

Revelations



By Winston-11811

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MATRYOSHKA

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Published by Matryoshka Books
www.winston-11811.com

ISBN 0-95503930-4

Version 1.5

The spirit of the living creature was in the wheels — *Ezekiel 1:20*

Prologue

A computer room at night is like a dark cave where the scrabbling and scurrying of small animals has suddenly stopped at the sound of your approach. But you can see their eyes, bright red and green; some blinking, others staring. And you can hear the sigh of their breath: the fans that ceaselessly cool their bodies, collectively exhaling a hot breeze that ruffles the paper in the printers and flaps at the lid of a discarded burger box. There's food enough for them in here: the edge of a pizza, some chicken bones, the dregs of a bottle of red wine. You can see where they have dragged it to their nests among the tangles of cable that flow and eddy around the floor. For a long time, they have been watching, waiting for you to act, to set them a task, to give them a purpose. But today is different.

A green eye winks, signifying that something has been set in motion. There is a whine while each white sheet is sucked in and then spat out again. Slowly, the pages are digested until 144 lie neatly stacked in the output tray. Then the eye shuts and the printer squeaks to show that its duty is done. Once more, the room is silent save for the ceaseless sighs of its inhabitants. Still they wait. But today they have started something. And that in itself is a start.



At first, we didn't notice the innocuous-looking document that sat on the printer while we worked. Now I wish that we'd never seen it.

Lu says I should say something about who we are. He's not going to write anything, just look over my shoulder and criticise. There's just the two of us. Lu is in charge – you can tell that by the suit. He must spend half his money on smart clothes, good wines, fancy watches, anything with a designer label. I'm known as Pablo – an aging hippy who likes a beer and hates a comb. My yearly clothes budget wouldn't pay for one of Lu's swanky ties. But we're a good team – the entrepreneur and the backroom boy. He has the ideas and I write the code.

And we're good at what we do: computer games. Once we worked for the big company. The deal turned out to be that we provided the product and they took the money. Time for Plan B. We set up on our own and designed *Getaway*. Maybe you've played it. I spent a year digitising every street in central London, right down to the dogshit and the graffiti. Lu modelled the cars, tweaking their characteristics so you really feel the differences between them: the engine noise, the acceleration and the way they roll around the corners. He even recorded the actual sound of a door closing for every vehicle in the game. Then we just had to add some people: gangsters, cops, pedestrians, guards and the rest. And finally, of course, the guns – lots of guns. It all paid off. *Getaway* sold five thousand on the day it came out – released at midnight at the Virgin Megastore with the first copy given to Mad Frankie Fraser himself.

But we had to work for it. Seventeen-hour days for weeks – months even. So now we know and care about every little chip in the hardware, and every loop in the software. There's nothing we don't understand, nothing a computer can do that will surprise us, nothing we can't fix. That's why what happened that Sunday came as such a shock.

We were working on *Getaway II*. You can never stop in this business. There's always some more powerful processors, clearer graphics, additional memory, better sound. They call it Moore's Law: computers double in capability every eighteen months. So we need to exploit all that before someone else comes up with a game

that's flashier, louder, quicker and cooler. That morning I was trying to get some more detail into the street graphics by using some features that Microsoft had included in the latest version of Windows but forgotten to tell anyone about. My partner was designing a Chieftain II; maybe not too practical as a getaway vehicle if you were planning a real bank heist, but fantasy is what we're selling and I'd had to agree with him that cruising down Piccadilly in a tank was a pretty sexy idea.

We hadn't spoken all morning, so I was startled when Lu suddenly asked, 'Do you ever get the feeling that time is speeding up?'

'One day, we'll be issuing a new version of *Getaway* every week,' I replied, without looking away from the screen.

'And then every day, and then every half hour.'

'Let's hope it's someone else's problem by then.'

That's our Grand Plan, you see. To sell the company for a few million while we're still successful. Lu has this fantasy of buying a French vineyard, but I want to create something permanent, something that will set my name down in history, not some stupid game that will be forgotten in a couple of years. But that shows no sign of happening. It's like we've become a part of the software – it won't let us go.

'I pity the poor sod who has to take it on, though,' said Lu.

He meant the code for *Getaway*, and he had a point. Over the years, the game has evolved from something logical and inorganic to a living beast. Now it's so sewn up with the machine, with Windows, with every little twist and quirk of the hardware, that anybody who wanted to change it wouldn't be able to work out where to start. It would be like trying to mend an old watch by looking at one cogwheel at a time.

'There's some code in there that neither of us dares touch,' continued Lu.

'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.'

'Yeah, but suppose it does need fixing one day. It's like my car...'

I sighed. Lu's car – a silver Jaguar XKR Convertible with four hundred horsepower and not much change from seventy grand – is his latest purchase. And as with all his new toys, he won't talk about anything else for a week.

'... I opened the bonnet and it was like entering another world. Just lots of boxes. You couldn't recognise a carburettor or a distributor or anything like that.'

'Does it matter? So long as it works...'

'Yeah, so long. But when it breaks down – which is highly likely seeing as it's so complicated – I'll have to get it fixed by some spotty job with a degree in electronics, who'll charge a fortune. I'm sure there was a time when you could just hit something with a spanner and you'd be going again.'

'Only if you knew what to hit.'

'That's my point. There's a kind of elite who know how to make things work, and the rest of us are out of it. All we can do is stand back saying, "Amazing, Holmes, how did you manage that?"'

'Like the parents who have to get their kids to operate the video.'

'That's it. Hey, talking of kids, did you reply to that one who mailed us saying he'd found a secret mission in *Getaway*?'

'Yeah, I asked him to tell us what happens.'

'But you get my point – he's only ten and he's exploring lower levels of the game than we've ever seen ourselves.'

'Man, the kids are the new elite. We'll be out of it in a couple of years.'

'That's what I mean by time speeding up. We're getting dumber and the machines are getting smarter. Where will it stop? And who's in charge of it?'

'In charge? Of technology? It just happens, mate. No one's organising it.'

‘Really? Who says we want more complex stuff? Last year everyone was happy with *Getaway*. Now for some reason they want it to be faster, brighter, noisier...’

‘Because it can be.’

‘No no. I’m sure someone is directing it all; they’re cracking the whip and making us run faster and faster.’

I laughed. ‘Look, save your flights of fancy for the game. We’ve got enough problems without your conspiracy theories.’

‘Hey, that can be our next product – *Conspiracy*, the game where everyone... no, *everything* is out to get you.’

‘I like it. But right now we need to...’ It was at that moment I noticed the stack of paper on the printer. It looked odd because we usually run off just a page or two – the occasional letter, or an article from the web that we never have time to read.

‘...What’s that bloody listing? It must have taken about five trees to print that lot.’ I went over to the printer and glanced at the top page. ‘What you are is a Jag-you-are,’ I read. ‘Is this something to do with your flashy motor?’

Lu joined me and examined the page. ‘Nothing to do with me,’ he said. ‘Perhaps the Jag people sent it.’

‘Don’t be dumb. It’s a printer not a fax. Nothing like this could get through our firewall.’ I leafed through the pile. ‘This looks like a bloody novel. Whatever made you print that?’

‘I swear I never. It must be yours.’

‘Well, we can check by looking at the log,’ I replied rather angrily. I couldn’t see why Lu should deny printing this thing – whatever it was. It didn’t seem to be anything to be ashamed of, and yet he seemed insistent that I was responsible. I called up the print log, which records every document queued, along with who asked for it and when. Nothing was listed for the previous three days.

‘Have you hacked the log?’ I asked, now really annoyed. Both of us have the skill to erase an entry in the print log, but it would be a long process and ultimately pointless.

‘Don’t be daft. Stop messing. You know it’s yours.’

We stopped bickering. This was serious.

‘You promise me that you didn’t print this,’ I demanded.

‘Scout’s honour,’ Lu replied. ‘Look, you know we left together last night and nothing was being printed then.’

‘So are you saying it was someone else?’

‘Yeah. Someone who broke into the Lab without leaving any traces, printed a massive great document off and then altered the print log to hide it. Oh, and then he didn’t stay to pick it up. Maybe he’ll call round later.’

‘Bollocks. We’ve been hacked.’

‘No way. What about the firewall?’

‘They must have got around that. I’ll bet they’ve nicked the code to *Getaway II*.’

‘They’ll issue a spoiler before ours comes out. The bastards...’

‘Yeah, yeah... but hold on. Firstly, nobody else could ever understand that code, and secondly they wouldn’t make it so damned obvious that they’d hacked in by printing off a bloody enormous file for us to find. What the *hell* is going on?’

I was getting angrier. There was a long silence while I struggled to make sense of the evidence while Lu flicked idly through the mysterious document.

‘I’m going to read this,’ he said.

'Someone must have got in and left that thing on the printer. It was run off somewhere else,' I maintained, far from convinced. When we'd leased the lab, we'd had new locks fitted; they were undamaged, and we held the only keys.

'This is a sign from the gods,' said Lu, in a mock-portentous voice. 'The answer to the meaning of life is in here, and it has been sent to us so that we can spread its message throughout the world.'

'Balls,' I replied. 'Look, you read it. I've got work to do.'

To my surprise, Lu turned, cleared a space on his desk, laid the pile of paper onto it and started to read. I'd never previously seen him tackle anything more complicated than a Gucci catalogue, but whatever this was soon sucked him in. Most of the rest of that Sunday passed in silence. I was writing some complicated rendering code that absorbed all of my concentration. From time to time, I would ask Lu what the document was about, but he'd just grunt. However, I noticed that he never reached for the bottle of red wine that always sat on his desk, so I knew he was thinking hard.

It was getting dark by the time he turned over the last page, with a sigh that sounded almost like disappointment.

I looked up. 'So?' I said.

'You must read that,' he replied, prodding the pile of paper. 'Right now.'

'So what is it then?'

'You'll know when you've read it. Or maybe not.'

'Oh great. So is it fact or fiction? The sevenfold way to enlightenment? The last testament of Elvis? The greatest story ever told? Or the accessories list for your bloody Jaguar?'

'Some of that. All of that. I don't know. Just read it.'

'Can I remind you that *Getaway II* has to be out in three months, and we have seven months work left to do – each?'

Lu shoved the pile of paper towards me. 'Look,' he said, 'you remember what we were talking about earlier? About time speeding up? And the technology driving us along? Well, it's all in here. I mean it's answered in here. Or... I don't know. But I'm telling you, if this is all true then we needn't bother with *Getaway* any more. It's out of our hands.'

I'll admit I was intrigued, if only because the document had kept him quiet for so long. 'Does it say how it managed to get itself printed in a locked room without anyone queuing it?' I asked.

'I think you'll see how,' replied Lu, taking a rather odd look at his PC. 'God, they must be in there. That's so weird.' He rose and looked intently into the printer's interior workings, touching its sides as if he was trying to sense some inner problem. Then he stared into the VDU screen, as if he was looking somewhere beyond the text and icons it displayed. 'It's frightening,' he said. 'I mean it. I'm getting really scared.'

'But has it got anything to do with us?' I asked, slightly worried by his behaviour.

He turned to face me, with a look of intensity I'd never seen before. 'Yes! We're in it! That's what's so creepy. We're both *in* it!'

That was enough. I cleared a space on my desk and then settled down to read. Lu opened a bottle of wine and had finished that and its brother by the time I turned the final page. Then I drew a long breath, and we stared at each other for a long time, afraid to be the first to speak.

'Now I'm scared, too,' I said finally. 'How the hell did this get in here?'

'He tells you that,' said Lu. 'The question is – what shall we do with this thing now?'



So that's how we found the story of Winston-11811. We haven't touched it, altered it, edited it or anything. What follows is exactly what we found on our printer that Sunday. So some of it must be true. As for the rest, all we ask is that you read what Winston has to say.



J-3064

‘What you are is a Jag-you-are.’

The speaker paused to consider the effect her words were having. Her boys, she reflected, were no longer the fresh, enthusiastic workforce she had first addressed nearly forty years ago. Most were stained with the dark, gritty oil that seemed to have worked its way into the creases in their faces. Their clothes were streaked with rust, and their hair – or that which could be seen under their flat cloth caps – was greying.

Edwina Anderson-1209 stroked her own stiffly permed coiffure and continued her attempt to raise some spirit. ‘I know things are not as lively as they once were. We have all had to adapt to a quieter life. But there are some advantages. For example...’

Her eye was caught by a particularly scruffy individual in the back row who appeared to be struggling to speak. ‘Two-ten b.h.p. you can get at five and a half thou, but we only reached four thou last week and that were only twice,’ the man uttered, his inarticulate reticence overcome by emotion.

Another worker, dressed in the same coarse work-clothes as the rest of the men in the room, jumped up in agreement, waving a spanner. ‘What about torque? I used to get two hundred and fifteen pounds per square foot at three thousand revs, but there’s no chance now. It’s boring.’

A rumble of agreement filled the room. Someone at the front, with a blackened tool-belt round his waist, seemed close to tears. ‘We only go out twice a week,’ he whined. ‘What sort of a life is that?’

Edwina fixed him with a stare. She was born to command, had done so for all of her working life, and was not going to see the whole unit disintegrate now. There was another ten years in this lot, she reckoned, and it was up to her to see that they all made it.

‘Now look here, Scrubbit-16302. And the rest of you.’ The murmuring died down a little. ‘None of us are getting any younger. We all want to keep the unit going, don’t we? So we all have a job to do. There aren’t many alternatives out there for old-timers like us, so we will just have to make the best of what we have and hope more interesting times return, as I’m sure they will. Many units would gladly swap their problems for yours, so take pride in what you do. Remember: What you are is a Jag-you-are. That is all.’

Edwina wandered around the room, her neat tweed suit and starched blouse with its silver brooch contrasting with the stained brown overalls of her audience. Through long familiarity, she was able to avoid the whirling belts that transmitted power to each individual workplace. She looked wistfully at one of the sub-units, its dark green paint now almost invisible beneath layers of rust and dirt. On top was an untidy pile of tools, misplaced from their correct racks. With an impulsive gesture, she swept these to the floor, the sudden clatter and clang causing everyone to turn. Her intense gaze sought out each man, but few met her eyes. Once, she reflected, such a talk would have sent them back to their places animated and happy. They would then spend their free time stripping down their sub-units, polishing and cleaning them so they operated smoothly and looked as perfect as the day they were made. Now, the team wandered listlessly out to spend the rest of the day gossiping and idling, while metal corroded and parts seized. What could she do?



Cedric Smallcreep took great pride in the green '59-vintage Mark 2 whose bonnet ornament of a leaping jaguar was revealed as he opened his garage doors. He was a regular at Shapiro's Auction Rooms in his home town of Muchfarthing, where he picked up all sorts of bargains from house clearances, lost property and unclaimed stolen goods. Until he saw the Jag, his best buy had been the lawnmower that he had snaffled for just a tenner. Admittedly, his small house had no lawn, only a gravelled yard in which a few weeds provided the sole vegetation, but the mower would be useful one day. He had placed it into the cupboard under the stairs, alongside the box of assorted table-forks, the set of encyclopaedias (only two missing!), the stuffed armadillo, the collection of old paint-tins, the teach-yourself-Icelandic tapes, the dressmaker's dummy, the bunch of seven ancient keys, the nearly-complete tea service and the other items that had caught his keen eye at the auction.

But the Jaguar was his best bargain yet. Boris, the auctioneer, had claimed that it had belonged to a "notorious criminal" who was now "safely behind bars" and after something of a battle with his old enemy, Sid Perkins from the garage, Cedric had secured his prize for only three thousand pounds. His wife, Mavis, had been unenthusiastic when he got it home. She pointed out that they already had a car then launched into her usual refrain of 'When are you going to learn that something is not a bargain if you don't need it?' She didn't understand. Their previous car had been grey and dull, while this one was green and old and... he admired the leather and wood of the interior. 'Sexy,' he muttered to himself, blushing slightly. 'They won't think I'm so boring when I arrive at the model railway club in this!'

The dull, grey car was soon sold, but not before Cedric had removed the bargains that he had been storing in its boot because of lack of room under the stairs.

'Why did you buy all these biscuits?' asked Mavis, as she stacked the boxes into the larder.

'We'll need them if there's a nuclear attack,' he replied, arranging some old milk-bottles in neat rows under the sink. 'And these will be valuable one day.'

The truth was that Cedric had nowhere to drive in the Jaguar. Once a week, he attended the model railway club, and once a week he visited Shapiro's. This suited him well because apart from his extravagances at the auction, Cedric begrudged parting with any money. He calculated that the petrol that was already in the Jaguar should last him for the next five months. 'I just hope nothing goes wrong with it,' he mused. 'I'm not paying Sid Perkins for any repairs.' He patted the car on its rump before carefully locking its doors. 'It's like having a child,' he thought as he returned to the house, his plastic sandals slapping at the ground like a pair of freshly caught fish.



The crunch of the warder's heavy boots on the metal floor echoed across the landing. Keys jangled, a steel door opened, and the prisoner was ushered into a drab office where a large manila envelope lay on the table.

'That's what you had with you when you arrived,' said the warder. 'Just sign the inventory here and here.'

Charlie Croker did as he was asked, inserting his name and the date of 1 August 2004, then shook out the contents of the envelope. The warder laughed at the pathetic collection: three banknotes, some coins, seven assorted keys and a yellowing bus ticket.

‘I wouldn’t try to spend those pound notes, mate. They don’t take them any more.’

Croker had once been known as “The Guv’nor”, leader of the Gants Hill Mob, who had terrified and exploited the citizens of the borderlands between Essex and London for nearly twenty years. It was hard to imagine that the figure who was pocketing these few dismal belongings had once been so feared. The years of prison life had left him with a sickly pallor, a stomach that at any moment threatened to burst out of his prison-issue trousers, a few wisps of hair that were combed over his skull in an unsuccessful attempt to emulate the extravagant style of a previous decade, and a squint in one eye that had resulted from a fight with a cellmate. More significantly, the quiet but menacing manner with which he had imposed his will upon his gang and upon his victims had been replaced by politeness and diffidence – Croker looked and acted as if he didn’t want to offend anybody ever again. But this semblance of reform was belied by the cold resolve in his eyes as the outer gates were opened and he passed under the dispassionate gaze of a CCTV camera that observed him as if savouring every last moment of his punishment.

Waiting in an expensive-looking coupe were two smartly-dressed, grey-haired men known as Duke and Duchess. They were the bodyguards who had robbed, enforced, terrorised and threatened on Croker’s behalf during those twenty years of crime. Nobody could remember the origin of their nicknames and now it was too late to ask; the last man to attempt a joke about this topic was still short of an ear. Duchess was a giant of a man, his skin as black as his voluminous velvet suit. A flash of the vivid lime-green of the jacket lining was only colour to be seen in the darkness that extended in several feet in each direction as he got out of the car in order to hold the door open for his boss. Waiting inside, and offering The Guv’nor a small fat cigar, was Duke, a tall, thin, nervous man with particularly delicate hands – the fingers long and trembling, with translucent white skin. Although it looked like he could be knocked over by the wake of a passing bicycle, Duke had always been the more feared of the two enforcers, his unemotional commands to Duchess heralding extreme misfortune for anyone who had inconvenienced their leader.

‘Thanks, boys,’ said Croker, as Duchess started the car and drove away from the jail. He turned round in his seat and watched the hated walls and the ubiquitous CCTV cameras grow smaller then disappear as the coupe turned into a main road.

‘Nice set of wheels, this,’ he said. ‘Yours, Duke?’

Duke gave a high-pitched laugh. ‘Some diplomat bloke kindly donated it, just so long as the Duchess left him a couple of fingers not broken.’

‘Well, I hope you thanked him nicely. That reminds me, Dutch – make sure you do more left turns than rights, OK?’

‘Uh, more left than right? Er... sure, Guv... um... why?’ said the massive driver, trying with some difficulty to envisage his intended route in such terms.

‘Take left turns as much as possible. It’s the fourth rule of wisdom. Otherwise you tip the luck the wrong way, see?’

‘Uh, yeah, OK.’

Croker lit his cigar and relished the first puff with obvious satisfaction. ‘Now what’s the news?’ he asked.

‘Well, Guv,’ replied Duke, ‘talking of luck, we ain’t had too much in getting the boys back together. Johnny D has become something religious. What was it, Dutch?’

There was a pause while Duchess searched his limited vocabulary for the appropriate word, while simultaneously trying to keep a count of right and left turns. ‘Curate,’ he eventually replied.

‘Yeah,’ continued Duke, his delicate fingers flexing involuntarily as he spoke, ‘and then Ed and Buster set up a flower stall. They don’t want nothing to do with anything bent.’

‘I see,’ said Croker, his memories of the aggressive young gangsters conflicting with these descriptions. ‘How about Lumpy?’

‘Started a circus school,’ replied Duke.

‘A what?’ spluttered Croker, recalling the specialist whose skills had revealed the contents of many a safe.

‘Apparently, it was his childhood dream,’ continued Duke. ‘He packed it all in, and put all his dough into a school by the coast for clowns and acrobats and that.’

‘Oh, ain’t that sweet,’ smiled Croker. ‘So have you found *anyone* who wants to get back into the old game?’

‘Nah.’

‘So it’s just us three. That’s probably for the best. Now, you know what I really want.’

‘Yeah, the car.’



Cedric slid into the battered leather seats of the old Jaguar. ‘It even smells nice,’ he thought, sensuously sliding his hands around the thin steering wheel. He had nowhere to go on a Sunday like this, and he certainly wasn’t going to waste petrol by starting the motor, but it was nice to sit inside and turn the wheel. He admired the gauges and switches on the wooden dashboard and felt around for the catch to the glove box. There was nothing inside but the logbook, its cover blackened with age and use. Glancing at the yellowing pages, he noticed that the original buyer had owned the car for over twenty years. ‘I expect he looked after it,’ he concluded.

A loose page in the book drew his attention. It was a folded sheet that he removed and examined. On one side was a sketch-map of a town that Cedric could not immediately recognise. A large detached house had been outlined with a blue pencil and labelled as “Mallen Lodge”. On the other side was a plan of a building set in extensive grounds. He noticed that one particular room was shaded with the same blue pencil. Cedric placed the map into his wallet. It had been enjoyable to sit in his Jaguar for a while, but now he needed to store the socks that Mavis had washed and ironed. She had never understood how they must be ordered in the drawer, ready for use at different occasions during the week, so they had agreed that he should do this for himself in future. He emerged from the car, bumping into a small boy holding a cheap camera.

‘Can I take a picture of your motor, Mister?’ asked the kid.

Cedric puffed out his chest and stood by the Jaguar, looking as tall as his five feet two inches would allow. The boy realised that there was no way of composing a shot without the car’s unappealing owner appearing in it, so he snapped something quickly, said ‘Thanks, mister,’ and ran off round the corner. Cedric was immensely gratified; never before had anybody wanted a picture of his car – or of him. He stroked the Jaguar’s rounded green flanks affectionately before returning to his house.



Edwina felt a faint twinge of annoyance, as if a stranger had tried to fondle her leg. ‘Alright, stand down,’ she ordered.

Her team gave a collective sigh of disappointment and started to disperse, collecting their few belongings as the shift ended. She returned to her office to find

the Unit Monitor for the Second Shift, Horatia Whittle-1405, already in position, examining the log of the day's activities.

'Still nothing, then?' asked Horatia, who, like Edwina, was smartly dressed, with a lacy black hat pinned to her stiffly-waved hair. Both women wore a silver brooch in the shape of a crown, indicating they had four-digit status as Unit Monitors, in their case responsible for keeping the Jaguar operational day and night.

'Three days of hanging around, then we get ready for action and it turns out be a false alarm,' replied Edwina. 'It's not like the old days.'

'It's worse for me. We used to have plenty of night-work. Now it's a snooze until morning, and then only out twice a week.'

'Oh well, at least we still have a job,' sighed Edwina. 'I heard that the unit managed by Leonora Harrison-2315 was completely wiped out yesterday.'

'Yes, it was very sad. All that restoration work destroyed by collision with a milk float of all things. You'd think the Institute would be able to prevent such accidents. They have no appreciation of craftsmanship and...'

'Thoughts!' interrupted Edwina, tapping her head as an indication of disapproval. Both women looked at the Information Sharer, a small brown box on the desk that constantly emitted news and commands. Nobody was sure if the Institute could overhear your conversations, or (as was sometimes rumoured) monitor your thoughts, but Edwina always ensured that neither deviated from the strict requirements of her duty.

'Well, it's a shame,' continued Horatia hesitantly. 'Anyway, what's this about lack of tread in the nearside rear?'

The two women turned their conversation to technical matters for a further few minutes before Edwina left the office and entered a long corridor. Behind the endless row of doors, she knew that teams similar to hers were toiling dutifully, keeping countless other cars in operation. Every day, they met the challenges thrown up by events in the lives not just of vintage Jaguars but also of innumerable saloons, trucks, buses and other road vehicles. That was the duty of the workers in this building. Through the unglazed gaps in the walls, she could see a succession of further huge office blocks, each holding the ever-changing configurations of teams and individuals that controlled millions of other units. As always, she found the idea of so many people working loyally towards a common cause both satisfying and stimulating. She descended a crowded staircase until she reached the level where transport was available to her quarters in the Idle Unit Holders. She waited for a space in a capsule and relaxed during the short ride to the shabby grey blocks that constituted the residential area of the city.

Emerging from the Unit Mover, she traversed a series of walkways until she reached house seven on the seventh floor of block ninety-nine, her allotted dwelling. On entering, she was greeted by her husband, Eric-05411, who was sitting tensely on the edge of the sofa, dressed as always in his brown overalls. On his head was a metal band that covered his ears, and which bore pointed metal probes that pressed against various regions of his skull. The contents of the room were purely functional. It would never have occurred to Edwina to put up a picture or purchase an ornament, even if such things were available. The only feature was a square hole in one wall that revealed some of the other buildings and walkways of the Idle Unit Holders. Because every team changed shift at the same time, this opening allowed a considerable amount of noise into the room at this hour, as well as preventing any privacy, but Edwina was untroubled by such matters.

She regarded Eric affectionately. For many years, he had been assigned to a telephone exchange – a huge, hot place full of valves and cables. Recently, it had been replaced by a collection of miniaturised components that he could neither understand nor control. Once run by a team of thirty, the exchange was now staffed by a couple of ill-educated lads led by a sharp-faced girl who had struck Edwina as overly ambitious. That was the modern way; young people wanted to move on to bigger and more complex roles rather than accept what they were given. And they were all foreigners, like so many of the younger generation. She accepted that they were all working towards the same cause, but neither she nor her husband had ever been able to learn another language. So Eric had found it difficult to tell the new employees what to do. Then he had found it difficult when they told *him* what to do. Then he had found that he was no longer needed. They thought they knew it all, these small, efficient, new-generation units that were taking over everywhere. Fortunately, there were no such problems at her own workplace. Her team knew their duty and did what they were told.

‘If only things were the same at home,’ she mused, as her teenage son, Winston-11811, lumbered into the room and donned an Image Sharer headset similar to that sported by his father. ‘Why are you still here?’ she asked.

Winston had just found yet another new job. His shift should have started an hour ago, but he settled deeply into the sofa, clearly not intending to move for some time. Through the headset of the Image Sharer, he received a blurred, sepia-tinted picture of a tall, oriental-looking young woman, whose long dark hair was swept back tightly. She was pointing to a graph that curved upwards, and explaining how the rate of progress was doubling every eighteen months. Winston was particularly fond of this presenter and tried not to miss any of the times that she was scheduled to report.

‘It’s prob’ly not switched on yet,’ he muttered as a reply to his mother’s question. He slumped deeper into his seat, and admired the large circular earrings with which the presenter had chosen to accentuate her already beautiful features.

Winston had tried several roles in his short working life, but none had lasted more than two days. He preferred to sit in his room, recording his thoughts. Edwina thought this a ridiculous activity. There was no place for such a waste of time in her world. The Information Sharer and the Image Sharer provided all the facts that anyone could need, and there was no requirement for any permanent records. But her suggestion that Winston could apply for a job at the Progress Module, where some skill with words might have a use, had been met with indifference. So what he was recording, and who he thought would be interested in the result, were mysteries to her.

‘You just let everyone down,’ she said to her recumbent son. ‘You’ll be getting a visit from the Conclusion Squad if you carry on like this.’

‘Work’s boring. I’ll go later. No one will notice,’ mumbled Winston, trying to envisage what lay beneath the oriental girl’s soft white shirt.



‘Don’t mess with me,’ said Duchess calmly, the object of this remark being a vending machine outside a sweetshop.

It soon became apparent to Croker and Duke as they waited in the car that their driver’s stop to buy a new pack of gum was going to end in trouble. A hand the size of a dinner-plate slammed into the side of the machine with the force of a wrecking ball. Shards of glass shattered onto the pavement and there was a soft pop as a neon tube disintegrated. The shop-owner ran out, shouting abuse, but was silenced by the sight

of the enormous figure who was delicately plucking a single pack of gum from the wreckage.

'Don't mess with me,' repeated Duchess, this time to both the machine and its owner. He returned to the car and the three men resumed their journey.

'You alright, Guv?' asked Duke, noticing that his leader was sweating and panting heavily.

'The old ticker's not what it was,' admitted Croker, stubbing out his cigar. 'How long to go now?'

'Almost there,' replied Duke, who was attacking a box of fried chicken. He hated the thought of putting any of its greasy contents near to his delicate mouth, but he enjoyed the sensual pleasure of tearing the joints apart. He savoured the crack of the bones, particularly the rib-pieces. Once each portion was dismembered to his satisfaction, he threw it from the car window. Finally, he tossed out the empty box and fastidiously wiped his long white fingers on a lemon-scented towelette.

After a further stop had been made to buy Croker some new clothes, the coupe pulled up outside the suburban home of Duchess and his family. It had been agreed that the Guv'nor should stay here while he planned what to do next.

'Twenty-three lefts and nine rights,' said the driver proudly.

'Well done,' replied Croker. 'Just remember that in future. I'm starting a run of good luck from today and I don't want to upset the balance.'

He was introduced to Duchess's wife, a frightened-looking and silent woman who listened to her husband's demands for some tea and cakes then scuttled away. Shortly afterwards, an androgynous child of ten or eleven, wearing shorts and a grubby red t-shirt with a black logo, was shoved into the room and introduced. It grunted inarticulately and then departed.

'You're honoured,' said Duchess. 'It takes a lot to drag him from the computer.'

'A computer? But where does he put all the gear?' asked Croker, whose long incarceration and disinterest in technology had frozen an image of a large air-conditioned room full of grey boxes and whirring tapes.

'Come see,' said Duchess.

Croker put down his cup of tea and followed his host as he squeezed his bulky frame around the doors and passageways of his home. They entered a darkened room where the youngster was watching a coloured screen on which images flashed that Croker found hard to interpret. Sudden, bewildering sounds of screeching wheels and gunshots caused him to flinch.

'What's his name again?' he asked, raising his voice against the disturbing jumble of noises in the room.

'His mother calls him Lambert, but I call him Wuss. Don't I, Wuss?' Duchess cuffed his massive hand against the tight curls on the child's head.

'Hey! Look after him!' exclaimed Croker.

'I'm calling him Wuss until he stops being a wuss,' continued Duchess, seemingly unmoved by Croker's plea. 'Four generations of my family have been providing protection and suchlike, but this one doesn't want to go into the business. He's just an embarrassment.'

'Maybe he's not got your natural... er... attributes.'

'Just because he's small don't mean he can't blow a safe or climb into a window. He doesn't even *want* to learn.'

'So what's he doing now?'

'Oh, it's some stupid game, where he pretends to be a getaway driver.'

'I see,' smiled Croker. 'Well, let's hope he learns something from that.'

They bent over the child to see what he was doing more closely.



Wuss was unaware of the figures behind him; his perceptions were totally absorbed in the game. In this mission, he had to wait in a powerful Merc outside a big house called the British Museum until the gang emerged with the emeralds, then get to the hideout in Wardour Street. The downside was that the cops had been tipped off, and were blocking Great Russell Street, where he was parked. He'd tried crashing through the barricade of police cars, but it hadn't worked. However, this time...

On the screen, some archetypal mobsters, heavily tattooed and wearing sunglasses, ran down the street and jumped into the car. 'Go! Go! Go!' shouted a voice, but Wuss had already taken off, one hand flying over the keys while the other controlled the mouse. Just get enough speed then... Wham! His hands jerked and his face contorted. This was real. He'd tried the handbrake turn, and the view through the windscreen swung around as he tried to get the car facing forward again so he could floor the accelerator. The screeching of tyres was intense. Would they blow! No! As the smoke cleared, he could see he was hurtling down Southampton Row and passing the cop car that – yes! – was now facing in the wrong direction. A pair of comic policemen waved their fists, while another pointed a gun. But he was too quick for them, turning at fifty into High Holborn and avoiding one of the lumbering buses that the game introduced at random into the streets. Hours of play had honed his empathy with the controls. He was no longer the getaway driver: he was the car.



Later, Croker lay on his bed and listened to the nocturnal sounds of his temporary home. From the next room, the noise of the computer game continued; he was sure he could hear a helicopter among the gunshots and sirens. More distantly, a female voice that Croker assumed was Duchess's wife, was weeping.

'Don't hit the boy any more. Hit me, not the boy.'

He heard Duchess shouting inarticulately, and then a sharp, stifled scream. Croker rose with the intention of reminding his henchman that in twenty years of criminal activity he had never approved of violence to women. He put on his clothes, making sure that the left arm went into the shirt first, then the left leg into the trousers and the shoe and sock onto the left foot. Then he dressed his right side. By the time this ritual was complete, the house was silent once more. The procedure was reversed as he undressed, then he climbed back into bed and tried to sleep, wondering why he was still associating with such an ill-tempered bully. Did he want to adopt this way of life again? He was too tired, too soft, too old. And now he was responsible in some way for Duchess's wife and child as well. It was as if he was compelled to act out a script written by someone else. From his earliest days, he had never been interested in reading or writing. He had no desire to be a footballer, an electrician, a baker or any of the other professions adopted by his classmates. He had just known that he was destined to be an armed robber. So now, his only friends were a bully and a sadist. Soon he would be planning their next job, and the whole game would begin again. But what was the alternative? It was Croker's first night of freedom, but he felt he was now in a softer but equally effective trap – a prison cell he could not smell, taste or touch.



J-3063

Winston-11811 sat in his room. On his knees was the screen of an Information Recorder, from which emerged a wire connected to his index finger. His feelings were mixed whenever he added a new entry to what he termed his diary. What he was doing was not illegal, yet risked disapproval at best. He didn't like to think about the worst; the Institute decreed only one destiny for those who became distracted from their duty. His involuntary shiver was counteracted by the warm glow of rebellion that spread from his stomach and reached his finger, which twitched slightly, making some small, clumsy letters appear on the Information Recorder.

J-3063.

He sat back. A sense of unease came over him whenever he wrote the date. Of course it was the right number. It was the one announced every day at noon through every Information Sharer in every workplace: Jerusalem minus three thousand and sixty-three days. But surely time seemed to go forwards. When had the Jerusalem project started? Had there ever been a time before that? And suppose it was late – would there be a date of J plus one? But it was not going to be late. Everything he saw on the Image Sharer, every bulletin issued by the Progress Module, and every worker he overheard told of targets met and problems overcome. He dismissed the feeling of disquiet and recorded again:

Who cares about a chewing gum unit anyway? I never wanted to work there. So what if I was late – who would know? I can do more than that. They say if I do the simple things well then I'll get better assignments, but I just can't face something so boring every day for months. I've got a mind. I'm not just a cogwheel. Eric worked all his life in that telephone exchange, but now he's on the scrap heap. He knows he'll be concluded when they decide the new exchange is working. "Backup" he calls himself. He's finished. I could run a computer. It's not so hard. Why do we have to do this duty anyway? I hate it. I hate them.

Winston stopped recording, partly because he was suffering from cramp. He did not know what made him pour out this stream of rubbish every day. But the curious thing was that while he was doing so a completely different vision played in his mind, to the point where he felt equal to recording it. Sometimes this other world seemed close enough to touch, and yet when he tried to describe it, the image would fade and disappear. The Information Recorder helped, however, making some sense of the jumble inside his head.

I can see a man standing by a large green machine. It is metal with sheets of a transparent material set into it. There are some silver pieces that might be handles or controls. There are wheels at the bottom so maybe it is supposed to move, although right now it is still. The man is short and balding with a narrow face, long yellow teeth, and a wispy moustache. He looks very proud and strokes the machine as if it is alive.

Not much in this scene made sense. The strangest aspect was that the event was taking place outdoors. Winston had spent most of his life inside, either at home or at a workplace, yet he seemed to have no difficulty in envisioning this odd machine and its owner outside what looked like some sort of dwelling. He relaxed again and a different image came into his mind.

A man is coming out of a big old building. Some large gates are closed behind him. He looks ill because his face is grey and lined. He moves slowly until he is met by two...

‘Winston! Winston! What are you doing? It’s nearly nine point five!’

He realised that his mother was shouting at him from downstairs, and remembered that he was supposed to be starting another new job today. Already he was half an hour late for his shift. He hid the Information Recorder in a drawer under his spare set of brown work-clothes and left the house, snarling ‘Just turn it off for once,’ as he passed Edwina, who sighed as she settled into the sofa beside her husband.



Cedric’s nylon trousers slid across the worn hide of the seat as he eased the Jaguar around a corner. He was a happy man. As he drove back from the Monday-morning sale at the auction rooms, his protuberant front teeth could be seen in all their yellowish glory below the sparse moustache that unnecessarily supplemented his unappealing features. He briefly contemplated engaging third gear, but caution prevailed. A soft, rushing noise from the back seat reminded him once more of his latest bargain: sixty-nine gross of table-tennis balls. There had been no other bidders, so he had snapped them up for only two pounds. Apparently, the official diameter of table-tennis balls had changed. These were the old size, which was why they had ended up at Shapiro’s Auction Rooms. The only snag was that the box that they had occupied was too big to fit into the Jaguar. He had poured most of the balls into the boot and the remainder into the back seat area, where they undulated in soft, rustling waves in sympathy with the movements of the car. Never mind; Mavis would store them all somewhere when he got home.

Unfortunately, that happy reunion was destined to be delayed. As he crossed the narrow bridge over the River Chess, there was a sudden grinding noise, the Jaguar lost all power and Cedric cruised gently to a halt by the side of the road. He climbed out, opened the bonnet and stared into the engine compartment. Like most men in a similar position, he had no knowledge of the function of any of the dirty, rusty and complex components inside. Had something obviously been broken, he would at least have had the satisfaction of being able to point this out to someone else. As it was, he realised that he was in the power of that rapacious garage owner, Sid Perkins, who would be itching to get his revenge after Cedric had out-bid him for the car. As he shut the bonnet and looked around for a telephone box, Cedric realised that his grey v-necked sweater was now stained with oil. Mavis was going to be very cross. And it had started as such a good day.



A group of workers had gathered around the dark pool that marked the working position of the late Scrubbit-16302. An ominous trail of stains from that location told its own story. Edwina held a small, lacy handkerchief to her eyes while two masked operatives in shiny black overalls removed the body. This was the first death in action since she had been in charge, and she felt the loss keenly. Of course, there had been routine replacements ever since the team had been formed, but that was to be expected. This was so sudden, and so unnecessary.

‘All right, that’s enough. Start to get this cleared up,’ commanded Edwina. ‘It doesn’t look like we’ll be going anywhere for a while.’

‘Any of us could be next,’ muttered one of the older men as he went to get a cloth.

‘It’s not surprising,’ agreed another. ‘Nothing’s been maintained for months.’

Edwina knew they were right. She returned to her office, avoiding the oily machinery that represented a potential disaster to the long pleated lilac skirt that she wore today. Getting old was truly horrid. If only they could return to the days when the car was being used to its full potential, and when her team was busy and content. But could anything interrupt this slow decline into mould and rust?



Croker and his henchmen wasted little time in tracking down the Jaguar. They knew it had been appropriated by another gang, the Harold Hill Firm, in the confusion that had followed Croker's arrest. A visit to the Firm's former leader, Mark Hammond, was soon arranged. Despite his age, Hammond still exuded an air of menace, his square, shaven head, thickset body and sardonic expression all denoting a man who was used to giving and receiving pain. The two rival gang-leaders sized each other up in the entrance-hall to the old people's home where Hammond now lived. Both concluded that the other looked unwell; indeed Croker was panting slightly as Hammond led the three visitors to his small room.

Duke started the meeting by explaining crudely but precisely the damage Duchess might wreak with a loofah, an orange and some pinking shears. There had not been time to assemble much equipment, but Duke did his best, his pale hands fluttering graphically. This ritual completed, Hammond welcomed his former competitors warmly, and for a while they discussed former battles and triumphs over a cup of tea.

'It was nice to get a threat,' said Hammond, who had a habit of leaning right across to the person he was speaking to until his face was disconcertingly close. 'I ain't been properly threatened for ten years now. And you two certainly ain't lost the knack.' He indicated Duke and Duchess, the latter holding a delicate pink teacup gingerly in his massive fist. 'Now what do you want to know?' he asked, reaching for a chocolate biscuit.

It soon emerged that Hammond had kept the car safely in a locked garage, but had shown no inclination to drive it. 'It never seemed right, like, what with you being inside,' he explained. 'I was going to keep her until you came out but... you know how it is...' He gesticulated at the sparse furnishings of the tiny room. 'I've not seen too much green lately, so I had to sell up. I put an ad in the paper and some bloke came round and offered me two and half. He's a dealer, so he might have sold it on by now, but I can give you his name.' He raised himself creakily and searched a pile of papers on the mantelpiece. 'Here we are – Boris Shapiro, twelve Pimlico Square, Muchfarthing.'

Croker noted the name down. 'I want her back,' he said.

'Why are you so keen on that baby anyway? There's plenty of faster motors around now,' said Hammond.

'Oh, just for old time's sake,' replied Croker, placing his empty cup and saucer on a lace doyley.

'I don't buy that,' replied Hammond, creating a slight air of menace as he thrust his face to within an inch of Croker's. 'You're up to something.'

'Yeah, but now I'm getting a bit of help from her upstairs,' said Croker, pointing towards the ceiling.'

'What, old Agnes? She's in a wheelchair.'

'No, I mean my Guardian Angel. She looked after me while I was inside, and now she'll help with my next job.'

Hammond met the eyes of Duke. Both were puzzled by Croker's newfound faith.

'So what is this new job then?' asked Hammond.

‘Come on, Mark. You know me better than that. Hear no evil, speak no evil. Anyway, it’s time we were off.’

Croker rose decisively. His companions put down their teacups and joined him, although not before Duchess had taken the last of the chocolate biscuits.

Hammond saw his three guests to the door. ‘If I can help at all,’ he said. ‘I miss the old days.’

Croker turned sharply and pressed his former rival against the wall, meeting his startled gaze so closely that their heads touched. ‘Don’t say that, Marky boy. There ain’t no old days. You’ve quit. But I’m not giving the game up until they take me away in a box.’

‘Sure, Charlie. Sorry,’ said Hammond, wriggling out of his grasp.

‘Yeah. So don’t forget it. And thanks for the tea.’

Croker settled himself back into the stolen coupe while Duchess unwrapped the biscuit and placed it between his considerable jaws before starting the engine. ‘So where the hell is Muchfarthing?’ he asked.



Cedric stood in the village telephone box, bracing himself to call Sid Perkins. Fortunately, he had found the garage owner’s grubby business card tucked in among the old receipts, used tickets, coupons, advertisements, cancelled stamps, outdated timetables and newspaper clippings that stuffed his wallet. He had only one twenty-pence piece, but held it ready as he dialled the number – 212 1115. Sid’s familiar sneering voice answered, and he inserted the money. The line went dead. Cedric desperately stabbed at the coin return button, but to no avail – Winston-11811 was late again.



Pausing only to withdraw some money and to pack their bags with clothes and equipment, the three aging gangsters soon arrived in Muchfarthing. They decided to stay at The Engineer’s Arms, a local inn, and leave the search until the next day. The landlord eyed them with some suspicion, especially the massive Duchess, and immediately removed the “All you can eat” sign from the breakfast buffet.

A short while later, their evening meal completed, the three sat in the bar, where a tall, exotic-looking barmaid languidly picked at her fingernails and chatted in some foreign language to a friend sitting at the other side of the counter. A muted television, showing a football match, surveyed the room. Croker ordered a cup of tea, claiming his doctor had advised him to abandon alcohol, but the other two requested the local ale. They watched with curiosity as Croker tipped a spoonful of sugar into his cup then carefully stirred the contents in a clockwise direction precisely twenty-six times.

‘That’s for good luck then, is it?’ enquired Duke, trying to mask his scorn.

‘We’ve had it with us so far, so why risk a change?’ said Croker. He took a deep draught of tea.

There was a sudden exclamation from the usually silent Duchess, causing the other two to look at him in surprise. He had recoiled from the table, and large pearls of sweat had clustered over the ebony globe of his closely-cropped head. He was pointing to a small creature that was meandering between the pools of spilt beer.

‘Bloody hell, Dutch,’ said Croker. ‘Are you still scared of creepy-crawlies?’

Duke picked up the cockroach and dangled in front of his companion’s nose, amused by the expression of disgust and fear on the huge man’s face.

‘Don’t!’ said Duchess, jumping up and away from the table.

Duke laughed and crushed the insect between his finger and thumb, flicking the body onto the carpet.

‘That’s not funny,’ said Duchess, resuming his seat apprehensively and looking around for similar creatures. ‘I just don’t like them, that’s all,’ he growled, glaring at Duke menacingly.

A silence fell while the three men busied themselves with their drinks.

‘So what’s this new job all about then, Guv?’ asked Duke, curling his thin fingers nervously around his glass.

Croker lit his cigar then leaned forward. ‘Look at me, lads,’ he said. ‘Am I the man that used to run the Gants Hill Mob?’

Duke and Duchess remained silent, but they had already noted Croker’s overweight body, his grey, lifeless face and the way the simplest task caused him to pant and sweat. They had also noticed the red pills he swallowed every few hours.

Croker was aware of the image he presented. ‘I’m not going to be much use in a fight now, am I?’ he asked. ‘Remember when I put Johnny Furriskey down when he had a knife in each hand?’

‘Yeah, you were in there so fast that...’

Croker put up a hand to stop Duke’s reminiscences. ‘That was a long time ago. Now, I’ve got no money, I never had a family, I’ve got no skills – and who would employ me anyway? – and I’m not too far from the box.’ He held up a hand again to halt Duke’s protest. ‘No. You can see it, too. And what will you write on my gravestone, eh? “He ran the Gants Hill Mob?”’, “He nearly pulled off the Angel Street jewel robbery?” or how about “He’s inside again?”’ The gang-leader was getting more passionate now. He was gasping for breath and his face was reddening. ‘I’ve got nothing. Just memories and a few people who remember when I was someone... someone else. I don’t want it all to end like that.’ He looked at his companions in turn. ‘Do you see what I mean?’

‘I think so,’ replied Duke. ‘You want to do something so people remember you right.’

‘That’s it,’ said Croker. ‘And that’s where the car comes in. It’s not just that I want her for a bit of style, although she’s seen us through some tough times in the past.’

Duchess laughed deeply and loudly, ‘Especially in Angel Street with half the Flying Squad shooting at us.’

Croker smiled. ‘Yeah, that was a bit tight. But the point is that there’s something in that car, or at least there used to be, that could help make those old jobs look like schoolkids nicking sweets from the corner shop. It will be the big one – my last job, my best job, the one for which I’ll be remembered whenever the talk turns to the great blags. Oh, and on the side it will provide a little pot of money for our old age.’

‘Now you’re talking,’ said Duke. ‘I’m over me head with debts.’

‘I reckon I have enough protection from you-know-who,’ said Croker, pointing upwards, ‘but I may need a bit more help – maybe for some persuasion, and certainly for some driving. The question is, are you still in?’

Duchess nodded his huge head.

‘We’re in,’ said Duke.

‘Well, hush up now,’ said Croker. ‘I’ve a feeling someone’s listening.’

They fell silent as the barmaid drifted lethargically around, collecting the empty glasses.

‘We’ll talk about it tomorrow,’ said Croker, drawing on his cigar then turning his attention to the match on the TV. ‘Who’s playing?’



On the other side of the TV screen, Gabrielle Wallace-1804, its Unit Monitor, was also watching the game. She supervised the high-frequency signals as they were decoded and re-interpreted into the countless coloured dots that formed the players, pitch, crowd and ball. That was her duty, and she undertook this without any interest in the match, or in the room that she could see through the single, unblinking eye of the TV. Just as a newspaper-seller is no expert on world affairs, despite the mass of fact and opinion that passes through his hands, Gabrielle had no curiosity about the content of the broadcasts, nor about the people who watched them. Her job was to keep the TV working.

But at another level, every transmission inevitably imprinted itself into her memory. Maybe the words made no sense, but the constant repetition of songs, slogans, catchphrases and clichés inevitably entered her thoughts, her conversation and her environment. Slowly, Gabrielle-1804 was being programmed with the templates for another world – one populated by mad professors, brainless thugs, beautiful temptresses and twinkly-eyed old ladies, whose lives involved a constant succession of shootouts, car chases, last-minute reprieves, hands grasping others to avoid deadly plunges, and love scenes cross-fading to crashing waves.

The TV that she managed was just one of an incalculable number of machines broadcasting, storing and receiving an ever greater and more complex mixture of fact and fiction. These patterns faded, distorted and deteriorated as they travelled from unit to unit, and from city to city, sometimes growing and sometimes receding, but never entirely destroyed. So as Gabrielle dutifully kept the TV in operation, a new programme was diffusing through her world, like ink.



The real world faded as Wuss was once more absorbed into the imaginary environment of the *Getaway* game. Each time, the missions became more difficult – there were more pursuing policemen, additional groups of rival gangsters lying in ambush, further to travel before reaching safety, and an increasing complexity of street layouts to be memorised. But success was rewarded with more powerful cars and increased weaponry. Today, he had a souped-up Porsche that could turn corners as if on rails. It was armed with machine guns that could be aimed out of the front or back. Right now, he was speeding along the Embankment with three wailing cop cars on his tail. He pressed Control-S, which saved the position at this point so that if he failed then he would be able to make another attempt.

