

Despite having his eyes closed the sudden brightness of the station lights forced his facial muscles to tighten up. He had been expecting the change. He knew the timing of the approach very well. Two years of this journey had imprinted every little nuance on to his consciousness. Every clump, clink and thump. Every variation of electronic bleep. Every change of light level and every change of odour. All seasonally compensated too. Now, this time of the year, mid-January, with the nights coming early, the severe contrast between the station and the darkness outside was inescapable. Had he kept his eyes open then his pupils would now be rushing reflexively to decrease their size. Or rather his iris muscles, or whatever, would be. His face would still be screwed up. Perhaps behind his eyelids the whole process was happening more gradually. He didn't really care. He had his eyes closed because he didn't want to see anyone or anything in the station. It also helped when you were trying to control your breathing. The last thing he wanted to experience now was the open animosity from the station guard. Two years of unrelenting scrutiny, of constant distrust, it was wearing.

While still outside the Zone he had stuck his pass over his jacket pocket, so it could easily be seen. Not for one moment did he expect to get away with this; he would still be disturbed. But it might limit the time he had to face the guard.

The Shuttle train had stopped. He could clearly hear people getting on and off. Considerably more getting on. A lot of people worked on the edge of the Zone. Very few

people lived there. He heard the familiar chatter of going home-from-work voices. The smell of alcohol diffused through to him. The station bar was a popular place. He could smell the food too. It made his nose twitch and his stomach reminded his brain about how little he had eaten today. Then his ears picked up the far too familiar sound of the guard approaching. The tell-tale rhythm of the steps grew closer.

Everyone who had got on the S-train would have had their passes checked before the S-train arrived. Perhaps more than once. You were never allowed to forget you lived inside the Zone. On the S-train itself the people who had arrived with it and were carrying on, now got the treatment.

Something was different tonight. He was the only person in this section who had come through. Eight - maybe ten - others had entered in the station. The guard should have reached him by now. He listened carefully. They were checking the passes again. Unusual. The just-sat-down were not objecting to this unusual extra inspection. All experienced at moving in and out of the Zone, they knew better than to do anything that would encourage the guard to inspect things other than their passes. None of them would have had more than a few drinks at the station bar. You did not get drunk outside the Zone - not if you lived inside it.

At last the guard was coming towards him. He kept his eyes shut. The cut to his hand, newly acquired that awful day, chose now to throb again. He tried to control his breathing again. Slow deep breaths. Suddenly a wave of paranoia swept over him. What if the guard knew? Knew about the disastrous visit. Knew about the 'accident'. Was he going to ask him about it? Was he going to be searched for a piece of meteorite, again?

He felt the guard stop. He sensed him looking at his pass. It would be any moment now. A rough shake of the shoulder to wake him from his pretend sleep. Then it would start.

With a barely audible grunt the guard passed on. He exited the section, the doors closed smoothly, the beeping stopped, the S-train pulled away. He kept his eyes tightly shut till they had left the station behind and were well and truly inside the Zone. What a let-off; he could not believe it.

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From behind the one-way security windows operative Sheila Jones watched the S-train head off into the Zone. She had been able to get a good look at the target while the S-train waited at the station; and while the guard did the extra pass check for her. All public transport vehicles were very well lit. It enabled the security forces, and anyone else for that matter, to see clearly inside. It also meant that it was very difficult to see anything outside when you were on the inside. Unless there was a lot of light outside, like in the station.

Sheila left the security office and walked quickly to the waiting groundcar. As soon as she was sat down it moved silently away. They were already inside the Zone security gate so there was nothing to slow them down. Inside the groundcar Sheila pressed a button on the arm rest. A light flashed once on the back of the seat in front of her. Then a panel eased itself out of the seat-back. It stopped with an audible click at a slight angle to the vertical. Sheila pressed a button at the top of the panel and several different coloured lights suddenly shone out. The dark interior of the groundcar became faintly illuminated.

Sheilah looked towards the driver in the front. He was concentrating on his driving. She glanced out of the darkened windows. No one could see her from the outside. They were travelling along one of the avenues that led to the City like spokes on a wheel. Only five had been kept open after the initial 'trouble'. Each one was very brightly lit and constantly patrolled by security. Currently the traffic was reasonable. Reasonable, that is, considering this was what passed for a rush hour in the year 2005. The traffic being mostly buses, taxicabs and various security cars. All delivery vehicles had to be off the roads at this time. There was the occasional private car too. Only officials and people who lived outside the Zone had cars. No one resident inside the Zone was allowed a car.

She touched a few keys on the panel. Almost immediately the stored file on the target appeared on the vidscreen. She looked at his photo again. He seemed more drawn and haggard in the flesh. She thought the lines around his eyes stood out more. There had been some tension in his face as he sat on the S-train pretending to be asleep. She smiled. If she had not ordered otherwise the guard would have given him a hard time.

He did not look bad for his forty-five years. There was the hint of a slight paunch, that would be the drink he enjoyed so much, she thought. But the feature that stuck out was his white hair. He had gone completely grey before he was forty. Now it seemed to be more white than grey.

A green light started to flash on the panel, it was accompanied simultaneously by a medium pitched bleep. Sheilah pressed a pad on the base of the panel.

"Operative XFSJ23 what is your present status and position?" It was the voice of City Central.

"I am in groundcar 14 on route from station South-west to the City," she replied easily.

"You are to report to City Central as soon as possible. The Arbiter's

office. Understood?"

"Understood", she replied keeping the annoyance out of her voice. What was it now?
Just as she

was about to begin the mission.

"Did you get that?" she asked the driver. He nodded his head. They had reached the
inner ring

road. He drove straight on entering the City. They were not stopped.

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The most obvious difference between the Zone and the outside was the presence of fires.
Outside about the only thing you could see was light. Electric light.

The small towns and the villages were still there. Not always the same inhabitants mind
you. Some had gone missing. More had moved in though, coming from within the Zone or
from its edge. Once the initial 'trouble' had died down he had been offered the chance to
move out of the Zone, because of his job. But he had refused. He had friends and they had
been through a lot. Some of them had not made it. Of course, the authorities, both local
and educational, did not understand him. It had caused problems, still did. It was the root
of many problems he had, and particularly when he was outside the Zone. But he was very
fortunate that the Director of the college was an old friend. He protected him as much as
possible, and he was very good at his job - he got results. For his part he tried to stay out of
the way of people with an axe to grind about his living in the Zone. He was always in work,
on time, did the job, then left to scurry back to the Zone as soon as he could. God! if only
that had been true today! What a mess of a day it had been.

Yes, there was electric light, and everything was, if anything, even more pleasant outside the Zone now. Everyone who lived there enjoyed a high standard of living, by any standard. Of course, this was one of the reasons why the authorities had got away with it. Once the initial 'trouble' was over most people found themselves better off. There was more security from the increased security forces, obviously. People were prepared to trade off a loss in civil liberties for more security in their jobs, homes and for their families. But for the people inside the Zone, as it came to be known, it had not been so simple. There had been unrest, riots and panic. Then followed the backlash, bloody and brutal. It had been everyone for themselves for a while, except where groups of people had got themselves together and organised some unity and protection. Sometimes it was by ethnic group, or race, or more usually by area. Streets together or smaller parts of the old city's areas working as a unit. That was how they had survived it all.

There was electric light inside the Zone of course. Apart from at the very beginning of the take over there had always been electricity in the centre and along the main avenues. Everywhere in fact where the officials and the security of the authorities operated. Also, where ever there were important factories, facilities, depots et cetera. More recently the centre, which was now called the City, was constantly lit up at night. It stood out in the distance as if to reinforce in people's minds just where the power lay in the Zone. Eventually as the authorities worked their way out, they came to the surviving communities and once they had satisfied themselves with them. They switched them back on. Some of these communities however disappeared at this time. All the survivors lost some members. He had been taken away and questioned then. That was when he had been offered a place outside. When he refused, they allowed him to return. But he had accepted the job at the

college. After all he needed to survive, and the money it brought with it would make him quite well off in the Zone. He did not fully realise then, the problems it would bring.

As he thought about it all again and as the pain in his hand nagged at him, the target looked out of the S-train. He could see the blaze of light that was the City coming up just ahead. The avenues that lay on this side of the City were like rivers of light in the dark. While the odd lit up areas were like islands, beacons in the night. He knew the names of all the surviving areas but had never been to any of them since the changes. Although recently, he thought, the realisation seemed to hit him suddenly, he had been allowed into a few neighbouring ones to his own.

There were only two stations left now between the entrance to the Zone and the City. The S-train was pulling up at the second of them now. He was forbidden to leave the S-train at this station, or any station for that matter, except at the City and the nearest one to his own area. It was common knowledge that the guards knew all the people who were expected to get out at their stations. Then there were the cameras and the inevitable spot checks.

He recognised some of the faces that were leaving and getting on the S-train here. Some he knew to be officials from overhearing conversations in the past.

He could not help squirming suddenly as his mind raced back to the events of the day. There was no way he could have got out of it. The Director wanted him to join the trip to the Astroscience lab. After all that the Director had done for him, he could not refuse. The signs were there, that he might be asked to contribute to the Astrophysics module next year. This was likely to be extra to his present work on the Mechanics modules. He was not particularly thrilled at this prospect. It would obviously mean spending more time at the

college. This did not appeal to him; It would be difficult. The Director had no real idea how much hostility he currently received. But it would also be difficult to refuse. He was glad it was the last day of term; just get this visit over with and there was the four-week holiday to come.

The journey to the Astroscience lab had been uneventful, but there was an undercurrent of unrest amongst some of the students. These were what he called the nouveau-powerful: the sons and daughters of the new officialdom and of the leaders of the security forces. They did not want someone who lived in the Zone with them on this quite prestigious visit. It was bad enough that the college felt they should be taught by him in the first place. Nothing was openly said but he felt their vibes very clearly. The Director, as ever, was oblivious to it all.

There was some delay on entering the lab. They duly gave his pass a fair amount of consideration. This included a call to the City Central Control to check if he could be cleared. While this was happening, he was kept separate from the rest of the party. It all served to mark him out as different. Helping to strengthen some prejudices. But they were soon making their way through the outer offices to meet their guide.

As the tour got underway the Director dropped back to where he was positioned at the tail of the group.

"Does that sort of thing happen often to you?" he asked. He had a measured voice, almost without any accent.

"I've never tried to get into a Government establishment before", he replied. "But I am used to having my pass checked."

"Yes, I suppose you are."

Was he that naive to think they would let him through without a check? Hard to think this was his protector.

During the tour, which was excellent, he stayed at the back. He never asked any questions. He thought it wise not to attract attention to himself. Although it was desperate. There were so many questions he wanted to ask. So much information to absorb. He had never realised how much work they were doing. There were many highlights.

At last they came to the room that housed their meteorite collection. Rumours had been flying around the scientific community about a curious meteorite that had recently hit the Earth, nearby. It had been incredibly hot on landing and had stayed that way for some time afterwards. Some people said for two days. It had been carefully brought to the Astroscience lab. No one had touched the main piece with their hands yet. Although thanks to some state-of-the-art spectroscopy and inspection of some smaller fragments (which had cooled down more quickly), they knew what it was made of. The experts at the Astroscience lab were very taken aback to find that it was nothing like any type of meteorite yet found. In fact, it appeared to contain features like every kind of meteorite yet found; it did not fit any class of known meteorite exactly having a bit of all kinds of minerals in it, including a high iridium content. Nobody had any idea where it could have originated from.

The room that held the meteorite collection doubled as a working laboratory. On a raised gallery alongside the walls, about four metres wide and only about one metre high at the most, the collection was laid out: the rarer ones in glass cases, others you could touch. In the middle of the room, in the well so to speak, was where the active work went on. He moved around the room giving all his attention to the inner part. Finally, he thought he had

identified the new strange meteorite sitting in a case near some steps that led down to the lower section. It was quite big, about the size of a large rugby ball. It was very roughly shaped like one, too, being more tapered at one end. The sunlight through the windows seemed to be refracted off it, somehow. He could see different colours. He found it strangely fascinating, being drawn to it, and feeling an overwhelming desire to touch it.

Probably it was this concentration on the object that was his downfall. He had not noticed that some of the less friendly students had gathered about him. Suddenly he felt a heavy push in the small of his back which propelled him to the top of the steps. Then a couple of helping feet tripped him up, and down the steps he fell. He tried vainly to break his fall but only succeeded in executing an awkward kind of forward roll. Next there was the sound of his collision with the case. It came crashing down on top of him. The glass broke, spilling the meteorite out onto the floor. As it hit the floor it split in two. At the same time part of it struck his hand. That was when he was cut. He had not noticed it at first, rather a sensation of heat in his hand.

There seemed to be an eternity before anyone reacted. He got to his feet and shook the glass off his clothes.

Then he saw the blood on the floor.

Then he found the cut.

Then he felt the pain.

Then, before all hell let loose, he saw that some of his blood had dripped onto the now exposed inside of the meteorite. It was fizzing as if it was being heated. Then it evaporated away leaving no kind of stain at all.

He was aware of being the centre of attention. The scientists looked at him with a mixture of amusement, annoyance and concern, feelings that most of the students mirrored. However, his assassins, so to speak, were roaring with laughter. The Director looked on with an expression of total bemusement. It took some time before they were ready to leave, by which time his humiliation was complete. He had apologised profusely and repeatedly. They had let him know, in no uncertain terms, what damage had been done. They became tellingly more hostile when they found out he lived in the Zone. The only person to show any understanding was a young research assistant who dressed his cut for him. He was so glad to get back onto the college bus. The Director, himself, took him to the S-train stop at the end of it all.

"Have a good break, Paul," he said. "Try to stay out of trouble for a bit, could you?" he added with a wry smile.

Paul Woodend, recent meteorite smasher, just waved his goodbye and headed for the S-train.

Back on the S-train, Paul Woodend, the unsuspecting target, gazed out at the Zone. His hand was bothering him. Perhaps there were some glass splinters still in the cut. He would look at it later. Otherwise, he had been quite lucky really. He did not appear to have any other scratches or bruises to speak of, although he thought that his cut hand did feel a little warmer, as if it had been exposed to direct sunlight while his other hand had been kept in the shade.

Watching, he could see fires dotted around in the dark between the lit-up areas: tell-tale orange yellow glows. The people who had lit them did not belong to any area and eked out a kind of living in the still devastated parts of the Zone, perhaps fugitives, almost certainly

dangerous types who lived by their own code. You did not want to fall into their hands. They, in turn, tried not to incur the wrath of the security forces. To that end, the fires were small. Large fires meant more people. The security forces did not like large numbers of people getting together in the ruined areas. Eight or ten was plenty. Neither, mind you, did the security forces want to eradicate these elements. They could easily have wiped them out, but it was useful to have a ready reminder of the recent past for the people of the new area communities. That it might well be to their benefit to have the security forces around was a point not lost on the areas.

From the outer ring road to the City station the S-train travelled underground. It did not surface again until after the outer ring road on the north-east side of the city. There were three stations left on that side of the city. The second of them was Woodend's, but tonight he was going to exercise his right and get off at City. He was dying to get home as soon as possible and hit the pub. He had a well-earned reputation for celebrating the start of a holiday. It went back to well before the onset of the 'trouble'. After this day he could really do with unwinding in his local. But it would have to wait, at least for a short while. He had an important task to complete and it took priority over his thirst.

Once the S-train had come to stop and the doors had swept open with a swish of released air, he was up and away. Moving quickly, he reached the escalators and was carried up ahead of the main crowd. He did not want to be stuck in a pass check queue now. Two levels later he was off and walking past the many fast food stalls towards the exit. Every kind of food available before the 'trouble' was represented and some different types since. The smell was glorious. He was severely tempted, having had very little to eat that day, but

he knew he could not relax until he had sorted out the present business. He would probably drop the food at the checkpoint!

As he came up on the exit and the checkpoint, he breathed two sighs of relief. One, because there was no queue, and two, because he recognised the guard, a basically friendly one. He was due a break. He offered his pass and risked a slight smile.

"Ah! Woodend! Not going straight home this evening, I see?"

"No, not just yet, anyway," he answered. "I thought I'd have a quick look around before I caught a taxicab home."

"I see."

He handed back the pass and waved Woodend through.

"You now finished for a few weeks, I see." It was not a question.

"Yes, I have."

"Well, enjoy your break."

"Thank you, I will."

He was through the check point.

"Oh, Woodend."

He stopped and turned to face the guard. What now?

"Yes?" he offered as nicely as he could.

"Don't forget the curfew for Zonies. Make sure you are out of the City by nine. You don't come into the City often, I wouldn't want you to get into any trouble."

"No, I won't. Thank you."

He turned and made his way out of the station.

Looking after him the guard smiled to himself. It didn't do any harm to be a bit friendly to some of the Zonies, sometimes. He was not going to make a habit of it though. That Woodend was a funny one. He did not recognise the guard from about ten years ago when he was coming through school. That was before the 'trouble' of course, and the guard had changed quite a bit since then. Whereas Woodend, well, now he was completely white haired. He was also slightly fatter in the face. The guard was glad that Woodend did not recognise him. It would not look good to be friendly with a Zonie. He, however, would really like to be friendly with this next one.

"Good evening, Lady Prose," he positively beamed, hastily making the way clear for her.

"Thank you, guard," Lady Prose said graciously, and with that, swept serenely into the station. She was a beautiful star of what passed for tv, post 'trouble', although her 'topical' show revealed little of news value. However, it did, often, reveal some of the Lady's finer physical points.

Bloody guards! Woodend was thinking. They bloody think they know it all. Even the more pleasant ones were a pain. Then he smiled as he thought again. They did not know everything.

The main change in the City area was the lack of people compared to before. At its busiest there were nowhere near the number of people on the streets or in the shops. This was a busy time, the end of the working day just before the evening bars filled up. Even so, Woodend was able to walk along the pavement without fear of bumping into people. No jostling occurred. The principal stores had become more and more glitzy. They catered for a small but very lucrative market: those at the top of the pile. Fitted in between these hi-tech, hi-cost modern-day emporiums were the sort of shops that the more well-off Zonies

might use - smaller scale and more accessibly priced. Everything you could ever want was here. The place was thriving. The local economy was bullish, if that was the word? But then after the 'trouble' the whole country and its economy was ebullient. After all, the need for a lot of the old expenditure had, you could say, been removed. Most people had quickly come to appreciate their new security and, more than ever, knew the value of a worthwhile job. Woodend, with regards to the job, was no exception.

Paul Woodend found he could never stay long in the City. Particularly in the night, it was too bright. Advertising everywhere: in your face and in your ears too. He made some pretence to look in the shop windows, but he had not come to do any shopping. On a point of principle, he never bought anything in the City, he made do in the Zone proper. As he walked along his eyes were fixed mainly on the roadway. The only vehicles allowed on it at this time, other than security of course, were taxicabs. He was heading for one of the main ranks, situated by a famous old pub. If what he was searching for was not there, he would be left with two choices: to carry on to the next big rank while continually scanning the streets; or to go into the pub, get himself a drink, and wait for it to turn up. Despite his craving for a drink now he did not relish the latter. The place would be full of petty officials and off-duty guards. There would be Zonies who worked in the City in there, also people having a drink before they made their way home outside the Zone. He had been in there before and at this time of day too. He was unlikely to walk into any hassle, being overlooked in the general crowd, probably. But after this day his paranoia was rampant. He could not face the place.

As he came around the corner, he paused at the entrance to the old pub. It was full. The sound of glasses clinking came from the bar. Then the music started up. The old juke-box

was turned up loud. Great clouds of smoke were fighting a losing battle with the huge fans set in the walls and the ceiling. He stepped away from the entrance. The smell of the drink was not helping. Across the street he could see a rank full of taxicabs. There was never a bad time for taxicab business these days. He knew of some people who used nothing else to get about. But this was a particularly good time, from now till the evening bars closed.

He walked slowly up his side of the street. Each taxicab was exactly like the next, except for their own individual numbers on the side. Each driver tried to add a little distinctive something of their own to their vehicles. It had to be innocuous and unobtrusive. The security forces were not unknown to strip out any excesses, as they saw them.

There he was! Another good break. He did not want to spend any more time than he had to, tonight. Excellent! He would soon be home at this rate. Crossing the street, he passed right in front of the taxicab with the familiar number. In the corner of the windscreen a small discreet sticker peered out. It was a black hand raised in greeting, or peace, on a background of the Rastafarian colours of green, yellow and red.

He looked into the cab and met the gaze of the driver. The taxicab was fifth in line on the rank. Woodend walked back down the line of cabs. He carried on past the first one in line then took the next turning to the left. He was now heading towards the edge of the City proper. He would soon be at one of the junctions that led to the inner ring road. But he did not get that far. Instead, he stopped at a paper booth and bought a copy of the evening edition. He walked just past the booth to a bench by the side of the road. He scanned the front page.

Back at the taxicab rank a customer took the first one in line. The others all moved along, except one in the middle. This one left the line and set off down the street. The taxicabs

tooted their goodbyes to each other. About ten metres ahead of the line the moving taxicab ignored a hail from the pavement. The would-be customer carried on to the front of the line. A final toot of thanks followed the taxicab as it turned to the left.

Paul Woodend was reading his way down the back page. He was not making much progress, because of his continual glancing at the traffic. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and hailed a passing taxicab. It drew up sharply alongside him. Woodend didn't bother to give his destination to the driver, he just got straight in. The doors locked, and the cab was flooded with light. He squinted. There was no hiding when you took a taxicab: anyone could see who the passengers were.

"Well, where are you going this evening, Mr Woodentop?" the accent was black, there was no doubt of it. But it was soft. Not like the voices you heard on the edges of the black area.

"Take me home, you queer Rasta," Woodend answered.

From the back, the driver had a fine head of dreadlocks that Woodend knew reached half way down his back at least.

"Would that be home, home? Woodentop. Or might you be going to your local, seeing the time, an' all?"

Was it the voice, or because he was a homosexual, or because he stayed out of trouble? He was the only black man allowed to operate inside the City. There were quite a few Asians, but only one black.

"To the pub, please, and don't try to get in the back with me, you queer-boy."

The driver laughed a light, slightly high-pitched laugh.

They were at the junction to the inner ring road. The taxicab stopped at the check. The guard ignored the driver and gave Woodend's pass the once over, then waved them on. Soon they were on the avenue that led north-east out of the City. It was an accepted fact that the majority of taxicabs that could operate within the City were wired. No one knew where the bugs were placed in the vehicles. Anyone who looked for them and found them had a habit of disappearing.

"So, how's business, Rasta man?" Woodend asked.

"Supreme, supreme," he replied.

Woodend had never known him answer any differently all the time he had known the man.

"And you, Quizmaster Woodentop, how's your business? Got any quizzes coming up soon?" the Rasta driver held his eyes in the mirror.

Woodend enjoyed his title of Quizmaster. He had learnt to take no notice of the Woodentop jibe. It was a name that spoke of the distant past, well before the 'trouble'. Well before, even, he had come to this part of the country.

"Yes, we've got one coming up at the Monarch, a week Tuesday," Woodend said.

"The Monarch, hey. Wasn't there some trouble last time?"

"Not really. Some guy collapsed and died in the toilet that's all." Said Woodend.

"Some guy!" the Rasta driver exclaimed. "He was a pain, I heard. Was causing some trouble."

"Well, I don't know about that," Woodend responded. "A lot of people come to our quizzes. Perhaps they settle some scores there. Anyway, I heard he had a heart attack."

They locked eyes again in the mirror.

"Anyway," he said again, "I'm popping down to the Monarch this coming Tuesday to see the Gaffer. Just to see if everything's alright - ready for the quiz."

He glanced out the window. They were getting close to home.

"Yes, I think I'll get there for about eight and stay an hour or so. That should be long enough to sort out any problems."

"Should be," said the Rasta driver. "The Monarch ain't a bad place to have a drink. You just need to be a bit careful."

They had pulled up outside his local. As he paid the driver, Woodend said, "I always try to be careful."

"Always pays to be careful, Woodentop,"

With that the Rasta driver pulled away.

Paul Woodend watched the taxicab disappear, heading back towards the City. Well, that was that done. He could now relax. In front of him was his second home. He could almost taste the drink. He could hear the barman asking him, "Usual Paul?"

He went in and walked down the corridor to the lounge.

City Central Control took up an entire block of space. It formed an almost perfect square. One corner spoiled the effect. It had what was, to all intents and purposes, a tower thrust into it. It gave the appearance of being added as an afterthought, which naturally it was. It performed two specific functions. It joined two of the existing sides together, thus completing the square. It also housed the communications centre. City Central Control not only looked after the Zone, but a large expanse of the surrounding region too. It followed that the Comtower, as it was referred to, was a busy section within CCC, one that never shut down.

Underneath CCC lay the vehicle parking and maintenance area. It occupied the same area as the block itself. Such a large area was easily used by the security forces stationed in or operating out of CCC. There were also two quite sizable depots just the other side of the inner ring road. They still held some of the heavier vehicles, the types that had such an effect during the 'trouble'. They were kept in a state of readiness just in case. They had not seen any action for a couple of years, but you never knew.

Operative XFSJ23 had left the groundcar behind in the subterranean garage and was on her way up to the third floor in the lift. The driver had told her he would be off duty by the time she was likely to return. Great! Just great, she thought. Now she could well be late for her first night. Whatever was up, she hoped it would not cause too much delay.

