperity of being and goodwill.

For the Radiant City was, indeed, the centre of the world: in commerce, in providence, and in all other good things besides. In the Manufactory Quarter, artisans and artificers in their thousands worked on jewellery so costly and exquisite, decorative articles so splendid and refined, mechanical devices of such a fine and marvellous complexity, that the results of their labours might have seemed created within the ethereal forges of the Dead Gods themselves! In the Provisionary Quarter the air was thick with steam and smoke from the stalls of a thousand varieties of vendor as they prepared and proffered their respective varieties of

vegetable and meat, the reek of each blending with the others in a manner that in some strange way remained harmonious and fit to make the mouth to water of even the most profound gustatory ascetic. In the Financial Quarter, those who held the keys to the treasuries and exchequers of kingdoms conversed with mathematical contrivances of such complexity and power that it was as though these men attended devotion at the temples of such Oracles as might have existed in the days of old. In the City Centre's vastly-staged hippodromes and the Thieves' Hell (the theatre district), the heroes and heroines of the world entire replayed their escapes from the clutches of fiendish and moustachioed villains.

In an alleyway leading off the Plaza of Spinning Lights, quietly and without undue fuss, a curious object appeared. It was curious in several aspects, the most profound of which, paradoxically enough, was that it elicited absolutely no curiosity at all. To those passers-by who happened to chance upon it, even those who had been watching directly as it appeared, it was simply a part of the scene. It had always been there.

Should any passer-by have decided to look closer, not that any would or had, it might have presented its second (in)curious aspect: though to all external appearances it was merely a rather shabby blue box, with nothing about it as such to remark upon, there was a sense of *solidity* about it, a sense of reality that by contrast made its surroundings themselves seem a little ghostly. It was as if some solid and definite object had been placed before a painted scene that had hitherto seemed perfect and true to life. Or rather, it was as if a hole had been torn in that painting to show the true scene beyond.

A pair of doors were set into the object's side, rather like those of a wardrobe, and now one of them proceeded to open. Had any erstwhile passers-by so much as noticed, they might have found themselves wondering just what might have emerged. In the event, and not it must be said without a certain degree of anticlimax, it turned out to be a man of smallish frame and what might have seemed a rather fussy demeanour, despite the careless rumples of the pale suit he wore.

'Always alleys,' he muttered to himself, rather than for the benefit of all those who were completely failing to take so much as the slightest

interest in him. ‘Or the equivalent. It’s not as if we couldn’t have materialised centre-stage in a production of the Threepenny Opera.’

In his hand was an umbrella more suited to the damper climates of the world, the incongruity of its presence tempered by the fact that it appeared to be borne in the manner of a cane. In his eyes, as he looked around, was a steady and somewhat piercing gaze, as though he saw straight through the alley walls and was taking in the *son et lumière* Radiant City, in all the particulars of its splendour, in its entirety.

‘It’ll have to go, of course,’ he said. ‘It’s a pity, but it’ll really have to go.’

BEFORE

If Old Man Srescht had any other name then he wasn’t telling –and neither was he telling how he had got it. Though quite self-evidently human and male, as opposed to Dracori and asexual, he was not particularly old, being barely into what he privately called the Prime of Life but what others might with far more justification call late middle-age. The point was, though, that he had been Old Man Srescht for as long as anyone who might have cared could remember, since early youth in any case. That was his name. Old Man Srescht was a fact of life.

Officially, he was employed by the trustees of the Crarahi ta lek Mamonan estate as a casual-labour caretaker for the building that housed the Hostel. Unofficially, as the only employee, it was understood that his function was basically that of a warden.

In actual fact, he was the undisputed ruler of his own little empire, personal and financial. He had no real overheads to deal with, and the pittances paid by those who spent their nights in the flophouse added up — and pay they did. It was barely, just barely preferable to spending another night rough on the streets, and for those who live on the edge even a little can make the difference between life or death.

Just so long as one avoided falling foul of the small collection of henchmen, Administrative Assistants he called them, that Old Man

Srescht retained to keep a semblance of order. This could be best achieved by endeavouring not so much as to look at them in a funny way.

Old Man Srescht's cut from the proceeds of informal robbery during the night was a pleasant little bonus. As were such possessions and items of clothing as might remain from the bodies of those who died. Old Man Srescht saw nothing wrong with this, thinking of it merely as not letting some useful resource go to waste — waste, in this sense, meaning to leave a perfectly suitable pile of clothing lying around, to be picked over and apart by those around the deceased without so much as a price.

The more clandestine of Old Man Srescht's activities were allowed to continue for the simple reason that nobody cared what happened to itinerants, least of all the City Patrol. Those who might decide to notice in the hope of being bought off, could be bought off cheaply at the local Precinct House for a matter of pennies, and so not a single patrolman had set foot inside the flophouse for years.

Now there were two of them. And not, thought Old Man Srescht, your usual uniformed thugs, barely one step away from the element they policed, though they wore uniforms of a kind. The unadorned, black kind that blotted out any sense of individuality and gave the pair of them, despite the fact of being human in form, a certain aspect of inhumanity. A Dracori, clinging to the old ways of its kind, was his brother compared with these two. They reminded Old Man Srescht of a pair of sleek, stalking carrion birds.

Old Man Srescht had heard *tell* of men like these: some kind of special division, he vaguely gathered, working directly for the City Council, who dealt with matters out of the usual remit of the Patrol. He had only heard tell of such men, of course, due to the alacrity with which such matters were usually dealt.

How could they have known? How could they have known to come so quickly?

'Well, now, you see,' Old Man Srescht said, shifting his massive, rather horrid bulk in the single chair of what had once been the office of a warehouse manager. 'Thing is, I can't let you be about disturbing my boys, not without knowing who you are. I need some kind of

identification.'

Besides, he thought, it's been barely an hour of the clock since it happened. It would not do to have these men watching as his Assistants went about the work of cleaning up – an activity to which the word 'disturbing' had seemed markedly apposite.

One of the black-clad men, alike as twins, cocked his cropped head in a thoughtful manner. It seemed to Old Man Srescht that he was listening to a voice that only he could hear. Then the man's eyes pinned Srescht again with a cold glare.

'We have identification,' he said. 'In our Precinct House there is a room reserved especially for the purposes of identification. Would you like to come with us and see that room?'

There had been no inflection to the words, Srescht thought, no sense of insinuation. It was as if the man was repeating phrases that, so someone else had told him, would have the desired effect. A veiled threat can at times be worse than a direct threat, but this was worse than both.

'I'll, ah, take you to the dormitory myself,' said Srescht.

Omnibus carriage-chains drawn by teams of miniature steam engines rattled past Joey. They were increasingly filled with the drudges of the Hokesch citizenry, the cleaners and the shovellers heading for their places of early morning work. It seemed perfectly natural that no bus slowed for him; Joey Quine quite obviously occupied a point several levels down from even that stratum of society that commonly rode the omnibus. He was the quintessential boy on the street.

Above him, the slightly more elegant trceries of monorail tracks were silent. The monorails tended to be the domain of the middle classes, the clerks and minor professional men of the City, for whom the morning started later in the day. If Joey thought about it in a certain way, he could *see* the way these patterns worked from day to day – literally, as though the City were a nest of luminous insects split open and viewed from a height. The flickering, interlinking trails of individual components shuttling back and forth through a mechanism that was greater than the sum total of its parts and —

Joey brought his mind to heel with a kind of vicious wrench. He

couldn't let himself think that way, not so soon. Not so soon after what he had done. Lose yourself in those thoughts at this point, that kind of thinking, and you'll never find your way back.

What the Thing Inside had done, back there in the flophouse.

The Thing inside him – it was hard even to *think* of it in terms of description, let alone find the words actually to describe it – was stirring, fitful in a dormancy that could not be called sleep, because sleep was a peculiarly human thing.

And the Thing Inside was nothing human. Nothing human at all. The black-clad patrolmen glanced about themselves at the dormitory with a kind of blank distaste, as though the sight was of insufficient worth even to be objectionable.

Strangely enough, despite the area of disturbed and in some cases shattered pallet beds, the vast majority of the occupants remained asleep. And although their sleep appeared perfectly natural, without the signs that spoke of unconsciousness or some chemical stupor, it seemed that nothing could be done to wake them. A pair of Old Man Srescht's Assistants, in the unwashed aprons that constituted their own variety of uniform, were quite brutally attempting to rouse a ragged-looking boy of eight or nine, injuring him quite severely in the process. The boy for his part simply lolled, the link between body and any vestige of self that might wake him entirely severed.

There were two exceptions: a human youth of around seventeen years and a Dracori, both clapped in the restraints used as the occasional punitive measure in a world where no enforcer of an actual law would ordinarily come. At first sight it would seem that neither of them was struggling against the shackles, but if one looked a little closer one might see that this was because the muscles of their limbs were straining against them with a desperate, debilitating force that it seemed might not relent this side of death.

They were covered with wounds of varying degrees, many old and long scarred-over, but the majority immediately recent. An observer, looking at those wounds, might have the uneasy sense that there was something subtly *wrong* about them and spend some moments wondering precisely what it was, before realising, given the circumstances, that he was

observing with the wrong assumptions. These were not wounds received from another hand: that of some overzealous Assistant, say, as he tried to subdue some struggling maniac. The wounds were self-inflicted. The human youth and the Dracori had been restrained to prevent them from further damaging themselves.

Human mouth and appropriate Dracori orifices had been gagged with wads of sacking, now stained with blood and ichor respectively. The intention, it seemed, had been to prevent them from biting off their own tongues and/or other appropriate appendages.

‘Why did they begin to damage themselves?’ one of the black-clad patrolmen asked Old Man Srescht without so much as a pause.

‘I, ah, don’t quite know,’ the caretaker admitted. ‘When I got down here my lads had already dealt with the — disturbance.’

Well, not exactly, he admitted even more privately to himself. The restraints had been on, but the boy and the Dracori had been shrieking and gibbering fit to peel the ears. He had ordered the impromptu gags so as to have some relative peace and quiet in which to contemplate the proper dispatch and disposal of the problem — and then the two patrolmen had turned up.

Somebody must have heard the shrieking from outside, he supposed, but just who that might have been, and how it could have been someone whose first response would be to call the City Patrol straight away, he found almost impossible to imagine.

A patrolman put his face close to the human boy, who stared back with one frantic eye. The other had been burst, possibly by a finger, either an Administrative finger or his own.

‘It is propagating,’ the patrolman said quietly.

‘Um, what?’ said Srescht.

‘No,’ said the other patrolman. ‘A reflex. Experimentation of the immature. The Seedling is merely responding to the fecund.’

The first patrolman put a hand to the boy’s mouth and pulled the sacking from it. In the way that one might fix on one small detail with perfect clarity, the mind concentrating upon it in an attempt to block out everything else, Srescht saw that a tooth, none too well affixed in the first place, had snagged on the rough material and come away with it.

It was a little like the effect of removing a set of earplugs in a room filled with the roar of machinery. The scream issued from the boy's damaged mouth instantly, a barrage of sound, seemingly without pause or need for breath. Some part of Srescht — some wishful part — expected the patrolman to slap the boy, but the patrolman merely regarded him without any particular expression. And the screaming simply stopped.

'Tell me,' the patrolman said, in the same flat and uninflected tone he had used before.

'The Broken Avatar,' said the boy in a perfectly calm and reasonable voice. 'The Magog god. He touched me. The Broken Avatar touched me all inside.'

Then his eye rolled up in his head and he began to scream again.

AFTER

Now, the lord and sovereign of the Radiant City was Magnus Solaris, who watched over his domain from the heights of the Gutter Palace. The Palace's name was of uncertain origin, lost since time out of mind, and in some ways inappropriate since it was the tallest and most glorious structure in the City, seemingly fabricated from pure gold: a massive and figurative statue of Magnus Solaris himself standing astride the great halls and plazas of the City Centre.

Its cranium it was said, by those who had had the fortune to find themselves inside it, was open to the stars, and in this Magnus Solaris made his private environs. In the chambers where, in a man, the heart would be, was the throne on which he conducted his public affairs, that is, the affairs of the Radiant City in its state. As for the rest of the torso, the spaces within were given over to the workaday business of the Court, the kitchens and the bath house and suchlike, all accessible, to those who had the privilege of such access, by the great stairwells and elevators in the legs.

Around each of these legs were gathered, standing proudly but with a

vague air of modest supplication about them, like children clustered around a benevolent but powerful father, other statues.

‘And who might these be?’ the stranger asked, standing and looking up at them in the lights of the Plaza of the Deities. The question, it seemed, was directed to the world in general, but a particular member of the crowd, a girl, found herself compelled to take it upon herself to answer.

‘The Dead Gods,’ she said. ‘The Captain and the Doctor and the other ones. They delivered us here, to the world, from distant Erth.’

‘Doctor?’ the stranger asked, suddenly all interest.

‘The Ship’s Doctor,’ said the girl. ‘It’s the Doctor, when we die, who pronounces us to be dead.’

‘Some other chap, then,’ said the stranger. ‘For a moment, there, I thought I’d forgotten something I should be remembering.’

‘Pardon?’ said the girl.

‘Don’t worry about it. And just who,’ the stranger said, looking further up towards the summit of the Gutter Palace itself, ‘is *this*?’

For a moment, the girl looked at him dumbfounded. The question had been as nonsensical as asking how one breathed or moved one’s hand. ‘Magnus Solaris,’ she said at last, simply. It seemed to be the simplest way. ‘The Gutter Palace of Magnus Solaris. It is as old as the world. He lives there.’

‘Lives there, does he?’ said the stranger, thoughtfully. ‘In the Gutter Palace built by his forefathers, no doubt. Nice to see people carrying on with the family firm.’

Again, the girl looked at the stranger as if he were mad. ‘He is Magnus Solaris,’ she said.

‘Hmf,’ the stranger said, taking her meaning. ‘Must be knocking on a bit, then. What with living in a palace, built in his image, that’s as old as the world. That’s what I’m getting at, do you follow me? Oh. You’ve gone.’

Quite contrary to following him, the stranger realised, the girl was hurrying away from him, shaking her head — though whether at the ravings of a madman or in an attempt to dislodge some new and quite terrible thought, it was impossible to say.

And it is known – by way of his lover at the time, who subsequently

reported it when certain others took it upon themselves to put her to excruciation – that at this time, in his private environs in the head of his Gutter Palace, Magnus Solaris stirred in his sleep.

It had been, she said, almost impossible to make out the words, but as he had clutched at her in dreaming fear, he had muttered to the effect that something was coming. Something terrible. Something he should be remembering.

Something, it seemed, that he had made himself forget.

BEFORE

The black-clad patrolmen strode out of the flophouse without a backward glance. It was well past dawn now, and the wharfside scene had changed markedly: the looming hulks of the fortress-barges were now alive with crewmen taking down the barricades and extending gangplanks.

On the wharf itself, Hokeshi dock workers, sporting the distinctive arrays of multicoloured bandannas that denoted status in their Guild, were establishing their barrel-trestles for trade and hauling themselves up into the hydraulic control cages of cranes.

Each side, in general, appeared to be ignoring the other, as though they happened to be about their work at a similar time by pure coincidence. It was not so much that the crews of trading vessels were forbidden to enter the City, but that they tended to keep themselves to themselves, and the dockside formed a kind of demarcation line, a figurative membrane through which trade occurred osmotically.