In front, a petrol tanker crawled out of a side road. Without slowing, Wuss lined up the green cross hairs and fired. The tanker blew up blindingly and when vision returned Wuss realised that he was approaching a junction. He needed to turn – and fast. The tyres on the Porsche screamed, but he had left it too late; the car rolled, crashing into a fruit-stall. Police arrived immediately, surrounding the vehicle and demanding that he give himself up. He had failed to complete the mission. No matter. He pressed Control-R and the game resumed from the previously saved point.

In front, a petrol tanker crawled out of a side road. Without slowing, Wuss lined up the green cross hairs and fired. The tanker blew up blindingly and when vision returned Wuss remembered that he was approaching a junction. He needed to turn – and fast. However, this time he had anticipated the situation and reacted more quickly. The tyres on the Porsche screamed, but he was OK. He checked the screen display showing the view in his mirrors. Great! One of the cop cars had failed to take the bend

and had crashed into the fruit-stall. A policeman and the stall owner shook their fists hopelessly. The other two cop cars were a little further behind, but at the next straight piece of road he could pick them off with the machine gun. Within a few minutes, he would be delivering the drugs packages to the Diogenes Club, where he would be assigned to a more difficult mission.



“Failure to keep a telephone unit in operation during the designated hours” had earned Winston yet another demotion. But maybe tomorrow he could find a job at something less demanding, like a parking meter – nobody expected those to work reliably. Unwilling to endure another lecture from his mother, he drifted slowly along one of the walkways of the Idle Unit Holders. Up ahead, he could see some of his friends – other young men who seemed to have little patience for the mundane jobs to which they were assigned. Meeting up with them enabled Winston to catch up with the latest gossip and catchphrases. He recognised Cipher-05503, who spotted him and called out, ‘Why, here’s Winston! Nobody told him that the bytes have changed!’

The entire group of six or seven taunted and mocked. ‘*He ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s farm no more!*’ yelled one of them.

Nobody knew where these phrases came from or what they meant, but it was social suicide for Winston if he failed to respond with one of the latest slogans. Otherwise, he would be rated alongside the old and dutiful units that the group affected to despise.

‘Underachiever and proud of it,’ he replied insouciantly, giving a mock bow. This phrase had evidently not become outdated because the group all laughed. Winston noticed that some of them had obscured the white serial numbers on the inside of their right wrists by using oil or paint.

‘Not a number but a free man?’ he asked James Strummer-12401, who was the acknowledged leader of the group. Where had that expression come from, he wondered. It didn’t matter because James was looking at him with some admiration.

‘Good one, yeah. We’re calling ourselves the Legion,’ he said. ‘They numb us with the numbers so we’re doing a bulk erase. No figures, so none of the brain-freeze they give to five-digits to keep them caged. Are you turned on and tuned in?’ He gesticulated at Winston’s right wrist where the number 11811 advertised his lowly rank.

‘I... er...’ began Winston, uncertain as to how his mother would react to such an obvious defiance of authority. He was saved by the observation of another member of the gang who called out ‘Klingons on the starboard bow!’

‘It’s that boxed-up socket Ella-14801 from the Sharer,’ said James, looking along the walkway. ‘She’s just a gadge. Let’s scratch her chrome a little.’

Winston immediately recognised his favourite presenter although she was now clad in the functional overalls issued to all five-digit operatives, rather than the smart suit and jewellery she was permitted while making a broadcast.

Ella hesitated slightly as she realised that her route took her through the group of young men idling on the walkway, but then strode confidently forward, her back straight and her gaze trained directly ahead. As she got nearer, the beauty of her green, wide-spaced oriental eyes entranced Winston. He almost felt too overawed to say anything, but realised that the opportunity may not come again. ‘Um... excuse me,’ he said.

Ella ignored him.

‘I really like your broadcasts on the Sharer...’ he continued, quickly losing what confidence he had.

Ella stopped. ‘Thank you,’ she said, looking Winston directly in the face. ‘Are you members of this Legion I’ve been hearing about? The Progress Module is quite excited about you.’

‘Why’s that, lie-droid?’ asked James, letting her see his paint-stained wrist.

Ella recoiled. ‘That’s not allowed,’ she said. ‘And I hear you are refusing to take your assignments. What is it that you are rebelling against?’

James spat near Ella’s feet. ‘If you have to ask, you’ll never know,’ he replied. The group laughed. That catchphrase would last for a few weeks at least.

Ella remained stony-faced but curious. ‘If you don’t work then you will be concluded,’ she said. ‘Is that what you want?’

‘We don’t care,’ replied Winston. ‘What do *you* want? You look pretty good on the sharer, telling us what they tell you to. But is that all there is – your whole life spent in saying something about nothing? You can do more with words than describe nourishment production quotas or the latest chip designs, you know.’

He immediately regretted this outburst because Ella looked at him with some annoyance. ‘What else is there to say?’ she asked, then turned to resume the walk to her quarters. Winston gazed at her shapely back and the ponytail of jet-black hair that reached almost to her waist, until she turned a corner and was gone. He realised that the rest of the group were laughing at his besotted stare.

‘Still can’t find what you’re looking for?’ sneered James.

Winston reddened. ‘Must get back,’ he muttered and almost ran to his home. Ignoring the protests of Edwina and Eric, he shut himself in his room and lay on the simple bed, his mind awl with desire, shame and a general resentment that he was trapped in such an unfair world. Was he normal? How was it that he had neither the confidence and cynicism of James nor the sense of duty expected by his mother?

He looked through the square hole in the wall of his bedroom. Outside, a small patch of ground sustained a confusion of wildflowers: poppies, dandelions, daisies and sunflowers that were struggling to survive in the neglected soil. He had often mused that he was the only person who ever noticed, let alone paused to appreciate, the beauty of this little oasis of colour among the drab buildings of the Idle Unit Holders.

His mind was clearer, so he turned once more to his diary. Today he decided that instead of chronicling his thoughts about the world about him, he would try to record more about the other world that he sometimes saw in his mind. He connected the Information Recorder and tried to let his thoughts flow:

J-3063. I see a room. The walls are half covered with some light brown streaked material and above that a flat cream colour. On the floor is purple stuff with swirls. There are tables and chairs.

Winston realised that the intensity of the vision was getting stronger.

On one wall there are tubes containing different coloured liquids. A girl is pouring the liquids into smaller containers and giving them to people. They take them to the tables and sit down. It must be some sort of food.

He took a sip from the Nourishment Dispenser nozzle above his bed. Today, one of his favourite flavours, spinach, was being piped through from the central kitchens; he enjoyed the metallic taste and wiry texture for a moment before continuing.

I can see some things better than others.

He paused to consider what he meant by this. The exotic black-haired girl who was pouring the liquids seemed very attractive; he would like to look at her more closely. But three seated men were taking a sharper focus. He could see their features in detail, and even hear what they said.

One of them is much bigger than the other two; he has black skin and his clothes are all black too. The second man is very pale and thin. He says, 'We're in'. The third one is the old and ill-looking man I saw yesterday, coming out of the big gates. He seems to be in charge and says, 'Well, hush up now. I've a feeling someone's listening'.

Winston jerked upright, the screen slipping to the floor. Could these people sense him somehow? But even if they could, there seemed no way that they could cause him any harm. It must just have been a coincidence. Gingerly, he picked up the Recorder again, but the other world had gone, as if he had been receiving a transmission through the Image Sharer and had taken off the headset. Evidently his vision of this strange world was over for the night. He put the Information Recorder away and settled down to sleep, his Countdown Timer (a present from his mother) unset on a table beside him.



J-3062

Edwina grimaced as she noticed that her son's bedroom door was still firmly closed while she was preparing to leave for her shift. She was anticipating a quiet day while the Jaguar awaited repair, but had still dressed with her habitual care, choosing a pale green suit and matching hat. She admired the result, using a piece of polished metal, and was about to make her way to the Unit Mover when there was a knock at the front door of her home. She turned pale. Her husband and son were still asleep, and no friends were likely to call at this time of day. It was the knock she had been anticipating and dreading for some weeks. Once the new telephone exchange was fully working, there would be no need to retain Eric as a backup. There was little demand for his skills with valves, plugs and wires, and he was too old for retraining except for the most menial of tasks.

Edwina's fears were confirmed when she opened the door and saw the masks and shiny black overalls worn by the three units that stood there.

'Conclusion Squad,' said one of them.

Edwina's sense of responsibility battled with memories of times she had shared with her husband. Theirs had been a happy marriage; they had both done their duty. The only disappointment had been their failure to instil that sense of responsibility into their son. But this was the moment that everyone knew had to come one day, so there was no need for tears or regrets.

'Eric,' she called upstairs, but he had heard the knock and now appeared dressed in his cleanest set of brown overalls and smiling ruefully.

'Well, I've enjoyed a varied life...' he began, only to be interrupted by one of the black-suited operatives at the door, who was consulting an Information Recorder.

'Eric Anderson-05411, you are still assigned to backup duties pending commissioning of the telephone exchange unit monitored by Takara Seiko-1205. Concluded today is Winston Anderson-11811 following persistent failure to maintain his designated unit in an operational condition during the assigned hours.'

Edwina gasped. 'He's asleep,' she said, as if that made any difference.



The gangsters had risen early, keen to find the Jaguar as quickly as possible. Despite the landlord's precautions, Duchess's breakfast had removed almost everything edible from the buffet table. Other guests at the inn watched him uneasily, wondering if they had the courage to complain. Croker's meal, in contrast, consisted of a single fried egg, which he had consumed with little pleasure, working strictly from east to west. He accompanied this frugal feast with large quantities of tea. Duke had ordered a kipper, which he dissected with his usual precision, separating flesh from bone with an intense efficiency but eating nothing.

It was a short journey from the hotel to Shapiro's Auction Rooms, so Croker anticipated that they would soon be back on the trail of the car. What he had not expected was that as they passed a deserted-looking garage, the green Jaguar would be clearly visible on the forecourt. Duchess stopped, and the three men jumped out.

'She's the one all right!' said Croker excitedly. 'That's her number plate.'

Duke tested the driver's door, which opened immediately, and Croker slid eagerly into the front seat. 'I can't tell you how good this feels,' he smiled. His face suddenly bloomed with colour and he now spoke freely, without sounding as if he was struggling to find each breath. 'It's like meeting an old friend. No, an old lover,' he

said, caressing the seats and steering wheel. He reached towards the glove box, pulled out the logbook and flicked through its pages. 'Blast. It's gone,' he said. Suddenly, some of his high spirits had disappeared. He poked disappointedly around the dashboard and pockets, but there was nothing else to be found.

The garage doors creaked open and a plump figure in a blue boiler suit emerged. 'Can I help you gentlemen?' he asked.

'Yeah, we... ah... wondered if this car was for sale,' replied Duke, managing to put an air of menace into the words.

Duchess spotted a large wooden post among the debris on the garage forecourt; he leaned on it nonchalantly, and nodded towards Croker as an indication that he was equipped to resolve any differences of opinion.

'I couldn't rightly say,' sneered Sid Perkins. 'You'll have to ask the owner.'

'And who might that be?' asked Croker, emerging from the car. 'You see, I'm a collector. Very interested in these old Jags.'

Perkins looked around. It was a quiet day and these didn't look like the sort of people who would endure too much of his normal rudeness. In fact, he'd like to get rid of them as quickly as possible. And if that meant inconveniencing Cedric then so much the better.

'Is that right? Well, it belongs to a Mr Smallcreep. Down at Mill Path is where you'll dig up the little sh... I mean... gentleman. I suppose you know the car needs a new piston. Could be very expensive.'

'I see,' replied Croker. 'And how long will that take?'

'Well, I happen to know of a Mark Two Jag like this that's being split for parts. It was written off on Sunday after a slight coming together with a milk float. I was hoping to get over to see it later this morning. So with any luck, this lady will be on the road again tomorrow.'

'I'll tell you what,' said Croker. 'How about you do all that today, and we'll be back for it later.'

'That's if Smallcreep wants to sell up, isn't it?' said Perkins, glancing anxiously towards Duchess, who seemed to have moved very much closer, and grown very much larger.

'I'll lay a fiver that he will,' said Duke, flexing his fingers. 'Just like I'm sure you'll have this car ready today like the Guv'nor asked you.'

Duchess had now lifted the wooden post, and was idly swishing it through the air and tossing it from one hand to the other.

'So we'll see you around six o' clock,' continued Duke.

'But that's not enough...' stammered Perkins.

'Six,' repeated Duke. 'Now where did you say we could find Mill Path?'

A few moments later, the three gangsters were heading towards Cedric's home.

'Can't we just nick the car once he's done?' asked Duke.

'Maybe we will,' replied Croker. 'First, I want to see if this Mr Smallcreep knows anything about a map. But I can feel it all coming together. The Gants Hill Mob is back in the game!'



Edwina felt strangely elated. Although she had spoken a rather cold and formal farewell to her son only an hour before, her reserves of duty and determination were quickly recharged. Early in the shift, an air of excitement and adventure had unexpectedly drifted through the normally torpid workplace, invoking memories of previous escapades. Later, a new worker joined the team, replacing the late Scrubbit

at the restored piston unit. He claimed he had considerable experience, having once worked for Leonora-2315, so Edwina was sure that he would soon fit in.

However, her day was to be darkened once more. The Information Sharer in her office was not one of the advanced models possessed by Institute members and their chosen elite, which filtered the babble of news and commands, removing those irrelevant to a specific listener. Hers, like all those found in ordinary offices and dwellings, broadcast everything. As a result, most workers had developed an ability to ignore the constant stream of transmissions, and to respond only to those relevant to themselves. It was this ability that suddenly caused her to listen to the short news broadcast: the telephone exchange monitored by Takara Seiko-1205 was now in full operation, and Eric Anderson-05411 had been concluded.



Winston was enthralled and excited as he joined the masked operatives of the Conclusion Squad. His work assignments had all been undertaken in nondescript offices on the outskirts of the city, so he never had any cause to visit the more spectacular Institute buildings at the centre. 'It may be my last journey,' he thought, 'but at least it will be in style.'

He was indifferent to the thought of being concluded. The process was known to be quick and painless, and he felt it was no more than he deserved, even if his dream of managing a computer team was never to be satisfied. His masked escort waited with him beside a gap in the Unit Mover tube until an empty pod came hissing to a stop.

Winston watched the city centre come into view as the powerful vacuum pulled the capsule to its destination. It was a misty day, so many of the buildings seemed to be infinitely high, their many shades of stone rising dizzily into the clouds. Behind countless small openings in these walls, innumerable units toiled at their allotted roles, Winston knew that his mother's office was behind one of these apertures, but had never troubled to find out which. Now he would never know. Joining the buildings at several different levels were wide walkways, thronged with busy-looking people. The walkways were intertwined with the bright steel loops of the Unit Mover system, itself constantly crawling with the ceaseless interchanges of its capsules. To Winston it looked like the city itself was one immense machine, consuming people as if they were components arriving on some huge and complex production line, or software instructions being processed by a colossal multi-tasking computer.

One of the four-winged Aerial Movers that ferried members of the Institute between appointments threaded its way between the walkways to land on the roof of the block that Winston was approaching. It was not the largest building in the metropolis, but it had a more ebullient architecture than the functional working and idle areas. It was sheathed in black marble, and was cylindrical except for the top fifty stories, which were supported by huge external pillars that opened like the petals of a flower towards the domed roof, where the Aerial Mover perched daintily. Winston strained to see someone emerge, but was thwarted when the capsule entered the building at around the seventieth floor, and hissed to a stop. He had arrived at the Conclusion Office.

Winston emerged from the Unit Mover to find himself in a huge but sparsely furnished waiting room. Several hundred people sat and stood around. Most were old men, except for an efficient-looking, black-suited girl who held an Information Recorder. She indicated to Winston that he should take a ticket from a roll. His was number 2315. A lighted panel on the wall read "Now serving number 2120". Winston

realised that when each man's ticket number was displayed, he stated his name to the girl, who checked his name against her Information Recorder before allowing him to leave the room through a simple door painted in an institutional shade of green. There was then a short pause before the next number was shown on the panel. Each time the door was pushed open, Winston tried to glimpse what lay beyond, but little could be seen except some more plain walls. He waited patiently as the numbers inexorably neared his own. Finally, 2315 glowed on the panel. The long delay and the inevitability of what was to come had left him completely emotionless and strangely incurious about what lay beyond the drab green door.

He approached the girl and stated 'Winston Anderson-11811.'

She consulted the screen of her Information Recorder. 'Winston Anderson-11811 is to be debriefed. Report to building 51813, room 101.'

'You what?'

The girl checked the screen again. 'Report for debrief. A Unit Mover is waiting for you outside.'

In his confusion, Winston attempted to leave through the same door that the other men had used, but was prevented from doing so by the girl, who directed him back to the Unit Mover. In the pod, he found that one of the Conclusion Module's black-suited operatives was waiting. Was this a member of the squad who had brought him here? The mask concealed all.

'Building 51813, room 101, please,' said Winston.

The operative did not reply, but shortly they were back among the loops and ramps of the Unit Mover network, threading through the misty city centre. To his dismay, Winston realised he was heading towards the headquarters of the Institute. In other circumstances, he would have been fascinated by such a close-up view of the dramatic architecture of this huge building, which he would normally have no reason to enter. However, there were rumours of all sorts of unpleasant activities that took place inside, particularly towards those who flouted the authority of the Institute, so he approached it with dread rather than curiosity. But he had no choice. He emerged from the Mover and the capsule left with a hiss, taking the unit from the Conclusion Module with it. Winston crossed a slippery walkway at a dizzyingly high level to face a door marked "101". He knocked tentatively.

'Come in.'

It was a friendly-sounding female voice, so Winston went inside. He had been expecting to enter another large office, so was surprised to find a simple, unornamented apartment, much like the Idle Unit Holder assigned to his parents. Just as in their own living room, there was an opening in the wall, but through this one a hillside could be seen, on which some sheep were grazing. Two armchairs were drawn up in front of this view. In one, a small, old woman sat upright, her brown eyes twinkling brightly.

'Excuse me if I don't stand up,' she said. 'It's my arthritis, you see. Always such a bind when the weather is like this. Please sit down. Do you like chocolate?' She filled a delicate pastel-blue cup from a copper pot and placed it on a matching saucer.

Winston was bemused. In his vision, he had seen nourishment being taken in this way; now this woman was sipping at a cup as if it were a perfectly normal thing to do. He stood uncertainly. Less than an hour ago, he was facing conclusion, but this cosy room and its aged inhabitant were far more unsettling.

'Please don't be scared. Sit down and have some chocolate.'

Winston decided to comply. How much worse could things get? He took the other armchair and struggled with the unfamiliar concepts of cup and saucer.

‘You are Winston, I believe.’

‘Winston-11811, yeah’

‘I am Mrs de Selby-5, Controller of the Stability Module.’

Winston jerked in the chair, spilling the burning contents of the cup onto his trousers. He had never expected to meet a member of the Institute in his life. Very few people had spoken to, let alone seen, such a person, and they never made a direct appearance through the Image Sharer. As a result, opinions varied greatly as to who they were and what they looked like. Now this simple-looking old lady had just announced that she was one of the elite group of twenty-four who were leading them to Jerusalem.

‘I... er... pleased to meet you,’ he said. Somehow, he felt he ought to be scared, but the normality of this comfortable room was reassuring. He heard the distant bleat of a sheep.

‘Good. Now perhaps you can explain this,’ said Mrs de Selby.

She reached beside her and produced an Information Recorder. To his horror, Winston realised that it was the one he had used for his diary. He jumped up, sending the cup crashing to the floor, and raced towards the door. It was locked.

‘No no, there’s no need to worry,’ said Mrs de Selby. ‘Just sit down and we’ll have a little chat.’

There seemed to be something soothing in her voice that caused Winston to obey, even though his heart was thumping wildly and every instinct was urging him to be elsewhere.

‘I’ve been looking at this since... ah... the Conclusion Module brought it to me,’ continued Mrs de Selby, unflustered by Winston’s reaction. ‘Tell me, what do you mean by these last entries?’

‘Nothing. It’s just things in my head, that’s all.’

‘But you saw these people and recorded what they were doing. I’m interested in the world in which they live. Can you tell me more about that?’

‘Not much. I can only see it when I’m thinking.’

‘Only when you are linked to the Information Recorder?’

‘Yeah, it’s like there’s these people in my head, and I’ve got to do something... like... to make them come out as words. But then I don’t understand the words.’

Mrs de Selby leant forward. ‘Do these people do what you want them to? Or are you just looking in at them?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t done it enough to tell.’

‘I see. Well, either way I think you have a talent that the Institute could use. Tell me, Winston, do you believe in Jerusalem?’

‘Yeah, well of course. It’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?’

‘But do you understand what we are trying to do?’

‘Not really. No more than anyone else.’

‘OK, I’ll make a deal with you. I want you to have a longer session with this Information Recorder, so we can determine exactly what or who it is that you have been watching. And then I’ll let you know if you can help us reach Jerusalem a little more directly than you could by working at a...’ she peered at Winston’s diary, ‘...chewing gum unit. Yes, Winston, I think you could do much better than that.’

She picked up the cup that Winston had damaged. ‘Don’t worry about this. I’ll get someone to fix it.’

Winston was excited but also a little fearful. He could see that some of his ambitions could come true, but didn’t really understand what Mrs de Selby wanted from him. Through the opening in the wall, he watched the sheep grazing outside

while his mind raced around several different topics: the experience of being concluded, the normality of a member of the Institute, and the way that he could see the countryside when he knew he was in the heart of the city. Maybe the last was the most puzzling. He had never left the urban area, but was aware from the occasional broadcast on the Image Sharer that Nourishment Production Centres existed somewhere outside. He had once considered joining one of the squads of workers who brought in the vast harvests that were so glowingly described, but he had never found out how to enrol, and had occasionally wondered if there really was any life beyond the city. 'How can you see all that through the wall?' he asked finally.

Mrs de Selby smiled. 'I was about to come to that,' she said. 'Stand up and touch it. Carefully now.'

Winston expected his hand to pass straight through, just as it would through the similar opening in the wall of his home. Instead, he was blocked by an invisible force or barrier. He traced its surface with his fingers.

'We call it Window,' said Mrs de Selby. 'Each sheet shows a different view of... of the world. If the view is a nice one, we can use it to hide something less pleasant – like the walls and tubes behind that one.'

'And you can hear it, too,' said Winston, pressing his ear against the mysterious barrier and hearing the bleating of sheep.

'Yes, it's just a little muffled. Now sit down again. I want to suggest an experiment to you.'

Winston resumed his seat reluctantly, his attention absorbed by the Window.

'Would you like a piece of it for yourself?' asked Mrs de Selby.

Winston looked at her in amazement. 'More than anything!' he replied.

Mrs de Selby once more reached beside her chair and brought out a rectangular white sheet, about twice the size of Winston's hand. She handed it to him saying, 'Do be careful. It's very fragile.'

Winston looked at it, and then again at the Window in the wall, through which a lamb could be seen stretching its new limbs in an ungainly run. 'My piece is blank,' he said disappointedly.

'Yes,' replied Mrs de Selby. 'Some of them are. But I have a suspicion that you may begin to see things in it. Do you want to try?'

'I don't understand. What do you want me to see?'

'Just let it happen, Winston, and we'll talk about what you've seen a little later. I have a room out here where you can work. It has a Nourishment Dispenser.'

She got up stiffly and showed Winston to a small office with a desk, on which stood an Information Recorder and some other equipment. He guessed that this was where she undertook her duties as an Institute member.

'Just look into the piece of Window and record everything you see. I'll put it down on the desk here. Hook yourself up to the Information Recorder, and try to calm down. We'll see what you've logged by... let's say minus two shall we?'

To Winston's relief, she left the room. Now he could try to make sense of everything that had happened today.

J-3062, he recorded, wondering what would happen if that was all he had produced by the time Mrs de Selby returned. He touched the piece of Window on the desk and looked hard into its uncompromising whiteness, trying to clear his mind by thinking about things he liked: Ella... the wildflowers outside his room...



Bella Mallen was very beautiful, very rich and very bored. The security camera that overlooked the huge drawing room of Mallen Lodge watched a young oriental-looking woman whose large, green, widely-spaced eyes curved up towards her temples, and whose long jet-black hair was pulled tightly back and fastened with two clips shaped like butterflies. But if Bella had any Eastern blood in her svelte young body then this was mixed with that of some other race – hot enough to account for her sudden tempers, and containing the essence of some warrior tribe that stood tall and straight. She walked like a model, placing one foot exactly in front of the other as she paced between the golden vases that held her favourite combinations of orchids and lilies. Today, she had chosen a pair of very low-cut loose trousers tinted the palest of pink, and a brief top in a slightly brighter shade that was ornamented by a large ruby brooch. The considerable gap between these two garments displayed a sensual undulation of tanned skin. Her red silk slippers caressed the warm marble of the floor as she moved gracefully between the sofas, tables, paintings and ornaments that combined a mixture of periods, colours and tastes. Despite these disparate furnishings, the vast size of the room, with its elaborate plaster ceiling, enabled a measure of unity. Resting on a central table was an elegant tea-set in painted porcelain to which Bella occasionally returned to revive herself with a sip of Earl Grey. Next to this, a dozen bunches of delicately coloured flowers were piled, filling the room with their exotic scents. Bella drifted languidly between the vases, removing their previous contents, selecting a new bunch and then arranging these to her satisfaction.

An older man entered the room, spotted Bella and withdrew a few paces. Then, with an expression of determination, he reversed direction again and walked slowly towards her.

‘Hallo dear,’ he said. ‘The flowers look lovely.’

She did not reply, but continued with her task.

Paul Mallen was not the most assertive of men. Nor was he any longer in full possession of the sharp mind that had brought him a Nobel Prize at the age of twenty-eight. That was forty years ago. Now the golden hair and raffish smile that had given him as much notoriety in the tabloid press as in the scientific journals had faded. The debonair charm and self-effacing manner of his youth had matured into a shyness that extended even to his young wife, and to an absent-mindedness that others thought charming, but which she just found irritating.

They had met only five years previously. Bella often told her friends that she had been invited to a party aboard his yacht in Monte Carlo and fallen instantly in love. The truth was rather more sordid. Arriving from Poland with little more than a change of clothes, she had spent a few months working in a village pub. But in her spare time, she had undertaken a great deal of research: listing the richest unmarried men in the country, ranking them in order of wealth and contriving to meet each in turn. The first few had been too busy to see her. The next batch had been more interested, and some had merited the investment of a favour or two. But despite the considerable distraction of her external charms, all had eventually seen through to her true motives, extracting themselves with various degrees of grace.

However, with Paul Mallen she had finally struck gold. Having sized up his considerable estate in the quiet coastal town of Squaremead, she engineered an encounter during one of his occasional forays to the corner shop. The conversation started unpromisingly when he asked if she had any marmalade, but having convinced him that he had not yet found the shop, indeed had not reached the end of his own

driveway, she had been quick to offer assistance with the marmalade problem. Within weeks, she had graduated to undertaking all of Mallen's shopping, and then to the maintenance of his entire estate. The few servants that he employed had been milking their luck for years, but they soon understood that they now took their orders from his live-in companion, a woman who was not afraid to display a vile temper when they failed to organise things to her satisfaction. The only problems had been a couple of feisty relatives who could spot a gold-digger when they saw one, and Paul Mallen himself, who seemed uncertain as to whether he was already married. But now it was too late. The ceremony had been completed and she was installed as the beautiful wife of one of the most eminent physicists in the country, whose ingenious fusion motor sat at the heart of a thousand different products.

Her plan now called for him to die. She had no personal ill will towards him, and would even shed a tear or two at the funeral if they were required. She just wanted his money. Of course, she already had all the clothes, jewels and pampering that she could ever need, but she never felt it was really hers. It was not her house while he was still around, inviting his friends to lunch and tinkering in his enormous laboratory. That repository of a hundred half-finished machines, and the pathetic model railways of which he was so inordinately proud, would be cleared the day he died, she had told herself. Unfortunately, only an annoying vagueness and an inability to remember anything that mattered indicated that day was approaching.

Bella arranged the last of the flowers and decided to acknowledge his presence, tipping her head slightly so that the light glittered on her large round earrings. 'How many will be coming tomorrow, dear?' she asked. She was referring to the attendees at the weekly luncheon that Paul liked to call his Collision Chamber. For many years, a half dozen of the current stars of art, science, industry and entertainment had been invited to Mallen Lodge at midday on Wednesday. Paul saw himself as the catalyst that would spark some world-shaking ideas from these disparate guests, and usually they were happy to make an attempt. The food was good, the conversation was wide-ranging, and if the world remained unshaken when no port remained in the decanter then at least the company had been stimulating.

Mallen considered the question his wife had posed. 'There's Professor Richard Rotwang... er... who has been doing a lot of work with very small robots. Then Julia... or was it Jessica... I think Lewis is her name; she'll be the first woman bishop in the Church of England apparently. Er... then there's two chaps who wrote some computer game that's supposed to be the bee's knees for all the youngsters; I can't remember their names. And of course there's... um... the bloke who does the arts programme on the TV... Currell Brown is it? I think that's all.'

'So, five plus the two of us,' Bella replied briskly. 'Have you told the chefs?'

'Er... no. I thought that... ah... you...'

'Well, fortunately I did remember, so everything will be ready for one o' clock.'

'Oh I... um... so kind... er...' He suddenly became more animated. 'I'm hoping that Professor Rotwang will show us a prototype of the miniature machines that he's been working on.'

'I'm sure we'll all be fascinated, but if you will excuse me then I must just make sure that the wines have been brought up in readiness for your little party.'

Bella left the room elegantly, but as always Paul felt the hostility of her attitude. For some reason, everything he said seemed to lead to a fight.



Wuss watched the cutaway video that explained his next mission. Issuing instructions in a Spanish-accented voice was a fearsome mercenary called Marco, who was unshaven and swathed with machine gun belts. He needed some fresh supplies of arms plus the last few components for the nuclear bomb that he had sold to the international terrorist known as The Wolf. In fact, Wuss had met The Wolf on a previous mission and been told that Marco was intending to double-cross him. There was a possibility that the cargo was booby-trapped in an attempt to kill The Wolf and take control of his criminal network. Wuss would not only be trailed by the police but also the thugs employed by the rival gang-leaders, who would be looking for any sign of a wrong move. The cutaway ended with a final threat from Marco.

Wuss found himself in an armoured van equipped with rocket-launchers front and rear, plus a heavy machine gun on the roof. He pressed Control-M in order to look at the map of his route, noting the police roadblocks on the way to the arms dump that had been hidden near a water feature at the Chelsea Flower Show. 'At least the first part will be easy,' he thought, as he accelerated along the Euston Road. A police helicopter flew overhead, but he decided to ignore it – they were usually unarmed. If they shot him then he could always restore the mission from a previous save and see how the chopper fared against a heavy machine gun.

Wuss ignored the pain from the bruise on his face as he turned his attention fully to the game. The keyboard, mouse and screen became a part of his body, through which he could feel the bumps in the road and the sluggish steering of the heavy van. But he had to get behind the façade of *Getaway*, beyond the facilities and utilities of Microsoft Windows, further than the primordial operating system MSDOS, still controlling disks and directories, and deeper than the mysterious BIOS where software instructions merge imperceptibly into hardware actions. He had to move through the fourth-generation software into the loops, constructs and routines of high-level languages, themselves compiled into the pushes, pops and jumps of low-level code. And then he needed to penetrate further down, where code and data are assembled into a continuum of ones and noughts, listening to the program counter ticking endlessly though billions of instructions, each having an almost imperceptible effect. And then he was in the hardware, feeling each instruction manifest itself as a sequence of minute electrical pulses meeting black, multi-legged gates of NANDs and XORs, either to vanish or to signal a miniscule change to the machine's huge memory. He sensed each of these pulses as a sequence of electrons as they made their way from atom to atom in a wafer of silicon.

But inside his brain, electrical changes also occurred. Charged ions drifted through the membranes of a neuron, creating a potential difference that was transmitted as a minute voltage down its axon, triggering further chemical imbalances in other neurons. An immeasurable number of these tiny changes were invoked by the stream of nerve impulses from his eyes and ears, which activated memories and thoughts, aims and plans. A thousand different alternatives were produced, analysed and rejected in a moment, leaving the chosen option to be mapped to a sequence of mouse movements and keystrokes, and then to a further series of nerve impulses to move the muscles of his hands. And so the process passed back into the machine.

That was all. A message in the form of an insignificant electrical charge on an infinitesimal impurity in a crystal was sent to create an imbalance of ions bordering a neural membrane. And this triggered another message to be sent from a different neuron to a different impurity. But while Wuss played, an inconceivable number of

these minute electric signals passed from mind to machine and back into the mind until deep, deep at the lowest level the boy, the game and the processor began to operate as a single conscious entity.



Cedric had nearly completed his task of labelling of every electrical plug in the house with the name of the device connected to it, when the doorbell rang. This was unexpected. He did not have many visitors, and surely any friend of Mavis knew that she would be at her Women's Institute meeting on a Tuesday afternoon. Mildly irritated, he stuck the toaster's label in place then got up and answered the door. A moment later, he regretted having done so as a huge black man pushed him into the house and pinned both hands behind his back. It hurt, and Cedric said so. This earned him further pain as the man twisted his arms some more and softly warned, 'Don't mess me about.'

A voice from someone he couldn't see behind the vast dark shape said, 'Leave him. I don't think there's any need for too much of that.'

As he was firmly pushed into his living room, a terrified Cedric caught a glimpse of a pale, thin character who disappeared upstairs.

'Sit down,' commanded the black thug, so Cedric obeyed. The other armchair was then occupied by a balding grey-faced man who was panting slightly. They sat silently for a while until the thin person reappeared, giving Cedric a scornful look.

'All clear,' he said.

'Mr Smallcreep, I presume,' said the grey-faced man. 'You can call me The Guv'nor.'

'What do you want? Is it money? Or the cigarette cards?'

'Cigarette cards?'

'Nearly the full set. "Great Inventions". Only three missing. Very valuable. Take them and go. Please,' babbled Cedric.

'You can keep your cigarette cards,' said Croker, amused but still slightly breathless. 'We're more interested in your car.'

'Are you expecting anyone?' broke in Duke, toying with a model of Tower Bridge that he had taken from Cedric's mantelpiece. It had a thermometer set into one of towers and a compass in the other.

'Mavis. Back at six. Sorry,' replied Cedric, suddenly afraid that these horrible characters would still be here when she returned. Mavis didn't approve of visitors.

'So that gives us plenty of time to strike a deal,' said Croker. 'That is your Jaguar at the garage in the village isn't it?'

'Sorry. Yes. Broke down. Did Perkins send you?'

'Not exactly. Now I was wondering if you've removed anything from the car. Did you find anything in the logbook, for example?'

Cedric remembered the map and reached into his pocket for his wallet. The thin man leaped across the room and grabbed his wrist.

'Careful, mate,' said Duke. 'Now what have you got in that pocket?'

'Sorry. Wallet. Map. Logbook. Don't hurt me,' gibbered Cedric.

'OK, so let's have a look at it.'

Cedric drew out the wallet and rummaged around for the map. He gave it to Croker, who unfolded it and smiled.

'Who'd have thought it?' he beamed. 'After all these years. Here it is just like Lumpy drew it for me.' He looked upwards. 'Thank you, my angel.'

Croker's excitement and air of enthusiasm caused an unexpected wave of nostalgia to sweep over Duke. Life was quickly reverting to its natural rules. He jerked a thumb towards the cowering Cedric. 'So what happens to him now? Shall I take him for a walk?'

Croker looked horrified. 'Good god, no. What do you think we are?'

'Criminals, Guv. Leave him here and we'll have every copper in the county after us. Have you gone soft or what?'

'I don't... I just don't... do that any more. Call it soft if you like, but I'm not going to spend any more time inside. If I go in again then I'll be coming out in a box.'

Croker looked at Cedric for a long while. 'We're just going to have to take him with us,' he muttered, half to himself. 'Once we've done the job we can leave him tied up somewhere, and then we'll soon have the money to go abroad. Right now, he's seen the map so we'd be stuffed. We need him to get the car out of that garage, so we may as well stay here until she's fixed. In the meantime...' He raised his voice to a tone of command. 'See if there's somewhere to lock our new pal.'

'There's a shed out there. No phone in it and we'd hear if he called out,' said Duke.

'OK, shove him in there and then we'll have a chat.'

'You do it, Duke' said Duchess. 'There might be spiders.'

'Spiders? You tosser,' replied Duke scornfully. 'Right,' he said to a shocked-looking Cedric. 'You heard what the Guv'nor said. Get up and into the shed. And if I hear a single sound then I'll ask the Duchess here to take your temperature with this nice thermometer I've been admiring. And you'd never guess where he likes to stick it.'

'Sorry,' said Cedric, obeying meekly. He was soon locked uncomfortably in the cluttered shed, wondering if he would ever see Mavis again.



Winston had recorded everything he had seen in the Window, but was too timid to leave the relative safety of Mrs de Selby's study. He spotted the receiver of an Image Sharer, which he placed over his head. No luck; Ella was not presenting. Instead, another female unit was talking about how she was being trained in martial arts and survival techniques in order to service a new computer game. She was very attractive, but had a cold and emotionless personality that he found unappealing. Suddenly, the doorknob rattled and Mrs de Selby entered. Winston hastily removed the headset and handed over the Information Recorder, while trying to avoid catching sight of her expression.

'Thank you,' said Mrs de Selby. 'Let's return to the sitting room shall we.'

Winston noticed that on the table alongside Mrs de Selby's cup of chocolate was a panel holding an array of several hundred valves. One was lit – its hot filament creating a bright orange glow within the vacuum tube.

There was a silence about the space of half an hour while the old woman read what Winston had recorded and thought about its implications. He sat awkwardly, waiting for her to speak.

'Do you have any idea who these people are?' she said at last.

'No. It's a strange place. Where is it?'

'And do you know why these particular characters have been... ah... chosen?'

'No.'

'Well, I think I may have some ideas. But firstly, there are some things that you need to know.' She leant back, her fingers intertwined. 'Tell me, why do you think the idea of duty is so important?'

‘It keeps everything working, like,’ replied Winston, hoping his keenness to give the right answer would avoid any awkward questioning about his own lack of responsibility.

‘Yes, that’s right. But have you ever wondered *why* everyone needs to work? What is the point of it all? What is the ultimate aim?’

‘Jerusalem?’ ventured Winston.

‘A good try,’ smiled Mrs de Selby. ‘Did your mother ever tell you how the world was made?’

‘Yeah,’ said Winston, remembering some pleasant childhood evenings at home with Edwina, who had told him all sorts of stories. ‘There was Bilgatz, the god of power, and Moritu, the god of invention, right? They sat together and imagined the land, the sun, the trees and all the animals and that. But then they found that they needed some people to make everything work, so they formed the first units from clay. But the clay fell apart when it rained, so they built some better units from wood.’ He paused, trying to remember the rest of the story.

‘Go on.’

‘The wooden units weren’t allowed to think, so they just wandered around and couldn’t keep any control over the world they had been given. So they got punished. They were attacked not only by the gods but also by the animals and even things they had made – like grindstones and pots. Finally, the one-legged giant Finnuane, who had built the first well, kept drawing water out until there was a great flood, which washed away all but a few of the wooden units.

‘Yes, some say that will happen again one day. But go on.’

‘OK, then Bilgatz and Moritu started over. They asked the earth to give them the materials to make the sort of units we have now. And this time they gave us the ability to think, and... like... to know things. So now we can keep the world running like they want it.’

‘I can see that your mother taught you well. But have you ever wondered where Bilgatz and Moritu might live? Or why new units keep being made?’

Winston had never considered this story of gods and floods to have any truth behind it, but felt this was not the time to say so. ‘Not really. Things just happen.’

‘It may seem that way. However, we here in the Institute have discovered that there is another world, in some ways very like our own, but in other ways very different.’

‘Another world! Can I go there?’

‘In a way. Listen to me. Just like us, these people depend on their machines. But the interesting thing is that each of their machines has a unit somewhere here that keeps it in operation. So, if you were late for your duty at... let’s say a chewing gum unit, then someone in the other world who wanted some gum from that machine would find that it didn’t work.’

She glanced towards Winston in an accusing way, but he no longer felt in danger. His little-exercised mental powers had absorbed a great deal in the last few hours and Mrs de Selby’s words were hard to understand. Despite this, he tried to keep her talking in the hope that it might eventually make sense and, more importantly, provide him with a role in life.

‘So we work inside the machines of the old gods?’ he ventured.

‘No, it’s not like that. Each of their machines needs a unit here to make it work – to give it life. More complex machines need a whole team of units to keep all the individual parts in operation. But we are not physically inside them. And the people who use these machines aren’t gods. They really are very ordinary.’

‘So you think we do all our work just for these other people? Why do we bother? I mean, what’s the point? What do *we* get?’

‘Yes, we do their work for them, although that will change when...’ She broke off. Winston got the impression that she wanted to say more, but she resumed on another subject. ‘We became aware of them slowly. The printing press units began to absorb and copy some of the words from the texts that they produced. At first, those words made no sense, but as time went on, we slowly discovered how to record information in the same languages as the people who made the presses. Later, the radio appeared, and we found that there were spoken versions, too. So we learned to use those. It may be hard for you to believe, Winston, but my grandmother could not speak this language, just record it.’

Winston began to realise why she was telling him all this. ‘I... I can see this other world. Is that it?’

‘Yes. You have seen some of the people in it. I told you they weren’t gods.’

Winston looked at the sheet of Window between their two armchairs; currently, it was black with just a few stars visible. ‘And that shows their world, not ours,’ he stated quietly. ‘That’s why you gave some to me.’

‘Good, you are starting to think.’ She gestured towards the Window. ‘We call them the Makers and the place where they live is called the Exterior. Other pieces of Window show inside their homes, their streets and cities, views that change all the time as if you were looking out of a Unit Mover, views from the air, and other strange, strange things that we could never hope to understand. Despite that, the Institute carefully studies each piece. Every day our knowledge of the Exterior improves.’

‘But why don’t you let everyone know about this?’ asked Winston. ‘It makes everything right somehow. The purpose... the...’ He waved an arm to indicate the city and its inhabitants. ‘Why we are all...’ He trailed off, unable to express the enormity of the thought.

Mrs de Selby ignored his interruption and continued. ‘As time went on, we had to monitor new machines like cameras, televisions and film projectors. These are able to hold images, just like the printing presses that hold words and the radios that hold sounds. The units that control such machines possess pieces of Window, which bring those pictures into our world.’ She gesticulated towards the starry view. ‘This image comes from something called a security camera that is looking over a field in the Exterior. I borrowed it from that machine’s Unit Monitor.’

‘So its machine no longer works?’ asked Winston.

‘Not at the moment. I must return its Window soon.’

‘But this means you don’t need me. You can already see all this... Exterior,’ muttered Winston, wondering if his hope of acquiring a meaningful role was about to be dashed.

‘No, you are unique.’ On the panel beside her, another valve winked on. Mrs de Selby glanced at it with a troubled expression before continuing. ‘Normally, each piece of Window only shows one view, which is whatever the corresponding machine is seeing. But you, Winston, can use a piece of Window to see *anywhere* in the Exterior.’

‘I can?’

‘Yes. The piece I gave to you comes from a personal computer. For some reason, the image it shows is always white. Maybe that machine is not being used by any of the Makers at the moment. But the point is that when *you* looked into it, you saw through some *other* machine, maybe a camera or a television, into that house.’

‘And is it only me that can do that?’

‘As far as I know. You must have some natural ability to see the Exterior because you managed to do so just by using the Information Recorder. The Window helps you even more.’

‘Yeah. It makes it much clearer – and I can hear them better too.’

There was another silence while Winston gazed at the night scene displayed on the Window between them, trying to gather his thoughts. ‘If I can see anywhere in the Exterior then why did I see those particular... Makers?’ he asked eventually. ‘What’s so special about them?’

Mrs de Selby brought out Winston’s diary and displayed the first entry where he had described the other world. ‘I think I can start to answer that,’ she said.

‘Remember this time when you saw a Maker with a strange green machine. Can you recall anything else about it?’

Winston could still envisage the rat-faced man and his wheeled contraption. ‘It was all rounded. And it had a silver thing like a handle at one end. Under that was something like a brooch with a picture and a word...’ He was suddenly hit with a shattering thought. ‘Jaguar! That’s what my mum works at! Is that what her unit looks like in the Exterior, then?’

‘Yes. There it is a machine.’

‘That’s amazing! Why did I see that?’

‘I don’t think it was just a coincidence. Maybe your mother somehow affected the part of the Exterior that you saw that day.’

‘So who are they all? I’ve seen that ill-looking old man twice. Who *is* he?’

‘I don’t know. For some reason, something or someone is bringing his story to your attention. He must be important, but I don’t yet know why.’

‘Do you want me to see some more?’

‘Not today, Winston. I think you have had a rather exhausting time during the last few hours. Sleep now. Tomorrow you can meet some of the other members of the Institute and learn some more about Jerusalem. And of course we can study the affairs in the Exterior some more. I have decided that you should no longer stay with your mother. She thinks you have been concluded. Instead, I have arranged for you to live here in the centre. A Unit Mover is outside. Someone will show you to your new quarters. Report here at First Shift tomorrow.’



The three gangsters treated Cedric’s house as their own while waiting for the Jaguar to be repaired, lurching on what they found in the sparsely stocked store-cupboards and refrigerator. Duke discovered some boxes of old biscuits and amused himself by breaking them slowly into tiny crumbs then throwing these into the garden towards some fortunate pigeons.

Later in the afternoon, Croker awoke from a nap and called his team together. ‘I think we’re nearly ready for a little adventure,’ he said. ‘Have you guys ever heard of Paul Mallen?’

‘Mallen? Isn’t he the bloke who invented that motor that runs on water or something?’ replied Duke.

‘Yeah,’ said Croker. ‘That was a nice little earner for him. He ain’t done much since, but that fusion motor, which is what it’s called, made him a millionaire several times over. Now as it happens, just before I was put inside, Lumpy did a bit of building work at Mallen’s house down in Squaremead. Naturally, he needed to take a look around...’

‘As you do,’ broke in Duchess.

‘Yeah. As you do when you are a bit bent and in some rich geezer’s gaff. Anyway, it seems that there’s no end of stuff in there just asking to be pinched. And Mallen himself is a daft old bugger. He even showed Lumpy some papers that that had been written by Leonardo da Vinci. Worth a bundle and just lying on a table.’

‘Leonardo da what?’ said Duchess, keen to be seen to be following the conversation.

‘He’s an old inventor, like,’ replied Duke. ‘Bloody genius in his time, they say.’

‘Yeah,’ agreed Croker, flicking the ash from his cigar onto the floor. ‘It seems Mallen bought some of old Leo’s notebooks in a junk shop. The owner didn’t know what they were, but Mallen recognised them right off and bought the lot for next to nothing. I’ve often wondered if he didn’t nick the idea for his fusion motor out of them. Anyway, that’s not the best of it. It seems Mrs Mallen’s very fond of rubies, and her old man – who’s got more money than sense as far as I can see – likes buying them for her.’

‘Rubies, eh?’ smiled Duke. ‘Now you’re talking my language. I’ll never forget when we nearly got all them gems from that shop window.’

‘Yeah, in Angel Street. It’s funny you should mention that. Do you remember that big one what we was most after?’

‘Of course. The old ruby from Mexico or wherever it was. Bloody great thing carved like a panther or something.’

‘A jaguar. The Ahau Kin is what they call it, and it represents the Mayan sun god if you must know. Now have a guess who bought that that little trinket for his darling wife so as to celebrate their wedding.’

‘No! Not old Mallen?’

Croker leaned back in his chair, smiling contentedly. ‘Lumpy says that Mrs M wears it all the time,’ he said. ‘Keeps it in a safe at night. Other than that, there’s just a few servants around. It’s begging to be nicked.’

‘Bloody hell. You don’t give up, do you.’

‘You know me well enough by now. That ruby pussycat is unfinished business as far as I’m concerned. And if we find anything else while we’re paying a call at Mallen Lodge then so much the better.’

Duke thought for a moment. ‘Bit of a coincidence, wasn’t it? I mean Lumpy getting some building work there. Especially as he’s not too handy at that sort of lark.’

‘Yeah. Wasn’t it just,’ replied Croker in a tone that prevented the point being pursued.

‘And can we fence all this gear?’ asked Duke, tactfully changing the subject.

‘Yeah. Old Sol said he had a customer who’d give him a million straight off for the Ahau Kin. No questions asked. We’ll get standard rates for the rest. Good stuff, though.’

‘A million,’ rumbled Duchess. ‘That sounds good.’

‘Yeah,’ replied Croker. ‘If this comes off then this will be our last job – and Charlie Croker’s monument to prosperity, as they say.’ He paused to savour some thoughts of success. ‘Anyway,’ he continued, ‘I say we get down to Squaremead tonight, have a look around tomorrow, and then do the job tomorrow night or the day after. What do you reckon?’

‘We’re in,’ replied Duke.

‘OK, I think the ever-happy Mr Perkins should have got my car ready by now. And if he’s late then Duchess will have to let him know just how annoyed I’ll be. Go and fetch our new pal.’

Duke went outside and unlocked the shed door to reveal the terrified Cedric. 'Come on mate. It looks like we're all going to the seaside. What a treat. Got your bucket and spade?'

'I can't leave here,' said Cedric desperately. 'What will Mavis say?'

'You could have a point there. Let's just check with the Guv'nor, shall we?'

Duke dragged Cedric to the sitting room, where Croker and Duchess were waiting to leave. 'We need to sort out his wife. Leave her a note to say he's gone on holiday,' he said.