She left the lift on the third floor and walked up to the desk. She brandished her I.D. and pass.

"I have been told to report to the Arbiter's office, immediately," she told the woman sitting at the desk.

"You are expected. Go straight up. You do know the way?"

"Yes, I do," she said.

She carried on down the corridor, passing the lift that could take you up to the fourth and fifth floors if you had a high enough security clearance. She did not, so she made her way to the stairs. There were cameras in the ceilings everywhere. Every step of her journey was being observed. She still had two more checks to go through before she would be allowed into the Arbiter's inner sanctum. Surveillance and security had been greatly stepped up since the unsuccessful attempt by the Resistance to assassinate the Chief of Security. It had been over a year ago now. Sheilah Jones remembered the day well. She had been working at CCC at the time, processing data in one of the second-floor workrooms. There had been one hell of a commotion. The sound of gunfire boomed around the corridors. There had been a little screaming, one or two people had panicked, but it soon calmed down. The would-be assassin had infiltrated as far as the third floor. She was shot dead on the stairs leading to the fourth floor. Just about where she was at this moment.

Since then operative Sheilah Jones had moved on to active service. She had recently completed her second successful mission in the south west of the Zone. Now she was about to move into the north-east sector, she hoped.

Finally, she was inside the Arbiter's office. She began to experience a growing feeling of unease. She had been told to sit in one of the chairs in front of the Arbiter's desk. Behind the desk sat the Arbiter himself. The desk was far too large for sense, especially when you considered how few things were laid out on it. The important item was the keypad and the

computer terminal. The other objects were incidental really - a notepad, various things to write with, a few personal pieces. The Arbiter himself was a man in his fifties. An ex civil servant from the capital. He appeared always quite warm and genuinely friendly the few times operative XFSJ23 had met him. He was completely bald and had a strong southern accent. I suppose people from the Zone would call it posh, she thought, not for the first time. However, here was a man who had survived several power struggles since his appointment, always emerging in a stronger position than before. He was described as very capable. He was both sharp and deadly. It was said that very little occurred inside the Zone or outside that he did not know about, if indeed he had not precipitated it in the first place.

To one side of the large desk sat her Case Officer. He was old-style secret service. Ex-military with overseas experience. A man who had originated in what was now called the Zone. He had been working for the drugbusters at the time of the 'trouble'. Sheilah Jones knew the value of his pre-mission briefing and training. It had saved her from detection several times already. She thought she had received her last briefing for this mission earlier today in the same office. The answer to why she had been called in for another meeting, lay in the presence of a third person in the room. This, also, was the source of her feelings of unease.

Standing behind the Arbiter was the Deputy Chief of Security for the City area. Here was a dangerous man. In only his mid-twenties he had risen to a position that few other men were ever likely to glimpse, let alone hold. A calculating, ruthless winner was his reputation. He got things done, and he could be cruel and vindictive. He had powerful friends and allies. People who crossed his path had a habit of being transferred if they were lucky. Otherwise they were likely to suffer a shocking downfall. Or they were just not around anymore. He

had not stopped staring at her since she had arrived in the office. What was he doing here?

Operative XFSJ23 did not appreciate this latest development.

"Agent XFSJ23," the Arbiter began. He always used the word agent, never operative.

"Could you let the Deputy Chief of City Security know the objectives of your present mission, please."

"I am to take up residence in the Times Past pub in area 35. I have secured employment in the same pub. From there I am to observe and infiltrate a group of people known locally as the Quizmasters." As she said this, she held the eyes of the Deputy as best she could.

"What specifically are you interested in?" The Arbiter continued.

Was this a test? She wondered. Whose benefit was it for? Hers or theirs? Or was it to show the Deputy something? Were they proving to him the aim of the mission? Bringing her in here suddenly without a chance to tell her what was happening. The goundcar driver was a Deputy man she thought, and she had not spoken to anyone else since receiving the summons. Once she had arrived at CCC, the Deputy would have been able to follow her every move and word.

"I am to investigate any possible link with the Resistance. Also, to see if I can find any connection between the group and the frequent deaths that occur at the time of the quizzes," she replied, now looking towards the Arbiter.

Her Case Officer had not even glanced at her once. There was something going on here.

She felt that she was being used as a pawn in another game.

"Within this group is there an individual who you will be paying particular attention to?" the Arbiter again.

"Yes, sir," she answered. "The person called Paul Woodend has been targeted in particular." She left it at that.

"Can you elaborate on the reasons for choosing this particular character, please."

This was the crux of the matter, she quickly thought. Without any hesitation she gave the details.

"Intelligence believes him to be the leader of the group. He is a prominent member of the area community and played an apparently major role in the setting up and defence of the community originally. He has taken a more back-seat role since he began working outside the Zone. But intelligence believe he still has a key influence within the community and has many contacts outside his area due to the quizzes. His acceptance of a job outside the Zone whilst remaining resident inside has marked him out for special attention."

Yes, she thought, that was what the Deputy had come to hear. His interest had intensified during her last spiel. His gaze never left her face. He said nothing. There was a pause at this point. She quickly glanced at the three men in turn ending with her attention back on the Arbiter. Her Case Officer continued to avoid eye contact. The other two more than held her eye. She waited.

"Agent XFSJ23, do you remember the TPF?" asked the Arbiter.

"Yes, of course, sir," she replied.

"What is, or was, rather, your assessment of the TPF agent?" the Arbiter continued.

She thought carefully. A part of her wondered what they wanted now.

"The TPF were a reactionary teacher movement who began operating towards the end of the nineties and into the first year of this century. They were thought to have started here in the Midlands with just one cell but were soon followed by other copycat groups both here and throughout the rest of the country. It was never established that there were any links between the different cells. They started with low level assaults on anyone who

criticised teachers in the media generally. It was mostly damage to property and possessions to start with. But gradually the level of action taken increased to actual physical assault. Finally, they took to attacking pupils who were known to have attacked teachers themselves. This included action against what they called problem families such as mass beatings and burning their houses down. Then a few people were killed, and we had the notorious Longfield incident as a result of what seemed like attempts to outdo each other by various cells." Better stop there she thought.

The Deputy was studying her intently.

"You do remember, I see," the Arbiter said.

He shuffled slightly in his seat.

"They hit a family near where I lived at the time, sir" she added. She did not say that most of the people welcomed the action at the time and that included her too.

They were all looking at her now. Her uneasiness began to blossom.

"What, in your opinion agent, were the consequences of all this?"

She thought even more carefully this time. Something told her that the answer she gave now would be crucial to her mission.

"At first," she began, "public opinion was fairly neutral. Then it swung in their favour when it was seen that they were hitting some of the undesirables of society. But at the end it had swung back the other way and served only to alienate teachers even more. I think the activities of the TPF and other elements around at the time, helped to convince many people that things needed to change. When anarchy broke out and the 'trouble' started, most of the people were ready to accept", she paused at this point, "a new order."

Afraid she may have put her foot in it she carried on quickly.

"Of course, since calm was restored to the country teachers are not allowed to operate in any Zone areas. Many have been retired, the rest have had to pass a stringent vetting process."

"How do you account for the target, Paul Woodend, then?" the Arbiter asked.

We've been over this before, she thought. This has got to be for the Deputy's benefit.

"He enjoys considerable support from the college director, an old colleague. The college director himself has the support of members of the ruling council. Aside from all that, the target is good at his job. He has specialised, and the scheme he has devised produces excellent results. We need the type of students the college develops. Therefore, he is tolerated." She paused again. "Mind you, he is not comfortable with it."

Now was that it? She wondered. Would they now come to the point of all this?

"It appears your man has had an uncomfortable last day of term," the Arbiter said, as he passed a report over to her. She read it quickly. It was interesting to note that the source clearly stated that the accident had been caused by some students pushing Woodend. But this did not change the mission she thought. More useful information but not earth-shattering news. There must be something else. The Arbiter was speaking once more.

"The Deputy thinks the target may have been involved with the TPF. Not in the actual actions of course. We got all those some time ago. But he may have supplied information: names, addresses, that sort of thing. The Deputy has asked us," there was a slight emphasis on the word asked, "if we could add the TPF angle to your mission."

"Understood, sir," she said.

"Right then, we will not delay you any longer, agent XFSJ23."

The Arbiter was bringing things to a close. "I am aware that you were going to use the groundcar again. There is another one waiting for you below. I wish you good luck in your mission."

"Thank you, sir" she said and left the office.

Outside, she breathed a big sigh of relief and then began to retrace her steps. Why had her Case Officer not said anything? Not even looked at her most of the time. Perhaps, like her, he did not like the sudden interest of the Deputy in the case. It could lead to complications. With the Deputy involved they could be nasty complications.

As the door shut behind the operative the Deputy addressed the Case Officer.

"How and when will she report?"

"Once a week at first," the Case Officer replied. "She will come into the City and meet me at a rendezvous point."

"You have the usual fall-backs and what have you?" the Deputy asked.

"Yes, sir." And then, almost to reassure himself, the Case Officer added, "she is a very capable operative, sir."

"I hope so" the Deputy said, and then, addressing the Arbiter, "I look forward to her first report. Thank you again for your assistance in this matter Arbiter."

"No problem, Deputy," the Arbiter responded. "We will send the reports direct to your office."

After the Deputy had left, the Arbiter turned to the Case Officer and said, "Keep a closer eye than usual on this one. I have a feeling there is more to this than meets our Deputy's eye." He winked, mischievously.

"I intend to, sir,"

With that, the Case Officer left the Arbiter's office.

The Times Past pub was described as a 'male boozier' by the brewery which owned it. That was before the 'trouble'. It would almost certainly now be classed as a community pub. There were more families and women about. It had been one of the few pubs in the area to have survived virtually intact. There had been some minor damage at one point, when a large troop of people fleeing from the security forces had tried to raid it, but by then the community area had been well established. They had been spotted early, making their way out of the inner Zone area. A little bit of open land adjacent to the pub had been used to entrap them. The struggle had been fierce, but quite brief. The community was far too well organised and armed also. The group of raiders had been sent packing and were forced to move on further out. They left behind a total of thirteen dead. These included some of their women and one of their children. There had been some remorse for the child. But they were difficult times.

The 'trouble' only lasted about two weeks, which was just as well, as things would have got desperate if it had lasted another two weeks. The community was set up for mutual protection, and, by pooling people's various skills, to help each other to get by. It had started with just the odd street here and there. These joined together with the next street

along. Then these groups of streets combined with others, to form what eventually would be the biggest of the community areas. There was no real infrastructure, just groups of people, chosen by their street, talking together. They agreed on priorities and organised everybody to do the tasks that would help them all to survive.

Throughout the period of the 'trouble' itself, all gas and mains electricity had been cut off. Fires provided warmth and the heat needed to cook. The water supply had been maintained, however. Some said this was only because the security forces needed it, to put out fires, mainly fires that they had started as they went about their business of 'cleansing'. The availability of water had been the reason that so many of them had come through in all the areas that had sprouted up. Without it a far different story would have unfolded.

When the security forces reached them, they had been thoroughly checked out. Eventually they had been recognised and allowed to continue operating as a community. Services had been resumed. The new regulations were explained to them. Things were certainly going to be different for those left alive in the Zone. Some people were then allowed to leave the newly created Zone. Some actively encouraged to do so. Others were taken away for more lengthy questioning. A few of these, surprisingly, came back.

One of the earliest things to get back to something like normal was the brewery business. The pubs were soon enjoying new regimes. The licensing laws were abandoned within the Zone. The pubs were run by the breweries and their gaffers. They decided opening times and what kind of service they offered to suit themselves. Apart from security buildings pubs received more rebuilding than anything else inside the Zone afterwards. They were a way of keeping the remaining population happy and to some extent under control. If any place got out of hand it was swiftly dealt with by the security forces. The pubs became the focal

points of the communities. Much more so than they had been before the 'trouble'. When Paul Woodend hit upon the idea of bringing back pub quizzes it was gladly embraced by the breweries and the gaffers. It had taken off, big time. Soon a league was in place in the community area. But there were also regular one-offs. Each pub became the venue in turn. Many teams followed the circuit. Others were put together on the night. The competition in the league was quite serious. Prizes were put up by the breweries. There were fun quizzes as well. Part of the success was due to the skill with which Woodend matched his quizzes to the different pubs. People had a good time. It was a chance to meet up. Gossip was exchanged, deals made, contacts maintained. They were good for business; all kinds of business not just the breweries.

The security forces obviously monitored the quizzes and all the people who were involved. There was a certain risk having so many people in one place at the same time. But it was one they felt they had the measure of. It was accepted that whether obtrusively or incognito, the security forces would be present at the quizzes. The Quizmasters introduced a routine where they made up a quiz team who would finish last. They had derisive names and were announced as the 'representatives of our masters', or something in that vein, at the end of each quiz.

It was not long before the Quizmasters were invited to play away in neighbouring areas. A certain amount of movement between adjacent areas had been condoned for a while. But it was mostly suppliers and such like. This only applied to areas within the different sectors of the Zone. No movement was allowed between sector and sector. No one in the north-east sector had set foot in the south-west sector, for example, since the end of the 'trouble'. Unless you were someone like Paul Woodend. But he was only permitted to

travel through. The only place where people from the different sectors might meet each other was in the City. But not everybody could go to the City. The Quizmasters had done their stuff in pubs belonging to three neighbouring areas so far. But not, of course, in the black or Asian areas.

Very rarely did the whites, blacks or the various Asians cross into each other's areas. Only suppliers, taxicab and bus drivers regularly did. If they encountered any kind of hassle, the security forces reacted with considerable speed and effect. They did not tolerate any kind of racial disturbance. It suited them to have the different groups in their separate areas. It suited most of the people to be in their own areas. When the Zone was set up a lot of people were forcibly moved into their respectively appropriate areas. Very few could remain in their original homes. They did not know it, but the community around the Times Past contained most of them. It was felt that they were safe there, still living in their old homes. They were mainly a few older black people.

Officially there was no unemployment in the Zone. After the 'trouble', with a considerably reduced population, there was plenty of work around. Some people got away with doing very little. But they found themselves 'encouraged' by the security forces. Some people had two, or even three jobs. Within the Zone some of the old industries had gone. Some had returned. There had been new investment to make use of a hungry workforce. Wages were kept down, but then inside the Zone prices were generally lower; although what was available to purchase inside the Zone was strictly controlled, and limited. To cope with the demand many people were brought in from outside to work in special units. They mostly worked in the hi-tech new industries, and they rarely mixed with the Zonies. All factories and industrial units were patrolled and protected by the security forces. Sabotage

had never really been a problem. They did not openly admit it, but the security forces knew that very few members of the Resistance came from the Zone. They almost entirely originated from the outside regions or from the City.

Once everything settled down, the people left in the Zone did not have a bad lot. They were busy, able to feed and clothe themselves within certain constrictions, and they were safer in their areas than ever before. However, they were severely restricted in what they could do. They had few civil liberties, and lived with an ever present, often oppressive security system that kept them in their place.

By the end of the night the Times Past would be busy. On Friday nights it got full. On Saturday nights it was packed out. At the time that Paul Woodend arrived it was beginning to warm up. People were stopping off on their way home for a quick one or two. They would go and have something to eat and almost certainly be back later with their partners or friends. Others were now out for the duration, like Woodend. Some had been there a while longer, especially the older brigade. They spent their time quietly ruminating on the old days and turning over the latest gossip. There were a few domino and card schools in the bar. The mother of all juke-boxes was available. It had an excellent selection of the old music. You could travel back fifty, sixty years with it. There was food, hot and cold, all day.

Paul Woodend loved the fact that the Times Past had become like a continental place. He had so enjoyed going abroad in the old days. Now that he was never likely to do so again, it helped that the pub had altered; it suited him nicely. As he walked into the lounge that night the smell of fresh coffee met him. Lovely, he thought. When he was on his

holidays, he could spend all day in here. All he needed was a paper or some books. The fact that he did was well known. When he was not working, he could be found at home, or in the Times Past.

He had once made the mistake of preparing a quiz in the pub. The titles of the different rounds had become like gold-dust locally. A conspiracy of silence had been brilliantly maintained, which led to an unusually high-scoring one-off event. The gaffer had no choice but to give out the extra prizes and concessions that were generated. It was only later in the evening that the truth had come out. Much too late for Woodend to get one of the other four or five quizzes that he always had prepared in advance. As a result, he was banned from preparing quizzes in the pub. Mind you, in an age when thefts were extremely rare, he felt he had been broken into. Some unscrupulous souls attempting to stay ahead of the quiz.

"The usual, Paul?" the barman asked. It did not qualify as a question. He was already pouring his drink out.

"Please, Tony," Woodend answered.

He sat down at the far corner of the bar and spread out his paper. His drink arrived. He took a good pull at it. He had needed that. Then he looked around the room to see who was in already. He nodded at the younger lads over in the opposite corner and waved at some of the older boys who he could see in the bar. Good, he thought. No one likely to disturb him soon. He ought to be able to get through the paper and calm himself down before he had to make too much conversation with anyone.

"Finished now, Paul?" Tony, Barman Number One, as Woodend thought of him, was asking.

"Thank God," he replied. "Four weeks off. It should be good."

"So, you going to go for it tonight then, Paul?"

"Oh, you know me. I might just have a few, Tony. Especially after the day I've had."

"Tell me later".

The barman was off to serve someone in the bar. He knew from experience to leave the Quizmaster alone for a while. Let him come around, have a few drinks, read his paper.

Then he could have first look at the paper when he was finished with it. City papers were in short supply in the Zone. They had some news from the rest of the country, and even from abroad too. It was censored, of course, but it was better than nothing.

Woodend had finished his second drink and the paper at the same time. He handed over his glass and money to the gaffer who had come down to help with the early evening rush that had developed. When Tony came back into the lounge serving area, he gave him the paper.

"Off again, you waster?"

The gaffer had come over to talk to him. He just smiled back at him.

"Does it say anything in the paper about the beer prices?" he continued.

"I didn't see anything," Paul said. "Why, what have you heard?" he asked.

"At the monthly meeting yesterday, they said there would be an announcement on it soon," the gaffer said.

"What, are they putting them up?"

"No. They are going to put the spirits down a bit and keep the beer the same. Well that's what they reckoned, anyways."

"That should keep Felix happy," Paul said.

"Aye, and a few others too."

He was off to serve one of the younger lads.

The gaffer had worked at the pub for some time now. The old gaffer had taken advantage of the offer to move out of the Zone after the 'trouble'. He had been near retirement and the 'trouble' had almost finished him off, so the present gaffer just stepped into his shoes. He and Paul had been friends for a long time. His wife lived in the pub with him and handled the food side of things. They had two kids who were in school out of the Zone at that moment. Woodend sympathised with them, being separated from their children. Any children who remained in the Zone had to go to school outside. They went to specially set up boarding schools. They were not encouraged to return to their parents during the holidays. So far, the gaffer's children had come home, but the couple feared the day when it didn't happen. God knows what they are taught out there, thought Woodend. One thing was certain: the authorities were getting the kids young. They were not going to let them get away either.

"When do your kids finish?" he asked the gaffer.

"Not for a couple of weeks yet," the gaffer answered.

"Tony, I'll have another, please," Paul said. "Where's this new barmaid you told us about?" he asked. "I thought she was supposed to be here by now?"

"Oh, she rang up a while back. She had some hassle getting through the City. She's going to be late. The gaffer has told her not to worry about working tonight."

Tony was giving one of the younger lads a huge cheese roll. "He told her to just get here as soon as she can. She can just see the place in action tonight," Tony grinned.

Woodend suddenly remembered how hungry he was.

"Get me a ham roll as well, please, Tony," he said. "Well, what's she like? Got any info on her?"

"Well she's no youngster; I know that much," Tony replied.

"Who is these days?" Woodend laughed with him.

"The gaffer not saying too much then?" Woodend carried on.

"Hardly said anything. It's a favour for some brewery bigwig. She's been working in one of the other sectors, but it seems there was some bother. Don't know what." He looked over at the gaffer. They were talking quietly. He continued, "I don't think the gaffer knows what either."

"Well to get yourself transferred between sectors someone must be pulling some impressive strings somewhere," Woodend thought out loud.

"You're telling me!" Tony said as he went back in the bar again.

Paul Woodend had been in the pub just over an hour. He had drunk a few beers and consumed, quite ravenously, one of the huge rolls. Someone had put one of his favourite songs on the juke-box. It was a real oldie with some great electric guitar. He had calmed down. He had even told the story of the disastrous trip to the Astroscience lab. Somehow, he had contrived to make it a little bit funny. Some of the older boys had asked if he knew any outside news that was not in the paper. He had done his best to remember everything he had heard recently; be it wild rumour or certain fact. His paper was doing the rounds in the lounge. He noticed that the guy who worked in one of the fancy clothes shops in the City had surrendered his paper to the same fate in the bar.

Woodend was beginning to look forward to his holiday. He ordered another drink, this time from the old barmaid, Genie, who had come in to fill in for the still-not-arrived new barmaid. Genie was another one who had survived from the old days. She did not like to work too much.

The Times Past was starting to get busy again. It had gone through a bit of a rush, then a bit of a quieter time. Now the clans were gathering, as it were. At either side of him were some of his main friends. There were the other members of the Quizmasters. Lee was standing at the bar, talking to one of the blokes who worked with him. They sold things. Lee was the voice of the Quizmasters. He ran the Quiz, doing all the vocals, asking all the questions, giving all the answers. He was a showman, and he did a very good job on the quiz-playing public. They were his audience and he often had them in fits of laughter. He sailed very close to the wind at times with his musings on the actions of the security forces. Everyone loved it. If Woodend was good at setting the questions Lee was equally as good at running the show. Woodend did not think anyone could do it better.

Sitting alongside Paul at the bar was the other third of the Quizmasters. Ronnie took care of the equipment. He set up the speakers and made sure the microphones worked properly. He handled any tapes or videos they used. Sometimes they had rounds that needed visual aids or even projections. Ronnie oversaw all that side. He was a pretty quiet sort of bloke. He had his own shop in what was left of the High Street. He could fix almost anything electrical for you. Every time Woodend went in there it fascinated him. Bits and pieces were strewn all over the floor. It was a rat's nest of a place. All sorts of machines and devices littered the shop in various stages of repair, or disrepair. God alone knew where he got all the parts from. Woodend knew that he was constantly on the lookout for anything electrical or electronic. Or mechanical for that matter. It was widely known that he had some dubious connections with the local security forces, but nobody mentioned it. Ronnie was a useful man to have around, invaluable to the community and everyone knew it.

Paul and Ronnie were about the same age. Standing between them was a younger man, Tapper. Lee and Tapper were about the same age, being about ten years younger than Paul. Sometimes, if they had a particularly big quiz on, Tapper helped Paul with the marking. Normally he preferred to take part. He was part of one of the teams that operated out of the Times Past. They were contenders in the league, but Woodend did not think they would win it.

True to his name, Tapper was tapping a pen on his paper. The three of them were stuck on one of the crossword clues.

"So, there is some trouble going on in America," he said to Paul.

"Well, in the States anyway. The rumour is that there is an uprising in the Midwest. They are having some trouble putting it down."

"And no more news out of Europe?" Tapper asked.

"Nothing for a week now," Paul answered. "There seemed to be something going on in the Alps. Nobody I know knew for sure what was happening. Or they would not tell me, anyway. But it does seem that a cross-the-mountains resistance has sprung up."

"Let's hope so," Ronnie interjected. "Fourteen down is marsh harrier."

"Good one!" Paul exclaimed.

"That one is too," Tapper said. The other two looked at him, then followed his gaze to the opposite end of the bar.

A pretty woman was introducing herself to the gaffer.

The gaffer had taken the new arrival straight upstairs to meet the wife. She had shown her the room she would be staying in, given her a cup of tea, that sort of thing. Then, when she had settled her in a bit, the wife brought the newcomer back down to the lounge. There she handed her over to her husband and went back to the kitchens before anyone could pump her over the new barmaid.

Most of the customers took an interest in the new person behind the bar. The gaffer went through his now time-honoured routine of showing a new member of staff around the bar. It included the different taps, the computer system and the food ordering side of things. She would be required to help in the kitchens, too. Finally, she was introduced to the regulars by the gaffer. This was when the disparaging comments flew, thick and fast. There was a certain amount of trying to outdo each other. All the names were wheeled out again, along with the histories. The shortened versions, of course.

The gaffer had reached their corner.

"Lee, this one is," he said. "If you want to buy or sell anything, he's your man. Mind you check your change if you do. Gift of the gab or gob, Lee has."

"Charmed, I'm sure," Lee responded, and winked at her.

"Next we have Paul," the gaffer continued. "Our resident teacher. He's just started his latest holiday, so you'll probably be seeing a lot of him."

Paul smiled and nodded hello to her.

"The quieter one is Ronnie." The gaffer had moved on. "He is the community Mr Fixit."

"Hello," Ronnie said in a suitably quiet way.

"Finally, standing there, is Tapper," pointed the gaffer. "He organises building work."

"Hi" Tapper did his best to beam. "Anyone offered to buy you a drink yet?"

"Yes, quite a few actually," she answered.

"I'm getting the first one," declared the gaffer and led the new barmaid away.

"Pretty girl," Tapper said.

"She's not a girl, she's a woman," Ronnie said.

"Pretty woman," Tapper responded. "How old do you think she is?"