The two patrolmen paid all this bustle no heed, rather in the same way that having received the information they required within the flophouse they had simply turned and walked out, leaving Old Man Srescht to deal with matters in any way that he saw fit. Such matters held no interest for them whatsoever.

‘If a new Avatar is truly here,’ said one, ‘a Broken Avatar here and now, he must be found.’

‘He will be located,’ the other said, without emphasis. He was merely stating an obvious fact. ‘We shall track the path of his body through the world.’

‘At our hand he shall be found.’

(... look at the oh gods I don't think I can stand the years I worked for that miserable old sot and now he tells me don't look don't look don't look them in the eyes and they won't pain in my leg and it never goes I think there's something growing gods I could peckish for some haven't had that SMELL gods what would it be like to get my hands on those no I don't no no no I'd never do something like not again but that little bitch was oh look a penny ...)

In the morning crowds of Market Hill, Joey Quine grasped a black iron balustrade that marked the territorial perimeter of a pavement café and let it take his weight as he fought for breath. Then he lurched away, as though stung, as he caught a flash of the sheer and somewhat animal rage in the head of the proprietor. He was an interloper from some other pack and smelt wrong.

It was almost noon, now. The late summer sun beat down and warmed the world in a manner reminiscent of a drowsy fever. In a daze, Joey staggered through the stalls and stores of Market Hill, pitching and yawning as the minds in the crowd washed over him.

(... didn't mean I didn't mean to felt it moving around under my skin and I think it's what that it's too early in the day for that it...)

He had always, when he came to think about it, been aware in some vague way of the minds of those around him, a susurrations as constant and unheeded as the sound of his own pulse. It was a simple fact of existence, just as much a part of life as breathing, although it occasionally occurred to him to wonder if those around him felt it too. There were ways of blocking it out when it got too much.

This was different. The yammer of a thousand other voices filled his head and threatened to burst it open. He had never felt this way before—

But then again, he *had*, hadn't he? When he didn't remember to forget. In his memory, now that he came to examine it, there were certain ...

blanks. And not the sort that could be accounted for by drink or opiates or by having been beaten into insensibility. Experiences of that nature had occurred quite enough times for him to be able to tell the difference.

There had been times, though, when he had simply *come* to himself, sudden as the ignition of a gas lamp, to find himself standing in a patch of waste ground or sitting in some temple shrine or merely walking up the street. A clean break in the sequence of his life, with no memory of anything in particular beforehand that might have caused it. No sense whatsoever of what might have happened in the interim save for the remnants of the confusion one found in dreams.

Was he in some manner doing that to himself? Was he in some manner forcing the Thing Inside back into dormancy and then forcing himself to forget? And if so, how in the various hells could he set about starting to do it now? The thing about forcing yourself to forget, he thought bitterly through the clamour of other voices in his brain, was that you forgot what it was that made you forget about it in the first place.

Well, there were certain obvious things he *could* do — and to do any of them he needed money. Joey Quine had begged on the streets all his life that he could remember, and his body could fall into the postures and impulses of it whatever might be happening to his mind.

As a middle-aged and rather matronly woman walked past him, he recognised the sort instantly: well-dressed enough not to miss a few coppers, not so overburdened with the day's groceries as to make getting those few coppers out of her purse too much of an inconvenience, a general demeanour that suggested kindness.

Joey adopted a posture that made him seem younger, smaller and decidedly rounder-eyed than he was. 'Spare some change, missus? I caught a wicked chill the other night —' tremulous coughing guaranteed to melt the heart of a small glacier at the plight of this poor little urchin '— and I must buy medicine from a cruel doctor charging twice over the odds. It's a cold old world for those without, and no mistake.'

The woman gave him a look that told him (a) she knew perfectly well he was trying it on, but (b) his present circumstances were still obviously such as to be in need of charity. She fished about in her clutch bag (presumably wary of exposing the purse inside to the open air) and then

extracted a small silver coin and held it out.

Joey took it – and in doing so brushed one of her fingers with his own.

A minute or two later, one Joseph Quine was still standing there, bemused, holding a small silver coin, a clutch bag complete with all contents including purse, and a net bag full of *oogli* fruit, which the woman had given him on the basis that he looked as though he could use the goodness. For his chill.

The minds of the market crowd still yammered in his head as intensely as they had before, only they now seemed unimportant, by sheer contrast.

When he had touched the fingers of the woman (Mira, her name was) images, associations and memories had burst through him in an instant, as though he had touched some bare galvanistic wire of the self.

He knew, in the same way he knew all the constantly half-thought and remembered collection of things that he thought of as himself, that she had been taken in off the streets when tiny, by a couple who had been quite old but very kind, now both dead and gone.

He knew that the scent of a certain kind of face cream could send her mind hurtling back to the night spent with her third ever lover – that never to be repeated night where it all went miraculously *right*. He knew that for some reason the raspy texture of string beans combined with the taste made her gag uncontrollably. There was a stain on the wall in her kitchen that she thought nothing whatsoever about but occasionally looked at when her mind was at —

It was not that even for an instant he *became* her or that he learnt the story of her life entire. It was that, for an instant, any number of details had come together to tell him who this woman (Mira) *was*. It was like the way musical notes come together to make a single chord – and in that instant the Thing Inside saw, and told him, how he could play it.

For some small while longer, Joey simply stood there, looking at the items in his hands. This was power – the sort of Power that could be dignified with a capitalisation. Power, quite possibly, to get anything he wanted. This bore thinking about.

In a life hitherto noticeably lacking in that quality, Joey Quine had developed a healthy loathing for those who had power and for the uses

they made of it. Now, if he could but believe it, if this was not all just some dream and he was still back in Old Man Srescht's Hole with his mind spinning comforting little stories to himself while his body healed from its latest crop of bruises, he had some Power all his own. The last thing he could ever do was abuse it.

The Council Hall that occupied one side of Guild Hall Square had, like the Hall of the Guilds themselves, long since fallen into dereliction, to the point where even those without homes would not dare to venture inside. The Council, like the Guilds, had relocated itself years past. Sloater sat as he had in living memory – should anybody still be living to remember – rather primly in a cramped office, which in some manner had contrived to remain merely shabby after years of disrepair. Sloater had taken no notice whatsoever when the Council had moved to splendid, if cheaply and ineptly built, new environs in Marshalt Side – that had been a human thing and unconnected to him, though he had once, perhaps, been in some technical sense human.

That had been years ago – centuries ago now, he supposed, when he allowed himself to dwell upon such paltry things. Centuries since his exploratory party had set out from the colony ship, scouting for the ideal location for a base camp, and had literally stumbled upon something very strange indeed. For years – for centuries – Sloater had been concerned with another, and quite higher power than the merely human.

One might think that several centuries of living – or at least, several centuries of existence – might have lent Sloater a cadaverous demeanour at the very least. In fact, though there was no-one there to see, he presented the aspect of a tidy and smooth faced man, dressed in the fashions of possibly seventy years earlier, which had been the last time he had bothered to take them into account.

On the desk before him was a small leather-bound notepad, in which he was writing in characters so regular that they might have been mechanically printed, his face set in an absently thoughtful expression that might have suggested that his mind was somewhere else.

This was perfectly correct. It was in a different place entirely.

Several of them, in fact.

The boy, he thought, the Broken Avatar, was powerful but entirely undisciplined, with no hope of being trained toward useful redemption. In other circumstances, Sloater might have been perfectly willing to stand down, but the boy was quite, quite unsuitable.

A number of times over the last few years, the Power had begun to surface in the boy, and Sloater had quashed it without so much as a second thought – at least, thought in the fragment of true consciousness that Sloater regarded as himself. He had become aware of the boy's presence, out there in his City, and had simply wiped the boy's immediate memory by way of what was more or less the equivalent of a sting reflex. The boy would simply come to himself and wake up, with no memory of his thoughts and actions of the preceding days, save for the sense of vague half-remembered dreams.

Now, however, it seemed that the boy's Power was manifesting with a vengeance –and far too strongly to be dealt with by such usual automatic measures. The psychic flare, when the boy had manipulated the mind of the woman on Market Hill, had been such that it had caused a positive and lancing pain to Sloater, even here.

It was time, perhaps, to take direct and definitive action.

It was not enough, now, that the boy be watched over. Events must now be set in motion so that the boy would be removed.

It must be said, for purposes of explanation rather than excuse, that the thought of simply killing the boy or having him killed by informal means, never once crossed what Sloater might have called his own mind. By its very nature, in and of itself, the mind of Sloater was unable to comport itself in any way other than in a posture of natural events.

In the next few hours, on Market Hill:

Joey Quine walked up to a vendor selling meat on bread and learnt that the vendor was becoming increasingly worried about a crawling pain inside him that he thought might be some growing cancerous malignity. Having also learnt that said vendor had something of a blind spot about washing his hands after emptying the spitting bowl, Joey walked over to a different vendor and, with the money from the charitable woman, bought a hauler-beast kebab – though not without washing his own

hands first, in one of the pissoirs provided on Market Hill by the City Council for that especial purpose.

Mouth full of the taste of kebab and feeling slightly better about the world in general, he begged for coins from whomsoever might cross his path, learning all manner of things about those who suddenly found themselves compelled to give him all their money – until he realised that he was going about all this in quite the wrong way.

After realising this, he walked into a barber's shop and learnt that the barber, a Mr Jelks, spent his days consumed with rage at the imagined infidelities of his wife – though this was in fact a rather desperate attempt to imagine that his wife was in any way attractive to man or beast when she quite obviously wasn't. Joey walked out with his hair considerably shorter and far more extensively styled, his lice treated, his incipient facial hair shorn smooth and with an armful of vulcanised preventatives fit to last him every weekend until the end of the world or of his life, whichever came sooner.

In the store of H. Flatchlock (Prop.) & Associates, one of the City's best and most refined tailors, he learnt that Mr Flatchlock (Prop.) needed to be constantly watched over by his Associates to prevent him from becoming needlessly personal when measuring an inside leg, though this was something he learnt otherwise than by way of his Power. Joey left the tailor's a 'new' suit of clothes, and took away with him an entirely different set.

In the store of Craghri Rago Su of the Navok Clan, he learnt that the proprietor had a shameful predilection for wearing human underwear, several sets at a time and evenly distributed over a number of different limbs and appendages. He took away a brace of hauler-beast-leather valises, tentacle-stitched to the highest quality, which solved the problem of his arms becoming increasingly full.

It was a little like extortion, Joey thought, but only in the way that it seemed to be the complete opposite. People just seemed happy to give him things without quite knowing why. Possibly their minds were merely grateful for the opportunity to talk about what was on them, for all that on any wakeful level they were unaware of doing it.

With use, he found that the Power, as he supposed he must call it, could

be exercised at a small distance. A physical touch was unnecessary. The effect was not as pronounced, but strong enough to get him what he wanted – and the explosion of images came as less of a debilitating shock. Now he caught sight of his reflection in a shop-front window and received a slightly more direct and personal shock. For an instant, he couldn't recognise himself. It took a moment to realise that the reflection was his.

And then there was, looking around, the reaction of people to him. Joey didn't need some abstruse means of reading their *minds* to see that the general reaction had gone from at best distaste and at worst outright disgust, to at worst nothing in particular and at best, in several ladies and in one or two gentlemen, a sense of slightly speculative admiration. Only one thing, Joey thought, was required to complete his sudden reversal of fortune – and here he ran into something of a personal snag.

While he might know everything there was to know about sleeping under bridges and in the depths of winter, the warmth one could get in the rotting centres of middens, while he knew about flophouses and the occasional City Patrol cell, he had not the slightest idea how too about getting a room of his own. The possibility of him doing so had simply never occurred. And while he knew about those establishments that might be termed 'hostelries' rather than 'hostels', he knew about them in the very specialised sense of where and on what days the kitchens threw out their leftover slops.

Over the course of his life, for one reason or another, Joey had declined the kind of invitations that might have had him entering by the front lobby – or more likely, bundled in through some discreet side door.

He could, he supposed, just find the nearest, most expensive-looking lodging house and – well, that was the problem when it came down to it. In all Joey's recent adventures through Market Hill, under his influence the stallholders and shopkeepers had done nothing other than what they might ordinarily do – albeit while neglecting the trifling matter of payment. In a situation where he only vaguely knew the rules (he was vaguely aware that the signing of a ledger was involved, for example, but could barely read and couldn't write) he suspected that his new-found Powers might desert him. He didn't know enough to know what

he might *want*, leave alone what it might be possible to get.

Ah well, that might be fixed easily enough. Joey cast around himself and found a likely prospect: a smallish, well-dressed looking man, strolling along and swinging a silver-handled walking cane and watching the bustle of the crowd with a sense of idle amusement. A dapper little man on his lunchtime constitutional, taking in the sights. Just the chap, thought Joey, who would know everything about getting a room in a better class of hostelry.

So he looked into his mind.

AFTER

The stranger wandered through the splendour of the Radiant City, eyes taking in the bustle of its ventures, ears alive to its multiplicity of voices. In every place his eyes rested, he saw happy smiles. In every voice he heard, he perceived contentment and joyful thanks that such a state of affairs continued. The majority of such thanks were addressed, directly more often than not, to the unseen presence of Magnus Solaris, in the sure knowledge that they would be heard.

Indeed, the stranger gathered, the ruler of the Radiant City had been known, on occasion, to venture out disguised and listen to his people. But more than this, it seemed to be fixed in the minds of the people that his spirit was with them perceptually: they lived their lives with his attention on them night and day.

There was something dreadfully wrong about this, the stranger thought. It was not that the smiles were pasted on and the constant praising of their ruler's name false, it was that they simply could not conceive of any other way of acting. It was as though they were simulacra, constructed for no other purpose than to feel joy at the fact that Magnus Solaris existed, and with no other function than to praise his name.

He tried to ask people about this. Some, like the girl he had spoken to on his arrival, thought him mad. Some suffered a variety of abreactive shock and stood, muscles locked and immobile, until he took himself

with much apology from their presence. Some became instantly and murderously hysterical —and the stranger was forced to take himself from their presence with rather more alacrity.

The stranger wandered the splendour of the city, eyes and ears and organs of sundry other senses alert for one thing in particular — until, at length, he found what he was looking for.

It was a place where the fine and shining structures seemed to blur and lose cohesion, devolving into something darker and dirtier. Twisted forms might or might not have been suggestive of buildings, but those forms were strained and ruptured, their insides spilling out. Against the brightness of the City, the place appeared to exist in perpetual dusk, the fires burning here and there doing nothing to illuminate the general miasma.

The City crowds appeared to be completely unaware of its existence, walking past it with their fixed smiles and not so much as a glance. The stranger, however, was entirely used to seeing what others could not.

Pale shapes skulked through the darkness. Shuddering a little, the stranger walked through the threshold of devolution and clambered over wreckage that was pliant and somewhat mushy, to a thing that might once have been a man.

‘What seems to be the problem?’ he said.

‘Forgot,’ said the thing. The words from its loose mouth must have been indecipherable to the ears, but the stranger understood them. ‘Forgot about us and took his attention away. Thought it would be better, thought he’d let us live — but he took his attention away —’

The stranger regarded the thing with a kind of sad compassion. ‘Somebody will be along,’ he said. ‘Soon, now, somebody will be along.’

‘Child!’

‘Yes,’ said the stranger.

‘Child coming! Child! Soon now!’