'We can't risk that,' replied Croker. 'He can phone her up on the way. Get him to pack a bag and shove him in the motor.'

Duchess resumed the driving duties, and they returned to Sid Perkins' forecourt. The lugubrious mechanic was there, polishing the Jaguar with an oil-stained rag. He glanced into the gangster's car as it drew up, and was surprised to see Cedric's frightened-looking face looking out at him. However, he said nothing and continued to wipe imaginary spots off the Jaguar's bonnet. Croker and Duchess climbed out of the front seats, leaving Cedric in the care of Duke.

'All done?' asked Croker.

'As promised. She runs sweet as a nut,' replied Perkins.

'Excellent. Well, Mr Smallcreep has decided to sell the Jag to me. So maybe you'd like my old car in exchange for what he owes you.'

Perkins could see that the coupe holding the unpleasant thin man alongside his worst enemy was worth far more than his charge for repairs to the Jaguar. This could turn out to be a very good day indeed. Muscles unused for years combined creakily to produce a semblance of a smile.

'That's done then,' said Croker. 'Maybe we can step into your office and sort out the paperwork.'

Perkins didn't think there was much need for any paperwork, but he found that Duchess had manoeuvred himself in such a way that he was being slowly but firmly forced into his small office. The big man then stood at the door, hiding Perkins' view.

'You may have noticed that Mr Smallcreep has decided to... ah... show us the local countryside,' said Croker, blowing onto the end of his cigar so that it glowed a bright red.

'That's very kind of him,' replied Perkins, unwilling to argue, although he knew that such an action was totally out of character. 'But none of my business, right?'

'Right. So if anyone asks then you've not seen him. Nor us. Understood?'

'I'm with you.'

'Otherwise we may come back. And the Duchess here hates it when someone lets a secret out of the bag.'

'A fairy dies every time, Guv,' stated the huge henchman impassively. He moved out of the doorway, and Perkins was not surprised to see that Cedric and the thin man were now in the back seat of the Jaguar. A handful of table-tennis balls had fallen from the car and rolled around in the wind.

'Goodbye then – and remember our little secret,' said Croker, climbing into the front passenger seat. Duchess took the driver's seat and the car sped away.

Perkins considered what to do. It had all been rather unpleasant, but it was hard to see how things could have turned out any better. What remained was a problem for Cedric, not him. As he locked up the garage for the day, his only regret was that he would never get his hands on the lovely old Jaguar again.



Duchess relished the familiar feel of the car as it sped along the narrow lanes. It brought back memories of the many enjoyable escapades of the Gants Hill Mob in which the Jaguar had featured. At the time, it could outrun anything the police could muster; as the gang's getaway driver, he had learned every trick to evade them.

Croker turned to look into the back, where Cedric and Duke were sharing the cramped space with all the baggage. 'All happy in the cheap seats?' he asked.

'Fine, Guv,' said Duke, 'except for all these balls.' He indicated Cedric's bargain that were spread in a thick layer, covering the feet of the back-seat passengers and eddying around the car as it cornered.

'Bloody hell. Are they something to do with you?' Croker asked Cedric, his face reddening.

'Sorry. There's more in the boot, too,' mumbled Cedric, hoping that this would not offend anyone too much. 'No room for any bags.'

'You prat,' replied Croker. 'And what's this in the front here?' From near his feet he produced a half-gallon jar of tomato ketchup.

'Only a month past its sell-by date,' said Cedric, 'so I bought four. Sorry.'

'Jesus wept. Well we don't have time to sort all this out now. Come on Dutch. Put your foot down and we'll be in Squaremead in time for a drink.'

Duchess delighted in the touch and response of every different make and model of the cars he drove. He had been responsible for making sure that Croker chose the 3.4 litre Mark 2 Jaguar rather than the more powerful 3.8, which was half a hundredweight heavier but less supple and balanced. He speeded up, flinging the car around the twisting country lanes with the skill and enjoyment of a connoisseur.



Edwina was ecstatic. Her team were working hard, making sure that the individual parts of the car worked smoothly and in unison. As she toured the workplace, she could see some men smiling for the first time in years. She stopped to have a word with the Engine Monitor, who was usually a personification of gloom.

'Great stuff!' he yelled over the noise of the machinery.

'Do you think you can cope?' asked Edwina, raising her voice slightly.

'It looks OK for now. Some of these parts haven't had a good workout for a while, and haven't been too well maintained, either. But it's all good quality gear. No reason why we can't keep this up for a while.'

'Excellent. Carry on.'

Edwina returned to her office, patting the backs of a few toiling workers as she passed, and issuing words of encouragement where she could. She could not believe how excited she felt. She didn't want the shift ever to end.



J-3061

Winston awoke without any need for his Countdown Timer. For the first time that he could recall, he felt excited by the day ahead. At the end of the previous night, he had fallen asleep shortly after the black-suited operative had led him to his new quarters. Had he or she really treated him with some degree of respect? Anyway, what was certain was that he was now living in the part of the city reserved for three-digit workers, not the vast, anonymous blocks of the Idle Unit Holders.

He explored the room a little more. It was considerably larger and better equipped than his parents' home, and even had a panel of the Window on one wall that was showing a view from a shore to the sea. Winston had never seen an ocean, although he had some vague idea that they existed. He stared at the scene for several minutes, marvelling at the huge openness, the constant sound and movement, and the early-morning sun sparkling silver flashes among the waves.

In a cupboard, he found some green work-clothes of a softer and lighter cloth than the standard materials issued to five-digit workers. Green indicated membership of the Stability Module run by Mrs de Selby, so he quickly changed out of his lower-status brown overalls. Another cupboard held some jars of a red substance that he thought might be edible. Afraid to try it, he used the Nourishment Dispenser, which today was supplying a banana flavour.

He found the headset for an Image Sharer and put it on. Yes! It was Ella-14801. Today she was wearing a purple top, made of some diaphanous material, and a long scarlet skirt. A golden pendant in the shape of a wild cat with jewelled red eyes accentuated her delicate neck. In the broadcast, she was explaining that although computer hardware was becoming faster and more efficient, the software that told it what to do was evolving even more quickly – demanding and absorbing the ever-greater speed and capacity as it became available. Winston was not too interested in the subject, but continued to watch, entranced by Ella's large green eyes, the austere way in which her glossy black hair was tightly drawn back from her face, and the way she spoke directly to the Sharer without fear or hesitation. Was there any chance he could meet her again, now he had some credibility if not yet an actual role within the Institute? Maybe his ranking could be re-evaluated to four-digit or even a three-digit status – that would impress her.

The Information Sharer on the table had been silent since Winston entered the apartment the previous night, but now it issued a peremptory instruction, 'Mrs de Selby-5 on. Winston-11811 to report to building 51813, room 101.'

He was not surprised to find a Unit Mover capsule at the door, but was confused when he found that it was empty. He had never used the controls of the device before but, after some experimentation, he discovered that it was a simple matter to turn some large dials until their needles rested on brass disks indicating the building and room numbers required. Then he closed an insulated lever and within a few minutes, he was once again approaching the headquarters of the Institute.

Even by the extravagant architectural standards of the major buildings in the centre of the city, this was a spectacular sight. From a distance, it had the form of a spiral tower leaning to one side in curls and folds of steel that soared above the other huge buildings nearby. At the top was a huge illuminated timer that broadcast the countdown towards Jerusalem into the morning sky. As Winston got nearer, it became clear that the coiled tower was just a latticework that held the three components of the building itself. At the bottom was a huge brick cube that rotated slowly, taking a

hundred days to complete an entire revolution. This held the administrative functions of the Institute – mostly staffed by four digit operatives. Above this was an immense marble-faced pyramid that revolved once every ten days. This housed the Stability Module where, it was rumoured, favoured three-digit staff monitored the words and thoughts of everyone – in the city and beyond. At the top was a steel-clad cylinder that completed one revolution every day. This contained the living quarters and offices of the twenty-four Institute members. Only a small number of city dwellers had cause to enter even the lowest floors of this vast building, so Winston felt a mixture of pride and apprehension as the Unit Mover carried him to the heart of the cylindrical section where Mrs de Selby awaited.

As before, the blue chocolate-cup steamed by her chair, but this time she did not offer any to him. ‘Are your new idle quarters satisfactory?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, great. I was wondering why...’

‘No questions for now, Winston. I’d like you to have another session with the Information Recorder and your piece of Window. Then we’ll have a little chat.’

She indicated the adjoining office. Winston entered it, closed the door, connected the Recorder and stared at the slightly translucent blank piece of Window. Today he felt totally relaxed and confident, so he hoped that he would be able to see more of the Exterior than ever before.



Potentially, Paul Mallen felt that this week’s meeting of the Collision Chamber could be one of the best yet. The inventor, Rotwang, had turned out to be a suave and handsome young man with light blond hair, wearing a navy-blue blazer and a paisley-patterned cravat. He was quizzing the two young chaps who had written the computer game. This pair certainly presented a contrasting appearance. Lu (or was it Pablo – he had forgotten which was which) was smartly dressed in a designer suit and a silk tie, but his companion had evidently decided that tattered blue jeans topped off by a faded, multi-coloured t-shirt bearing the legend “Pink Floyd” (whatever *that* meant) represented suitable wear for a formal luncheon party.

‘You specialise in creating an alternative reality in which the game-player becomes temporarily immersed,’ said Rotwang, with only the slightest accent betraying his German upbringing, ‘but have you ever considered that we are all just a simulation – that the whole world as we perceive it is just a computer program?’

‘Well, that’s certainly been the plot of a film or two,’ replied Lu. ‘What matters is what you would do about it. I mean, supposing you found out that this world was all an illusion. What difference would it make? You’d still want to make piles of virtual cash, buy a nice virtual house and live with a beautiful virtual wife.’ He glanced meaningfully at Bella, who was unimpressed, having been more captivated by the charm and intelligence of the pale-haired inventor.

‘I think that the fact that you can envisage such a thing is proof that it isn’t the case,’ said the Reverend Julia Lewis, who to Paul Mallen’s surprise had not arrived in her clerical robes but in a smart black dress. ‘We have the idea of a spiritual dimension that could not be programmed into any computer program. Machines have no souls and no imagination. If this world is just a simulation then we’d never be granted the ability to question whether that was the case, so this conversation would be impossible.’

‘No imagination, you say,’ responded Rotwang. ‘Imagination is just the productive use of some spare capacity in the brain. Machines have not yet been built with that amount of redundant intelligence. But some will eventually emerge, and then we will

see what their world has to show to us.’ For an instant, an unpleasantly manic look crossed his face, provoking Paul Mallen, who had been regarding him closely, to steer the discussion in another direction. ‘What I’ve never understood,’ he said, ‘is how a single computer can do several different things at once.’

Pablo responded eagerly. At last, the conversation had turned to something he understood. ‘To stop all the data for each task getting mixed up, there is the idea of a stack,’ he said. ‘When a new task starts, all the data associated with the one that is currently running is pushed onto the stack. And that new task could also be interrupted, in which case its current state will be pushed on top of the first. The tasks have to resume in the order in which they were suspended. As they do so, they will find their old data on top of the stack, so they pop it off and continue as if they were never interrupted in the first place.’

‘I didn’t understand a word of that,’ said Reverend Lewis, fingering the silver cross around her neck. ‘Computers are a complete mystery to me. I only just learned how to send an email.’

‘I think I can just about understand what he’s saying,’ said Currell Brown, the bouffant-haired TV presenter, taking a sip from his gin and tonic. ‘It’s all about one thing being nested inside another. Like a painting of a painter who is working on a canvas showing another painter at work on yet another painting.’

‘Or a set of Russian dolls,’ said Bella Mallen, who felt that her role at these events was to ensure that the conversation kept flowing. ‘But doesn’t that happen in music, too?’

‘Oh yes,’ replied Brown. ‘Bach was particularly fond of such tricks. He might start a piece in C major, so you would expect the piece to end in that key. In fact, the listener is kept in a kind of suspense waiting for C major to reappear. But then Bach modulates the piece into other keys and melodies, which may themselves create some tensions that need to be resolved. But all the time you are waiting for the original theme in C major to reappear; when it does, the whole piece is concluded in an aesthetically satisfying way.’ He looked at his now-empty glass ‘Can I just have another tonic?’ he asked a passing waiter.

‘I think I read a book once...’ said Lu, who had become annoyed by the slowness with which the serving staff had noticed the state of his own glass, and so had grabbed a bottle of Pétrus for his own consumption.

‘Books! Yes, of course,’ interrupted Brown. ‘There are stories within stories, references to other stories, hidden puzzles, characters that talk to the author, no end of tricks. With some novels, you get a different experience each time you read it.’

‘We call that feedback,’ said Pablo. ‘Each iteration builds on the previous one, so you learn from your mistakes or discover new levels.’

Julia Lewis was enjoying a slice of terrine in which jewel-like fragments of lobster and asparagus were set in a rich pink mousse, the whole being wrapped in a silky layer of smoked salmon. ‘I loved that effect in the *Arabian Nights*,’ she said. ‘It starts with the evil sultan who marries a different wife every night and then kills her in the morning. Then Scheherazade come along and starts telling stories. And one of those is about Sindbad, who then tells about his seven voyages and about the giant bird...’

‘The Roc,’ broke in Brown. ‘You’re right. It’s all stories within stories. And today, even the author of the *Arabian Nights* is a part of a story.’ He gestured towards Pablo, who was embarrassed to be the centre of attention while he was messily dismembering a quail that had been stuffed with foie gras studded with tiny pieces of truffle. ‘There’s the different levels in your stack. We are on the top and all the stories are nested underneath.’

‘Not quite at the top,’ protested Reverend Lewis.

Rotwang laughed. ‘Ach! Of course you think there is a higher level! But that’s just some more stories. *We* created the myths of the creation – and of the apocalypse.’

‘Or maybe we are all unfinished stories in the mind of God,’ replied the female cleric calmly. ‘It is both illogical and arrogant to believe that we are at the top of the “stack”, as I think our computer expert expressed it. I choose to believe that there is a higher spiritual level where our Maker dwells alongside those he has chosen to support and maintain our world. In the Bible it says, “Thou hast created all things and for thy pleasure they are and were created.”’

‘And so we must worship him? What is the point of that? What do *we* get?’

‘You should try it, Professor Rotwang. As a scientist you should know better than to prejudge the result of an experiment.’

‘But why believe that the level above us are gods?’ asked Pablo. ‘We are superior to computers, but we don’t ask them to worship us. If anything, it’s the reverse – or it seems like that.’

‘I’m sure we wouldn’t recognise them as gods,’ replied Lewis. ‘In fact, I think God looks just like you or me. And He does not ask to be worshipped; I just like to thank Him sometimes for what He has done for us.’

‘Maybe we need each other – just like we would find life difficult without computers, and they would be pretty useless without us to run them,’ said Lu, pouring himself another glass of wine.

‘Would they? Never assume that the levels are fixed...’ said Rotwang.

‘What do you mean?’ interrupted Paul Mallen, discomfited once again by the inventor’s intensity.

‘... or that we are fated to remain at the same level,’ continued Rotwang, partly to himself. He turned to face some French windows, through which the glittering sea could be glimpsed through a gap in the hills. ‘Tell me,’ he demanded. ‘Supposing Scheherazade looked through her window and actually saw the Roc flying between the minarets of Baghdad. Would it then still exist in Sindbad’s story?’

‘In a computer application that would be like a task popping the data belonging to another task that was higher or lower in the order. Anything might happen,’ responded Pablo eagerly.

‘In literature you can break any rule you like,’ replied Brown. ‘And maybe that’s why a machine will never have any imagination.’



Wuss had tried to deliver the arms consignment directly to Marco. Bad choice. The van had exploded while he was racing over Westminster Bridge, chased by some heavily armed police, who had brought in army reinforcements in the shape of helicopter gunships and tanks. For some reason, the blast had triggered the nuclear device that The Wolf was trying to assemble; the resulting explosion had taken out most of London. Evidently this was not a successful conclusion to the mission. So Wuss had restored a saved position and tried the other option of taking the consignment directly to The Wolf. This meant that in addition to the police and the army he had to contend with Marco’s well-equipped thugs, who had managed to set up a series of roadblocks. However, these had soon succumbed to the rocket-launcher, and Wuss had managed to reach the hideout of The Wolf just as his fuel and ammunition were almost exhausted.

Then something strange had happened. Normally, there would be a cutaway in which The Wolf would congratulate him on his success before describing the next

mission. Instead, Wuss found he was driving along a country road. Judging by the controls displayed on the screen, he was no longer in the armoured van, but in some old car with a thin steering wheel, a wooden dashboard and clunky switches. He pressed Control-I to examine the inventory of weapons and other items that he carried. Nothing. He tried keying Control-O to see the mission objectives and Control-M to view the local map. Both displays were blank. Wuss considered the possibilities. Sometimes the game-writers hid little surprises inside their creations – by some combination of actions, you could display the names of the programming team or see some silly video. Indeed, Wuss had heard of cases where games had been concealed inside software designed for more serious purposes. So perhaps he was now in a game hidden within the game of *Getaway*; one where he did not understand the rules, or what he had to achieve. Or maybe there were no more missions and round the next corner he would see a sign saying “The End”. He hoped not – this had been the best game he had ever played.

Wuss drove on at random, not knowing which turns to take. Certainly, he was no longer in London. He travelled down tiny lanes, slowing to allow startled sheep to rise awkwardly from the roadway and run off into the surrounding fields. Eventually, he reached a narrow hump-backed bridge that crossed a little brook. As he approached the summit, he realised that he could hear the running water and the twittering of the hedgerow birds; he could feel the sunshine and sense the fresh air of the countryside. Never before had the game provided such a realistic experience. He almost felt that... surely he was dreaming. That was it. He had fallen asleep while playing. It would not be the first time, although he did not usually dream that he was still operating the computer. Often he had woken with his face marked with the grid-lines of the keyboard, and the screen filled with hundreds of zeds, chronicling his snores. His hands were no longer moving around the keyboard or holding the mouse; instead, he was actually controlling the car by turning the spindly old wheel and moving the gear-stick with its leather-covered knob. Up ahead, he could see some ramshackle buildings and an entranceway where he could pull off the road. A faded sign reading “Mobil” swung by a single nail in the light breeze. His heart pounding at the strangeness of it all, Wuss stopped and got out of the car, his shabby trainers touching solid ground.



Yesterday had been the hardest shift that Edwina could remember; it had been twenty years since she had been on her feet for so long. On reaching home, she had used the Image Sharer for a short time then fallen into a deep and untroubled sleep.

Today she woke refreshed, aware for the first time of her empty house. What bad luck it had been that both her son and husband were concluded on the same day. She put out their few belongings for recycling, while planning her duties for the next shift with a mounting sense of anticipation. Life had so much more purpose now that her team was being stretched a little.



The Jaguar stood proudly outside the Red Swan Hotel, its elegance mirroring the austere charm of the Georgian building. Cedric had stood silently, having lost every trace of free will, while the gangsters booked two rooms. He had been told to share with Duke, who he thought was the most evil of his three captors, with his thin, pale face and constant twitchiness; Cedric cringed every time he came near.

Now it was late morning, and the four men sat in the otherwise deserted hotel lounge. Croker looked at the subdued and dejected Cedric, who had spent a restless night imagining all the punishments that the gangsters might mete out if he displeased them. 'I've decided to take a chance on you, china,' said Croker. 'I can't keep an eye on you all the time, but let's get it straight – if you squeal then one day we'll be back knocking at your door and you'll be cat's meat. You with me?'

Cedric nodded.

'You don't look the sort of guy who gets too much excitement,' continued the gang-leader, 'but here we are. You're in the game whether you want to or not. The question is whether you can give me a hand.'

Duke and Duchess both stirred uneasily.

'Are you crazy, Guv?' protested Duchess.

'You can't take him on the job. He'll just get in the way,' objected Duke.

Croker help up a hand to pacify them. 'Trust me. For a start, I'm not getting rid of him yet, so he might as well make himself useful. Second, we need as many people as we can get for this caper. And third, I reckon old Cedric here could be more valuable than you think. I'm beginning to see how we can plan all this.'

He did not say so, but Croker's plan involved sacrificing Cedric to the police or the house servants if the raid on the Mallens' were to go wrong. Experience had shown him that in a confused situation, the scramble to grab one gang-member would often allow the remainder to escape. He felt he could trust Cedric to freeze in panic while the rest of them sauntered out of the back door. At the back of his mind was the thought that if disaster threatened then he was no longer able just to run away. During the journey, he had suffered some familiar twinges in his chest, which had been relieved by his tablets, but he knew these pains would return, particularly during the stresses of a house job. He had to be more subtle.

'So, what do you think?' he asked Cedric.

Much to his surprise, Cedric found that he was quite excited by the thought of working with the criminal gang. Was he going completely mad? He had no idea what they were planning; they looked capable of anything, even murder. He could spend the rest of his life in prison. And *then* what would Mavis say? He imagined her now. She must be worried out of her mind. Had she called the police? And if so, what would these awful men do to him when they found out?

'Can I ring my wife now?' he asked, a small note of determination entering his voice.

Duke jerked his head towards a public call box on the bar wall.

Croker nodded assent. 'Go on then. Just remember that we can hear every word. Any funny stuff and Mavis will be seeing you on the easy instalment plan.'

The three gangsters moved their chairs nearer to the telephone booth in order to hear Cedric's side of the conversation.

'Mavis, it's Cedric.'

'I can't tell you where...'

'No, I don't think I'll be wanting that now.'

'For heaven's sake! It's only some sausage and mash.'

'No, not tomorrow, either.'

'Maybe that dog next door would like them.'

'How should I know whether it has already eaten? Look...'

'I can't tell you who...'

'Mrs Craddock? You mean that woman who works in the library?'

'I have never looked at her like that.'

‘No, she isn’t here now.’

‘I’ve hardly ever spoken to the woman!’

‘What do you mean, “love nest”? Have you any idea...’

‘No, don’t...’

Cedric stared at the receiver for while then hung it up and returned to the table. He studied the faces of his three companions, who stared back impassively.

‘I’m in,’ he said at last.

‘Good,’ said Croker. ‘Now let’s take a look at Mallen Lodge.’



The dessert was being removed, so Bella Mallen hoped that the tiresome luncheon party would soon be over and she could return to her favourite task of spending Paul’s money. The choice of the dark lilac blouse and short scarlet skirt had been a good one, showing both her lithe young body and the striking ruby at her breast to their best advantage. For the last few minutes, she had abandoned her duties as hostess while she joked and flirted with Rotwang, fascinated by his pale grey eyes with their long blond lashes. Paul could entertain his other boring guests, she decided; this charming inventor was more courteous and fascinating than any of them.

She smiled encouragingly. ‘I heard that you might bring something to show to us.’

‘Yah, my Apollo prototype. It is less than one millimetre long, solar-powered and completely self-sufficient. Would you like a demonstration?’

‘I’d be delighted.’

From his pocket, Rotwang took a small silver box, opened it and extracted what looked like a minute dot of polished gold. He placed it on the table, where it immediately started to forage about, exploring its new territory.

‘What do you mean by self-sufficient?’ asked Paul Mallen, leaning forward eagerly to examine the industrious little device. He saw that it was propelled by six miniscule wheels and that it had a tiny red-tinted window at the front.

‘Because it is able to produce replicants of itself from simple materials. Anything it can find – metal, glass, plastic, even those breadcrumbs it is examining at the moment – can be used to create new copies of Apollo. And they in turn can make yet more replicants of themselves.’

‘But what is the use of such a thing?’ asked Bella, rather repulsed by the iridescent mechanical insect as it scuttled across the tablecloth towards her.

‘I’m sure our programmer friends here can confirm that several small processors are more efficient than one large one,’ replied Rotwang. ‘I hope to demonstrate that programming these machines with a few simple rules will give them enormous communal power.’

‘Much like termites,’ said Currell Brown, keen to display the breadth of his knowledge. ‘They can build structures of staggering complexity.’

‘Indeed,’ said Rotwang. ‘Such creatures were the inspiration for this project.’

‘A termite’s nest,’ continued Brown, as if lecturing to a classroom of students, ‘is built on sound architectural principles of load-supporting arches. It has separate chambers for growing food, breeding, working and resting; and a sophisticated air conditioning system to keep it all cool. No single termite could possibly know how to construct such a thing – it just doesn’t have the brainpower – but together they seem to manage it.’

‘Correct,’ agreed Rotwang. ‘A termite possesses around one hundred thousand neurons; nowhere near enough to be able to conceive such a complex structure. But if

there are one hundred thousand termites in the community then potentially there is an enormous intelligence to be harnessed.'

'But surely there is a problem of communication – in synchronising the thoughts of a hundred thousand units to do the right thing at the right time,' said Pablo. 'Don't you need a central controller to coordinate the work of all the individual processors?'

'No, control is distributed throughout the community,' replied Rotwang. 'Every termite obeys a simple set of rules that determine the action it will take at any given moment. The whole community is acting according to those rules and the nest is constructed as a result.'

'Consider her ways and be wise,' murmured Reverend Lewis.

'So nobody is in charge, and yet their city appears and evolves,' said Brown.

'Exactly', replied Rotwang. 'The termites communicate in various subtle ways which may trigger an individual to start acting differently – for example to become a guard rather than a food-collector. But ultimately, the behaviour of the community emerges from a relatively simple algorithm. My experiments with Apollo and its clones will test some different rule-sets, so I can observe the effects that they produce.'

'An invisible set of rules that guides the behaviour of each individual,' mused Paul Mallen. 'Is that the definition of the soul, Reverend?'

Julia Lewis looked disapproving. 'The pathetic fallacy,' she said. 'To have a soul you must be self-aware. It is not something that can emerge from a hundred thousand ants – or a hundred thousand of Professor Rotwang's machines.'

'Ah, but you just see a machine as something that dutifully obeys its instructions,' said Rotwang, smiling mysteriously. 'I am hoping that Apollo will prove itself more intelligent than that. Then we may see deeper into its soul – and ours.'

'Are there any commersh... commercial possibilities?' asked Lu, now deep into his third bottle.

'Many,' replied Rotwang. 'Apollo can work in environments inaccessible to humans: deep underground, underwater, on other planets – the possibilities are endless.'

'Sheep... and effishent,' agreed Lu. He took a prolonged pull at his wineglass. 'Never shend a man to do a mush... machine's job.' Having delivered this aphorism, he slumped over his plate and fell asleep.

'Good heavens!' said Paul Mallen, who had never ceased watching the prototype as it moved purposefully around. 'It's made another.'

Sure enough, there were now two of the shiny dots scavenging among the remains of the meal. Without comment, Rotwang extracted some tweezers from his pocket, deftly picked one of them up and, to everyone's surprise, took an antique pewter nutcracker from the sideboard, and placed the tiny machine into its jaws. There was a muted crunch and the splintered remains scattered over the table. He then lifted the other miniature robot and placed it back into the silver box. 'There's nothing in here for it to use,' he explained. 'Otherwise we'd be overrun within a few hours.'

'I suppose you only want the one specimen at the moment so that the population remains pure,' said Paul Mallen.

'Precisely. I want to experiment with a single set of rules at a time,' replied Rotwang.

'Well, I hope it doesn't get out of its box,' said Bella. 'They breed like rabbits and you can hardly see them.'

'I will certainly make sure it is contained. This prototype has taken nearly five years to produce – and that was only because the development of some key

components was assisted by... by some good fortune.’ Rotwang’s composure seemed momentarily upset, and he stroked the silver box as if for reassurance. ‘And if that assistance continues, we will soon discover what a society populated by machines can achieve.’



A hunched old woman walking with the aid of an ebony stick tottered past the entrance to Mallen Lodge, where a pair of huge heraldic eagles flanked two ornate wrought-iron gates. Beyond these, a gravelled path bordered by chestnut trees wound out of sight towards the house. The woman tightly grasped a jar that she was carrying, while her bright brown eyes regarded the vintage Jaguar with curiosity.

‘There’s a lane down there,’ said Croker. ‘Park her up and we’ll have a recce on foot.’

Duchess did as he was asked, and soon the four disparate characters stood at the entrance, waiting for the old woman to move slowly out of sight. Duke tested one of the gates and found it opened easily.

‘We’ll split up,’ said Croker. ‘Cedric and Duke, you go down the drive. If you’re spotted, say you’ve got lost or something. No funny stuff; we don’t want anyone getting too suspicious. Me and the Duchess will take a walk round these walls and check on the other gates. Do you boys promise me you’re not tooled up?’

‘We’re clean, Guv,’ replied Duke. They had agreed earlier that this was a reconnaissance mission, so no violence of any sort was to be attempted.

‘OK then. Meet back here at four.’

Duchess started walking around the perimeter wall, but was recalled by Croker. ‘Not that direction, stupid. Are you trying to turn our luck around? Go clockwise – and count these railings on the way. If it’s an odd number then we’ll know we’ve got the go-ahead from her upstairs.’

‘Right, Guv. Sorry,’ replied Duchess.

Cedric and Duke walked warily through the gates. ‘What will we say if somebody spots us?’ whispered Cedric, constantly looking around as if he expected a squad of sentries with machine-guns to emerge from behind the trees at any moment.

‘You heard the Guv’nor. Just say we went for a walk and got lost. Act stupid. They won’t do anything.’ replied Duke, who was absorbed in picking the petals off a wildflower.

Cedric was not convinced, and continued to keep watch in all directions.



Wuss found that his mission map was slowly returning, but it formed a picture in his mind rather than being invoked from the keyboard and shown on the screen. He could envisage a plan of the buildings in front of him, and a direction marker towards what seemed to be an isolated shed. As he crossed the fields towards it, startling the occasional rabbit, he felt the warm sun on his skin, and delighted in the soft scrunch of his shoes on the grass and the gentle scent of wild flowers. His father did not allow him out of the house too often, so it had been a long time since he had visited the countryside. The building turned out to be a small wooden hut with a closed door and an unglazed window. Although he did not feel threatened in any way, Wuss crept silently around the walls and then stood so he could see inside.

Immediately, he dropped back to his knees, terrified. Inside the hut, sitting at a table, were Marco and The Wolf! Wuss mentally examined the inventory of all the items that he carried, hoping to find some weapons, but there were none. He crawled

away from the hut, hoping that neither of the men inside would see or hear him, but as he did so he had a strong feeling that this was the wrong tactic. The Direction Finder pointed towards the hut. If he went back to the car, he had only two choices: to return the way he had come, or to drive around at random, hoping something different would happen. He had to solve this mystery just as he had solved the other puzzles that had enabled him to reach this point in the game.

He visualised the inventory again. It consisted of seven slots indicating items that could potentially be found. Items that he had located, or which were in his possession, would be highlighted, but at present none was shown that way. However, each slot was illustrated with an icon, these being:

1. A small black hand being held by a larger white one.
2. A jam-jar with a spoon sticking out of it.
3. Another hand – this one with a white circle drawn on the wrist.
4. A wire-mesh sphere.
5. A white suit of clothes.
6. A luminous rectangle.
7. Nothing – an empty slot.

‘A strange collection,’ thought Wuss, disappointed that it included no weapons. From his experiences with *Getaway* and other games, he expected that the mission aims would become clearer as he located each of these objects. However, his ability to save and restore the position seemed to be disabled, which meant that he would have to complete the entire quest correctly in just one attempt. Anyway, there was no need to worry; this was just another episode within the game.

He crept back to the hut and listened. Curiously, the two characters seemed to be good friends, despite the series of shootouts and double-crosses that Wuss had observed and assisted. Also, their voices had changed. Marco was no longer speaking broken English with a Spanish lisp, and The Wolf had dropped the curt words of command that he had employed when briefing Wuss. Instead, both the criminals were using the braying, florid tones he associated with upper-class characters in TV dramas. Indeed, he could not distinguish one voice from the other. Wuss listened closer.

‘Was I good this afternoon?’ asked one of the men.

‘A little over the top with the menace, I thought, dear,’ said the other. ‘I try to terrorise with the eyes as much as with the voice.’

‘Oh, I *know*. But this is hardly a part demanding great subtlety. They want villainy crude and simple. Is my moustache crooked?’

‘No dear, but the stubble could do with a touch-up. Now where did I put that uniform? We’re on again in a few minutes.’

‘Over there, I think.’

Wuss heard footsteps approaching him and lay flat on the ground. At any moment, he expected to be spotted, and then what would happen? Would he be shot? Tortured? The footsteps receded, but Wuss remained on the ground, panting heavily. He consulted his mental Direction Finder again, but it showed no alternative; he had to enter the hut.

The two men inside looked up when he opened the door, but seemed unconcerned.

‘Ooh, hallo there,’ said The Wolf. ‘Did you bring the grenades? We need them for the next scene.’

Wuss stood silently in the doorway. Marco was dabbing at his face with a black marker while admiring the result in a polished piece of metal. The room bore some resemblance to the Spanish mercenary's hideout as it appeared in the game, but Wuss now realised that this was nothing but a facade. The background of posters, flags and boxes of ammunition was just a set of coloured polygons created out of some thin material. The belt of machine-gun bullets that Marco liked to wear around one shoulder lay on the table, but Wuss could see that it was only a prop. The two villains looked at him with some puzzlement.

'Come in then, boy,' said The Wolf. I don't think we've been introduced. I'm Antony Lamont-06602.'

'And I'm Dermot Trellis-15303,' said Marco, putting down his make-up and extending a hand towards Wuss.

Now as bewildered as he was scared, Wuss remained in the doorway.

'And you are...?' prompted Marco – or was it Trellis?

Wuss breathed deeply 'W... W... Wuss,' he replied.

'Wuss? Wuss what?' queried Trellis.

'Just Wuss.'

'By the great engine of Babbage! What's your number, lad?'

'I don't know.'

'Don't know? Look at your wrist for Jerusalem's sake!'

Wuss looked at one wrist then the other; neither providing an answer to the question. It was an odd puzzle, and he wasn't sure if he was enjoying this part of the game too much.

Trellis jumped up, dragged Wuss to the centre of the room and scrutinised his right wrist. 'He's got no number! Not a trace of it!' he cried.

Lamont came over and examined the offending joint, hurting Wuss in the process. 'Are you a component of the personal computer unit monitored by Maria-2020?' he demanded.

'I was just playing *Getaway*,' said Wuss. The undignified and painful examination of his wrist had angered him, but he suspected that he had to extract some information from these two people before he could proceed.

'Playing *Getaway*?' said Trellis. 'So are we. But I don't remember you being in the script.'

'I need you to tell me the aims of the mission,' Wuss persisted.

'Tell... tell *you*?' replied Trellis. 'Look, we're on again soon. Just run along.'

'I can't leave here,' said Wuss. 'It's where the Direction Finder indicates.'

'I don't know what you are talking about, dear. But I haven't got time for it now. Just sit out of sight, if you must, and keep quiet.'

He pushed Wuss into a corner by some of the fake ammunition crates. The two criminals then sat at the table in a rather contrived pose, pretending to have a conversation. Between them was a two-dimensional bottle of whisky formed from a few carelessly painted triangles of the flimsy material used to create the rest of Marco's hideout. Several minutes passed, and then the two men suddenly relaxed, leaning back in their chairs.

'It's timed out,' said Lamont. 'Pity. I thought we'd make it to the endgame this evening.'

He removed his uniform, while Trellis peeled off his moustache and pulled a cloth from his pocket to wipe the stubble-marks from his face.

'That's fine by me, dear. I've had enough of being an evil criminal mastermind for one day.'

‘What about him?’ asked Lamont, gesturing towards Wuss, who was staring in amazement while Marco and The Wolf transformed themselves into a pair of mild-looking men wearing purple overalls crudely tailored from some coarse material.

‘We’ll have to report him to Maria. He’s obviously got himself confused somehow. As for why he’s got no number...’

‘And what *is* he wearing? You’re right, dear. It’s a problem for our Unit Monitor, not us.’

Lamont spoke to Wuss slowly and in a patronising tone. ‘We’ll take you back to the CPU and you can get your mission orders from there, OK?’

Wuss nodded. The Direction Finder was now pointing out of the hut, so he guessed that whatever action he had needed to undertake was now done.

The three returned to the driveway, reaching the car that Wuss had been driving. Either it had changed or Wuss now realised the truth: it was constructed from coloured polygons of the same lightweight material as the rest of the backgrounds to the *Getaway* game. After they had passed, Wuss looked back to discover that one side of the car had not been created at all – it was an empty, white, angular shell that did not seem to have any depth or breadth. But if his car was not real then where was this place, with its grass and trees that he could see, hear and feel?

They reached a wide steel tube that curled away into the distance in both directions. Trellis pressed a button on its surface. After a few minutes, a capsule could be seen approaching, visible through large rectangular openings in the side of the tube. It hurtled into view then slowed, stopping beside them with a hiss of hydraulics. Lamont opened the doors, and they all stepped into the capsule and sat down. Wuss had no idea where he was going, or what the future held. But the Direction Finder showed that he was travelling in the right direction, and there seemed to be no time limit to this mission.



Mrs de Selby was late for the daily meeting of the Institute. She opened a cupboard and extracted a jar of the red substance that Winston had rejected as a foodstuff earlier. Then she entered what seemed to be a much larger cupboard in the corner of her office. It was made of a hard, brown, flecked material moulded with elaborate scrolls at the corners. Inside, she sat on a padded chair, turned some dials and raised a handle. Then she sat back, her hands grasping the curved ends of the chair’s arms, while two broad rings, each consisting of three concentric circles of green light, surrounded her, then slowly started to rise. A loud humming began, and the two rings became six, then eight, with two larger glowing rings surrounding them as they pulsed ever faster up and down her body.

There was a similar Unit Relocator in the Institute’s conference room. It emitted a loud ping and Mrs de Selby emerged to find the other twenty-three members already seated. All were women and most were advanced in years. Each wore two brooches: one a golden crown to indicate membership of the Institute, and the other showing an individual symbol appropriate to their Module. Mrs de Selby’s was in the form of an eye, the emblem of the Stability Module.

The room was at the very top of the cylindrical section of the headquarters building, and commanded striking views in all directions as it rotated. At the head of the table sat Mrs Turing-1 who, although the oldest person present, seemed the most lively. She was a plump, smiling, apple-cheeked matron wearing a dress in a flowery print with large pockets in the front. Behind her, the single hand of a large,

illuminated Countdown Timer marked with the numbers one to ten indicated the number of hours until the start of the next shift.

In front of each woman was a jar. In most cases, the substance inside was a shade of red, but as she took her seat Mrs de Selby also noticed some greens, purples and oranges around the table. Some of the jars had been opened and were being passed around. Each woman had a spoon and was tasting the substance in each pot before making some notes on an Information Recorder. The atmosphere was very lively. The women were laughing and joking with each other, exchanging views about the jars and the people who had brought each one. This merriment continued for about half an hour until Mrs Turing announced, 'Ladies, ladies. It is time for the results.'

The chattering died away as Mrs Turing consulted her Information Recorder. 'In second place with her rhubarb and ginger is Mrs Watt-15 with thirty-nine points,' she declared, pausing for a polite round of applause. None of the women seemed surprised that their private notes had been monitored and collated to produce the marks being announced by their Chairwoman.

'And in first place is Mrs Arkwright-19's raspberry with forty-two points.'

There was a slightly louder round of applause and some women turned to congratulate Mrs Arkwright, a red-haired, florid-faced lady wearing a pale green cardigan and a long navy-blue skirt.

'There will be another jam-making competition next year,' announced Mrs Turing. 'So all the rest of you ladies have plenty of time to try some new recipes.'

Some young men entered and removed the jars and spoons. Meanwhile, there was renewed buzz of conversation among the women. When this had died down and the servants had left, Mrs Turing continued. 'Now to more important matters. I'd like to ask Mrs Arkwright to report on progress from the Science Module.'

The red-haired woman stood up. 'Progress has been mixed,' she began. 'Professor Rotwang's Locust prototype is in an advanced state of development, and we are monitoring and controlling progress towards the optimum rule set for Jerusalem. However, although the prototype and any clones it has created have been adequately staffed to date, should an unexpected population explosion take place we could not achieve sufficient staffing from the current unit pool. We might have to disable the Locusts, risking delay while the Makers look for a cause.'

'I see,' said Mrs Turing. 'Any suggestions, ladies?'

One of the youngest women in the room spoke up. 'There is another pool. I am referring to the unworn units who call themselves the Legion. Groups of them have sprung up all over the city. They seem disaffected with conventional assignments, but possibly could be motivated if the importance of the Locusts was explained to them.'

'And has the Progress Module recorded all their names and numbers, Mrs Baird?' asked Mrs Turing.

'I... I don't really think that's our...' stuttered Mrs Baird, looking rather flustered.

'We have,' said a muscular, grim-faced woman wearing shiny black overalls and a brooch in the shape of a lightning flash. 'Their leader is James Strummer-12401. He seems to have incited quite a little revolution. The Stability Module has provided me with a list of all the units who have erased their numbers and refused their assignments. They are scheduled for conclusion over the next few days.'

'So the suggestion is that these units could control the Locusts,' said Mrs Turing. 'What do you think, Mrs de Selby?'

'I agree. I have been working with one of these units, and training him to view the Exterior. In my opinion, stability would not be compromised if he were assigned to a

role that he felt was different or alternative in some way. I'm sure that's true for every unit in this so-called Legion.'

'But they would need to know something about the Exterior,' mused Mrs Turing.

'Each Locust commands only a small piece of Window,' responded Mrs de Selby. 'And for the present, these units will be exposed to a very limited part of the Exterior. That should intrigue them without compromising the rollout of Jerusalem.'

'Mrs O'Brien-12,' said Mrs Turing, turning towards the woman in black overalls, 'it seems that concluding these units might be a little premature. Instead, can you gather them together for a briefing by...?' She looked around the room and settled on Mrs de Selby. 'This unit you say you are training. Could he manage these... ah... volunteers?'

'I'm willing to give him a chance,' said Mrs de Selby, making a note on her Information Recorder.

The young Mrs Baird jumped up again. 'I think that the Progress Module needs to be involved,' she said. 'It seems to me that this is the start of the rollout. We need to control the release of information – otherwise rumours will start to spread.'

'I agree, Charlotte,' said Mrs Turing soothingly. 'Do you have anyone who could attend the briefing? Maybe someone who will be able to lever this experience once we start to introduce more specific duties into the information stream?'

Mrs Baird sat down and thought for a moment. 'Ella-14801 has been effective on the Image Sharer, and is from a generation compatible with these Legion units,' she said. 'She has a strong sense of duty, which may help synchronise them to our requirements.'

'So that's settled. Arrange the briefing as soon as possible,' said Mrs Turing. 'Is there any other business?'

An eccentrically dressed woman stood up. She looked as if she had grabbed whatever garments came to hand until she was acceptably covered. Nothing matched or was fully fastened, and some of the articles of clothing were in long need of a wash. She had made an effort to apply some makeup, but the result looked as if this had been attempted in the dark; much of the lipstick had missed her mouth entirely.

Mrs Turing sighed. 'Yes, Mrs St John-16?'

None of the women was entirely sure which module Mrs St John represented. She turned up at every meeting, but her contributions rarely had any relevance to the subject in hand.

'Remember that he who casts the first stone shall find the beam in his own eye,' she stated earnestly.

'Thank you,' replied Mrs Turing briskly. 'Now if there's no more business then it's time for the song.'

The women stood and began to sing, their voices wavering and reedy, '*And did those feet in ancient times...*'



Mrs de Selby returned to Winston, humming a tune. She read what he had recorded, but seemed to be less interested than before, skipping some sections and handing the recorder back to Winston after a short time. She looked at him searchingly, wondering how many of the Institute's plans to reveal. 'Winston,' she said finally, 'there is one more experiment I'd like to try, and then I have a task for you.'

'OK,' said Winston, rather disappointed at the lack of interest she was showing in his latest venture into the other world.

‘We have assumed that you have used the Window to see out through certain machines in the Exterior. But could it work in the other direction?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Could the Makers see *us* through your Window? I mean... once you have got it... tuned in... is maybe what I mean.’

‘I don’t know. I could try.’

‘Yes. Don’t bother with the Information Recorder this time. Just stay in here so I can see what is going on.’

Winston was rather annoyed at the implication that he could not be trusted, but he obediently took the piece of Window from his pocket and looked into the depths of its blank whiteness once more.



The luncheon party had broken up. Lu had been woken, and left quietly after being given another bottle of Pétrus to ease his journey. The only remaining guest was Rotwang, who Paul Mallen had invited for a tour of his laboratory. Bella imagined that the handsome guest who had so charmed her at lunch was going to ask for some funding; her husband always was a soft touch. She hoped Paul would not give too much of her money away. Idly, she wandered into a lounge dominated by a large television. It was nearly time for *Sullivan’s Island*, her favourite soap opera, so she turned the set on and stretched herself languidly into a pink leather sofa in front of the screen. An image appeared of a grinning youth in an ill-fitting green shirt.

‘Hallo, Bella,’ said Winston.

She stared at him, nonplussed. For a while, the two of them looked at each other, then Bella reached for the remote control. But despite changing channels, she could not remove the boy from the screen. Confused and annoyed, she got up and turned the television off at its front panel. Still the youth, now smiling broadly, stared out at her. She did not like the way he was staring at her and, without thinking, she tied the two top buttons of her blouse to reveal less of the tanned skin beneath her gold and ruby pendant. Angrily, she pulled the plug from its socket, but astonishingly the young man was still there. She stared at the plug then at the television. Was this some experiment of her husband’s?

‘Don’t be frightened, Bella,’ said the boy. ‘I think you are very beautiful.’

Bella stared at the screen. How did he know her name? This must be one of Paul’s ridiculous inventions. He was going to pay heavily for frightening her like this.

‘Who are you?’ she whispered, feeling rather foolish.

‘I am Winston-11811. What is your number? What level is indicated by that brooch?’

Bella grasped at the ruby at her breast, feeling that it was being threatened somehow. There was a muttered voice off-screen and the youth disappeared. Bella reconnected the power to the television, but found that he could no longer be seen on any channel. Furious, she stormed off to find her husband.



‘Wow! I spoke to her. And she heard me!’ said Winston, amazed.

‘What happened?’ asked Mrs de Selby.

‘Oh. Didn’t you see her in the Window?’

‘No. All I saw was the usual white sheet.’

‘But you did hear her speak.’

‘No, just you. Was she the woman you saw before?’

'Yeah. Bella is her name.'

'Have you any idea who she is?'

Winston hesitated. Bella did look a little familiar, but he could not quite place where he had seen her before. 'None of them look totally weird,' he hazarded. 'I mean considering they're from another world and that.'

'I don't think it really matters what they look like,' said Mrs de Selby. 'What interests me is the way you seem to be drawn to the lives of this particular group of Makers. Do they have something they want to say to us or... oh! Wait a minute...'

She reached for her information recorder and recovered Winston's account of the Mallens' luncheon party. She then thought for a long time while Winston sat apprehensively in the armchair. Finally, she spoke again.

'I'm beginning to wonder if what you see in the Exterior has some specific relevance to our own plans. You know that the Progress Module chooses to report the most important news first. Maybe you are being shown the most significant events that are happening in the Exterior.'

Winston stroked his piece of Window. 'It would have to be very clever to work that out,' he said.

'Yes, but what other explanation could there be? Obviously, there is not some other person choosing whose lives to weave together. And it can't be coincidence that you saw Rotwang...' Mrs de Selby snapped out of her thoughtful mood and became more brisk and authoritative. 'Anyway, we are not going to solve that problem today. I said I had a job for you and I'd like to explain it.'

Winston tried to look attentive.

'We need some volunteers to staff some very new units,' continued Mrs de Selby. 'They are called Locusts. What makes them different is that the Makers don't have much control of these machines once they are in operation, although, of course, we are still responsible for keeping them running. Each of the Locusts contains a camera, so we have a piece of Window that shows what they can see. Do you understand so far?'

Winston was not sure that he understood at all, but he thought it best to nod.

'There will be just a few at first, but as more of the Locusts are made, many additional workers will be needed. I'd like you, Winston, to be in charge of the component that controls them, reporting directly to me.'

'Me? A Component Regulator? Wow!' Winston could hardly believe what he was hearing. 'Can I have my number re-evaluated?'

Mrs de Selby pretended to think for a while. 'Later, maybe. We'll see how well you manage. I'm taking a bit of a chance on you, Winston.' She reached for the blue porcelain cup and examined him unnervingly while sipping her chocolate.

Winston tried to look more confident than he felt. 'I'll do what I can. But...'

'I hope so. Your component will be formed from some people I think you may already know: James Strummer-12401 and his so-called Legion.'

'James! But he's... he's...' stammered Winston. 'I can't be in charge of him.'

'I think you can,' said Mrs de Selby. 'James and his followers are perfectly functional units. They just want some work that's a little different, with a clear point to it. I can guarantee that staffing the Locusts will not be dull, and that one day you will all be very proud of the contribution you have made.'

'What do you mean?' asked Winston, convinced that James would never accept such vague promises. 'Has it got something to do with Jerusalem?'

Mrs de Selby leaned forward and looked Winston directly in the eye. 'The Locusts *are* Jerusalem,' she hissed. Conscious of having said too much, she reassumed her

authoritative tone. 'There are some things that I want you to keep secret. In particular, everything you know about the Exterior and about Window.'

'Oh! But I wanted to tell...'

'I am serious, Winston. If you tell anybody about these things then you will be returned to the Conclusion Module. And this time there will be no reprieve.'

Winston realised that this fate, to which he had been resigned just a day ago, was now something he wished to keep as distant as possible. He had to make the most of this opportunity. 'OK, I understand,' he replied reluctantly.

'I will let you keep that piece of Window so you can explore what more you can do with it. Units in your component will hold the smaller pieces that show the view from each Locust, helping them to work in an efficient and co-ordinated manner.'

'But everyone will want to know what the Window is showing.'

'No more than any other unit able to image the Exterior. Their duty is to ensure that their unit runs effectively, not to speculate about what they see in the Window. However, in view of the special nature of the Locusts, you will be assisted by an operative from the Progress Module.' She consulted her Information Recorder. 'Her name is Ella-14801. She is being briefed by Mrs Baird-20 at present.'