"About your age, Tapper," Paul replied. "Mid-thirties."

"I thought so. Sounds good to me." Tapper beamed again.

"And me," Lee put in.

"Sounds like the boys will be playing soon," Paul said to Ronnie.

"I don't think I'll stay to watch," Ronnie sighed. He finished his coffee, said his goodbyes and left.

Paul Woodend studied the new arrival introduced to them as Sheilah. She was a good-looking woman, about five eight, with dark black hair, a pleasant voice and an attractive figure. She had seemed surprised when he was introduced as a teacher. So, she should. He wondered what had happened to bring her their way - on a transfer of all things. She caught his eye across the room and smiled at him. The gaffer was still talking to her. His wife had joined them, and Genie was there too. They were laughing about something or other. Meanwhile Tony, Barman Number One, and Phil, Barman Number Two, were working flat out in the busy place.

It was not long before it was all hands to the pump. It had become as busy as a Saturday for some reason. The new woman was also pressed into service. She was keen to get started. Obviously, she had done this kind of work before. Paul did not pay much attention to her. He spent the rest of the evening talking to people from his road who had come in.

At closing time, midnight, they walked back together. Woodend stopped to get his feed of chips on the way. He usually had chicken and chips. You could not get fish at all anywhere in the Zone. That included the City. Woodend knew that even in the rest of the country fish was a luxury. Too late in the last century the world woke up to the fact that the fish stocks were dwindling. Ocean fishing had been sharply cut back, but not in time for some species. Then the 'trouble' began. It was apparent that it had been orchestrated not so much worldwide, but amongst the developed nations. Woodend had discovered that since the global problems had resolved themselves only certain countries around the world carried out ocean fishing. They were the more powerful regional nations. Not necessarily the traditional fishing countries. He had once been told by a jingoistic visitor to the college that Japan, Spain or Norway would never have a fishing fleet again.

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The next morning Paul Woodend woke for the second time at about nine o'clock. He rarely slept for more than four or five hours in one stretch, but he was good at going back to sleep again. When he had first woken, at half five, he had had a drink of water, turned over and gone back to sleep. The second thing he did after he had got out of bed was take the dressing off his injured hand. The first thing he had done was to start to remove last night's drink out of his system. He had forgotten about his hand last night, being more interested in stuffing himself and then crashing out. Now he unwound the dressing. It had some dried blood on it, but he was in for a surprise when he examined the cut. It had completely

healed. There was a soreness and a skin discoloration where he had been cut, but otherwise the wound had sealed up. He had always been a good healer, but this was uncanny. Perhaps it had not been much of a cut in the first place, more a bloody graze than a deep one. All the same, he could not help feeling it was rather strange. Perhaps they had a new wonder treatment at the Astroscience lab. Well, whatever, he threw the used dressing into a bin, went back to his bedroom and got dressed.

Saturday mornings always started the same way for Woodend. They had not changed since the 'trouble'. First thing to do was to see about the week's washing. Once that was in the machine and the cycle activated, he was out of the house. Shopping was next on the agenda. With him being on his holidays he did not need to think too far ahead today, just what was necessary to get through the weekend. Some bread, some milk, some fruit and what passed for a paper in the Zone. He did not hang about talking to people that day. Sometimes it could take him an hour to get home, and this with everything he needed in a small area only three hundred metres or so away.

Saturday was a good day for taking your time over the shopping, talking in small groups and staring back at the security men. They were walking up and down the High Street or standing guard at the new check point cum guard station. It was a bit of a game really. The guards let everyone know they were there, occasionally flexing their muscles. The people in turn offered a little hostility, usually in the form of looks. Sometimes it got down to verbal exchanges. Very rarely someone went too far, or the guards were more irritable for some reason. Then there would be a short scuffle. The inevitable result was someone locked up for a while. A crowd might briefly gather to hurl some more abuse on the security men. Then the crowd would disperse, and things would settle down to normal again.

This morning, though, Woodend was back home in under half an hour. He put his provisions away. For some reason he had bought more fruit than was usual for him. Impulsive buying was not something he was in the habit of doing. He sometimes did it when he was a bit flush with the money. By the time he got back to the house he was quite hungry. He started to eat the fruit. It was going to rain soon, he thought, looking out the kitchen window. Better check the garden now. He went out the back of the house. The garden was not well kept. He made sure the path that lay in the middle, and a swathe about a metre either side of it, was clear. This insured his washing could blow free when he hung it out to dry. Otherwise, the garden was overgrown. There had been a lawn either side of the path once upon a time. Now it was an area where weeds and grasses of all types held sway. They came in various sizes of height and spread. There were nettles and thistles, plenty of stingers to beware of. At sometimes in the year there were rather pretty explosions of colour.

Woodend made his way up the path towards a dilapidated-looking shed. He kept some garden tools and other things in it. Despite its appearance the shed kept out the rain. Just in front of the shed lay a broken old flower box. Some of the panes of glass that had covered it once were cracked. Others had fallen to the side. The front wooden section was rotted and had fallen over in some places. The flower box was about a metre long and twenty centimetres or so high. Inside it there was a blanket of green plants, probably of three or four types. Woodend had pulled a three-foot-tall weed out of his way and was staring into the flower box. He could recognise two types of plants amongst all the green: mint and shamrock. But he was not interested in these. Standing a little taller than all the green around it was a plant that had quite small pink and white flowers. The stem and leaves were a more yellowy shade of green compared to their neighbours. The plant was

not alone; it had a few siblings dotted in the green blanket. But how many was the information Woodend was after. He counted. Some had spread out of the flower box. Good, he thought. Twenty-one flowering plants. Last weekend there had been only seven. A three hundred per cent rise in a week. That was what they needed. Perhaps it might work after all.

It was starting to rain. Woodend had a quick general look around. He noticed evidence of foxes in the nearby undergrowth: patches of flattened grass, some animal bones, some droppings. He went back into the kitchen. Next up was some more breakfast. Toast and coffee should do it. Then last week's ironing. That would take care of the housework for now. Plenty of time for any cleaning next week. After all, he had lots of time on his hands.

When eleven o'clock arrived, he was ready to go to the street meeting. He put on a decent coat and walked the short distance along the street to the meeting house.

Woodend lived in a street with about twenty houses on either side. Of these forty houses, barely, half were still occupied. On his side of the street the houses were mainly semi-detached. On the opposite they had been one long terrace. Ten houses in total were damaged or smashed beyond repair. These were mostly at Woodend's end of the street. He had only two immediate neighbours, one next door and the other dead opposite. Halfway up the street on the terrace side two houses were sandwiched between two wrecks, which had been, in fact, burnt out, the only ones in the street to suffer that way. The two houses together formed the meeting house and the street store.

These houses were completely bricked and boarded up, downstairs and upstairs. Only one entrance remained. This had a good solid door which was normally kept locked and bolted. The door had come from one of the High Street banks that had ceased operations

after the 'trouble'. Inside, the two houses had been knocked into one. Downstairs was the general meeting place. Upstairs a store was kept.

In the build-up to what became the 'trouble' people panic bought almost everything they could get their hands on until the money ran out. Then, during the 'trouble' itself there had been widespread looting. Anarchy prevailed until the streets organised themselves, then very quickly the communities came together. This led to a more ordered stockpiling of essentials. At first these were spread out evenly amongst the houses in the street. If one house was lost for any reason, then the rest remained. At the height of the 'trouble', when the community seemed to be under threat from roving bands every hour or so, no one realised how soon it would all be over. When the security forces restored order the street still had a large amount of supplies remaining. They successfully managed to hang onto them. Then, when things had settled down more, it was decided to store it all in the one place. All the perishable items were shared out and used up. Everything else was put away for safe keeping in their newly converted stronghold. From soap to tinned food, it all lay upstairs, waiting for the next crisis.

There was plenty of room downstairs to hold meetings. Any suitable furniture that was left in the now unused houses had been moved in. Paul Woodend sat in one of the easy chairs. He did not sit at the tables. He looked around. Not everyone left in the street was there, but there was a representative from every house.

No one person led the meetings, although there was a smaller group of four who were their representatives for the area community. Sometimes the meetings went on a bit long for Woodend's liking, but at least everyone could have their say. Local democracy, of a kind.

When the 'trouble' started they had surprised themselves with how quickly they had got together, then the ferocity with which they had defended themselves. Woodend could remember it well. He had been constantly scared yet amazed at his own aggression.

In a short time, people who mostly just greeted each other on passing had formed a tight knit group. They had fought together and watched friends die together. They had done some desperate things together. But more than anything, they had survived together.

When life returned to normal, at least to the normal of the newly created Zone, some had left; those who remained found that they missed the togetherness that the struggle had brought. So, they arranged to have these weekly meetings on Saturday mornings to bring them together.

Woodend had taken an active part at first. But once he had started to work outside the Zone, he found he had less time and energy to devote to street and community affairs. Also, the Quizmasters were on the go and he began to receive more attention from the security forces. He thought it best for him not to be too involved. The others had agreed.

The main cause for concern, and what they spent most of the meeting on, was the rats. Woodend had not really noticed, but apparently the rats were on the increase. They seemed to be getting bolder too. He had been told in the pub the previous evening that this was the main worry now. He had not been able to think of a solution in the meantime. The discussion went around and around for the best part of an hour.

Woodend wondered if they could find a predator to help them. It appeared that the local cats were doing their best. But these rats were a large breed. The foxes probably took a few but not many, people thought. Of course, all the wild dogs had been shot a long time

ago now. No one living in the Zone could have a dog. The only dogs to be found in the Zone were those that belonged to security. You did not want to get mixed up with any of them.

Poison was suggested by someone else, but where could you get enough of it to do the job? And at what cost? How long would it last, as well? It did not seem a problem they could solve. Maybe all they could hope for was a way to contain the problem. It was decided that their own building people would inspect every house. They would seal up all possible ways in which the rats might get into the houses. Everyone was to attempt to kill as many rats as they could. People left, talking about water traps and electrocution and what have you. Woodend said he would ask around to see if anybody else had any bright ideas.

The meeting broke up. Woodend refused another cup of tea, saying he had an appointment - an appointment with a pint. They laughed and smiled knowingly. Some said they might see him later. He left. Walking past his house, he checked his money. That should do nicely. He had enough to stay out if he wanted to. And why not? He was on holiday.

Ronnie was usually quite busy on Saturdays. He stayed open till the time it said on the door. Other days he would often lock the door and retreat to the back of the shop where his workshop was. If you rang the doorbell he would soon come and let you in. The shop itself was like a goldmine. If you were so inclined, you could spend a happy hour in there. Anyone into electrical machines and electronic gadgets, pre- 'trouble' naturally, would have a field day. If anyone was ever allowed into Ronnie's workshop, they would find a veritable treasure trove.

Today Ronnie was not particularly bothered about having a quiet day. He had plenty of work on, enough to keep him going for a couple of weeks. He kept looking out the window, watching for Paul. He wanted to catch him on the way to the Times Past. He knew that Paul was due to go to a street meeting in the morning. That ought to be finished by now, he thought. If he knew Paul at all, he would soon be on his way to the pub. If he left it much later, he would miss the start of the Sports' Review programme.

"Ha, ha!" he said out loud. "There he is." He opened the shop door and called out to Paul. Woodend had seen him coming and had slowed down to meet him.

"What's up, Ronnie?" Paul asked him.

"I've checked the plants again, this morning," he began. "We've lost some more overnight."

"Did you get the petals in time?" Paul asked.

"Yes." Ronnie said, quickly. "But we're not short of the petals, Paul. You know that."

"Yes, I know, Ronnie," he replied. "I looked at the other plants this morning. There were twenty- one, in flower too. I think it is going to work. Look, I can't stop now. Remember Tuesday, we still have that yet. I'll see you then"

He was on his way.

"About eight, Tuesday?" Ronnie asked after him.

"No later than eight," Paul called back.

Ronnie went back into the shop. He put the closed sign on the door. Then he went through the workshop and out of the back door. He gazed into the greenhouse that stood there. The floor was covered with pots of plants, plants that appeared to be in varied states of health. Many of them had small pink and white flowers. Near the door stood a table. On it were lines of petals. Also, there appeared to be seeds, but not so many of them.

The front doorbell was ringing. Ronnie shut the back door. He had a rather thoughtful look on his face when he appeared in the shop. He was thinking that it was no good having plenty of poison, without plenty of antidote. Not for what had enabled him to survive virtually on his own, here in his shop and flat; or, for that matter, their present dark needs.

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Woodend had reached the Times Past. He was not late, but he had cut it a bit fine. When he entered the lounge the music for the Sports' Review had just started. Most of the free seats in the room had been placed in front of the large vidscreen. This was embedded in one of the walls facing the bar. All the seats were filled with regulars of all ages. The overspill took up positions standing by the bar, or any spot where a good view could be had. A large proportion of the males in the area who were not working were likely to be found in front of similar vidscreens in other pubs, or in some of the newer 'caffs'. The pattern would be repeated in the other areas all over the Zone.

Woodend wove his way through the crowd at the bar. Eventually he got to where he had been sitting last night, where he normally sat or stood. Tapper was already there.

"I thought you wouldn't be much longer," he said. "I got Sheilah to pour you one ready." He passed Paul a drink.

"Thanks, Tapper," Paul responded. "That bugger Ronnie clobbered me as I passed his shop. Mind you, I was already rushing."

"What's his problem?" Tapper asked. "Run out of change again?"

"No. He's having a minor panic about Tuesday for some reason," Paul answered. "You know what he's like. Does he even know the Sports' Review is on at this time, do you think?"

"I doubt it," Tapper grunted. "What's happening Tuesday then?"

"Don't you remember! We're going down the Monarch again." Paul glanced at Tapper. "Changed your mind about coming?"

"No, I have not," he said.

The new woman, Sheilah, was waiting patiently for Woodend to pay her. He apologised and did so.

Sport had been drastically affected after the 'trouble'. All the men in the room had followed one local team or another. Football team, that is. Some supported other teams from further away. The team that Woodend supported still played, but the only way any Zonies could get to see them in action live, was to try to get a job at the club. It was difficult. There were plenty of people outside the Zone willing to work on match days.

The grounds were packed out with fans from outside the Zone. They were bused, trained, flown in even, in special hospitality choppers. There you had it. To see live action, you needed to have the money and to be the right kind of person. The teams were brought in for the matches, then returned afterwards to their bases outside the Zone. On match days the ground came alive. Any other day there were just security men about.

The authorities recognised the role that sport could play for them. They made sure no sport was accessible to the Zonies except through the vidscreens. They controlled the output. Sometimes, when appropriate, they showed sport from around the world. The flagship of their sporting programmes was the Sports' Review on Saturdays. It started with a round-up of sporting news and action from the week. Then a match was shown live. The gaffers could have any of the matches on, any match anywhere in the country. The system also allowed them to tape other matches which they could show at other times.

The Times Past used a voting system to decide what matches they would watch on Saturdays. The gaffer had the casting vote if necessary. Whatever happened, there were always different matches in the lounge and the bar, and at least two other matches being recorded at the same time. Woodend was looking forward to the match today. He could

not get as passionate about them as before but at least it was football. The atmosphere in the room was warming up nicely in anticipation. Saturday afternoons were a time when the Times Past reverted to a 'male boozier' for the most part.

"So how come you're a teacher?" Sheilah was asking. "How come you haven't moved out of the Zone?"

"Or been moved out, is more like it, you mean," countered Paul. He stopped to watch the game briefly. Truth was, the game was quite disappointing, quite boring really. He had been talking on and off with the new barmaid since it had become obvious what type of game it was going to be. She seemed to be a friendly person as well as good-looking. Paul had judged her age right. He had asked her outright, much to Tapper's dismay. Tapper, also bored with the game, was at his beaming best, trying his hardest to worm as much information out of Sheilah as he could. She, in turn, was apparently forthcoming.

"Our Mr Woodend is a specialist," Tapper said half mockingly to Sheilah. "He gets to travel across the Zone in the new gleaming S-trains. And really gets to go outside the Zone."

"Well, it's pretty unusual, isn't it" Sheilah said. It was not a question, more a statement of fact.

"I work in a fancy college," Paul began. "It's about twenty miles outside the Zone, on the south- west side. The college is a science-only place. It's supposed to train the future scientists and engineers. The guy that runs the place is an old friend of mine. We worked together before the 'trouble'. He's responsible for me working there. He thinks I'm worth bothering with. He looks after me."

"Mind you, Paul can't stand it there," Tapper interrupted.

"No? Why not?" Sheilah asked.

"The place is full of people who take the piss out of me," Paul answered. "All the time, too. The students are all full of themselves. They come from the privileged elite. None of them have any family in or from the Zone. They look down their noses at me. Only a few appreciate what I'm doing. Only a few of the staff bother with me as well."

While he said this both Sheilah and Tapper nodded their heads.

"Don't they want you to move out of the Zone?" Sheilah asked. "Wouldn't that make life easier for you?"

"God! I'm never going to move out of the Zone," Paul cried. "They are always on at me to do so, but I refuse. I'd stop the job first. I think that while I'm of use to them they let me get away with it."

"The pay must be good though?" Sheilah was asking again.

"I can't deny it," Paul smiled. "I do nicely out of it, and I get to still live where my friends are. I'll have another one please, Sheilah."

She went off to get him a fresh glass. Tapper was looking at him. He had what seemed like half a smile on his face.

"What's up with you?" Paul asked him.

"Nothing," Tapper answered.

"Come on. What?" Paul insisted.

"I was just thinking, never is a dangerous word to use,"

He looked back at the vidscreen.

It was half-time. Right on cue the gaffer and his wife brought trays of sandwiches in.

They placed them around the room and along the bar. The people who had been sitting got up and moved around. Some went to the bar for refills. Some went to toilet. Everyone ate some sandwiches and chatted to each other. Woodend talked to some of the younger lads.

They talked about the match so far and waited for the other half time scores to come up on the vidscreen.

The bar staff were busy during half-time, but things went quieter as soon as the second half started. By that time Tapper and Paul had begun to do what would be the first of many crosswords. They paid attention to the game when the commentator's volume increased. The game continued to be uninteresting overall. The local team, in name only, eventually won. A late goal did the trick.

By that time the pair of them had dispatched the first crossword with a little help from Tony who had just started his shift. People started to drift away once the live action had finished. The chairs went back, and the pub entered a lull. Soon enough it would begin to fill up with the Saturday crowd.

Sheilah was taking a break. She had finally succumbed to Tapper's persistence and had accepted a drink from him. The three of them were sitting at a table next to the bar. She had just been told all about the Quizmasters by Tapper. Woodend had put some money in the juke-box and was doing his best to listen to the music. Occasionally he nodded an agreement in Tapper's direction. This Sheilah was an interesting character, he thought. He got the impression she was here to stay. She was dead interested in everyone, so to speak. Tapper was giving her the run-down on everyone in the pub at that time, and a few others besides. Overall, he was being unbiased. They were getting on well, it seemed.

"So, we won't see Ronnie today then?" she was saying.

"Not till Tuesday now," Tapper said.

"And he survived the 'trouble' all on his own," she added. "Amazing."

"Well, not exactly on his own all the time." Paul was joining the conversation now. "Our street community noticed him at the start of the second week. There was a lot of damage to the shop front. Not so much to his flat above, though. What caught our eye were the bodies; there were five or six in the shop itself and more outside on the pavement. He had obviously been fighting back."

Paul paused at this point, lost in the memory of it.

"Paul and I met outside Ronnie's shop." Tapper took up the story. "We knew each other from before. We weren't half pleased to see each other, I can tell you. That was when our two streets began to cooperate."

Paul was smiling. He was wondering how Tapper would tell the rest of the history.

"Ronnie was all out of food by then," Tapper carried on. "We managed to persuade him we were on his side. He was desperate and very tired by then. He had been on his own for a week. He joined up with my street but never moved in with us. He stayed put all the time. He did come to the meals and did his share of patrolling though. By that time, we had cleared the area of all the shit people. All our hassle came from outside, but we were becoming more and more organised by the day. More streets joined us. We were feeling hopeful."

Paul watched Tapper. He could see the light in his eyes. He could feel the pride in his voice. Yes, it was something to be proud of, their story. He glanced at Sheilah to see her reaction. She was taking it all in, even though she must have heard loads of similar stories before.

"How did he do it on his own?" she asked. "He doesn't look the type somehow."

"I know what you mean," Tapper said. "We could not understand it at first. There were hardly any marks on the bodies; Ronnie had a few scratches, didn't he Paul."

"Strictly superficial," Paul obliged.

"He tried to tell us some half-arsed tale at first."

Tapper was off again. Woodend attempted not to show too much interest.

"We got the truth out of him. Being a kind of gadget wizard, he had made something which produced really piercing sounds - high frequency sounds." He glanced quickly at Paul, but he was not forthcoming this time; he seemed to be absorbed in the music.

"Anyway, his device knocked people out for a while. Then he would hit them in the throat while they were flat out. Smashed their windpipes and stuff. When we got to him, he was getting anxious because his device had been broken in the last attack."

"I hardly know him, I know," Sheilah said, "but all the same, it's hard to believe."

"We all did things we didn't think we were capable of during the 'trouble'," Woodend cut in. "After all we are..."

Together he and Tapper cried out...

"... the most dangerous animal on the planet."

They laughed. Sheilah shook her head and smiled at them. In some ways they were like big kids, she thought. They all had little sayings in this pub, and they all laughed at their own in-jokes. But they did not keep much to themselves by the sound of it, especially Tapper. She had got a lot of useful information out of him. He obviously fancied her, but she could handle that.

Paul Woodend was a bit different though. He needed a few drinks inside him by the look of it. Then he was more talkative. Last night she noticed he developed a mischievous glint in his eye once he was well on. He had not reached that stage yet this afternoon, or evening

rather. She had felt him watching her closely. He was curious about her, she could tell. Also, he tried his best not to show his interest in how she responded to Tapper's story.

The people in the Times Past were very much like the people she had encountered in the south- west sector. They were a close bunch and proud of themselves, which was understandable because of their common experiences of the 'trouble'. They were also suitably irreverent about the security forces, but also, they were beaten. They knew their place in the scheme of things. Many of them, probably, secretly happy at the way it had all turned out. After all, they had quite a reasonable life really. For many it was now better than before the 'trouble'. After all, the human animal was a selfish one when it really came down to it, she mused.

But Woodend did appear different. He was without doubt a 'thinker'. She could see why he would generate some concern. But was he mixed up in the Resistance? It was hard to see it, not at that moment, anyway. Despite their recently related history it was hard to imagine him, or Tapper, getting involved in any activities as such. They were far too comfortable. Now this Ronnie bloke; he might be a better bet. She needed to get in with these Quizmasters soon.

The gaffer was calling her over. Her dinner was ready. She excused herself and left Tapper and Woodend to join the gaffer and his wife at a table away from the bar. After this meal she would be back on duty. It was starting to get busy already. It promised to be hectic from the sound of it. She would keep her ears and eyes open. It was always, in her experience, when you least expected it that the breaks came.

The rest of the night passed in a typical fashion for Tapper and Woodend. They were soon joined by other friends.

They did some more crosswords. They had some food. They carried on drinking and they had a good laugh. The Times Past filled up. The music played. Then it was time to go home again, and they all did.

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The next morning Paul Woodend had a lie in. He was feeling a bit groggy from the previous day's drinking. There was not much point in getting up too early. In the old days he would probably have done so, turning on the TV and spending the morning watching some old sci-fi programmes. But all the TVs had been destroyed or removed from the Zone. No Zonies could have access to any information other than that carried by the official papers and vidscreens. The City vidscreens had more services. Woodend tried to watch them whenever he was in the City for any length of time. But that was a rare occurrence.

Ronnie's shop was regularly searched for TVs and TV parts. If they ever found any, he would be in serious trouble with the security forces. Paul could not help thinking that the only person capable of making a TV and then getting it to work around here was Ronnie. He could not help thinking, also, that Ronnie had done it and somehow hidden it from the searches. Or perhaps worse, he had some arrangement with the searchers. Anyway, if he had done it, he never let on about it to anyone.

He missed those old programmes, he thought, idly.

Eventually he got up, dressed and had some breakfast. It was a clear day. He went out the back garden and checked the plants again. They were doing fine as far as he could make out. If these plants could only take here in his garden of all places. Well, it would solve a problem or two. With that thought in mind he returned to the kitchen. On a shelf above his fridge freezer were a line of small glass bottles. They contained what looked like spices and herbs, that sort of thing. Woodend took down a bottle in the middle, unscrewed the top and poured out some of the contents into his hand. They appeared to be seeds of some kind - white seeds with yellow tips. Woodend popped them into his mouth. He chewed them for a good minute before swallowing. It seemed like ages, every time he did it. He hated the taste. He always drank three or four glasses of water afterwards in a vain attempt to rid his mouth of the taste. Ronnie insisted on the chewing. It broke down the tough outer casing of the seeds. This was necessary, Ronnie said, to make sure enough of the antidote chemical got into the bloodstream.

With his weekly fix completed there was nothing really left to do but to go and get something that would replace the horrible taste - a few proper drinks, naturally. He left the house. Across the road his neighbours were poking around in their front garden. Woodend called over a greeting and waved at them. He did not stop; he had another appointment. Rats, he thought, suddenly. I have not seen any yet. That's what they're up to. They are on the rats' case.