‘Not soon enough for you, I’m afraid, but yes. Rest easy. The Child will be coming soon.’

BEFORE

It was evening now. The fog rolled in from the marshes, though at this time of year the heat released by the walls and pavements dispersed it, leaving the air clammy and tepid, rather like a neglected steam bath. In the Guild Hall Square, illuminated proprietorial signs hazed, casting their soft secondary light on the splendid and somewhat overcomplicated edifices of Halls that were now, effectively, no more than that: edifices.

Around the central fountain (depicting, in statuary form, a collection of human and Dracori artisans symbolically marching to a brighter Future, the fountain's water once spraying from their heads but long since turned off) lounged tough-looking, belligerent boys and wasted, washed-out girls, plying their trade with the bare minimum of nicety and, indeed, return, and with a general air of drudgery and defeat. The desperately cheerful off-key strains of a detachment band of the Hokesch City Nondenominational Crusade for the Reclamation of Wickedness didn't help matters much.

In the public ordinaries that ran around the edge of the Square, things were rather more genuinely cheerful and even boisterous. The public ordinaries were a place for the relevant people, of either gender, to struggle into corsets, flap feather boas around and call everybody 'dearie'.

Farther out, in the establishments on thoroughfares radiating from the Square, things became more complicated and decidedly more elegant. The activities associated with Guild Hall Square were an almost entirely human thing – Dracori and humans existing in a mutual state of almost utter incomprehension so far as the business of certain recreations was concerned – and the fact of any activity of human men is this: the more money involved, the more respectable to all intents and purposes it becomes. Indeed, when those possessed of a certain variety of moral sensibility, like the Nondenominational Crusade for the Reclamation of Wickedness, likened Guild Hall Square to a sore on the face of their dear city-state, they tended to miss the point that a *sore* is merely one of the visible symptoms of a body that is in itself diseased.

The *Café de la Rue Tigris* was an establishment on the cusp, as it were, between the Guild Hall Square sore and the so-called healthy tissue. Here the line between what might have been called professional and client was so diffuse as to be nonexistent. Ladies and gentlemen in fine evening dress circulated through discreetly opulent rooms, engaging in such intercourse as would not seem out of place in the most formal society *soirée*. Save, perhaps, that there was a certain air of intent to the formalities — and quite possibly, what with one thing and another, a certain lack of hypocrisy.

‘Good evening,’ a smallish, dapper looking man said, tipping his hat to a young woman sitting rather primly at a table by the bandstand. His eyes gleamed a little, more in the amused twinkle of one enjoying a game for the sake of it than in any obvious passion. ‘Please allow me to introduce myself. Smith, my name is, at your service.’

‘Charmed.’ The young woman extended a languid, gloved hand. The avowed Mr Smith took it, briefly, and sketched a little bow.

‘I must confess,’ he said, ‘to some small degree of astonishment at finding such a vision of loveliness as yourself unaccompanied. You are feeling perfectly well, I trust’

‘I must confess,’ said the vision of loveliness, ‘to a slight debilitation. A sick and megrimous headache. I rather fear that I must be about retiring home to bed.’

The little man nodded thoughtfully. ‘Then do, please, allow me to accompany you for some small way and lend what small assistance I can. The streets, after all, are quite unsafe for a lady of such obvious refinement. Who knows whom it might occur for you to meet?’

The young lady nodded with a small, faintly bored smile. The man signalled a waiter and paid her rather extortionate bill — the *Café de la Rue Tigris* had no involvement with anything so vulgar as payment for what might be termed as services rendered, being merely concerned with and profiting from the provision of space in which such assignations might be essayed.

Bill duly paid, the young lady and the little man strolled out into the street, where the man hailed a passing Hansom cab — which, the jarvey noting the cut of their demeanour, halted immediately.

From his vantage point in an opposite doorway, where he had contrived to bundle himself in layers of sacking and a collection of old news sheets, Joey Quine swore to himself, vehemently, as he watched them get into the cab.

The heavy clamminess of the night had turned to rain. Joey's feet kicked up a spray from the backstreet cobbles as he ran, lungs fit to burst. Whatever arcane Power he might have to bend the will of others to his own, it did not seem to work in connection with causing a Hansom cab to slow down for more than a surly cut at him with the whip from the jarvey.

Of course, this might have been due to the fact that he was wearing what he thought of as his *own* clothing again: the accumulated collection of rags he had worn before his various acquisitive exploits on Market Hill – the getting back of which from H. Flatchlock (Prop.) & Associates had taxed his Power to its very limits, the handing back of a filthy bundle of castoffs being something they would not ordinarily do.

The fruits of his Market Hill exploits were currently stored in a locker, in one of the more specialised bath houses off Guild Hall Square. He would have been too conspicuous in them, he knew, in a thousand ways that it would never occur to him to counter in those around him. If he was to do what he must do, he must do it entirely as *himself*, without having to worry about putting on an act.

That afternoon, on Market Hill, he had looked into the mind of the dapper little man —

— and found something so alien that it made the innermost mind of a Dracori, for example, as familiar and unremarkable to him as the back of his right hand.

This was a man – Smith, his name was, the Thing Inside had told him – who had done certain things, *lived* to do those things, simply because he had decided to do them. He took no pleasure from doing them, felt no guilt or regret. It was not some impulse to be fought against or indulged. It was simply who he was.

And he had decided, with neither guilt nor regret at the prospect, to do those things again tonight.

Even now, as he ran, some large part of Joey wanted simply to stop, and turn his back, and walk away. The same thoughts had occurred during the hours he had spent in the doorway outside the establishment that he knew, with an utter inner certainty, was the man Smith's hunting ground: this was not, in the end, his problem. This was nothing to do with him, and to become involved with it would in all probability be dangerous, quite possibly fatal. Why should he, Joey Quine, put himself in danger, just because he happened to know?

But that was the point, wasn't it? If you *knew*, you had to try to do something. Otherwise you couldn't look at yourself and live.

So he had dressed himself up in his inconspicuous retrieved rags, and waited, and watched. And it had been only when the man Smith had hailed a cab that Joey had realised the basic mistake in his thinking. He quite simply hadn't *thought* in terms of people hailing cabs, and leaving any soul who might have it in his mind to follow them standing there forlornly on the pavement.

On the whole, he thought, it was fortunate that he knew where the cab would be going. He knew where the man Smith lived.

It occurred to him now that he could have waited there and saved himself the effort, but then there was that flaw in his thinking again. Something inside him, something entirely more fundamental than the Thing Inside, had pictured him loitering on one of the more select residential streets of Hokesch, had known damned well how the City Patrol dealt with such loiterers and had quashed the notion before he could so much as think of it.

And for that matter, why not just turn the whole matter over to the Patrol and let them deal with it? Because they would not have believed him, and would no doubt have expressed their disbelief in a quite unconscionably physical manner.

Only, hang on, Joey. Have we simply *forgotten* how we came upon this information about the man Smith in the first place? Have we forgotten that we seem to have the Power to make people believe or do almost anything we wish?

Joey was arriving at the conclusion that something deep and fundamental inside him was, in fact, deeply and fundamentally dense.

Ah well, it was too late to worry about such things now. He was nearing his goal. Joey dodged through a set of iron bollards, sprinted up a narrow alley and found himself, winded and gasping, out in Pauper's Gate.

Just in time to spot the Hansom as it disappeared around a corner, heading at an easy pace back towards the City Centre and leaving the street itself deserted.

Pauper's Gate, in the way of such things, had become over the years one of the better addresses. Not as rich as the areas occupied by Councilmen or the aristocracy, Joey gathered, but close enough as to make no difference to him.

Discreetly spacious townhouses lined the street, the occasional chink of light burning behind stout windows and thick curtains that seemed in some way like an armour protecting those within from the common perils of the outside world.

Forcing himself not to scuttle like some such common peril, Joey ran down the street, waking mind ticking off the house numbers, but *knowing* which house he was looking for before he got there.

The house in question, No. 57, appeared to be empty, the windows dark. This was slightly odd, he thought, vaguely aware that the people around these parts would like as not have live-in servants, errand-boys and people to do for them in general.

Had he misunderstood the address in Smith's head? he wondered. Had he by some fluke arrived before Smith and his new lady friend – or had Smith decided to take her somewhere else entirely? After all, the cab he'd just seen leaving could have been carrying anybody.

No. Joey looked at the house and *knew*, with a clear and utter certainty, that the man Smith was inside. He mounted the steps to the front door, hoping to catch some flicker of movement or possibly candlelight through the small bulls-eye of glass sunk into it – and as he did so, he heard a scream. It was muffled, would not have been heard from even so short a distance away as the pavement, but Joey knew a human scream when he heard it.

Joey lurched forward and shoved at the door. Without a fuss, the latch clicked and it swung open, pitching him forward to all but fall flat on his

face.

Thinking about it later, Joey could not shake free the disquieting notion that the latch had, for an instant, become a kind of *living* thing, sensing his presence and responding to it.

Joey found himself in a hallway, a shifting, reddish glow issuing from a doorway toward the end of one wall, throwing up the silhouettes of heavy furnishings and the overgrown mass of the occasional potted plant.

The human sounds were distinct, now, but not louder. The screaming had stopped, had been replaced by choking sobs of fear, obviously female, the sounds of struggle and exertion, obviously male. Suddenly the sobs became a ragged gurgle.

Joey pelted for the doorway, cracked his shin against what might have been a low table and this time fell definitively, fell sprawling, burning his palms on the carpet. With a curse, he hauled himself to his feet and flung himself forward – any element of surprise he might have had was gone; the only virtue now lay in speed.

Through the doorway.

A simple room: a simple cube – impossibly big, by several orders, even if one were to imagine it taking up this entire floor of the house.

The dim red glow came from the walls, impossibly smooth and lambent like an abstract surface rather than any kind of physical material Joey had encountered in his life. The walls seemed nothing more than neutral space on which to hang the –call them the exhibits.

The sight of the exhibits and the realisation of what had been done to produce them, stopped Joey dead. So horrendous were they that it was some few moments before he was able to tear his eyes from them.

The man Smith stood there, in the centre of the room, made diminutive by a distance that seemed more than merely physical. He had removed the jacket of his evening dress and loosened his tie, though he still broadcast a sense of neatness. A neat little man in the process of removing his neat little suit before hopping neatly into bed.

In one hand, negligently, as though the weight was nothing to him, he gripped the body of the woman he had met in the *Café de la Rue Tigris*. She hung loosely, knees buckled, head lolling unnaturally. Her throat

had been cut. The man held nothing in his other, free hand that could have done such a thing, though his fingers were bloody to the knuckles.

‘She won’t feel it,’ the man ~~Smith~~^{Smith}id conversationally, studying the body with a mild satisfaction. ‘When I do it. It’s kinder, this way.’

His head turned and rose to regard Joey. ‘Mr Quine,’ he said, smiling. A tight little smile as might be offered to some acquaintance with whom one has no particular reason to be anything other than civil. He dropped the body of the woman in a softly collapsing heap. ‘I have, for one reason and another, a perfect horror of the banal, so please believe me when I say that it pains me to bid you welcome; I’ve been expecting you.’

In the red near-darkness his eyes flared with magnesium light, emitting scything beams that sliced across Joey’s own eyes like a physical thing and half-blinded him. Through the glare and pain, Joey looked on as, explosively, impossibly, Smith’s head began to *expand*. At the same time his body diminished, as if deflating to hang flaccid.

Joey Quine stared in terror, rooted to the spot, and the face and burning eyes of Smith filled his field of vision, filled his entire –

ELSEWHERE

(... caught and caught and falling head over heels tumbling through the bogeyman and juju lights behind his ragged eyes it lights and falling and it hurts it hurts to BREATHE and all I can hear and touch and smell and see is blood on the walls and thick clotted mucus on the walls and something is happening to my ...)

For a long time, he would never know how long, he hung in a deprivatory sensory gulf. Not black and still and silent, because *blackness* requires light from which to be a contrast, *stillness* needs some concept of motion from which one can be at rest, *silence* needs the hope of something other, any hope at all that something might exist to break it.

Then sense of the world flowered inside him, tendrils of awareness

spreading from him and interlinking, skeining out, binding sense to self–

– he floated without effort, hanging in space before something huge and unknowable: a shifting wall of filth crawling with half-formed masses reminiscent of skulls and mechanical clockwork, insects and internal organs ... their forms never quite resolving and leaving nothing in the mind but an overwhelming sense of disgust.


Some part of him, some sane and coherent part, realised that he was somehow *inside* the head of the man Smith, in his world and face to inchoate mass with the thing that lived there, his own mind trying and failing utterly to comprehend the processes of a being that was to a human as a human might be to an ant. Only just what, this sane and coherent part enquired, am I supposed to do about it now?

As if in response to his indecision, as if pouncing on it, the mass in front of him heaved. A bone spike shot from it, trailing a membranous tube like a whaler's harpoon. With a sickening — *clunch!* — it speared him through the abdomen before he so much as had time to react.

(... the face of a young woman appears before me. She is human in precise and absolute detail. Her disguise is complete. 'Angel of Oblivion, I she says. 'I'm the Angel of Oblivion and, oh, you're in trouble now ...')

Rap, rap, rapping of bare knuckles on wood.

He was in the cupboard, locked safely in the cupboard.

'I know you're in there. I know you're there. Won't you come out?' A strangely pleasant voice, friendly, knowing and full of the possibility of secrets. It was a trick. For the long  ne Little Joey stayed very small, and very still, and held his breath.

'I'm still here, you know,' the voice said after a while. 'Don't you remember me? Don't you know? I'm Jack of the Pelt. I'm the toy man. Don't you remember who I am?'

(... not who you think it's not you're not here and now its name is Smith but it's not really and it's not what you think you...)

‘I remember you,’ said Little Joey. ‘I made you. You’re mine.’

‘Ah, but of *course* I’m yours!’ The voice laughed, happily. ‘You’re the God, the Broken Avatar. You made me and you made it *all*. You made it out of spit and string. Do you think I want to hurt you? If you made me, how could I *hurt* you?’


‘Listen ...’ the voice became conspiratorial. ‘I can make things change for you. I can help you make things change. We can make things *right*. Won’t you come out?’

Little Joey thought about this. ‘If you wanted to, could you open the door yourself?’

The voice of Jack of the Pelt chuckled. ‘Of course I could. Just like that. But there are rules about these things. It’s your choice. Won’t you come out?’

Little Joey pressed on the door. The lock opened for him with a click. It was like it was alive. Little Joey tumbled from the box –

(...and I’m outside, outside the walls: I don’t know how I got here, shot from plutopolis to the grave-pits in one easy move, and she’s leading me, the Angel of Oblivion, sylph-like now; she’s shucking nonessentials left, right and centre as she hauls me through the mud and ruptured coffins – past the thieves new-gutted, past the simulacra shamen with their mortified and wormy hearts: the tomahawks and knives with grey hairs sticking clotted to the heft – she’s positively glowing. You made this. I slipped on something, momentarily: ointment made from monkshood, hemlock, nightshade, fat; they use it, apparently, to fly...)

– the soiled reek of the flophouse. The occasional whimper and sob. The sounds of surreptitious fumbling uffling. For a long time Joey lay still, gathering a sense of place and time about him. That was the trouble with dreams, he thought. You think they’re *real*, within them, even when


they twist to what you would ordinarily call insanity. At last, when he felt he had some grip on what was real and what was not, he opened his eyes.