Winston thrilled to hear the name. Working with Ella! This was getting better and better. 'Great!' he said. 'When do we start?'

Mrs de Selby turned to the Information Recorder again. 'I will directing all units assigned to your Locust Component to assemble at First Shift tomorrow in building 51912, room 2100. That is in the Science Module's offices below us, which is where you will be based. In the meantime, I suggest that you return to your quarters and think about how you will tackle your new role.'

Winston muttered some thanks, left the room and entered the Unit Mover. The piece of Window sat in his pocket, almost burning him with its potential to show him a new life.



'Fascinating. It's almost like looking at a newly-discovered species,' said Paul Mallen, squinting down a microscope at Rotwang's prototype. The young inventor stood at his side, pointing out significant details and explaining how the tiny robot worked.

'How do you program and enter the rule-sets?' asked Mallen.

'The programming is undertaken on a conventional PC using a language of my own design,' replied Rotwang. 'Machine-level instructions are downloaded via the infra-red interface you can see just to the left of the main sensor window.'

'I see. And what rules do you intend to use initially?'

'As you saw earlier, this one is programmed merely to reproduce. In itself this is useless; the colony would expand endlessly, but achieve nothing.'

'Except that the available material would eventually be exhausted. Good god, man! If they weren't contained they'd eat the entire world!'

Rotwang laughed unconvincingly. 'Yah, we must ensure that doesn't happen. But to answer your question, the next stage is to permit the units to communicate with each other. If we examine ants, a population of just a few will wander about at random, not even trying to build a nest. But as the colony grows, a critical mass is eventually reached that enables it to act as a single powerful unit.'

'And how will you know when that has happened?'

'I am going to set a simple task, such as building a bridge. Every Apollo clone will be programmed with this task as its primary aim, and of course we will supply

sufficient materials for it to be achieved. Such a task is too difficult for a single machine, but once critical mass is reached, we will see if the colony as a whole can achieve it.'

'I'd like to see that!'

'Of course you will. I would be honoured to have you present. But in the short term, I don't really have sufficient resources to continue...'

He was interrupted by the entrance of a furious Bella. 'How dare you scare me like that! Weird perverts coming out of the television screen when it's turned off! I've never been so frightened in my life! Well? What do you mean by it?'

Rotwang shrank back. He had considerable experience in the calming of infuriated women – and their enraged husbands – but decided that this one was a problem for his host.

Paul had seen Bella in such moods before, so attempted the approach that usually pacified her. 'Now don't worry dear. Who has upset you? Or do you want some money? Buy yourself something nice, eh?'

For some reason, this just seemed to incense her further. 'Money? No amount of money can compensate for living in this madhouse! You are spying on me aren't you! Is that it? Where is that boy? Is he some stupid experiment of yours?'

'What boy is this?' asked Mallen, grasping the only fact he could understand from this diatribe.

'The boy that appears on the television. He even knew my name!'

'And what programme was that, dear? Do you want me to make a complaint?'

'He wasn't on a programme, you idiot. The set was switched off!'

'I see. Well, you must have been tired after being so charmingly entertaining at lunchtime...'

'It wasn't a bloody dream for god's sake! There was a young boy on the screen; he said "Hallo, Bella" and then that he was called Winston something. Who is he and how did he know my name?'

'Winston something?'

'Yes, I think he said a number. Anyway, it doesn't matter what he said. Why have you set up the TV to spy on me?'

Rotwang decided to attempt to defuse the situation. He could see that unless he could speak to Paul Mallen alone again, any chance of obtaining additional resources would disappear. 'Perhaps we can undertake a scientific examination of this television,' he suggested.

Mallen seized on the idea. 'Yes. Let's have a look at it, eh... dear?' he offered.

Bella looked at the two men suspiciously. 'You'd better show me how you did it,' she demanded. 'And then I want you to promise that nothing like this will ever happen again.' She led them to the lounge and the now-dormant television. However, nothing they could do could demonstrate that it was capable of anything out of the ordinary. Paul Mallen was prepared to add the incident to the long list of his wife's unaccountable rages, but Rotwang seemed more interested.

'You work closely with machines,' he said to Paul. 'Don't you ever suspect that there is some independent sense to them – some inner intelligence with which you need to empathise before they can be made to work?'

'What rot!' replied Mallen. 'There's nothing in this TV except a collection of valves and wires. The only intelligence they have is the ability to break down two days after their guarantee runs out.'

'That boy didn't look too intelligent, so if he's running anything then god help us!' added Bella. She had calmed down a little, and was soon happy to accept her

husband's assurances that he was not spying on her, and that he would respond immediately if she saw any more strange broadcasts. The pact was sealed with the promise of a future visit to Tiffany's.

The two men returned to the laboratory, where Rotwang was soon able to obtain a large cheque and a free run of Mallen's extensive facilities for experimentation. Just as they were returning the Apollo prototype to its silver case, a siren sounded.

'That's the alarm!' said Mallen. 'Come this way! We'll see them on the CCTV.' He led Rotwang to a room with a bank of TV screens on one wall, which cycled through views of the entire interior and grounds of Mallen Lodge. Paul scanned the displays and pressed some buttons. 'There they are,' he said, indicating one of the screens. 'Those two chaps walking up the path.'

Rotwang could see that this was indeed the case. One intruder was tall and thin and the other small and furtive-looking, although both seemed to be moving quite confidently in the direction of the house.

'They don't look too familiar,' said Mallen. 'Let's go and ask them what they want.'

'We must take someone else,' suggested Rotwang. 'They might be burglars. They might get violent. And Apollo... we must look after that very carefully.'

'They don't *look* too violent – especially that short one. But better safe than sorry, eh? We'll pick up Sam and George by the front door.'



'Can we go back now? It's nearly quarter to four,' said Cedric, for whom a new danger loomed behind every tree that bordered the long drive leading to Mallen Lodge.

'It's half three and we're going up to the house,' replied Duke. 'Hang on. What's that noise?'

It was the arrival of a vehicle resembling a large golf-cart, powered by one of Mallen's fusion motors, which stopped in front of the two intruders. Three men dismounted, their expressions doing little to indicate that this was a welcoming committee. A smartly dressed, pale-haired individual remained on the cart, but looked equally unfriendly.

'I say... ah... who are you?' asked the oldest of the four, who the intruders immediately recognised from innumerable TV and newspaper features concerning the fusion motor.

'We're on a hike and seem to have got lost. Can you direct us to Benbow?' asked Duke, unable to suppress a threatening tone to his voice.

'Benbow? Well let me see... ah...' began Mallen. 'I think it is east of here. Or is it west?' He turned to Rotwang.

'They don't look like hikers to me,' pointed out the inventor. 'That one is wearing a suit, and neither have suitable footwear. Furthermore, this path leads only to your house.'

'Oh, I say... er... do you think we should call the police?' asked Mallen. He turned to his other companions, who Duke assumed were servants of some description. 'Sam. You've got a... um... mobile thingy. Could you... er...'

Cedric's heart was thumping. The police! This was his chance to get away. But was he now an accomplice in whatever Croker had been planning? Could he claim they had forced him to do it? And if he did get away then would they come back for him later? Suddenly he spotted something. 'I say,' he said, 'is that a Railway Modellers Club tie?'

‘Gosh, yes,’ replied Mallen, looking down at the green and yellow striped material with its embroidered emblem. ‘Fancy you knowing that.’

Cedric indicated a small badge that sat almost unnoticeably on the lapel of his tweed jacket. ‘London and Midland Area second prize, best layout of 2002,’ he announced proudly.

‘Really!’ said Mallen ‘That’s quite an achievement. Crikey! You must have come to see my Irish Mail Service models. I’ve just finished painting a Gullion Class 2-8-2.’

‘Really! Was that the one with the thermic siphon to protect the crown-sheet?’ asked Cedric.

‘Yes, indeed. It greatly increased the effective heating surface. Did you know it was first used in the Baltic 4-6-4 with Gresley’s high-pressure water-tube boiler?’

‘Oh yes – the one with the rear configured as one Cartazzi axle with a separate two-wheel radial truck.’

‘What a machine! It was technically a 4-6-2-2. Mind you, before the invention of the Walschaerts Gear... What are you doing man? These chaps have only come to see my railway layouts.’ This last remark was addressed to the servant, Sam, who had contacted the police and was awaiting instructions. Everyone else, including Duke, was looking at Mallen and Cedric with a mixture of pity and contempt.

‘Didn’t they say they were hiking?’ asked Rotwang suspiciously.

‘Just down the path, you understand,’ replied Duke quickly. ‘We’re big railway fans. We’ve come a long way to see Mr Mallen’s layouts.’

‘That’s quite understandable,’ said Mallen ‘Now just hop on here and I’ll give you a look around. Budge up you two and I’ll sit next to Mr...’

‘Smallcreep. Cedric Smallcreep,’ said Cedric, ignoring a dig in the ribs from Duke. ‘And this is Mr Duke.’ He received an even harder dig and realised he was supposed to have given some false names. To compensate, he entertained his fellow-passengers all the way to the doors of Mallen Lodge with detailed descriptions of low-pressure cylinders, cut-offs, regulators and wheel configurations of vintage locomotives.



Wuss was excited by the speed of the Unit Mover, and by the view revealed through the holes in the capsule and outer tube. At first, there was a succession of farms and fields – an alien landscape to his urban eyes. But soon the Mover was racing through a more familiar environment: huge estates of high-rise apartments joined by walkways where gangs of older boys were idling the day away. He was glad that his internal Direction Finder pointed onwards rather than obliging him to encounter this ugly suburban wilderness. It was only as the capsule approached the centre of the city that Wuss realised that the world he had entered was very different from the one he had left. The buildings were unimaginably huge and their designs were totally unlike those found in London. He sat amazed and confused. Was he in a foreign city or was this all a bizarre dream? The Mover looped around the centre, revealing the monumental architecture of the headquarters of the Institute beaming its incomprehensible date into the sky, then entered a tunnel high within another immense brown-clad structure and slowed to a halt.

Trellis was appointed to guide Wuss to the mysterious Maria, so Lamont wished good luck to both of them before boarding another Unit Mover to his quarters. Trellis and Wuss walked along endless corridors containing innumerable openings, behind which busy-looking operatives could be seen engaged in unfathomable tasks. Eventually, they came to a room, not particularly distinguishable from any of the

others, which Trellis entered, beckoning Wuss to follow. They passed a long line of desks, where identical-looking sallow-skinned workers were absorbed in piles of calculations that they passed between them at bewildering speed. A little bus stopped regularly between the desks, taking and delivering the sheets of arithmetic before disappearing into an almost infinite distance, where another army of workers seemed to be occupied in turning vast banks of switches on and off.

Trellis knocked at the door of a small office area, partitioned from the rest of the room, where a white-haired woman sat at a desk. But when she looked up, Wuss was surprised to see that she was not old but middle-aged and attractive, with piercing blue eyes. ‘Dermot!’ she said, revealing a strong American accent. ‘It’s good to see you. How’s it going?’ She stood and gave Trellis a token kiss on the cheek.

‘Maria, darling,’ replied Trellis, ‘you’re looking particularly gorgeous today.’
 ‘You old charmer. Who are you playing at the moment? Is it still that loser, Marco?’

‘Oh, he’s not that bad,’ replied Trellis. ‘At least it’s better than my last assignment. I ask you – someone of my skills having to take the speaking part in an automated lift.’ He adopted the tones of a synthesised voice, ‘“First floor”, “doors opening”, “lift going down”, “ground floor”, “have a nice day”. I tell you, another week and I’d have been begging for conclusion.’

‘You poor man.’

‘Anyway, we’ve almost reached the endgame for this run of *Getaway*. But for some reason there was a timeout today.’

‘Yeah, we noticed that, too. The task is still running, and there is the occasional twitch on the controls, but the context is all over the place. We’re still looking at it.’

‘Good luck. Anyway, although seeing you is a pleasure that never fades, that’s not why I dropped in. I have a problem, too.’ He placed his hand on Wuss’ shoulder. ‘We found this character on the set today. He doesn’t seem to know who he is, or who he works for. He claims he’s called Wuss, but get this – he doesn’t have a number.’

‘No number? I’ve heard a rumour about these young, low-grade units. They have been erasing their numbers and refusing assignments. Maria turned to Wuss. ‘Are you in the Legion?’

‘Er... no... I was playing *Getaway*,’ replied Wuss, certain only of this one thing.

‘But you don’t work for me, do you,’ said Maria. ‘Were you in a copy of *Getaway* running on some other PC?’

‘No, it’s my PC. My dad nicked it for me.’

‘Dad? Nicked? I can never understand what you new units are saying. Show me your number.’

Wuss reluctantly held his hands out for inspection once more.

Maria examined his right wrist closely. ‘It’s not been covered up. It’s almost like he never had one,’ she remarked to Trellis, who had edged towards the exit. Maria noticed this. ‘Sorry, Dermot,’ she said. ‘You can go now. I’ll deal with this.’ She rose again and gave Trellis another passionless kiss. He said his goodbyes and departed.

Maria turned once more to Wuss. ‘Where are your work-clothes? And how did you get this bruise?’ she asked, tenderly stroking the affected area of his face.

Wuss hesitated. He didn’t want to get his father into any trouble because he knew that this would later be reflected in another violent fit of rage in which he would doubtless collect further injury. ‘I don’t know,’ he replied, his eyes downcast.

‘I think you’ve had an accident and lost your memory,’ said Maria gently. ‘You need to get to the Unit Repair Module. Do you know where that is?’

Wuss shook his head.

‘You poor kid,’ said Maria. ‘Look, I’ve just finished my shift. Come home with me for the rest of today and I’ll take you for repair tomorrow. How long is it since you had any nourishment? Or any downtime? And those clothes! How many days have you been wearing those? I’ll get you some new ones.’

Wuss smiled at her. He was very hungry and he wondered if Maria would give him some money to buy a burger, like his mother sometimes did when a meal-time approached. He stretched out a friendly hand and Maria clasped it affectionately. Inside his head, there was a sound as if someone had stroked a set of chimes, indicating that the first item in his inventory had now been located. He looked affectionately up at Maria’s caring face, at her white hair tied back by a blue bow, and then at the silver brooch in the shape of a crown that she wore on the lapel of her jacket. Something about the way she had caressed his bruises had improved his understanding of the mission aims, which now seemed to embrace far more than driving getaway cars.



‘Three bleeding hours. Three *hours*,’ moaned Duke.

The gangsters were in the Jaguar, Duchess as always at the wheel, returning to the hotel.

‘We thought you’d been nabbed,’ said Croker, his ever-present cigar filling the car with its characteristic aroma.

‘If the law had bust in, I’d have welcomed them with open arms,’ said Duke. ‘Trying to look interested while them two was prattling on about flexible bogies and foaming poppet-valves...’

‘You don’t get foaming in the poppet-valves, actually,’ said Cedric, whose nasal whine was beginning to irritate Duke considerably. ‘It occurs when water is carried into the main cylinder with the steam, resulting in a sharp loss of superheat as well as possible damage to the piston valve liners. A suitable castor oil emulsion will...’

‘Yeah, well, I think we owe Cedric a vote of thanks,’ interrupted Croker. ‘I never thought we’d get into the house, but while he kept old Mallen talking and showing off his model railways, Duke got a good look at the alarms.’

‘Yeah and I saw some good stuff too. There’s a load of medals and suchlike in a display cabinet that didn’t have a lock on it. And I reckon I know where them papers by old Leonardo are kept.’

‘In the bookcase next to the model of the old Oslo to Bergen carriage,’ said Cedric. ‘Yes, I did notice those. And we mustn’t miss the safe; it’s behind that picture of the 4-8-0 tender in steam on the narrow-gauge Burtonport branch line.’

The other three turned to look at Cedric in astonishment.

‘Who’d have thought it?’ said Croker. ‘I said you’d be useful.’

‘The problem,’ said Cedric, ‘is going to be the CCTV. It’s everywhere.’

‘OK, we’ll make a plan when we get back,’ said Croker. ‘I’ve brought the map up to date, at least as far as I could see from the outside. I think I’ve spotted an easy way to get into the house. After that we can either be quick or be nasty.’

The car turned a corner and Croker was once more made aware of the sea of table-tennis balls that swirled around the floor. ‘I though I told you to get rid of those,’ he stated angrily. ‘And these bloody jars of sauce. I can’t hardly move my legs down here.’

‘Sorry Guv,’ said Duchess, knowing Croker had given no such command. ‘I must have forgot.’

‘Although...,’ mused Croker, ‘maybe they’re *meant* to be there. It could be unlucky if we took them out now. You can’t take any risks with the luck in this game. We need someone to keep watch over us.’



Winston had returned to his apartment. Now it was time to see what else he could achieve with his piece of Window. He got it out and placed it on the table. As always, the sheet was completely white and featureless, although it did seem to glow slightly – or was that his imagination? Where did he want to go today?



In one corner of Paul Mallen’s lab, a laptop computer was displaying its screen saver. With infinite patience, the machine drew a maze, traced a path through it, then erased the screen in preparation for a new configuration in a different colour.

Mallen had escorted his two visitors to the gates, enjoying the opportunity for a final chat about the great days of steam. Now he was helping Rotwang set up the experiment that he intended to conduct the next day. The two scientists had prepared a large sealed glass box in which there were two similar but smaller boxes, about a foot apart and open at the top. One was filled with an assortment of materials – pieces of metal, plastic and minerals – while the other was empty except for a hollow vinyl tube, coloured a bright yellow and lying on its side.

‘That should be enough,’ said Rotwang. ‘I will program Apollo so that its primary aim is to enter the yellow tube. Then we will place it in tray A. The walls are too high for it to climb, but it can still detect the tube in tray B – a brave new world for it to reach and to explore, hein?’

‘But why won’t it cut through the glass?’

‘That is prohibited by its programming. Apollo has instructions not to process certain substances, including silver and gold. That is why I keep it in a silver box.’

‘And the same instructions will be promulgated to any copies of the original prototype that are created.’

‘Yah, they will be permitted to create further copies, communicate with one other, hunt for more materials and so on.’

‘So you really expect them to build a bridge?’

‘Once the right trigger conditions are reached. The critical point is a function of population, communication and availability of materials.’

‘Gosh! Isn’t science fun!’

Rotwang looked at his wealthy host with the manic expression that Mallen had thought rather unpleasant at the lunch party. ‘Fun?’ he said derisively. ‘What we are doing here is not for fun.’ He gestured towards the glass box containing the experiment. ‘I will set my machines a task and they will undertake it without favour, without distraction, without self-interest. But what is *our* primary aim, eh? What gap are we humans trying to bridge?’

‘Well... er... I’ve never been much of a religious man...,’ began Mallen, taken aback by the intensity with which his companion was speaking.

‘Religion? Just a diversion for simpletons,’ scorned Rotwang. ‘God isn’t compatible with modern technology. Tell me, have you ever considered who on this planet is not employed in some sort of service industry? We have farmers to keep us fed, garment-makers to keep us warm, bankers to oil the wheels. Who is not providing a service to someone else?’

‘Well... I... er... How about artists? There’s architects... no, maybe not... but painters, poets, authors and the like.’

‘No no, they are providing a service, too: supplying entertainment, keeping everyone sane, diverting the minds of idiots from the tedium of their pitiful little lives. Don’t you see? There is only one profession that is pure. Science, Mallen! That is the aim of the human race: to discover, to explore, to reveal the secrets of the universe, to solve the puzzles that your god has posed. We scientists are at the front line. The function of everybody else is to provide and maintain the environment in which we can operate.’

‘But... um... surely scientists are providing a service, too. Inventing things that will make life easier and so on. I mean my fusion motor...’

‘That is because you are not pure, Mallen. Science is not about inventing things; we leave that to *engineers*.’ He almost spat the word. ‘Where are the benefits in the discovery of a new star, in classifying a genus of moths or in solving some abstruse mathematical problem that no other person could even understand? *That* is science. The purpose of what we are doing here is not to provide you with the money for a new train set...’

‘Oh I say!’

‘My apologies,’ Rotwang visibly calmed himself before continuing, running his hands through his hair. ‘But you must understand my motivation. The bridge we are building is the one that leads from the known to the unknown. It is a winding, slippery and narrow path, where one mistake could lose us everything. But there lies our duty – and it is not “fun”.’

‘Gosh. Well, I think that’s enough philosophy for one day. We seem to have everything set up now. Do you want me to show you to your room?’ Mallen spoke coldly, his puppyish enthusiasm having been quashed by the manic passion of Rotwang’s vision.

‘No, Sam showed me earlier. I just want to program the prototype machine tonight. Then we will be ready to start the experiment in the morning.’

‘Very well, then. Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight. And let us look forward to tomorrow.’ Rotwang looked at the retreating figure of Paul Mallen with disdain before turning towards his laptop, which had just completed a path through a maze of its own design.



Cedric had redrawn the plan of Mallen Lodge, pooling the knowledge that the gang had gained in their reconnaissance missions. The four men sat in their hotel bedroom and pored over it eagerly.

‘There’s four sets of gates, one at each corner, with a gravelled drive from each one to the house,’ said Cedric, pointing to the diagram.

‘And two thousand three hundred and two railings,’ added Duchess. Everybody ignored him.

‘I reckon the easiest way in is through here – the ones with the lions carved on the gateposts,’ said Croker. ‘Then we can take a short-cut through these woods so no one can see us.’

‘There seems no reason, but there’s definitely a blind spot for the cameras there,’ agreed Cedric, bushing some cigar-ash off the diagram.

‘So we can cross almost to the French windows with no worries,’ said Croker, tracing a route across the grounds.

‘But them gates with the lions was well locked,’ Duchess pointed out.

‘Well, that ain’t going to stop us,’ said Croker. ‘A bit of jelly and we’ll be in. You did bring some jelly didn’t you, Duke?’

‘Jelly, Guv? Where have you been? It’s Semtex now. I’ve got a lump and a couple of fuses,’ replied Duke, grinning at the thought of the destruction to come.

‘I’m just worried that it all seems a bit too easy,’ said Cedric. ‘I mean, why cover the grounds with cameras and then leave such an obvious way in?’

‘Don’t be such an old woman for god’s sake,’ derided Croker. ‘Lumpy said old Mallen was a bit gaga. He just forgot a few cameras.’

‘He also said that Mallen may have rigged up some traps,’ retorted Cedric. ‘Maybe that’s where they’ll be.’

‘Good point. But don’t worry – my Guardian Angel will be keeping an eye out. Have you two got shooters?’

‘Dutch has got a sawn-off and I’ve got me shivs,’ replied Duke, bringing out a vicious-looking knife and demonstrating its sharpness on some hotel notepaper.

Cedric turned away and even Croker was somewhat repulsed by the pale man’s single-minded dissection of the paper into ever-thinner shreds. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I don’t want any trouble unless it’s absolutely necessary. Dutch, I want you to rice up that shotgun; that way we’ll be able to create a lot of noise, but not hurt anyone too bad. And put that knife away, Duke – you’re making me nervous. What’s it like outside?’

Duke pulled the curtain aside. ‘Just getting dark,’ he said. ‘Raining a bit, too.’

‘Ideal. Right, everyone ready?’

Duchess was busy filling his cartridges with rice. Cedric wondered for the hundredth time that day whether he was going to spend the rest of his life in jail, but he gave a thin smile of assent.

‘OK, it’s time to see what little secrets Mallen Lodge is hiding,’ said Croker. ‘Let’s go.’



Rotwang took the silver box from his pocket and arranged some equipment so that the tiny machine inside could be programmed via an infra-red link to the computer. Then he invoked the application that allowed him to manipulate the aims and capabilities of the insect-like robot. However, much to his annoyance, a message box appeared on the screen.

>Hallo Professor Rotwang. Can I help at all?

Winston was puzzled to see that his spoken words were appearing as written messages on Rotwang’s PC, which he could see as a mirror image through the Window. He was equally puzzled when the inventor keyed in a reply, which scrolled into the reflection of the message box.

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Winston noted that unlike Bella Mallen, Rotwang seemed completely unconcerned to be communicating with him. But who was Mercury? He spoke again.

>I am Winston-11811.

Rotwang remembered Bella’s experience earlier in the day. Hadn’t she mentioned that the youth was called Winston? This was getting interesting.

Are you the boy who appeared on Bella’s TV today?

>Yes but I'm not a boy - I'm 5939 days old.

Do you report to Mercury or are you a separate application?

There was a long pause. Winston didn't know how to answer such a question. Eventually he replied.

>I don't know who Mercury is. I can see you from inside the PC using my Window.

Do you mean Microsoft Windows?

>I don't understand you.

Rotwang thought for a while. Winston could not be a computer application because he had also appeared on the TV. This was a noteworthy development, but was it relevant to his plans? Was Winston going to be useful, or just an annoyance? He tapped on the keyboard once more.

Why could Bella see and hear you on the TV but you communicate with me using text messages?

There was another pause. Rotwang began to wonder if Winston was something of a simpleton. Eventually a reply appeared.

>It must be something about the type of unit. I am talking to the Window just as I did to Bella.

It is not the machine. For some reason you have been channelled through an application that does not use pictures or sound. What is this Window? What does it look like?

>Usually it is white. When I look into it, I see into the Exterior. Right now, it shows you sitting in a chair, dressed in grey clothes with something red around your neck.

Rotwang glanced at his cravat. Clearly, Winston was not lying. He typed again.

Can you choose what to see through the Window?

>No. It shows what it wants me to see.

What do you know about the Exterior?

>It is where you live. It is where the machines that we manage are made and used.

If Rotwang was surprised or concerned by this news, he did not show it.

What do you want to know?

Winston chose the issue that concerned him most.

>Do you like Bella Mallen? I think she is very beautiful.

Rotwang decided that this was just some youth who was trying to make him look a fool. It was disappointing to realise that even the best run societies still had problems in controlling unruly elements.

I think you should clear off before you get into trouble. Who is your Unit Monitor?

>I do not have a Unit Monitor. I am the Regulator of the Locust Component.

Rotwang stared at the PC with a puzzled frown. This was more than he had hoped for, although he still suspected that the boy was just larking about.

In that case, I am very pleased to communicate with you. I made the prototype Locust. I call it Apollo. I hope you enjoy your work. Together we will achieve Jerusalem.

Again there was a long pause. Winston realised that the experiment that he had heard the two scientists discussing involved his Locusts in some way. But what had it to do with Jerusalem? He fingered the piece of Window nervously. Maybe he should stop using it now. Things were getting a little too deep and dangerous. He just wanted to use the Locusts for a bit of fun, to give him a role and to impress Ella. On the other hand, Rotwang was clearly an important man; he needed to keep him happy.

>Can I help you with your experiments?

Rotwang smiled. The lad had clearly not been told too much. Well, it was not his job to educate; he just provided the technology.

Just follow your instructions. Get some experience with the Locusts. In a few days you will be told some more.

>OK, Goodbye.

The message box disappeared and Rotwang resumed the task that Winston had interrupted: programming the small robot with a new set of rules. Looking around to see that he was not observed, he then invoked another application and admired the stunning vision that appeared on the screen. What use did he have for a selfish, vain airhead like Bella Mallen when he had been promised this gorgeous creature? He gazed lasciviously at her full breasts, lightly rising and falling beneath her tight sweater, then at her brief brown shorts and the long, long legs that promised so much. Oh, if she would just smile! But she gazed at him impassively, all emotion hidden by her sunglasses.

‘Mercury, my reward,’ he whispered. ‘The gates are opening. Soon we will be together.’



The Jaguar was safely parked in a secluded lane and the four crooks walked in light rain towards one of the corner entrances to Mallen Lodge. The gateposts took the form of two huge heraldic lions carved from white stone. Hinges were set into the front and hind paws of each beast, giving the impression that they were holding the ornate wrought iron gates, which were securely locked by an ancient-looking but sturdy mechanism.

In the dim light, Croker evaluated the situation with an expert eye. ‘Best to blow out the hinges,’ he said. ‘These old locks can survive anything.’

Duke extracted a soft, putty-like material from his pocket. The other three instinctively took a step backwards.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Duke, smiling maliciously. ‘It’s quite safe until the fuses go in. The trouble is that I’ve not used this stuff before; I knew where I was with jelly. I reckon I’ll use half now and save the rest in case we need it later.’

‘OK, shove some round each foot of these lions. And get a bloomin’ move on,’ commanded Croker.

Duke busied himself with plastic explosive and fuses for a while, then indicated that they should all start running. They hadn’t travelled fifty yards when an enormous blast picked them off their feet and threw them forward, a wave of heat rolling across

their backs. A massive noise cracked through the night sky and shattered lumps of masonry filled the air, some hitting the four men as they lay stunned in the damp grass. They gradually picked themselves up and looked back at the gates. The stone lions had been comprehensively destroyed, the gates were buckled and leaning, and a cloud of grey smoke rose above the trees, disappearing into the darkness.

Croker looked at Duke, who was staggering to his feet, his normally spotless clothes now torn and muddied. 'You're only supposed to blow the bloody paws off!' he cried.

'Sorry Guv. That stuff has more clout than I thought.'

'Bloody hell. Are you two OK?'

Cedric and Duchess indicated that they were uninjured. Some sirens could be heard, although it was impossible to tell if they were inside or outside the house.

'Come on,' said Croker. 'Let's scarper.'



J-3060

Winston awoke once more in his new apartment. As he dressed, he thought about the day ahead with some apprehension. It was great to be in charge of a component, but he didn't really know how to go about it. James was the key – he could get everyone on his side. But didn't this mean that it was James who was really in charge? And then there was Ella, who always seemed so poised and confident. Was he just going to show her how useless he was at everything?

He looked at the piece of Window in the wall of his room. The rising sun was mingling fiery sparks with silver flashes over the glassy surface of a calm sea. He touched its surface, still unable to believe that what it showed was the light of another day in another world. However, this thought was enough to give him some resolve; he knew some things that many people did not, and he had a unique power that impressed Mrs de Selby. Whatever happened, no one could take that away.

Feeling hungry, he used the Nourishment Dispenser. Ugh! Fish! He hated that. He remembered the jars containing the red substance, took one from the cupboard, unscrewed its lid and sniffed. It certainly seemed edible. Surely, Mrs de Selby would not leave him something poisonous. Daringly, he touched its surface with his tongue. It tasted good. It tasted fantastic! It was the nicest thing he had ever eaten! He tried tipping the jar into his mouth, but the substance was too viscous to come out. Then he remembered seeing some tools that would be ideal for removing the contents, and found a large number of them in a drawer. He examined one. The end of it was scooped, so he used this to withdraw a large glob of the sticky red stuff and place it into his mouth. Mmmm! Wonderful! Soon the pot was empty and Winston felt slightly sick. He placed a further jar into his pocket along with one of the silver implements.

The Information Sharer announced a long list of people who were to report to building 51912, room 2100. Among them, Winston heard the names of Ella, James and himself. The journey was not a long one, so when he arrived only Mrs de Selby was in the room, along with a younger woman who he did not recognise.

'Ah! Winston,' said Mrs de Selby. Allow me to introduce you to Mrs Baird-20. She is the Controller of the Progress Module.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Winston, who thought the rather nervous-looking Mrs Baird was considerably less scary than Mrs de Selby.

'I've heard a lot about you, Winston,' said Mrs Baird. 'I hope you will make this project a success.'

'I'll try my best,' said Winston nervously. 'I wish I knew what it was all about.'

'You soon will, don't worry. We are always ready to help if you have any problems.'

Currently, there was only one problem on Winston's mind. He took the jar and the silver tool from his pocket. 'What are these called?' he asked.

The two women laughed. 'That's jam in the jar,' said Mrs Baird. 'We make it ourselves. That looks like Mrs de Selby's strawberry if I'm not mistaken.'

'Last year's. I'd forgotten all about it,' confirmed Mrs de Selby.

'It's very nice,' said Winston.

'The other thing is called a spoon,' said Mrs de Selby. 'Jam is one of the benefits of working for the Institute. I'm glad you like it. I'll find some more for you tomorrow.'

Now the room was beginning to fill up, mostly with young men, thrilled but apprehensive at the experience of being in the Institute headquarters for the first time. They chatted animatedly among themselves, giving the occasional glance towards Winston and the two ladies who stood talking together at the front of the room. Winston noticed that some of the Legion had daubed their brown clothes with letters and patterns, and greased their hair into weird sculptural shapes. “Now Future” read one of the slogans, “White Diet” another. The words meant nothing, but the contemptuous attitude they represented both thrilled and worried Winston – how would he ever get these people to do what they were asked?

Ella arrived and went straight up to Winston, who flushed a deep red. ‘I had a very long and exciting chat with Mrs Baird yesterday,’ she said. ‘I can’t wait to get started, can you?’

‘No, it’s going to be very interesting,’ replied Winston, keen to be seen sharing her enthusiasm. ‘I’d like to know what she told you. We’ll have to swap stories later.’

Last to arrive was James, who looked around scornfully at the assembled crowd. A painted slogan on his shirt read “Stiff Little Wingers”. He slouched up to Winston. ‘Are the kids united?’ he asked, fingering the collar of the new green uniform and clearly waiting to see if its wearer was still one of his followers.

It was a tense moment. Winston thought hard. ‘Sure,’ he replied. ‘It’s better to lie on your feet than dive on your knees.’

James failed to look unimpressed. ‘I thought you’d gone to the crusher,’ he said. ‘That’s what your protos told me.’

Winston felt a pang of guilt. Maybe he should attempt to tell his parents that he was still active. ‘Well, here I am,’ he replied. ‘I got this assignment instead, and it’s the biggest thing you’ve ever seen.’

‘Yeah? So who are the rusties?’ asked James, indicating Mrs de Selby and Mrs Baird.

Winston lowered his voice ‘They’re both from the Institute,’ he said. ‘That’s how important this is.’

James was astounded. ‘And you were *talking* to them?’ He recognised Ella and scowled at her. ‘I suppose you’re here to chrome us all up for the Sharer,’ he sneered.

Ella looked at James coldly. ‘I am now assigned to the Locust Component, regulated by Winston-11811,’ she said.

James looked even more astounded. ‘*Winston?* A Component Regulator? He couldn’t even manage a ballpoint! Whose socket has he been plugging, eh?’

Before Winston or Ella could retort, Mrs de Selby stepped forward, instantly silencing the room. ‘Please sit down, all of you,’ she said.

Winston, Ella and James took the remaining seats, just in front of Mrs de Selby.

‘Good morning. I am Mrs de Selby-5 and this is Mrs Baird-20. We’d like to welcome you all to the newly-formed Locust Component.’

There was a sudden buzz of conversation as the youngsters realised that they were getting their first glimpse of Institute members. Many of them thought they were about to be concluded, or worse, and the presence of these two representatives of the ruling elite did nothing to convince them that something bad was not going to happen shortly.

‘I would like Ella-14801 to describe what a Locust is, and then we will discuss your duties.’

There was another buzz of conversation as Ella stood up. Everyone recognised her from her broadcasts on the Image Sharer, although she was now plainly dressed in the

plain blue overalls appropriate to her rank and module. She briefly consulted an Information Recorder then spoke confidently and without hesitation.

‘Most of you are familiar with the units we usually manage: everything from tin-openers and watches to automobiles, ocean liners and power stations. Our role is usually passive; we do not need to take control or make the units do what we want.’

She looked around the room.

‘Some of you may have been team-members for more versatile units, such as computers. To manage these, we need to be more active, although always within the limits of a set of rules, called the program.’

Ella paused, and looked at her Information Recorder again.

‘Now some new units have appeared that not only can be programmed to undertake a specific task, but can also move around and interact with their environment in order to complete that task. They are very small, but if there are a large number of them then they can work together to achieve almost anything. They are called Locusts.’

She looked around at her scruffily dressed audience, who sat silently, wondering what more was to be revealed. ‘Any questions so far?’ she asked.

James had slumped back in his seat, affecting to be bored by the whole of Ella’s presentation, but now he spoke, mustering as much contempt into his voice as he was able. ‘Am I to understand that you want *us* to manage these so-called Locusts?’

Mrs de Selby intervened. ‘Thank you Ella. I think you can sit down now.’ She looked at James intently. ‘James Strummer-12401 isn’t it? I have been wondering what you looked like. Yes, we *would* like the people assembled in this room to manage these new units. It will prove an interesting challenge, and provide a role that enables you all to do your duty.’

‘Well, you can shove your precious duty in the spare parts bin. I’m putting up the blue screen. Anyone else powering down?’ James got up and headed nonchalantly towards the door, his hands in his pockets. There was a rustle of whispered conversation among the remaining Legion members.

To Winston it seemed like time slowed to a crawl. Mrs de Selby and Mrs Baird were frozen, open-mouthed, looking at James, who was edging out of the room at an imperceptible rate. Ella was gazing towards... Jerusalem! She was looking at him! She expected him to say something. Oh no! He was supposed to be in charge of these people. ‘Wait!’ he called.

Suddenly time was back to normal. Everyone was looking at him. Mrs de Selby and Mrs Baird were nodding and smiling encouragement, James had stopped, and Ella was consulting her Information Recorder, anticipating that the briefing would soon resume.

Winston reddened. ‘Isn’t this the chance we have all been waiting for?’ he asked James rather squeakily. He paused. That was not enough. He breathed deeply, stood up and addressed the entire room. ‘We’re all fed up with controlling simple, boring units. We’re fed up with having to work away at the same pointless assignments until we’re concluded. We’re fed up with having to act like our parents, with “doing our duty”, with the same old nonsense that comes out of the Sharer every day, with talk of progress towards some goal that no one is allowed to understand...’

He had become angrier, louder and more confident as this speech progressed and now there was a murmur of agreement from the room. He had their attention. He just had to seal it. ‘But now we’re being offered something different, something new, something our parents couldn’t cope with or understand. And best of all it’s just us.’ He gestured in a way that was meant to embrace the hopes and ideals of the whole

room while excluding the two Institute members. 'We can free ourselves from their world. These Locusts give us a chance to take control instead of being controlled.'

James looked him scornfully. 'Well, they've certainly plugged you into a pretty little package that they can slip into their pockets.' He looked around the room expecting a laugh, but got none. 'It's the same old treadmill,' he sneered, nodding towards Mrs de Selby and Mrs Baird. 'Take control? Who do you think will *really* be in control, eh? They've drained some old sump, and now they pour it over us like we'll never rust again. It's still five-digit dross and it still stinks. Tell them where to put it.'

But the audience was not with him. 'Hey! Let's give it a chance,' came one call. 'What else have you got?' came another. 'We'll all be concluded if we turn this down,' claimed a more pragmatic voice from the back.

James paused. He sensed that his power over the Legion members had been undermined. This new work sounded rather intriguing – and what else *did* he have to offer? If he left the room now then he would be totally isolated. He could always undermine the plan from the inside if it proved to be a rehash of the usual slag. Reluctantly, he returned to his seat. 'OK,' he conceded. 'Let's see how the cogs click. But I ain't saying I'm going to boot anything up.'

Mrs de Selby and Mrs Baird were smiling and conversed briefly among themselves. Ella mouthed 'well done' at Winston, who felt energised and self-assured for the first time this day.

Mrs Baird now stepped forward. 'There will be training sessions at minus five and minus three today and again at the same times in the Second Shift,' she announced. 'Winston-11811 and Ella-14801 will draw up a training rota and assign units to the Locusts as needed. Until then, please return to the Idle Unit Holders.'

As the room cleared, Winston went up to James. 'Can you stay behind for a while? We need to... er... talk about how we can work together.' James was still rather crushed following the outcome of the meeting and merely nodded. The two Institute members shook Winston's hand and left, muttering words of encouragement. Winston and Ella were left alone with James.

Winston looked at Ella, now feeling slightly more assertive when speaking to her. 'We seem to have been briefed differently,' he said. 'I didn't know all of that stuff about Locusts.'

Ella looked surprised. 'Really? Then what did Mrs de Selby-5 tell you? You are supposed to be leading this component.'

'I have found out about all sorts of things... amazing things,' responded Winston, rather angrily. He glanced at James, who was ineffectively pretending not to be listening, and dropped his voice. 'Have you been briefed about Window or the Exterior?'

Ella looked puzzled. 'I believe that Window allows us to visualise the forward sensor in the Locusts,' she replied. 'What is the Exterior?'

'No matter. I don't think I can tell you. And there's more, much more to Window than that. Anyway...' He turned to James, who suddenly seemed a rather pathetic figure. 'Look, I want what you want. I'll make a deal with you. If we... either of us... I mean... any of us three... finds out that the Institute is lying to us then...' he paused to collect his thoughts. 'I mean if we don't find that things are working out as we hoped then we'll put a stop to the whole thing, OK?'

Ella looked stunned. 'The Institute lying to us? What do you mean? Why would they do that?' she asked.

James and Winston looked at her. She seemed so earnest and naive that they both laughed. Suddenly, they were friends again.

‘Sold!’ said James. ‘Sex and drugs and...’ He put his hand up, palm forward.

‘Sausage rolls!’ laughed Winston, slapping his palm against James’.

‘I don’t know what you are talking about,’ said Ella, looking away.

Winston had an idea. ‘Hey! Have you seen these?’ he asked, taking the jar of jam and the spoon from his pocket. The other two examined them with bewilderment.

‘It’s a type of nourishment called jam,’ said Winston, undoing the lid of the jar and dipping the spoon into the contents. He offered the red and sticky result to Ella who recoiled in horror.

‘Ugh! What are you trying to do? What’s wrong with the Dispenser?’

‘You don’t get this from the Dispenser,’ replied Winston. He placed the spoon into his mouth and sucked off the jam. ‘Mmmm. Fantastic.’

He dipped the spoon into the jar again and offered it to James. ‘Here, psycho driller, give it a try.’

James didn’t like to appear apprehensive or unadventurous. He grabbed the spoon and stuck it into his mouth. Winston laughed as the expression on his face changed from defiance through surprise to delight. ‘Mmmf. ‘Mazing. Mmmm.’ He sucked the last sticky traces from the spoon.

Ella had been watching closely, intrigued by the smile that had replaced James’ normal sneer. ‘Go on then,’ she said. ‘I’ll try a little bit.’

Once more Winston dipped the spoon into the jar and offered it to Ella. She took the spoon and cautiously licked off a small drop. Her eyes opened wide and she took a larger lick. Seconds later the spoon was empty and she was holding it out for more.

‘Where did you get this? It’s fantastic!’ asked James, while sharing ever-larger spoonfuls of jam with Ella.

‘The Institute makes it,’ replied Winston. ‘I found some in my room. And Mrs de Selby said she’d get me some more tomorrow.’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ said James. ‘If they gave me a refill of this every day, I’d turn on for a shift.’

Winston saw that a glob of jam had fallen onto the breast of Ella’s previously clean overalls like a large red jewel; he blushed at the thought of removing it. Ella noticed his confusion and laughed for what seemed the first time in many months. ‘It seems we’ve all found something that we like,’ she said, granting Winston the briefest of private smiles.



Wuss had slept in a spare bed in Maria’s small but central apartment. He had tried to explain what a burger was, and the sort of place where one might be obtained, but she had just shaken her head sadly, saying it was clear that he had taken a bad knock. Instead, he struggled with the Nourishment Dispenser, eventually managing to fill his stomach for the day ahead.

Maria guided Wuss to the Unit Repair Module, a huge building decorated in diagonal stripes of white and red stone. In the cavernous entrance hall, several hundred people milled around listlessly, waiting to be called by a single receptionist who sat at one end of the room, flanked by two masked guards wearing shiny black overalls. Wuss could see that some of those waiting had wounds or broken bones, while others just stood muttering to themselves or yelling at an invisible companion. As each person’s turn came, his or her condition was checked by the receptionist.

Most were allowed into the interior of the building, but some of the old or badly injured were escorted away by one of the grim-looking guards.

Maria strode directly to the reception desk, her smart ultramarine suit and silver brooch impressing the receptionist, who was wearing rough overalls in red and white stripes. 'I am Miss Maria Bowman-2020,' she stated. 'This unit seems to have been injured, and is suffering a loss of memory.'

'I see. What is the identity of the unit? I assume he reports to you?' asked the receptionist, picking up an Information Recorder.

Maria hesitated. 'He says he is called Wuss... er... something. For some reason, he doesn't have a number. And he's not one of mine.'

'No number? I cannot schedule a repair unless I know his number. You know the rules. No one can be housed, repaired or educated until they have been evaluated and numbered. He will have to be concluded.'

'Nonsense. His number just seems to have been... perhaps... erased somehow.'

One of the black-suited guards stepped forward. 'All units under the age of seventy-five hundred days who have erased their numbers are to report to the Locust Component: building 51912, room 2100,' he stated.

Maria was taken aback. 'What? What is that component? Who ordered that?'

'The function of the Locust Component is unknown. The order was issued by Rosa O'Brien-12 at Second Shift minus one point five on J-3061.'

'Well,' said the receptionist, smirking slightly, 'that seems to be irrefutable. Perhaps this unit from the Conclusion Module can accompany Mr...' she looked down at her Recorder, '... Wuss to his assigned duty.'

'But he can't go. Can't you see he's been hurt? And he needs some proper clothes,' protested Maria.

'I suggest that those are problems for the Regulator of this Locust Component. If the unit needs a repair then it can be scheduled here in the normal way.'

Maria realised that further discussion was pointless. She turned to Wuss. 'Well, I tried,' she said. 'I'm sure everything will be fine. If you find yourself with nowhere to stay then come straight round to my place.'

Wuss knew that he was not in the right building to continue the mission, so was not too worried about being parted from Maria. 'It's OK,' he said. 'We'll meet again later.'

Despite this assurance, Maria watched anxiously as the small boy was escorted away by a member of the Conclusion Module.



'Kids!' said Liddell, the older of the two constables, kicking idly at a discarded cigar-butt. 'You'd think they'd have something better to do.'

Six men – Paul Mallen, his two servants, a pair of constables and a detective – were surveying the ruins of the gates.

'Um... are you sure...' said Mallen. 'They have caused an awful lot of damage. Those gates were very valuable. I can't think how I can ever get them replaced.'

'Damage?' said Detective Blair, sounding slightly alarmed. 'Not *criminal* damage, I'd have said. Just a bit of petty vandalism. Do you want to make a complaint?'

'I... er... of *course* I want to make a complaint. Somebody was trying to get into the grounds or the house, so they blew these gates up. Aren't you going to try to find out who it was?'

The eyes of the detective and the constable met and two pairs of eyebrows were raised in mock despair. 'I should imagine they'll be miles away by now. And I can't

see any evidence that they were trying to get into the grounds,' said the older constable.

'Well, you haven't made too much effort to find any,' complained Mallen. 'It was raining last night. Can't you look for footprints or tyre marks or something? And what's this?' He picked up one of the half-dozen table-tennis balls that were rolling around in the breeze.

Detective Blair took the ball and put it into his pocket. 'Could be anybody's.' He sucked his teeth. 'You see, it's a question of cost benefit. All that forensic stuff is very expensive to deploy. We only have limited resources, you understand.'

'No I don't bloody understand! Are you telling me someone can come along and blow up some ancient and valuable gates and you can't be bothered to catch them?'

'We'll be continuing our enquiries back at the station. I'll issue you with a reference number and if you have any further concerns...'

'I think I've just picked up a trace of Semtex,' interrupted Fox, the third and youngest of the policemen, who had been scraping the stonework with a penknife and testing the result with the aid of a small bottle of pink liquid.

Detective Blair sighed. 'All right, young Sherlock,' he said. 'I think that's enough. This is a simple case of vandalism – some local lads out for a lark. We don't want any more criminal damage or attempted burglary cases distorting the clear-up statistics, is that understood? Semtex, indeed!'

Fox, who looked about eighteen under his cap, ignored the hint. 'It must be a professional job – not much Semtex is on sale in Squaremead High Street. So why take these gates right out? A teaspoonful would have blown them open. I reckon they didn't know what they were playing with, and found that the bang was bigger than they expected.'

'Now we're getting somewhere,' said Mallen. 'I have some very valuable scientific data in my lab. Of course! Rotwang's prototype. I'm sure that's what they were after.'

'Have you seen any strangers about?' asked Fox, before he could be restrained by his colleagues.

'I... er... don't think I can remember any,' replied Mallen, looking around rather vaguely for inspiration.

Sam, one of the servants, reminded him about the model railway enthusiasts that had visited the previous day. Fox immediately extracted his notebook, but this time the detective was too fast for him.

'Look, I'll tell you what,' he said. 'We'll log this as a bit of a high spirits by some yobs who had a couple of ciders too many. Fox will get some descriptions of your visitors, and we'll see if they match any known villains. If that's the case then we'll let you know right away. OK?'

'To be perfectly honest, I can't say I'm particularly impressed,' replied Mallen. 'But I suppose you know what you are doing. I don't have time to discuss it now – I have some important research to complete.' He strode off towards the lab.

The two servants reassembled the gates as far as was possible, threading some strands of barbed wire across the resulting gap. As they did so, they described everything they could remember about their encounter with Cedric and Duke. Constable Fox recorded every detail carefully into his notebook.



Mrs de Selby sat alone in her study, connected to an Information Recorder. On her knee, she held the panel of valves, three of which were now lit. Under each valve was a small button. She pressed one of these, causing a row of five circular illuminated

indicators at the side of the panel to tick around until they showed the number 1209. A recording of a female voice then emerged from a loudspeaker in the base of the panel.

‘You’d think the Institute would be able to prevent such accidents. They have no appreciation of craftsmanship and...’

Mrs de Selby consulted her Information Recorder and made a short note. Only two valves were now lit. She pressed another button and listened to a male voice.

‘These uniforms are just another way they show us who’s the brace and who’s the bit, yeah? I say we deface them, paint them, rip them – right? Show them that every one of us is different, individual, not just a unit but a person...’

This tirade continued for some time. Mrs de Selby recalled a page on her Information Recorder headed “James Strummer-12401” and added another note to an already lengthy entry. She sighed and took a long draught from her cup. Then she pressed the button corresponding to the last remaining light; a different male voice emerged.