There were very few children in the Zone. Any that were of school age were still in their schools outside the Zone. There were some younger than the school age of four. Only two babies had been born since the 'trouble'. Nobody was particularly keen to bring new life into the Zone. It was not encouraged and one medical service, if you could call it that, still

freely available was contraception in all its forms. You were left entirely on your own to cope with the pregnancy with no support from anywhere, except your own people. This combined with the knowledge that once your children reached school age you would lose them, for what was beginning to look like good, served to be an effective deterrent. There was also a lack of actual numbers in the most relevant age group. More people in the twenty to thirty cohort had left to live outside the Zone. More people in the same age range had died originally.

If you still wanted to see something that resembled pre-'trouble' family life you had to go to the Asian areas. Their already stronger family ties had helped them there. They still had to give up their children at the age of four. From what the Asian taxicab drivers told him, Woodend suspected that more of their kids would return to the Zone after their schooling was completed.

Various contacts he had, led him to believe that in the black area there might even be a resurgence in so-called family values, although it was difficult to get any concrete information. The fact that the black areas had lost more of their younger people than the other areas might have some bearing on it.

The lack of a visible family unit present in the house most of the time led to a few changes in lifestyles. Family dinners were on the decline. Truth was, they had been before the 'trouble'. Street dinners began to happen, more frequently in some communities than others. People ate out more often than before. Couples particularly took advantage of the flourishing restaurant scene and the cheaper prices.

The traditional Sunday dinner suffered most. This was why the Times Past would be full of couples, groups of friends and what was left of families on Sundays. Every table would be

taken and there would be plenty of people waiting their turn to sit down. The Sunday afternoon food rush took precedence over the drinking. More staff were employed and more of them worked on the food side. To compensate a little, one of the recorded matches from the day before was played in the bar. The drinkers just had to be patient. They had all day and after all where else were they going to go? What else was there to do on a Sunday? The Times Past was at its community best on Sunday afternoons.

The smell of food as you entered the Times Past was, well, just gorgeous - mouth-watering. It could almost take the taste out of Woodend's mouth, but not quite. He was pleased to see Lee was in already. He wanted to check a few details with him before they set off for the Monarch on Tuesday. Tapper was there too, naturally. Woodend had forgotten the last time he had got to the pub before Tapper. Woodend was also pleased to note that Sheilah was on bar duty. He could use these two jokers, he thought, to find out more about her. Yesterday the information exchange had been mostly one way.

By the time he arrived in their usual corner Sheilah had his drink ready for him. She was a good one. The short journey across the lounge through the tables had taken quite a while. It seemed that every table had someone Paul knew, or someone who had something to say to him. A few jokes about the previous night were doing the rounds. As often happened Paul could not really remember the end of the previous night. Some vague memories floated around his mind.

Paul said his hellos to everyone, paid Sheilah, then took a good pull at his drink. Immediately the alcohol hit his stomach he had a reaction. He reeled briefly. A wave of light-headedness swept over him as if he was going to faint. He fought to stop himself being sick. Then it passed. Curious, he thought. I didn't have that much last night, surely.

Lee was talking to him.

"Sorry, Lee, what did you say?" Woodend said to him.

"I said, are you alright? You look a bit pale," Lee answered.

"Yes, I am now, thanks," Paul replied. "I had a bit of a turn for a second there."

"You, old holiday boys, just can't take your medicine," Tapper joked.

"Well, now you're here you can settle this one for us," Lee continued. "You know the border between England and Wales. A river forms part of it. Tapper says it's the Wye, I say it's the Monnow."

"I think you're both right," Paul informed them. "What about another one for you: the Severn."

"The Severn?" Lee sounded doubtful.

"Are you sure?" Tapper asked.

"Not really," Paul said. "I'll look it up when I get home."

Paul took a sip of his drink. Hmm, he thought, we'll take it quietly today.

"Do we know any more about our Sheilah?" he asked them.

"Not really," Tapper said.

"Well, let's get cracking," Lee said smiling broadly. "I like a challenge."

Paul and Tapper exchanged looks full of raised eyebrows.

"Sheilah!" Lee called over to her. She came their way.

In the next hour or so Paul said very little. He listened to Tapper and Lee doing their best to prise Sheilah's life story out of her.

She was originally from a part of the country south of the Zone area. Woodend had noticed a slight accent. She had come north as a young woman to study. She did languages at one of the universities. While a student she had done a lot of bar work. After finishing the course, she stayed at the university working in the administration. She was still there when the 'trouble' broke. All the universities had been very quickly brought under the

direct control of the authorities. As a result, they were well protected by the security forces. She had got through the period of unrest without incident.

She had no family left in the south. There had been a failed relationship on the way. After the reorganisation of the university system she elected to carry on working at her old job. She lived on the campus. This meant she was classified as a Zonie. She could have moved out of the Zone, but the university was her life; it was just easier to be there. Times were different, but it was still a good job and a safe place to be based.

Woodend felt she might not have had many close friends. She had an air about her as she told her story. An air of loneliness. It was not obvious, but it was there. It gave her a certain vulnerability. Lee and Tapper were warming to her even more. Woodend tried to keep a smile off his face.

But things had gone wrong. The university had absorbed staff from the north of Ireland. After the 'trouble' only rumours of the terrible strife in Ireland reached the Zone. In fact, they only had vague information about the rest of the country at first. They knew there were other Zones. That was it, really.

It was only when large numbers of northern Irish arrived outside the Zone that they got more information. Woodend had found out the full story when he started working at the college. People who had fled the carnage were working there.

As soon as the authorities made their move and the 'trouble' really began, they dumped Northern Ireland. It was one of the first things they did. They pulled out completely, overnight. The manpower was needed elsewhere, and the new regime did not plan to have the Irish albatross around its neck. There was a brief period of shock. Then the Catholic majority and the Loyalists clashed. It was vicious and bloody. There were tales of gruesome

atrocities on both sides. Whole communities were wiped out. The savagery continued until the southern Irish realised that the new regime across the sea did not give a damn what happened. They came in on the Catholic side. There was evidence of American-Irish involvement. It did not last long after that; the sheer weight of numbers proved decisive. The authorities agreed to take large numbers of Loyalist refugees who knew they could never go back. It was finished.

The pain and horror of it haunted some of the people Woodend had met. It was not thousands of people who had died, but hundreds of thousands. The world barely noticed; there were problems in virtually every country. Who cared anyway? The Irish question had finally been answered. Most people thought, good riddance.

However, there were quite a few Loyalists who Woodend had come across who were a different matter. They had enormous chips on their shoulders and were very bitter. They were often nasty pieces of work, best avoided. Their community had problems with the group based outside the Zone. The worst ones were those who had joined the security forces. They could be very dangerous indeed.

One of these resettled Irish began to hassle Sheilah. He made life a misery for her. She put up with it. Then, after one particularly unpleasant incident, the Director of the university called her in and suggested a way out. They could not do anything to the man directly. He was too useful, involved as he was in some hush-hush projects. The answer seemed to get her away from there. The Director knew some people, strings were pulled and here she was.

"A bit different to the university, I bet," Lee said.

"You can say that again," she laughed. "But I'll get used to it."

She had continued to serve while telling her history in response to Lee and Tapper's questioning. Now she felt that was enough for them to stew on. She positioned herself where she could chat to the gaffer. His wife had just come from the kitchens for a break.

Woodend was off his drink. He was almost forcing it down. However, at the same time, he found he was hungry. It was as if he had not had any breakfast. Throughout the telling of the new woman's tale he munched bar snacks. It was costing him a small fortune. Tapper was keeping him company - it was his breakfast.

Woodend realised, suddenly, that he had a headache. He seemed to be a little warm in the forehead. Perhaps he was coming down with something or had picked something up. It was unusual for him; all his life he had enjoyed good health and he was fit and reasonably active. A little middle-age spread was apparent. He had knocked smoking on the head a long, long time ago. Since his thirties he had watched what he ate. He had never had a day off any work for illness. It would be bloody typical to be unwell during his holiday.

He physically shook himself. Tapper and Lee stared at him. "Think positively," he muttered to himself. "I will not be ill, except from drinking." He finished one drink and ordered another.

Tapper and Lee were talking to a bloke about some jobs. Woodend knew him but did not like him much. He was too pushy. He was from the other end of the community; the jobs he was talking about were up that end. Woodend lost interest. He scanned around the room. A group of younger women were in one of the corners. They had recently set up together in Tapper's street. They had taken one of the houses still left in a good condition. The former occupants had returned to their birthplaces after the 'trouble'. It had been

empty for over a year. Tapper said they had done a good job on the place. His sister was one of them. They were an attractive bunch. They had finished their lunch and had made way for other people. A larger group of the younger lads appeared to be winding them up a little. It was all good-natured.

Woodend looked at Sheilah. She was watching him watching the women. She smiled at him and gave him a knowing look. He feigned innocence, he shrugged his shoulders.

Woodend looked through to the bar. He waved at some people. He was feeling better.

"Paul," the gaffer said. "You not forgot about the Monarch, have you? Only he was on the phone about it this morning."

"No problem. Ronnie and I are going down there on Tuesday," Paul answered. "We'll go around eight and stay for an hour or so."

"That's good. He's alright you know," the gaffer said.

"I know," Paul said. "I can't see any problems. It was fine last time."

Woodend thought he must not forget to talk to Lee about it as soon as he finished with this bloke.

"I'll ring him and tell him when you're coming if you like."

"Okay," Paul said.

Pubs were about the only places in the Zone with phones, and they were only for the gaffers' use. They rang each other or the brewery and sometimes the security forces; sometimes the security forces rang them.

Woodend looked back at Sheilah. She was serving one of the women a lethal-looking thing, cocktail he thought. He considered her history once more. It sounded feasible. She seemed to be genuine; some of the memories obviously still bothered her. She was amused by Tapper and Lee. She had a very probing type of look. Woodend had felt it a couple of

times. Something told him she was not going to be interested in either of them. Maybe she preferred older men. He doubted it somehow.

Perhaps someone at the college knew someone at the university. He could try to check her story out. But, what did it matter? She could well be a security spy or even a brewery spy. He could not do anything about it. It would not be wise to try. That was bound to bring a lot of unwelcome attention. If she was bogus, they would have to wait her out. If she was the real thing, then it would be nice to have her around. The Times Past could always do with another good-looking woman.

One thing he was sure about. If this bother with the Irish bloke had happened here it would have been quickly sorted out. He or Ronnie would have got him. A quick blow through the pen, a barely felt prick, and another suspected heart attack victim hits the floor.

Yes, Ronnie would particularly enjoy that one. I suppose there is an outside chance the bloke could find her. Then Ronnie would have his chance, Woodend thought.

The next couple of days passed uneventfully. Woodend loved being on holiday. Who didn't? The first day he spent walking around the community visiting some old friends. He had three lots of coffee and tea, enjoyed some homemade cakes and generally had a good time. He knew a lot of people in the community, a lot of nice people. A lot of people knew him also. He lost count of the number of people who greeted him as the 'Quizmaster'. He was able to tell those who belonged to the keener teams about the Monarch quiz. Not many fancied it though. They would need to get a clearance to be able to travel to the place. That was not a big problem; any gaffer could arrange that. No, it was the prospect of the pub itself that put people off. It was, shall we say, an interesting place.

Woodend was not particularly bothered that few people were up for it. He did not want a lot of the usual crowd around. The place was very likely to be packed out and it was not huge, or at least the room where the quiz would take place was smallish. Woodend felt obliged to tell people about the Monarch quiz. It was good business. Information did not always circulate well in the community. He did not want anyone to feel left out for any reason.

Rats. That was his main topic of conversation. He still had not seen any himself. It was the same everywhere. Rats were a problem for every street. They had various ways of coping. But no one had the solution. It was a case of containment, keeping the numbers down. People were using various nasty chemicals. The one thing that was common to everyone's experience was that there was absolutely no interest from the civil services. They were left to their own devices.

Woodend gave the Times Past a miss that day. He returned from his visits and told as many people as he could find his news. There developed an informal street meeting. Everyone came out of their houses. Some drink was passed around. To some surprise, Woodend refused the alcoholic variety and had pop instead - dandelion and burdock. It had been ages since he had had any. Lovely stuff.

They decided to just carry on killing as many rats as they could. They would burn the bodies in one of the burnt-out houses. They decided to carry on talking. It was chilly, but it was enjoyable. The security forces dropped by to see what was going on. They could not resist a gathering of people. Well, I suppose they would say it was their job, but they were not looking for any hassle that night. They soon carried on with their patrols.

The street lit a fire and organised some food. Woodend was not contributing much, he thought. It was a clear, sparkling night. He went to get his binoculars. He had three pairs which he had scavenged from wrecked houses and been given by friends. Woodend knew a lot about the night sky. Astrophysics and Astronomy were hobbies of his. He gave everyone who was interested a guided tour. There was considerably less light pollution nowadays - a real boon to stargazers. Woodend was in his element. They had great fun, and they were very late going to bed.

The next morning, Woodend was up quite early considering the previous night. He was soon at work. His task that day was to set a quiz. It was for about four weeks' time. After the Monarch quiz he would have four in the can. He liked to have five at the ready. Before he left the house today, he would have five. It would be a class 'A' quiz, not too difficult. Ten rounds of five questions, three rounds of ten, a music round, and a picture round, which would be used as the decider if there was a tie. He liked preparing quizzes and would be quite lost to the world for a few hours.

At seven o'clock that evening Paul Woodend came through the lounge door of the Times Past. It was quiet, only around ten people there. Paul was a little surprised to find Tapper and Sheilah sitting at a table. He waved at them but carried on to the corner. Tony was pouring his drink for him. He did not sit with the pair of them. They probably wanted to be alone, but within a few minutes of taking up his position the two of them got up and joined him. Sheilah was obviously not working that night. Paul got the impression Tapper would much rather of stayed sitting down.

"Aren't you off down the Monarch in a bit?" he asked.

"Yes, as soon as Ronnie gets here, we'll be off," Paul answered.

"The Monarch?" Sheilah said. "Where's that?"

"It's down towards the City. Out of our community," Tapper got in before Paul. "It's a border pub between the black area and one of the Asian ones."

"Are you going there for the night, Paul?" she asked.

She knew he was not. She knew all about his trip to the Monarch.

"No, Sheilah," Paul said. "Me and Ronnie want to check a few things out with the gaffer before we do a quiz there next Tuesday. We'll go when he gets here and spend about an hour there."

"Then you'll come back here?" she asked.

"Yes, of course." Paul said.

There was a slight pause. She had not finished.

"Can I come?" she asked Paul. "I could do with a break from the Times Past for a while."

It was hard to tell who was most taken aback, Tapper or Paul. Tapper recovered first.

"You don't want to go there, Sheilah. It can be a rough place, you know."

"It can't be that bad, Tapper," Sheilah said. "Is it Paul? Anyway, I'm sure I'll be alright with three of you. You will come too, Tapper?"

Paul was desperately trying to think of a reason for not taking Sheilah with them - apart from he did not want her along, to say nothing of what Ronnie would think.

"We'll be quite safe; the gaffer has invited us," Paul said. They would be alright anyway, Paul thought, although having a good-looking woman with them probably increased their chances of attracting some unwanted attention.

"We'll need a clearance to get there," Tapper was saying. "Paul's alright and Ronnie has one, I expect."

Paul nodded.

"Well, go and ask the gaffer to get one," Sheilah said to Tapper. There was a hint of a challenge in her voice.

You are trapped, mate, Paul thought. As Tapper headed for the gaffer, Paul smiled grimly.

"Let me get you a drink, Paul, you've been so kind to me since I got here." Sheilah was speaking again. "You don't mind if I tag along with you, do you?"

"No, it's okay." How could he say otherwise? "But Tapper?" he joked.

They laughed.

At that point Ronnie came in. He accepted a drink from Sheilah. It was not coffee. Paul could tell from his face he was not in a particularly good mood. It was a 'don't ask' look.

"Well, that's all sorted." Tapper was back. "We're coming with you."

When Ronnie realised what was going on, the look on his face was comical. He made no attempt to disguise his annoyance. Paul almost laughed out loud.

It was about quarter to eight.

"Time to go," Paul said. "Drink up everyone. Ronnie, you forgotten something?"

Ronnie was not with him. Paul motioned to his shirt pocket and raised his eyebrows.

Realisation dawned on him.

"Sorry, I was forgetting," he said.

He reached into his jacket pocket and produced two pens. He gave one to Paul. Sheilah looked at it. It was thicker than a normal pen. In bright red lettering on the top and on the body, was the word 'quizmaster'. Paul slid his into his shirt pocket, so that the top was visible. The word 'quizmaster' stood out clearly. Ronnie had done the same.

They had all finished their drinks. Paul stood up.

"Quizmasters, away," he spoke in a rather grave tone. He made for the door. Ronnie fell in behind him.

Sheilah looked at Tapper.

Over his shoulder Paul called, in as offhand way as he could muster, "Oh, and I suppose, you two."

Tapper and Sheilah followed them out. There was always a taxicab available outside the pub, or any pub for that matter. They got in. It lit up, and Paul said to the driver, who, of course he knew.

"We are off to the Monarch, Asif."

"Quizmasters to the Monarch" he said to them, as much as to his radio. "The other two got clearance?" he checked.

"Gaffer phoned it through twenty minutes ago," Tapper answered.

The driver nodded. They pulled off and were soon on the avenue going in the direction of the City.

Woodend decided to say little in the taxicab. He looked out the window.

Halfway between the community and the City they came to the junction. There was a large check point. The taxicab stopped at one of the three barriers. A guard opened the door to the taxicab. He checked Woodend's pass and then gave a cursory inspection of the driver's pass. He consulted an electronic note pad in his hand, glanced at the other three occupants, then waved them on.

Their destination was a border area between the black area and the neighbouring Asian one. Most community areas in the Zone existed as islands surrounded by wasteland. Strays, little gangs and drop-outs could be found in some parts of these wastelands. However, some of the new community areas established themselves close to each other. Over time, a kind of buffer grew up between the two. It was usually no more than two streets wide. Either side of this and you were in the community proper. The border area in which the Monarch stood was about a mile long and linked the two areas: black and Asian.

The people who lived in a border area often had friends or business in both areas. They were also multi-racial.

The border area was well lit. The security forces recognised it as a hot bed of various intrigues. There was a much higher disturbance rate in the borders. The guards had an even higher profile than usual and were there in numbers. The street lights allowed Woodend to see the ruins of the tower blocks to either side of the main road. In the daylight the full extent of the smashed buildings was apparent. The people in this area had been singled out for special treatment by the security forces. Most of them had been classified undesirable. Most of them were gone. All the tower blocks had been destroyed by the heavy weapons. There was a story that many younger people of all colours had been resisting bravely, stubbornly or foolishly, some might say. They were cornered in one of the blocks. No one would leave alive. The place was levelled. Their bodies were said to be buried under the rubble. No attempt was made to remove them.

When things had settled down, people from the two areas moved into the border area and others came from outside - small time entrepreneurs, dealers and people hoping to make a living off the proximity of the two areas. There was a different atmosphere here, Woodend thought as he paid the taxicab driver.

"How long are you staying for, Quizmaster?" Asif asked.

"About an hour or so," Paul replied.

"I think I'll visit an old friend," Asif said. "I might be around when you come out."

"I'll keep an eye out for you, Asif."

Paul shut the door.

On the outside the Monarch looked no different to the Times Past. On the inside the size of the bar and lounge was reversed. The bar at the front was much bigger than the lounge

in the rear. Paul led the way to the lounge. Sheilah glanced into the bar as they passed. It was busy and noisy. There were obviously more black and Asian customers than you would find in the Times Past. But there were as many white people as well. It was very smoky. Perhaps they did not have fans. She clearly smelt dope.

There was very little room in the lounge. Woodend made straight for the bar. He found some space and ordered the drinks. As soon as they arrived, he passed them out. He looked around the room. A table had just been left free. Nobody seemed to be rushing to grab it. He motioned to Tapper.

"Take Sheilah and sit down there. Ronnie and I will join you, in a bit," Paul said.

He asked to see the gaffer, explaining who he was. One of the bar staff had already gone into the bar to get the gaffer, he was told. He had been noticed, apparently.

The gaffer was a big bloke, well over six foot. He shook Paul's hand. Ronnie nodded at him. They were soon into details. The Quizmasters wanted him to rearrange the tables and the seating. They liked to be able to see all the teams. Last time a few teams were out of their direct line of sight. There were accusations of collusion. Also, they wanted to put the speakers where everyone could hear properly. The gaffer walked around the room with them. Ronnie explained where he wanted the speakers. It was agreed - no problems. They would have it laid out before the Quizmasters arrived.

Ronnie left Paul and the gaffer at the bar. He joined Tapper and Sheilah at their table. Paul was bought a drink on the house. He set about sorting out the last detail. The Quizmasters wanted to put a limit on the number of teams. The gaffer wanted to cram in as many teams as he could. The Quizmasters wanted all the registration of the teams and the collecting of the entrance fee done by the pub. They wanted to arrive, set up the PA, take a

list of the teams and start. The gaffer did not want to pay too many extra people for the night. Paul and the gaffer worked out a compromise. The lounge would only be used for the quiz that night. Teams would have to be registered in advance and their fee taken, but the gaffer would decide how many teams were included. They shook hands again and Paul re-joined the other three. Ronnie gave him a quizzical look.

"He'll take the hassle with the money," Paul said to him, "and do all the registering in advance. But he's going to cram 'em in."

Ronnie grunted.

"You'll just have to keep a sharp eye on the gear," Paul said to Ronnie.

"Is everything alright?" Sheilah asked.

"Fine," Paul replied. "How do you like the Monarch, then?"

"It's certainly different. But I've been in similar places on the other side," she answered.

Woodend did not seem to be listening; he was looking at his watch.

"Someone get another round in, then we'll go after that," Paul said. He got up and went out the door.

He headed in the direction of the toilets. The toilets were at the end of a passage at the back of the pub. Before you reached the toilets, there was a fire exit. A black couple were talking together in front of the exit. The black man glanced up as Woodend approached. When Woodend was only two paces away from the exit it was opened from the other side.

Without breaking his stride, Woodend went through the exit door. It shut behind him.

It took his eyes a little while to adjust to the darkness. A dark form stood in front of him. A cigarette was in its hand. A heavily accented black voice called him to follow. As Woodend followed, another figure took up position by the door.

Woodend was led through the back garden of the Monarch. They climbed through a hole in the back wall and into a ruined house. There were about five black guys standing around. They were smoking huge reefers. The smell of the dope was very strong. The smoke hung heavy in the air. Woodend was frisked by the black guy who had led him there. He made a soft scoffing-type of sound as he examined the pen. Then he handed it back and led Woodend further into the house. In a room without any roof someone was waiting for them.

Woodend knew that the man opposite him was an impressive man. Even in the dark you could make out a physically powerful-looking body. He was about Woodend's height, but Woodend would have been no match for him. He knew he would not have been able to run away quickly enough either. The man exuded a kind of power and control that Woodend had only felt from the most dangerous guards. But this was not a meeting of conflict. Woodend waited for the man to speak.

"Quizmaster, how is your business?"

He spoke slowly and with little accent. Woodend knew the lack of accent was for his benefit. He also knew that in the dark the man would have a sly smile on his face. He thought he could make it out.

"Going well. We shall be here next week," Woodend answered.

"Good, the people of the border will look forward to that," the man said. He sat down on a chair and considered Woodend. There was nowhere for Woodend to sit down. Hopefully, he would not be staying long.

"My brother said you wanted to see me," the man said at last.

"Yes," Woodend said. "It's about the plants. Have you found any more for us?"

"We have," the man almost laughed. "They were exactly where you said they would be. My people were most impressed. But nobody can work out why you want them. None of the older ones know of any use for them."

"As I said before," Woodend tried to keep any tension out of his voice. "We have someone who believes the smell of the leaves helps her arthritis. You gently boil the fresh leaves and let the aroma loose." He never stopped looking at the man. "She is the mother of an old friend, a friend who did not survive the 'trouble'. You must now what I mean."

"I know what you mean," the man said, "as you well know, Quizmaster. But I don't believe you for one minute."

Woodend stared at the man but said nothing.

"The last lot I gave you. How did they get on?" the man asked.

"They are, in fact, doing well," Woodend answered truthfully. "This should be the last time I need to ask for your help."

"You shall have the plants, but we need a favour, too." The man glanced at his aide. "My friend here will be at the quiz. He will show you the one, as before."

Woodend nodded.

"Will the plants be delivered, as before?"

"Look out for my brother on Friday," the man said and added. "You still owe us one, Quizmaster. We will collect."

"I know," Woodend said and he followed the other man out of the room. They walked quickly back. The man by the door held his hand up. They waited.

"The sooner I know, the better," Woodend whispered.

The man he had followed nodded in the dark. Woodend heard a soft tap. The other man opened the door and Woodend slipped inside. He heard the door close. The black couple followed him down the passage and into the lounge. Woodend knew they would watch him until he left.

Woodend had been away less than ten minutes, and yet Tapper and Sheilah had become a little concerned.

"Here he is," Ronnie said as Paul sat down.

Paul finished what was left of his old drink.

"Tapper thought you might be having a problem in the toilet," Ronnie continued.

Paul looked at Tapper and smiled.

"I just popped in the bar to see if I knew anyone," Paul said.

"Who's in there?" Ronnie asked.

"Just a friend of that friend of mine," Paul said to Ronnie. "I told him I'd be back next week."