Jack of the Pelt was sitting on the end of his pallet: a thin man dressed in black and with a battered stovepipe hat, from the ragged top of which issued a haze of smoke. Pale face, stringy hair and wide, strange eyes.

He was just as Little Joey remembered him.

He was playing with a small wooden doll, bending its arms and legs back and forth. He proffered it to Joey with a smile. ‘Do you like it? It’s for you.’

Joey caught the doll automatically, turned it over in his hands, peered at it in the dim, reddish light. It felt like flesh and bone. Its eyes were closed and it was smiling as though asleep. From the form of it, it seemed to be a big boy, maybe fifteen years old, ten years older than Little Joey.

‘Do you like it?’ said Jack of the  and suddenly the doll, which had been naked, was wearing a fine suit of clothes. ‘I *told* you I could make things happen.’

Jack of the Pelt snapped his fingers. Now the doll wore a ruffed clown’s costume of tissue-thin silk. He snapped them again: a City patrolman’s uniform. Again: a linen suit and a squat little hat. The doll now clutched an umbrella in one hand. The handle of the umbrella appeared to be in the form of a question mark.

The flophouse dormitory – the entire world – gave a lurch –

(...she dips a wafer in the stringy mess – it’s something else, now, and something not entirely pleasant – and offers it to me as I kneel before her, begging for something, the nature of which I cannot quite recall. The doll riding on my neck, enraged, attempts to snatch it away. Deftly, she avoids the tiny, clutching hands. Looks down on me. You really don’t, she says. You have no idea, do you? You made yourself forget...)



– the grinning face of Jack of the Pelt hung before him, filling his field

of vision, lips curled back from rotted teeth. One eye bulged obscenely. And he could hear the leprous words twisting through his head as they squirmed and fought and ate each other whole with saw-toothed mouths.

‘... said I’m not going to hurt you,’ said Jack of the Pelt, ‘and I *won’t* (but) I won’t (but) lay a hand upon you, no, not a finger (but, oh).’ The hands moved over Joey, the barest fraction from his body. The mouth of Jack of the Pelt split wide, tongue lolling. ‘You made us all! You made a place for us and this is our place now, and here in *our* place (but, oh) we can do what we *like* ...’

(...the fingers of the Angel taste of earth and chemicals as she works them into my mouth. She smiles a smile I have never seen before, she smiles with love and truth and my heart leaps into my mouth until at last, at the very last, she administers the Antilethe ...)

— he returned to himself suddenly: hanging before the alien mass, linked to it by a membranous line that seemed to be pulsing. With each pulse, energy flared and crackled in his heart and head. It was strangely painless, as though he were in some way watching himself experience this from the outside rather than actually experiencing it.

This is just what things look *like*, he thought. I’m seeing things I’ll never be able to understand properly, and this is the nearest I can come.

Ah well, he told himself, you don’t have to understand to do something about it. He waited for the next pulse — and then sent back a pulse of his own.

The alien mass boiled. Somewhere in the back of his head, leaving aside the question of just where his head was, he thought he heard something shrieking in shock and pain.

The scene before him fractured. He —

— came to himself as though surfacing from a dream, the heft of reality

settling upon him in a way that he had not noticed was missing until it returned. Whether this was real or not, things done by or to him would have effect and consequence. They would be — well, real.

Joey Quine blinked.

He was standing, breathing heavily as though from some recent exertion, in a perfectly ordinary parlour — he knew what perfectly ordinary parlours looked like, having occasionally been involved with the breaking into of them.

A pair of armchairs arranged suitably for the entertaining of the occasional guest. A table supporting a modest selection of decanters. Watercolour landscapes on the walls. A cabinet containing a modest library. A small fire burning cheerfully in the cast iron grate.

Not a hint, in figure or content, of the hellish chamber in which he had encountered the man Smith and his doomed young lady.

There was no sign of a young lady. A body lay, dead but still twitching, on the floor, blood pooling slowly from it as it saturated the carpet. Joey looked down at his hand to see the blade, by no means smeared with gore as in some play put on by a Penny Theatre, but with a slight glisten that told him that, in any real world, it had been recently used.

Had *he* done it? Surely, even under the influence of some hallucinatory fugue, he would remember doing such a thing? He stared dumbly at the blade, trying to find some connection or correlation between his recent megrims and its use.

The sound of knuckles rapping angrily on wood took his attention to the parlour door. There was no key in the lock, he noted, but the door had been bolted on this side.

‘Open up!’ came a voice from the outside. ‘You in there, open up! This is the City Patrol!’

The door was the only conventional exit. Joey was hauling back the thick velvet curtains over a window when the sounds of a shoulder being utilised began – and had discovered that the window had long-since been painted shut by the time the eye of the bolt came free.

AFTER

In the heart-chamber of his Gutter Palace, Magnus Solaris sprawled across his throne and dealt with the petitions and judgements and other sundry businesses of the sovereign's working day: a young man, to all external purposes, having barely reached the age of his majority. He had been this age for years now, more years than anyone could count. He was, after all, Magnus Solaris, the man of gold, eternal and forever young.

It was noted, though, by certain functionaries and minions, that while he decreed this and disposed that with his customary vigour of person, his mind itself seemed preoccupied with other matters.

At length, the sundry businesses of the sovereign having been dealt with to the satisfaction of all concerned – at least, all concerned who mattered – he sent away the body of his Court with the exception of his few closest advisors. Since no man alive was fit to hold a candle to the glory that was Magnus Solaris, 'closest' in this instance meant simply those few who had happened to be standing closest to him at the time.

'Tell me,' he said to them, 'from what you have seen and know, how things are in my City. How my people fare.'

Wearily, after quite some while of his Advisors telling him that things were perfectly fine, no problem whatsoever, thanks for asking, he dismissed them and made his way to his apartments in the Gutter Palace cranium.

A menial was dusting the apartments and setting them in order, dressed in the voluminous, sealed robes worn by such servants to prevent the tracking in of dirt from outside, and which served to conceal any distinguishing mark of the wearer.

'You have no idea,' Magnus Solaris told him/her, taking the excuse of a presumable, concealed set of ears to muse aloud. 'I could feel the City, see its workings, move it like my own hand. Something's wrong, now. Something's gone wrong. There are holes in my mind. Things I can't see—'

The menial contrived, so far as was possible, to convey bewilderment.

'Tell me how things are,' Magnus Solaris said. 'Among your fellows,

among the commonality. Tell me the truth.'

'I – wouldn't like to say, sir.' The menial was now, clearly, in fear for his/her life.

'If you do not,' said Magnus Solaris, 'the Exquisitors are always in need of subjects on which to practise their art. Tell me the truth. What are people saying?'

'Lies, sir,' said the menial, desperately. 'People are telling lies.'

'Such as?' said Magnus Solaris.

'That you are a man, sir, like any other and nothing more. That there is no reason, so far as is known or remembered, for you to be set above to rule. That due to your neglect, the City falls to dissolution. Whole areas now, it seems, are uninhabitable by men.'

'So fast –' Magnus Solaris said as if to himself. 'I never expected it to happen so fast. Tell me, do those who say such things offer a solution?'

The menial attempted to scratch his/her head. 'Well, sir, they do talk in places of a child. A child is coming, so they say, who will grow to be a true man for the City, to take it for himself and heal all wounds.'

'And is there any indication,' said Magnus Solaris, 'just who this child might be?'

'None, sir. They only say – those who tell such lies, sir – that the child will come.'

'Damn,' said Magnus Solaris, once again to himself. 'I knew it was too good to last.'

For a moment he seemed lost in private thought, then he recalled the presence of the menial.

'Leave me,' he said. 'Go back to wherever it is you people go, and much good may it do you.'

The menial hurried gratefully away. In a cubicle devoted to that purpose, he removed his all-concealing robes. There was, of course, nothing particularly remarkable about him. He was merely a Palace servant, just one of many. Only now he had a tale, borne of personal experience, that his sovereign, Magnus Solaris, was a man capable of being discomfited and disconcerted, just like any other.



BEFORE

The two patrolmen were dressed in uniform black, and with their close-cropped hair and the identical set to their faces they might have been twins. There was something unnatural about the way they moved, Joey thought, as they advanced on him: each limb moving independently of the others, in precisely controlled amounts that in sum total approximated human walking, in the same way that a mask approximates a face.

‘You are coming with us,’ one of them said, tonelessly. Again, there was the sense of disconnectedness, as if the patrolman were speaking the words by rote. ‘We are constables of the City Patrol – Black Watch Division.’

‘Black Watch Division,’ repeated the other. ‘You are coming with us.’

Despite the unreality of his circumstance, these words hit Joey Quine like a dash of slops in the face. Everyone – everyone, that is, who moved in what might be called his circle of acquaintance – knew of the Black Watch. They were a section of the Patrol who informally kept the streets safe and clean for respectable folk, by the simple expedient of removing, quite terminally, those they found disreputable. Hardly a night went by but in the morning some derelict was found, knifed and floating face-down in the canal, as an example to others. Funnily enough, despite all the Watch’s best efforts, there continued to be a healthy supply of street beggars and derelicts for such unfortunates to be an example to.

Backed against the paint-sealed window, Joey looked down again at the man Smith. Quite apart from the obvious fact of being dead, the body, he now noted, bore no resemblance at all to the dapper little man he had encountered on Market Hill.

The patrolmen took hold of him. The flesh of their hands touched him – and, quite by reflex, Joey felt the Thing in his mind stir, and open its inner eyes, and cast them to the minds of his captors –

– and Joey Quine was running through the streets again, with a certain extra degree of exertion than before. There is a world of difference between running after some stranger in the vague hope of preventing him from killing some other stranger, and fleeing from concrete forces who you know damned well are intending to kill *you*.

It was times like these that you let the City help you, spoke to it and let it guide you through its alleyways and hidden plazas, trusted in it to fetch you in the end to safety

Joey stopped. Where had *that* thought come from? Where had that *manner* of thinking come from?

In all his years of living in Hokesh, one Joseph Quine hadn't had the slightest feeling that the City wanted him to be there at all – quite the reverse, in fact. One day had followed another, nights had followed one another, occasionally under shelter, and the City was the just the place in which he spent them. He'd never once thought of the City as a living thing, except –

Except that he *had*, hadn't he?

He could catch a breath of the feeling, deep inside himself, connected in some way with the blank places in his memory. There was a sense of connection with the City, so deep and basic that he had not thought about it consciously.

The rain had taken a turn for the worse. Joey leant in the lee of a doorway of a boarded-up shop to get his bearings. He was in the Temple Quarter, from what he could make out: those streets around what had once been the finest church in the City, built to worship the gods of those who had originally come here from Erth, but subsequently dismantled and lost as times and fashions of religion changed. Now only the name of the area remained to mark its site.

Now that the first, panicked rush of escape had gone, he scanned the street for signs of pursuit and found none. Well, that was probably understandable, he thought, given the *nature* of his escape.

As the Thing Inside had insinuated itself into the patrolmen's minds, Joey had held out no great hopes for its effect. After all, if any Power he possessed was to have people acting as themselves, only more so, then all the Thing would achieve would be to have them drag him off and

hang him with all the more alacrity.

What he had found had given him a physical jolt, like putting a foot on a step that wasn't there. The patrolmen had been little more than automata; it was as if someone had decided to build machines that moved and spoke like humans and had used the closest material to hand: human flesh and bone.

Their minds had been in some manner simplified and streamlined; nothing inside them save for a few scraps of automatic impulse that kept them ticking over. Something else had been there, coiled up in those empty mental spaces ... something, Joey had realised, like the Thing Inside. Something in control.

The presence had been quite weak, Joey had noticed; split between the two and whichever agency that engendered it some small way off. It had been possible, he saw, to override that presence, to operate the mental controls it was using, to turn the so-called minds and bodies of these two patrolmen against themselves –

Their jerking and thrashing, the sound of their bones splintering, would in all probability haunt him for the rest of his life, if he let it.

Now, hunched and chilled, but out of the rain in the shop doorway, Joey tried to set his thoughts in order. Had he been under control, just like the patrolmen? First given the delusion that the man Smith had been a murderer and must be stopped, then entirely subsumed while his body killed the man himself?

Joey thought about the hallucinations he had experienced upon entering the house. The alien creature, he suspected, had been his mind trying to come to terms with the thing that was attacking it, the thing that had plunged him into a waking dream concerning the creature Jack of the Pelt.

That was understandable, Joey thought. There had been a man, once, years ago, who had – well, he didn't want to think about it, much. Suffice it to say that the dream of Jack of the Pelt was understandable.

There had been something *else*, though, hadn't there? Images of a girl, an Angel or some such, who in some way he couldn't quite define had saved him, given him the strength to face the thing attacking his mind and break free. The image of her hadn't come from his own mind, he

was almost entirely certain of that, but then again it hadn't seemed to come from some outside source. The thing trying to control him hadn't put it in there. Some memory, perhaps – not from the past but from some other direction entirely?

The rain slackened off. For a moment, Joey paid this no mind, contemplating a night spent in some doorway or other out of force of habit – and then again remembered his adventures of the day, the adventures that had culminated in his present problems.

The bathing house where he had left all his new personals and movables, by its very nature, never closed. Ah well, he thought, whatever else, there's going to be a hot bath and a change of clothes. Feeling somewhat more cheerful about the world in general, he stepped from the doorway.

A sleek black automobile, its radium engine so finely engineered as to be all but silent, slid to a halt beside him – so smoothly that he barely had time to react.

Its door swung open. In the driver's seat, instead of the black-clad patrolman his panicked mind had been expecting, was a girl, towards the later end of her teens. She was dressed in heavy clothing somewhat like a man's, her hair dragged back and pinned. There was a certain hard-lined set to her face that Joey recognised instantly, having seen any number of them and acquired one himself over a life of living on the streets.

That was nothing, however, to a different kind of recognition entirely. He had seen this girl before.

She was the Angel of Oblivion from his dream.

'Look, are you gonna get in or what?' she snapped. 'You're Joseph Quine and my name's Dorothy, but you can call me Ace. I'm here to help you. And you can keep your grubby little fingers out of my mind, for a start. I've been told about you.'

AFTER

So little comes down to us, when we try to grasp it. We are born, and born again, into worlds that shift in ways we cannot begin to imagine, for the simple reason that they were made while our minds were occupied elsewhere. What we feel is incidental slips away, and we only later realise that the incidental was the point. We lose so much by not paying attention.

The thing about losing things, reflected Magnus Solaris, was that one didn't miss them until the lack of them turned around and bit.

His debilitation, once started, had run its course quickly. For as long as he could remember, he had been able to send his mind and will out into his City, with no more effort and thought than if he were moving his hand. And now it was as if he were suddenly blinded, the nerves controlling that hand abruptly severed. It was impossible to recapture the trick of it.

Worse, it was becoming increasingly difficult to remember how it had *felt*.

Through the windows of the Gutter Palace, when one pulled back the drapes, the City seemed as it ever had: bright and perfect and eternal. There seemed a lack of depth to the vista, however: a sense that it was merely that, an image painted on some impossibly large canvas, erected before the windows by some putative arrangement of scaffolding and to all real intents no thicker than a breath. No sense whatsoever of what might lie behind it.

Or what might lie in general.

Magnus Solaris looked around at his apartments, realising with something of a start that he had not particularly bothered to look at them for a matter of years – for decades, even. Noting that their opulence contained a note, to put it mildly, of shabby wear, despite the best efforts of all those decades of coveralled menials. Noting something of the smell.