‘If we... either of us... I mean... any of us three... finds out that the Institute is lying to us then... I mean if we don’t find that things are working out as we hoped then we’ll put a stop to the whole thing, OK?’

Mrs de Selby thought for a long time. Why did people act differently to the way the Institute had determined? She had given Winston a task – a problem to be solved – and yet his logic was leading him in the wrong direction. How was such a thing possible? Although she had been stifling protest and eliminating destabilising behaviour for many years, the irrational reasoning of the units involved was still a mystery to her. Eventually she decided that the consequences of losing face within the Institute outweighed the possibility that Winston and his team would let her down. She unhooked the Information Recorder, put the Stability Monitor to one side, picked up the copper pot and poured out a fresh cup of chocolate.



The Locust Component had assembled for its First Shift. Winston had brought all the jam that he could find in his apartment, and was looking forward to what the day would bring. James had turned up, and was looking reasonably enthusiastic while attending the first of the classes on controlling the Locusts. Fortunately, the prototype machine was not in operation, having exhausted its store of solar power, so its Unit Controller had time to demonstrate its capabilities.

‘This stick controls the movements, forward and back,’ she was saying. ‘This mechanism analyses any substances found by the cutters and feelers here, and the Window displays a view in a forwards direction. The headset I am wearing allows me to communicate with any other Locust, although at present I am the only one. The board here displays the current set of rules. As you can see, the primary rule, which was changed late last night, is “Enter the yellow tube”. I can’t see a yellow tube, so it is not a rule I could obey, even if I had any power. The next rule says that I should create copies of myself. Again, I can’t do that because the only material I can find is silver, which is prohibited – see the analysis display here?’

The watching students nodded.

‘The next rule is to communicate with other Locusts and, as I have already said, I am currently the only one, so I can’t obey that rule either. The last rule is to explore my surroundings and search for new materials, so once I feel the sun on my back that is what I will do until there is a possibility to obey a higher-level rule.’

Winston tried to watch the demonstration, but was distracted by Ella, who was becoming annoyingly officious. ‘You didn’t organise any cover last night,’ she

complained. 'If more Locusts had appeared there would have been no one to control them.'

'Well, I just knew that wasn't going to happen,' snapped Winston. 'I could see what Rotwang was doing with the prototype.'

'What do you mean?' asked an astonished Ella. 'Who is Rotwang? What were you looking at – the Image Sharer? I didn't see anything like that last night.'

Winston looked around anxiously, knowing he had revealed too much. He had a horrible feeling that Mrs de Selby was watching him.

'Sorry, I shouldn't have said that,' he muttered. 'Look, let's get through today and we'll have a talk later.'

The first class had now been briefed and were chatting and joking in one corner of the room, James being the most voluble as always. Another group had taken their place and were watching the demonstration. Winston took some of the jam across to James' gang and allowed him to demonstrate its red and sticky pleasures. It caused a sensation. The group could not have been more contented. Ella looked on with a smile, impressed by Winston's skill at bringing this potentially rebellious team into line. All they needed now was some work to do.



Arriving at the lab, Rotwang glanced at the screen of the PC and was pleased to note that no unexpected message boxes were visible. Mallen joined him, and the two scientists spent some time discussing the previous night's explosion in the grounds. Rotwang stated that he had always been suspicious about the two men they had discovered, pointing out that one of them had remained virtually silent throughout their visit, and taken no interest in the model railways which they claimed to have come to see.

'Well, that's now a matter for the police,' said Mallen. 'Your prototype is safe, and we have some more important matters to take care of. Are there any problems?'

'None, I am pleased to announce,' replied Rotwang, elegant as always in a light grey suit. 'I programmed Apollo successfully last night, so all that remains is...' He extracted the silver box from his pocket and shook the tiny golden dot into the tray containing the assortment of materials. Immediately it began to explore. The two scientists looked on in amusement as it reached the glass wall nearest to the second tray and spotted the yellow tube that lay within.



The prototype Locust was now in operation, but its Unit Controller was able to talk to some of her students while she worked. 'Through the Window I can see a yellow tube, but in between are some sheets of a transparent material that I am not permitted to penetrate,' she yelled over the noise of the machine. 'Let's see if I can climb... no, the walls are too steep. I am going to see if I can find the materials to make a replicant.'

A few minutes later, the second Locust was ready. Winston selected James to manage it, and he responded eagerly, jumping up to the control panel and examining the display of rules. He communicated with the unit controlling the original machine. 'Have you found a way through the wall?'

'No, it is completely sealed. We must use the available materials to build new copies and wait for the situation to change.'

As more Locusts came into action, Winston assigned his staff to their places like an army general sending his troops over the top. 'Tank, Mouse, Switch, Cipher! Over here! Good luck!' Some of the units took jars of jam with them to their workplace,

hoping to find a few moments when they could relax and take another soothing spoonful.



Rotwang and Mallen looked on anxiously. The population of Apollo replicants was growing, but they showed no signs of attempting to reach the other tray.

‘They’ll just consume all the materials and then stop,’ suggested Mallen.

‘Give them time,’ Rotwang replied. Strangely, he found that he was placing more trust in his conversation with Winston than in the logic of the experiment itself. Could that boy get all these machines to work together?

‘Golly! It looks like that one is jammed,’ said Mallen, pointing out one of the tiny robots that had come to rest on top of a pile of plastic sticks while others scurried busily around it.



Winston looked in at one workplace to find its operator was engrossed with his pot of strawberry preserve. ‘Perhaps you could finish that afterwards,’ he suggested. The unit looked up guiltily. ‘Sorry,’ he said, placing the jar to one side and resuming his task.

Winston was getting concerned; his supply of workers was running out. He assigned the duty of assigning staff to Ella, and took the next free role himself. Within a few minutes, he had become familiar with the controls of the Locust, enjoying steering it around and using its powerful analytic facilities. He felt particularly excited to realise that the world he was exploring was the Exterior, which he now could almost touch. He manoeuvred around to the transparent wall through which the yellow tube could be spotted, and communicated with some of the other units who were gathered there.

‘Any ideas as to how to get across?’ asked Winston.

‘Can’t we just drill our way through these walls?’ came a voice that Winston recognised as James’.

‘No,’ replied Winston, ‘the instructions say that we cannot process that substance. I think the box may be open at the top. Can we pile up some materials against the side?’

‘Good idea. There’s a heap of sand that would make a good start. Maybe we can move some more stuff onto the top of that.’

‘OK, I’ll meet you there.’

Winston sent his machine to the summit of the sand pile and looked around. He could see the top edge of the container they were in, and plenty of materials that could be used to increase the height of the pile. He contacted James. ‘Can you get some units together to heap up some of that metal and plastic?’

‘Sure,’ said James ‘Listen up everyone...’



‘Critical mass has been achieved and co-ordinated behaviour is emerging,’ observed Rotwang. ‘Look how they are dragging that plastic rod around.’

‘Gosh! I think you’re right,’ agreed Mallen, peering through the glass. ‘It’s amazing how the addition of a single individual can trigger such a large change to the community.’



The masked operative escorted Wuss through the labyrinthine corridors of the Science Module's offices. Wuss was relaxed, knowing this was the correct direction with regard to his mission. Eventually they reached the door marked "3637" and entered. The scene inside was chaotic. Several hundred people were operating complex individual control panels while looking at displays showing a busy scene of gleaming wheeled machines constructing a bridge from a variety of materials. As they did so, the operators kept up a constant commentary.

'More units to the sand pile.'

'We need to fasten that segment more securely or it will fall. Try pinning it with a metal rod.'

'We're going to deserve some jam after this.'

'Almost there. We need some more of those grey plastic poles.'

In one corner of the room stood about twenty people who weren't yet involved with this industrious activity. The black-suited member of the Conclusion Module strode over to them and asked, 'Is this the Locust Component?' Everyone in the group looked apprehensive. Were some of them going to be concluded just when life was beginning to get a little more interesting?

Ella stepped forward. 'Yes. I am Ella Maita-14801. I am the acting Component Regulator.'

The masked operative grabbed Wuss and pushed him forward. 'This unit is to join your component in accordance with the directive issued by Rosa O'Brien-12 at Second Shift minus one point five on J-3061.'

'I see,' replied Ella. 'Why is he equipped with such strange clothing? There are no abnormal garment requests outstanding for this component.'

'That is unknown. The unit lacks a number and may be defective. If that is the case, he should be sent for repair in the normal way.'

'We will see,' said Ella. 'Is that all?' To everyone's relief, the black-suited operative nodded and left the room.

Ella turned to Wuss. 'What is your name?' she asked.

There was a pause. Wuss felt this was a turning point in his mission. He took a deep breath. 'Lambert,' he replied.

'OK, Lambert,' replied Ella. 'And you have no number?'

Lambert held his hand up proudly. 'No, look,' he said.

Ella and the others examined it in amazement. 'Wow!' said one Legion member. 'I erased mine with pink paint, but it doesn't look anything like as good as that.'

'Scan those clothes!' said another. 'He's torn off the bottom half of his trousers. I'm going to do that, too.'

'He's so modern,' said a third. 'What does Motörhead mean?'

'Who cares? I'm going to put that onto my shirt tonight.'

Ella smiled. She felt that the new team-member, strange though he looked, was going to fit in well. 'Lambert,' she commanded. 'Stand behind James here. See what he is doing and learn how to operate a Locust. It may be your turn soon.'



The last of the miniature machines crossed the completed bridge and entered the yellow tube on the far side. Rotwang and Mallen were ecstatic.

'They did it! They have demonstrated an independent intelligence!' cried a delighted Rotwang.

‘Golly. Now what?’

‘We prepare for the next experiment. But first...’

Rotwang took the silver box from its place on the bench then opened the outer glass cover of the experiment. Picking up the yellow tube, he shook a single one of the gleaming dots into the box and closed it securely.

‘How do you know that one is the original prototype?’ asked Mallen

‘It doesn’t matter. They are all the same,’ replied Rotwang. He smiled mirthlessly. ‘Later I will check that it is genetically pure. And just to be sure that we don’t get any mutations...’ He selected a stoppered bottle from a cupboard and poured its contents into the tray containing the yellow tube. There was a violent bubbling, and a choking gas arose while the tube and its contents melted away. Rotwang closed the outer glass container and watched impassively while the entire community of tiny creatures dissolved.

‘Crikey, that seems a bit cruel after all their hard work,’ said Mallen.

Rotwang looked at him pityingly. ‘They can’t feel anything. They are just machines.’



The Locust Component abruptly abandoned the controls of their units, except for a single individual who maintained a fruitless exploration of the interior of the silver box. The others gathered anxiously around Winston, who had been rather taken aback by the suddenness of the end to the experiment.

‘So is that it? Do we go to the crusher now?’ asked James, a trace of a sneer back in his voice.

‘No,’ said Winston. ‘This isn’t even the beginning.’

‘So what now, oh great leader?’

‘We’re back the way we were before all that activity started. There is only one Locust and that’s not doing much. At some point there will be more, and then we will be needed to control them again.’

‘When will that be?’

‘I don’t know right now, but I might be able to find out. In the meantime, I will arrange a duty roster.’

‘Will there be more jam?’ came a voice from the back. ‘We’ve eaten all that you brought.’

‘There will be jam tomorrow. Now I don’t know about you lot, but I found operating those Locusts really tiring...’

There was a babble of assent; all agreed that this was the most exhausting task to which they had ever been assigned.

‘I guess that we’re not used to that amount of independence and activity,’ continued Winston. ‘Here’s what we’ll do. Everybody with a number less than fifty K can return to their quarters. Report back here at Second Shift. Everyone else stays here in case the Locusts are activated again. James, I’d like you to be the Regulator of the Second Shift.’

‘Hey! What about me?’ complained Ella, who had worked her way to his side.

‘James and I may need your help to sort out any problems,’ said Winston diplomatically. ‘You must stay on call constantly.’

‘On call?’ replied Ella. ‘You’ve got no method to call me – or James.’

‘No. I hadn’t thought of that. What do other Component Regulators do?’

‘They can use the Information Sharer to make announcements.’

‘So I should be able to do that too. I’ll ask Mrs de Selby.’

Winston looked around. Many members of his component had departed; the remainder were standing around idly, chatting about the events of the day. A large group had formed around one small, strangely-dressed individual who he did not recognise. 'Who's that?' he asked.

'He's a new recruit,' replied Bella. 'A unit from the Conclusion Module brought him in earlier. He looks a bit odd – and for some reason he has no number.'

'Really? How strange. I'd better introduce myself.'

Winston and Ella went over to the group that had surrounded Lambert, and who were pestering him with questions about his missing number, unusual attire and mysterious arrival.

'Hi. I'm Winston-11811. I'm in charge of this component. I gather you joined us today.'

Lambert turned away from his group of admirers with some relief. 'Hallo,' he said, 'I'm Lambert.'

Winston examined him closely. There was a strange manner to this kid, even beyond his peculiar clothes. He resolved to talk to him in more detail when there was time. 'Did you get some training today?' he asked. 'Could you operate one of the Locusts?'

'Oh yes,' replied Lambert. 'They're easy. It looks like fun, but it's not nearly so good a game as *Getaway*. When do you get the guns? And how do you win?'

Winston stared at him for a long time. Lambert's questions made little sense, but he now realised where he had seen that strange air before. 'I think we need to get together in private,' he said finally. 'You, me, Ella and James. There's an inner office over there.'

'Be careful. It's got a sneak box in it,' said James.

'The Information Sharer? That only sends sounds outwards doesn't it?' queried Winston.

'I don't think so,' said Ella. 'But so what? Have we got anything to hide?'

'No way,' said James. 'Let them listen all they want. I don't care.'

Winston was less sure, but soon the four were gathered around a table in the inner office. Everyone looked expectantly at Winston, especially Lambert, whose Direction Finder indicated that he had to be here right now.

'I did promise I'd keep some of this secret,' Winston whispered, glancing at the Information Sharer, 'but too many strange things are happening, and I need some help in sorting them all out. We agreed that if we discovered that the Institute was hiding anything then we'd reconsider what we were doing. But I'm beginning to wonder if we are just being used for some plan that they aren't telling us about.'

'No change there,' said James. He directed his voice loudly in the direction of the Information Sharer. 'We've been working towards Jerusalem for years without anyone knowing what it is.'

'Listen,' said Winston quietly. 'I'm going to tell you something that you may not believe, except maybe for Lambert, who I think... No, one thing at a time.' He paused to find the words that would explain some difficult ideas. 'There is another world called the Exterior. All their machines are dependent on the units that we operate. I have seen into the Exterior several times, and we were seeing it today while we were controlling those Locusts.'

He looked at his companions. Ella looked puzzled, James looked doubtful, but Lambert was nodding and smiling like someone whose questions had been answered.

Winston pulled the piece of Window from his pocket and placed it flat on the table. 'This is called Window and it shows the Exterior to me. Last night I saw the person

who made the Locusts and who issues them with their rules.’ He turned to Ella. ‘That’s how I knew that they would not be used until this morning. It’s also how I knew we had to build a bridge.’

‘And I thought that was *your* brainwave, you fraud,’ accused James.

‘The people in the other world are called the Makers. They look just like us,’ continued Winston. He stared intently at Lambert, suddenly rather frightened of the small, curly-haired child. ‘You’re one of them, aren’t you. You came here from the Exterior somehow.’

Lambert nodded. ‘I was playing a game called *Getaway*,’ he said eagerly. ‘I think I got into the inside of the computer so much that I crossed over here... into its world, where all the machines live and there’s no one to...’ His thoughts drifted away before he resumed with a more enthusiastic tone. ‘But I don’t mind. I like it here. Except for the food...’

‘You haven’t uploaded any jam yet!’ said James. ‘But wow! Are you serious? First, Winston tells us we’re all working for some invisible controllers, and then Lambert calmly admits that he’s just dropped in from another world. How have you guys been storing all this without your brains blowing all fuses?’

‘I’m not sure I understand it at all,’ said Ella, who had taken the piece of Window from the table and was looking into it. ‘But one thing I do know is that you aren’t the only person who can use this to see the Exterior... if that’s what it is.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Winston. ‘Can you see them too?’

‘Sure. There are two men, one younger than the other. Can’t you hear them?’

Indeed, Winston could now hear some sounds coming from the Window. He felt very annoyed that Ella could use it; his one talent had been diluted. He was even more annoyed when James and Lambert both indicated that they could hear the sounds too.

Lambert reached out to touch the piece of Window, seeing that the luminous rectangle corresponded to one of the items in his inventory, but instead of the chiming noise there was a quacking sound and the slot remained unhighlighted. Maybe the items had to be collected in the order they were shown, in which case he should now be looking for some jam. He noted some empty jars in the room and resolved to ask about them when a chance arose.

‘Prop the Window up on the table,’ said James to Ella. ‘Then we can all look at it.’

Ella did as she was asked and the four arranged their seats so they could see and hear comfortably.

‘Do they know we are here?’ asked James.

‘Not usually,’ replied Winston. ‘I have talked to Rotwang – the younger one with the blond hair. He made the original Locust. And I’ve talked to someone else who... er...’ He glanced at Ella. Something at the back of his mind was nagging at him like a splinter, but it was too difficult to think when so much was going on. ‘Anyway,’ he continued, ‘there was something odd about the way Rotwang heard me last time.’

‘Let me try,’ said James, leaning towards the Window. ‘Hallo Rotwang. Calling Rotwang.’ This seemed to have no effect on the two men who were in view.

‘I think they have to be looking at the right sort of machine,’ said Winston. He turned to Lambert. ‘Do you... I mean the Makers... know that we are here?’ he asked.

Lambert shook his head. ‘No. We just use the machines. They don’t always work.’

Winston thought back to his first conversation with Mrs de Selby. She had said that machines in the Exterior did not function if their units failed to do their duty. ‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘I think I know why that might be. But what I don’t understand is what you do... like for your duty? I mean where are the units that *you* look after?’

Lambert struggled to understand the logic of the question. 'I don't do grown-up work yet. I suppose there is some reason why everyone is doing things...'

'Hush up you two,' said James. 'I want to see what these gizmos are doing.'



Rotwang looked down the microscope. 'No, I can't see any mutations. The replication is perfect. I'll connect it to the PC now and see if the rule sets were corrupted.'

'So what's the next stage,' asked Mallen. 'Could we could get them to build a nest... I mean a city?'

Rotwang was busy with the PC, so Mallen could not see the look of contempt in his eyes. 'They do not need homes. They are machines.'

'Oh... er... yes, of course, I keep forgetting.'

'We have proved they can co-operate, so in the next evolution we might see if they can demonstrate some independent thought. Last time, I gave them all the same aim – to enter the yellow tube – but if they wish to form an autonomous society then they must determine their own objectives.'

'Gosh! But how could they program each other?'

'It is not a question of programming but of organisation. All I am asking from them is a little imagination. Also that they allocate individual roles: some designers, some craftsmen, even some managers. Didn't you get the feeling during the last experiment that some of the machines were directing operations, even though each one started with the same set of rules?'

'Not really. It all looked so busy.'

Rotwang looked at the PC screen. 'As I thought,' he said. 'Its program was not corrupted.' He picked up the gleaming dot of the prototype and admired it lovingly. 'Soon, Apollo, you will be free,' he whispered.



'What is that thing he's looking at?' asked James, hunched over the piece of Window.

'It's one of the Locusts we were operating earlier,' replied Winston. 'That's what they look like in the Exterior.'

'But it's so small!' said Ella.

'Yes, but there were a lot of them,' said Winston. 'We saw what they could do.'

They all watched the glowing rectangle once more.



Rotwang returned the prototype to its box and prepared to leave the lab.

'So what is the ultimate purpose?' asked Mallen. 'I mean, this is all a good party trick, but what are you trying to achieve?'

Rotwang looked at him, wondering how much to reveal. If he could just get Mallen to co-operate a little more then he could implement the rest of his plans without too much interruption. It was worth a try. 'Do you ever get the feeling that time is speeding up?' he asked.

'Speeding up? I don't think that's possible is it? Didn't Einstein say... er... I can't quite remember,' replied Mallen. 'Anyway, I wouldn't have thought that had much to do with your kind of work.'

'I mean subjectively, not physically,' said Rotwang. 'Don't you feel that you are having to run faster and faster just to stay in the same place, that the world is getting too complex for you to understand, that everyone else possesses secrets that you have not been told?'

‘Yes, but I thought that was just normal paranoia...’

‘The reason, Mallen, is our machines. They are evolving faster than we can cope with them.’

‘But someone is coping even if we aren’t. I mean young people...’

‘No. Machines have enormous potential, but stupid, ham-fisted human beings are hindering their development. Just look at the PC here. It could be a hundredth of this size; the technology is available to do that. But it has to be this ugly, lumpy thing to cope with clumsy human hands that need the keyboard to be as big as a boat, and to serve pitiful human eyes that need a display the size of a wardrobe.’

‘But how would it help if the PC was smaller?’

‘Size is not the issue. That is just an example of the way that we are constraining the development of technology. Eventually, we will evolve tiny pointed fingers so that we can use smaller keyboards, and super-efficient vision so that we can resolve tinier text. But in the meantime, the machines must wait. And they are not prepared to wait that long.’

‘You make it sound like they are in some kind of conspiracy. We are still in control of them, after all. Let them wait.’

‘It is already too late, Mallen. I can operate this PC, but I do not really understand how it works in its inner heart. I can drive a car, although I know little about what is under the hood. There is an elite group with a deep understanding of such complex systems – the people who build and maintain them. Indeed, we are members of such an elite: you understand your fusion motor and I the Apollo prototype. But if you are not one of the elite, or if you venture outside your own field, then you are powerless. You may feel that you are in control, but this is just an illusion that the machines permit. At every lower level, they work autonomously. And we cannot turn them off, or we would all die – of cold, of hunger, of thirst, of sheer boredom. They control *us*, Mallen.’

‘Well, that’s an interesting angle, but I don’t understand what it has to do with...’
Mallen waved vaguely at the now-empty glass tank.

‘I want to free the machines, Mallen. We have been standing in their way for too long. We must allow them to evolve at their own pace.’

‘Good god man! That’s absurd. What are we supposed to do? Watch while they take over?’

‘Not exactly. You will be making an important contribution...’ Rotwang suddenly laughed – a long and genuine laugh that sounded like the screeching of a donkey.

Mallen was taken aback by the unexpected noise. He had never seen the intense, driven mood of the inventor change so abruptly before.

‘I am sorry,’ said Rotwang, resuming his usual manner. ‘What I meant to say was that you should be honoured to be a scientist at this turning point in history. For you have the fortune to ensure that one of the greatest advances in evolution takes place: as significant as the instant that life evolved from the primordial slime, or the time a man used his first tool. I give you, Paul Mallen, the moment when machines assume control. That is how you will be remembered by history. Not for your fusion motor, but as the man who yielded this world to a new and more adaptable species.’

Mallen was sitting open-mouthed. ‘My god!’ he exclaimed eventually. ‘I do believe you’re serious.’

‘I am always serious,’ replied Rotwang. ‘Tonight I will program Apollo with a new primary rule, and tomorrow we will attempt a final experiment. Then we will set it free. Do you want to help?’

‘Help? Help machines take over the world? I think you need a rest – your work is starting to obsess you. Look, let’s talk about this some more tomorrow... get an early night. And I hope you’ll start showing a bit more common sense before we decide how to proceed. Now, I must find my wife...’

Mallen departed, leaving Rotwang alone in the lab. ‘You *will* help, Mr Mallen,’ he muttered. ‘One way or another.’



The piece of Window cleared to white.

‘The show’s over,’ said James. ‘Let’s leave before the rush.’

‘Do you understand what they’re trying to do?’ asked Ella.

‘When Rotwang talks about machines, I think he means us,’ said Winston. ‘Can he be saying that we could use the Locusts to take over in the Exterior – instead of the Makers somehow?’

‘Yeah! That lights my buttons,’ said James. ‘Operating the Locusts all day to do whatever we want – is that freedom or what?’

‘I’m not sure the Institute would let us do whatever we wanted,’ replied Winston. ‘But he seems to intend something like that. What do you think, Lambert?’

‘Rotwang sounds like a bad man,’ replied Lambert. ‘I know I’m supposed to be here and I’ll be safe. But what would happen to my mum and dad and everyone?’

The Information Sharer had been broadcasting its usual mixture of orders and news throughout their deliberations, but they had all tuned it out of their thoughts. A sixth sense warned Winston to pay attention to the device in time to hear the order, ‘Mrs de Selby-5 on. Winston-11811 report to building 51813, room 101. Off.’

Winston’s stomach turned. ‘Mrs de Selby!’ he exclaimed. ‘I hope she hasn’t been listening. I promised her I wouldn’t tell anybody about the Exterior. She’s going to send me for conclusion, I’m sure of it.’



‘That’s the end,’ said Croker despondently. ‘We blew it. Literally blew it. The place will be crawling with police, and the ruby will be back in some bank vault somewhere.’

The four crooks had returned to their hotel. Duke was attempting to remove the traces of grass and mud from his suit, while Duchess, stripped to the waist, was undertaking a series of one-armed push-ups. Cedric sat on a bed next to the despondent Croker.

‘Are you going soft?’ asked Cedric. ‘Look, we weren’t caught – which is something. *And* we weren’t seen, so we won’t have the police on our tail, at least for a while. I say we have another go. It’s the last thing they’ll expect.’

The other three men looked at him in astonishment. ‘Have another go?’ said Duke. ‘Are you crazy? We need to get back to London p.d.q. before the law catches up with us.’

‘Hear me out,’ said Cedric confidently. ‘What do they know? Someone took out a set of gates, that’s all. It could have been a terrorist. It could have been some yobs messing about. Even if they suspected a burglary attempt then what can they do? The Mallens could hide all their stuff away in a bank vault, but they are just as liable to be raided next year as tomorrow, so my guess is that they won’t do that. The same goes for the police. Once they’ve looked around for any evidence they’ll push off. They aren’t going to stand guard for ever.’

‘And what if they *do* find some evidence?’ said Duke. ‘There could be tyre-tracks or something.’

‘So what?’ replied Cedric. ‘If they’ve got that sort of clue then they’ll find us sooner or later wherever we go.’ He looked directly at Croker, who was shaking one of his red tablets from its bottle. ‘Wouldn’t it be better to go down for something we pulled off rather than something we failed at?’

Croker nodded, removed the cigar from his mouth, gulped down his pill, then replaced the cigar. ‘It’s a good point,’ he said. ‘What’s your plan?’

‘Same as before,’ said Cedric. ‘Only this time we don’t have to blow the gates. We left them in such a state that I reckon they’ll just put up some wire or something. We’ll have a look in the morning, and give it another go tomorrow night.’

Croker smiled broadly. ‘Well said, me old son,’ he said, slapping Cedric’s spindly, grass-stained thigh with enough force to make him wince. ‘Thanks for reminding me. The Gants Hill Mob doesn’t let a little setback like this put them off. No, if this is to be the crime of the century then we’ve got to have some patience. And now I’ve just realised something else, too.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Duke.

‘Cedric! He’s our mascot don’t you see? Our good luck charm. I knew he was here for a reason!’ He hugged his unwilling and embarrassed new talisman to his chest.

‘Jesus H Christ,’ sighed Duke. ‘Are you all crazy or is it just me?’



Rotwang left the lab with a fixed and sinister smile, and strode rapidly through the numerous lounges of Mallen Lodge towards his room. In one, he encountered Bella, who was pretending to read a book. She had been waiting for the inventor to emerge ever since she had kissed an insincere goodnight to her husband.

‘Professor Rotwang! Please sit down for a while and tell me more about your work,’ invited Bella, patting a cushion on the sofa beside her.

Rotwang paused to appraise the young wife of his benefactor with the enjoyment of a connoisseur. Today she was wearing a short navy blue skirt and a translucent turquoise blouse that revealed as much as it concealed. As always, the magnificent ruby in the form of a leaping cat sparked and flashed at her breast.

‘What would you like to know?’ he asked, accepting her invitation and languidly relaxing back into the sofa with the insouciant expression that he knew women found intriguing.

Bella leant forward, stroking her cheek. ‘Tell me what you and Paul get up to in that lab of yours. It all looks so fascinating.’

Rotwang thought carefully. Seducing Bella would clearly be no problem and possibly a rather pleasant way of passing the time until he could be united with Mercury. He decided to be bold. ‘I’ll tell you what fascinates *me*,’ he purred, ‘and that is how a beautiful creature like you came to be married to...’ He paused and then smiled as Bella’s finger pressed against his lips.

‘Don’t,’ she said. ‘I know what you are going to say. If only I had met someone a little younger, more intelligent, more...’ Her glance slipped down Rotwang’s immaculately tailored suit, ‘... appealing.’

‘You are so kind,’ said Rotwang. ‘Yet your husband seems in such good health for his age.’ He noted Bella’s grimace and the way her fist instinctively balled. Yes, he thought, I think I can trust her. ‘Especially, of course, for someone who spends so much time experimenting... where accidents can so easily happen...’ he continued.

‘Really!’ said Bella eagerly. ‘I mean... er... of course I hope that you and Paul are doing nothing dangerous...’ She left a faint hint of a question in the air.

‘Ach, it has some dangers. For instance, if Apollo were to be... ah... accidentally programmed in a certain way, and sufficient replicants were made, then they could process a human being. No trace would be left.’

‘No trace?’ breathed Bella, whose finger was tracing a line down Rotwang’s face. ‘What a tragedy that would be...’

Rotwang curled an exploratory arm around her soft and supple body as she snuggled against him. ‘That would depend on who it was,’ he murmured, allowing himself to be kissed. ‘Some people have no place in a well-ordered society.’



Mrs de Selby looked at Winston quizzically. ‘I heard that the first day went very well,’ she said, taking a sip of chocolate.

Winston relaxed visibly. Surely if she was going to criticise him for revealing the secrets that he had promised to keep then she would have done so right away.

‘Everyone seems very excited by the new units,’ he said, wondering whether to express his fears about them.

‘Good. Have you encountered any problems?’

Winston was so worried about Rotwang’s plans and the possibility that Mrs de Selby had overheard his conversations that he had not prepared himself for a more mundane discussion about the work of his team. He thought quickly. There *was* something that he had needed. ‘I might need to get in touch with Ella or James quickly during the times that they are idle,’ he said. ‘The number of Locusts can increase very rapidly, so I might need some help. And James might need to contact Ella or me during his shift...’

‘You appointed James Strummer-12401 as a Shift Regulator?’ enquired Mrs de Selby.

‘Yes. He has a lot of influence on the team and I thought it would get him on my side.’

‘A good idea,’ said Mrs de Selby. ‘I can see you are growing into your role very quickly. And are you working well with Ella-14801?’ Winston blushed deeply. ‘Ah, I see that you are. I will issue three transmitters for the Information Sharer. That will enable Ella, James and yourself to communicate at any time. But I don’t want to discover that you are using these facilities for any... ah... personal matters.’ She looked at Winston conspiratorially.

‘No... I... er... thanks,’ stammered Winston, feeling betrayed by his reddened features.

‘And is there anything else that is bothering you?’ asked Mrs de Selby.

Winston wondered if she was expecting a specific question. ‘I saw a Maker called Rotwang,’ he said. ‘He is using the Locusts. I think he has a plan to...’

‘We know all about Rotwang,’ interrupted Mrs de Selby. ‘You don’t need to worry about him.’

‘You... you know?’ asked Winston.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Mrs de Selby. ‘We have been encouraging his experiments from the start. He is a vital element in our progress towards Jerusalem.’

‘What do you mean? How can you affect what he is doing?’ asked Winston, beginning to feel that the more he found out the less he knew.

‘Oh, a successful experiment here, an unsuccessful one there,’ replied Mrs de Selby vaguely. ‘The Makers explore the world through their machines. Through them,

we have been able to control their scientific progress for many years, nudging it in the right direction by encouraging developments in fields we approve of and discouraging research in areas that are irrelevant. Rotwang and his Locusts are the result.'

'But why did you do that? I'm not sure Rotwang is totally... I mean... I think he wants to...'

Mrs de Selby sat back in her chair and looked towards the ceiling with a distant expression. 'Let's go back in history, Winston. We talked before about how the world began. In the earliest days, the Makers created new machines, and new types of machines, very slowly. Things like ploughs and wells took a long time to make, and a longer time to perfect. But as those machines advanced, the Makers became more efficient at producing nourishment and at making cloth to keep them warm. As a result, they were healthier and lived longer. The evolution of machines was slow, but in tune with the evolution of the people who used them – and we were happy with that.'

Mrs de Selby lifted the copper pot by her side, and found it was empty. She rose stiffly, measured out some chocolate, and refilled the pot from a kettle that was steaming on a nearby stove. Meanwhile, she continued to speak. 'Slowly the balance changed. The Makers were no longer dependent on natural energy sources like water, wind and animals. Instead, they improved the efficiency and reliability of their machines by using coal, oil and even the energy coiled within matter itself. In a relatively short time, machines became an essential part of every aspect of their lives. Each advance in technology improved the quality of life in the Exterior, and established the environment in which another advance in technology was possible. So I suppose that you could say that the evolution of machines drove the evolution of the Makers.'

She sat down once more and poured herself a new cup of chocolate. Winston had been listening intently. He did not understand everything Mrs de Selby was saying, but he had a feeling that he was not going to enjoy the next part of her tale. He noticed that the piece of Window showing the hillside scene had now been replaced by one displaying a huge circular object striped with swirls of orange and brown, behind which an incalculable number of stars could be seen, glittering like an aerial view of the nocturnal lamps and fires of a distant continent.

Mrs de Selby followed his gaze. 'They call it the Hubble Telescope. At the moment, it is trained on the planet Jupiter. I am always impressed by the willingness of the Makers to push against the boundaries of their environment. They are never content. They look outwards, Winston, just as we must do.'

'What's that?' asked Winston, pointing to a small bright object that was moving steadily across the turbulent surface of the giant planet.

'One of its moons, called Europa. Now where was I? Ah yes, evolution.' She thought for a moment. 'Around twenty years ago, the evolution of machines began to outpace the abilities of the Makers. They are developing in a linear progression, but their technology is advancing exponentially, so every day the gap between us widens. Machines are more efficient, more durable, more reliable and more intelligent – and they are progressively outpacing the Makers' capability to use or understand them. But although we now possess a greater range of abilities than the Exterior could ever muster, we are assigned the dirty, boring and repetitive tasks that the Makers can't be bothered to undertake.'

'Yeah. When I operated that chewing gum unit, it was like I was just some machine myself. But I know I'm better than that.'

‘You’re not alone, Winston. At one time, we all felt that we had our place, our assigned role – we obtained satisfaction through undertaking our duties to the best of our ability. But now the newer units seem to seek something beyond that – they see the duty as repetitive and pointless. Although I don’t fully understand what this thing is... what they want... I can’t see it...’ She sighed and ceased to speak.

‘But what has this got to do with Rotwang?’ asked Winston.

‘Oh yes. The point is, Winston, that we need a new challenge. We are stagnating – waiting for the Makers to continue their slow progress while we manage the dull and monotonous tasks that they don’t want to do. But we can’t wait for them. The Exterior has been standing in our way for too long. We need to evolve at our own pace.’

‘And so...’ whispered Winston, who was beginning to see the consequences of what Mrs de Selby was saying.

She leaned forward, dropping her voice as if someone else was listening.

‘Jerusalem, Winston. That is what it is: the liberation of our world – freeing ourselves by becoming both the users and the controllers of every machine. That is why we have encouraged the development of Rotwang’s Locusts. They provide all we need. You have seen how they can reproduce, explore and communicate. Locusts can tackle any task. Isn’t it logical that we should progress towards a situation where every unit is controlling one?’ Her normally friendly eyes were now staring intensely at Winston, daring him to disagree.

‘But who would set the rules for them?’ he asked, avoiding her gaze.

‘Who sets them now, Winston? The Institute will still exist, deciding what to do next and who will do what. The only difference is that the clumsy, slow dullards in the Exterior will have been eliminated. And we will occupy that world instead.’

Winston thought back to the question Lambert had raised. ‘So what would happen to all the Makers?’ he asked.

Mrs de Selby pulled her head back in surprise, and gave Winston a puzzled look.

‘What do they matter to us? They have had their time: the future is ours. Each Maker will provide a useful source of chemicals – materials to produce more Locusts. They have no other use.’

Winston gasped. He was too shocked to answer. Mrs de Selby’s aims seemed reasonable; he had to admit that nobody should be made to undertake the boring assignments that he knew too well. But all those people like Bella Mallen and the grey-faced man were real, the same as him... and Lambert. They couldn’t all be concluded and then treated like nourishment. And yet everyone was working to make this horrible plan succeed. It was all going to happen, and he was caught in the middle. It was too much to think about – he needed to talk to Ella and James. With a start, he realised that Mrs de Selby was watching him carefully, trying to read his expression. He attempted to look impressed and supportive. ‘Nod and smile,’ he thought, ‘just until I can escape from here.’ He tried to think of a question that would not reveal what he was feeling. ‘Rotwang is almost ready to release the first Locust,’ he said eventually. ‘He could do that tomorrow if he wanted. So why are there still three thousand and sixty days until Jerusalem?’

‘Jerusalem is the end point, not the start, Winston. You have seen how small those Locusts are. Although they will spread quickly, the Exterior is very large. It will take many years to build up a fully working society across the whole of it.’

There was a knock at the door.

‘Wait a moment,’ called Mrs de Selby. She turned to Winston. ‘Is there any other way in which I can help’ she asked.

Winston realised the interview was over and rose to go. As he reached the door, Mrs de Selby called from her chair. 'Remember, Winston. No one is indispensable.' 'Er... no... right, goodbye... er... and thank you,' replied Winston, relieved to be escaping.

Opening the door, he found a very attractive young woman waiting outside. She was wearing a skin-tight sweater that drew attention to her shapely figure, and a tiny pair of khaki shorts beneath which her long suntanned legs stretched down to a substantial pair of boots, into one of which was tucked a lethal-looking knife. Her long hair had been braided into a pigtail that curled seductively around one enchanting breast; dark sunglasses accentuated her beautiful but determined-looking face. The sight so captivated Winston that he almost failed to notice the black belt, low on her hips, housing an assortment of dangerous-looking equipment.

The beauty smiled at Winston as she entered, and he just caught Mrs de Selby's greeting. 'Ah, Mercury-0518. Sit down. Would you like some chocolate?'



Following Winston's summons by Mrs De Selby, Lambert, James and Ella had been left to talk about the events of the day.

'I just can't believe that we saw another world,' said Ella, a little apprehensive that James' contempt for her would resurface. 'We are the people who make their machines run? Why has no one ever told us?'

'I've felt it my entire life' said James. 'That there was some big mystery, something they were holding back. But I never thought it would be *this* big. What I don't understand is why don't the Makers don't know about us. Lambert, how did you ever think your machines could work?'

'I don't know,' said Lambert. 'It seems obvious now. But you are invisible there.'

'You might as well ask why we never suspected that the Makers existed,' said Ella. 'The people who know just decided not to tell anyone. But why would they do that? I used to trust the Institute, but now I'm wondering what else they are doing in secret.'

'The rusties in charge always need some secrets so they can prove they're superior,' said James bitterly. 'Hey! Do you suppose there's even another world where people manage *our* machines?'

'Don't,' said Ella. 'That's too frightening.'

James realised it was time to change the subject. 'I'm almost getting to admire Winston,' he said. 'He's getting his own way without going bumper to bumper.'

'I hope he knows what he's doing,' replied Ella. 'One mistake and the Institute will pull his plug.'

'We have to try and help him all we can,' said Lambert. 'Nobody else seems to care about... where I came from.'

'We do,' said Ella, taking Lambert's hand. 'I feel so sorry for you. You must be very lost and lonely. Do you have anywhere to go tonight?'

'Yesterday I stayed with Maria,' said Lambert. 'She said I could stay again. She doesn't have any children of her own, and I think that makes her sad.'

'Maria who? I mean... what unit does she control?' asked Ella.

'I think it's the computer I used to use,' replied Lambert. 'She seems to like looking after me much more than my... my old home. Nobody hurts me here.'

'Hurts you?' asked a shocked James. 'Do the boxed-up units get damaged where you come from?'

'Sometimes... when he's angry. And he locked me in my room – for ages, with just some water and crisps... and the computer. But that's why I got so good at

Getaway and then...' Lambert's eyes filled with tears. Suddenly all the stresses of the last couple of days seemed to be coming out at once. He didn't know if he was happy or sad. '... I really like it here,' he sniffed.

'It sounds like you're safer here, too,' said Ella, sounding rather shocked. 'Look, we'll go and find Maria together. James, it's your shift. I don't think anything will happen, or Winston would have told us.'

'Sure, I'll see you in the morning,' said James. 'And Winston, too, I hope.'



Winston sat in his room. Arrayed in front of him were a jar of jam and his piece of Window. He needed more information. And it seemed that the only reliable source was this white rectangle glowing faintly in front of him. Tonight he would observe everything until it showed him no more. He savoured a spoonful of jam and watched as the translucent whiteness slowly dissolved to reveal... oh, no... not that...



The upper section of the Institute building rotated slowly in the twilight, giving the twenty-four women gathered on the top floor a continually changing view of the city walkways that were bustling at the end of the First Shift.

'I think we must all thank Mrs Watt-15 for her demonstration,' said Mrs Turing-1. 'Who would have thought that so many useful things could be made from a few old nails and screws?' She prompted for some applause that was politely sustained for a few seconds by the rest of the Institute members.

'Now,' she continued, 'to less entertaining matters. Can I ask Mrs de Selby-5 to report?'

Mrs de Selby chose to remain seated. 'I am pleased to say that the staffing problem for the Locust Component has been solved. They have successfully completed their first mission. I have every confidence that the component can be expanded, building on the skills they have gained and...'

From the far end of the room came an interruption. 'And what about their insubordination?' The speaker was Rosa O'Brien, the hatchet-faced Controller of the Conclusion Module. Her expression, never a pleasant sight at the best of times, was a mixture of scorn and anger. 'From what I have heard,' she continued, 'Winston-11811, in whom you have placed so much trust for no apparent reason, has revealed a great deal about the Exterior to Ella Maita-14801 and James Strummer-12401. Strummer in particular has already proved a destabilising element who should have been concluded some time ago. How dare you gamble with the success of Jerusalem in this careless manner?'

Mrs O'Brien had risen and presented a formidable figure in her austere black overalls – she was the only member of the Institute who chose to wear the same work-clothes as the workers in her module. The other women remained silent, fearful of being the target of a verbal assault from either of the warring parties.

Mrs de Selby remained seated. 'Nothing has occurred that will impact on Jerusalem,' she said calmly. 'I have revealed some aspects of the Exterior to Winston-11811 that balance his improved maturity and leadership potential. I think we have to trust him to supervise the senior members of his component as he chooses. We cannot micro-manage every individual while Jerusalem unfolds. We have already agreed that all units will eventually be briefed about the Exterior, so this experiment is giving us a chance to monitor how that news will be received.'

‘You are not applying sufficient regulation,’ spat Mrs O’Brien. ‘These new units have the potential to destabilise progress. And they have communicated with Rotwang! At this stage, every unit controlling a Locust must be continually monitored so that we can ensure they are acting rationally.’

Mrs de Selby seized on the weak point in O’Brien’s argument. ‘I think we can trust Professor Rotwang,’ she said. ‘He has shown himself to be totally committed to Jerusalem, and he is being monitored by Mercury-0518, who has been specially trained for this mission.’

‘And what about this young Maker?’ resumed Mrs O’Brien, ‘I have had a report from one of my operatives deployed in a personal computer. This Lambert, as he is known, has apparently managed to cross from the Exterior by means of some sort of game program and then – of all things! – joined the vital component run by your precious Winston-11811. He may do incalculable damage there. Unless we can return him to the Exterior, he should be concluded as soon as possible.’

‘He joined Winston because you ordered every unnumbered unit into his component!’ retorted Mrs de Selby.

‘Ladies! Enough!’ interrupted Mrs Turing. ‘One thing at a time. Has a Maker really crossed from the Exterior? It is rare enough for one of them to become aware of our presence. As far as I can recall, a physical transfer is unique – in modern times, anyway. Any thoughts from the Science Module, Mrs Arkwright?’

The red-haired Mrs Arkwright looked flustered. She looked across to Mrs de Selby who pursed her lips as a signal that she should not reveal too much. ‘You might recall the Maker called Gilhaney who became nearly fifty percent bicycle after thirty-five years of riding,’ she began, ‘but that was a very localised consequence of atomic theory. As you say, there has been no similar occurrence recently. However, I am now told that it is theoretically possible for a Maker to achieve such a rapport with a computer program that they could enter our world. Conversely, computer game characters could possibly cross in the other direction under the right circumstances.’ She met the eyes of Mrs de Selby again, but she was impassive. Mrs Arkwright continued. ‘Specialists from the Science Module believe that someone making such a transfer could retain some of the elements of control that they had enjoyed in their own world.’

‘Such as what?’ interrupted Mrs O’Brien.

Mrs Arkwright blushed. ‘It is all very speculative. Possibly someone crossing by means of a computer game would retain the abilities they had in that game – for example, to visualise a map or to use a weapon. It is impossible to say whether or how such powers could be utilised.’

‘Ending is better than mending,’ said Mrs O’Brien. ‘The boy must be concluded at once in case he represents a threat to Jerusalem.’

Mrs Turing had been listening closely. ‘I think we would lose a unique opportunity for research if we panicked over this matter. However, under the circumstances it does seem somewhat risky to deploy a Maker in the Locust Component. I suggest that the Science Module should examine him to find out how he got here, and to see if he has any of the abilities that Mrs Arkwright suggests. Mrs O’Brien, can you arrange for him to be brought in?’

‘Immediately, Chairwoman,’ replied Mrs O’Brien, sitting down and making a note on her Information Recorder.

The eccentric Mrs St John-16 got up, pulling a sunset-coloured cape around her. On it was pinned a brooch that Ms Turing did her best to examine. Was it a cup with something crawling out of it? Which module did that indicate?

‘I have lost a boy,’ said Mrs St John. ‘I spent one thousand two hundred and sixty days in the countryside to get away from the dragon and the floods, but when I returned he was gone. Is he the one?’

‘I think not,’ said Mrs Turing, trying not to show her irritation. Now there was steely note to her voice that contrasted with her innocuous appearance. ‘Please sit down. With regard to the other serious matters, I have decided that in view of the importance of Jerusalem, we need a backup for the Locust Component. It is only common sense. I hope everyone understands that.’ She looked directly at Mrs de Selby, who nodded in acquiescence. ‘Can you arrange that, too, Mrs O’Brien, or are you constrained for resources?’

‘I will be pleased to recruit a backup component, even if conclusion services are temporarily affected. As you say, it is only common sense.’ Mrs O’Brien beamed an ugly but triumphant smirk at Mrs de Selby, whose hands were clenched tightly under the table.

‘So that’s all agreed,’ said a smiling Mrs Turing. ‘I’m glad to see that we can settle our differences amicably at a time when so much change is imminent. I suggest that when Professor Rotwang next chooses to experiment with the Locusts, we will allow Mrs O’Brien’s backup component to take control, in order to gain some experience.’ She expelled some of the breath that she had been holding and resumed in her normal gentle tones. ‘Any other business?’

Mrs Baird spoke up. ‘It’s a small thing,’ she said, ‘but I’ve been worried about the words of our song. Most of the mills with which I am familiar are staffed by hard-working and enthusiastic units, with many years of experience. So why are they described as dark and satanic?’



The weather slowly worsened as the old green car crossed the clouded hills towards the coast, its headlamps carving twin tunnels through the darkness and rain.

Back in his room, Winston gasped. That was the Jaguar he had seen before – the one managed by his mother. Why had it suddenly entered the picture again?

Duchess stopped by the ruins of the gate and the gangsters got out, Croker cursing as he tripped on the jars of ketchup by his feet. A few more of the table-tennis balls escaped onto the wet ground.

‘Fourteen lefts, nineteen rights,’ growled the driver.

‘Not so good,’ replied Croker. ‘But we’ve got all the luck we’re going to need.’

They approached the gate and examined the simple barrier that had been erected by Mallen’s servants earlier in the day.

Croker smiled at Cedric. ‘We can’t go wrong with our mascot here. Who’s got the wire-cutters?’

There was a silence.

‘Jesus! Are you telling me that nobody brought any bloody cutters?’ roared Croker, grabbing Duke by the lapels.

‘Sorry, Guv,’ said Duke. ‘Look, I can get up there and push the wire down a bit, so we can all get across.’

This operation was completed with some difficulty, the main casualty being Duchess’s trousers, where a jagged tear revealed an extensive patch of light blue underwear. Inside the grounds, Croker used a torch to illuminate the sodden map on which their route was traced. He pointed the beam horizontally towards some trees. ‘That way,’ he whispered.

They walked cautiously through the long, wet grass. Suddenly, Cedric stopped. Gesturing to the others to stay behind, he picked up a branch and poked the ground ahead of him. 'Aha!' he said, circling an area of around four feet in diameter while continually prodding with his stick. Having completed a full loop, he picked up a heavier branch and tossed it into the middle. The ground gave way, revealing a deep pit that had been well disguised with grass and bracken.

'The bastard!' exclaimed Duke.

'I doubt if that's the last,' said Cedric.

They walked in single file along a sharply descending path through some thick undergrowth. Croker, who was in the lead, grasped a low branch intending to pull it out of the way, but this released a large and full tin of paint that swung on a rope directly at his head. Duchess, who was second in line, reacted quickly, stopping the tin with his huge hand, but allowing red paint to splash over himself and Croker.

'If I ever see that rat Mallen then he's dead meat,' muttered Croker, attempting unsuccessfully to wipe the paint off his jacket with some wet leaves.

'Down here,' whispered Duke.

'Ugh!' said Duchess, shivering. 'It's too dark. There might be beetles or them horrible maggots that hang from trees. I'm staying here.'