"I told them you left me here the first time we came," Ronnie said accusingly.

"I didn't leave you, Ronnie," Paul retorted. "You left me."

"Well you were going to be all night," Ronnie retorted. "You were in a right state when you turned up at the Times Past."

Paul laughed.

"Is it the old football crowd you know down here?" Tapper asked Paul.

"I only remember the one bloke in particular," Paul said. "But they are all supporters in the bar. You know Ronnie, he can't stand football talk. He disappeared quickly once we got going on the old days."

Paul and Tapper grinned at each other.

"Well, who would want to stay here any longer than they had to." Ronnie said a little loudly

Tapper and Sheilah looked at him sharply, Paul smiled at everyone and took the top off the new drink waiting for him on the table.

It was another quarter of an hour before they were all ready to leave. Paul waved at the gaffer and followed the others out. They had found Asif's taxicab. Sheilah sat next to Ronnie on the way back. She plied him with questions about his life. Paul thought she was trying hard to get on with Ronnie. For his part, Ronnie was less reticent than earlier; the drink was having an effect. He was not a big drinker. Tapper caught Paul's eye. He raised his eyebrows very slightly.

"So, you didn't think much of the Monarch then, Tapper?" Paul asked. They had cleared the check point and were back on the avenue.

"It's not my scene, Paul," Tapper replied. "Did you notice all the drugs being done in the place?"

"Things are different in the borders, Tapper," Paul said. "You know that."

"They were openly taking all sorts of stuff," Sheilah interjected. "I can't see that being allowed in the Times Past."

"There are drugs in the community," Paul said, "but they're only used by a few people, and never brought into our pub."

"No one would stand for it," Tapper and Ronnie said, almost together.

Paul nodded his agreement, "Drink is our drug."

They had reached the Times Past. Paul paid Asif. The others had gone in, except Ronnie.

"Are we in business, Paul?" he whispered as if the whole world was trying to listen.

"We are, but at the usual price," Paul said.

He noticed a smile pass briefly across Ronnie's face.

Once they were back, all four of them could finally relax. But not all of them for the same reasons.

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Sheilah Jones lay awake in her bed. She was thinking back to the trip down to the Monarch. She was trying to remember as much as she could about the evening. Everything everyone said. All the faces pulled, and the little actions made. The looks they gave each other.

One thing she was happy about. It seemed that she had broken the ice with the Ronnie character. Mind you, it had not been easy; he was hard work. She was certain that Ronnie had been on edge all the time they were away from the Times Past. When Woodend was absent for that short period, he had been extra nervous. Despite trying to play down their concerns, his body language betrayed him. But she was convinced that he was not worried about where Woodend was, more about when he was going to come back. When Woodend did come back, she could feel his desire to know something from Woodend, but they were being careful. She had done her best to stick close to Ronnie in the hope she might pick something up between him and Paul. It had worked well till they reached the Times Past. Then that fool Tapper had interfered. He had led her into the lounge like she was a prize, a trophy. She tried to hide her annoyance. But it had allowed Paul and Ronnie to have a few words before they entered the pub. Whatever transpired between them, and she was sure

something had, Ronnie was markedly less uptight for the rest of the evening. She had got most of his life history out of him and found out more about how the Quizmasters operated. Later, she had even got Ronnie to agree to her helping next Tuesday. This was before she had mentioned it to Paul or Lee. Luckily the gaffer had already given her the Tuesday as her rest day.

She was pretty sure of something else too. This Tapper did not seem to be involved. Whatever was going on, it was between Paul and Ronnie. She did not know about Lee; she had not seen enough of him. Tapper had been nervous that evening, but it was only because he was uncomfortable in the Monarch. He obviously thought he was above the people there. His mood had not been improved when she concentrated her attentions on Ronnie. He had been sulking in the taxicab back. It had all led to that performance on arriving at the Times Past.

As soon as she arrived back, she spent a little time talking to the gaffer and his wife. Then she re-joined them. Lee had just popped in to find out the result of Paul's chat with the Monarch's gaffer. He was happy. Then Lee and Tapper started to vie for her attention. As if he understood, Paul had suggested she join the men and leave the boys to their games. He and Ronnie had sat down. It was just what she needed. Ronnie was getting drunk, a rare occurrence. Paul, however, drank little and said less. He seemed to be preoccupied.

Sheilah was sure Woodend had met someone when he had gone missing briefly. When he returned, his clothes smelt strongly of dope. He could have been standing next to someone smoking. He could have been smoking, but she doubted it. He did not show any of the signs, and she was good at detecting them. Besides, they were not dope heads. What they were she did not know.

She had to hope that the back-up team, who had most certainly been following them had picked something up. If Woodend had met anyone in the bar it would have been noted. Her Case Officer would tell her at their first meeting.

Woodend also lay awake that night. He had been terrified and unable to move. But now he was calmer and had the use of his limbs back.

He had fallen into another deep sleep almost as soon as he had pulled the duvet over him. For the last few nights he had been vaguely aware of his dreams. They had spanned his lifetime. It was as if he had sub-consciously been going over his life in his dreams.

Suddenly he was awake. He was on fire. Sweat poured out of him. He was lying in a pool of it. His heart was racing. Just before he woke, he had been dreaming of running away from something, or someone. Running for his life. His whole body was tense. He was in flight mode. Then he tried to move. Nothing. No response anywhere, not even his facial muscles. All his muscles seemed to be flexed. But he was flat out in the bed.

His heart was pounding, his chest was heaving and his lungs gasping for all the air they could get.

After the initial surprise, terror set in. What the hell is this? He couldn't even move his eyeballs!

Then he became aware of a feeling, or a thought in his mind.

So, you are awake. Never mind. Now is a good time for you to know.

Woodend felt his heart rate slowing down. His breathing became more like normal. He was relaxing. He felt less afraid.

Good, you are working yourself already. It will be better for both of us if you can carry on doing everything as before. I can then handle the new things we might do - we will have to do.

Who are you? Paul spoke aloud. Where are you?

He could move his head. But there was no one in the room with him.

You will learn all in time. There is no need to physically speak. I can sense your every thought. You are aware of me, I am with you.

Paul became more anxious.

Do not worry. Be assured that it is not in my interest to let any harm come to my host.

Paul became calmer again, despite himself. He felt a soothing sensation all over his body. He could move all his parts. He used his hands to check his body. Everywhere. Legs, arms, torso, between his legs and finally his head.

You are satisfied, but curious.

Woodend experienced a flashback. He was tumbling. There was a crashing sound. He felt a pain in his hand.

I was in the meteorite. Waiting to be released. Waiting for something like you. I felt your interest, but I was a little fortunate in being able to make the connection so easily. I have discovered that there is no better place to enter your body than through your bloodstream. It saved me time and energy

You were in the meteorite? Woodend was thinking. What are you? Where have you come from?

I am a prokaryote. That seems to be the nearest thing I can find in your knowledge.

A memory came into his mind. He saw lines of writing in his mind's eye.

Tiny, single-celled, no nucleus; bacteria.

I am more than your knowledge can help you to understand. Think of me as a much more complex prokaryote. There are many of what you call single cells. Presently we are all joined together in your brain. But any number of us can detach at any time and travel to any part of your body, wherever we see a need.

Paul was amazed.

Think of us as one organism. We have invaded you. But we mean you no harm.

What do you want? He thought.

We need to use your body to survive, until we can find a way back.

Paul lay there while a virtual programme played in his mind. It had originated from the outermost reaches of the solar system. It took refuge inside a lump of space debris when a passing comet had disturbed the gas cloud, they were in. There was no information on their actual beginnings or whether they had always been there.

Over thousands of years the organism had protected itself within the rock. As it moved through the solar system it picked up dust and gas. Sometimes it collided with larger lumps. Gravitationally it grew, attracting matter to itself. Occasionally, it passed close enough to larger bodies to be affected by gravity. Over thousands of years it had made many orbits of the Sun. It used chemistry: heats of reaction, bond-breaking and bond-forming. It absorbed as much solar radiation as it could, particularly on its closest approaches to the Sun. All these things were used to keep it alive until it could reach the third planet. That was the only other place in this system where a form of life existed, apart from itself.

It then needed to survive the heat of entering the atmosphere. The rock it was travelling in was big enough not to burn up completely. But it could break up. It did. But the most dangerous part of the journey seemed to be over. However, no living thing came close

enough for it to enter. Besides, the rock that had protected it so well now presented a problem. It had to be cracked open somehow.

Paul had come along just in time. It was losing heat energy within the rock. It was not able to convert enough chemical energy any more.

Some fate thought Paul. Why did it have to be him?

There was no response.

Paul suddenly felt sleepy.

You will sleep now. I will wake you at a suitable time, or if there is a threat to our being.

Like flicking a switch Paul fell asleep.

.....

The next two days Paul stayed mainly in the house. He left the house only twice. Early each morning he did a little shopping in the High Street, then he came home. He bought mostly food, and the prokaryote told him what to buy.

The thing - it did not care what he called it - had told him that it knew all about his body. It knew what it needed. It knew where and when it had sustained damage. It had full access to his memories, and they were not all contained in his brain. He wondered at that.

In fact, his brain had a record of every experience and every piece of knowledge he had gained in his life; however, he had forgotten it. Much of it he had forgotten. But, nonetheless, it remained inside his brain, locked away in the countless synapses. The prokaryote, or at

least one of its constituent cells, could trigger these memories at will. It could supply him with information, if he had it buried there.

To prove the point, it had given him a whole range of lost memories and knowledge to ponder over. Paul found it an enlightenment; but also, rather sad, to think of all the things he had lost, forgotten and unused. Knowing his feelings, the prokaryote told him that he was aware of, and still used, far more knowledge than he had lost.

It privately thought what an excellent database the brain of these creatures was. It must find a way to bring one back with it.

Woodend was instructed what food to buy. Using the previously untapped knowledge he had, the prokaryote was attempting to put into his body the chemicals necessary for it to make repairs. These included repairs, particularly, to his liver. It was trying to understand a creature which willingly contaminated itself with harmful chemicals. But it had used the excellent regenerative power of the liver to help it succeed. It told him that there now functioned within his digestive system a means of removing and detoxifying these alcohols safely. The excretory system took care of the rest of the process as normal.

It had also told him of repairs made to old muscle tissue damage and joints, tendons and ligaments. He could never be as good as new; it knew that. Paul wondered what it would do when it saw a better host than himself.

There was no response.

Of course, the thing knew all about Paul - all his history, past and present. It knew about the West Indian plant, the poison and the antidote. It told him that it might be possible to synthesise the antidote internally. It needed to monitor the process. So, Paul had got one of his Quizmaster pens, taken the top off, twisted the back end and lifted that off. He pulled

out the tube of ink. At the ballpoint end, just below the ballpoint itself, arranged one hundred and twenty degrees apart were three small plastic attachments.

Paul held the tube up to the light and looked at each attachment in turn. Two were empty. One contained what seemed to be a short needle-like dart. It glistened slightly in the light. He was about to take off the attachment when he received a message.

He dropped the ink tube, complete with attachments back into the body of the pen. He put the back end on and twisted it shut. He held it and looked at the end. There were no holes. Then he twisted the back end the opposite way. He looked at the end again. There were five tiny holes in the it.

He then twisted the front end of the pen. As it twisted one third round, the ballpoint bit did not move. He placed the back end in his mouth and held the pen between his lips. Holding the palm of his hand out in front of him he pointed the pen and blew. Nothing. Without taking the pen from his mouth he twisted the front-end round one third and blew again.

It was difficult to see but something had struck his palm. Very lightly. The solid glass dart had fallen to the floor as designed. There was a spot of blood where it had struck and penetrated the skin.

He put the pen down, went to the kitchen and went all the way through the antidote routine. Just to be on the safe side.

He was left alone for a while. Well, there was no direct communication anyway. He somehow doubted that he was free to do exactly what he wanted, especially if it threatened their being.

During these first two days Woodend was left in no doubt just how much his life had changed. Short of death, he could not get rid of the prokaryote, it might choose to leave him, however. He did not know what it was going to do with him. How it could use him to get home was beyond him. But he did know that it was not going to let any harm come to him if it could help it. They had discussed his activities and his motives. It knew all that he had done and what might have to be done in the future.

The prokaryote organism viewed Woodend as a suitable host for the time being. It could observe others through it and evaluate them. There were dangers involved with the association. It would have to protect and preserve him until he began work outside the Zone again. Then there should be more suitable hosts available.

In the meantime, it was going to be a fascinating experience. Its host had a deep knowledge of this world. It would use him to find out more about it and the curious creatures in it.

One thing was obvious; they were all descended from its kind. Everything alive on this planet had a prokaryote ancestor. It was not the first to have made the journey to the third planet.

Woodend surfaced on the Friday. He had been spotted doing a bit of shopping, true. People in the street knew he was in his house. But he had missed a meeting with Ronnie and not turned up in the Times Past. Lee wanted to clear up one last thing to do with the forthcoming Monarch quiz. But it could wait. He was not going to bother Paul at home. Woodend was bound to be in the pub on Saturday afternoon; he would catch him there. Paul was probably knocking a few quizzes together.

Ronnie was not too bothered either by Paul's absence from the scene. He was busy working on the backlog of work he had. In the evening he prepared more refills for the Quizmasters' pens. He had made six pens in all. He and Paul had two each, while Lee had one. The pen he had given Lee was identical to the others. It could be twisted in the same way and had the holes. But there were no attachments on the ink tube.

The other pen he had given to the gaffer. It was kept behind the bar in the Times Past. It was also a dud. He and Paul took a pen each to the quizzes and kept one, always, safe at their homes. If they lost their pens for any reason Ronnie had the parts ready to make two more almost immediately. After that it would take a week for Ronnie to make four more.

Ronnie's shop had been open an hour when Paul walked in.

"Shut the shop, Ronnie," he said, "I'm expecting the delivery."

Ronnie locked up and put the closed sign in the window. He looked at Paul.

"Been busy?" he asked.

"I've had a quiet day or two," Paul replied. "Felt a bit grotty."

"Too much drinking." Ronnie wagged his finger at him.

They left the shop by the rear. Ronnie locked the backdoor. Paul peered into the greenhouse.

"No change there," Ronnie said as he walked past.

Paul followed Ronnie. They were walking behind the High Street. There was rubble and broken bits and pieces everywhere. They had to watch their step. On their left were what remained of the backs to the shops. In amongst the wreckage, the shops that still functioned were obvious. Not only did they have to negotiate the man-made obstacles, but the overgrown undergrowth too. Trees and bushes had shot up everywhere. There were young trees of various kinds already a couple of feet high. Similarly, to Paul's garden, huge weeds blocked their path.

After about fifty metres of this, to their left, lay an alley. Compared to the general clutter they had just waded through, it was remarkably clear. Someone had worked on it. At the end of the alley was the High Street. They could see people walking by.

Halfway down the alley a door was set into the wall. Ronnie banged loudly on it. There was a slight delay, then they could hear someone struggling with the locks. The door opened to reveal a woman about the same age as Paul and Ronnie. She had almost as much white hair as Paul. She wore a blue overall that was stained with soil marks. Her hands and arms were dirty as if she had been up to her elbows in soil.

"Well, well," she said. "Two Quizmasters at my side door."

She had a heavy Zone accent. Stepping aside, she let them in.

As she locked the door behind them, Paul looked around. They were in the back of a large shop. There were skylights in the roof. Rather surprisingly, only a few had holes in them.

The ground space was filled with all kinds of plants and flowers, most of them in tubs and

pots of all sizes. Some were in large plastic growbags. It was a bit like being in big greenhouse. The smell and the slightly stifling atmosphere were just as Paul remembered.

There was only one florist left in the entire community. Pat, the woman who had let them in, had always been a florist. Her original shop had been destroyed during the 'trouble'. She had found this shop afterwards, virtually intact. She moved in with her daughter. Her husband and son had chosen to leave the Zone. The women had not seen the men since.

Paul thought Pat had more out of the community contacts than anyone else in the High Street. She would regularly get deliveries from other communities and from outside the Zone. It was a two-way process. She supplied plants and flowers to a wide variety of people.

"What can I do for you two?" Pat asked.

"Paul's expecting a delivery today," Ronnie answered.

"When are you expecting it?" she asked Paul.

"Any time now," Paul replied.

"I'll tell my daughter to get ready for it," she said. She went into the front of the shop.

She was soon back.

"Do you want a cuppa while we're waiting?" she asked them.

"Please," they said together.

Ronnie and Pat started to chat about business while she made the tea. Paul slipped into the shopfront. Pat's daughter was serving a customer. She was a big girl, not tall, but very plump. She noticed Paul and smiled warmly at him. She was without a doubt one of the nicest girls in the community with a lovely smile. Shame about the body, but he did not

know of anyone who had a bad thing to say about her. She was very popular. But weren't fat girls always so?

Pat was handing him his tea. He wondered again why her daughter had stayed. Perhaps the prospect of living outside the Zone had been too daunting for her. She was respected here for staying with her mother. It was hard to see what respect the outside world would give her.

Paul wiped away some dirt from the rim of his mug and drank the tea. More customers had come into the shop. They were only browsing.

The sound of a taxicab pulling up drew his attention. The daughter was out of the shop quickly. She greeted the driver as he got out. They gave each other high-fives. Then they shook hands. It was a black handshake. Paul watched the queer Rasta lean towards the daughter and whisper something in her ear. She erupted in laughter. He was laughing with her.

Paul finished his tea and went outside. The daughter had started to unload the taxicab. There were five or so boxes of plants and flowers. Neither Paul nor the Rasta tried to help the girl. They watched her carry the boxes into the shop where Pat then moved them out to the back.

"What you want is in there somewhere, Quizmaster," the Rasta said to Paul.

"My thanks to you," Paul said in a very formal voice.

"No problems," the Rasta said. "I'm going to be there Tuesday. So, make sure it's a good quiz, Woodentop."

Paul noticed the daughter giggling as she carried the last box in.

"What, like you would know the difference," Paul responded. "There's one question; if you get it wrong, I'll take the piss out of you."

The daughter was back.

"Now, don't stay too long," Paul warned. "You'll make the boys nervous."

She giggled again. Paul went into the shop.

He looked behind before going through to the back. They were talking away. She was admiring his dreadlocks, laughing with him. They were ignoring the funny looks the passers-by gave them. A guard was watching them from across the street.

Paul was not worried. The Rasta was well known to the security forces, if not to most people in the street. He was bound to have been searched twice on the way up here. They knew what he was carrying and where it was going. It was not unusual.

Pat was examining the plants. She lifted a box of cannabis plants off another box. In the box on the ground Paul could see eight strong-looking plants with small pink and white flowers. Ronnie gave an audible sigh of relief. Pat caught it.

"I don't know why you're both so keen on this plant," she said.

"Sentimental reasons" Paul said.

Ronnie said nothing.

"I still haven't been able to find out its name," Pat added.

"We don't know either," Ronnie said, "just what it looks like."

"Are the plants okay?" Paul enquired.

"All the plants are fine," Pat answered. "You sure you don't want anything for the others?"

"No, you're alright Pat," Ronnie said. Then, turning to Paul, he said, "I'll take half of them."

Pat helped Ronnie put four into another box. He left by the side door. Paul picked up the box with the remaining plants and went out the front.

The daughter was back serving. He said goodbye. The Rasta driver was gone. There were now two guards across the street. Paul headed home.

Pat watched Paul go. She wondered about the plants, again. She knew they were trying to get the things to take in Paul's garden. Having looked in Ronnie's greenhouse she knew he was doing something with the petals and the seeds. The curious thing about these plants was that they seemed to flower regularly throughout the year. She came to the same conclusion as before; it had to do with a drug of some type.

Woodend had reached the security station.

Stop. What's that?

His friend was back. He found himself looking upwards.

In the sky, quite high up, were three dark objects. They were like huge birds swooping and hovering in the air.

They are the latest flying machines, called Swifts because they look like the bird of that name.

In his mind flashed scenes with swifts flying around. There were also swallows and martins he noticed.

I see it can perform like the creature.

As they watched, one of the Swifts came shooting down towards them. As it got closer and closer, apparently moving faster and faster, Paul thought there was a moment of concern from his companion. But it was fleeting. It had accessed his knowledge of the Swift.

The Swift did not seem to slow down, yet it stopped about ten metres above the station. It just hovered there, making hardly any noise. It was black-coloured and about four metres long. The wings were angled back at this moment. Tip to tip, straightened out, the wings would be six metres. Where the tail was on the bird the engine was on the machine, some type of brilliant new jet engine, as far as Paul knew and extremely compact and manoeuvrable. The Swift could stop and start on a sixpence, as the old saying went. Hover at any angle. Dive and climb almost vertically. One person flew it.

A few test pilots had died developing it. It was ideal for the Cities and the Zones - any built-up area. It had a limited range, of course, but that was not usually a concern. There was no information about its weaponry. It had state-of-the-art communications systems.

A small crowd had gathered to see the Swift. Some guards had come out to look at it. Without any warning it suddenly shot into the air, going straight up, turning slightly as it went so that it faced up. There had been a whooshing sort of noise. The crowd broke up. Paul heard mutterings of there being no chance of any privacy with those things flying about.

Woodend walked home. The thing had been quite taken by the Swift flying machine.

Do you know the person responsible for it?

No. But it might be possible to find out when we go back to the college. If it is not a secret.

I am looking forward to going to the college.

I bet you are.

Woodend arrived home. The first thing he did was go into the garden and plant the new additions. It started to rain before he finished. It had become cold, but he barely noticed.

The prokaryote was urging him to hurry up.

Back in the house he made some coffee then went into his study. He found the book he had left sticking slightly out of one of the bookcases. It was a reference volume, one of a set, on significant dates in world history. He sat down, opened the book and started.

To anyone who might have peered into the room and watched Woodend for a time, it might have appeared that he was running his eye and finger down the pages seeking a piece of information; however, he worked through the whole book like this, quickly. Then he replaced the book, took the next volume off the shelf and repeated the process.

Paul knew that everything he read was being stored in his brain. The thing was also evaluating the information. It was hungry. They were about a third of the way through Paul's reference library. It was his pride and joy. The study was walled with bookcases crammed with every kind of reference book imaginable. He had spent years collecting them. Since the 'trouble' he had rescued every book he could find in every library and house he could get into. Ransacked rather than rescued, Ronnie would say.

The prokaryote wanted to be two thirds of the way through the books before it would let Woodend leave the house to go to the Times Past. By the time he would be ready to go to watch tomorrow's Sports' Review they would be finished.

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At the time that Woodend and Ronnie were in the florist's shop, Sheilah was leaving the Times Past. She had told the gaffer's wife she was going into the City to do some shopping. She still had a pass that allowed her to travel to the City.

The wife had been worried about her bumping into the nasty man, but she assured her it was very unlikely. He had to work in the university labs in the daytime. But she would keep an eye out anyway.

Sheilah asked her if she wanted anything from the City, but the wife had said she did not. If she could not get it here, she could go without it. Sheilah realised she had touched a nerve and left.

On leaving the pub she walked to the nearest bus stop. Very soon a bus arrived. She was the only person who got on. She showed her pass to the driver and sat in the front seat. There were only two other passengers - an old couple sat at the back. A brief look she took at them suggested they were from outside the Zone. Probably taking the scenic route into the City. During the journey the woman pointed out landmarks to her male companion.

When she got off the bus, Sheilah went into the first cafe she came across. There was time to waste. She wanted to sit down and spend time amongst her own people. Working in the communities always got on her nerves after a while. She needed to unwind a little.

The people in the communities were so small-minded – most of them, anyway. Their lives were full of petty concerns. She found them so boring.

At least here in the City there were people involved in the real world. She soaked up the hustle and bustle all around her. There was more energy here in one day than there was in

the community in one year. After this assignment it might be good to go back to a desk job in CCC.

She ordered a sandwich, lemon tea and a newspaper. She could do with reading some real news. She was not disturbed once. Peace.

When she was ready, she left and headed in the direction of one of the middle range stores. On the way she gazed in all the shop windows. She still had ten minutes left when she entered the store. The escalator took her up to the floor for women's clothes.

She quickly chose a selection of blouses and skirts. Then, carrying her choices she approached the changing area. A young girl was standing by the entrance. She was wearing the uniform of the store. Sheilah received a big smile off the girl.

"Would Madame please use the cubicle at the end, on the right."

Sheilah found the cubicle, pushed the door open. It was empty. She closed and locked the door behind her. She stood staring at the wall in front of her. A short time passed then the entire wall swung back. Still clutching her clothes, she stepped forward.

The wall-door closed soundlessly. She was in a room not much bigger than the cubicle. There appeared to be no other way in. Her Case Officer sat on the opposite side of the small table in front of her. She gave the clothes to a man standing to the side and sat down.

The Case Officer exchanged some pleasantries with her. Then he pressed a button and two panels slid open on the table surface. Exposed beneath were two hand-shaped illuminated plastic sensor pads.

"Shall we begin," the Case Officer said. Sheilah put her hands onto the sensor pads. She knew that everything would be recorded from now on. She was being taped, filmed and her physiological responses monitored. The pads could even check her fingerprints.

"Operative XFSJ23 report on your mission," said the Case Officer.

Sheilah Jones recounted almost everything that had happened since she had arrived at the Times Past pub. She answered every question thrown at her. She expressed opinions and hunches. She suggested follow-up activities.