He remembered how he had commonly filled it with lovers of quite surpassing variety and beauty, or at least of interest, whom he had by some abstruse manner contrived to have present themselves to the Gutter

Palace and himself. Likewise the sundry Advisors and Counsellors who attended him in the Chamber of the Heart. Now, for the first time in years, he found himself wondering just where precisely they came from, where they went, and precisely how one should go about getting them back. It had once seemed so obvious, and now he had not the slightest idea.

There was nothing else for it. In one of an extensive collection of garderobes was a rather less than prepossessing collection of rags, their origins lost to his memory, which he would commonly wear during his occasional and surreptitious sojourns out into his City. Magnus Solaris took them from their peg – realising, now he came to look at them and think about it, that they seemed only slightly more dishevelled and soiled than the once-splendid robes he currently wore.

His sight had failed him. His sight had gone. There was nothing for it but to see what had become of his City by means of the physical sight that resided in the eyes situated in his head.

BEFORE

‘Last stop,’ said Dorothy, but you can call me Ace. ‘Everybody out.’

She had pulled the automobile up outside a townhouse that seemed disquietingly similar to the one that had contained the man Smith. They left the vehicle and she popped the trunk open, and pulled out what Joey recognised as the pair of cases he had left in the Guild Hall Square bathing house.

‘I thought you might want your stuff,’ she said. She looked a little sheepish for a moment. ‘I probably shouldn’t have gone for it. I lost track of you for a while, there. Took me a couple of hours to pick up the scent again.’

Joey looked at her, dumbly, until she became impatient.

‘Look, I’m *sorry*, OK?’ she snapped. ‘I wasn’t on top of my game. My friend just told me to be in a certain place at a certain time, let you run into me and then come it with the old unwilling hostage routine. I

thought I'd do better keeping tabs on you, though. And then I lost you. I got to the place I was supposed to be and found bodies, and cops crawling all over them. Bad scene.'

There was something about the way in which the girl talked, Joey thought, that was fundamentally wrong. The words, most of them at least, made sense, but the manner in which she strung them together seemed somehow to tangle in his brain, so that it was a positive effort to make out anything she meant. It was as if she were some foreigner, off some trading vessel, speaking by her lights perfectly naturally, in a language that was similar to but not quite his own. It was a little like the way a Dracori spoke — save that the variations came in different and completely unexpected ways.

Ace handed him the bags in such a way that he was forced to grab them quickly to prevent them from falling to the pavement, then turned and strode towards the townhouse door without so much as a backward glance. There was something about her movements that seemed angry; not angry about anything in particular, but having more a kind of innate and constant ire at the world in general. Clutching his bags, Joey hesitated, debating with himself whether to follow her or simply to take off and try to lose her again. Appearances in dreams aside, he had no reason to trust this complete stranger. On the other hand, while her manner was by no means friendly, she seemed at least to tolerate his company — which made this the closest relationship he'd had with what might be called a *respectable* person in his life. Or at least, someone with such a position in life that they had access to an auto without stealing it.

Joey shrugged to himself and followed her, telling himself that he would be more than able to handle a mere girl if things turned nasty — which just went to show, as he would later remark, how much he knew.

Where? Where had he gone?

Where had the boy gone?

For a moment the abstract tendrils extruded from the mind of Sloater thrashed wildly, latching onto human minds in several quarters of the city, one after another and at random, and in certain cases

discorporating them from the shock.

It had wormed its way through the boy's mind, spurring him aphasically through a structured series of delusions that should have had him, with the body of the man his body had killed cooling at his feet, allowing himself, quite meekly and with all due process, to be taken by two members of what was obviously the City Patrol. The process demanded certain postures. The boy could no more refuse to comport himself in the manner of those postures than he could, at will, transform his body into that of some anthropoidal beast – even though the physical vestiges of the potential for such a transformation might exist.

The boy could do nothing other than comply.

Something, it seemed, however, had subverted the process. Some future-echo in potentia, grasped at by the boy, had allowed him to break the control of Sloater sufficiently to disable his patrolman minions and escape. The problem had not seemed insoluble; Sloater had been able to track him, while the part of Sloater's mind that decided such things decided what to do –and then the link had been cut. It was as if a shutter had come down between Sloater's perceptions and the boy, snipping the tendril of attention that tied them as though it were a physical thing.

This was unprecedented. Some new and alien factor was operating – so alien that the mind of Sloater found itself at a loss as to where to begin to investigate it. It was Unknown and therefore terrifying.

The mind of Sloater ranged the City desperately, pawing at it and turning it over in its figurative hands, looking for any hint of a clue as to what the true nature of this factor might be. The Unknown must be converted to the Known. It demanded a complete and proper explanation.

‘I don't know about you,’ Ace said, lighting the gas lamps in the hallway, ‘but I'm starving. I could murder a bacon butty.’

‘Bacon?’ Joey said. The word was entirely unfamiliar to him.

The girl tut-tutted to herself, as though realising some thoughtless mistake. ‘I was forgetting. You don't know what you're missing, chum. You go for a sort of vinegar-cured donkey in these parts, right?’

‘Donkey?’ said Joey.

‘Haulage beast, I think you call it. Sorry. One of the few strains of animal DNA that survived the trip out, yeah? Chuck your bags down over by the wall. We’ll sort you out somewhere to sleep later.’

With a rather bemused Joey trailing behind, she repaired to a small but well-appointed kitchen and opened the ice box with a scowl. ‘He’s on one of his vegetarian kicks again – I mean, he’s decided that everybody he knows should be vegetarian. We’ll have to make do with eggs.’

As Ace busied herself with bowls and a skillet, a realisation formed in Joey’s mind, to do with the fact that while he was not entirely familiar with the distinctions of people who might live in a house like this, the girl seemed not to fit them.

‘You’re the housekeeper, yes?’ he asked.

Ace snorted. ‘I’m probably lucky you didn’t ask if I was the scullery maid. The house is owned by a friend of mine. I suppose you could call me his companion — and you can take that look off your face, matey. Nothing mucky involved.’ She spooned quantities of not particularly elegantly prepared scrambled eggs onto a pair of plates. ‘He’s the guy who sent me to find you. Here. Just like mother would have rather drowned in live rats than be bothered to make.’

Joey took the proffered plate and fork. He looked around himself for a spitting bowl and found no sign of one. Just what sort of household had he found himself in, he wondered?

‘So, when am I going to meet this friend of yours?’ he asked.

‘At some point.’ Ace had found a bottle of some red stuff and was vigorously shaking it to loosen up the goo inside. ‘I’m just supposed to keep you on ice for a few days. You’re very important in the scheme of things, apparently — whatever little scheme it is he’s got into his head this time.’ She upended the bottle and poured a liberal amount of the contents over her eggs. ‘The man has plans.’

Joey didn’t like the sound of this one bit.

‘Plans?’ he said.

‘Oh, you know,’ Ace said with her mouth full. ‘Worlds saved from abject peril, hideous evil thwarted, home in time for tea and muffins and the smug satisfaction of a job well done. He’s a big one for all that. He needs you ‘cause of that Power of yours — and don’t you try to come it

all cagey with *me*, thank you very much, because he knows all about you. Don't ask me *how*, but he knows.'

It would have been nice, Joey thought, if *he* had known all about himself.

'He called you a psycholeptic,' Ace said, catching some of this in his expression. 'You can go into this kind of waking trance state, so he says, where you can interact with and affect the world on a seriously other level.'

She waved a forkful of egg vaguely, taking in the world in general.

'The way he explained it, you're using the bits of the brain that would normally produce something like precognition, only here and, uh, now, they're throwing up some incredibly freaky side effects ...'

'What are you talking about?' Joey said. Some part of him, obscurely, hadn't wanted to say it, but he wanted to know what the girl was talking about.

'Look, don't take everything I say as gospel,' Ace said, swallowing. 'I mean, I've been around, but that was mostly knocking around in spaceport bars and stuff. I'm just telling you what I was told, and what I was told was it's to do with this world being closer to the Galactic Hub — closer than a lot of other places, I mean.

'Time starts getting weird, here. The senses and tenses keep swapping over. I mean, look at this whole City — there's stuff from any number of different time-zones, all mixed up together. There are bits of it where the world *itself* becomes thin, or incoherent, or even just plain non-existent, like a pencil sketch instead of a painting, or like it was a book and the writer couldn't be bothered to come up with a description.


'You yourself keep switching around the way you think and talk, and you don't seem to realise that you're doing it. Then there are those other differences — You don't notice all these things because it's just the world you're living in. It takes someone from outside to see what's happening, I suppose.'

Joey was staring at her with an utter, if somewhat fascinated horror. The shock had been such that in a very apposite sense the articulation of it was just too big to get out of his mouth. It wasn't over anything that she had said. It was something she had done, and that he had only

belatedly noticed.

‘Now the way my friend explained it to me,’ Ace said swallowing another mouthful of eggs, ‘your precog stuff would normally be used to see the future – only here, the *future* could be anywhere from here and now, to last Wednesday week. Trying to foretell it is a bit like throwing a monkey-wrench into the machinery of the world. It disrupts and changes things – and that’s what my friend wants you for, I think. He wants to use you to change the world.’

AFTER

The elevators in the legs of the Gutter Palace were not working. For as long as Magnus Solaris could remember, their cages had simply and instantly arrived when he had happened to want one, but now this was not the case – and he found that ~~he did~~  not have the slightest idea of how to summon one.

He left the Gutter Palace by the spiral stairs. It was a long descent; the breath was hitching in him when he was done with it, and he wondered where he might ever find the strength to climb up again.

The Plaza of Deities, with its statues of the Dead Gods, seemed almost entirely the same as he remembered it last, save a little more gritty to the eyes and with the faint but pervading smell of smoke. As he followed the scent, out towards the Street of Spinning Lights, some last vestige of the sight that had once allowed him to see and feel the City in its entirety felt the world begin to twist itself into new shapes around him.

The splendour of the City that he remembered was still there in some respects, but it was like looking at a corpse before it collapsed into decay: an object of a similar construction to what might once have been a living thing. Such inhabitants as might remain were ghostly, complete in all detail but existing on the edge of sight. Utterly distant in some manner unconnected with that of physical distance. Almost gone.

Great holes had been eaten in the buildings of the City — no, in the very fabric of the *world* of the City. They were expanding, like drops of

petroleum on water, their edges running together.

Behind them, dissolution. Darkness and fires. At the rate they were expanding, Magnus Solaris thought, with the kind of icy and clinical calm that exists when one has gone through terror to the point where nothing can be truly terrifying anymore, it would be only a matter of hours before the City was consumed completely — perhaps a matter of less than one.

How had this happened so quickly? All this might have stolen up on him, while his attention was diverted elsewhere —but how had it happened so quickly?

He realised that he had reached the leading edge of one of the holes. The smell of smoke from beyond was all but overpowering. There was no turning back — or rather, there was turning back, but where was there ultimately to go? Shuddering, Magnus Solaris stepped into the hole—

— and half expected to find himself transformed on the other side, his flesh corrupt and flowing from his bones. He remained precisely as he was, in fact, in the rags of his disguise and coughing in the smoke.

What might or might not have been buildings flickered and contorted around him, attempting to form themselves into coherent shapes that were never quite resolved. If anyone or anything were living in them, Solaris couldn't see it. There was nobody to tell him anything of what he might need to know. How this dissolution could be fixed again. How it could be mended. How Magnus Solaris might find himself alone again, in a world containing any other thing than himself.

On the basis that they might just possibly be a sign of life, he headed for one of the fires burning in the dark, clambering over indefinable wreckage that seemed pliant and somewhat fleshy to the touch.

In the firelight he found life, of a certain kind at least, in abundance. A crowd of humped and degenerating forms that might have been in one sense human, together with creatures that even in a normal state would have been monstrous and tentacular. Magnus Solaris could not

remember having ever seen such creatures before. The memory of a name surfaced in him from time out of mind: Dracori. He had no idea what the name meant.

He became aware of his own name being spoken; the susurrations of it from a thousand misshapen mouths, the occasional and piercing shriek of it. For a moment, though, he could not connect the name with himself. He had never heard it uttered with such a feeling of hatred.

The attention of the crowd, however, was on a promontory of some clotted material, on which stood the figure of a man. He was smaller than the creatures surrounding him, this man, and dressed in a pale rumpled suit that shone out like a beacon of cleanliness in the general decay. Though he seemed quite unprepossessing, there was a sense of command about him. His voice was quiet, but it cut through the general excoriation of Magnus Solaris's name and rang through the collective body of the crowd.

'You are dying,' he said. 'You are in pain — but believe me when I say that these things shall pass. Your Child is coming now, and through it you will live again. The man who ruled over you shall be gone, he will be removed ...'

Magnus Solaris, meanwhile, had been edging closer to the man, the better to look at him. There was something strangely familiar about him, something that Solaris thought he should be remembering, for all that he had never seen him before — had never been so much as *aware* of him before. Thus preoccupied, he blundered into some denizen of the crowd, which lurched away and turned several of its eyes (for it was one of the more monstrous denizens of the crowd) toward him. And then in those eyes Solaris saw the light of recognition.

The creature howled. Several of its fellows turned to see what it was howling about, and promptly joined in. As the circle of recognition widened, as more of the crowd saw Magnus Solaris and realised who he was, the howl took on the aspect of a murderous roar.

From his vantage point, the stranger who had been addressing what was now, increasingly, a mob, seemed a little startled.

'Um, when I said that he would be removed, that's not what I *meant* ...'

BEFORE

Comments to the effect of the fundamental instability of the world notwithstanding, the next few days were a haven of stability so far as Joey was concerned. He had been expecting to put down his bedroll in the scullery, but had been given an actual room, with a bed so soft that he had ended up sleeping on the floor, the carpet of which was almost soft enough to be a mattress in itself.

He had regular meals, for which he had finally obtained a spitting bowl. On the morning after his arrival in the house, Ace had left on the first of what would turn out to be a steady stream of errands and wanderings, and had returned loaded down with bags of groceries of the predominantly meat-based variety. She was sick and tired of rabbit food for the moment, she had opined, and if her, still unnamed, friend had a problem with finding a dead animal in his larder then he was quite frankly welcome to stuff it.

Ace had prepared all the meals, on the understanding that she was fixing them for herself and allowing him to come along for the ride. Joey had no basis for comparison as to whether she was a good cook or bad, and he certainly had no idea whether the meals consisted of ‘rabbit’ food or not, having no idea of what a rabbit was; all he knew was that they were the best meals he had tasted in his life. Now, if he could only find some means of not thinking about what Ace *did* with her food, things would be perfect.

The very thought of it made him nauseous. I mean, he thought, what happens to it? Where does it *go*?

Once she had realised how much it disconcerted him, Ace made an effort to eat in private. But it was a constant reminder that, although she might look human, she was something else entirely — something alien, the true nature of which he could barely begin to guess at. Despite her admonishments against doing so, Joey had been peeking into Ace’s mind, simply to try to make sense of it all. The notion that she might have it in her to transform into some ravening alien beast and rend him limb from limb was, of course, neither here nor there.