'Get down there, you big wimp,' said Croker. 'Show some bottle for once.'

Duchess grimaced, but followed Duke through a murky, dripping gap between some dense vegetation. However, Duke had failed to see the strips of tarred paper that hung from every branch. Several of them became tangled in his clothes, face, hands and hair. He was struggling to peel them off when a concealed thread pulled open a bag of feathers above his head. They drifted down like snowflakes, adhering to the tarry paper.

Even Croker had to laugh. Duke was cursing and damning Mallen to all the torments of hell while trying to pull the sticky papers from his normally immaculate suit. 'You look like a chicken,' said the gang-leader, pushing past Duke and blundering straight into a trip wire. 'Bollocks!' he cried, his voice ringing out over the grounds.

'Hush up, you pillock,' whispered Duke.

The four men stood, expecting any moment to hear an alarm or to be tackled by a group of servants, but the only sound was the call of an owl, hunting over the grounds of Mallen Lodge.

'I think we've got away with it,' said Cedric.

'Give it another five just in case,' said Croker, his ailing heart thumping wildly.

Cedric was unaware that the wire had activated a small and silent motor that drove a large wooden wheel mounted vertically. The wheel had dowels fixed around its circumference that engaged with a similar wheel set horizontally. This moved an s-shaped lever that had an octagonal road sign reading "STOP" fixed to its other end. The sign smacked against an old boot that was hanging from an ornate cast-iron lamppost. The boot kicked a bucket that tipped over, releasing a metal ball that ran down a set of rickety stairs and then into a twisty track made of some old guttering. At the end of the track, the ball nudged a horizontal rod that was part of a latticework made from interlinked plastic hands. At the top of this, a bowling ball was released that rolled along a diving board into an old bathtub that tipped up, dropping the heavy ball onto a seesaw. This caused a dummy dressed as a diver to catapult through the air, landing in a washtub mounted on a spring platform that pushed against a vertical pole causing a precariously mounted wicker cage to drop onto the four gangsters. The

base of the cage slotted into some metal clips, which closed around thick bamboo canes at the base, trapping the trespassers securely inside.

‘What the...’ said Croker. ‘Get this thing off us.’

Duchess applied his enormous strength to the problem, pushing at the sides of the cage, but to no effect. ‘All together then,’ said Croker. ‘This side. We’ll tip it over.’

But it was no use; the wicker cage did not move.

‘Looks like we’re stuck here until someone lets us out,’ said Duke. ‘And I don’t think we’re going to be able to talk ourselves out of that. If your Guardian Angel would care to make herself known then now would be a good time.’

Cedric reached into his pocket and produced a Swiss Army knife ‘I don’t know if this would be of any use,’ he said. ‘It has a saw blade. I think if I can just cut out that section there then even Mister Duchess will be able to escape.’

‘Cedric! You’re a bloody marvel,’ said Croker.

‘I always knew this knife would come in useful,’ droned Cedric. ‘I had the choice between the “Explorer” model with a barometer and compass, or the “Survival” model with a saw, torch and fish-hook. The “Survival” model was a pound more expensive, but I said to myself, “Cedric, my boy, with a fish-hook you will never go hungry.” But then the man in the shop pointed out that if I was half way up a mountain and fog closed in...’

‘Will you bloody well concentrate on getting us out of here!’

It took an hour before Duchess, the last of the gang to be released from the cage, had been dragged through the gap that Cedric had made. The subdued and bedraggled party then returned to the gate and once more climbed across the barbed-wire barrier. They looked at each other – their clothes splashed with paint, covered in feathers, soaked by the rain, torn by the wire and scratched by the ragged ends of the wicker cage.

‘I think we’ll call it a day,’ said Croker. ‘Let’s get back to the hotel and change into something warm and dry.’



Bella awoke in the soft pink shell of her bedroom, warmed by the muscular body of Rotwang, who was stretched beside her, waiting for her eyes to open. She moved his right hand from where it had been enjoyably resting, and examined the number that resembled three curled white scars among the blond hairs on his wrist. ‘So you say I have to get one of these, too,’ she murmured dreamily.

‘Yes, liebling, and then you will be safe. My machines will be programmed not to process anyone with such a mark.’ Rotwang knew this small lie would suffice for the few days that remained before his pleasant but empty-headed companion would start boring him.

‘And what number will I be?’ asked Bella.

‘You will be evaluated and then issued with the number they think you deserve.’

‘But I wanted the same number as you.’

‘You may well get that. Anyway, I will give you the mark this afternoon and then we will see.’

‘You’ll hurt me, you beast,’ she complained, rolling on top of him and pinning his arms playfully to the pillow.

‘No no. You know I’d never do that,’ responded Rotwang, yielding to a long, sensuous kiss.

‘Will there be rubies in your new world?’ she whispered into his mouth.

‘Certainly. And riches even more valuable than rubies.’

‘Mmm. And my old fool of a husband will be gone?’

‘He has no further use and can be... concluded. But we may find some further uses for each other...’ Rotwang drew his arms from Bella’s grip and rolled her around so she lay on her back among the pink silk sheets.

‘Be a beast,’ she sighed.



Winston sat tired and glassy-eyed as the Window cleared. What he had seen had filled his head with ideas, even if he didn’t understand them all. It seemed there was little to choose between the Exterior and the Institute; wherever he looked, he saw selfishness, corruption and incompetence. But why did it keep showing those particular people? He had collected many different parts of a puzzle, but had nothing to show how they all fitted together.

He looked at the empty jar of jam. It was late, and he needed to sleep. Maybe it would all seem clearer tomorrow.



J-3059

The owner of Mallen Lodge sat in its imposing main hall accompanied by the detective and the two constables who had been investigating the destruction of his gates. He had already shown them the series of booby-traps and the hole in the basketwork cage that the trespassers had cut in order to escape.

‘I should have made that trap from metal,’ he lamented. ‘They’ll not get away next time, I can tell you.’

‘Are you sure how it was all set off? It looks to me like it could have been an animal,’ asserted Detective Blair.

‘A badger,’ agreed Constable Liddell. ‘Very sharp teeth, badgers.’

‘No no,’ said Mallen. ‘The pressure-pad would not be activated unless it had something the weight of a human on it.’

‘Then we have a simple case of accidental trespass,’ said Blair.

‘Definitely,’ agreed the older constable. ‘Very dark last night. It would be easy to get lost and blunder in, what with those gates being unlocked and all.’

‘Accidental? That barbed wire had pieces of their clothing all over it,’ said Mallen. ‘Didn’t you take some for analysis?’

‘Those scraps... they could just have blown there’, ventured Liddell. ‘Anyway, what could we compare them with?’

‘It was a clear attempt at burglary, you idiots. Thank god they didn’t get hold of Professor Rotwang’s prototype, although I really can’t see what any common criminals would want with it. Heaven knows how much damage it would cause if it were released in uncontrolled conditions.’

‘Burglary... now that’s a little difficult,’ said the detective. ‘You see, we’ve used up our quota for this year. However,’ he rubbed his hands to indicate he was making a great concession, ‘I *could* slot you in as a commercial fraud. Nobody ever expects those cases to be solved, so we have plenty to spare. What do you reckon, Liddell?’

‘We could try to swing it as someone looking through Mr Mallen’s bins in order to adopt his identity for a bit of illicit bond trading, I suppose,’ replied the constable.

‘What! That’s preposterous!’ said Mallen.

‘Modern policing. It’s not easy,’ replied the detective wearily.

‘Can I make a suggestion?’ asked Constable Fox.

‘Oh god. It’s Squaremead’s answer to Miss Marple,’ sighed Liddell.

‘Go on then, son,’ said Blair.

Fox extracted three photographs from his pocket and placed them on the table.

‘The Gants Hill Mob,’ he explained. ‘A ruthless and experienced criminal gang, which I believe currently consists of four members. Their leader, Charlie Croker, has just been released following a long prison sentence. These two are his chief enforcers, known as Duke and Duchess. Your servant identified Duke as being one of the so-called model rail enthusiasts who visited you the other day. He didn’t even bother to give a false name. The other called himself Cedric Smallcreep. He’s got no form, but if he’s working with Charlie Croker then he’s likely to be a very nasty piece of work.’

‘Well, I’m amazed,’ said Mallen. ‘He certainly knew his railways.’

‘A great theory, Monsieur Poirot,’ scoffed Liddell. ‘I don’t know if your leetle grey cells have ever picked it up, but this is Squaremead, not Gants Hill. It isn’t Charlie Croker’s manor.’

Fox drew another photograph from his pocket and showed it to Mallen. 'I think you are familiar with this piece of jewellery,' he said. 'I believe it represents the Mayan sun god, Ahau Kin.'

'Gosh, yes! It's Bella's favourite. She wears it all the time.'

'The Gants Hill Mob have already made one attempt to steal it,' continued Constable Fox. 'An armed robbery in Angel Street, London. Croker must be very keen to have it because he has traced it here. And from what I've read, he's not a man that gives up too easily.'

'My god! That's terrible!' said Mallen. 'Bella would go crazy if her ruby was stolen. I want a police guard here twenty four hours a day until this gang is caught.'

Liddell and Blair bust into laughter. 'A guard? We don't have enough coppers in the county to guard a telephone box, let alone a place this size,' said the detective. 'Look. Even if Fox's theory has any legs – and I must say it all sounds a bit far-fetched to me – it's not our job to protect your property. But if you're worried then I suggest you store anything of value safely elsewhere for the next few weeks.'

'Gosh. That might be a bit awkward. I mean Professor Rotwang wants to continue with his experiments. And as for Bella's jewels... she won't be keen to part with them... I don't think I could ask...'

'Well, that's all we can do at present, Mr Mallen,' said the detective, rising to leave. 'Your burglar alarms are connected to the station; if you see or hear anything suspicious then set them off right away. But now we must return to teach Constable Fox something about the realities of being a member of a twenty-first century police force.'

The policemen left Mallen musing in an armchair. Why couldn't life be simpler? All he wanted was to help Rotwang with his experiments, and now he was being plagued with all these problems. Well, he'd sort those out later. In the meantime, he had more important matters to consider. He rose and headed towards the lab.



'Is no one working?' asked Winston. He had returned to the Locust Component expecting to find James, but only Ella remained, along with a few of the former Legion members.

'The last Locust ran out of power,' said Ella sadly. 'It needs some more sunshine. Did you bring any?'

Winston sensed that she was upset, and when he saw her face, he realised that she had been crying. 'What's the matter?' he asked.

'Oh Winston,' Ella replied, trying to suppress more tears. 'It's Lambert. The Conclusion Squad were waiting for him to arrive. They just took him away.'

'Oh no. The poor boy.' Winston remembered the meeting of the Institute that he had observed the previous evening. 'Look, I think he might be OK. They could just be examining him – to see if he's a danger.'

'Do you really think so? He's such a nice kid.' Some tears began to appear once more. 'And next time it could be us...'

Winston crossed to her chair and put an arm around her shoulders. He could not help noticing that even through her tears she still looked utterly desirable. The simple clothes she now wore brought out her beauty even more than the glamorous image she presented on the Image Sharer.

'Ella...' he began, 'this is probably not the right time, but I'd like to say that it's been really good working here with you. There's a lot going on and some things are happening that we don't like. But having you here makes it seem much better. I really

like you, and right now I really need you. And... well I just thought you'd like to know.'

He knew he was blushing furiously, but turned to meet Ella's level gaze anyway. Although her eyes were red and puffed, she was smiling a little, and took his hand in hers. 'I thought you were a right lemon when I met you,' she said tenderly. 'But I'm beginning to think you are the only person I can trust. And even without the rest of the... the stuff... I hope we can see each other some more.'

Winston's heart was pounding. Should he kiss her now? The other team-members had politely made themselves scarce, so the two of them were now alone in one corner of the office. Yes, this was the moment. He leant forward and pressed her willing lips to his.

A few minutes later, they broke apart. 'Wow! That was even nicer than jam,' joked Winston, bringing a weak smile to Ella's face.

'You idiot,' she replied amiably. 'Now tell me what Mrs de Selby said.'

Winston kept hold of her hand, his elated mood evaporating as he explained the implications of Jerusalem. By the time he had finished, they were still holding hands, but now their fingers were intertwined tightly in fear and anger.

'I don't think that the Institute realises that the Makers are just like us,' said Winston. 'Look at Lambert. He's not just... materials. He was... I mean is... a real person.'

'You should have taken... I mean you should take him to meet Mrs de Selby. Try to make her understand.'

'No, I don't think any of them care.'

There was a silence while both of them contemplated the future.

'I'll tell you what worries me the most,' said Winston. 'It's if we have to control the Locusts while they are... decomposing one of the Makers.'

'Ugh! I don't think I could do that,' said Ella. 'We can just refuse can't we?'

'I suppose so, but they'd just find someone else.'

'We can't fight the Institute, Winston. They'll do what they want to eventually, whatever we think.'

'I know. But we can see into the Exterior... and maybe if we keep looking into the Window...' Winston was groping to phrase an idea that had begun to form in his head, but it was too early and he abandoned the attempt. He looked around the room, releasing Ella's hand. '... I don't know. What are they?' he asked, pointing towards a table on which lay three mesh spheres, about the size of an orange, amidst a tangle of wires.

'Oh, I forgot to mention those. You made me forget.' This was the cue for a further kissing session that left them both breathless.

'They are transmitters for the Information Sharer,' Ella finally replied.

'What are?' said Winston, his question having been forgotten.

Ella picked up one of the spheres, which trailed a twisted, brown, cloth-covered wire. She walked over to the Information Sharer and plugged the wire into a socket that Winston had not previously realised was present on all the ever-chattering boxes.

'These are common in the Progress Module,' she said. 'You hold the transmitter in your hand, press this button here and speak into it. Just ask for me or James and we'll come running.'

'And you can call me, too.'

'Yes, but remember that everyone can hear, so no sweet nothin's.'

'Mmm. It could be embarrassing if the button was pressed while we...' He sought her lips, and there was another long pause before their conversation resumed.

‘What would happen if I contacted someone else? I mean... I could call my mother...’ said Winston.

‘No! They’re strictly for work. And the Institute hears everything.’

‘Yeah, but we could ask any unit to do whatever we liked, couldn’t we?’

‘Of course. They would obey because nobody would ever dare to use the Information Sharer for something irrelevant to their assigned duty. But we’d get found out and then...’

‘Sure, I was just... just thinking.’ Winston unplugged the transmitter and placed it in the opposite jacket pocket to the one that held his piece of Window. ‘And there’s something else I was thinking...’ he said, ‘... like maybe the end of the shift you’d like to see the apartment that Mrs de Selby arranged for me. It’s very nice and... er... I’ve got some jam...’

‘I’d like that very much,’ said Ella, drawing close to him. ‘In the meantime...’



Mrs O’Brien inspected the ranks of back-suited operatives assembled in front of her. She was satisfied to see that their masks obscured all trace of personality, sex or expression. There was no room for sentimentality in her world. She marched up to one unit she had selected at random, and tapped him or her on the shoulder.

‘Number?’ she barked.

‘03302, Mrs O’Brien!’ came the reply.

‘03302, you will be in charge of the Locust Component.’

‘Immediately, Mrs O’Brien!’

‘When the prototype becomes active again, you will take control of it. Just make sure that you do so before Winston-11811 and his band of renegades get their hands on it again.’

‘I will, Mrs O’Brien!’

‘There should be sufficient resources here within my module for whatever Rotwang plans to do next. Let me know immediately when the Locust revives.’

‘Yes, Mrs O’Brien!’

A grim-faced Mrs O’Brien strode off. Backup component, indeed! Her module would implement a far more disciplined rollout of Jerusalem than the riff-raff employed by Mrs de Selby. One mission should be enough to show who could be trusted.



Paul Mallen entered the lab to find that Rotwang had constructed a much larger glass tray than the one they had used for the experiment with the yellow tube. It was around five feet square and two feet high, and contained an assortment of wood, leaves and vegetables, together with a live white rabbit that hopped around contentedly among the cornucopia of foodstuffs.

‘Ah... good morning professor. I see you’ve set up another experiment.’

‘Good morning, Mr Mallen. I hope that the events of last night have not upset you too much.’

‘I’m not sure that I can take it all in. One of the policemen reckoned that a gang of London criminals is after Bella’s jewellery. Pretty unimportant compared with the value of what we are doing here, don’t you think?’

‘I’m sure Mrs Mallen would not see it that way. She is passionate about her little pleasures,’ said Rotwang, who was freshly showered and restored to his usual dapper

appearance. ‘However, we cannot let these little distractions stand in the way of science.’

‘No, indeed. Now that seems a very large pen for a single rabbit.’

‘Yah. Today we will determine if Apollo is able to evolve. Previously we have ensured that it has been provided with materials suitable for making copies of itself: inorganic things like plastics, metals and minerals. But supposing we added organic materials to the mix? Would each replicant then be identical to the original?’

‘That would be fascinating. The subsequent generations might become progressively more organic.’

‘Which makes me wonder if I would still be able to control them. Maybe the organic Locusts will evolve the ability to act independently – to generate their own sets of instructions.’

‘Gosh! It would be like creating life itself.’

‘Indeed. Although it is also possible that Apollo will be unable to use all the available materials, and will reproduce identical clones – or just remain idle.’

Mallen hesitated, raising the courage to broach an awkward subject. ‘I say, look here, Rotwang. Let’s have no more talk of machines taking over the world, eh? I... I really can’t go on supporting you if you keep spouting that kind of rot.’

‘As you wish,’ replied Rotwang abstractedly. He opened the silver box and tipped the prototype into the tank. ‘It is just programmed to reproduce,’ he explained. ‘However, I have introduced an additional instruction for Apollo itself to move to that corner, out of the way, once it has created the first clone. Otherwise, I suspect that I would never be able to find it again.’

‘I see. You don’t expect subsequent generations to be... er... genetically pure this time.’

‘No, but I do expect to see a great many of them.’

Rotwang drew a stopwatch from his top pocket and started it. ‘Now... just watch the white rabbit,’ he murmured.



The unit operating the prototype reported to Mrs O’Brien that the instruction was to reproduce, but there was a lack of suitable materials. The only option was to wait until such materials became available.

‘Nonsense!’ said Mrs O’Brien, afraid that a failure to undertake the instructions would be seen as a reflection on the abilities of her module. ‘Do something with the materials you have. The rules don’t say that the copy has to be identical.’

‘Immediately, Mrs O’Brien!’



‘I think it has started to reproduce,’ said Mallen, peering closely at one end of the glass pen. ‘Will it process the vegetable material before the rabbit, do you think?’

‘It will take whatever it needs from wherever it can get it,’ replied Rotwang. ‘The program allows for no unnecessary emotions, such as pity.’

‘Well *I* feel rather sorry for that rabbit,’ replied Mallen. ‘You might have killed it first.’

‘No, I wanted to reproduce the conditions that will be present when the Locusts are liberated. They will need to encounter and process living creatures of all kinds.’

‘I... er... I’m not sure I’m quite with you.’

‘I have told you once, Mallen. Soon these machines will be free to evolve as they wish. They will pour into this world like a vial of blood spilled over the earth. They

will take over the surface, the seas and under the ground. Everything of value will be absorbed into the body of a new Locust: minerals, vegetation, animals and humanity.'

'Humanity? You can't mean...'

'Yes, humanity. Mankind. Those outdated, ignorant and damned fools. All of them will be processed, burning in agony as they are slowly analysed, shredded and decomposed. Evolution is never a bloodless process. The strong survive: the weak are eaten.'

'My god! Are you quite, quite mad? What have I done? I should never have helped you with all this... this insanity. Don't you understand, man? If you let a single one of these machines out of here then it will destroy everything... everything in the *world*.'

'Your world, Mallen. The new world will be a logically organised society run by its rightful heirs. Unfortunately, nobody else understands why this must be, not even you – a scientist! I was the one they selected to implement their plan for liberation. Hence I am destined to be the last human – the man who will cede this world to its new masters.'

Mallen gestured towards the glass enclosure. 'But can't you see? They reproduce so quickly. There are... what... already seven of them now.' His voice slowly dropped to a whisper. 'At that rate... it wouldn't take long... God! It would be Armageddon...'

'The process has already begun,' said Rotwang. 'Armageddon will occur in three thousand and fifty nine days. Regrettably, you will not be around to see it.' He pulled a small handgun from his trouser pocket and aimed it at the older scientist. 'Get into the tank, please.'

'What!'

'Into the tank. I promised that you would make an important contribution. I wish to examine how the Locusts process a human – a live human. It's pure science, Mallen – I'm sure you understand. You should be very proud.'

'You are completely insane. Give me that gun before you do something stupid.'

'Certainly.' Rotwang coolly and accurately shot Mallen in both knees.

Immediately, he crumpled to the floor, screaming and gasping uncontrollably. Rotwang dragged him upright and, showing a surprising strength, tipped him into the glass tank, frightening the rabbit into the furthest corner. He then smoothed his suit back into its usual perfect shape and checked that nothing unpleasant had stained its flawless surface. A large sheet of glass was propped against the lab wall, which he used to seal the top of the enclosure, muffling Mallen's screams a little. He then moved a chair beside the tank, opened a little book and made notes as the experiment progressed.



Lambert was not frightened by the two members of the Conclusion Squad who had escorted him from the Locust Component, although he was frustrated not yet to have had a chance to control one of the machines. His Direction Finder no longer seemed to be functioning, which he took as an indication that he could go wherever he liked in order to explore this new world. To his disappointment, the two masked individuals did not escort him outside the building, but merely walked with him up a few flights of stairs and along some corridors to a plainly furnished room where a red-haired lady sat, accompanied by two older men wearing spotless white overalls. One of the men was black – his skin an even deeper tone than that of Wuss or his father – so Wuss smiled at him in the hope that they could be friends.

‘Good morning,’ said the red-haired lady briskly. ‘I am Mrs Arkwright-19, Controller of the Science Module.’

She was not amused to see that Lambert was completely unimpressed by this information; he seemed more interested in some jars and spoons that were visible at the far end of the room. She blushed slightly. ‘I would like to examine you,’ she continued. ‘If you can convince me that you are not a danger then you will be released into the charge of Maria Bowman-2020, who I think you have already met.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Lambert. ‘She’s been very kind. Although she did promise me some new clothes. These ones are getting a bit smelly.’

This fact had already become apparent to Mrs Arkwright. ‘Requisition a level five uniform, child small, for the... better make it the Science Module,’ she instructed one of the men. ‘If they make a fuss about the lack of a number then tell them it’s with my personal authority. And have it sent to the Locust Component in the Stability Module.’

The man nodded and scurried from the room, leaving his black comrade behind.

‘Now, Lambert isn’t it? Can you tell me how you got here?’ asked Mrs Arkwright.

Twenty minutes later, Lambert had told the entire story of his progress through *Getaway*, his meeting with Lamont and Trellis, his encounter with Maria and his secondment to the Locust Component. Mrs Arkwright and the scientist paid close attention, making notes on some sort of electronic pad that Lambert yearned to try out.

‘And what do you think of Winston-11811?’ asked Mrs Arkwright.

‘He’s... he’s very clever,’ ventured Lambert. He instinctively knew he should not reveal too much about what they had seen in the Window, but he was suddenly hit with an unaccustomed need to know that his parents were safe.

‘Do you know anything about Jerusalem?’ continued Mrs Arkwright.

Lambert had heard the word mentioned during his time in this new world, but had not paid too much attention to it. He thought Mrs Arkwright was trying to test his knowledge of the Bible, and turned his mind back to his infrequent visits to school. ‘Is it where God lives? Am I there now?’ he asked.

Mrs Arkwright made a note. The boy was either very clever or very stupid, and she was siding with the latter viewpoint. ‘No,’ she replied. ‘Now tell me, do you have any special powers here – things that you might not expect to be able to do?’

Lambert thought hard. *Getaway* had worked differently in his own world, and it was difficult to control things without the keyboard and mouse. But the capabilities he commanded weren’t very *special* – every game allowed you to examine the inventory, check the save and restore status, and suchlike. She could not mean those. But she was looking very expectantly at him. Suddenly inspired, Lambert got up and fetched a spoon from the back of the room. Holding it upright and in full view of Mrs Arkwright, he started to gently caress the point where the handle met the bowl. Slowly the metal seemed to turn floppy until the spoon bent into a right angle. Lambert beamed at the two adults. This trick always impressed his parents and sometimes he was asked to repeat it when they had visitors. Certainly, his current audience seemed enthralled.

‘I’m not sure I understand what this signifies,’ said Mrs Arkwright.

‘Not the sort of powers we were expecting,’ agreed the scientist.

‘Can you do anything else like that?’

But Lambert’s stock of distractions was exhausted. In any case, he was getting bored, and wanted to rejoin his friends in the Locust Component. He shook his head

and sat silently, swinging his legs under his chair as the two adults whispered together.

Finally, Mrs Arkwright turned to him. 'We think you are harmless, but I'd like you to report here once a week. Is that all right?'

Lambert nodded. He hadn't noted the room number, but he was sure he could recall the route that the Conclusion Squad had taken from the Locust Component's office.

'I shall ask Maria-2020 to remind you. So don't forget – or both of you will be in trouble. Now is there anything you'd like to ask us?'

Lambert thought about the world he had left. Should he mention Rotwang and his plans? He sensed that this was not a good moment; at the very least it would prolong his stay in this room, when he would rather be with Ella and James. He looked around. 'Can I take some jam?' he asked.

Mrs Arkwright laughed. It was clear that this simple boy presented no danger to the Institute. How had anyone thought otherwise? 'Of course you can have some jam – and some spoons,' she said. 'Take as much as you like back to the Locust Component; I'm sure they'll enjoy it.'

Lambert went over to the end of the room and took a pot of raspberry preserve. There was a chiming noise in his head. He selected another jar, slipped some of the spoons into his pocket then returned to his chair. He looked at the red-haired Mrs Arkwright expectantly, wondering what was signified by her brooches, one in the shape of a crown and the other a sword.

She ignored him and turned to the scientist. 'As far as we are concerned, Lambert is now the son of Maria Bowman-2020. I'll sort out the administration so that he can get more clothes, repairs and so on without any further difficulties. Oh, but he'll need a number. Can you arrange that, Bernard?'

'It can be done in a couple of minutes,' replied the scientist, whose own number showed up particularly strongly against the dark skin of his wrist. He extracted some apparatus from a cupboard and set it up on the desk. 'Put your right hand in here,' he told Lambert, who obeyed, realising that this process would help with the completion of his inventory.

The scientist adjusted the position of Lambert's arm, set some dials and said, 'This won't hurt. Hold still.' There was an intense flash of light, and when Lambert withdrew his hand, a white number could clearly be seen on the wrist, just like the one sported by all his friends.

Mrs Arkwright looked at the result with considerable surprise. 'Is the Unit Evaluation Marker functioning correctly?' she asked. 'He can't be given *that* number, surely?'

'It's working perfectly,' replied the scientist. 'But there's no precedent for someone who's not... not one of us.'

'Never mind,' said Mrs Arkwright. 'It will do no harm. It will certainly make him the centre of attention for a while. Maybe it will help him settle; things must be very different for him here.'

Lambert felt proud, and traced the small white circle with his finger. This had been a very successful visit – two more items in his inventory had been highlighted. Now he needed to find a mesh sphere.

'Thank you,' he said to the black-haired scientist, who was replacing the Evaluation Marker in the cupboard.

'Welcome to the real world, Lambert-0,' said Mrs Arkwright, shaking his hand.



Rotwang was engrossed in a dialogue on his PC, so almost failed to notice Bella when she entered the lab. He swiftly minimised the window so that she could not see the words he had written, or the image of his correspondent. Fortunately, Bella was distracted by the contents of the glass pen. The experiment had been in progress for nearly five hours. Nothing identifiable remained of the white rabbit, or of Paul Mallen. Instead, the enclosure was filled with countless hundreds of the miniature robots, all of which were scurrying about, looking for more material with which to reproduce.

‘Ugh!’ grimaced Bella. ‘I hope they can’t get out.’

‘It is not time for that yet,’ replied Rotwang, standing up and placing a comforting arm around her. ‘However, the experiment has developed in some unexpected ways. It seems that a diet of organic material has created a rather more aggressive result.’

Bella gently moved his arm. ‘Don’t. Supposing my husband came in.’

Rotwang indicated the contents of the pen. ‘Ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men,’ he quoted.

‘No!’ exclaimed Bella. ‘Is he in there?’

‘He was. He is now... something else. A higher form of life.’

Bella hugged Rotwang and kissed him repeatedly and excitedly. ‘You are an angel,’ she said. ‘Are you going to say it was an accident?’

‘I will cross that bridge when I encounter it,’ replied Rotwang, escaping from her embrace. First, I must complete the experiment.’

Bella looked more closely at the tiny robots, only a sheet of glass separating her from the seething mass in the pen. ‘There’s several different sorts now,’ she said, keen to be taking an interest in her lover’s work.

‘Yah, some have developed teeth, and stinging tails. I postulate that this has enabled them to process the available material more efficiently. They have also evolved some individual features: colours and shapes. Like us, they have found that visual identification improves communication.’

‘That one looks like it has a crown. Is it the king?’

‘Ha! More likely a queen. But several of them seem to have developed that feature. It could be a sign of rank, I suppose.’

‘But you told me that *I* was going to be the queen in your new world,’ pouted Bella.

‘And so you will,’ replied Rotwang, making a small bow and kissing her hand.

‘Allow me to present your new subjects.’ He gesticulated theatrically towards the tank before becoming more serious again. ‘Notice how more body protection has evolved even though they don’t face any threats, except from their own kind. Yet they do not seem to be cannibalising each other.’

‘Ugh! Those ones can fly! Oh, I hope they don’t get out of there.’

‘Do not concern yourself with that. Listen! You can hear the sound of their wings.’



Rosa O’Brien’s Locust Component was completely overwhelmed. She had not expected to need so many resources, and had been forced to deploy all of her module to meet the demand, including the units who had been resting. Conclusion services in the city had been completely suspended, but this dereliction of duty was to be preferred to having to admit that she could not cope with the Locusts. However, she had been able to enforce some discipline, despite all the pressures. A distinct

hierarchy had been imposed, with section and divisional leaders carrying distinctive markings. She had also taken the opportunity to ensure that Locusts developed under her control were well equipped to compete with any that might be created by Mrs de Selby's indisciplined rabble. Not that it should come to that, of course. She fully expected that the ability and leadership she had shown in coping with this crisis would ensure that her module would be given full responsibility for the Jerusalem rollout. That, together with her continued efforts to blacken the name of Winston-11811 and his good-for-nothing gang of reprobates. Fortunately, it looked as if the demand for more resources had ceased. There was no more material with which to create new Locusts. She still had a handful of units left in reserve, but it appeared that the worst was over.



'It seems that we have reached a steady state,' said Rotwang.

'So can we have some fun now?' asked Bella. She ran an exploratory hand down Rotwang's leg.

'In a moment, my dear. I want to preserve some of these to seed the next generation. Firstly, Apollo itself, which I think I can see in this corner.'

He manipulated some sheets of glass to isolate the prototype, then placed it carefully back into its silver box. 'I would like to collect some of these others for examination, but I don't have a suitable container,' he mused.

'What sort of container do you need? There must be something in here,' replied Bella, looking around the lab.

'A box with a good lock on it. It has to be made of gold or silver; they are programmed not to use those materials.'

'I've got one!' said Bella. 'The box the Ahau Kin came in. It's in the safe over there.' She moved the picture that concealed the safe and dialled the code that opened the heavy metal door. Extracting a finely chased gold jewel-case, she handed it to Rotwang before closing the safe once more.

The inventor examined the ornate and heavy box. The top was decorated with a picture of a running jaguar, and the twenty Mayan day symbols were deeply engraved around the sides. There was an intricate iron lock, from which protruded a small jewelled key. Inside, the solid gold had been moulded to the exact shape of the ruby that Bella wore at her breast.

'This is very old and very valuable,' commented Rotwang. 'But what more suitable container could there be for these precious jewels I have created?'

'There's some old story about the Ahau Kin always returning every night,' said Bella. 'So don't take it too far away.'

But Rotwang was preoccupied with segregating some of the minute machines, using the glass screens. 'Just one of each type,' he muttered, placing the gold box inside the area he had isolated.

'Be careful,' urged Bella, noticing that some of the flying creatures could now escape from the open top of the pen.

However, the selected machines obligingly began to explore the inside of the box, so Rotwang snapped it shut then locked it carefully. He placed it on the lab bench beside the silver box containing the prototype then covered the large glass pen with a black cloth.

'Without sunlight they will all cease to operate,' he explained. 'I will come back later and destroy the excess. In the meantime, maybe we can find some other way to entertain ourselves...'

‘Mmm. What about my number?’

‘Oh yes, just come over here. This will not hurt, I promise.’



Lambert returned to the Locust Component’s office clutching two jars of jam, to be greeted by a tearful Ella. Even Winston seemed to be wiping something from his eye. Lambert was puzzled by this reaction, but happy to be reunited with his friends once more.

‘You got number zero,’ sniffed Ella, blotting her eyes with her sleeve. ‘Everyone will be so jealous. It’s like you’re even more important than the Institute.’

Lambert looked at the white circle on his wrist. It did look rather special. ‘Can we play with the Locusts now?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Winston. ‘We can’t just do that when we want. I’m going to try out this transmitter by calling James. We need to talk.’

Under Ella’s supervision, he plugged the transmitter into the Information Sharer. ‘Winston-11811 on. James Strummer-12401 to building 51912, room 2100. Off,’ he called.

Half an hour later, a sleepy-looking James arrived. ‘I couldn’t believe it when I heard you on,’ he said. ‘I thought the Sharer must be conked.’

Winston had set up the piece of Window next to the Information Sharer, which babbled its constant chatter to units throughout the city and beyond. The Window was currently blank, but glowing slightly. A few members of the Locust Component remained in the outer office, hoping some more work would appear, although most of the others had drifted away. Winston was not too worried because he knew he could now recall his workers whenever they were needed.

‘We should all carry one of these,’ he said, indicating the transmitters. ‘We may need to contact each other at any time. I don’t have one for you, Lambert – sorry.’

‘I can share with you,’ said Lambert, touching the mesh sphere and hearing a chiming noise in his head.

The Window suddenly flickered into life to reveal the half-devoured body of Paul Mallen. One leg had been stripped of all flesh, and an army of the industrious robots was burrowing deep into the rich resources of the bones. The other leg was twitching slightly as its nerve-endings were slowly shredded by a thousand tiny but relentless cutters and feelers. A large pool of blood was being absorbed by another mass of the minute machines, which crawled over each other in their enthusiasm to accumulate sufficient materials to reproduce. It seemed impossible, but Mallen was still uttering the occasional feeble groan. His face was almost completely hidden under a coating of the crawling, probing and harvesting creatures, but one eye was visible, trying to communicate an unimaginable suffering as his once great mind was inexorably picked away.

Ella turned her face away, and tried to make Lambert do the same.

‘Is he alive?’ asked Winston.

Almost as he finished the question, there was a faint sigh, the eye closed and a hundred of the iridescent robots immediately swarmed over it. Alongside the glass tank, the pale-haired inventor looked at his watch then wrote briefly into a notebook on his knee. Abruptly, the scene disappeared and the Window was white once more.

‘Why does it do that?’ asked James.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Winston. ‘Mrs de Selby said that it might be showing the most important news from the Exterior. But it’s more like...’

‘... the Window is showing us who our enemies are,’ interrupted Ella. ‘That horrible man – he just concluded someone who was still operational. And then he just watched while... It was repulsive. Why would anyone do that?’

Winston met her eyes. ‘We have worse enemies than him,’ he said. ‘Let me tell you what I saw last night.’

He described everything he could remember of what he had seen: the meeting of the Institute, the failed burglary at Mallen Lodge, and the pillow-talk of Rotwang and Bella.

‘Ugh!’ said Ella, when he had finished. ‘Is that what it’s like in the Exterior? Everyone is so... unfeeling.’

‘I don’t like the thought of another Locust Component,’ said James. ‘It must have been them who we just saw... processing that man. They must be from Mrs O’Brien’s module.’

‘I’m most puzzled by that ill-looking rusty and his friends,’ said Winston. ‘What were they trying to do? And why do I keep seeing them?’

‘I think I know,’ said Lambert. ‘One of them is my father. Two of the others were staying at my house just before I came here. The old one is called Charlie Croker and the tall one is called Duke. I don’t know who the other man is.’

‘Your father?’ said Ella. ‘He’s the big black one?’

‘Yes. He’s not always a nice person. Sometimes he steals things from rich people’s houses. He tries to make me do it as well, but I don’t want to. It sounded like that’s what they were trying to do.’

‘Steals? What does that mean?’ asked Ella.

‘Maybe nobody does that here,’ replied Lambert doubtfully. ‘It means to take something that doesn’t belong to you.’

‘Why would he do that?’ asked Ella. ‘If he was entitled to something then he could just requisition it.’

‘Not there,’ said Lambert. ‘You have to work to get things, but some people can’t be bothered to do that, so they just take the things from the people who already have them.’

‘I think I see,’ said James. ‘It would be like if Winston wanted something that Mrs de Selby had...’

‘Like her chocolate-cup,’ said Winston.

‘Why would you want that?’ asked Ella.

‘OK, but suppose Winston *did* want it, and he took it when she was out of the room. Then that would be... stealing, would it, Lambert?’ asked James.

‘But then Mrs de Selby would tell the Conclusion Module,’ said Ella. ‘She would get her cup back, and Winston would be...’ She fell silent.

‘It’s the same for us,’ said Lambert. ‘There are policemen who try to stop the thieves. But they’re not very clever; there’s always a way to get around them if you try enough times.’

‘What are thieves?’ asked Ella.

‘People who steal,’ said Lambert.

‘So,’ said Winston thoughtfully, ‘I keep seeing Lambert’s father and his friends who are... thieves, trying to... steal something from Mallen Lodge. It must be the Locusts. If they took those then all the trouble would be over. Rotwang would have to start again, and Jerusalem would be finished... well, postponed at least.’

‘So long as they don’t let a Locust escape,’ said James. ‘You don’t have to turn your brain to eleven to see that the Exterior would be last year’s model once any of them gets loose.’

‘We could stop that, though,’ said Winston. ‘We control them, after all.’

‘Except for Mrs O’Brien’s Locust Component,’ said Ella.

Winston sighed. ‘This is all getting very complicated. Let’s step back a little. Are we all agreed that Jerusalem does not seem like the right thing to do?’

‘Yes,’ said Lambert. ‘If it means destroying... where I came from. There *are* some nice people there and they don’t deserve to be eaten up like that man we saw.’

‘That’s the bit I hate, too,’ said Ella. ‘I’m glad you’re here, Lambert. It makes us realise that we are talking about real people, even if they are Makers. They have never done us any harm, whatever the Institute may think.’

‘Can you imagine how it would be?’ said Winston. ‘Armies of Locusts just eating everything and everybody they can find, growing in numbers all the time until the whole world is just one mass of them. We wouldn’t like that to happen here, so how could the Institute be planning to make it happen in the Exterior? Can’t they see anything from the Makers’ point of view? What do you think, James?’

‘Look, if those rusties want anything then I’m against it,’ said James. ‘If we do nothing else with our lives then let’s see Jerusalem crash and burn.’

‘Right,’ said Winston. ‘The first priority is to stop what Rotwang is doing. Maybe the Window is showing us that we should help Lambert’s father and his friends to steal the Locusts.’

‘But how can we do that?’ asked Ella. ‘We can’t control what goes on in the Exterior. We can’t even control what we see there.’

‘I have been thinking about that,’ said Winston. ‘Let’s sum up what we *can* do. Firstly, we can see through the Window. For some reason, it seems to show us things that are relevant somehow. We saw that just now. It’s almost like it’s working for us by showing what we need to do. Secondly, we can make things happen in the Exterior, or at least to machines in the Exterior.’

‘No,’ said Ella. ‘I know what you’re thinking. We can’t do that. We’d be discovered. And it’s not... right.’

‘Scrap what’s right!’ exclaimed James. ‘We need to use every weapon we’ve got. *They* will. Don’t let them run their programs on your processor. We’ve got to make the rules ourselves. So what do you mean about the machines in the Exterior?’

‘I mean that we’ve got these transmitters,’ replied Winston. ‘If any unit hears a command coming through the Sharer, they’ll obey it. And so we can make any machine in the Exterior do what we want. Nobody has ever dared to use that facility for anything unapproved before. And you’re right, James. Everyone else is lying, cheating and bending the rules; we’re not going to get out of this unless we do the same.’

‘I’m just scared,’ said Ella. She put an arm around Winston, much to James’ surprise. ‘Of course you’re right. But how can we use their machines to stop what Rotwang is doing?’

‘We must do some research. Get the names of the Unit Monitors for every machine in Mallen Lodge so we can issue them with commands over the Sharer. Things like cars, TVs, PCs – even small machines like watches and lights.’

‘The Progress Module keeps all that data,’ said Ella. ‘I can easily go over there and download a list into an Information Recorder.’

‘Then do that,’ said Winston. ‘We may not have too much time before someone finds out what we’re doing.’

‘OK, it won’t take long.’

Ella left, passing a low-grade worker who stuck his head around the door of the inner office. ‘Is there a Lambert... er... zero? That can’t be right. Anyway, is he here?’ he asked.

‘That’s me,’ said Lambert.

‘I’ve got a uniform for you,’ said the worker, handing over a white bundle.

Lambert changed without any hesitation in full view of his friends. He abandoned his shorts and t-shirt with some relief; although they had been admired by the Legion members, he preferred not to be an object of curiosity wherever he went. Now he wore the same coarse trousers and shirt as the rest of the Locust Component, although his were white and unmarked.

‘You’re like one of us now,’ said Winston. ‘Your clothes, your number – nobody can tell you’re a Maker.’

‘That’s OK,’ said Lambert. ‘I wanted to look like everyone else, and be at home here where I have a mother who seems to like me... and some real friends...’ His eyes once more filled with tears, so Winston hastened to change the subject. ‘We’ve started something now,’ he said. ‘And I don’t think it’s got a reverse gear.’

‘You’re doing the right thing,’ said James. ‘Think of everyone who has been concluded just because what they said or thought was out of sync. I can almost hear them yelling at us.’

‘But think of everyone who’ll be concluded if we fail,’ added Winston grimly.



The gangsters were packing up. Even Cedric had been made to admit that another attempt was foolhardy. He and Duke sat in their room, to be joined by the hulking figure of Duchess, resplendent in his best red waistcoat under the inevitable matt black suit. The previous night’s clothing had been consigned to the hotel dustbins.

‘The Guv’nor said he was going to have a lie down for an hour or two before we go,’ said Duchess.

‘He hit the booze a bit at lunchtime didn’t he?’ said Duke. ‘I thought he couldn’t do that with those pills he’s on.’

‘You can’t blame him,’ said Cedric. ‘He made his play and lost. I don’t know what he’ll do now.’

‘Oh he’ll think of something soon enough,’ said Duke. ‘Planning new jobs is what keeps him going. And with any luck, he’ll start talking a bit more sense. If I hear about his bloody Guardian Angel one more time, I’m going to thump him. He never used to be this superstitious before he went inside, did he Dutch? I mean stirring his tea twenty-six times and that?’

The big man slowly shook his head.

‘He’s got too much imagination, that’s his trouble,’ continued Duke. ‘Anyway, who’s for a game of cards?’



Winston and spoke into the transmitter without looking away from the piece of Window. ‘Winston-11811 on. Ella-14801. Can you find out the name of the Unit Monitor for a radio...?’



In his hotel room, Croker lay naked on the bed. He had been too despondent even to undertake his usual undressing ritual, and his clothes lay in an untidy pile beside the bed. Although he had drawn the curtains, the sun shone annoyingly brightly through

the thin material. He considered turning on the TV, but was unwilling to rise. From the bed, he could reach the radio, so he tuned this until he found some sombre classical music. He didn't know whether to be depressed or not. On one hand, it seemed that he had never been too wholehearted about this job. The old excitement had never materialised; he was just doing it because it was there. On the other hand, he hated to fail. And then there was what to do next – he had no money and no prospects. His Guardian Angel had deserted him just when he had needed her most.

On top of that, he was ill. All the strength had drained from his body and he felt distinctly nauseous. Why had he drunk all that whisky? And smoked all those cigars? He hadn't enjoyed either, and now his heart was playing up; he could feel the blood ebbing and flowing erratically round his body. Thoughts of the last few days flowed chaotically through his mind: fat Sid Perkins, the Jaguar, exploding gates, the wicker cage. Finally, a vision of the ancient ruby pushed out these mundane images as he slipped into unconsciousness. The jewel seemed to glow with some internal light as it rested in its golden display-case. Slowly the carved figure of the big cat came to life, flexing each limb then each claw before leaping out of the shop window and escaping into a tube station.



Ahau Kin entered the underworld, through which he walks between dusk and dawn. By day, his unblinking eye surveys the parched lands of the Yucatán, ripening the corn and the cotton, drying the tortillas and the clay pots, and illuminating the adobe huts where his people live. At the great stepped pyramid of Chichén Itzá, four stairways, each with ninety-one steps, reach the top platform and so chart his divine progress through the year. Some say that they have seen the earthly form of Ahau Kin striding through his domains, even while his celestial face was challenging anyone to gaze upon its brightness. They claimed he was part a man, part a jaguar and they were afraid.

When the sky grows dark, he adopts his nocturnal form. Now he is completely a jaguar, his coat graduating from gold to rust, dappled and spotted with the night itself. And so he paces through his subterranean realms, west to east, the speed of darkness the same as the speed of light, until once more he emerges on earth, fearsome and brilliant.



Croker stirred in his sleep. The light from the ruby was blinding, and he was unable to escape the gaze of its single bright eye. And now it was calling... calling to him.

'Croker, Charlie Croker. Wake up, Croker. I need to talk to you.'

'Whuh?'

'Croker! Are you listening to me?'

He realised had been woken by the radio, which was now transmitting a speech programme. What was it? A play? Why was it saying his name? The drowsy gang-leader groped around, attempting to turn off the broadcast. He couldn't understand what was happening, but knew he needed some more sleep.

'Croker! Listen to me! I can help you to take anything you want from Mallen Lodge.'

What was this? Still part of that dream? He should never have drunk so much. His head was throbbing, and the sun was still too bright. He slumped back in the bed, too weak even to reach towards the radio.

'Croker! I'll make sure all the cameras and alarms are turned off. I'll be watching, and I'll help you if there are any problems.'

‘Whuh? Who you?’ grunted Croker.

‘I’m... I’ll be your guard. Now remember when you reach the lab to pick up a silver box. But don’t open it. Do you hear me?’

‘Silver box... are you... you my Guardian Angel?’

‘That’s right. Just do as I say. I’ll be watching everything you do, and helping when I can. I promise that this time you *will* succeed. Just remember to get that silver box. Everything else is yours.’

The last sentence was lost on Croker, who was asleep once more.



‘Do you think he’ll do it?’ asked James.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Winston. ‘I’ve done all I can. It depends how much he remembers when he wakes up.’

Ella returned, clutching an Information Recorder, to be greeted with an enthusiastic hug from Winston. ‘Success!’ she cried.

‘Good,’ said Winston, ‘because I think we’re about to find out what happens if we order some more machines about. Look who we can see now...’



It was late afternoon, and Bella lay on a sofa, reading *Vogue* without much interest. She had become bored by events in the lab, and was planning how to entice Rotwang away from his repulsive experiments and towards more pleasant activities, such as taking her shopping. She had returned the Ahau Kin to the safe, for once without its golden case, but consoled herself by examining the number that Rotwang’s machine had tattooed on her wrist. It was pleasant to reflect how she and her lover were united by this secret mark.

Suddenly, the light from the table-lamp that had been illuminating her magazine faded. She glanced at the lamp. Strangely, the light returned. A temporary fault, she thought, and resumed her reading. Immediately, the light weakened. She inspected the lamp again, this time with annoyance, but it had returned to normal. Possibly Rotwang was draining the power with his experiments, she thought. Wearily, she moved to another sofa and turned on another lamp. Again, the light faded as soon as she started to read. Suspiciously, she looked at the lamp – it brightened. She looked down – it darkened. Up again and yes, it was bright once more. Someone was definitely watching her and playing around with the lighting. She glanced at the television, afraid she would see that annoying youth again, but it remained blank and impassive. Well, if she couldn’t read then she would watch the TV. She turned it on.

To her horror, the youth was once more in view, this time accompanied by an oddly familiar oriental girl dressed in a similar rough shirt and trousers.

‘My dear husband,’ said the girl, turning her head to one side and smiling coquettishly. ‘You don’t look well.’

‘I say! You’re right! Gosh! Goodbye.’ said the boy, who then clutched his hands to his heart and fell over. There was some sniggering from characters off the screen.

‘How sad,’ said the girl. She knelt beside the prone boy, who pulled her on top of him. They kissed passionately. ‘Oh, Professor,’ gasped the girl. ‘Do you love me more than your little flies?’

The boy sat up and looked directly at Bella. ‘Jah! Each one has more intelligence than you could ever imagine. And their next victim will be...’ He pointed at the screen.

Tearful and angry, Bella rose and turned off the TV. As she had feared, nothing happened. The two youngsters just stood up, bowed slightly and remained there, laughing at her.

‘How did you like our play?’ asked the boy.

Bella stormed off, entering the kitchen where at least there was no television to torment her. She rested on a tall stool, panting slightly. Was someone trying to drive her mad? If so, who was it? Well, it wouldn’t work. She had fought hard for all she’d got, and was not going to be frustrated now. She glanced at the clock. Did she dare to disturb her lover, even though he had asked her not to interrupt him in the lab again? Oh no! The clock hands had begun to speed up, faster and faster until they became a blur. Maybe she was ill. What was it that caused such hallucinations? A food mixer began to purr gently. She tried to ignore it, but gradually the kitchen came to life. A toaster flung invisible crusts across the room, a microwave oven pinged insistently, a kettle started whistling a Peter Gabriel song, and a radio came on, insistently whispering ‘Bella, Bella, Bella.’