She received the information of whom Paul had met at the Monarch with a little surprise. She knew better than to ask how they got the information. She was also filled in on the movements and activities of the leading suspects that she was not already aware of.

Plans were made to keep a careful eye on the upcoming Monarch quiz. She looked at Ronnie's file and saw where his technical wizardry had come from. But there was very little other information that was useful.

Finally, the Case Officer gave her some new orders.

"The Deputy Chief wants you to get as full a set of Woodend's fingerprints as you can. We suggest you work your way into his house and find something suitable there. We think there ought to be other useful information inside."

Sheilah nodded her head in agreement.

"Try to obtain the prints as soon as you can," the Case Officer continued. "The Deputy Chief is quite keen. We will arrange a drop when you have them."

Sheilah went back into the cubicle after two hours of debriefing. The wall-door shut behind her. She quickly tried on the clothes. Some were worth keeping, she decided. On

leaving the changing area she gave the unwanted clothes to the same smiling girl. The other clothes she took to the counter and paid for.

Back on the street, she thought to herself, a look round a few more shops, then a sit down for some food. After that, the bus home. She would be back in plenty of time to start her shift. She was down to work all the way through with just the one-hour break.

The problem has not been easy to solve.

It was talking to Paul.

More difficult than the chemistry needed with the alcohol. Much more difficult than sealing your skin. But we believe we have cracked the chemistry involved. What you call the immune system is quite adaptable, if sometimes prone to be self-destructive. You creatures have developed from the random changes in genes, but this process can also bring many problems.

Are you saying I need not take any more antidote?

Not exactly. Not yet. We have isolated the relevant reactions and the main player. But this chemical is not able to be stored in your body for long. All of it is expelled after a period of about a week. If you were to forget to take the antidote for two weeks, then accidentally poison yourself. Then we, I, estimate your body has built up enough resistance to last half an hour. If you did not ingest more antidote in that time your life would cease.

Paul was thinking of Ronnie.

Your friend's anxiety is understandable. If you found yourself in trouble, I think we could possibly give you another half an hour of living time. But it may serve our purpose to spend that time transferring to another host.

Paul knew he would be helpless to prevent that happening. How would it decide? Would it be a case of time and place or would it be the availability of a suitable host? How many,

quite different, ways could it make a transfer? Could it be airborne like in a sneeze, or a cough? Bodily fluids had to be a way. Could it transfer in a kiss?

There was no response.

He thought of Ronnie again.

I believe there may be an added complication with your friend. I have been studying him.

He may have developed dependency. He has been taking the chemicals for longer than you.

Carry on taking the antidote regularly. It is obviously in both our interests that we do not forget. In the meantime, we are working on finding a suitable receptor molecule for the crucial chemical and an appropriate position in the body for it to be attached.

It could explain some of Ronnie's behaviour, Paul thought.

He remembered how he had found out about Ronnie's secret. How he had really defended himself - not that rubbish with the sonic device and smashing their wind-pipes. Ronnie was okay blowing his poison darts. He was not an actual hands-on person. True Ronnie had smashed their windpipes, but it was after the poison had killed them. Hand to hand fighting and Ronnie would not have lasted long, although Paul suspected Ronnie had a vicious streak deep down. Ronnie had done most of their killings and Paul was sure he enjoyed it. He actively looked for targets.

It was this that had alerted Paul to Ronnie in the period immediately after the security forces got to the community and before they were accepted. There were still one or two awkward people about, not to mention some very difficult guards. There were clashes.

Some of these people were found dead, apparently with no obvious cause of death. Paul noticed a high correlation between these victims and people who had crossed Ronnie in some way.

Paul witnessed one such falling out. He noticed a strange look that Ronnie gave the guard. The next day Paul waited for Ronnie to leave his shop. They both knew this guard would be on duty on the High Street junction where the new guardhouse station thing was being constructed.

He watched Ronnie get the poor excuse for a paper at that time. He then sat down on a bench next to some other people and began to read the paper. The guard noticed Ronnie and gave him some verbal, which Ronnie ignored.

When he had finished the paper, Ronnie folded it and started to do the crossword, taking a pen from his pocket. Paul watched Ronnie very closely, never taking his eyes off him. Ronnie played with the pen, often putting one end in his mouth.

Then Ronnie seemed to watch the guard, the pen was in his mouth. But his hand held the other end this time. He was facing the guard. Suddenly his cheeks moved quickly. The pen came out of his mouth. Paul glanced at the guard. He was touching his face. Then he gave a muffled cry. His face contorted, and down he went.

The other guard rushed to him, but he was finished. Paul looked back to Ronnie. He was writing in a few answers. Ronnie looked up to see the fuss, briefly, exchanged a few comments with a couple of people, then continued with the crossword.

Paul waited till Ronnie had finished and had got up to walk away. He walked alongside Ronnie. They greeted each other.

"You want to tell me how you did that?" Paul asked him.

Ronnie looked at him warily. They kept walking.

"With the pen and the guard, I mean," Paul continued.

Ronnie stopped dead in his tracks. They faced each other. Paul was sure he did not know what Ronnie was likely to do next.

"We are on the same side, you and me," Paul urged him. "Come on, I'll buy you a coffee."

Ronnie thought for a few seconds, then nodded his head.

"One condition, Ronnie," Paul said. "Keep your pen in your pocket, will you."

A sly smile formed on Ronnie's face.

That was the start of their real friendship. It was also the beginning of their deadly association. Paul remembered trying not to ask too many questions. He did not want to spook Ronnie. For his part, Ronnie would not tell him everything then and he still did not know everything about how Ronnie had come by this poisonous method.

Paul found out then about the plants, the poison and the antidote, the blow pens and the type of people he wanted to dispatch with them. Paul remembered the TPF. They found they shared some ideas, had some common ground, especially how they felt about certain kinds of people.

They formed their unholy alliance. Soon they were indulging in their own sort of lethal, vigilante behaviour. Spiteful deeds, some might say.

Paul thought they formed a useful team. Each was a good foil for the other. Ronnie had the technical brilliance, Paul the personal skills. When the Quizmasters took off and Lee was recruited, they were provided with a perfect cover.

In time, the original plant stock that Ronnie had inherited declined. They were forced to search for fresh generations. He did not tell Paul how he knew, but Ronnie suggested where

to concentrate their efforts. That had led Paul to the borders, amongst other areas. But that was another story, as they say.

Yes, Ronnie had been more anxious at times since then. Perhaps he was hooked on something to do with the plant; the antidote, or something else he had not told Paul about.

It is time to eat. Do you want to cook? Or do you want to go out?

Paul thought. Out. It presented the menu of the Times Past to Paul's mind. He was putting his coat on. He had got to the door.

Okay, decide when you get there. I do find the place intriguing.

Paul left the house. At the bottom of the street he stopped to look up at the stars. What a beautiful night.

Then, suddenly, he was engulfed by darkness. Slowly he realised he was part of a thin faint cloud or mist. It was moving almost imperceptibly, swirling slightly. The cloud was spread over a vast distance on all sides. In amongst it were dispersed bands of colour: reds, blues and greens. The colours smudged into many other hues where they intermingled. All around him stars shone through the thin veil, some brighter than any he had seen before. Others pale, their light almost sickly in comparison. He could see the different colours of the stars. One drew his gaze which seemed nearer than the rest. It glowed white with a faint orange-yellow fringe in the dark. He thought he could make out vague shapes between the star and him. Closer to him still, he could just see, slightly less dark against the background, smaller objects. They were strung out on the edges of the cloud. He knew it was cold out there, outside the cloud, the coldest it could be. But inside he felt...

...He was back. He was still standing in the street, looking up at the brilliant night sky.

Paul felt a great longing. The feeling did not belong to him though.

That is where I am going.

Paul started walking again. The prokaryote allowed Paul to sense its thoughts. He was lost in wonder and amazement. He walked, completely oblivious of his surroundings. Everything was working on automatic. He even greeted people and was only vaguely aware of doing so. Paul was in two places at once.

The sense of awe he experienced that night never left him.

.....

It was Saturday night and Sheilah could now relax a little.

Woodend had just walked in. She had been worried when he had left the pub that afternoon. As soon as the match was over, he was gone. Tapper had been taken completely by surprise. He did not know whether Woodend would be back either.

Sheilah listened to a discussion on the downturn in Woodend's drinking. Those participating decided it was a combination of feeling a bit off and to do with this Monarch quiz. He was also probably having one of his quiet periods. These often coincided with his holidays. No one was taking bets on him not returning in the evening, early.

Sheilah read the situation a little differently. She felt it was something to do with the Monarch. Woodend was getting ready for it alright; something was going to happen. She had to be there. Ronnie and Lee, she had squared it with, but not Woodend yet. He was the one that mattered. If he said no, she could not see the others going against him.

There was also the matter of getting herself into his house and those prints. She had been thinking about the prints business. Surely CCC had a record of Woodend's prints? They should have been taken when he was brought in for questioning, at the time the security forces authorised his community.

Well, he was here. She could now get to work properly.

Woodend was not exactly certain how she had managed it, but Sheilah had got herself invited back to his house. She was not alone, Tapper was there also. In fact, you could say that it was Tapper's fault.

During the evening the conversation, and the juke-box, had come around to music - old music, the rock music of the last century. It had all got very nostalgic. People remembered certain songs and what they were doing at the time. There was a great deal of laughter, mickey-taking and 'those were the days' comments.

Woodend suspected Tapper. Sheilah had found out about Paul's collection of old CDs. She was thrilled to find some of her old favourites were amongst it. Oh! It must have been ages since she had heard certain tracks. She was dying to hear them again.

Woodend suspected Tapper thought he was in with Sheilah once more. He invited her and himself to Paul's house after closing time, after Sheilah had helped clear up. She had been so keen, Woodend could hardly refuse. After all, it was Sunday tomorrow, as Tapper pointed out.

So here they were in Paul's front room drinking some wine that Tapper had brought from the pub. The CD player was on and Sheilah was in charge. She was chopping and changing the tracks and the CDs. Tapper, who was drinking most of the wine, was holding forth on some point or other. Neither Paul nor Sheilah paid much attention to him. Sheilah seemed lost in the music.

We need to keep an eye on this woman.

I know. Stop going on about it.

Ever since it had become apparent that Sheilah and Tapper would be coming back with Paul, the prokaryote had been issuing warnings. It had developed deep misgivings about Sheilah. Whether it had picked something up itself or was feeding off Paul's highly suspicious nature, he did not know.

Despite the evening spent drinking Paul felt as if he was on full alert. All his senses seemed to be fine-tuned. He thought he could smell the wine in the glasses from the other side of the room. He could feel the tension, almost, in the thing. It had told him that he had an innate survival instinct. It thought all humans must have one. It was building up this quality. Curiously, at the same time, it had hinted at other latent abilities within human brains.

"I'm going to make some coffee," Paul said aloud. "Who wants some?"

They both grunted in the affirmative.

Paul headed for the kitchen. Tapper followed him, then muttered something about the toilet and went upstairs. He was back down by the time Paul brought the coffee through.

Tapper became very sleepy. He had drunk most of his wine but hardly touched the coffee.

Paul grew concerned. He could do without Tapper falling asleep now.

"Paul, can I have a look at your books?" Sheilah asked.

"Sure," Paul replied, "they are in the next room."

He led her into the study. She positively beamed in appreciation. She was soon pulling books off shelves and leafing through them hungrily. Her enthusiasm infected Paul; he began to give her a guided tour of his library.

Don't show off too much. Be wary. She is after something.

Sheilah pointed to one book and asked Paul if she could borrow it. He pulled it out and glanced at it. It was a biography of a musician - very famous and very old. He handed it to her. She held it by the edges between her hands and looked at the front and back covers.

From the other room there was a slumping noise and then the sound of something being dropped.

"He's not fallen asleep, has he?" Paul asked her.

He went into the front room. She followed.

Tapper was sprawled over the sofa. On the floor beside him was the coffee mug. Its contents had spilled onto the carpet.

Sheilah smiled and picked up the mug.

"Don't worry about that," Paul said to her, "I'll tidy up."

"I think I'd better be going Paul," she said.

"You don't want to take him home, do you?" Paul asked.

"No, thank you," she answered quickly. "Can't he stay here with you tonight?"

"He'll have to."

Paul had got her coat. She put it on and opened the door. They said their goodbyes. Paul watched her cross the street, then closed the door. He rushed into the front room. Gently, he parted the curtains very slightly. He watched as Sheilah disappeared around the corner. He kept watching. Half a minute or so, probably less, passed. A taxicab slowly went by the

bottom of the street. There was one passenger. Paul saw him look up the street, then the taxicab sped off. It would soon catch up with and pass Sheilah.

Paul picked up Tapper's wine glass. He held it up to the light, then sniffed it.

Yes, as I thought, she drugged his drink. She could have done it anytime we were outside the room. There were at least three occasions.

Will he be alright? Paul wondered.

Yes, he will sleep well and have a big pain in the head in the morning. A good headache.

But what does she want with that book?

I don't know.

It flashed the book incident through his mind again. He felt the brush of her hand as he passed the book to her. Then as they touched that brief tingle of satisfaction from her.

What could she want with that book? It could not be the subject matter surely? Perhaps it was just some book that they could tamper with in some way?

We will need to inspect that book carefully when it returns.

Paul looked at Tapper. He knew he could get him upstairs to bed. He knew he could do it easier now, but he could not be bothered. He tidied up the mess, took the glasses and things out to the kitchen and washed them up. He left them to dry overnight.

Paul got some blankets from the airing cupboard and carried them to the front room. He took Tapper's shoes off and made sure his clothes would not hinder his breathing. Then he wrapped the blankets round him and propped his head up with cushions. Paul switched the light off and went to bed himself.

Sheilah could hear the taxicab coming up behind her. She resisted the temptation to turn around. It stopped, and the door opened. A voice called to her.

"Can I give you a lift home?" It was her Case Officer.

"I've not got far to go, really," she replied.

"Well, it will not be a problem for me then," he exclaimed.

She hesitated and looked at the driver, for effect.

"It is a bit late to be walking home, you know," he said.

She glanced at her watch for the benefit of any observers, then said. "Well, alright, thank you."

She got in. The cab pulled away.

Sheilah had been holding the book very carefully while walking. She now passed it to her Case Officer. He opened a small case which was lying on the cab floor. Placing the book inside he pressed a button in the handle. The inside of the case, which was a kind of plastic, seemed to flow and move so that it locked onto the book shape. He closed the case. The book would now be completely covered by the plastic. He pressed another button in the handle and a green light winked once. Five seconds later a red light winked twice. He opened the case and handed the book back to Sheilah.

The whole process had taken less than a minute. They were at the pub. Sheilah got out and thanked him, quite loudly. She hurried to the side door and let herself in. She was pleased to see no one was still up. She went straight to her room and was soon in bed.

She slept easy in the knowledge that she was going to the Monarch quiz. Woodend had said she could help him with the marking. She had got his prints, too. They were stored in the flexi-plastic of the printcase, making its way back to CCC with her Case Officer. It was all going nicely.

When the Case Officer arrived at CCC he handed the printcase to a technician.

"I want these prints developed for Monday morning. Copies to the Arbiter's office and the Deputy Chief's office."

He then went to a rest room and settled in for the night. There would be reports requiring his attention in the morning.

The Case Officer entered the Arbiter's office. He was expected and was waved on through. Inside, the Arbiter waited for him. He was ever so slightly late. The Arbiter continued looking at his computer screen, the Case Officer sat down facing the Arbiter and waited.

"Just looking over the reports again," the Arbiter said. "These prints, the most recent additions?"

"Yes, sir," the Case Officer replied. "Nothing new over the weekend."

"Well, these prints have caused a stir over at the Deputy Chief's office," the Arbiter continued. "He has been on to me already this morning. Wants to pull Woodend in right away."

The Arbiter looked at the Case Officer. There was no reaction.

"I understand that some evidence," the Arbiter went on, "has resurfaced. Not new, obviously, but something that was buried in the paperwork at the time. The Deputy Chief personally helped in the unearthing of it, my sources say. He is taking a very keen interest in this Woodend character."

He paused.

"Almost an obsessive interest, my sources say. Tell me your view on this business. Is this Woodend really a threat to us?"

The Case Officer pondered the affair again briefly, then began.

"I tend to agree with operative XFSJ23, sir. I don't think Woodend has any links to the Resistance as such. Outside the Zone he knows some Resistance sympathisers; that is all.

We have all his movements well documented and he is constantly monitored. Inside the Zone we know there are very few Resistance elements operating. Whenever there has been any Resistance activity, inside or outside, he has been nowhere near it."

"...So not a Resistance person," the Arbiter cut in.

"No, sir," the Case Officer carried on. "Whether he had any links with the TPF we cannot tell. Our operative has drawn virtually no response from Woodend in this area. She has got more out of the man, Ronnie. He was a supporter of the TPF's stance and clearly shows vigilante tendencies."

He stopped for a second.

"Whatever Woodend's links are with the TPF, the Deputy knows more than we do."

"So, that leaves us with the quizzes and associated murders?" the Arbiter said questioningly.

"Yes, sir," the Case Officer drew a breath. "As you know over the time that the Quizmasters have been in business, we have the following statistics. At about a quarter of the quizzes held someone has died that evening. For around a third of the remaining quizzes someone has died within a couple of days after the quiz. Every time the quiz has gone out of the area someone has died. The deaths have not always involved people actually in the quiz teams but always someone associated with the pub or the immediate area."

"And these people all died the same way and all shared similar traits?" the Arbiter enquired.

"Yes, sir. All appeared to have heart attacks; death was very sudden in each case. All the victims were well-known profiteers or people considered a nuisance locally. Some were informers for our services.

I have been running a check on all such deaths in the community area since law and order was reintroduced after the 'trouble'. There is a similar pattern in the victims, except there are also security personnel included. Usually, the guards who died had a reputation for heavy-handedness."

The Arbiter could not help smiling at the Case Officer's use of that quaint old phrase 'law and order'.

He asked again, "And the labs have been able to find nothing in the bodies?"

"Not really, sir," the Case Officer answered. "We only have the most recent victims' bodies to examine. The labs believe some agent triggers the attack, but they have not been able to isolate it from the general body fluids. They think it probably starts decaying or something as soon as it enters the body."

"You mean it is a kind of radioactive poison?" the Arbiter asked.

"No, sir, we would definitely pick that up," the Case Officer replied quickly. "Perhaps I should not have used the word decay."

"Well, whatever," the Arbiter smiled. "Where does it leave us? We seem to have someone who likes to do our job for us. But we are not sure who, and how they do it."

He looked directly at his officer.

"Well, sir, I agree with our operative," the Case Officer began again.

"This pair are definitely involved. I agree that the most likely killer is Ronnie and that Woodend's role is to identify targets. I think these plants come into it somehow. The lab is analysing some of them as we speak. We know Ronnie does something with them."

"Do we proceed as planned?" the Arbiter asked. "Or do we let the Deputy pull Woodend in?"

"Sir, I think we should proceed," the Case Officer answered earnestly.

"Something will happen on Tuesday. We are ready to move in with force when it does. We should be able to get the body off to the labs really quickly and more importantly, see how they do it."

"Where does the black man fit into all this?" the Arbiter asked. "Can we expect any adverse reaction from the locals?"

"We will be there in force very quickly," the Case Officer replied. "As for our black friend, we keep close tabs on him. We allow him control over certain commodities. He keeps order well in the black area. Sometimes he does a little cleaning up of his own. We largely ignore it. If the balance is maintained, we are happy and so is he. I don't think he will want any undue unrest. It's bad for business."

"Does he know about our infiltration of his organisation?" the Arbiter asked.

"Hard to say," the Case Officer said. "He is suspicious and clever - as Woodend is."

"Well, I have told the Deputy that he can have Woodend after the quiz on Tuesday night, whatever happens."

The Arbiter was winding the meeting up.

"The operation proceeds; you will carry on as planned. However, some of the Deputy's men will standby to take Woodend in. They will have first crack at him."

The Arbiter nodded at his officer and returned his attention to his computer screen.

The Case Officer left. There were a few more details to sort out. Then bring on Tuesday night.

.....

Tuesday soon came around.

Woodend spent Monday making sure his end of the quiz was ready. He checked he had enough paper, pens and copies of questions. A quick phone call between gaffers had given him an idea of how many teams to expect.

On the way back from the Times Past he popped into Ronnie's to get refills for his blow pens. Ronnie closed the shop while he performed the task. As soon as he was finished Paul left and went straight home.

Ronnie went about his normal day on Monday and Tuesday. He made sure his blow pens were armed. He did not bother to check the equipment. He always took plenty of spares: spare speakers, spare microphones, spare leads, everything he could possibly need. Besides, he always checked the equipment the day after every quiz and it was never used for anything else.

Lee did what he always did. Whatever day it was, he tried to make some business deals. He usually succeeded. He gave little thought to the quiz. He would not see any of the questions until Paul handed them to him on the night. He knew he could rely on his native wit to make some funny comments. He was sharp, and he was always the star of the show.

Sheilah gave a lot of thought to the quiz.

Paul and Lee were already in the lounge and having a drink when Sheilah came down. Tapper was there but it was Lee's voice that she heard. He was holding forth about something that had happened to him that day. He had everyone in stitches.

Soon there was a shout from the bar. Ronnie was outside with two taxicabs. Paul, Lee and Sheilah went out to join him. Ronnie was sat in one taxicab. He seemed to be

barricaded in with all the gear. They got in the other taxicab. Sheilah noticed they all had their Quizmaster pens on show.

"Could I have one of those pens?" Sheilah asked Paul.

"Just for the night?"

She glanced at Lee.

Paul said nothing. Lee looked at her.

"No chance!" he said.

Nobody said another word until they reached the security checkpoint.

They were soon through the checkpoint and into the border area. Paul looked around all the time. He was trying to see if there was anything out of the ordinary. The prokaryote was active, to say the least. Ever since it had caught sight of Sheilah it had gone on full alert. It had been urging him to be vigilant. He was feeling calm; the thing was controlling his breathing and heartbeat. Yet he knew that it was also ready to stir him into action if necessary. What action, he had no idea.

When they got to the Monarch Paul was pleased to see that the gaffer had not let anyone into the lounge yet. He had arranged the tables and chairs as they wanted. There were a lot of teams by the look of it. Good, Paul thought, the more people in here the better tonight. They quickly unloaded all the gear and started to set it up. Ronnie was in charge.

Sheilah tried to help but was told to stay out of the way. She bought the drinks and stood chatting to the gaffer. She watched the Quizmasters quickly set up for business. As soon as everything was in position and the system had been tried out the gaffer opened the room to the punters. The bar, which had been bursting at the seams, disgorged some of its contents. The lounge soon filled up. Paul took all the team information off the gaffer and gave it to Sheilah to check. He showed her where to enter the names and how they would

score the quiz. He then left her to get on with it, as well as counting the money. Paul and Lee went to have a drink with the gaffer. Sheilah was left sitting by Ronnie at the Quizmaster's table. She finished what she had to do as quickly as she could.

Sheilah tried to keep an eye on everyone and everything. She watched Paul and Lee, and whom they talked to. She observed the people coming into and already in the room. Most of them were sat on their tables waiting for the quiz to begin. In amongst these people would be other operatives. She tried to identify them. There would be nobody she had met before; that was for sure. When all the tables were occupied, she thought she had narrowed down the possibles and the probables.

One thing Sheilah was dead certain about. Ronnie also was studying the people in the room, only he was making no attempt to hide the intensity of his scrutiny.

Paul and Lee seemed to know many of the people, of all colours. In the crowd it was difficult to keep an eye on them. But then she was not the only one watching them closely.

Paul, for his part, was enjoying the crack at the bar. Lee was in top form; it was going to be a great quiz. He glanced over at Ronnie and Sheilah. Ronnie was lost, staring at the people. Sheilah caught his eye and he waved at her. They smiled at each other.

You felt the tension in her.

It was talking to him.

Yes, I agree. We had better be careful tonight.

You must let Ronnie handle this business you have. Alone. I think you should lose that pen of yours.

I must use the pen. It is our mark, our sign, advertising.

Then swap it with Lee's pen.

That's a bit below the belt, isn't it?

You are not aware of it, but we feel the mental intensity of a few individuals directed at you.

Where are they?

One you know of. One is on the table nearest the Quizmaster table. One on the table nearest the door. One nearby at the bar and one the other side of the bar.

Paul, as casually as he could, scanned around. It showed him each one in turn. He felt a little of what the thing was picking up each time. It was like that feeling you get when you think someone is looking at you, you turn around and there's no one there - but more intense.

In future you will sense these feelings as we do.

I think we have bogies on both those tables. They look like border people. They have a mix of colours too. One to nab us quickly, one to hold the door I would think. Males and females: big and small, no doubt armed.

I agree.

Paul almost became worried. But it controlled him. It could anticipate his immediate reactions now.

Let us hope the target is not on either of those tables.

Have you found a possible host in case it all goes wrong? Paul thought.

There was no response.

A table near one of the speakers, close to the front, had a reserved sign on it. Paul had a good idea who would be occupying it during the quiz. There was a gentle murmuring in the crowd, as if they had heard him and in came the occupants.

The black man was always more impressive in the light. He led the way and sat down at the table. Several people exchanged greetings with him. Following behind were the Rasta driver and three other men. They looked like bodyguards of some kind: one black, one white and one Asian. The Asian sat down opposite the black man and the other two went to stand by the bar. They would not be far away all night.