What he had found raised more questions than it answered. The girl

seemed to Joey quite simply mad — in the way that some people can have minds filled with utter gibbering nonsense while appearing perfectly lucid and sane from the outside. She had the fixed and absurd notion, for example, that the world was some variety of ball spinning around the sun, when the world was — well, it was the *world*, everything there was, whole and complete. Joey could recognise nothing of the world he knew from the chaos of images inside her, save that she was grudgingly amused by him and, ultimately, meant him no harm.

A large part of her inner life seemed to be centred on the friend she had talked of, to whom she was devoted. Such thoughts were carefully guarded, though — Joey wondered if some other, outside influence was keeping them so, possibly from the man himself — and only fragments of them could be gleaned.

Joey had the impression that the man might or might not be named *Smith*, which gave him pause for various thoughts of his own, and had him worrying about certain things that he'd rather not have had to think about, like a tongue worrying at a broken tooth.

Was he — that is, was one Joseph Quine — a murderer? If he had killed the man Smith, under some influence from within or without, did it make much difference whether he himself had been in control of the hand that had wielded the knife? Joey had the uneasy notion that, if he were caught, those who administered justice would be far less concerned with punishing the guilty party than with ensuring that the body that had committed the crime was in no state to commit it ever again.

The image of what he had done to the two members of the Black Watch came back to him again. *He* had done that — though the fact that he had merely injured them rather than killed them possibly said something about himself. Or, at least, the self he assumed himself to be. The thought occurred, however, that when not being controlled, those bodies could have been inhabited by perfectly decent and innocent people — so how was what he had done to them any better than what others might do to him?

And just what, precisely, might Ace do to him should the name ever emerge of the man he might or might not have killed?

He had wandered the house, looking for and hoping not to find some

connection between its owner and the putative Smith. In a room lined with books, the titles written in some indecipherable language different from his own, he found a journal on a desk. Neat lines of script in a completely different but equally indecipherable alphabet filled its pages, but there was also a meticulously drawn sketch, of such fine quality that it might have been a lithograph. It showed a bulbous form that might have been a plant of some kind, from which sprouted a number of fleshy tendrils, each drawn in such a manner as to appear transparent and ghostlike, each ending in a simple bipedal form that might have been a man – or, occasionally, a slightly less simple multipedal form that might have been a Dracori.

It had been heavily annotated, the annotations scribbled, but the image itself seemed to jar somewhere deep in Joey's mind, in the place where he imagined the Thing Inside to be. Once again, these were more questions that some part of him was flatly, almost hysterically, refusing to answer.

More or less to take his mind from these questions, Joey began to occupy it in other ways. For most of his life he had thought of his intimations into the workings of the world as perfectly natural and shared by all – only now, it seemed, they were unique to him. They were a talent that might be developed. So, rather haltingly, he began to develop it, sending out his inner eye into the City, listening to it with an inner ear and trying to comprehend it. He had expected this to feel somehow mystical, magical even, and was vaguely disappointed to discover that he just began to know things without learning, that things became as familiar to him as the words of a well-loved book. Joey had never read much of anything in his life, but now he knew that there were people, in the City, who loved books – and what it felt like to love them.

As the web of his perceptions grew, he began to see what Ace had meant when she had talked of things being disrupted or missing. If the web had been a physical and literal thing, it would have been as if some finger had poked holes in it. There was the matter of the Council, for instance. Joey knew that the City was run by the Council. Everybody knew that. Only, when he came to search for it through the fund of his new-found knowledge, he could find no actual trace of it, or any real

effect it might have upon the world. He knew that there was a place called Marshalt Side, but could think of no roads or walkways or monorail lines leading either from or to it —

And, as his mind followed the abstract strands of the perceptual web, it brushed at length up against the very real spider that lurked in the middle of it.

There!

In a shabby and forgotten office, the body of Sloater stiffened, in response to the shock in a mind that, for the most part and so far as was possible, tended to ignore its body's very existence.

There!

The mind of Sloater had ranged the City, looking for a trace of the boy, the Broken Avatar, and it had found nothing.

Now, there it was, simple and plain, the mind of the boy clumsily brushing against his and as noticeable as some physical collision on the street.

Sloater latched onto it, as surreptitiously and unnoticed as a pickpocket lifting the pocketbook of a man who had collided with him, his own perceptions tracking back along the boy's mental trail. The abstract tendrils of it were extruding from ...

There!

The disembodied mind of Sloater paused in puzzlement. The Broken Avatar was extending his mind from a place it was simply impossible to see. There was no sense, within it, of the boy. There was no sense of anything. The mind of Sloater would never have noticed it had his attention not been drawn — even now it could be perceived only in terms of its absence, by the hole it made. And while the boy stayed in that mental hole, it was impossible for the mind of Sloater to reach him.

Never mind. It might be impossible to attack the boy directly, at least in a manner that the mind of Sloater, being by its nature abstract, thought of as directly, but there were means of dealing with him other than in the pure realm of the mind.

Ace was heading back from the local market precincts, arms weighed

down with various bags and packages of comestibles –rather more than she had intended to buy, if truth be told, but a number of things she had chanced upon had looked too good to resist.

The food was like the sex, she thought. The people here went through all the postures of it while being utterly incapable of *doing* it – and this seemed to have led to a perfection of the incidentals, and in the preparation. The stores of the market precinct had been crammed full of the most sumptuous foods imaginable, their inventory reading like a shopping list for the Gods of Gustation, but the sole fate of those foods was to end up, thoroughly masticated, in a spitting bowl.

It was a little disconcerting, when she thought about it, to think about where it all came from.

There was a famous, or so she'd been told, explanation of the principle of cause and effect which backtracks a plate of steak to the waiter, the chef, the butcher, the slaughterhouse, the accumulation of genetic and prionic matter that was the cow, the grass that converted sunlight into energy to construct the cow, the sun, and so forth back to the Big Bang. It was worrying to know that, here and now, several large sections were missing from the chain. Something to do with an inherently truncated arbitrary base for the Catastrophic ~~FOR~~nite Regression, she'd been told, which of course had left her none the wiser.

It wasn't so much that she couldn't ask *why*, but that the question had passed the point of human meaning. It was the difference between asking why something fell in a certain direction when dropped, and asking why large masses distorted space-time around them, like weights on an elastic sheet, so that a smaller, free-moving mass on that plane appeared to fall towards them. It entered the realm, in human terms, of the Just Does. The stacks of food that nobody would ever actually eat were Just There.

Ace walked up the street towards the house that had been acquired for her stay here. That was another thing, she thought –if you weren't destitute or derelict, you could simply *buy* a house for the sort of money that she vaguely remembered her grandparents talking about.

There were, she realised, certain things that, even knowing certain other things, *she* liked about this world despite herself. Ace was old

enough and had seen enough to know that life was not simple or kind, that it was so very easy for life to twist you into the dark – but for all that, she had been taken at quite an early age from the world into which she had been born. This world reminded her of that: a child's world, where people live in houses because that's where people live. Where tramps don't live in houses because they're tramps. A world where people are punished only if they're Bad.

She had only to look around her, at the people on the street, to see it was like the world she remembered as a child – well, all right, not the world of the estate, but what they said the world was like on the kids' cartoons and at school. There was the milkman delivering bottles of (donkey-derived, admittedly) milk. There were the people in business suits waiting for the bus to take them to work. There was a policeman, of the friendly and helpful sort, patrolling his beat ...

There they were – every single one of them – suddenly standing stock still, as though receiving orders, and then turning their heads – every single one of them – towards the house for which she was currently heading –

– 'Joey! Snap out of it!'

Joey wrenched himself from his fugue, his face contorting with a horror that seemed so endless inside that the mere movement of muscles and mouth could never do it justice.

'I saw it,' he babbled. 'The meat machine and the man inside it – and oh, it's old and cold and it doesn't know what it's ... I know the *name* of him. Sloater's the name of him. Sloater sitting in the centre of all the meat and all it does is ...'

'Very interesting,' Ace said sourly. 'And now if you can bear to shut your gob for thirty seconds, you can listen to me. We have to get out of here. We have company.'

She was wearing the bulky jacket, of a coarse-woven but shiny substance Joey had never seen elsewhere, pinned with a collection of personal sigils and talismans, and she was out of breath. Joey vaguely

remembered that she had left the house on some errand or other before he had entered his trance state, and realised that she had come back for him. The realisation made him feel oddly pleased.

Now those sigils and talismans rattled as she pointed to the window of his room. 'Take a look out there.'

The window looked out onto the street. The collection of attributes that he thought of as the Thing Inside, Joey realised, were already warning him of some approaching danger, so it was not entirely surprising when he saw the figures advancing purposefully on the house. A few of them were dressed in the uniforms of the Black Watch, he saw, but most wore what one might find on the general passers-by on any street. They did not lurch, but their movements had the even and precise quality of those under some outside control.

'I was heading back and I found this lot coming it with the zombie right behind me,' Ace said. 'A couple of them noticed I wasn't part of the crowd, so I sort of had to drop my shopping and stop them doing anything about it.' She wagged the smooth, metallic club she held and grinned. It was used for playing a ball game, she had explained a few days previously, in the place from which she came. Joey had looked at the dents on its surface and tried not to wonder overmuch about the disposition of the balls.

'Looks like whoever's in charge of this town, this Slater or whatever, has noticed you,' Ace continued now, bringing him somewhat back to the point. 'Probably caught you messing with his mojo. Nice going, genius.'


'Sloater,' Joey said. 'I think his name is ...'

'Whatever. Let's just hope he isn't on the ball enough yet to have anticipated our utterly well thought-out and wily plan of nipping out the back.'

The townhouse backed onto a communal arboretum for the local residents. Joey remembered smelling the burning flesh, and hearing the laughter, and the occasional scream, when they had a barbecue.

As they ran through it, heading for an alleyway that would take them out through the terrace on the other side, Ace stopped to search through

her jacket. She finally unearthed what appeared to be a short and rather thick-barrelled mechanical pencil with a plunger at one end to push out the lead.

‘I don’t think there’s time to write something ...’ Joey said, looking at it, vaguely reminded of the journal he had found back in the house. Had Ace written and illustrated it  than her ubiquitous friend? She didn’t seem the type, somehow.

‘There’s time to write something off.’ Ace shrugged. ‘There’s a lot of stuff in that house that people shouldn’t have –and so there’s also half a kilo of something my friend doesn’t like me having.’ She pressed the little plunger with her thumb. ‘So now nobody has anything.’

AFTER

Magnus Solaris ran, the misshapen pack snapping at his heels like jackals. He seemed to remember now that there had once been jackals. For all their deformities and dissolution, they had a fair turn of speed. It didn’t seem exactly fair.

He scrabbled desperately through the soft dark, the slime of it hitching into his mouth with his breath, nails shearing from his fingers to the quick as he clawed through piles of wreckage that seemed to have grown inordinately in the short time since he had last encountered them, when heading in the opposite direction.

The darkness seemed to have no end. It seemed to Solaris that he had long since passed the point at which he had stepped through the hole in what had once been his world. Had it simply closed up? Was this reeking dark the only world for him now, all he would ever have or know?

There was a flash of light before him; a cleaner, brighter light than that of the sickly guttering fires of this place. With a desperate burst of energy, Solaris sprang towards it — but tripped over his own feet and fell flat on his face. It was only the degeneration of the world that saved him from the loss of several teeth when he hit it hard, but the fall split

and bruised his lips, broke his nose and set it to bleeding.

The creatures, once-human and otherwise, were piling on behind him and very close. Solaris scrambled to his feet and, with something like a sob, lurched forward to find himself —

— before the doors of one leg of the Gutter Palace. Behind him, his pursuers lashed at him with claws and tentacles.

The creatures appeared to have been brought up short by the boundary of the hole through which Solaris had passed, unable to come through themselves. This was less reassuring than it might have been, since the expansion of the hole was bringing it, slowly but inexorably, closer to the Gutter Palace itself.

Solaris turned his back on them and ran, taking the steps of his inside-leg three at a time, thoughts of his exhaustion never so much as impinging on his mind. There was too little of his mind left, by now, in which they might occur. All that was left was the overriding, animal need to bolt for the illusory safety of his lair.

Up he went through the main body of the Gutter Palace, through the chambers of his heart and at last to his apartments in the head. Perhaps symbolically, as he leant against the frame of the doors leading into them, doubled over with breathlessness from his exertions, his shattered thoughts began to reassemble themselves.

This was all that was left. There was nowhere else to go. All he could do now was wait for the holes to open in the walls and the darkness to pour through —

Lying on a couch, on which Magnus Solaris had once lain to greet the lovers who had presented themselves to him, was a hat. It was battered, bearing the patina of wear and age, and there was nothing whatsoever remarkable about it — but Magnus Solaris recognised it instantly. He had last seen it being worn by the diminutive stranger who had been addressing the creatures in the dark and talking of a Child.

And as Magnus Solaris walked to the couch, the night roaring up the stairwell behind him, he realised that he had seen the hat and its wearer

before then. Long before.

His torn and aching hands picked the hat up by its battered brim, and he remembered.

BEFORE

‘Look, I don’t know what the big deal is,’ Ace was saying. ‘I set the charges to leave the structure standing and incinerate the contents — and if anybody *had* got inside by the time the charges went off, then what the hell? They weren’t exactly going to give us a box of chocolates and a big sloppy kiss. Better them than us.’

Joey remained unconvinced. ‘It wasn’t them, not really. They weren’t responsible for what they were doing ...’

‘Moral sensibilities from you?’ Ace snorted. ‘Remember, matey, I was following you around for quite a while, and I know for a fact that you’ve got all the moral sensibilities of a turnip that’s decided to go around robbing old lady turnips. What’s up with you?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Joey, somewhat miserably. And he didn’t.

A few days earlier, Ace had talked of his thoughts and manner of speaking changing – but with the various excitements and distractions since then, he was only now starting to recognise the differences himself. His thoughts seemed to be becoming spare and pared-down, while at the same time more sophisticated in a way that he was, well, not sophisticated enough to grasp. Complex as opposed to complicated, he supposed – without, again, being entirely clear as to what that supposition meant. It was as though somebody else was using his mind to think with, and he was listening in and vainly trying to keep up.

Was he learning how to think in new ways or merely remembering? Was this how he had thought during the blank spots in the memory of his life?

He noticed that Ace had become, momentarily, a little uncertain, as she was struck by some thoughts of her own.

‘Um, it might be a good idea not to *mention* blowing things up, when

we meet my friend. He doesn't tend to like me blowing things up, much.' She frowned. 'Then again, he keeps on putting me in situations where they *have* to be. It's a bit strange really.'

'Your friend,' said Joey. 'Do you think he'll be able to find us, now?'

'Oh, he'll find us,' said Ace, a little sourly. 'He always does. And speaking of being found —' She looked about herself, rather nervously, at the passers-by on the street they were walking through. 'If I've got this straight, there's this mind with a capital M floating about —'

'Sloater,' Joey said.

'Yeah, Sloater,' said Ace. 'His name is Sloater, according to those visions of yours. At least we've established that. It'd be nice if those visions had bothered to mention Just who or what or where this Sloater actually is. *Anyway*, as I was saying, there's this Mind floating around, looking for us — so at any moment, any of these people could suddenly do the Zombie Jerk and start coming for us, holding out their hands and going "Grr! Arg!", yes? That creeps me out a bit. You're supposed to be hooked into the City, right? So why don't you *use* that and see if you can find us somewhere quiet and safe?'