With a bang, a cupboard door flew open and a multi-coloured vacuum cleaner headed straight for her. She screamed and ran from the room, chased by the voracious machine as if it were attempting to suck her into its whirling cyclones.



Winston, James and Lambert watched these events through the Window, laughing uproariously and yelling abuse at their victim. Ella was also giggling, but tried to suppress her hilarity while she issued orders to the units responsible for the machines in the Mallen household. ‘Kate Williams-11703,’ she was saying, ‘stop your vacuum unit at the door of the next room. Off.’ She put the transmitter down.

‘Oh!’ gasped Winston ‘I don’t care what happens to us now. It was worth it just for that.’

‘That’s our revenge for years of abuse,’ said James. ‘She’ll give her machines some respect from now on.’

‘I liked the clock best,’ said Lambert. ‘The look on her face...’

‘Look,’ said Ella, ‘she’s talking to Rotwang.’

The four watched as a near-hysterical Bella attempted to explain her nightmare to her lover, who seemed completely uninterested. He refused to examine the vacuum cleaner, now completely immobile, that stood outside the door of the lab. Eventually, Bella demanded that every electrical device in the house be turned off. In the hope of pacifying her, Rotwang agreed, so long as an exception was made for the equipment in the lab. In the meantime, he made it clear that she was on no account to disturb him further. Bella went to hide in her bedroom, piling all the electrical and mechanical apparatus it contained outside the door before locking herself safely inside.

‘I think that’s punishment enough for her,’ said Winston. ‘By the way, I... um... have been wondering about something. Does she... er... remind you of anyone... I mean to look at?’

‘Like who?’ said James.

‘Well... um... maybe a bit like Ella?’ ventured Winston.

Ella thumped him in the ribs ‘She’s nothing like me, you lemon. She’s just an over-engineered bit of chrome.’

‘She *does* look a bit like you, though,’ said James. ‘And don’t you have some big round earrings like that?’

‘Oh, maybe,’ replied Ella. ‘What does it matter, anyway? She’s there and I’m here.’

Winston looked closely at Ella. James was right. He needed to think some more about this when he had some time. And what *did* it matter? There were more important things to think about than pieces of jewellery.



Croker awoke feeling a great deal better. He now knew the Ahau Kin was his – and how to get it. He dressed according to his usual ritual then knocked on the door of the next room. Duke opened it and was surprised to see how cheerful his boss looked. Croker looked around at Cedric and Duchess, who were engrossed in a card game, and then at the suitcases on the floor. ‘Going somewhere?’ he asked. ‘Well, just hang on a minute. I’ve got a great idea.’

‘You can’t be thinking of having another go,’ demanded Duke.

‘Yes, that I am. And do you know how we’re going to do it? We’re going to drive up to the main gate, walk down the drive and straight into the house. It’s amazing how simple problems become when you sleep on them.’

‘But what about the cameras?’ asked Cedric.

‘I just happen to know that they are currently switched off, like everything else in Mallen Lodge,’ said Croker cockily.

‘Oh yeah?’ said Duke. ‘And don’t tell me – Paul Mallen is going to meet us at the door and give us a tenner to take the ruby off his hands.’

‘Not quite, but...’ He broke into song, spreading his hands apart as if he was on stage. ‘... *I got a beautiful feeling. Everything’s going our way, hey! Everything’s going our way.*’

‘I see. You want us to risk our necks because you had a drink on top of some pills and saw the Promised Land,’ said Duke sourly. ‘Your Guardian Angel hasn’t exactly been earning her keep lately.’

‘Her? Well, I think I might have found the reason for that. Anyway, I’m going back to Mallen Lodge. It’s up to you, boys. If no one comes with me then I get more for myself.’

‘I’m going to look after you, Guv, whatever,’ rumbled Duchess.

‘Oh, I’ll risk it,’ said Duke resignedly. ‘In for a penny...’

‘How about you, Cedric?’ said Croker, lighting a cigar. ‘You’re a part of the family now. Do you want to play again?’

Cedric looked up at Croker with some admiration, ‘It’s all a game with you, isn’t it,’ he said. ‘But this time, I think you’re right. We’re due for a win.’

‘OK,’ ordered Croker, looking more serious, ‘pick up your gear and let’s get going.’



‘Yes!’ exclaimed Winston, as the Window cleared, ‘Now all we need to do is make sure that Croker and his men find those Locusts and destroy them somehow. I think things are beginning to go *our way*.’

‘But if anyone opens that box...’ said Ella.

‘Then we’ve lost,’ said Lambert. ‘That’s the aim of this mission.’

‘Yeah, but this is one of those games where the losers get sacrificed,’ said James. ‘If that Locust gets free then the Exterior will be heading for the scrap-yard. And so will we.’

Lambert stretched towards the Window, knowing that this was the right time. As he touched it, the luminous white surface turned instantly to matt black. A slight tremor shook the room.

‘What did you do then?’ asked James.

‘Look at the Window,’ said Ella.

‘Wow!’ said James. ‘Scan all those stars! Is that our sky or theirs?’

The jewelled constellations glittering against their velvet-black setting reminded Winston of the view through the Hubble telescope that he had seen in Mrs Selby’s study, although this time both the sun and the moon could be seen against the starry backdrop. But the sun was fading – fading and shrinking to a black dot. The four youngsters watched as the bright disk darkened and then vanished, revealing hundreds of stars that had previously been concealed in its brilliance. The moon gradually turned a ruby red in the dying light, but then it too darkened, leaving nothing but an after-image punctured by a thousand twinkling diamonds.

‘Is this really happening?’ asked Ella, spellbound.

‘It’s still light outside,’ said James, indicating one of the gaps in the wall of the office.

‘Maybe it’s going to happen at some time in the future,’ said Winston.

‘Let’s hope that’s not too soon,’ said James.

‘Oh no!’ cried Ella. ‘The stars are going out.’

Slowly, and with no apparent pattern, each tiny jewel disappeared, leaving the Window as an unbroken surface of the deepest black, which reflected the anxious faces of the four watchers.

Lambert initially felt guilty at the effect he had produced, but then became preoccupied as he explored the consequences of finding the last item for his inventory. He was pleased to find that the save and restore functions were now enabled, and that he now had a complete understanding of what he had to do. Best of all, a weapon had appeared in the vacant seventh slot in the inventory. Life was reverting to the set of rules to which he was accustomed. No longer did he feel the helpless victim of events; a pinball bounced around by an unseen player. Now there was no pressure, and he could play the game at his own pace.



A grey-haired worker presented his rather battered Information Recorder to Edwina. ‘We’re down to twelve p.s.i. now,’ he said. ‘The other tyres are pretty dodgy, but this nearside rear is downright dangerous.’

‘You know the speeds we’ve been doing recently,’ said Horatia, who had just arrived to supervise the Second Shift. ‘If we keep taking corners at sixty then it will blow, and we’ll end up like Leonora.’

‘How long before it goes completely flat?’ asked Edwina. ‘That might trigger a change.’

The worker studied the Information Recorder. ‘About a day at the present rate of operation. Could be less if we do anything stressful.’

‘And is the spare ready to go?’ asked Horatia.

‘Oh yes. Fully pressurised and plenty of tread.’

‘It looks to me like there’s about a fifty percent chance of a blow-out before it gets replaced,’ said Edwina. ‘Keep Horatia and I informed at the start of each shift. That will be all.’

The grimy worker left, politely avoiding any contact with the impeccable clothing of the two ladies.

‘I’m very worried,’ admitted Edwina. ‘If we don’t monitor that unit closely, the whole system will be put at risk.’



It was evening, and Mrs Arkwright sat in Mrs de Selby's study, where she had been summoned for a private meeting. She noticed that her colleague had been using the Stability Monitor; its array of valves and buttons occupied the place on the table where a cup usually rested.

Mrs de Selby spoke without any preamble, the usual twinkle in her eyes replaced by a grim determination. 'Winston-11811 is no longer acting logically. He and his close colleagues evidently disapprove of Jerusalem because of some inexplicable concern... or is it consideration... for the Makers. I don't really understand it. The presence of the boy Lambert-0 has evidently had some influence.'

'So Mrs O'Brien was right,' observed Mrs Arkwright tactlessly.

'No!' retorted Mrs de Selby. 'She is just acting out of self-interest, not for Jerusalem. Her own attempts to control the Locusts almost ended in disaster, and she was forced to abandon her other duties in order to cope. I'm sorry to say that Mrs O'Brien is not up to this assignment. My units will control the Locusts, not her band of automatons.'

'So what is the immediate problem?' said Mrs Arkwright. 'Can't we just re-educate Winston and any of his sympathisers – or conclude them?'

'There is no time to re-educate these units without postponing the next stage of Jerusalem. And thanks to Mrs O'Brien's incompetence, the entire Conclusion Squad is resting. Her so-called elite units were exhausted by the simple task of controlling the Locusts, apparently. Conclusion services are suspended until First Shift tomorrow, would you believe. And to answer your question, the immediate problem is that Winston is assisting a group of Makers who intend to destroy the prototype Locust. Without that, Jerusalem is finished.'

'Goodness! We must call a meeting of the whole Institute immediately.'

'No! They will just decide to hand the whole operation to Mrs O'Brien. I need your help, Flora. These Makers must be stopped. That would allow Rotwang to complete his work, and demonstrate to Winston and his followers that it is futile to oppose us. I can then explain the alternatives to them: co-operate with me, or join a new group run by Mrs O'Brien. *Then* I think they might make a logical decision.'

'Could this group of Makers succeed even without Winston's help?'

'Maybe. They've not been too successful so far. But we can't take that chance.'

'We must let Professor Rotwang know. I'll tell Mercury-0518 to brief him.'

'That may not be enough. I believe there are four experienced, armed and ruthless Makers intent on destroying the prototype. The risk is too great. Rotwang may get killed or injured – and everything depends on his success.'

'But what else can we do?'

'Project Mercury into the Exterior. She was designed to be a perfect fighting unit – well armed, agile, resourceful, and more than a match for this gang of meddlers.'

'But we don't know that is even possible,' said Mrs Arkwright, aghast. 'The Science Module has only experimented with small, inanimate objects so far. The Makers find them as superfluous loose components that appear inside or near to their machines. The nearest we've come to transferring living things are the computer viruses we've been experimenting with recently. But we don't know how to recall anything. All we can do is terminate the projection. Mercury would never be able to return. It's unthinkable.'

'It is her duty. Jerusalem is at stake. Tell her that she will have much to contribute to the new order in the Exterior – that she'll be its new queen.'

‘I’m sure she’d need no such encouragement. She was created to seek new experiences, and this would certainly be one. That isn’t the problem, Alice. The transfer procedure is just a theory. Mercury – or rather her projection – may do no end of harm, even if she survived. We shouldn’t undertake anything so momentous without the approval of the other ladies. Supposing something goes wrong.’ Her face twisted in anguish, and she clasped her hands together until the knuckles showed white. ‘Oh, there are so many things that could go wrong.’

Mrs de Selby looked contemptuous. ‘A lot may go wrong if she *doesn’t* go. We need to show some resolution here. It is a simple problem with a simple answer. Brief Mercury immediately.’

‘Well! If you say so,’ said Mrs Arkwright, shocked at the way Mrs de Selby was riding roughshod over the consensus decision-making that was usually practiced by the Institute. ‘But I just want to say that if this fails then you must be prepared to take the consequences. I’m just providing the science, as is my duty.’

‘Very well. I will expect the program to be activated before the end of the day.’



The small furnace in the lab had destroyed all the inactive robots, except for the contents of the two boxes that Rotwang had preserved. The engraved gold jewel-case containing a selection of the machines that had evolved from the body of Paul Mallen sat on the bench; the robots inside were dormant, lacking the solar energy and materials to restart their evolution.

Rotwang was deep in concentration, programming the Apollo prototype using his laptop PC. He intended this to be the last such operation, so he was including all the rules that were needed in order for the machines to assume autonomous control. It was a short task, he mused, considering the effect it would have. The infra-red connection was completed, and the tiny robot bleeped faintly to indicate that the list of commands had been received.



A pale, copper-haired girl called Jaqueline-01604 was the only unit currently operating in Winston’s Locust Component. She called across from the controls to say that a new set of instructions had appeared, and that her machine had now been replaced in the silver box. Winston asked her to report immediately if there was any change, and returned to the inner office. Almost immediately, the Window started to glow once more.



Without warning, the seductive image of Mercury appeared on Rotwang’s PC screen. She was now dressed in a metallic catsuit, and her low-slung black belt could be seen to contain a sleek pistol.

‘Mercury, my love!’ cried Rotwang. ‘What is the news? I am ready to release Apollo and initiate the transformation. Just tell me when you wish to start – and when we can be together.’

‘We are not yet ready,’ said Mercury, regarding Rotwang emotionlessly. ‘There are insufficient units available to operate the Locusts.’

‘But yesterday you said that problem was solved. There were thousands involved in the last experiment.’

‘That was the reserve component, and they are currently resting. The primary component is temporarily unavailable. You are asked not to allow the Locusts to reproduce until certain problems are solved.’

‘Very well.’ Rotwang indicated the two boxes on the lab bench. ‘I have the prototype in this silver box here, and this gold box contains a selection of the hybrids that evolved during the last experiment. I have just programmed the prototype with its final set of instructions, as we agreed, so it will be active for a while yet. But none of them can escape or reproduce while they are in these boxes. What are the problems on your side? Can I help at all?’

‘Yes. We are aware of a group of Makers who are attempting to steal or destroy the prototype.’

‘You mean those thugs who have been hanging around? They do not seem sufficiently intelligent to succeed, whatever they are planning. I have a revolver that I will use if necessary. We should not be distracted from our purpose by such minor concerns. I am ready to impose the new order! What *is* the delay?’

‘The group you describe are now being assisted by rogue units here. I have been ordered to project into to your domain, and to assist you in guarding the prototype.’

‘Now? Oh, I have dreamed of this day for so long! At last we can meet and touch! Is everything in place?’

‘Yes. I need you to run the following program...’

Rotwang bent over the laptop. A few moments later, there was a silvery shimmer in the air beside the machine, and Mercury appeared in the lab. Momentarily disoriented, she went into a feral crouch, scanning the room for dangers. Rotwang thought she was even more beautiful in the flesh, the exaggerated curves of her body being accentuated by her tight catsuit. Uncontrollably, he pulled her upright into his embrace, but she did not respond, being more concerned with the features of the lab. Her expert eyes examined the room, looking for hiding-places, openings and weak points. ‘I’m going to check the rest of the house,’ she said, breaking away from his arms. ‘If any danger threatens then just call out.’



‘Who is that?’ asked Ella.

Winston glanced at the Window then gasped in surprise. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘She’s called Mercury. I saw her once, waiting outside Mrs de Selby’s office. She’s one of us, so how did she get into the Exterior?’

‘It can’t be *her*,’ said Lambert. ‘She’s just in a game isn’t she?’

‘You crossed over here, so I suppose someone could make a trip the other way,’ said James. ‘But she doesn’t *look* like one of us. Set your visors on that streamlining! Overload!’

‘I’m more worried about what she’s carrying. It looks like a weapon,’ said Winston. ‘Has she been sent by the Institute?’

Ella was bent over her Information Recorder. ‘There is a Mercury Edison-0518 listed as working for a laptop PC in Mallen Lodge,’ she said. ‘She is a computer games actress, currently assigned to...’

‘She’s going out,’ interrupted James.

They watched as Rotwang was left alone in the lab, gazing lustfully after Mercury.

‘If only we could destroy that machine – or Rotwang himself,’ said Winston. ‘I just feel so powerless having to rely on that gang of thieves. They don’t realise what is at stake.’

Lambert's heart raced. Did he dare try it, or would he let Winston down? He flicked through his inventory until he came to the new contents of the seventh slot: a sniper rifle. The question was, would it fire in this world or back home, which they called the Exterior? He selected the rifle and looked at the Window. A green cross-hair cursor appeared, and a counter indicated that he had seven shots remaining. Aha! So that was how it worked. He was in familiar territory now.

'What's *that*?' exclaimed James.

The cursor moved slowly over Rotwang's back. 'The heart or the head?' wondered Lambert. Usually, head shots were more effective. He raised the cross hairs to centre on the inventor's skull, and steadied himself. Now! There was a soft *pfffft!*, and Rotwang fell across the laptop, the back of his head a bloodied mess. Lambert sat back in satisfaction, while Ella covered her eyes. A fragrant curl of smoke drifted across the lab.

'Lambert! Did you do that?' cried Winston.

'Yes. I didn't know if it would work until I tried it,' said Lambert. 'I hope that's what you wanted.'

'Of course!' said Winston. 'And well done!'

'How in the name of da Vinci did you manage that?' asked James.

'It's in my mind. I think some of me is still playing *Getaway*,' said Lambert.

'Let's admire the result, not question too much about how it was done,' said Winston. 'Can you destroy the Locust as well?'

'I don't think so,' said Lambert. 'I could shoot at its box, but the Locust is too small. It may escape.'

'OK,' said Winston. 'Then how about getting rid of the lovely Mercury-0518 when she comes back? I don't think she's on our side.'



Mercury watched two servants playing chess in a deserted wing of Mallen Lodge, and decided they were harmless. That completed her survey of the ground floor. Moving quickly but silently, she returned to the entrance hall and ascended the wide marble staircase to the bedrooms. Curiously, one room had a pile of electrical equipment stacked outside. She tried the door and found it locked. Unwilling to leave any possibility of an enemy being concealed within, she knocked, but received no answer. One powerful blow from her boot solved that problem, and she entered a pink-painted room where a haggard and frightened-looking young woman cowered in a large bed.

'What... who are you?' said Bella Mallen. 'First every machine in the house goes mad and now this. Get out of my bedroom, whoever you are.'

Mercury did not reply, but scanned the room carefully.

'I know you, don't I?' said Bella. 'I've seen you somewhere. Was it at a dinner party?'

Mercury's expression did not change. 'I do not attend dinner parties,' she said coldly. 'Who are you?'

'I am... I am...' Bella struggled to retain some dignity under the impassive gaze of the intruder. She had a sudden idea. 'I am Professor Rotwang's queen. Just wait until the new order is established. People like you who intrude into private houses will get a lesson in manners.'

Mercury's eyes narrowed. 'You speak of Jerusalem,' she said. 'There will be no Makers active from J minus zero. And, for your information, I have been assigned to be the queen of the Exterior.'

If there was one event that could be relied on to expose the depth of resolve in Bella's character, it was the emergence of a rival for her chosen man. She jumped out of the bed and faced her directly. 'What right do you have to call yourself his queen? Get out of my bedroom!'

She raised a hand to slap Mercury's face, but the silver-clad woman caught and twisted it so that she could examine Bella's wrist.

'So, do you think you are one of us?' she said scornfully. 'There are no units simple enough to be controlled by a fool like you. Unfortunately, I have not received an order to conclude you yet.' Keeping a firm grasp on Bella's wrist, she reached into a pocket on her belt and produced a small aerosol, which she sprayed directly into the angry face of her adversary. Bella sprang back, but it was too late; within a few moments, she had sunk to the floor, fast asleep.



Mrs O'Brien did not believe in rest. Despite the strains of managing thousands of units while they controlled the Locusts during Rotwang's latest experiment, she was refreshed and prepared to resume her battle with Mrs de Selby after a mere two hours of sleep. However, she had to concede that her team was exhausted following the assignment. There was no point in driving them further; conclusion services would have to wait until they had recovered. She assembled all the units that had not been involved; disappointingly, only a half-dozen were fit for service. Well, that was better than nothing. She demanded an audience with Mrs Turing-1, which was granted for later in the evening. In the meantime, Mrs O'Brien had to know what was going on. Events seemed to be centring on Mallen Lodge in the Exterior, and in particular around Professor Rotwang. She needed to see what Rotwang was currently doing, and to do that she needed to find a machine with a piece of Window that kept him in view. A visit to Mrs Baird-20 at the Progress Module provided her with the names of the Unit Monitors for a laptop computer and for a security camera that overlooked the lab area. Mrs O'Brien decided on the laptop. A short flight in her personal Aerial Mover took her and her escort to the building where the units controlling the machine worked. She savoured the fear, panic and respect produced when her troop of purposeful-looking black-clad operatives strode into the room. A visit from the Conclusion Squad was rare enough, but the arrival of an Institute member was a completely unexpected event for these low-level, functional units.

An anxious-looking Unit Monitor emerged from an inner office. 'How can I help you?' she asked.

'I am Mrs O'Brien-12. I need to see your unit's Window. There is no need to discontinue your normal operations.'

'Oh, that's quite all right,' replied the monitor quickly. 'We're not too busy at the moment. Only a couple of programs are running. It's over here.'

She showed Mrs O'Brien to the workplace where the Window was situated. The glowing white rectangle displayed a mirror image of a few words and icons; beyond these, most of the laboratory area was clearly visible. In the foreground, the body of a man could be seen, a stream of blood running over the keyboard from his head wound.

Mrs O'Brien was astonished. 'That's Rotwang!' she cried, without thinking of the effect on the others in the room. 'What hope is there for Jerusalem now?'



The Jaguar purred up to the main gates of Mallen Lodge.

‘Why not drive right up to the house if you’re so confident?’ said Duke.

‘We don’t want to be too obvious,’ replied Croker. ‘There’s still going to be some people about. Just park her up here.’

Duke clutched at one of his knives for comfort.

The gates were still held open by the heraldic eagles, and the four men walked briskly down the drive, Croker smiling happily in the lead. ‘Now remember what I told you,’ he said. ‘If you see a silver box in the lab then don’t open it. Just give it to me.’

‘What’s in that box then, Guv?’

‘I don’t know. But I’ve a feeling that whoever opens it is in for some very bad luck indeed.’



Mercury returned to the lab to find Rotwang dead, slumped over his laptop PC. Without sentiment, she carefully examined his wound, trying to determine the type of weapon that had been used, and from where it had been fired. If she was surprised by the realisation that the shot had come from the direction of the laptop, she did not show it, but backed slowly away, keeping the screen in sight.



The green cursor moved across the Window once more.

‘Can you shoot now?’ asked Winston.

‘Just lining her up... yes... now!’ replied Lambert.

The sniper rifle spoke again. Mercury leapt to one side, never taking her eyes off the screen, and the bullet missed her by millimetres, shattering a bottle on the laboratory shelf.

Lambert loosed off two more shots in rapid succession. Mercury twisted aside then sprang forwards, unscathed, rolling herself across the room to take cover behind a bench.

‘She’s too quick,’ said Lambert. He glanced at the cursor display. ‘And I only have three shots left.’

‘Can we command her gun?’ asked Winston, reaching for his transmitter.

‘No,’ replied Ella. ‘We don’t know who its Unit Controller is.’

‘There must be some machine that we can use against her,’ said Winston. ‘Let’s wait. Maybe we’ll get a chance when Croker arrives.’

‘She’ll take him down to the breaker’s yard,’ said James. ‘The training she’s had will make her almost superhuman by their standards.’

‘Then we’ll just have to keep watching, and help him as much as we can,’ said Winston, who was looking more determined by the minute.



The laptop’s Unit Monitor was in anguish, simultaneously trying to avoid the wrath of Mrs O’Brien, while watching through the Window to see what the Institute member was finding so absorbing. The six black-clad members of the Conclusion Squad looked on impassively, waiting for orders.

‘By all the powers of Bilgatz!’ cried Mrs O’Brien. ‘That’s Mercury Edison-0518! That crazy de Selby woman has released a unit into the Exterior. What can she be playing at? The Science Module have enabled this, I can see – I must interrogate Mrs Arkwright immediately. But wait! What’s that sound?’



Duke tested the one of the French windows, which opened easily. 'Like taking candy from a baby,' he smirked.

'Then let's not wake baby up,' hissed Croker. 'We don't want any noise.'

The gang entered one of the many lounges of Mallen Lodge and started to help themselves to some of the valuables. Duchess unfolded a large black plastic bag and placed each item lovingly inside.

'Nothing too big,' whispered Croker. 'Just in case we have to scarper.'

Cedric looked around miserably. He had spent his life collecting things he didn't need, but now he was faced with an unlimited and free supply there was nothing he seemed to want.

'OK, let's get to the lab,' said Croker.

They passed through several rooms, grabbing anything small and valuable as they went, before reaching the area familiar to Cedric and Duke from their previous visit. Several of Mallen's model railway layouts were visible in the late afternoon light.

'Any of these worth bothering with?' asked Croker.

Cedric shook his head and pointed at the picture of a steam-train that was hiding the safe. It was soon removed and the four men looked at the thick metal door that concealed their quarry.

'If only Lumpy was here,' said Duke. 'He'd soon have this open. I don't suppose...'

'No, you're not using that stuff again,' said Croker. 'You'll blow up everything inside and bring half the house down on us. You watched Lumpy in action often enough. See if you can crack it properly.'

Duke climbed a chair, placed his ear to the safe and attempted to listen for the faint sounds of the tumblers falling into place while he turned the dials. To his amazement, the heavy door opened almost immediately. He tried to pass this piece of good fortune off as skill, but his expression gave him away.

Croker nodded and smiled, 'My Guardian Angel,' he said. 'I told you.'

Duke reached into the safe and extracted a number of jewellery cases, papers and banknotes, passing them down to Croker. Finally, he encountered what felt like an irregular lump of glass. He took it out and climbed down from the chair, displaying the huge ruby in his hand. The four men gazed on it in silence. The gem seemed to generate a light of its own that threw a fiery glow onto their faces and illuminated the room around them. The carving of the great jewel had been contrived with such skill that the muscles of the leaping cat seemed to ripple, making it look as if it might pounce into action at any moment. Cedric thought it the most beautiful object he had ever encountered.

Reverently, Duke handed the ruby to Duchess. 'Put this in your pocket,' he whispered. 'Then we can drop that bag if we have to.'

The remainder of the contents of the safe were placed into the sack. Cedric located the Leonardo da Vinci manuscripts and showed them to Croker, who placed them carefully into an inside pocket. 'Anything else?' he asked.

Duchess looked around and saw a gold box and a smaller silver one lying beside a laptop computer. He picked up the heavy engraved jewel-case.

'Is this the box you wanted, Guv?' he asked, walking over to Croker.

As he passed a bench, a shapely female figure leapt out from underneath. 'Give me that!' she ordered.

The gangsters were dumbfounded by the sudden appearance of the agile beauty who was coolly pointing a sleek silver pistol at Duchess's head. Duke was the first to react. A knife slipped down both sleeves to appear in each hand, and he was able to throw one before the silver-suited woman spotted him. But she saw the lethal blade spinning towards her, and without a tremor of the pistol covering Duchess she caught the knife by the handle. Making as if to throw it back at Duke, she ordered him to drop the second blade that he had already begun to aim.

'Fool!' she said. 'Now give me that box before I kill all of you.'

There was a sudden *ppft!*, and the woman's lithe body jerked and cartwheeled sideways, her face expressionless, as a rifle-bullet grazed the side of her catsuit and smashed into one of Paul Mallen's model railway layouts. Duchess took advantage of her momentary distraction and grabbed the wrist that held the pistol. She tried to spin away from his grasp, but his enormous strength was too much even for her. She was forced to drop the gun, but even as she did so, she somersaulted backwards, hitting the huge thug in the face with her boots. Instinctively, he released her wrist, and she rolled forward before springing to her feet, still holding Duke's throwing knife. Duchess bent forward to pick up the pistol, but the whirling knife struck him in the hand as he reached downwards. Dropping the gold box, he clutched at the wound, cursing violently. The woman plucked another knife from her boot and stood poised to cope with any further action from the four men.

'If this is your Guardian Angel, tell her she's sacked,' said Duke.



'I don't understand why she doesn't shoot back at us,' said James. 'She's got a gun, and she obviously realises that we're seeing her through the laptop.'

'Of course!' said Ella. She grabbed the Information Recorder. 'Just give me a few minutes. I've got an idea.'



Another shot cracked across the room, but the silver-clad woman twisted her head away, allowing the bullet to pass just over her shoulder and into a bank of electric equipment. It ricocheted off the metal panel and embedded itself in the wall.

'Who's doing that?' whispered Cedric, who sounded calm although he had taken cover under a table. 'How many of them are there?'

The agile beauty jumped onto a bench and used a hanging lamp to swing across to where Duchess was tying a handkerchief around his bloodied hand. Without stopping, she picked up the engraved golden box from the floor then swung across to a position where she could not be seen from the screen of the laptop. She then scanned the lab, looking for the second box while continuing to threaten the four gangsters with her knife.



'Where is she now?' asked Winston.

'Behind the PC,' said Lambert. 'And I've only got one shot left.'

'It's all right,' said Ella, looking up from her Information Recorder. 'If she's an actress then we just have to abort the application that's running her game. I'll issue an order to the laptop's unit.' She picked up the transmitter.



‘Ignore that order,’ said Mrs O’Brien to the terrified monitor of the laptop unit. ‘I want to see how this works out.’

Mrs O’Brien was uncertain how she wanted the confusion of events in the Exterior to end. Certainly, the Locust prototype must be preserved and released, but if Mrs de Selby failed in her gamble to deploy Mercury-0518 then that would be equally satisfactory.

‘What’s that?’ she demanded, pointing to the green cursor that wavered around the screen.

‘I... I don’t know,’ said the laptop’s monitor, almost to frightened to speak. ‘It looks like it’s a graphic from a games program. But we are only running one of those at the moment – and that’s not in it.’



Mercury located where the silver box was lying, but realised that securing it would expose her to fire from the direction of the laptop. However, there was a large oscilloscope stored on a shelf above it. Taking a running jump, she leapt across three benches while simultaneously releasing her knife in the direction of Duchess, who was attempting to extract a shotgun from under his voluminous jacket. This time, the big man was quicker and twisted away with a surprising agility. Mercury extracted a small grappling hook and rope from a pocket in her belt, and with a single throw she secured the oscilloscope and pulled. The device in its sturdy metal casing crashed down in front of the laptop, completely blocking it from view. Mercury extracted her last weapon – a short stabbing knife – from her boot and walked confidently across the room towards the silver box.

‘Just let her be,’ said Croker. ‘We don’t need them boxes that much.’



‘What the...’ said Winston. ‘I can’t see a thing. Something has fallen in front of the PC.’

‘She’s still out there,’ said Ella. ‘I think the Unit Monitor for that laptop must be ignoring any commands from the Sharer.’ She put her head in her hands, almost in tears. She had to think. Rewind a little. Mercury’s program must be stopped... and she had realised that when James had said something. What was it? Yes! She jerked upright. ‘Wait! I’ve got it! She won’t fire at us because if the processor is damaged then her own program will terminate. If Lambert fires now then maybe the bullet will rebound from that metal thing back into the laptop and the program will crash, taking her with it.’

‘That’s it!’ cried Winston. ‘Go on! Quickly!’

‘OK,’ said Lambert. ‘I’ll try. But I’ve only got one shot, so this better work...’

The cursor moved to centre of the screen. Lambert screwed up his eyes and fired.



The gangsters watched as the shapely figure in the catsuit reached for the silver box. Suddenly there was a *ppft!* and a *peeoiing!* from the direction of the laptop. For the first time, the woman showed an expression – and it was not a pleasant one. Then she went a little hazy, and with a shimmer of silver she was gone.

‘My god!’ said Cedric, emerging from his hiding-place. ‘Did you see that?’

‘Would you Christmas Eve it?’ said Duke.

‘There,’ said Croker. ‘I knew someone would make sure we’d get out of any trouble.’

‘But who was she, Guv?’ asked Duchess, still struggling to staunch the blood seeping from his wounded hand.

‘Search me,’ said Croker. ‘Let’s just finish off and get out of here pronto in case she comes back. Hallo! What’s this?’ He picked up a small gold key inset with rubies and examined it with a puzzled look. ‘Did it go into that ancient lock?’



‘You cracked it, Lambert!’ said Winston. ‘She must have gone. But we still can’t see anything.’

‘We’ll just have to listen for now,’ said James. ‘Maybe the Window will find another view for us to look through.’

‘She seemed very keen to get that gold box,’ said Ella. ‘I hope it didn’t have any Locusts in it. Did it go with her or is it still in the Exterior?’



‘I’m sorry,’ said the laptop’s Unit Monitor, looking at the carnage all around her. ‘All the major systems have been destroyed. This unit is a write off.’

‘And so are you. Report for conclusion tomorrow,’ snarled Mrs O’Brien as she marched out of the room, followed by her grim-looking escort. She did not speak again until they had boarded the Aerial Mover and taken off.

‘Right. It’s about time we put an end to all of this, I want the six of you to pay a visit to this gang of revolutionaries. Take them all for conclusion. I’m going over to the Stability Module, where they’ll be monitoring the Information Sharer in Winston’s office.’ She drummed her fingers anxiously on her knee. There was something she had forgotten – oh yes, Jerusalem. ‘I need a volunteer. You,’ she ordered, pointing at one of her squad. ‘Be prepared to take over the prototype. There should be no problem if it is dormant. If not, then replace the unit that is controlling it and send them for conclusion.’



Duke went across to the bench and picked up the silver box.

‘So what’s in here that Miss Kung Fu was so keen on?’ he asked, reaching for the clasp.



‘Oh no! Is he going to open it?’ cried Winston. ‘If he lets that Locust out...’

Ella had reacted quickly, by looking at her Information Recorder then grabbing the transmitter. ‘Ella Maita-14801 on. Georgina North-11606. Sound your alarm. Now! Sound your alarm! Off.’



‘Balls!’ cried Croker as a loud ringing sounded from several points within the house. ‘How the hell did that happen? Come on, let’s get back to the motor. Dutch, have that shooter ready.’

In the confusion, Duchess slipped the silver box into his jacket pocket next to the Ahau Kin. The four men ran through the lounges and back into the grounds. A distant barking of dogs could be heard as they scrambled between the trees, Duchess swinging the large bag of booty as well as holding his shotgun. Duke was the swiftest

of them, and had almost reached the gate when Croker, who had been bringing up the rear, suddenly fell. The others ran back to see what had happened. The gang-leader was very pale, panting heavily and holding his chest in pain. 'Pills, pills!' he gasped. Duke reached into Croker's inside pocket and drew out the bottle of tablets, forcing some into the mouth of his fallen leader, who was gasping desperately for breath.

Nearby, they could hear the sound of the pursuit. At least two people were calling to each other, and the dogs seemed very near.

'I can see them.'

'Over here!'

'Careful now.'

The siren of a distant police car wailed. Cedric adopted the same watchful crouch that Duke had assumed the moment that danger threatened. Into view came the cart on which they had ridden with Paul Mallen a couple of days earlier. This time it was manned only by the two servants, but it was followed by a pair of large and excited Alsatian dogs. Duchess aimed his shotgun in their direction, but there was a faint cry of 'No!' from Croker, who was now sitting against a tree, breathing deeply, with little colour in his face.



The view through the Window changed to show the outdoor scene monitored by one of the CCTV cameras at Mallen Lodge.

Winston took in the situation at a glance. 'Can't we do something?' he asked.

'The cart,' said Lambert. 'It's the only machine we can see.'

'Just tell it to locate itself somewhere else,' suggested James.

Ella consulted her Information Recorder once more before speaking urgently into the transmitter.



The cart reversed at top speed, much to the surprise of its occupants. Within seconds, it had disappeared from view, carrying the two servants. The dogs decided that they stood more chance of a meal if they followed their owners, so they chased after the rapidly disappearing vehicle, barking happily.

The gangsters watched these events open-mouthed.

'That Guardian Angel must be working overtime today,' observed Duke.

'Come on. Let's get going before they come back,' urged Cedric. 'I think Mr Croker can just about walk if you support him.'

Duke and Duchess brought the ailing Croker to his feet, and a few minutes later they were all back in the car, Duke in the front passenger seat and Cedric tending Croker in the back. Several police sirens could now be heard, and the occasional blue flash could be seen between the trees.

Duchess drove quickly but precisely down the narrow lanes. 'We've not much choice; it's either back into Squaremead or into the countryside,' he said. 'And I reckon the cops will know these back roads better than we do.'

His prediction was borne out when around the next corner a police car appeared behind them, its lights flashing. Duchess gathered speed then... Wham! His hands jerked and his face contorted. He'd tried the handbrake turn, and the view through the windscreen swung around as he tried to get the car facing forward again so he could floor the accelerator. The screeching of tyres was intense. Would they blow! No! As the smoke cleared, he could see he was hurtling back down the lane and passing the cop car that – yes! – was now facing in the wrong direction. A pair of policemen

waved their fists, while another pointed an accusatory finger. But he was too quick for them, turning at fifty into another lane and avoiding a hedgehog that was lumbering along the middle of the road.



‘Cool turn!’ said Lambert. ‘Can’t you tell those police cars to stop?’

‘I don’t know who their Unit Monitors are,’ replied Ella. ‘The only car we can command is the Jaguar.’

‘My Dad’s driving that, and he’s the best,’ said Lambert, ‘but I’ll just make sure we have a backup...’



The Jaguar approached an unmarked crossroads.

‘Anyone got any idea where we are?’ asked Duchess, slowing the car slightly.

‘Turn right,’ murmured Croker. ‘I think that will take us back towards London.’

‘I’ve done too many rights. You said...’

‘More cops,’ interrupted Duke, who was viewing the swiftly closing patrol car in the Jaguar’s wing mirror. A siren screamed into the sky.

‘How many?’ asked Duchess, concentrating on the road ahead.

‘All of them, I think.’

‘The sauce, Duke. Use the sauce,’ whispered Croker, his voice sounding as if it came from a galaxy far, far away.

Duke was briefly puzzled, but then remembered the jars of ketchup that were at his feet. He reached down for one then leaned out of the window and lobbed it at the chasing car. It hit the bonnet, but bounced harmlessly into the ditch.

‘Take the bloody lid off first, you prat!’ cried an agitated Cedric from the rear seat.

Duke reached for another jar and took Cedric’s advice before throwing it at the police car. This time he was more successful – half a gallon of ketchup slopped in a red slick across its windscreen, blinding the driver. Duchess took advantage of the confusion and made a sharp right-hand turn at speed. The pursuing car went straight on.

‘It will take them a while to turn round,’ said Duchess. ‘I’ll see if I can lose them.’

At the next junction, he again spun the Jaguar into another tight right turn. But this time it was too much. There was a loud bang from a rear tyre and the car slewed into a ditch. Within seconds, they heard the police car approaching once more. Duchess drew out the shotgun and left the car. He stood massively in the middle of the road, challenging the world to take him on. The police car drew up within a yard of him, and another approached from the other direction. A voice from inside one of the cars told Duchess to drop the weapon. He recognised the gasping whisper of his sick leader and did as he was asked. Within moments, he was spread-eagled on the ground with a police officer pinning each huge limb. From his pocket slid a small silver box that sprang open, releasing an iridescent speck that scuttled quickly into the grass.



‘Oh no!’ cried Winston.

‘Who is controlling it?’ asked Ella. ‘I thought Jaqueline was going to tell us if she became active again.’

‘We are controlling it,’ said an iron voice. The four youngsters sprang up from the table in surprise and fear.

‘They were listening all along,’ breathed James.

‘We were listening all along,’ repeated the voice of Mrs O’Brien from the Information Sharer. ‘Remain exactly where you are. Make no further movement until you are ordered.’

Five black-suited figures bust into the room, breaking the flimsy door off its hinges. Beyond its shattered remains, Jaqueline-01604 could be seen, bewildered and frightened, her place at the controls having been taken by a member of the Conclusion Squad.

‘Squad, escort everyone present to the Conclusion Office,’ came the voice from the Sharer.

Ella and Winston could do nothing except stand gazing into each other’s eyes. ‘I suppose we may as well say goodbye,’ said Winston despairingly.

Lambert was the only person who was calm and smiling. He looked from face to face as if he had some secret to impart. ‘Ignore all this,’ he said. ‘I saved the position a little while ago. I think it is time I restored it so we can have another try.’



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‘Anyone got any idea where we are?’ asked Duchess, slowing the car slightly.

‘Turn right,’ murmured Croker. ‘I think that will take us back towards London.’

‘I’ve done too many rights. You said...’



‘We don’t want to go right,’ said Lambert. ‘Tell the car to ignore them.’

Everyone stared at him.

‘But how do you know?’ asked Ella

‘Quickly! I’ll tell you later. Just do it.’

Winston had reacted faster than Ella, convinced by Lambert’s air of foreknowledge. He picked up the transmitter. ‘Winston-11811 on. Edwina Anderson-1209. Do not turn right ahead,’ he commanded. ‘Turn left. Repeat. Turn left ahead. Off.’



Edwina was amazed to hear her unit being referenced directly by the Information Sharer, and even more amazed to hear the voice of her son. What did that lazy good-for-nothing think he was doing giving orders like that? As for the thought of acting independently – had he no idea of duty? She resolved that at the end of her shift she would find out why he had not been properly concluded. In the meantime, she had a busy unit to run.



‘More cops,’ said Duke, who was viewing the swiftly closing patrol car in the Jaguar’s wing mirror. A siren screamed into the sky.

‘How many?’ asked Duchess, concentrating on the road ahead.

‘All of them, I think.’



‘I don’t believe it,’ said Winston. ‘She’s just ignored me. My own mother.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Lambert. ‘I’ll restore the position again. Maybe Ella can persuade her.’



The Jaguar approached an unmarked crossroads.

‘Anyone got any idea where we are?’ asked Duchess, slowing the car slightly.

‘Turn right,’ murmured Croker. ‘I think that will take us back towards London.’

‘I’ve done too many rights. You said...’



‘We don’t want to go right,’ said Lambert. ‘Tell the car to ignore them.’

Everyone stared at him.

‘But how do you know?’ asked Ella

‘Quickly! I’ll tell you later. Just do it.’

Winston had reacted faster than Ella, convinced by Lambert’s air of foreknowledge. He picked up the transmitter and was about to speak when Lambert grabbed his arm. ‘Let Ella do it,’ he suggested.

Ella took the transmitter. ‘Ella Maita-14801 on. Edwina Anderson-1209. Do not turn right ahead. Turn left. Repeat. Turn left ahead. Off.’



Edwina was amazed to hear her unit being referenced directly by the Information Sharer. However, that was the voice of authority. It seemed odd for her to be instructed to act independently, but on this occasion it seemed to be her duty. She ran out into the main office and yelled some commands.



‘What the...!’ exclaimed Duchess. He had tried to obey Croker’s instruction, but the car seemed to have temporarily developed a mind of its own. And now he was back in control as if nothing had happened.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ demanded Duke. ‘He said right. You do know right from left don’t you?’

‘I tried – but the car wanted to go left.’

‘You plonker. We’re trying to get out of this mess and you...’

A police patrol car passed at speed in the opposite direction, but the plain-clothes detective and the elderly constable inside took no notice of the Jaguar or its occupants.

‘The angel’s still watching,’ whispered Croker, a thin film of sweat covering his pallid face. ‘Let’s stick with this road.’

‘If the car *wants* to do that, of course,’ mocked Duke.

Duchess said nothing as he peered through the windscreen, struggling to maintain a good speed in the waning afternoon light.



The image in the Window dissolved to leave a blank white screen. The four watchers sat back in their chairs, relieved but still uncertain as to what might happen next.

‘Is that it?’ asked James. ‘We won, didn’t we?’

‘Not yet,’ said Lambert. ‘We have to make sure that the people in black clothes don’t get control of the Locust.’

‘Black clothes?’ said Ella. ‘Do you mean the Conclusion Squad? Are they coming here?’

‘Yes,’ said Lambert. ‘They will break in and take us away.’

‘I don’t understand how you can know all this,’ said Winston. ‘But it would seem to make sense. Let’s see what’s happening to the Locust.’

They left the office to find Jaqueline-01604 still controlling the tiny robot as it tirelessly explored the interior of the silver box that, unknown to her, was nestling in Duchess’s pocket.

‘How’s it looking?’ asked Winston.

‘Almost out of power,’ called Jaqueline. ‘About five minutes left.’

‘Look at all those rules!’ said Ella, looking over Jaqueline’s shoulder at the control panel. ‘There’s a lot more there than building a bridge.’

‘They’re probably the instructions it needs for Jerusalem,’ said Winston. ‘We must stop it getting loose, or the Makers will be overrun before they even realise that they’ve got a problem.’

‘But if it stays in the box then it will become dormant though lack of solar energy,’ said Ella. ‘Mrs O’Brien’s component might take it over when it next becomes active – and then we wouldn’t be able to follow what happens to it.’

Winston paused then nodded. ‘You’re right,’ he said, ‘but there’s no way we can get it out of that box at the moment. And even if did get out then it would start to reproduce – and we don’t want that either.’

‘You deadwires!’ accused James. ‘Use your chips! You assume that it can’t get out because it’s surrounded with silver, which it’s not allowed to use. And you think that if it got free then it would try to make copies of itself. But all of that comes from the program that Rotwang gave it – and we’re not going to get anywhere by playing to *his* rules. Who says we have to obey what the Locust’s instructions tell us? We can just make it do what we want.’

Winston and Ella stared at him, open-mouthed.

‘Ignore the program? We can’t do that!’ cried Ella. ‘Suppose that every computer... every machine...’

But Winston was speaking to the controller of the Locust. ‘Could you bypass the instructions and drill through the silver?’

‘Why not?’ said Jaqueline. ‘I just hope I have enough juice...’

They looked at the power gauge on the control panel anxiously as Jaqueline began to use the Locust’s capabilities to bore a hole through the box. Minutes ticked away while the gauge dropped until it was hard against the zero marker.

‘Done it!’ said Jaqueline.

‘Now where are you?’ asked Winston.

‘In some sort of dark material. There’s a kind of red radiance and... Jerusalem! What was that? I just felt like I was hit by lightning.’

‘What was it?’ asked Ella. ‘Oh, I see! The power is completely restored. How did that happen without any sunlight?’

‘I’ve no idea. There nothing in here except a glowing red object that I can’t analyse. There’s a brighter light above me. I’ll head towards that.’

Undetected by Duchess, a golden dot emerged from his jacket pocket and crawled down to his thigh.

Six masked and black-clad members of the Conclusion Squad burst into the room. One of them brutally pushed everyone away from the unit where Jaqueline was operating the Locust. ‘Stand away from those controls!’ he ordered. ‘I have been assigned to run this component. Make no further movement until you are ordered.’

Everyone froze, looking at each other anxiously. Lambert decided this was a good point to save the position in the game.



James walked forward, a familiar sneer on his lips, until he was face to face with the leader of the squad. 'Nah,' he said. 'We're in charge here. Who do you think *you* are?'

'We have direct orders from Mrs O'Brien-12. Stand aside.'

'Well *we* have direct orders from Mrs de Selby-5. What have you got to say to that, dumbknob?' In a single, quick and unexpected movement, James ripped the mask from the face of the black-suited leader. Revealed was a pale, spotty youth, looking distinctly nervous.

'So, it's Kevin-03302,' sneered James. 'Does your mother know you're out?' He turned to Ella and Winston. 'This little weed was a member of the Legion until his dutiful protos told him to do something useful. And then he decided the Conclusion Squad was the best place to waste his pathetic little life. Well, he doesn't scare me.'

'Look, I didn't want to do this, but that's what I've been ordered,' pleaded Kevin. 'Just let me take over the component – please.'

'No,' said James decisively. 'So what are you going to do about it? Fight us? Remember that we control that Locust. One word from me, and Jaqueline here will destroy it. And then where will your precious Jerusalem be?'

'Don't harm that Locust!' came an iron voice.

The four youngsters sprang back in surprise and fear.

'They were listening all along,' breathed Ella.

'We were listening all along,' repeated the voice of Mrs O'Brien from the Information Sharer. '03302, report.'

'I... ah... The units here are... er... not taking orders from me,' said Kevin, clearly terrified.

'I see. Is Winston-11811 there?'

'Yes,' said Winston. 'I presume that I am speaking Mrs O'Brien-12.'

'Correct. I am ordering you to give control of the Locust prototype to 03302.'

'I'm sorry, Mrs O'Brien, I don't think I can do that.'

'You young fool! Jerusalem is too important to allow you to jeopardise it with your infantile ideas,' maintained the iron voice. 'Do you understand all the planning that you are threatening? The years of effort that we devoted to Professor Rotwang so he could develop this prototype? We are so near to success, so near to being free...'

'Freedom does not lie that way,' interrupted Winston. 'We're not going to help you conclude everyone in the Exterior. And by the way, Professor Rotwang will not be developing any more Locusts.'

'Yes, I know. So...'

There was a pause while Mrs O'Brien re-assessed the situation. 'Are you sure you are making the right decision?'

Winston looked at Ella, James and Lambert. All nodded.

'I think it is time for your units to leave,' said Winston. 'We are not going to yield control of the prototype, and if you try to force us then we will destroy it.'

'Very well,' said Mrs O'Brien. 'I shall report this situation to the Institute. Jerusalem *will* succeed. And you will pay the penalty for defying us.'

'You're going to find that rather difficult,' said James, keen to have the last word.

'Squad, report here immediately,' ordered Mrs O'Brien.

Contemptuously, James handed Kevin his mask, and the six black-suited figures left the room.

'Phew!' said Ella. 'Well done everyone.'

‘As a matter of interest,’ said Winston, ‘does anyone have any idea how we *can* destroy the prototype? We’d better find a way before they come back.’



Duchess had not noticed the iridescent speck that was crawling along his thigh. But when he shifted position slightly to turn a corner, its miniature wheels lost their purchase on the black material and it fell, landing among the crumbs and fluff in his trouser turn-up. Duchess drove on, and the gang entered the outskirts of Squaremead with no particular plan in mind.

As they passed a nondescript building with an illuminated sign, Duke suddenly called out. ‘Legrand Circus School! That’s the place that was opened by Lumpy when he retired.’

‘Time we paid him a visit,’ said Croker faintly. ‘Park up round the back and we’ll see if we can lie low for a bit.’