The Rasta driver walked around the room saying hello to a lot of the regulars. Before he went to sit down with his brother, he could not resist a gentle Woodentop jibe at Paul. Lee burst out laughing. Paul looked at Lee with a mock wounded facial expression. Paul shook the Rasta's hand and reminded him about the one question.

As the Rasta sat down, the bloke who had taken Woodend to see the black man joined them.

Lastly, a truly stunning woman walked in. She was in early twenties, mixed-race black and white. All the men in the room watched her sit down between the black man and the Rasta. She was obviously with the black man, but she was chatting away to everybody. Paul watched them; they were in good humour.

It was almost time for the quiz to start when the black man's main man approached the bar.

This is it. Paul and the thing knew at the same time.

He ordered the drinks and turned to Woodend.

"You starting soon?" he said.

"Almost time," Woodend answered.

"Good. The woman loves quizzes," he said.

"She is a fine-looking woman," Woodend said, looking across at her.

The man did not look; he said, "She is the one."

"She is the one for now," Woodend said. "I expect he'll have another one next time I see

him."

The man collected his change. He looked directly into Woodend's eyes. Paul knew this man did not like him.

Dangerous, the prokaryote reminded him.

"She is the one," the man said. "For now."

He started taking the drinks back to their table.

Ronnie is welcome to this one, Paul thought.

I think he will rather enjoy it.

Yes, Paul agreed.

It was time to get started. Lee was taking their drinks over to the table. Paul turned to follow him. As he did, he bumped into the black man who was making for the bar. Some coins dropped to the floor.

"I'm sorry," Paul said and bent down to pick them up.

"Don't worry, man" the black man said and knelt beside Paul.

Some people by the bar eagerly helped. The black man's head was very close to Paul's.

"My brother, also," he whispered. "Be careful of a reaction."

They stood up again.

"That's all of it," the black man said. "Thank you, Quizmaster."

Paul went and joined his team. He sat down between Lee and Sheilah. He ignored the stare that Ronnie gave him. Lee was beginning his introductory spiel. Very soon he had said just the right things to get the audience on his side, laughing and banging the tables along with him. He started to read the first round of questions.

This is going to be more of a problem, Paul thought.

Would it be better to time the hits together? It asked him.

Well, one method is most certainly out. We cannot follow her to the toilet and do it. We can get one, then get the other during the following fuss. Or we could try to get them at the same time. Paul wondered what he had meant by 'be careful of a reaction'.

I believe the black man is on edge. We sense his wariness.

The only other person who knows for sure we are hitting someone tonight is his main man. He is not going to react to the woman. But he does not know about the Rasta target, presumably.

Paul gave all his attention to their table. He saw through the thing's eyes. The enhanced perception gave him the answers.

Paul had decided. Ronnie would take them out at the same time. They would rely on the general confusion to cover them. If the main man caused a scene, well, then Paul would take him, providing the black man or anyone else did not get in the way.

It is good to have decided on a plan of action, the prokaryote agreed.

It did not let Paul sense that it was not going to allow him to get involved either way. It had been doing some calculating of its own. It had considered the possible players and how they would react. It could see a way out of the coming mess. But to succeed, Paul must not use his blow pen.

Sheilah could sense the tension in Ronnie. He was playing with his pen continually. She had seen the black man come in with his crowd. She had seen the conversations Paul and Lee had with some of them. She watched them pick up the money. Was there something in any of it? She could not tell from here.

Once the quiz got under way, she found herself enjoying it. Lee was very good, if not subversive. Ronnie collected the answers at the end of each round. Paul and she marked

them and kept the totals. After five rounds she refused a drink. It was her turn to go and get them, but she did not want to leave Woodend and Ronnie alone. Woodend went for the drinks.

She watched him as much as possible. She noticed that Ronnie never took his eyes off Paul. It took Woodend another round of questions and the answering time to return with the drinks. He had stopped by at least four of the tables, swapping banter on his way.

"How are we all doing?" he said as he sat down again.

"Fine," Sheilah replied.

"See that Rasta over there," Paul said to her, "and that gorgeous woman next to him."

"Yes," she said, following his gaze.

"Don't you think they are the most striking looking couple here?" he asked.

"They certainly stand out," she agreed.

"He's as queer as a ten-bob note," Paul said.

"As a what?" she asked, incredulously.

"It's an old expression," Paul was smiling.

"Ronnie," Paul said. "They say they have a problem with the speaker next to them."

"Really?" Ronnie responded. "I'll take a look."

He headed for the speaker through the crowded tables, pen in hand.

Sheilah watched him go. She glanced at Paul; he was watching her. There was something in his look. She felt herself shiver involuntarily.

"How are the scores going?" he asked. "That lot in front of us still winning?"

"Fraid so," she answered.

She found she could not look him in the eye. She looked back at Ronnie. He had both hands on the speaker, the pen was held in his mouth. He was doing his best not to be in the way. Lee was reading out more questions.

Ronnie relaxed a little. He had been feeling more anxious than usual. It was the woman's fault. She was getting in the way. He knew that Paul had the target before the quiz started. But he had waited this long to tell him and to tell him to do it now. Despite the woman, something was making him feel more edgy than normal. He could not put his finger on it. But now he was in action. He did not think twice that there were now two targets. He had twisted the pen as he walked over. There was nothing wrong with the speaker. He made a play of examining it. He faced their table. They were laughing at one of the questions. All except that miserable git who was the black man's main man.

The Asian bloke cracked a joke. The woman leaned back and laughed, her head raised, mouth open. Ronnie blew. The dart flew into her mouth. Beauty! Ronnie thought. She's probably swallowed it. He used one hand to give his pen a twist, ready for the next one.

The woman seemed to shudder. She started to cough. Leaning forward, she brought her hand up to her mouth. It sounded like she was choking. Perhaps something had gone down the wrong way. The black man showed some concern.

The Rasta turned in his seat, his hand came around onto the woman's shoulders. As he did this the nape of his neck presented itself to Ronnie's aim. He blew.

As the dart struck home Ronnie gave a last check to the speaker lead. He started to walk back. Paul was watching the table behind him. The woman had slumped onto the table. The black man had one hand on her shoulder. The Rasta had a hand on her other shoulder. Then the Rasta's head jerked up. He stared at his brother, his mouth open. Then, before he could say anything, his shoulders hunched, and he slumped on top of the woman.

The black man stood up. His two henchmen at the bar came closer to the table. At the same time, the main man was on his feet and moving round to the Rasta. The Asian man was also standing. The main man examined the Rasta, the expression on his face was furious. He shot a glance at Woodend. Then he looked at the black man, but he received an icy glare in return. The black man's henchmen now flanked him.

People on the other tables were beginning to take notice. Ronnie was almost back. Sheilah looked at Paul. He was staring at the scene in front of him. He had a curiously bewildered look, as if he was confused by something.

Where were they? she thought.

The black man had made his plans. If his main man reacted violently then his other men would restrain him. If he came quietly, all the better. Either way they would leave the room taking the bodies with them. No one was going to stop them. There would be time for explanations later. The quiz would carry on.

But it was not to be.

As Woodend later recalled, it was then that the shit hit the fan.

Whistles suddenly blew. The people on the table by the door produced weapons.

They shouted, "Stay in your seats! Nobody move!"

Of course, virtually everybody stood up. There was an eruption of noise – a wave of pure indignation and anger. Somebody screamed.

The people in front of the Quizmaster's table stood up too and turned to face Paul, Lee and Sheilah. They had weapons and pointed them at Paul.

The man directly facing Paul said, "Keep calm everyone. No sudden movements."

Ronnie had stopped in his tracks. He was about two steps behind the man, facing Paul.

Steady as you go, it was telling Paul. *They do not want to hurt us.*

They've forgotten Ronnie.

Not for long. It's not over yet.

Paul was then aware of a few things happening at once.

Shots were fired.

A few electric shock truncheons were wielded. People collapsed to the floor.

There were more whistles blowing outside and the sound of running approaching, louder and louder.

Ronnie had his pen in his mouth. The black man's men gathered round him protectively. Then guards poured into the room.

"Everyone sit down!" a loud voice cried out.

Then, even louder: "Now!"

The people started to do as they were told. The black man and his men also obeyed.

As Paul sat down, the man in front of him crumpled up and fell to the ground. Almost in slow motion, Ronnie stepped over the body and snatched Paul's pen off the table.

Ronnie was in a bad way. After the successful hits he had a feeling of elation as he made his way back. This feeling gave way to one of surprise as the whistles blew, then desperation as what was happening sunk in. He froze. He watched the security people confront Paul.

Hell, he thought. What's going on?

Have they rumbled us?

Security everywhere!

Got to get out of here!

They've got Paul!

Desperate thoughts whirled around in his mind. Fear gripped him. He was sweating.

Got to do something! One thought stayed in his mind: I'm not going to be taken by the security, not alive. The bastards!

The security people facing the Quizmaster's table reacted slowly to their colleague's collapse. They had heard no shot. Nothing had been thrown. No one had struck him. They were almost paralysed by confusion.

Ronnie had moved in, got the pen, and started to back away before they came to their senses. They turned to face Ronnie, their weapons fixed on him.

"Stand still!" one of them shouted. "We don't want to hurt you."

"You're not getting me!" Ronnie screamed. "I'll take some of you bastards with me."

He put the pen in his mouth.

"Don't be stupid! You are unarmed," the same man said.

"Ronnie! What are you doing?" Paul shouted out. "What's got into you?"

Sheilah watched Ronnie look at Paul. For a second, he seemed confused. Then the desperation returned to his features. She glanced quickly at Paul. He was obviously concerned. She could feel the worry in him.

"I'm sorry, Paul." It was Ronnie's voice. "It's the only way for me."

He had taken the pen out of his mouth to speak. He put it back in and faced the security man.

"What can you do with that thing?" the man asked.

There was a ripple of gentle scoffing from the other guards. Everyone was watching the strange scene unfolding.

Ronnie blew, then immediately twisted the pen without removing it from his mouth. The security man flicked at his face. He looked at Ronnie questioningly. Someone laughed out loud. The man began to smile. He never finished it. He suddenly doubled up, then twisted and fell to the floor.

A gasp of amazement filled the room. The guards brandished their weapons and moved towards Ronnie. He moved his head, pen in mouth, fanning the room.

One of the security people near Lee, a woman, cried out. "Nobody do anything! We need him alive!"

But somebody was moving. It was the black man's main man. He was approaching Ronnie. He screamed at him.

"So, you're the one! I'll kill you myself!"

Ronnie turned to him, waited a second, then blew. The main man ducked sharply. A miss! He laughed and sprang forward. But Ronnie was ready. He had practised quick operation of the blow pen. His last dart caught the man in the eye. He pulled up dramatically, stunned by the pain. He appeared shocked, he clutched at his eye. Then he, too, crashed to the floor via one of the tables. Someone screamed again.

Ronnie turned to face the woman security officer. With the pen still in his mouth he said wildly, "Who's next?"

There was not a moment's hesitation. She fired.

Paul watched Ronnie's body fly backwards against the wall. A red patch appeared on his chest. The pen fell out of his mouth. His head fell onto his chest and his body slid down the wall. Blood was trickling out of his mouth as he came to a final stop.

Woodend was only vaguely aware of what happened in the next few minutes. The prokaryote let him slip into a kind of shock. It knew that Woodend was under no threat of physical injury from anyone in the room. It knew also that their best chance of survival lay outside - outside the Zone completely. Where ever they were to be taken would be the first stage in that journey. It had complete confidence in its abilities to protect Woodend. So far, things had worked out well. It was ready for the challenges to come.

Sheilah thought Paul had been fazed by the events. He did not seem to be conscious of what was going on. Lee was in shock. He seemed to be incapable of moving at all. She gave her attention to the security operation. The people were kept in their seats while the rest of the pub and the immediate area were secured. There would be many more security personnel in the street. The security woman was talking to the pub gaffer. He did not appear happy.

It was not long before Paul, Lee and herself were led out to a waiting wagon. As soon as they were inside the wagon the bodies were brought out. They were placed in other wagons which then sped off to the labs. Sheilah could see a good crowd had formed. They were curious rather than looking for trouble. Their wagon pulled off. There were two guards with them.

They were soon in City Central Control. She had tried to talk to Paul and Lee during the journey. It was important that they thought she was in the same position as themselves. But it was futile. Lee, although more with it, just kept muttering, "I can't believe it". She thought Paul was in another dimension. He looked right through her.

As they got out of the wagon they were separated and led off to different interrogation rooms.

Woodend sat alone in the interrogation room. There was a table and some more chairs - nothing else. He felt as if he was waking up from a deep, deep dream. He was not quite sure what was real yet. The prokaryote fed him his memories piecemeal. Woodend remembered leaving the Monarch. He remembered seeing the black man slumped in his seat as he passed. His eyes lifeless. His men staring at him.

The journey to the City he remembered, and the splitting up of the three of them. When would he see Lee again? He hoped they would soon realise Lee was not involved and let him go. Woodend thought of Ronnie. He saw again his bloody slide down the wall. Well, you took a few with you Ronnie, old mate.

Woodend remembered that wild, hunted look on his friend's face. He remembered trying to say, "Don't do it Ronnie, put the pen down." But his words did not come out like that.

His death was for our best.

Was it necessary? Paul thought.

Absolutely. The death of the black man may well prove to our advantage also.

Ronnie seemed to lose it completely at the end there, Paul thought.

He was always liable to be unstable.

Did you tip his scales a little bit?

I, we, were working on many of your kind at the time. I am learning how to use your ancient hidden mind powers. They are buried deep in your sub-conscious, latent and useful talents. They will help us greatly in our struggle.

So, what happens next? How long have we been here?

We have been here about twenty minutes already. Next will come the interrogation. But they do not seem to be in a hurry.

Well, we are not going anywhere!

Not yet. When the time comes, I will take over everything. You will have no part to play. You will not be aware of everything. I will take whatever measures necessary.

They will have detectors, machines, the works.

I can handle them. I have the necessary control.

Will you leave me?

There was no response.

Paul Woodend did not worry. He was incapable of worrying. He did not have any control.

Would he ever have control again?

He was put to sleep.

Operative XFSJ23 was led into an interrogation room. Inside, sitting on one side of the table, her Case Officer waited. He welcomed her.

"Sit down, Sheilah. Well done. The tricky stuff is over now. We may still want you to see Woodend again, so you cannot relax completely yet."

"Thank you, sir," she replied. "When will Woodend's interrogation start? I would like to observe it."

"Yes, well after the events tonight the Arbiter wants to observe too. The Deputy will have to wait for the Arbiter to get here and then both enquiries will be pursued simultaneously."

"A little awkward?" Sheilah asked.

"Perhaps," he answered, "I am required to be a part of it."

"What about the Lee person sir?" she was asking again.

"He is under interrogation now," he replied. "We expect it to be fairly short. The detectors should do the job. Then we can decide to let him go or whatever. You still believe him innocent of any involvement?"

"More so," she said.

"Right, well let's get your debriefing out of the way," he said, "then we can concentrate on Woodend."

A panel opened in the table top and Operative XFSJ23 placed her hands on the pads.

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The Arbiter was not in the best of moods. He had been looking forward to a restful evening in the luxury of his house outside the Zone.

But it was not to be.

The first report said two security personnel down, four others also dead, among them an important Zone figure and one of their agents. It would require a little sorting out.

He kissed his wife goodbye and climbed into the waiting hoverjet. As the pilot headed for CCC he thought to himself, I want this case finished with sooner rather than later.

The hoverjet landed on the roof of CCC. The Case Officer was waiting. The two men greeted each other and quickly made their way to the Arbiter's office. Once inside the Arbiter spoke.

"A bit of a mess was it?" he asked.

"Not really sir," the Case Officer said defensively. "One of them went rogue and had to be shot. We had given orders they were to be taken unharmed. One of the locals also complicated matters."

The Arbiter grunted, not convinced.

"Here are the preliminary reports, sir" the Case Officer said. "They include the commanding officer at the scene, the debrief of Operative XFSJ23 and the interrogation of the Lee character."

He offered them to the Arbiter who took them and sat down at his desk.

"Where is Woodend now?" the Arbiter asked.

"Still in the interrogation cell, sir" he answered. "No one has spoken to him although the Deputy Chief is anxious to get started."

The Arbiter smiled at the tact employed by his man.

"Let him stew alone for a while longer," he said. "Has the Deputy seen these reports yet?"

"No, sir," the Case Officer replied.

"Let me worry about the Deputy" the Arbiter added and he began to read the reports.

When he had finished, the Arbiter passed the reports back to his man.

"When we get down there, give them to the Deputy," he said. "It will give him something else to think of."

The Case Officer nodded.

"What do you make of XFSJ's report?" the Arbiter asked. "She is not confused in any way? Affected by the night's events perhaps?"

"I don't think so, sir," he answered. "She is no stranger to deaths. Her scans and read-outs from the detectors all confirm what she is saying. It appears she is confused because she is no longer a hundred per cent convinced of Woodend's guilt.

She has only gut feelings to go on. She felt Woodend was up to something early on. But at the end he seemed to be as out of it as everyone else."

"What do you think, at this moment?" the Arbiter asked him.

"We may have the wrong man. She is usually correct in her reactions," he answered.

"But I will hold judgement till we have spoken to him. We do know about Ronnie and how it was done."

"Any news from the labs?" the Arbiter asked.

"Not yet, sir," he answered. "But they are more hopeful with so many victims. We are turning over both Woodend's and Ronnie's houses at this moment."

"Any local resistance?" the Arbiter asked.

"None, sir. The whole affair has shocked the community as far as we can tell."

"Right, let's get to the bottom of all this," the Arbiter said. He walked towards the door.

Sheilah watched the Arbiter and her Case Officer approach. There were guards at intervals along the corridor. Each saluted in turn. She had spent the last ten minutes observing Woodend from behind the one-way security windows. There was not much to

see. He was asleep. The sleeping was annoying the Deputy Chief immensely. He had questioned her at length about that evening. The Deputy was waiting inside with two of his men. He was not happy. She had left the observation room to get out of the way.

"Good work agent XFSJ23," the Arbiter said to her.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

The door to the observation room opened and the Deputy stepped out.

"Ah, Arbiter, are you ready to begin?" the Deputy asked.

"Please proceed, Deputy," the Arbiter answered. "I want a speedy conclusion to this affair. Here are the latest reports."

Sheilah followed the Arbiter into the observation room. They sat down. They had a clear view of the interrogation cell. To one side sat an operative who was facing a bank of screens and dials. Behind him stood one of the Deputy's men. This was where all the detectors and sensors in the cell fed their information to. Here it was recorded and processed. The operative wore a head set which allowed him to communicate with the people in the cell.

The door to the cell opened. Woodend immediately woke up. He had not been faking his sleep. The sensors had confirmed that. Woodend watched the three men enter the room. The Deputy and the Case Officer sat down opposite Woodend. The Deputy's other man stood a few paces back, he held a file under his arm. All three wore headsets.

Woodend was wide awake. How long?

Over an hour. There is danger.

Woodend looked at the youngest of these three men. The man was tense. You could see it in his body movements. Then a picture of a younger version of him flashed into Woodend's mind.

Yes, dangerous. Not friendly.

Woodend scanned the other two men. The one standing was completely impassive. The older one sitting down, had placed a file in front of him. The young one also had some files in front of him on the table. The older one smiled at Woodend. The younger one glanced at his files. When he looked at Woodend there was no smile on his face.

Woodend shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

You will appear nervous at first. We are sensing where the threat is coming from.

The prokaryote knew that none of these people would make suitable hosts. Only one would do in an emergency. It would not leave Woodend unless it had failed in its task. That had suddenly looked less likely.

The Case Officer was about to start the questioning when he noticed that Woodend had gone very pale and sweaty. His eyes rolled, and he slumped in the chair. Before anybody had time to react, Woodend slipped off the chair and hit the floor.

Woodend had fainted a couple of times in his life. He did not need the thing to tell him. As he lost consciousness, he could feel a pain in his fingers. A searing pain in all his fingertips.

Sheilah and the Arbiter glanced at each other. It was not unusual for people to faint or collapse under interrogation - but not before it had begun.

A medic was called for, but Woodend did not come around for five minutes, by which time a doctor had arrived. Woodend was given some water and passed fit to continue by the doctor. The Deputy's humour had not been improved by the palaver.

The Deputy pressed the button to reveal the sensor pads in the table. He instructed Woodend to place his hands on the pads. There was a pause while the sensor connections

were verified. They were, and they also showed that Woodend was okay to proceed. All the physiological readings were normal.

The Case Officer began the questioning. Name, age, date of birth, place of birth, address, that sort of thing, to start with. In amongst all this there was some false information, and Woodend was forced to tell a lie. It all served to check the sensors out. But, more importantly it checked that Woodend's responses were being picked up properly.

"How long have you known Ronnie for?"

"Since the 'trouble' began."

"He was a good friend?"

"He was difficult to get close to. We were quite good friends."

"You knew him very well?"

"I wouldn't say very well. I knew him better than anyone else, I think."

"You were surprised at his behaviour this evening?"

"Yes. I could not believe it."

"Could not believe it?"

"Yes, it was a shock."

"You did not suspect Ronnie of this kind of activity?"

"I don't think I understand exactly what behaviour it is."

The Case Officer stopped there. He considered Woodend. Before his faint he had appeared slightly nervous. But now he seemed very assured. His answers were quick and apparently automatic. There had been no untoward responses yet. The operative in front of the sensor bank was very quiet.

The Deputy began to question Woodend. He started with some gentle ones to do with Woodend's work: how long he had been doing it, what did he do before, where had he taught, what had he taught, what his role in the college was.

"You did not know Ronnie before the 'trouble'?"

"I knew of his shop, but not Ronnie?"

"You never saw him before that time?"

"Oh, I had seen him around, but never talked to him."

"Never went into his shop?"

"No."

"Do you remember the TPF?"

"Of course."

"Ronnie did not sympathise with them, did he?"

"Yes, he did."

The Deputy waited for a response on his headset. Nothing came. He glanced at the security window. Woodend followed his gaze.

"Subject answering truly. No other responses noted," the sensor watcher confirmed.

"Was Ronnie involved in any way with the TPF?"

"Not that I know of."

"Were you involved with the TPF?"

"No."

"Did you sympathise with the TPF?"

"Yes."

"You were not involved with them, but you believed in them?"

"Yes."

He paused again. No response in his head set.

"You were perhaps not active, but you passed on information, yes?"

"No."

"You knew people in the TPF?"

"No."

"Not even suspected anybody?"

"No one."

"You agreed with everything the TPF did?"

"I don't think I know everything they did?"

"You agreed with everything you know of then?"

"Yes."

"Even if the innocent were killed?"

"Were they?"

"What about the Longfield massacre?"

"What about it?"

"There were innocents killed then."

"Nobody is innocent in this world."

"What?"

"Nobody was innocent then. They had it coming."

The Case Officer could feel the tension between the two of them. The Deputy was glaring at Woodend. But Woodend stared back at him; there was hatred stirring in him. The next thing he said came with a dose of scorn.

"What's the matter, Deputy? Somebody you knew put down at Longfield?"

The Deputy was having trouble controlling himself.

"Do you know me, Woodend?"

"No."

"Subject lied." Came down the headsets.

"You lied. You do know me?"

Woodend looked at the Deputy, then turned to the Case Officer.

"I remember him. He was a little shit. Always a troublemaker. Stirring git. Hasn't changed really, has he."

The Deputy sprang off his chair and lunged at Woodend.

"I'll get you, Woodend."

The Case Officer was fighting to keep a smile off his face. The Deputy had grabbed Woodend by his shirt collar. He was screaming at him. Woodend stared unflinchingly back at him.

A buzzer rang in the room.

The Deputy glanced at the security window, then shoved Woodend away. He started to walk out of the room.

"We will take a break," the Case Officer said, and followed the Deputy out. The other man stayed put, staring at Woodend.

"Well, Deputy?" the Arbiter said when they were all back in the observation room.

"I know he's involved with the Longfield incident," the Deputy replied a little defensively. "The prints will prove it."

"Well, he is clean on the sensors so far," the Arbiter carried on. "He has not registered anything to concern me."

"He's lying, or beating the sensors, somehow," the Deputy said.

Everyone in the room looked at him. No one said a word.

"Is it possible?" the Arbiter asked the Case Officer.

"No one has been able to completely fool all the sensors," he answered, "ever sir. Some people have managed some control over heart rate or breathing. But there is always something that gets them. No one has ever coped with skin temperature variations."

The Arbiter looked at the operative and raised his eyebrows.

"True, sir," he said.

The Arbiter looked back to the Deputy.

"We will see what the fingerprints show," he said. "Otherwise we want to bring this case to a conclusion, quickly."

The Deputy did not like the tone of the Arbiter's voice, or the look in his eye. But he particularly did not like the looks the others gave him. He would have to be careful. He could lose credibility here. It would not do to have any damaging talk doing the rounds.

Sheilah kept glancing at Woodend throughout the conversation. He seemed to be unperturbed by it all. He seemed to be locked away in his own thoughts. Very calmly he sat there, not fidgeting at all. Somehow, he appeared to be distant. Again, she wondered about him. The doubts would not be quietened.