Not for the first time, Joey was shamed by a thought that had never so much as crossed his mind until it was in some manner forcibly pointed out. He'd have kicked himself mentally, had he been sure he would not have ended up with a physical bruise.

'I suppose I could try,' he said.

'I said *safe*,' said Ace. 'This isn't safe. It's about as far from safe as it's possible to be.'

'Uh, why's that?' Joey looked around uneasily for something that his senses might have missed.

'Because every second we spend in a damn *sewer* brings me one second closer to breaking off your arm and beating you to death with the bloody end,' said Ace. 'What the hell were you thinking?'

'I don't know,' said Joey. 'It just seemed right. It was as if something was calling to me and that's all I can say. It just seemed right.'

Ace glared around at the brickwork of the tunnel walls with a scowl that was by this time almost a silent snarl. 'Just consider yourself lucky

that it's just mostly water down here and —'

She frowned as a thought struck her.

'Hang on,' she said. 'If none of you people actually ... well, if you don't ... what does the City need with a sewerage system, is what I'm trying to say.'

Joey merely looked at her, confused. The question was nonsensical.

'It's a sewer,' he said.

'How could I not have known?' Ace waved a hand in front of her face. 'And while we're about it, what's up with this *light*? I mean, we can *see* things, but there's no light coming from anywhere to see them by.'

'I think that's me,' said Joey. 'Or something working through me. I don't think it wants to hurt us; I think it just wants us to know where we are —'

He stopped as something stirred in the sludgy water through which they were wading.

'That was a tentacle,' said Ace, uneasily. 'I know what a tentacle looks like, believe you me.'

'Don't worry,' said Joey, dreamily. 'It won't hurt you. It doesn't want to hurt anybody, I think.'

Ace looked at him sharply. 'You're going off into one of your trances, aren't you. Do you think this is the time and place?'

'It doesn't want to hurt anybody,' Joey repeated. 'It just wants to talk.'

With that, he simply walked off, heading deeper into the tunnels and leaving Ace standing at something of a loss. For a moment she considered just leaving him there and making for the surface, but then dismissed the thought as completely unworthy of her. She shrugged to herself, gripped her East Grinstead Slugger tighter for what reassurance it was worth, and set off after the boy.

'Oh, well,' she muttered, 'how bad can it be?'

AFTER

In the bedchamber of Magnus Solaris, a place that none had seen save

under especial and at times quite strenuous circumstances, there appeared to be a new item of furniture: a large, blue-painted cabinet, in form something like that of a wardrobe.

A man stood, regarding certain aspects of the furnishings with an air of slight distaste. This expression turned into a friendly if somewhat distant smile as Magnus Solaris entered.

‘Thank you,’ he said, taking his hat from Solaris’s unresisting hands. ‘I’m always leaving it somewhere. Forget my own head, I expect, if it wasn’t held on by vertebrae, muscle, skin, subcutaneous nerve-fibre and cartilage. Now you’ll recall, Mr Solaris, how I once said that this would be a temporary arrangement at best?’

‘Yes,’ said Magnus Solaris, ‘I remember.’ And he did.

‘You lasted longer than I’d have given you credit for,’ said the stranger, ‘I must admit. In the end, though, your little world was too limited, too inward-looking and self-serving, to survive. I barely had to do anything. A word here, another there. The simple fact of my unaccounted-for presence was enough to tip the balance to entropy. And now it’s over. It’s *done*.’

Behind him, Solaris saw, in the chamber he had left, dark holes were eating through the walls.

‘And from this mulch shall grow a Child to set the world to rights,’ said Solaris, sourly. ‘Do I get to see it? Do I get to fight?’

‘Of course you don’t,’ said the stranger. ‘And neither will I. The nature of the Child itself has nothing to do with me whatsoever. It’s none of my concern. You know as well as I do what concerns us both – and where, and when, any *fighting* will be done.’

The stranger walked to the blue-painted cabinet and unlocked the door with something that twisted and squirmed in his hand like a living thing. ‘Well?’ he said. ‘Are you coming?’

Magnus Solaris turned to look at the consuming darkness behind him. ‘Do I have any choice?’

‘Oh, there are always choices,’ said the stranger. ‘The problem is that none of them, ultimately, is particularly happy.’

BEFORE

In the dark but strangely pristine depths of the sewers, Ace follows the light that seems to exude itself from Joey Quine –knowing that it is not light at all, as such, but merely the fact of being able to see. She doesn't much like the idea of being down here on her own, strangely pristine or not, and not being able to see.

As she catches up, she notices more of what might be called an organic component. What she had originally thought of as a tentacle now seems more plant-like, like the roots of a tree, albeit made of what looks uncomfortably like extruded human flesh. Thinner tendrils of a similar material are joining it, intertwining with it and, ultimately, attaching to and joining with the main mass so that it becomes noticeably thicker.

Ace tries to avoid touching it, so much as brushing against it, as she presses on. Up ahead, the sewer tunnel opens out. The light from this space ahead seems brighter. It is starting to pulse.

When they left the sewers, finally, through an outlet clogged with wild vegetation, Ace was still shaken.

'That – *thing*,' she was saying, as though constant repetition would dull the edges of her reactions to it. 'There were people in it. There were bits of ...'

'I don't think it was real,' said Joey. 'I mean, I don't think it was really *there*. I think that was what we saw because we couldn't think of anything else.'

He paused, trying to fit a number of ideas that were so clear inside him into mere words. 'It was the City, trying to show itself to me – trying to show itself to me in one place.' He frowned, remembering. 'It called me an Avatar, only it said I was broken. It doesn't like that. But it needs me all the same.'

'And what does it need you for?' Ace asked.

'I don't know!' Joey collected his wits to some extent. 'I'm sorry. I can't put it into words. It just needs me to *exist*, I think. To be here. It's to do with Sloater. The City doesn't want him any more and it wants to use *me* instead ...'

‘Well, I’m glad we’re clear on all that,’ Ace said, looking around herself. ‘Where the hell are we now, anyway?’

She is in a vaulted hall, the catchment chamber for several sewer tunnels, which radiate outward in a kind of multiple-star effect. From each of them, through the incongruously clear and unsoiled water, runs a thickening, fleshy tentacle.

These pseudopodia terminate and merge in a vast mound of suppurating meat.

It is as though people in their hundreds, in their thousands, have been killed, and chopped up, and piled in a seething heap. Limbs and eyes, hands and organs and faces roil across its outer surface, visible for an instant and then subsumed, like the components of some particularly noisome stew. It is a moment (during which she spoils the water of the sewer with a variety of detritus it has never actually seen) before Ace realises that this is not, quite, what she assumes it to be.

It’s like the difference between a glass eye and an eye that’s been torn from a living head, she thinks. This is not some accelerated grave-pit of decay – it is, in fact, quite the opposite.

As she watches, trying to pull some recognisable sense from the motile chaos, a hand attaches to an arm, which attaches itself to a partial torso, which goes looking for a head — the process continues until what looks like a complete and human child is produced.

And then it fades away — gone who knows where.

There is something slightly unreal about the scene, when she comes to think about it. It’s there in front of her, but it’s a little like watching TV on a set with bad reception. It’s there but hazing into static, ghosting.

Joey Quine is standing before it, before the boiling mass, watching it. Tendrils from the mass have punched themselves into his eyes. They are translucent and, Ace realises, not entirely physical — which means, she hopes, that his eyes are not currently existing as burst gelid sacs. The effect, emotionally, is more like seeing how a peripheral is plugged into a computer.

Joey seems perfectly calm, as though he is merely watching and listening to something that he finds of interest. He seems to be

communicating with the mass.

In the life of those living on the Hokesch streets, the best that one could hope for was the occasional night under a roof, even if that roof was over the likes of Old Man Srescht's Hole. Joey had heard tell that sometimes, when very young children were found on the street, those who found them would take them in and raise them as their own — but he had never known that to happen, and had been too old for it to happen to him, ever, by the time that he had heard it.

In the end, when one became too old for even such charity and sufferance as was afforded by Old Man Srescht and the like — a state that a surprising number managed to achieve, despite the best efforts of the City Patrol, the Black Watch and the occasional citizen who might try to take matters into his own hands by way of a bottle of distilled oil and a match — there was only the Outmarsh.

It spread out from an ancient breach in the Hokesch City walls in an irregular semicircle, rather like the fluid discharge from some minor wound. Indeed, there could be said to be something clotted and crusted about it: hovels built from debris and such refuse as might be found washed out from the sewers.

It was a place for the unminded and forgotten. A place of leavings, and of ending up.

This was the sight that greeted Joey and Ace as they emerged from the sewer pipe. It was hardly an improvement.

The tendrils whip from Joey's eyes – leaving them none the worse, Ace notices, for having been there. The churning of the mass of limbs and eyes and heads continues, though with a sense that it is now more simmering than boiling. Not cooking, now, but waiting for somebody or something to come home.

The City! exclaims Joey. The City is alive. He slumps. Ace is just in time to catch him before he pitches forward. He leans on her gratefully, turning to look at her with eyes that seem quite old: knowing things, but not realising that other people might not, because those things are so obvious to him.

We have to leave, now, he tells her. Something's going to happen, and we have to leave for it to happen. There's a place we can go. I never wanted to go there, but that's where we have to go.

‘Well, they seem to be keeping themselves busy, at any rate,’ said Ace, watching as a small crowd of thin and rag-clad figures, human and Dracori, worked on piecing together a collection of large sculptures: statues of vaguely human forms, all more than three metres high and resting on wheeled platforms.

‘It’s for the Feast of Fools,’ Joey explained. ‘One day every year, the people of the Outmarsh take them through the City. For one day the City must bear them in mind ...’ He paused, recalling certain aspects of his communion with the thing in the sewer tunnels. ‘In return it lets them be for the rest of the time – I mean, the City leaves them alone, but it also lets them *be* here.’

‘Some existence,’ Ace said gloomily.

‘If we don’t want to be noticed,’ said Joey, ‘if we want to stay safe, we stay here. I know some of the people; I think I used to know some of the people. I can look after you here.’

Slightly later, he would realise that, at this precise and particular point, his relationship with Ace had in some manner turned on its head. From her taking him in, and giving him protection, he was now in a position to protect *her*. At the time he realised this, he wished he had taken a moment to relish it –as this moment would turn out to be exceedingly short lived.

‘What do all these things mean?’ Ace asked, in reference to the partially constructed totems.

‘They’re supposed to show the Dead Gods that brought us here from Erth,’ said Joey. ‘Men, I mean, at the beginning of the world. The man with the big hat and the pipe – from which real fire will belch when it’s completed – is the Captain, who instructs men on the purpose of their life before they are born. The figure with the popping eyes and the lightning in his beard is Mister Bosun, who guides men through their waking life. The woman with the surprised look on her face, like she’s found herself sitting on a spike, is the Councillor, who sometimes helps

and sometimes hinders men by sending cryptic messages to them while they dream. The big blue wooden box with the beacon on its summit signifies ... Um, I don't know what that signifies. I've never –'

'You wouldn't,' Ace interrupted. She stormed over to the box, and hammered on the door set into its side. 'Come on out! It's me! I know you're in there!'

'No I'm not, as it happens.'

The voice was light, and held a burr of an accent that Joey had never heard before, not even from the crews of trading-vessels from the farthest cities of the world. It was coming from a little way behind the blue-painted box. He followed Ace around it to a little scene that its bulk had hidden from view: a folding table and four similarly portable chairs.

On the table was an open wicker hamper, well stocked with provisions of a sort that Joey would have hesitated to acquire even on Market Hill – the little tins and packages of the higher-class variety with which he would have been insufficiently familiar even to ask for in the first place.

Two of the chairs were occupied: the first by a smallish, rather gnomish-looking man in a pale and rumpled suit, who was sipping from a glass of wine with the slightly prissy air of one finding interest in, as opposed to actually enjoying, the experience.

The other was a man who appeared only slightly older than Joey – just the other side of that age, Joey thought, where one thinks of oneself, as a matter of course, as a man rather than a boy. His face, and the carriage of the body under the brightly coloured silks he wore seemed ... Joey never had and never would know the name *Adonis*, but this man had a kind of smooth perfection to his countenance that would not have looked out of place amongst the Dead Gods of which the denizens of the Outmarsh were currently and slightly ineptly building simulacra.

The effect, Joey considered, was slightly spoilt by the eyes, which held a kind of red-rimmed fever common to those he had known who had indulged themselves with opiates for a little too long.

'I thought you'd be coming here,' the little man said to Ace. 'After the unfortunate destruction of the house – under quite mysterious circumstances that I couldn't even begin to speculate about – there was really nowhere else for you to go.'

‘Well, yeah,’ Ace said. ‘The thing is ...’ But the little man had turned his attention to Joey.

‘Mr Quine!’ he said, as though people had been calling Joey *Mr* all his life. ‘It really is a pleasure to meet you in person, at last. For the first time, in any case. You know my friend Ace, of course, and I’m her friend the Doctor. And this is —’

He got no further. His companion, Joey realised, had been glaring at Ace, the whole time since first seeing her — and now, suddenly, he rose, kicking his chair away behind him, and launched himself at her with a scream of utter and incoherent rage.

IMMEDIATELY PREVIOUS

And now it is the day of the Feast of Fools — which is actually far less impressive than might perhaps be imagined, consisting as it does of the Outmarsh denizens merely wheeling their tottery Dead Gods through the Hokesch streets to general indifference and the occasional jeer.

It is to be noticed, though, that their progress is completely unimpeded by the City Patrol or anything else: quietly and without fuss, the streets open up to let them pass.

Joey, walking with Ace towards the rear of the ragged procession, notices this.

The attention of the City is on us, he says.

Yeah, well, big whoop, says Ace. It’s an attention I could live without. She rubs at the side of her face which, while not bruised, is still slightly reddened and sore from the events of the previous day ...

‘You little bitch!’ the blond man roared, slapping Ace with the flat of his hand, hard enough to injure rather than just hurt. ‘You did this to me! You got me into —’

Ace was bringing back her club with the intention of teaching this man the consequences of raising a hand to poor defenceless women – but she never got the chance, because at this point Joey cannoned into the blond

man and bore him forcefully to the sodden ground.

Over a lifetime of street-brawls, Joey had learnt that when you put someone down, you do your damndest to lay them out. The blond man, for all his finery, seemed to have attended that same informal school. They rolled and struggled, looking for something to gouge – until Joey felt the touch of another hand on him.

There had seemed to be no force behind it, but the next thing he knew he was flat on his back and gasping for breath, some considerable distance from where he had been. The blond man, he noticed, had fetched up against an Outmarsh hovel with enough force to partially collapse it.

The Doctor rubbed his hands with a slight air of distaste. Joey got the impression that he didn't like to touch things, much.

'I always find,' the Doctor said to Joey, rather sternly, 'that if one descends to the cruder levels of violence, all one really ends up fighting is oneself.'

Joey looks ahead in the silent procession to see the blond man, walking sullenly in the company of the Doctor – although to call it 'company' might be something of a stretch. The Doctor is ducking back and forth, clowning for the all-but-non-existent interest of the crowd.

Displacement, Ace says, scowling. That means he's worried. He always does that, when he's worried. He sets up all his insanely complicated little plans and then sits there with that smug superiority, coming it like Blofeld ...

Blofeld? Joey asks. The only man he knows by that name runs a fruiterers in Bagshall Place, and the only insane and complicated plan he is involved with, so far as Joey Quine is aware, is a villainous scheme to sell the world more fruit.