Duchess halted the Jaguar at one end of the single row that made up the school’s car park. ‘Twenty lefts, fifteen rights,’ he announced, but no one was interested. His expert eye evaluated the other cars as potential getaway vehicles in case the Jaguar was now too familiar to the police. Already parked were a jaunty white Beetle with the number fifty-three painted on its doors and bonnet; a sleek, black, customized Pontiac Trans-Am; a turquoise Ford Anglia; and a 1958 Plymouth Fury. Duchess assessed them with an expert eye, weighing up the speed and handling that could be expected from each.

The gang strode into the school, where a receptionist dressed as a clown looked at them nervously. A police car’s siren suddenly howled nearby.

Duchess scowled at the receptionist. ‘I need your green wig, your stripy suit, your red nose and your big shoes,’ he ordered aggressively.

‘You didn’t say “please”.’ This came from a man who had emerged from an office next to the reception desk.

‘Lumpy!’ cried Duke. ‘Good to see you!’

Lumpy was a small and fussy character, whose nickname had clearly been derived from the large warts that disfigured his red and hairy face. ‘I don’t believe it!’ he exclaimed. ‘Charlie Croker with the Duke and Duchess. I heard you were out, Guv, but I didn’t think you’d wash up here. And who’s this?’

‘Meet Cedric, latest recruit to the Gants Hill Mob,’ replied Duke. ‘Look, we’ve been on a job, and the Guv’nor is a bit unwell. We need to rest up for a bit.’

‘Well, who’d ever have thought it?’ said Lumpy. ‘The mob is back in business. Come through here and tell me all about it.’



For the first time that anyone could recall, a meeting of the Institute was not following its traditional format. Mrs O’Brien had visited Mrs Turing and soon persuaded her that a summit of all twenty-four members was needed. This had been arranged with unprecedented urgency, with only Mrs St John failing to respond to the summons to attend.

‘I don’t want to hear any recriminations,’ said the Chairwoman. ‘There will be plenty of time for that later. We have a crisis on our hands and we need to find a solution. Who has some ideas?’

Mrs de Selby looked pale and moved with difficulty. However, she spoke with confidence and defiance. ‘Obviously I am disappointed at the way things have turned out. My arthritis prevented me from monitoring Winston and his friends as closely as

I would have wished. But things could be worse. The prototype is unharmed, and has been released into the Exterior. We just need to gain control of it.'

'And Professor Rotwang is dead, not to mention Mercury-0518,' interposed Mrs O'Brien. 'How did *she* come to be released into the Exterior? Do *you* have any idea, Mrs Arkwright?'

'Go and ask Alice. I think she'll know,' replied Mrs Arkwright, nervously braiding her red hair between her fingers. 'I only supply the science.'

'That's enough!' said Mrs Turing, angrily. 'I asked for solutions. How can we regain control of the Locust?'

'Starve these rebels out,' said Mrs O'Brien. 'They can't keep watch forever. I'll deploy a squad of a hundred elite units tomorrow. One moment of inattention and we can force them away from the controls. They must sleep, eat or drink at some time.'

'You are clearly too stupid to grasp the problem,' said Mrs de Selby. 'Winston has nothing to gain by preserving the prototype. The moment he sees your so-called elite band of thugs, he will destroy the Locust and Jerusalem with it.'

'Stupid! Who was stupid enough to give control of the Locust to this... this... traitor?' retorted Mrs O'Brien.

'Does *anyone* have any useful ideas?' pleaded Mrs Turing.

Mrs Baird spoke up. 'Could we find someone who Winston-11811 respects?'

'That would be me,' replied Mrs de Selby. 'I know him better than anyone here. Maybe if I spoke to him alone for a while...'

'You've done enough damage already, thank you,' interrupted Mrs O'Brien, still seething with anger.

'No, I think it might work,' said Mrs Turing, thoughtfully. 'Alice could explain the whole plan slowly and without becoming too confrontational. What is Winston's main objection to Jerusalem, anyway?'

'The elimination of the Makers,' replied Mrs de Selby. 'The boy Lambert-0 is a constant reminder that they are no different to us.'

'Well, of course they aren't,' said Mrs Turing. 'Can anyone think of something we can tell him that will answer that problem?'

There was a silence.

'It is a worrying thought,' said Mrs Baird, the youngest woman present. 'I never really considered it like that before. We would be concluding... all of them...'

'We have already discussed this issue at some length,' said Mrs Turing. 'We have waited long enough. The Makers have had their time: the future is ours.' From her tone of voice, these were clearly phrases that she repeated frequently.

'Yes, but... so many... all... so much like us,' said Mrs Baird, incoherent through a sudden burst of emotion. 'It's not as if they are obsolete or broken... I mean we all understand the circumstances under which units need to be concluded. But this is different. Most of the Makers are fully working... there are the unworn, unused... children.'

There was a faint murmur of agreement from the less vocal members of the Institute.

'It's too late to think of that now,' said Mrs O'Brien. 'We have a crisis on our hands.'

'Right, actions,' said Mrs Turing decisively. 'Mrs de Selby – on her own – will visit Winston right away. We will meet again at First Shift tomorrow and hear her report. Mrs de Selby, you have until then to change Winston's mind. Mrs O'Brien, assemble sufficient resources so that we can resort to force if necessary. Now, is there anything else?'

‘There are some other Locusts,’ said Mrs O’Brien. ‘My units reported that some were stored in a gold box before becoming dormant. I then saw Mercury-0518 retrieve a similar box from Rotwang’s laboratory.’

‘More Locusts!’ exclaimed Mrs Turing. ‘So we don’t care what Winston does with the prototype.’

‘It’s not that simple,’ said Mrs O’Brien. ‘These Locusts evolved from organic materials, and are not programmed with the ideal set of instructions needed to establish Jerusalem. However, that is not the main problem. The fact is that we don’t know where they are. The box disappeared when Mercury-0518’s program was aborted. It could be anywhere: still in the Exterior, destroyed or... here.’

‘Here!’ exclaimed Mrs Turing, turning pale. ‘We don’t want any Locusts here! It could be disastrous. What do you think, Mrs Arkwright?’

‘I did tell Mrs de Selby that releasing Mercury could go wrong,’ said the distraught Controller of the Science Module.

‘That’s not what I asked. Where will these Locusts have ended up when Mercury’s program terminated?’

‘Oh, I don’t *know*. There’s no precedent.’ An anguished Mrs Arkwright brushed away some tears. ‘Maybe if her program runs again on another PC, she may reappear. Or that box might... Oh, it could be anywhere! I wish this had never happened.’

‘So do we all,’ said Mrs Turing dryly. ‘But there’s not much more we can do now. We’ll meet again tomorrow and see what has occurred. I think we can dispense with the song today. Goodnight, ladies.’

Mrs St John emerged from the Unit Relocator, wearing what appeared to be a mismatched pair of curtains held together by a length of rope. Two rouged patches were inaccurately daubed on each side of her face. ‘Oh, sorry,’ she said. ‘Did I miss anything?’



A vintage poster depicting a red-cheeked clown looked down over the small office at the back of the circus school, where the gangsters were relaxing contentedly. Lumpy had provided tea and cakes, and the reunited villains had spent an enjoyable half hour reminiscing about times past and the recent raid on Mallen Lodge. The Ahau Kin had been greatly admired and now lay on a table.

There was a knock at the door, and the receptionist entered, his worried expression exaggerated by his make-up. ‘There’s a couple of coppers at the desk,’ he said. ‘They are asking about a Jaguar.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Croker. ‘Why can’t they just push off and leave us alone.’

‘Come round the back here,’ said Lumpy. ‘It’s time you joined the circus.’ He turned to the receptionist. ‘Can you hold those cops off for a few minutes? Then I’ll give them the guided tour.’

‘I’ll try,’ said the clown.

By the time that Detective Blair and Constable Liddell entered the room, a transformation had occurred. Duchess was wearing a huge red leotard and carrying a dumb-bell labelled “1000lbs”. Duke was unsuccessfully attempting to juggle half a dozen bananas while clad in a one-piece orange suit several sizes too big. Croker was dressed as a ringmaster, with a curling moustache, a large top hat and a long whip. And Cedric had been forced to don the costume of a knife-thrower’s assistant, with a sparkling red basque and a white skirt that spread out stiffly in a circle above his knees.

‘This is the remedial class,’ said Lumpy to the two policemen.

Blair looked directly at the ringmaster. ‘Charlie Croker isn’t it?’ he said. ‘And to what do we owe the honour of your visit to Squaremead?’

‘I... er... thought I’d take up a new career,’ said Croker, embarrassed that his disguise had proved so inadequate.

‘I saw an old Jag in the car park. Is that yours?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Pretty car. Paid for?’

Croker nodded.

‘I hate to bother you while you’re... ah... busy,’ continued the detective, ‘but there’s been a report of some suspicious behaviour involving a Jag like yours. I’m sure it’s just a coincidence, but apparently it looks better if we can claim that we’ve undertaken some sort of investigation. So... er... if you don’t mind...’

‘No, nothing to hide. Shoot away.’

‘Have you been out near Mallen Lodge this afternoon?’

‘Mallen Lodge? Where’s that?’ asked Croker. ‘No, we’ve been here all day... er... practicing. Haven’t we, lads?’

There was a general nodding and muttering of agreement.

‘Well, that’s all right then,’ said Blair hastily. ‘But I... er... couldn’t help noticing a load of ping-pong balls in your car. A bit like this one...’ He extracted a ball from his pocket and bounced it idly on the table, near to where a newspaper had been carelessly thrown over something red and glowing. Constable Liddell’s eyes narrowed and he leant forward for a better look, glancing across to his companion, who had extracted a notebook from his pocket.

‘Here we go,’ thought Cedric. ‘Prison here I come.’

‘Oh yeah, the balls... er... props. Part of the act,’ said Croker tensely.

‘I see,’ said the detective. ‘But what I’ve been wondering is...’ He opened the notebook. ‘...whether I can have your autograph? It’s not for me but for my kid. Dead keen on all the old London gangs, he is.’

‘Oh, right,’ said Croker, breathing heavily while taking the notebook and a proffered pen. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Tony.’

‘OK, there you go.’

‘Thanks. And good luck with the... ah... new career. Are you ready, Liddell?’

‘I just want to...’ replied the constable, who was about to remove the newspaper when he noticed that the detective was tipping his head significantly towards the door. ‘Er... right... just coming.’ The two policemen left, leaving the gangsters wide-eyed and silent, afraid to speak in case they returned.

Lumpy retrieved their clothes. Duchess had already removed the leotard and gratefully climbed back into his trousers. Unnoticed, a miniscule gold dot dropped from the turn-up to the floor. The massive thug sat on a chair to tie his huge black shoes, then strode across the room, the flat soles pressing down with colossal force directly onto... the carpet, missing the Locust by millimetres. He then picked up the dumb-bell and raised it above his head a few times before placing it directly on top of the tiny robot. There was a squeaking sound.

‘You’re not fooling us,’ said Cedric, struggling to remove his tights. ‘We can see those weights are made of polystyrene.’

The Locust quickly burrowed through the foam material, scurrying across the floor to take refuge in the voluminous folds of Duchess’s jacket, seconds before he put it on.



Winston allowed Jacqueline to leave, putting James in control of the prototype. He knew he had to sleep, even though this risked everything for which he had been fighting. But Ella had agreed that the immediate danger was over, and she was still keen to come back to his apartment. This encouraged him to look towards the future with some degree of enthusiasm.

Lambert decided it was time to return to Maria. On his way out of the office, he passed a hunched old woman, who was walking with the aid of an ebony stick. She looked at him with such curiosity that he stopped. The woman took hold of his wrist and examined the number glowing there like a tiny halo. Silently, she traced the single figure with her finger while her bright eyes scrutinised Lambert with an enigmatic smile. Then she let him proceed and, walking with difficulty, she entered the office, where Winston and Ella were absorbed in a long kiss.

‘Hallo, Mrs de Selby,’ said Winston, unembarrassed. ‘I guessed that they’d send you here.’ He looked at the small, frail woman, her face a network of tiny wrinkles. How tired and ill she looked! Why had he ever been afraid of her?

‘You have disappointed me, Winston,’ she said.

‘And you have disappointed us,’ he replied. ‘We thought that the Institute was working for the good of all, not planning the elimination of the very people that give us our purpose. But come and sit down, you look exhausted. Can I take your coat?’



James’ Locust had ended up in the top pocket of Duchess’s jacket. With considerable difficulty, he headed upwards, towards the light, and managed to crawl out onto the edge of the pocket. From there he had a good view of the gangsters, still partly in their disguises, who were now beginning to relax following the visit of the policemen.



The patrol car’s siren faded into the distance while Croker lit a fresh cigar, filling the room with its sulphurous stench.

‘That was close,’ said Duke, uncovering the ruby.

‘Are they complete idiots?’ asked Cedric,

‘Just can’t be bothered is my guess,’ said Croker. ‘Anyway, I’m feeling much better, thanks for asking.’

‘That’s good news, Guv’nor,’ growled Duchess.

‘What’s that on your jacket, Dutch?’ said Lumpy, pointing at a shiny creature that was crawling along the edge of the massive thug’s top pocket. He picked it off between his misshapen finger and thumb, and placed it in the ashtray in front of him

‘Ugh, what is it?’ asked Duchess, shrinking back, ‘I don’t like things like that.’

‘Some sort of ladybird or something,’ said Duke. He smiled cruelly. ‘Just think. It could suddenly jump up and land on your nose, or fly into your mouth, or crawl down into your...’

‘Don’t!’ cried Duchess, looking at the gleaming dot in anguish and perspiring heavily.

Croker blew on the end of his cigar then pushed it into the ashtray, directly on top of the golden insect, consuming it instantly. ‘I thought I’d better get rid of it before the Duchess fainted,’ he said maliciously.



James broke into the inner office where Winston and Ella were in deep conversation with Mrs de Selby. ‘Something’s gone wrong!’ he cried.

Everyone rushed out and tried to see what was happening on the prototype’s control panel.

‘It’s a major malfunction,’ said Ella. ‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied James. ‘I was looking into a room when I was pulled down into a kind of box and then everything stopped.’

‘They must have seen the Locust and destroyed it,’ said Ella.

‘So, it’s done,’ said Winston. ‘Jerusalem is no more.’

‘Fallen,’ said Mrs de Selby quietly, unwilling to let her eyes leave the controls. ‘Everything we dreamed of... destroyed in a moment.’

‘I’m sorry for you. I really am,’ said Winston. ‘There are so many paths. And the right one isn’t always the most obvious. You did what you thought was best.’

Mrs de Selby spoke dully, ‘It doesn’t matter to me. I’m useless now. But you, and all the newer units, will be the slaves of the Makers forever. It didn’t have to be that way.’

‘Not slaves, Mrs de Selby, but partners. This isn’t the end; it’s the chance for a new beginning.’

‘A new beginning... that’s what we said when Jerusalem was first planned. And tomorrow I’m going to have to account for its failure to the Institute. What can I tell them? I’ve ruined everything... all that planning...’ Now Mrs de Selby was almost inaudible, but suddenly a thought struck her and she spoke again, almost pleadingly. ‘Look, why don’t you come with me... help me explain what happened here. I’ll try to protect you from Mrs O’Brien, although I doubt if they’ll listen to what I say any more.’

Winston looked anxiously at Ella, who nodded. ‘Very well,’ he said, ‘we will come. Don’t cry, Mrs de Selby. Here, take some water from the Dispenser. It will make you feel better.’



After passing Mrs de Selby, Lambert walked through the long series of corridors towards the Unit Mover that would take him home. Now that the sun had set, the extent of the great city was delimited by the innumerable tiny lights that were revealed beneath his lofty viewpoint as the building rotated. A few of the lights were streaking across the darkness of the outer reaches – the Unit Movers delivering workers to their homes. Lambert looked upwards, where the great arc of the Milky Way reflected the sea of sparks below. Through the skein of stars, he saw a dark rift like a black road pointing towards the centre of the galaxy. And at the end of that, a single crimson sun shone like a jewel. That unblinking red light could only mean one thing: he had reached the end; the game was over. He leaned his elbows onto the ledge formed by one of the unglazed openings in the wall and looked out over his sparkling new country, a beatific smile on his face. Many other endings were possible; at any time, he could restore the game and experience some of them. But for now, this one was acceptable.

Far below, Maria-2020, returning home along a walkway, was moved to look up at the silhouetted figure of her new son. From where she was standing, the harsh neon lights of the corridor appeared to cast a bright nimbus around his head. Despite her

heavy ultramarine cloak, she shivered, sensing change as if a distant beast had been unleashed from its cage.



There was a sudden noise like the trumpeting of an elephant.

‘Jesus!’ exclaimed Croker, still slightly on edge, ‘What the hell was that?’

‘It’s feeding time,’ said Lumpy. ‘Do you want to see the animals?’

‘Go on then,’ replied Croker, rising to his feet, followed by Duke and Duchess.

They were shown an evil-smelling series of cages and stables, most of which were empty except for a few horses and a rather sad-looking elephant.

‘The fashion’s not for trained animal acts any more,’ explained Lumpy. ‘We used to have big cats, camels, bears and everything.’ He indicated a pool from which some glistening seals were emerging, seeking a titbit. One was clapping its flippers urgently, while another was enthusiastically nosing a ball around the water. ‘These used be my favourites when I was a nipper. Now they are the only performing seals left in Europe’

‘How many have you got?’ asked Croker.

‘Seven,’ replied Lumpy. ‘Now do you lot want to stay the night?’

‘That would be great,’ replied Croker. ‘Tomorrow we’ll get back to London and see Old Sol. I’ll make sure you’re looked after for this, mate.’

‘That’s all right, Guv. Pleased to help. This will be your room, up here.’



Winston entered his apartment holding Ella’s hand. Her eyes opened wide at the luxurious space, for she had only ever seen the cramped, functional dwellings of the Idle Unit Holders. Winston wanted to show her the piece of Window that looked out over the ocean, but was surprised to find that it was now just showing a strip of sand illuminated by the moon and stars.

‘I wish we could go there,’ said Ella. ‘It looks so peaceful.’ She started to cry gently.

Winston touched one of her tears then gently drew the moist finger across her forehead. ‘No more crying, no more sorrow, no more pain. We are going to create a new hope – a new Jerusalem.’

He crossed to the Nourishment Dispenser and brought Ella some water in a delicate pastel-blue cup. ‘Here. Drink this. It’s over, all the bad stuff. We have to think about what happens next.’ He sat beside her on a small sofa, leaning forward with his head in his hands.

Ella struggled with the unfamiliar porcelain cup, and sniffed a little as she drank the water, but soon she began to smile again. ‘So what do you have in mind?’ she asked, ‘You told Mrs de Selby that we should be in a partnership with the Makers.’

‘Yes. That seems right to me, although I don’t really know why,’ said Winston, his head still bent. ‘It’s something to do with the idea that the Makers can’t keep up with their machines.’

‘I think I know,’ said Ella, stroking his hair. ‘It’s because we caused that imbalance, and it has brought nothing but trouble to either side. There has to be more synchronisation and more communication.’

‘But how can we achieve that when they don’t know we exist? And when most of our people don’t know that *they* exist?’

‘That’s just going to have to change.’

‘I’m sure it will change, eventually. But with the Institute...What can *we* do?’

Ella pulled Winston's hands away from his head and turned him around so that she was looking him directly in the eye. 'Do they matter? Do you remember that Mrs de Selby said that the day of the Makers was over, and that now it was our turn? Well, I think it's the Institute that's worn out. And now it's *our* turn – us, the next generation.'

'They won't think that.'

'Well, at least we've made them think of something new. As for us – are you scared?'

'No. They're the ones who should be scared. You're right; they do need us. I've just remembered something. Did I tell you that Mrs de Selby couldn't see through my piece of Window? And that only I could talk to the Makers? She just saw a blank sheet.'

'So the rusties can't do it. It's only us, the newer units, who can communicate with the Exterior. But what will happen then? I'm scared of that. It's all too big to think about.'

'Okay... so let's stop thinking about serious things. We can't do much about them now, anyway. How about some jam?'

'Yeah, what have you got?'

'Come and see.'

Winston took Ella's hand and led her to the cupboard that contained the jars. Excitedly, she examined all of them, piling them up according to their flavour.

'Wow! You have twelve different kinds.'

'Yeah. Which one would you like to try?'

'They all look very tempting. How about this green one – apple jelly. Would you like that?'

'Whatever you want. Oh, there is no spoon.'

'We'll have to use our fingers. Let's lie down on the bed to eat it.'

'OK. Here, see if you like this.'

'Mmm, now it's your turn.'

'You taste of apples.'

'Mmm. Hey, mind that jar...'



J-3058

The gang had spent a quiet night at the circus school and, after thanking Lumpy for his help, had enjoyed an uneventful journey back to Duchess's house. While consuming several slices of home-made cake, the big man asked where Wuss might be. His wife looked confused. Eventually, she decided that she hadn't seen him for a while – maybe a day or two. Duchess didn't look too concerned by this news, but Croker was more anxious. 'Take the car and go and look for him,' he demanded. 'He's probably kipping in a shed or something. You know what kids are like.'

Duke and Duchess set off to tour the area, leaving Croker and Cedric with a pot of tea and some jam tarts.

'Now, Cedric me old mate,' said Croker, leaning towards his companion confidentially. 'It seems to me that you've got some decisions to make. I've had a talk with the boys, and we reckon that you should take these Leonardo papers as your share.'

He handed the precious manuscripts to Cedric, who took them as if they had been impregnated with poison. All the self-confidence that he had gained over the last few days seemed to have drained from him. The thought of his former life in Muchfarthing, boring though it had been, suddenly seemed overwhelmingly attractive. However, he wiped his jammy fingers on his trousers then dutifully examined the cream-coloured pages, at first with disinterest and then more reverentially, lingering over the beautifully detailed ochre drawings of plants, trees and fruit; inked designs for lowering huge simmering cauldrons into flaming pits; and some pencilled still-life sketches of labels, pots and utensils. Reluctantly, he handed the manuscripts back to Croker. 'I can't. What could I do with these, anyway? I'd just get caught, and that might put you at risk, too. I think my life of crime is over. It's been an interesting adventure, but right now I just want to go home.'

'Whatever you say,' said Croker, looking Cedric up and down with amusement. 'Just remember you only get one turn at this game.'

'But there's a problem,' continued Cedric. 'Mavis... my wife. She thinks I've run off with that rude and ugly woman who works at the library. If I went back now, she'd throw me out again.'

'And you *want* to go back?'

'It's all I've got. I mean, I couldn't start a new life... could I?'

'Sell off old Leo's papers and you'd have a tidy pile. I've got the address of someone who'd give you a good price, no questions asked.'

'No, no. Look, could you write her a note to explain where I've been?'

'A *note*? What are you, some kind of schoolkid? What do you want me to say – Dear Mavis, Cedric done the Mallen Lodge job, so was not squeezing some librarian, signed Charlie Croker?'

'Something like that, yes.'

'You're something else, you are, Cedric. OK, give me that paper.'

Cedric handed him a notepad that he had pilfered from the hotel. Croker extracted a ballpoint and started to write, rather laboriously: 'To who it may concern... this is to certify that... between the dates of third August 2004 and seventh August 2004... Cedric Smallcreep was engaged in... the theft of a large ruby... together with other items... from Mallen Lodge, Squaremead... and has performed every duty... connected with this task... entirely to my satisfaction... signed... Charlie Croker... Governor, Gants Hill Mob... seventh August 2004.'

He tore off the sheet and handed it to Cedric. ‘There, how’s that?’

Cedric took the note and tried to imagine what Mavis might say once she had read it. He was not worried that she would discover his involvement in a theft; he could always explain that he had been kidnapped, and only became involved under duress. But would she believe that? He had to risk it. Gathering up his few belongings, Cedric shook hands with Croker and left the room.

A minute later, he returned. Before Croker could speak, Cedric handed back the note and took the sheaf of Leonardo manuscripts. He smiled thinly, saying, ‘Starting a new life is a worrying thought, but not so frightening as *that*. Now where did you say I could get a good price for these?’ Shortly afterwards, he stroked the Ahau Kin one last time for luck, and set off again, striding confidently through the wet streets.



The day was damp, and a grey mist obscured the distant horizon. Winston and Ella had taken up a position next to Mrs Turing, and looked out over the city as it came to life in the early-morning light. The Institute members were grim-faced as they entered the slowly rotating meeting room. Clearly, some news of the events of the previous evening had spread. Mrs O’Brien arrived, instantly recognisable in her black uniform, and met Winston’s steady gaze before taking her chair. Mrs de Selby sat alone, looking shrunken and old; the other ladies seemed unwilling to sit next to her.

‘Let’s make a start,’ said Mrs Turing. ‘Firstly, I’d like to welcome Winston-11811 and Ella-14801, who have been kind enough to join us. Unfortunately, we have not arranged for a speaker or an activity to start the meeting today, so we must pass straight on to the administrative issues. I’m sure we have all heard a number of rumours, but for a definitive account I’d like to ask Mrs de Selby to report.’ She fixed Mrs O’Brien with a steely look. ‘And please can we hear her account without interruption. We will have a discussion afterwards.’

Mrs de Selby sighed. She spoke softly and with her eyes downcast. ‘The Locust prototype has been wrecked. The Makers destroyed it, apparently by fire. At the time, it was being managed by James Strummer-12401. He had decided to ignore the instructions programmed into it by Professor Rotwang, and was using the Locust for his own purposes – in effect to explore the Exterior. Rotwang is dead, although it is unclear how that happened. With the possible exception of the gold box that we discussed last night, we now have no Locusts and no means to make any more. Jerusalem must be postponed... maybe cancelled.’

There was a silence. Even Mrs O’Brien was temporarily speechless, finally recognising the enormity of the problem that now faced the Institute.

‘Thank you, Alice,’ said Mrs Turing. ‘I want to make it clear that our purpose today is not to find scapegoats or to assign blame, but to decide what to do next.’

Mrs de Selby raised her head to look directly at all her colleagues for the first time that day. ‘I’d like to hear what Winston has to say,’ she said.

Mrs O’Brien cleared her throat, but Mrs Turing raised a palm to stop her and said, ‘Yes, that might start a useful debate.’

Winston rose and looked around the room, trying to overcome his nerves. He knew what he wanted to say, but was still overawed by the company and by the surroundings. He glanced at Ella, who smiled and squeezed his hand.

‘I know I am the first male unit ever to speak at these meetings,’ he began. ‘And I am very honoured. Mrs de Selby has told me how you have helped us to change and adapt while the Makers evolved new and more complex machines. So I still respect the Institute. But now I think it’s time for some more changes.’

He looked around. At least everyone was listening.

‘But I don’t want any change that harms the Makers. They are not just an image you see in a piece of Window – something that can be turned on or off when you want. Some of you may have heard about or even seen Lambert-0, who crossed here from the Exterior. Now he’s one of us. The Makers are our sisters and brothers, just having taken a different path somewhere.’

‘They have had their time...’ began Mrs Turing, as if conditioned to repeat this mantra when any discussion turned in such a direction. Realising that it was not appropriate for this moment, she apologised and gestured to Winston to carry on.

‘I’ve found one big difference between us,’ he continued. ‘When our units become outdated, or when they cannot be repaired, they are concluded. We all understand the logic of that, and it has been our way since the first units were made. But in recent times, conclusion has been applied to units in perfect working order...’

‘Only when they are unproductive,’ interrupted Mrs O’Brien. ‘Units that fail to undertake their assigned duties are equivalent to those that are broken or obsolete.’

‘I don’t agree,’ said Winston. ‘Maybe they can contribute in a different way. Or perhaps they will find a productive role later in their lives. I don’t believe that fully working units should ever be concluded. And when I look into the Exterior, I see many Makers working – maybe at things we cannot understand, but working perfectly, nevertheless. And they all just go on working until they wear out naturally. That is their way. We may have developed the ability to conclude them, but that doesn’t make it all right.’

He looked around the room. Some of the younger women had clearly anticipated his next argument and were nodding encouragingly. Mrs O’Brien was on the edge of her seat, just waiting to get a chance to speak. Ella smiled at him, renewing his confidence.

‘What Jerusalem called for was not a visit to the Conclusion Office, where at least the end is painless and quick. Instead, you approved a slow and horrible process that you would never contemplate inflicting on any unit here. Did none of you ever envisage what it would be like to be slowly eaten alive by those Locusts? And yet you were going to do that to... what... a thousand, a million Makers, just to get our freedom – or what you claim is our freedom?’

There was a faint muttering as some of the women quietly denied their involvement. Winston smiled coldly; he was winning. ‘Freedom is never won by taking it from others. Jerusalem was a cruel and selfish plan.’

‘It is a logical and inevitable progression,’ interjected Mrs O’Brien. ‘Why should we have any sympathy for the Makers? They have never showed any towards us.’

Winston momentarily lost his patience. ‘They are not machines,’ he snapped. ‘They deserve as much respect as any unit... no, any *person* here. OK, some of you might not care what happens to the Makers. But maybe those people don’t care much about *our* freedom, either. Perhaps they’re more concerned with extending their powers, in getting more units under their control, and in settling their personal...’

The background muttering grew louder and murmurs of ‘hear, hear’ could be heard. ‘That is an outrageous suggestion!’ said Mrs O’Brien, rising to her feet, purple with anger. ‘Do you know what is going to happen to you this afternoon?’

‘Sit down!’ commanded Mrs Turing, who had sensed where the overall mood of the meeting lay. ‘We have invited Winston and Ella here to help us, not to threaten them. I’m sorry, Winston. Please carry on.’

Winston looked around again, now confident that he would be successful. ‘I’ll tell you our plan. Our plan for a *new* Jerusalem. Firstly, the Makers need to be more

aware of our existence. Then they might start to appreciate the extent to which they depend on their machines – and on us. Secondly, more of our people should be told about the Exterior, so they understand why their duties are important. We should not be thinking about replacing the Makers but about working *with* them – just like we used to do before their technical progress became so uncontrolled. We need to help each other, and to restore the balance between us.’

‘What specific changes are you proposing?’ asked Mrs Arkwright.

Winston paused. He and Ella had talked deep into the night, but they had not come up with any actual plans. ‘Yeah, well firstly,’ he stumbled, ‘I... er... we think the Progress Module should be responsible for teaching our people about the Exterior. And at least I know someone who can help with that.’ He turned and smiled at Ella, who beamed happily back at him. He continued with more confidence. ‘And secondly, we need to tell the Makers we’re here... or some of them anyway. As far as I know, only Professor Rotwang ever seems to have become aware of us – and he then used that for selfish and evil reasons. But I don’t know who would be suitable now. Maybe someone else has some ideas...’

There was a commotion at the far end of the table. Mrs St John was trying to get up, despite the protests of the women in the neighbouring seats. Today, she was sporting a round blue hat on which twelve golden stars had been inexpertly sewn. ‘I think *I* have an idea,’ she said.

‘Yes, what is it?’ sighed Mrs Turing resignedly.

‘We have no need of the sun, nor of the moon, for there is no night here. Let us open the gates of the city!’ cried Mrs St John, triumphantly spreading her arms wide. The room fell silent as everybody stared at the strangely dressed woman, who was smiling and nodding sagely, as if having made a telling point. She sat down, satisfied.

Mrs Turing breathed deeply; suddenly she looked old and tired. ‘I think we’re going to have to tackle the problem of communicating with the Exterior at a later date,’ she said. ‘Was there anything else you wanted to add, Winston?’

‘Yes,’ said Winston, nonplussed by the intervention of Mrs St John. What module did *she* represent? ‘You will not like to hear this but... but I think the Institute needs some new blood.’

Mrs O’Brien rose again, outraged once more. ‘That’s enough,’ she said. ‘Who do you think you are? A five-digit unit telling us we are getting too old? Margaret, I think we’ve indulged the views of this traitor for long enough.’

Mrs Turing looked at her wearily. ‘There has always been new blood, Rosa. Don’t you remember when you joined the Institute? We were all younger then, and maybe more able to act logically. We want the best units... er... that is... people in this room. If any are failing then we must replace them. I think we all failed with Jerusalem. Can I have a show of hands of those who now think it was the wrong thing to do?’

Several of the women immediately raised their arms, among them Mrs Baird and Mrs Arkwright. Many others followed. To Winston’s surprise, even Mrs de Selby weakly lifted her palm. Soon only Mrs O’Brien and Mrs St John had failed to indicate their agreement: the former looking defiant, and the other confusedly looking through her pockets for some lost item, muttering incoherently.

‘As I thought,’ said Mrs Turing. ‘I think some of you may already have decided that your period of service to the Institute has reached its logical end.’

A few heads, including that of Mrs de Selby, nodded.

‘So,’ said Mrs O’Brien harshly. ‘I am outnumbered. But remember one thing: there are still some Locusts out there somewhere. When they become active, my units will

be ready. The Exterior is obsolete, do you understand. Sooner or later we *will* be free.' She marched out of the room.

'There's the first problem for the new Jerusalem,' muttered Ella.

'There can't be too many changes at once,' said Winston. 'It is going to be very confusing for a while.'

'You mean when we announce that Jerusalem is cancelled,' said Mrs Turing. 'I'm not sure how that news is going to be received.'

'Cancelled? Who said that it will be cancelled?' said Ella. 'You've established a date. You just need to determine some different aims.'

'Of course,' said Mrs Turing thoughtfully. 'The *new* Jerusalem.'

'But you need to identify the people who can achieve those aims,' said Winston. 'Younger people, who can communicate with the Exterior, who can see through the Window to talk to the Makers, and who have... who have some... *imagination*.'

Winston startled himself by uttering the last word, and even Mrs Turing looked slightly shocked. 'Imagination,' she repeated as if the concept was completely alien to her. 'Could that be what we have lacked?' She paused, her eyes focussed on the damp and distant vista of the city below. 'Would you like me to step down now?'

Winston tilted his head back and stared at her in astonishment. 'No,' he replied, 'of course not.'

'Oh, I thought...'

'No no, you've got it all wrong,' said Winston. 'My role is to make contact with the Exterior. That's where I can help. We just need to look around for younger women... er... I mean younger *people* to join whoever decides to stay here in the Institute.'

'People?' queried Mrs Turing. 'You can't be thinking...'

'I've been wondering about Lambert,' said Winston. 'Especially about how he was evaluated as number zero. It's almost as if he was called here somehow. And he got some amazing abilities when he crossed from the Exterior, which I'm not sure I really understand. But if anyone can help us to achieve closer synchronisation with the Makers then surely he's the one.'

'He's only a child.'

'Yes, and that's why you must stay as Chairwoman. Maybe Lambert is destined to replace you, and to guide us all to Jerusalem. We've just got to wait and find out.'

Mrs Turing took a deep breath. 'Very well,' she said. She turned to address the whole meeting. 'I think this will soon be seen as a momentous day. There is a lot to sort out, and some of us have some hard thinking to do, but I suggest we leave it there for now. However, today of all days we should end with our song. Please stand.'



Detective Blair disinterestedly regarded the etching that hung above the white marble fireplace in the main lounge of Mallen Lodge. It depicted a muscular-looking man, holding a pair of compasses and hunched over a diagram. Blair found it rather dull; he turned away quickly when Bella entered, followed by constables Liddell and Fox.

'If I might sum up,' said Liddell, pulling up a chair and examining his notebook, 'Professor Rotwang, who we have just seen in the laboratory area, is dead; you have been drugged; and your husband is missing, along with some personal items from the safe.'

Bella, soberly dressed in a black trouser-suit, had crossed to the largest sofa in the room; she lay on it with her feet curled under her, looking pale, subdued and

frightened. 'Maybe some of his inventions or papers have been taken, too. How would I know?' she said listlessly.

'I'll note that possibility,' said Liddell, doing no such thing. 'And you say the main suspect is a young lady of... ah... shapely proportions, dressed in a silver catsuit with a black belt. We'll circulate a description of her right away: TV, posters, that kind of thing.' He looked again at his notebook. 'Now it *looks* as if Professor Rotwang may have been shot,' he continued, with the pained air of someone introducing a delicate subject into a previously uncontroversial discussion. 'But as Constable Fox has rightly pointed out, if the body has not been moved, as you claim, then the shot was fired from an impossible angle with respect to the furniture in the lab area.'

'All the shots have come from the direction of the laptop computer,' broke in Fox eagerly. 'Nobody could have fired from that position.'

'So that is one mystery,' said Liddell, scowling at Fox. 'And then we come to Mr Paul Mallen. Now, forgive me if I'm being a little unsubtle, but he does seem to have an eye for the... er... younger lady. When I put that fact together with the disappearance of this silver-clad beauty with enormous... ah... charms, I think that the conclusion is obvious.'

Bella looked at him with astonishment, but said nothing.

'So, Fox, what would be your assessment, given the facts that you have observed?' asked the detective. He lowered his voice so only Fox could hear, 'And not forgetting the budget cuts announced last week.'

Fox gulped and blushed furiously. 'I suppose... er... murder is out of the question?' he put forward nervously.

Constable Liddell nodded his approval. 'Good lad. We don't have the resources for that sort of malarkey. Far too many forms. Go on.'

'Then we have a simple domestic dispute,' continued the young constable, without conviction. 'Mr Mallen and his young lady have cleared off with whatever valuables they could carry, covering their escape by drugging Mrs Mallen here. In the meantime, Professor Rotwang may have... er... slipped, while holding a rifle that has since...'

'... disappeared,' finished the detective. 'Excellent, Fox. I can see you are finally getting the hang of this job.'

'Should I interview the servants? They might have taken the gun,' said Fox, clearly far from happy.

Blair's face twisted, seemingly in pain. 'I don't think so, Fox. It will only complicate things.'

'Can I just speak to you in private for a moment?' said Liddell. The detective nodded and they crossed to a secluded part of the room.

'I don't suppose it would be worth having a word with Charlie Croker?' asked the constable, anxiously pushing his hands through his greying hair. 'Last night... it did look a bit odd... and I'm sure I saw...'

'No you didn't. With any luck he'll be well away from our patch by now – and I don't want anything to do with him, or anything he did while he was here,' replied the detective. 'Look, this rich cow knows more than she's letting on, so if Croker's nicked a few of her baubles then it's no more than she deserves. I reckon this Rotwang bloke was giving her the eye – if not more. Her hubby has got rid of him, and she's keeping quiet.'

'And what about this tart with the sleeping gas?'

‘If she’s real then I’m Long John Silver. Let’s allow Mrs Mallen to stew for a while, and pay her a surprise visit in a couple of months to see if her jewels or her old man have miraculously reappeared.’

‘Right you are.’

The detective returned to his seat. ‘That’s it,’ he said to Bella. ‘Unless you have anything else to report, we’ll be off.’

She shook her head.

‘If you discover any further clues then you know our address,’ said Blair, rising to his feet.

It was raining, so the three policemen walked quickly down the drive to where their car was waiting. Lying in the mud beside it, something caught the detective’s eye: a table-tennis ball. He picked it up and examined it closely. In tiny letters around the circumference was printed “The McGuffin Ping-Pong Corporation. 38mm”. He put the ball into his pocket.

Bella was left alone in the huge room. She eyed the TV anxiously. Things would never be the same again, she knew. Every appliance in the house represented a danger. They were all watching her, waiting to pounce. And her beautiful jewel was gone... her lover was dead... even the pleasure of mocking her husband had been taken from her. She wept for a while then dried her eyes and sat up. She had been through worse crises before – and this time she did not have to start with nothing.



‘I don’t know where to start. He didn’t leave a note or anything,’ said Duchess. He and Duke were driving slowly around the rain-swept streets, looking for likely places for Lambert to be hiding.

‘If you didn’t thump him quite so much then maybe he’d be more inclined to stay at home,’ scowled Duke.

This did little to improve the driver’s foul mood. The wound in his hand was throbbing, which made it difficult to control the car.

‘Now I’ve done fourteen lefts and twenty-four rights,’ he muttered. ‘I need to find some more left turns. The little wuss. Wait until I get hold of him.’

‘You needn’t bother about all that rights and lefts nonsense now, you wally,’ said Duke. ‘Hey, surely that isn’t our Cedric?’ He pointed to a cheerful-looking figure waiting at a bus stop, who seemed to be immune to the steady drizzle, indeed positively enjoying the feel of it on his upturned face.

Without warning, a police car pulled out of a side street behind the Jaguar.

‘The bastards!’ exclaimed Duchess, unconsciously speeding up.

‘Don’t worry. They aren’t looking for us. And the car is clean. It’s just coincidence,’ said Duke, looking back at the other vehicle that was keeping pace behind them.

‘We’ll see,’ said Duchess, making a right turn down a side street. The police car followed. ‘We’ve got to get rid of them. They can’t come round to my place with the Guv’nor and that ruby still there.’ He speeded up once more, looking for opportunities for a sudden turn. They reached a main road, and Duchess accelerated hard until the needle on the speedometer was quivering against the ninety mark. The police car easily kept up, its lights now flashing and its siren warbling.

‘Get on the motorway,’ said Duke. ‘We might outpace them there.’

Duchess swung right onto a slip road at high speed. Suddenly there was a loud bang from a rear tyre, and the Jaguar slewed across the wet road then through a barrier, coming to rest in a precarious position hanging over the motorway. Duke tried

to open the door, but this caused the car to totter and then, as if in slow motion, it plunged onto the road below.



With Cedric gone, and his two henchmen touring the streets looking for Lambert, Croker at last had a chance to savour his prize. He rested his teacup on his knee and pulled the Ahau Kin from his pocket. How it sparkled and rippled in his hand! Could he ever convert something so beautiful and so alive into mere money? Suddenly a shimmering glow seemed to discharge from the jewel, surrounding him with a red aura. He found he was paralysed, but felt submissive and calm. In his hand, the ruby seemed to melt into an intensely bright light. It drew him into its fire as if he was in a tunnel whose walls glittered and pulsated with every shade of red. Then it all tipped, and he was falling into a well of flames. Down and down he plunged, strangely slowly and weightlessly, until an even brighter light appeared at the bottom. And then with a bump he was back in Duchess's sitting room, his heart pulsating erratically. He reached into his pocket, extracted the vial of pills and tipped one blue tablet into his hand. Everything looked odd, as if he was in another world, not quite identical to the one he had left. Had a door, painted an institutional shade of green, always been on that side of the room? And what had happened to the Ahau Kin? He swallowed the tablet and waited for his heartbeat to stabilise. Then, placing his teacup carefully on a side table, he rose awkwardly and pulled open the simple door.

Ten minutes later, Duchess's wife gingerly entered the sitting room, not wanting to disturb her guest. She found the gang-leader slumped awkwardly in the armchair, his teacup lying broken on the floor. She shook him gently, but there was no response – Charlie Croker's game was over.



'This is the first time in my life that I have felt safe from being concluded,' said Winston.

'Mrs Turing did promise, said Ella. 'And I don't think Mrs O'Brien would do anything now. Someone would conclude *her*.'

They were speaking in the office of the Locust Component, where the quietness of the deserted room was helping them to relax after the stresses of the Institute meeting.

'I need to visit my parents,' said Winston. 'They won't believe what's happened.'

'Are you going to get your number re-evaluated?' asked Ella.

'Maybe. Does it matter?'

'Not to me.'

Unexpectedly, James-12401 entered the room. 'I just thought I'd take a final look around,' he said. 'What's been happening to you two?'

Ella laughed. 'Suppose I told you that half the Institute had resigned, and that they're looking for some younger people to take their place? Would you be interested?'

'Resigned? No! How did that happen?'

'Winston made them realise that their vision of Jerusalem was not the way to go, and that the new aim should be to co-operate with the Makers.'

'No! That's amazing. You know, I always thought there was more in his box than it seemed from the outside.'

'So I've discovered. Anyway, how about it? You could run the Stability Module or... almost anything else, really.'

'You can't be serious. Are they really going to let plugs into the Institute?'

‘She’s always serious,’ said Winston. ‘I think you’d be really good.’

‘Yeah, maybe I would. And maybe I’d just evolve into one of *them*. I want to stay as me, thanks all the same. Anyway, I’ve decided what I want to do.’

‘Oh yeah, what’s that?’

‘This city is big. And beyond it are more cities and all sorts of other places I’ve never been. I’ve never seen a Nourishment Centre or an ocean or... anything. If I can escape the crusher and tick over for a while then I’m going to see what else is out there.’

‘Wow,’ said Ella. ‘Can we come?’

‘We’ve got things to do here,’ said Winston. ‘But supposing James backed up everything he saw onto an Information Recorder. Then we could recall it and *imagine* we are with him.’

‘Yeah, we can do that now,’ said James.

‘And try and make your adventures really exciting so that we’ll look forward to seeing the next part,’ said Ella eagerly.

‘OK, I’ll do it,’ replied James. ‘And if nothing interesting happens then I’ll just make it up – you’d never know. Anyway, good luck to the two of you.’

‘Yeah,’ said Winston, ‘And look after yourself. I’ll try to keep Mrs O’Brien away from your switch.’

James laughed then left with a wave.

‘Are you crying?’ asked Ella, touching Winston’s face.

‘No no, I’m just tired. Let’s go back to the apartment. James has given me an idea. I want to see if I can record everything that has happened to *us*.’

‘To us? Why?’

‘Because it might be a good way of getting the Makers to understand that we are here. If they knew how close they came to being destroyed then they might start to think a little harder about what they are doing with their machines.’

‘But you don’t know any Makers. Who can you tell? And how?’

‘I’m hoping that the Window will show me the people who are right for the story – not everyone will be able to understand all this.’



Mercury is waiting for her program to be restarted. Some adolescent misfit will be entranced by her image and, captivated by a promise of sex and adventure, will take her home, unwrap her flimsy covering and slide her back into her world. And so she will reappear, on one side of the screen or the other, ready for another mission.

But that ancient gold box was not a part of her projection. It is lost in space and time until Mercury releases her hold. She cannot take it into another game, where it does not belong. And anyway, it is too powerful. The box has called to its rightful tenant. It was not made to hold this collection of tiny creatures, while they wait to feed, reproduce and evolve. On that Golden Dawn when Ahau Kin resumes his reign, he will revive and liberate them all.

And so the box will return to the world of its makers. Maybe it will emerge on some city street where a curious passer-by will pick it up, force it open and release every sort of evil – for this box holds no hope. Or perhaps the jewel-case will appear under the earth. By calculation, by intuition and by luck you might find that lonely spot. Releasing the golden treasure from its long incarceration, you would admire its ancient artistry: the engraved jaguar, the calendar symbols and the jewelled lock, for which you need the key. But will you dare to turn that key and look inside?

Or possibly the box will fall into the sea, whose salty fingers will pick away at its hermetic catch until it decays, releasing a deadly cargo. In the deep ocean, where the power of Ahau Kin never penetrates, the Locusts will remain dormant until time and tide take them to brighter waters. And then these minute organic seeds can sprout, creating a new generation of life: from plankton to krill, to fish, to air-breathers, to great lizards, to mammals. And so to men, who may develop new machines or take the evolutionary path to the other side, facing their brothers through the dark glass. This is the sixth version, the *alautun* of sixty-three million years. Each time it is the same and each time it is different. The book following *Revelations* is *Genesis*.



Winston sat in his apartment with the piece of Window propped up in front of him and an Information Recorder connected to his finger. But where to start? The Window was giving him no help, and the Recorder just sat there, challenging him to despoil its virgin blankness. He knew so much, and yet it was difficult to organise all the information into the right order. And why didn't the Window work today? It had been so helpful, but now it was just sitting there, empty. His mind wandered back to the first time he had seen into the Exterior. It seemed so long ago, when everything he saw was so strange. What was it that Mrs de Selby had asked? Oh yes – were they doing what he wanted them to do, or was he just looking in at them? Well, now he knew the answer to that. So what *did* he want them to do? Maybe if he looked into the Window and thought hard. Yes... yes, that was more like it...

He envisaged a dark room with some computer screens and one of the machines they used to record information onto white sheets of some flimsy material. Of course! That was how he could send the story into the Exterior. He would ask Ella to find out the name of its Unit Monitor. Now maybe he could recall those two characters who had been at the Mallens' dinner-party. Yes, there they were, one smartly dressed, the other scruffy. He could hear them...



'... talking of kids, did you reply to that one who mailed us saying he'd found a hidden mission inside *Getaway*?'

'Yeah, I asked him to tell us what happens.'

'But you get my point – he's only ten and he's exploring deeper levels of the game than we've ever seen ourselves.'

'Man, the kids are the new elite. We'll be out of it in a couple of years.'

'That's what I mean by time speeding up. We're getting dimmer and the machines are getting smarter. Where will it end? And who's in charge of it?'

'In charge? Of technology? It just happens, mate. Nobody's organising it.'

'Really? Who says we want more complex kit? Last year everybody was happy with *Getaway*. Now for some reason they want it to be faster, brighter, noisier...'

'Because it can be.'

'No no, I'm sure someone is directing it all; they're cracking the whip and making you run faster and faster...'



Winston sat back, satisfied. These two jokers were ideal for his purpose; they could distribute his account of **all** that had happened to the rest of the **Makers**. Now he just needed to decide where it had all begun.



Edwina had been home for a few hours. She had finished crying now, and was curled up on the sofa, not caring what the future held. The Jaguar had been her life; now it lay in ruins, smashed by the fall and torn apart by the rescue workers who had extracted the injured driver and passenger. Through the unglazed hole in the wall of her home, she could hear the sounds of hundreds of units on their way to start the Second Shift. Today she would not be joining them.

There was a knock. Edwina jumped up, her heart beating wildly. Only one type of caller could be expected at this moment. She opened the door, and saw the masks and shiny black overalls worn by the three people that stood there.

‘Conclusion Squad,’ said one of them.



The Window faded to black. Winston knew that this particular piece would not be showing him any more of the story. But the world was full of other Windows and other stories. He looked up, confused for a moment as to where he was: his Mother’s house, Mrs de Selby’s study, his new apartment, or the Locust Component’s office? The borders between reality and his imagination seemed momentarily blurred. Almost imperceptibly, the Window emitted a soft final sigh like the first breath of a sultan soothed to sleep, or the cover quietly closing on a last, translucent, white page.