The Case Officer and the Deputy returned to the interrogation room. The Case Officer began first, placing a Quizmaster pen on the table before Woodend. His hands in position on the sensor pads, Woodend just looked at the familiar pen.

"You, of course, recognise this object?"

"Of course; it is one of our pens."

"Your pens?"

"One of the Quizmasters' pens."

"Who has pens like this?"

"Myself, Lee and Ronnie. The gaffer of the Times Past has one too."

"No one else?"

"I don't think so. We kept hold of them rather jealously."

"Who made them?"

Woodend paused slightly, glancing quickly at the two men facing him.

"Ronnie made them."

The Case Officer waited for some response in his headset.

"You had nothing to do with the manufacture of these pens?"

"Nothing."

"How many did Ronnie manufacture?"

"I don't know. Not that many I think."

"Four, five, seven or ten or more?"

"Not ten or more. I should think more like six or seven."

"How many do you have?"

"Two."

"How many does Lee have?"

"Well, at least one. I don't know if he has any more."

"One of yours you had with you this evening. Where is the other one?"

"At home."

"Whose pen is this one, do you think?"

"Well, they are all the same." He suddenly stopped and studied the Case Officer. After a while he added, "Aren't they?"

The Case Officer did not reply. He watched Woodend closely. In his head set came a message.

"Subject is not lying but shows all the signs of being confused and uncertain."

"You do not recognise this particular pen?"

"No. They all look the same to me."

The Case Officer cast a quick glance at the security window.

"Subject speaking truly. However, confusion and worry signs on the increase."

The Case Officer looked closely at Woodend. Yes, he did not seem quite so sure of himself now. There was a cautious feel to him and a concerned look in his eye.

"Although these pens look identical on the outside, they have an important difference inside."

The Case Officer started to dismantle the pen on the table. He glanced at the window again.

"Subject still exhibiting concern, but interest now is growing."

"You see when you remove the ink tube there are these attachments. Inside them are small glass darts. These darts are coated with a poison. Our labs are working on isolating it now."

The Case Officer was very careful not to touch any of the darts or attachments. He put the pen back together. He looked directly at Woodend.

"We know how it works. You just twist it like this. Then put it to your mouth and blow." He pointed it at Woodend.

Woodend stared intently back at him. The Deputy shot a sharp glance at the Case Officer. The Case Officer kept his eyes on Woodend.

"We took this pen from your house this evening. Your friend Lee's pen does not have any attachments. Neither does the gaffer's, we checked that one too. But yours and Ronnie's do."

He waited.

"Subject now registering extreme worry and confusion."

"This is your pen. Did you know it can fire poisonous darts?"

"No."

"Have you ever used it to fire darts at people?"

"Never."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes."

"This is all a mystery to you?"

"Yes."

"Why would your friend, Ronnie, give you a pen that can fire poisonous darts and not tell you about it?"

"I don't know."

Woodend's voice was beginning to crack a little. There was obvious strain in his face.

"This is all nothing to do with you?"

"Nothing."

"You did not help Ronnie in any way with these attacks?"

"No."

The Case Officer waited.

"Subject is speaking truly. He is, however, now very afraid."

Bringing the pen back to his mouth the Case Officer kept his eyes firmly on Woodend.

"Shall I fire one of these darts at you?"

Woodend stared at him. His mouth fell open.

The Deputy also stared at the Case Officer.

There was a worried frown on his face.

The Case Officer suddenly blew.

Woodend tried to duck, but the dart hit him on his cheek.

He jumped up and patted his face violently. His eyes were wild.

"You bastard!" he screamed.

The Deputy was also on his feet. He glared down at the Case Officer.

"What are you doing, man? I haven't finished questioning him yet. You bloody fool!"

"It's a dummy. We have removed the real ones."

He smiled and turned to Woodend. Woodend looked at him with a crazy disbelief.

Then he fainted again. This time he caught his head on the chair as he fell.

Back in the observation room the Deputy was still fuming.

"What kind of stunt was that?" he demanded.

"Yes, I would like to know what the point of that was," the Arbiter agreed.

"Well you see sir," the Case Officer began, "I have a bit of a theory. If Ronnie has been using this poison for so long, there must have been a good chance that at some point he might have accidentally exposed himself to it. Especially with this blow pen weapon.

Therefore, he must also have a remedy against it, an antidote. It is almost certainly tied in with the plants. If Woodend was also part of the picture, he would also have to be immune to the poison. If so, he would not be able to hide it if I threatened him with the pen."

He turned to the sensor operative.

"Subject showed extreme fear throughout. He thought he was going to die. Heart rate, everything, went off the scale."

"Still a damn fool thing to do,"

The Deputy was not convinced.

"Your conclusions then?" the Arbiter asked the Case Officer.

"I believe Woodend to be innocent of involvement in the killings," he answered instantly.

"But I would like to question him more about Ronnie and the plants, sir."

"Deputy, when your investigation is over, we will decide what to do with him," the Arbiter said. "Carry on, I shall be in my office."

He then left the room.

Sheilah shared her Case Officer's belief in Woodend. He had come through all the tests. Not one showed him to be lying. Well apart from when he was trying to rile the Deputy. All his physiological responses were in line with what you would expect from someone put into this position. It was a little hard to think Ronnie could have done it all on his own. Maybe Woodend could throw some light on Ronnie's activities in general, and the plants especially. They knew he helped Ronnie to get hold of the plants.

They had decided to take a break. The Deputy and one of his men had gone off somewhere. Sheilah and the Case Officer had gone to get a coffee and a bite to eat in CCC's canteen.

Woodend was also being given some food and drink. He had appeared a bit shaken when he came around. He was starting to look somewhat tired. It would be a long night for him yet.

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Sheilah watched the Deputy and her Case Officer enter the interrogation cell. The Deputy carried some files which he laid out on the table. Sheilah was alone in the observation room except for the sensor operative. One of the Deputy's men had remained with Woodend. He took up his position behind the two seated men. Sheilah thought the Case Officer did not appear totally committed to this next phase of Woodend's interrogation. He had already decided to continue his questioning later today, as it was now Wednesday. Sheilah was tired herself, but she was also keen to see Woodend and the Deputy again. There was obviously a history between them. Round one had belonged to Woodend, but the Deputy had that dangerous look on his face.

The Deputy began, sneeringly.

"Recovered from your latest faint, Woodend?"

"Thank you." His voice was even and smooth and there was a confidence about it. It was irritating, in a way. A barely concealed smugness was there. The Deputy could hardly hide his anger already.

The Case Officer settled back into his seat. This was going to be interesting.

"I want to take you back to the Longfield massacre."

"Must you?"

"Shut up! Answer my questions only. What were you doing on that night?"

"Well, I'm hardly going to remember, am I? It was some time ago."

"Funny, most people remember what they were doing that night, especially teachers."

The sensor operative had indicated a lie.

"It was a Friday night, if I remember. I was in the pub."

"A story backed up by numerous witnesses. I have the file here."

Woodend said nothing.

"You had nothing to do with the actual killing?"

"Hardly, if I was in the pub at the time."

"So, you did not do any actual killing. You did not get involved in the physical stuff."

He paused and gave Woodend a contemptuous look.

"That is accepted. But whether you were a part of the targeting; that is another matter."

The two men looked at each other. The Case Officer thought the sureness in Woodend was back. He did not seem concerned at all. There was no comment from in the headset.

"You were questioned at the time?"

"Of course. Every teacher in this whole region was questioned. I worked over there.

They questioned me for a long time."

"This, of course, was before the sensor pads came into use."

It was not a question. Woodend did not respond.

"You were under suspicion. The investigating officer had a feeling about you."

Woodend said nothing.

"Why do you think you were suspected?"

"I thought a lot of us were under suspicion. I was not the only one. Of course, I refused to condemn it. That caused me problems."

"In what way?"

"I got roughed up, pretty badly."

"Shame."

They stared at each other. Woodend smiled slowly.

"Mind you, when I saw who they had got, it didn't seem to matter."

The Deputy seethed, shifting his position in his seat. Everyone present could feel his emotion.

"You still refuse to condemn the massacre?"

"Yes, why should I worry about a little matter like that."

"A little matter! Why you bastard! I'll ..."

The Deputy got himself under control, just. Woodend stared impassively at him.

"Let me just remind you what happened."

"...Oh, please do," Woodend burst in with exaggerated eagerness.

The Deputy clenched his hands tightly, twisting one of his files in the process. He glared at Woodend with uncontrolled hatred.

The Case Officer was in no doubt that the Deputy would lose it, and soon.

"At about eight that evening, two vans pulled up outside a house in Longfield. In the middle-class area. Leafy suburbs, they used to call it. One group of men went to the rear of the house, one to the front. Eye witnesses said some men kept neighbours from interfering. They wounded four people."

"Couldn't have been after them then," Woodend cut in again.

The Deputy ignored the interruption.

"The front door was knocked. When the owner opened the door, he was beaten savagely. Then many firebombs were thrown into the house through almost all the windows - upstairs and downstairs. Any person trying to flee the house was shot or beaten badly and flung back into the growing inferno. Friends were visiting; there were babies and young children. Nobody survived."

The Deputy drew breath, then continued, "The whole attack lasted five minutes and then the men rushed to their vans and tore off down the road. Nobody could do anything to help the occupants of the house. But someone had got an alert out to the special forces. They intercepted the vans. A chase developed. The result was one of the vans crashed and blew up, killing everyone aboard. The other van was involved in a shoot-out at a roadblock. All the men were killed."

The Deputy paused there.

"You remember the details?"

"Most of them."

"Two families destroyed. People you were teaching. People you had taught. People you were likely to be teaching in the future. Mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. You felt nothing?"

"They were scum. They had a bad attitude to education. They were famous for being too bloody full of themselves by half. They had caused a lot of trouble in the school over the years."

"So, you arranged for them to be slaughtered like animals?"

"Nothing to do with me."

Woodend looked the Deputy right in the eye.

The Deputy waited for some response in his headset. He glanced at the security window.

"Subject speaking truly."

"There were babies in there. Doesn't that worry you?"

"I said before, no one is innocent in this world."

"What! Even babies? How could they possibly be...?"

He stumbled on his words.

"They would have grown up with the same attitudes as the rest of them. It saved a lot of trouble in the long run, I expect. They were a scum family."

The Deputy could hardly control himself. His face was contorted in rage. The Case Officer stared at Woodend. His amazement was shared by the other people watching. Sheilah could hardly believe her ears. No wonder the TPF had been difficult to deal with, if someone like Woodend could believe these things.

Woodend stared at the Deputy. He was smiling again.

"I've got it. Now I know why you are so interested in this case."

The Deputy's eyes narrowed.

"Yes, it was her, wasn't it? That nasty spoilt shit who you fancied. She had been visiting them at the time."

The Deputy was off his seat and had reached Woodend before the Case Officer or his man could react.

He struck Woodend across the face.

Woodend went flying off his chair.

Then the door opened and one of the Deputy's men came in with a thin file. He stopped short, stunned by the sight in front of him. The Deputy stared at him furiously. Then, by degrees, he calmed down and got control of himself. He sat back down and accepted the file from his man, who then left. Woodend was helped back into the chair by the Deputy's other man. Woodend was rubbing the side of his face. However, he still grinned at the Deputy.

"We will see if you are still grinning after this, you scum." The Deputy pulled a piece of paper out of one file. It was old-looking, having lost some colour. It had been screwed up tightly at some point and then carefully pulled open again. Even so, there was a tear in it. On the paper were printed some words: it was an address and a time. The whole piece of paper was inside a protective plastic cover.

The Case Officer could make out the address of the Longfield incident and the time, eight o'clock on the paper. He glanced at Woodend.

Woodend looked at the scrap of paper then stared back at the men. He did not appear concerned in any way. The Deputy glanced at the window.

"This evidence has only recently come into our possession. It was left to the security forces in someone's will. That person was the mother of one of the TPF members killed in the shootout following the Longfield massacre. She discovered it soon after the death of her son but kept it hidden since then for fear of more reprisals."

He looked at Woodend.

"But the guilt of association gnawed away at her as the days went by. She decided to leave it to us when she died. Does it look familiar to you?"

"No."

"The ink matches pens you were using at the time, according to the case records."

"Yes, but a lot of people used the same pens."

"Yes, but a lot of people do not have the same fingerprints, do they?"

"No two people have the same fingerprints."

"That's very true, Woodend," the Deputy seemed very pleased with his response. "As you say, no two people have the same fingerprints."

He glanced again at the window.

"The subject seems unconcerned. No unusual responses."

"Are you aware of our modern fingerprint detection devices?"

"Yes. I read somewhere how they work."

"We have tested this piece of paper."

He paused and smiled at Woodend.

"Your fingerprints are on this paper."

Woodend stared at him in surprise.

"Don't talk rubbish. I've never seen it before." He was indignant.

The Deputy pulled another file to him. He reached into it and pulled out two fingerprint records. He held the negative like sheets to the light.

"This one is the paper, and this taken from your house recently."

"When?"

"It does not matter. You will see that they are a good match."

The Case Officer and Woodend leaned forward to examine the sets of prints.

"The subject is exhibiting great surprise."

"How do I know these are my fingerprints? I don't understand it. I've never seen this piece of paper before."

"While you have been sitting with your hands on the sensor pads, we have taken another set of prints. They are in this file."

The Deputy seemed very pleased with himself. He smiled his dangerous smile at Woodend. The Case Officer looked intently at Woodend. He still did not seem worried, more surprised. The feedback down the headset was not incriminating.

"Do you still deny any involvement in the Longfield massacre?"

"Yes."

Defiance.

The Deputy removed the fingerprint negative from the thin file and held it up by the others.

The Case Officer studied the prints.

The new one was nothing like the others. Quite different.

He looked sharply at the Deputy.

The Deputy looked aghast, then anger spread across his face.

"What's this? They've got to be the same!"

He turned to his man, who rushed to compare the prints. He soon shared his boss's consternation.

"There must have been some kind of mistake," he said quickly.

"I want this sorted out quickly," the Deputy shouted. "Are you sure that woman of yours got the right prints?" he demanded of the Case Officer.

The Case Officer looked towards the window.

"We can always check again," he said.

The Case Officer and the Deputy's man left the room hurriedly. Woodend watched the Deputy carefully. He was quite upset again. He moved menacingly towards Woodend.

With his face up close to Woodend's he growled.

"I don't know what's happened, Woodend, but I'm going to get you yet."

Woodend said nothing and looked away. The Deputy followed the others out of the interrogation room.

Paul Woodend was waiting in the interrogation room. He thought back to the last time he was in here. The thing had just released him. The Deputy had disappeared out of the door. He remembered feeling tired. The prokaryote spoke to him.

We will be safe for a while. I shall let you have your senses back.

Is it over?

No, not yet. It will not be over until we are out of this building and out of the Zone. Then there may be different dangers.

But is it over for now?

Perhaps for a few hours.

Paul wondered what had gone on here. He looked at his watch - early hours of the morning. Hours had passed.

But he got no answers.

Then some men he recognised came in and made him put his hands on the sensor pads and on a piece of card. After that he was led away down the corridor to a room with a rough bed in it. A sort of camp bed, it looked like. As soon as he lay his head down it put him to sleep.

He pretended to be woken at around eleven. It had woken him about an hour earlier. He had been listening carefully to every sound since then. He was given some breakfast and

some coffee. Despite attempting to start a conversation, no one spoke to him. He was offered the use of a toilet and a wash basin. He gladly used them. Then, at twelve, he was led back to the interrogation room by some guards he had not seen before.

Now they waited.

While he waited a meeting was under way in the Arbiter's office. The Arbiter faced the Case Officer and his operative, Sheilah Jones. The woman was quite nervous, the Arbiter noticed.

"So, what do we have?" enquired the Arbiter, and carried straight on with his summary. "Our suspect passes all the sensor tests with flying colours. We believe him to be innocent of these murders. The real assassin is dead. Correct?"

"Correct," the Case Officer agreed.

"The other member of the Quizmasters we have already sent home. He is completely in the clear?"

The Arbiter looked for agreement.

The Case Officer nodded his head.

"So that leaves us with the fingerprints," the Arbiter continued. "The Deputy asks us to provide him with Woodend's fingerprints. There is no copy, in the records or in his file. We do this."

He looks questioningly at the operative.

She nodded her head vigorously.

The Arbiter paused a second.

"We find that these fingerprints match the prints that the Deputy has found on a recently discovered piece of evidence. This would convict Woodend of involvement in the infamous Longfield incident, this despite all the sensory data to the contrary. We find out the Deputy

may have a personal angle in the Longfield affair. Then, just when the Deputy thinks he has got his man, it transpires that Woodend has completely different prints."

The Arbiter paused again.

"Then when we check Woodend's house, we can find very few prints that resemble his actual fingerprints." He looked at his officer.

"That is correct, sir," the man replies.

"This operative has been checked through the sensors again," the Arbiter indicates the woman.

"Yes, sir," the officer answered as Sheilah hung her head.

"Well, we have a mystery, do we not?"

The Arbiter smiled at them both. But neither of them smiled back.

The Arbiter looked at his officer and said, "Proceed with the final part of your questioning. I want to see you as soon as you have finished. I will then decide what to do with this Woodend."

"What about the Deputy's investigation?" the officer asked.

"Do not worry about our Deputy," the Arbiter replied. "I do not think he will be pursuing his interest in this matter." He turned back to his computer terminal. His officer and the operative left.

The Arbiter did not add that there were rumours spreading around CCC, and indeed beyond, that the Deputy had lost his way a little, that he had shown a damaging lack of control, and that he may have been involved in some highly suspect evidence.

The Arbiter allowed himself a wide smile. It would not take too much pressure on some of the Deputy's men and then I will have you, my young pup. Now, where else could he sow the seeds of this sorry tale in the mean time?

The Case Officer entered the interrogation cell first. He sat down opposite Woodend.

Paul remembered that much, then it took over again.

"Good morning," the Case Officer said. "I hope you are rested?"

"Yes, thank you," Woodend replied.

"We have some final questions for you."

The panel slid open in the table and Woodend placed his hands on the sensor pads once more.

"I would like to introduce an associate of mine. She will sit in today."

The door opened, and Woodend watched Sheilah Jones come in and sit down next to the man. She smiled at him.

"Hello Paul."

"Sheilah."

"Subject registering some surprise, but not a lot."

"You don't seem very surprised to see Sheilah?"

"Well, I'm not really. Ronnie thought there was something wrong with her."

"Something wrong with her?"

"He did not trust her for some reason. He did not say why."

The Case Officer glanced at the security window.

"Speaking truly."

"I would like you to think back to just over a week ago. You were in the Monarch pub. You left your companions, briefly, yes?"

"Did I?"

"Yes, you went to see a black man. He is a prominent figure in those parts."

The Case Officer looked questioningly at Woodend, who had a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Yes, I did."

"Why did you meet in such a secretive fashion?"

"His idea. Sometimes he preferred to meet like that. Especially if you wanted something

off him."

"What did you want off him."

"The usual thing - more of the plants."

"These are the plants that are growing in your back garden - the same as the ones in Ronnie's greenhouse and the ones that were delivered to the florist for you."

"What is so important about these plants."

"Ronnie used them for some reason; he never explained why, really. He said the seeds were good for you. He gave me a jar of them."

"You don't know exactly what Ronnie did with these plants?"

"Not exactly. I know he was very keen on the flowers. He said he wanted only strong plants that would flower regularly. You could see the petals and flowers in his greenhouse. Lines of them."

"The flowers were important?"

"The flowers and the seeds that came after."

"You are sure you don't know why?"

"I think it could have been something to do with drugs. He may have used them in some way."

"Why do you say that? Do you have any reason?"

"No, not really. It's just that he used to get a bit ratty if there were problems with the plants. Like he needed new ones."

Woodend paused there. He looked at the man.

"Yes? Something else?"

"Most people, I think, thought Ronnie was doing some sort of drug. Me with him, I expect."

The man looked to the window.

"Subject responding truly."

"What happened to your fingerprints?"

"What do you mean?"

"They were not the same?"

"Not the same as what? I don't understand?"

"Your fingerprints appear to have changed in the last week?"

"How can my fingerprints change in a week? It's not possible."

"You have no answers?"

"Answers? I don't understand the fuss. How can a person's fingerprints be changed?"

"Subject speaking truly. There is some confusion, but also amusement."

The Case Officer studied Woodend again for the last time. You cannot beat the sensors, he thought. He did not understand the fingerprints business, but he did understand the sensors and the pads. Woodend must be innocent. They would let him go. He could tell them no more. The labs had the poison from the flowers isolated. Perhaps the antidote was in the seeds.

"Those are all the questions we have for you."

The man made to leave.

"Can I go then?" Woodend asked.

"Not just yet," the man replied, "but soon, probably."

"Goodbye, Paul," Sheilah said.

"Bye"

Woodend watched them leave.

I believe that is it. We can relax now.

Good I want to go home to the community.

The prokaryote doubted that they would be going back to the community. But it said nothing to Woodend.

.....

Paul Woodend was following the man who had interrogated him. They had left the interrogation cell with a guard in attendance. So far, they had gone up in two lifts and walked down a few long echoing corridors. The third check point was coming up. Woodend had never seen a building with so many guards and checkpoints. But then they were inside CCC.

He had not been given his pass back. But the man in front had no trouble getting him through the checkpoints. Woodend had tried to find out where they were going. However, the man in front was saying very little.

They were quickly waved through the checkpoint and into an outer office room. Here Woodend waited for a minute with the guard while the man went on into the main office. They were called in. Woodend went through, but the guard only went as far as the door.

Paul Woodend was taken by surprise. He found himself sat opposite the Arbiter. He did not need the man to tell him. He could feel the thing's interest and, almost, pleasure. He wondered what was going to happen. He was in the clear, was he not?

Don't worry. This is good. This one is very interesting. Not like any we have encountered yet.

Are you going to leave me?

There was no response.

"Well now, this has been quite a business," the Arbiter was talking to him. "But it is all over and we believe you to be innocent, Woodend."

"I'm relieved to hear that," Woodend said. "Sir," he added hastily.

"I expect you would like to go home now?" the Arbiter asked him.

"Yes sir," Woodend answered.

"Home to see your friends?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, hopefully they will be concerned about me," Woodend said.

"No doubt they will be," the Arbiter agreed.

The Arbiter gave Woodend a smile. He said. "I am afraid you are not going back to your community and your friends."

Before Woodend could reply he raised his hand. "Listen to me. We do not think you are implicated. But in the community, this whole business has caused a stir. You, by association, will carry some suspicion. We have released you, yes, but sometime after your other Quizmaster. You were more of a friend to Ronnie than anybody else. Some people will find it hard to believe you did not know what was going on. You may find it hard to convince them. Then there is the matter of the friends and families of all the victims. They may want revenge. Your friend Lee may find it hard; you may find it deadly."

Paul Woodend stared at the Arbiter. His mind was in a daze. The thing was doing nothing to help. He was on his own. He thought about the Arbiter's words, the community and himself. He was afraid. There was something to be worried about here.

The Arbiter was talking to him again.

"Of course, that is not all you have to be concerned about."

"There is more?" Woodend seemed unnerved.

"You have made a powerful and dangerous enemy here," he said. "The Deputy is dropping the Longfield charge. But he is not happy with you, and he has many men in the City and the Zone."

The Arbiter smiled at Woodend again and carried on.

"I think it is safe to say that he hates you."

He paused.

"You would always be looking over your shoulder."

He looked at the man.

"We do not think you will last the rest of your holiday, Woodend."

Woodend appeared crushed to the other men, weighed down by the worry of it all, suddenly.

He asked, "Why are you so concerned about me?"

"Well, you are not without your uses to us," the Arbiter answered. "I have spoken to the Director of your college this morning. He and I are old friends. He is anxious that you leave the Zone. He agrees that you can no longer be allowed to live here."

"Where shall I go?" Woodend was resigned to it now.

"The Director is organising a place for you to stay," he said. "In or near the College. You will be safer there."

Woodend was lost in thought for a while. The prokaryote was soothing him. It told him it was for the best. There was no going back. They would go forward together. His mind settled.

"Of course," the Arbiter again said, "you may be useful to me in the future."

Woodend pondered that comment then, and at times afterwards.

"Can I not take anything with me?" he asked. "From my home?"

"We have given some thought to that," the Arbiter replied. "A groundcar will be sent to your house; some of our men are still there. If you give a list to the officer here the groundcar will return with what you want. Be sensible, the groundcar will then take you directly to the college. It can only hold so much."

The Arbiter had finished. The case had ended entirely satisfactorily. He was happy. He waved Woodend away.

"Goodbye, Woodend, our paths may cross again."

Woodend was ushered out of the Arbiter's office and soon found himself on the lower floors. As he was led by the guard to a waiting room, he gave the list to the man. He dictated it into a tiny recording device that the man gave him. He included where to find certain things. It was mainly clothes, some of his favourite books and some personal items. He was surprised how quickly he had decided.

The officer gave the device to another guard and left Woodend with the original guard for company. Woodend made no attempt to talk to the guard. There were no windows in the room he sat in one of the chairs.

He thought about the community, the house, the street and the people in the street. He thought about the Times Past, the gaffer, his wife and all the regulars. He thought about Lee and Tapper and Ronnie.

The prokaryote let him reminisce, or was it mourn? It thought about the future, what to do next. It was tapping Woodend's memories, making a list of possible places and people. There would be plenty to do once they arrived outside the Zone.