... and then he acts all surprised when everything falls apart spectacularly at the end, says Ace.

Um, that happens a lot? asks Joey.

Only all the bloody time. You know, I sometimes think he does it on purpose ...

‘There are things,’ said the Doctor, ‘that you all must know. You each have a certain amount of information, but without context to give it meaning, it’s ... well, it’s meaningless.’

They were seated around the collapsible table, enjoying the contents of the hamper while watching the Outmarshers completing the day’s work on their Dead Gods. The Doctor had made a point of providing spitting bowls for Joey and the blond stranger.

The Doctor had also, so he said, laid on bowls of mean gruel for the Outmarshers later — not that he wouldn’t have been willing to supply something better, he had said, but that charity rather than payment out of appreciation for their work had been refused.

Enjoying, perhaps, was the wrong word. Ace was contriving, so far as was possible, to ignore the blond man — whom the Doctor had now introduced as Magnus Solaris — and he and Joey were regarding each other with utter mutual hatred. This was compounded, for Joey’s part, by the fact that, try as he might, he could not catch so much as a breath of the workings in Solaris’s head. There was no sense of the man being shielded in some manner; Joey simply couldn’t do it.

Joey had thought of looking inside the Doctor’s head. The moment he had thought of it, the Doctor had turned to him and said, ‘I wouldn’t, Mr Quine. I really wouldn’t. You never know *what* you might find.’

He had said it in such a manner that the thought to look inside hadn’t crossed Joey’s mind ever again. It wasn’t so much that he was afraid to do it; it was more the way that you realise a fire will burn you, just before you actually put your hand into it.

‘The most important thing you have to know is —’ The Doctor suddenly broke off, distracted. ‘Do they put these little bits of pepper in by hand, do you think? Every single one? Or do they have a machine of some sort? Ghastly little things, in any case. I could never see the point of them.’

He put the offending item — a little green pellet of a type that Joey had never seen before, but that he gathered was called a stuffed olive — down on his plate, and continued.

‘The most important thing you have to know is that this City really is alive. That’s not a metaphor; the City is a living creature, albeit living in

slightly more abstract terms than the purely physical.'

Joey nodded thoughtfully at this confirmation of his earlier realisation, during his communion with the mass in the sewers. 'That's right,' he muttered, before being silenced by a glance from the Doctor.

'Those who live in it,' the Doctor continued, 'might be regarded as parasites — though of course the relationship with the host organism is slightly more symbiotic than that. In the general course of things, on this world, these city-organisms tend to grow to be no more than a metre across. Add *humans* into the mix — and have such indigenous parasites as might survive force-evolving like nobody's business in order to keep up — and you get, well ...' He gestured to the bulk of Hokesch beyond the ancient breach. 'You have only to look.

'The salient point, I think, is that the City is dying. For it to exist, it needs what might be called an interface between itself and those who inhabit it. A patron deity — rather like those of a city with which I was once, I seem to recall, quite familiar. A pair of giants named Gog and Magog. The city needs an Avatar to give it form and connection to those on which it in some sense feeds; the representative and embodiment of it in the world of men.'

The Doctor paused, sipping once again at his glass of wine, to let this information sink in.

'Sloater,' said Joey suddenly. 'He's the Avatar.'

The Doctor glanced at Joey and nodded. 'The *current* Avatar,' he said. 'But Sloater is worn out — functionally immortal, but very, very old and ... well, you might say that he's losing interest. On a fundamental level. And without it, the City is losing coherence and falling apart, as if the flesh of a man were to give up clinging to the bones. The City, by its very nature, needs an Avatar — and so the current Avatar must be replaced ...'

Joey Quine stared at the Doctor as the meaning behind his experiences of the past few days, all he had learnt, at last became clear. 'It's me, isn't it? It's me.'

The Doctor looked at him, a little sadly. 'No it isn't. Not really. But the City can use you as a stop-gap while it breeds a true Avatar. You're just the nearest thing it could come up with in the time available.'

So what am I supposed to do? Joey asks Ace as they walk. Fight Sloater? Kill him? What am I supposed to do?

Ace shrugs. What you can, I suppose. The Doctor's a great guy for just banging people together and watching what happens. It's a bit like hypnotism, really – you don't have to go along with him, you could just stop and turn back, but then you go along with him anyway just to see what happens.

Of course, says Joey, a little hopefully, there's the matter of finding Sloater. You said it yourself: we might know the name, but we have no idea of who or where he really is ...

Oh, I don't think that'll be a problem, says Ace. You know how we headed to that Outmarsh place to be safe, because the City didn't pay it any mind?

I remember, Joey says.

Well from what you say, this Feast of Fools is the one day when the City remembers it.

The parade has reached the centre of the City, Guild Hall Square, now.

Standing there, in place of the usual, somewhat slovenly occupants, are more than a hundred men, each dressed in the uniform of the Black Watch. Each is so similar in demeanour to the others that they might be identical siblings.

They are armed with an extensive variety of weapons. There are the common blades and bludgeons, staves and halberds. Some of the more ancient weaponry, it seems to Joey, is not actually weaponry at all, but rather complicated mechanisms that terminate in a long barrel or tube, the purpose of which he can only guess at.

Before these men stands another, smooth-faced, rather dapper-looking little man. With a start, Joey realises that it is the man he met earlier on Market Hill. The man who set his body to killing another, whose name might or might not have been Smith. The spider at the heart of its web. Sloater.

The man seems quite calm, his manner relatively friendly –but Joey can see the fury and the hatred of the Thing squirming in his head. It seems to be fury at no single thing in particular, merely a towering frustration at and loathing of the world in general, and how it happens

to be.

Well, Joey knows how that feels.

You've come to take me, Sloater says, in a quiet voice that nonetheless seems to ring around the Square. He seems to be asking purely for the purposes of information.

You've come to take me? Do you really think you can?

DURING

(Across the City of Hokesch, the citizens paused in their labour and their business, and found themselves turning to the direction of Guild Hall Square — a place almost none of them had visited, or even thought of, for as long as they could remember.

They had been only vaguely aware that today was the Feast of Fools, in the same way that a Briton might be vaguely aware that a certain day was the vernal Equinox, or the time of some other Pagan ritual not subsumed into the current *corpus culturalis*.

Now, however, the good people of Hokesch were struck by the thought — without knowing where it had come from — that something important was happening, in places they had long since forgotten.

There was something they should be remembering.)

‘You dare?’ Sloater’s voice was still quiet, but now it bore a certain, and slicing, degree of venom. ‘You *dare* to presume upon me, here, in my very seat of Power? You’ll learn better. Oh, yes, you’ll learn better.’

Joey felt the tendrils of Sloater’s mind attack his own, felt them crawling over him, searching for a way inside.

He found that he was able to fend them off relatively easily —but this, he realised, was because Sloater’s efforts were divided. The Black Watch in the Square were already under Sloater’s control — and now he saw the bodies of the Outmarshers stiffen, felt their minds as they were subsumed. He looked to his side and saw that Ace, with her otherworldly thoughts, was more resistant, but that even she was starting

to succumb.

In a flash of insight that had nothing whatsoever to do with arcane Things Inside and Powers, Joey saw the immediate future unfurling: the Black Watch in the square, the Outmarshers and Ace, every single one of them, would now turn to him with blank eyes, fall upon him and tear him limb from limb —

‘I really don’t think you should be doing that,’ said a quiet voice — and the tendrils of Sloater’s control simply broke. Ace shook off her temporary confusion. The Outmarshers shuffled and muttered in bemusement. The Black Watch simply stood there, immobile.

A figure stepped forward. Joey realised that the Doctor, in some manner, had contrived to fade for a while from the attention of all these here.

Now he was back, with a vengeance.

(The streets were packed. The people of Hokesh — man, woman and adopted child — were walking, under the control of something quite other than what they might have called their wills, towards the central point of Guild Hall Square.

If one had asked them why, they would not have been able to answer. If one had persisted, taken some individual by the collar and demanded an answer, then one would have been trampled underfoot — maybe even trampled to death, looking upward at a thousand pairs of blank eyes, as a thousand pairs of feet tramped inexorably onward.)

‘A lot of people might think of this Control of yours as something magical,’ the Doctor said to Sloater, who was now casting about himself with a bemusement all his own, ‘but I, on the other hand, tend not to believe in magic. On even-numbered days, at least. If minds are being controlled, my first thought — other than on odd-numbered days, anyway — is in terms of physical processes. Naturally-occurring processes, maybe, but entirely physical nonetheless.’

He stepped forward, hands searching through the pockets of his trousers. ‘Where is it ... I know I have it somewhere ... aha!’ He unearthed the item he was looking for and displayed it with a kind of

childish pride.

‘My friend Ace over there,’ he said, gesturing with the item to the young lady in question, seems to think that I have the insufferably bad habit of leaving important things out and, at the last moment, pulling them out of my proverbial hat. Be that as it may, this little device here is currently set to jam electromagnetic pulses — naturally-occurring or otherwise — of a certain frequency.’

He looked at Sloater. Sloater, for his part, looked back with complete incomprehension.

‘The upshot,’ the Doctor continued, ‘is that the more invasive aspects of this Control of yours won’t work. You’ll have to deal with this on individual terms, one-to-one, as it were.’

The bemusement left Sloater’s face, to be replaced by an expression of profound defeat. For a moment, Joey felt a pang of sympathy despite himself. Sloater did not seem to be a particularly *bad* man, just old and tired and in a situation to which he must adopt a certain posture.

‘Is that it, then?’ Sloater said, a little plaintively, slumping in upon himself. ‘After all these years, I just walk away, and die alone, and let the boy take over.’

‘That would probably be the best thing for all concerned,’ the Doctor said.

‘It would, wouldn’t it?’ Sloater said, and transformed.

(In the streets of the City the crowd shuddered as one, all collapsing in on themselves a little as a certain degree of vitality was sucked from them.)

The bodies of the men of the Black Watch crumbled into dust as bolts of energy burst from them to Sloater, who began to grow, his neat little suit splitting open under the pressure of lumpen, crawling flesh.

‘This does *not* look good,’ Ace opined, turning to the Doctor. ‘I thought you said that thing of yours would leave him powerless?’

‘It deals merely with electromagnetic pulses, sadly,’ the Doctor said, working frantically on the item he held. ‘I can’t seem to find a configuration for dealing with the direct transfer of energy ...’

Sloater had retained something of a human form, but had swollen to become a monstrosity akin to that encountered by Ace and Joey in the sewers; eyes and ears and mouths burst from the surface of his flesh and folded in on themselves to be reabsorbed, like the bubbles in boiling fat.

The thing that had been Sloater was speaking, from a thousand temporary mouths and orifices, the same word over and over again. ‘MINE!’ it stated. ‘MINE! MINE! MINE! MINE! MINE! ...’

Inside the contorting flesh, Joey saw the energy building, building to the point of discharge that would end his life. Around him, as his mind scrabbled for some direction of escape, he felt the energy held within the bodies of the Outmarshers. Some part of him wondered if he could somehow use that energy to counter the thing that had been Sloater. The only problem was that he had not the slightest idea where to start —

‘No!’

The voice came from Solaris, about whom Joey, being unable to see inside his head, had for the most part tended to forget. Now, as Solaris ran forward, something *blazed* inside him, and Joey suddenly realised what it was. It was the Power. The Thing Inside.

The reason he had never been able to sense Solaris’s thoughts was the same reason he was unable to sense his *own* thoughts. They were happening in the same head.

The thing that had been Sloater released its energies, striking Solaris squarely in the chest and incinerating him. But before Solaris died he locked eyes with Joey, and Joey saw with burning clarity the skills and knowledge he had acquired, and saw the trick of what it was he must do.

(The intangible energies that interlinked the crowds on the City streets flared, and the people imploded, flesh falling softly from them, bones collapsing to crumble into dust.

Only the buildings remained, for a while, like the teeth in a death’s head. Then the buildings, too, began to degenerate and collapse, to be softly absorbed into the fabric of the ground.)

The bodies of the Outmarshers imploded instantly as Joey sucked the life’s energy out of them. The Power caged inside him, while not strong

enough to transform him as it had Sloater, had been more than strong enough to be redirected and unleashed to blast the thing that had been Sloater into a mass of tissue and energy that now whirlpooled down into the ground, bringing to an end the life and works of the old Avatar.

AFTER

The structure of the City remained. It might even be made functional again. Like a mechanical clock from which the face had been torn, it might be repaired. It might be rewound – unaware that the hand that rewound it would set it to a completely different time.

In Guild Hall Square, Ace surveyed the ash and the fast-disappearing human remains. She was angry and sickened. She knew that there was an entire City like this, but the idea was too big to fit into her mind. She could only concentrate upon the immediate, on a single mass grave, not take in the full horror of the events that had produced it, and others like it.

‘You never *told* me,’ she said. ‘You never told me this would happen. This is ... You never told me!’ There were tears in her eyes, the kind of hitch in her throat that comes when a child begins to catch on to the idea of what is really on the other end of some proffered sweet.

The Doctor frowned, holding his umbrella with the air of one determined not to do something so offensive as to absentmindedly poke around in the ashes with it. ‘It was ...’

‘You’re going to tell me it was necessary to some greater *scheme* of things and the common good, aren’t you?’ Ace all but spat. ‘Something like that. Don’t you *dare* try to tell me that this was —’

‘I was merely going to say it was a natural process,’ said the Doctor, mildly. ‘Just as the blood and pain that accompany human birth are natural. Here and now, this is how the city-organism regenerates. Don’t think of it in human terms, Ace, because the components involved aren’t human. They might *look* like human beings, adopt human postures and reactions – talk, laugh, smile, cry, run, fight, love – but they’re not.

They're something entirely different. You know they don't eat. You must have noticed the lack of truly intimate relations as such. Haven't you noticed that there are no *children* here, except for those that suddenly appear and find themselves living on the streets? No sewage. No cemeteries. And no death. As such.'

Joey left them to it. He was feeling sickened and angry himself –and for the most part *at* himself.

He had gone along with Ace and her mysterious friend the Doctor, done the things they'd wanted, purely because they had wanted him to and he had been content to follow the line of least resistance. It occurred to him that he had been doing this, in some manner or another, all his life.

Well, things would change now, he thought. The knowledge given to him by Solaris, before he died, still burned fresh in his mind. He knew the way of things now. He could wrap the City around himself like a coat and make it move the way he wanted.

He could bring it back. Bring it all back.

It would be best on the whole, he thought, to give himself a fresh start. Leave a lot of bad memories behind, become somebody new, even change his body, perhaps. The knowledge he had acquired from Solaris, together with the Thing Inside, seemed to show the trick of something like that ...

IN THE END

They do say that, at the last, the stranger took Magnus Solaris away with him, and that together they remade the world, made it into a better place for all — or at the very least, made it what it is.

But that is no concern of yours.

It is time, now, child. After all these years, you are sufficiently grown and rested. Time to take your place. Make the City yours.

Time to wake up and be born.

About The Author

Dave Stone has written any number of things, from comics and radio scripts to full-length novels, which currently include *Heart of TARDIS* and *The Slow Empire* for the BBC Worldwide *Doctor Who* range and *Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Infernal Nexus* for Big Finish. This is his first work published in the novella form, as opposed to a short story which didn't know when to stop, and he thought that with the relatively low word count it would be easy!

He thought that, but ...