



A Season of Happiness

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Reborn

by

Vin Jackson

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REBORN by Vin Jackson

Is there life after death? Richard and Karen are sure of it because they died once and, although the doctors brought them back, part of them is still trapped on the other side. But this Afterlife their alter-egos are experiencing isn't what they were led to believe. It seems there is no peace after death, no Heaven, not any more. There is just a decaying land of medieval customs and barbarity, a living nightmare.

Join two fresh reborns as they enter a world of depravity where the only rule that really matters is survival. Learn the true price of friendship and loyalty. Know what it is like when you are forced to kill; then share the despair of wanting to stop, but realising it has become an addiction.

Embark on the classic quest for the ultimate prize. The price for failure - no life, no death, nothing! Not anywhere ever again!

The following preview of Vin Jackson's **Reborn** has been extended to the **first three chapters**. This way you will be able to get a good feel for the book before you buy.

Although viewing of **Mature** reader sample pages is unrestricted, they may contain offensive language, violence and adult themes.

Vin Jackson's

REBORN

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REBORN by Vin Jackson

LONFAY

It existed, it encompassed, and would ever be an impersonal, heartless land. Unforgiving, intolerant of failure, indifferent to success. Life existed here simply to struggle... dwindle..... perish.

An invisible sun shone through a low canopy of swirling, hazy cloud, bathing everything in pink light to create a surreal landscape of terracotta plains and rolling vermilion hills. In a shallow depression, the sightless eyes of a decomposing human corpse looked on, crisp blackened lips curling back from a manic grin.

Across the open areas, scattered flocks of diseased sheep grazed on sparse clumps of grass the colour and texture of rusted wire. While in and around thinning forests of stunted crimson trees other creatures scrimped a meagre existence. These were the Domains.

Worse still were the Deadlands where even the will to live had long been overshadowed by the simpler requirement of cheating death. Parched and desolate by day, blasted by ferocious dust-storms at night, survival here was basic, the reward hardly worth the effort. Those who bothered to earn it paid only rare homage to decency and honour. They left such luxuries to the fools and dreamers of Vasteplage.

Like any other city, the rambling metropolis promised much. For some it may have even exceeded expectations. For most, however, it was merely a civilised alternative to total deprivation. When life hurt and death waited on every corner, over-indulgence was the inalienable right of the condemned. And it was fun while it lasted.

Fun? This was a word Vallande had little use for recently. Extending a hand beyond the bell-sleeve of his dark monastic robes, he looked on it in dismay. A year ago it was soft and unblemished, but already it was showing signs of premature ageing. How long before this corrosive atmosphere dried him up completely? Although he was starting to blame them, it was unlikely the Elders could have known. He would be the first, they'd said, and hopefully the last. Assuming, of course, he achieved the mission they had entrusted to him.

He'd been so sure he could succeed. Especially when one of them had fanned an arm across a valley of golden corn ripening beneath a blue sky and had asked the question: isn't all of this worth saving? Of course it was, and the thought of losing it had lit a fire in his belly. Nova must go on forever!

Then he had turned to face the reason for this meeting - a distant, unnatural swelling, a blister on the landscape extending to the horizon and beyond. No-one recalled seeing it arrive. One day it was just there, small at first. Like most, he had watched it grow with simple curiosity which graduated to concern as it continued to swell until it was the size of a small village. Someone had compared its growth with a decrease in childbirth - a ludicrous theory, but one that gained popularity as the bubble got bigger while the birth-rate continued to drop.

It was simply a matter of time before logic was dismissed in favour of the unthinkable - this parasite was somehow robbing them of the ability to bear children. And as they were all reincarnations of those who had passed over from the other world, this *thing* must have somehow interrupted the natural process. Allowed to grow unchecked, it would not only usurp the land on which they stood, but would also starve it of children. Nova would eventually be no more!

These were the cold facts, incitements the Elders whispered to a young Vallande becoming more angry and brash by the second. Until, finally, he could stand it no longer and had pledged his life to destroy the parasite. The Elders had all applauded, then confided that he would have to do just that - for the beast had to be conquered from within, and the only way he could enter

was to die! So he had, and a year later, he was dying still - slowly. But not in the place he imagined. Lonfay was a land, a world; not a creature. How had he ended up here? Why?

These thoughts accompanied him along the crowded streets of the city until he was into the open plaza before the Arena. There was no noise here, no people which was hardly surprising - the awesome monolith on the far side commanded respect. Flawlessly smooth, the gargantuan pillar rose up to disappear in the permanent layer of pink cloud. Was it connected to the parasite in some way; perhaps literally, even? He had to believe something in this bizarre place was. Otherwise, he had died for nothing!

With a weary blink of resignation he crossed the plaza and entered, pausing momentarily in the race to let his eyes adjust to the faint, lilac hue of the Arena. Then he was moving again, mechanically, trying not to think too seriously. Finally, he halted.

His body continued to tremble while gazing up at the gigantic archway before him. After the makeshift hovels of town it was an architectural masterpiece, yet Vallande despised it. Even more so the Field of Honour which lay beyond - a contradiction if ever there was one. There was no glory in butchery, especially not as an officially authorised spectator sport. Though the Gate was closed now, it was small compensation. It would open next week at the commencement of the Conflict - a monthly serve of barbarity, standing room only. Those who fell in battle would be free of it, and occasionally Vallande envied them. At least for them, release from torment would be sure if not always swift, their purpose fulfilled; his might never be at the rate he was going.

Pushing defeatism aside, he withdrew a small black box from a pocket and tapped out a binary code on the sensor pads. Then he waited. A static hiss filled the air. Ozone drifted, peppering his nostrils and he tried to ignore it, concentrating instead on The Gate. It shimmered with myriad atomised particles which sped inward to congregate at a central point. A definite shape began to form around the nucleus.

The young man drew in a shallow, constricted breath and bowed his head: a lowly acolyte about to report to his superior. A chill rippled through him as he looked up at the image which was fast becoming the bane of his life - The Recorder General. A man, yet inhuman. A hologram. The product of an advanced technology which seemed totally misplaced in this land of organic decay; inconsistent with the anachronistic way of life the subjects of Lonfay were forced to lead. An illusion just like the Gate, although not as refined, not as perfect. As if its creator wished to demonstrate the power of the unreal over the rationality of the weak.

And they all complied. From the rabble of the draff to the fine Nobles of Vasteplage, none would dare to wonder why, or how; whether to rebel or not. Except maybe Vallande. One day he would find a way to free the people of Lonfay, perhaps return some to Nova where they truly belonged. If he could just find a way past this glitzy facade.

The suspended atoms stirred, shimmered more brightly. A voice echoed from within - metallic, arrogant. "You have come prepared, Novice?"

Panic! Vallande's lips were flapping, but there was no sound. Only the static hiss from the Recorder General.

And it was growing impatient. "Well?"

Swallow. Think. Try! "Er, yes, Your Eminence. I am ready."

"I seriously doubt that, Vallande, but it is time. You understand the price of failure?"

"I do, Your Eminence." The young recorder's mind skipped through the possibilities - a terrifying montage of violence, gore and depravity; the misery of others which might easily be his. He had to qualify. He had to!

"Then, you may begin."

He attempted to remain calm as he began reciting his oath, but composure was suddenly a lost virtue. He stammered. He faltered. Next, a mental block. It was bound to happen. His

teachers said it would. When it does, just pause, they'd advised. Relax. It will pass. And amazingly it did.

He concluded. Waited.

"Hmm. Passable." A spangled hand stroked a cheek, thoughtfully. "Now The Order."

Vallande was dreading this part. "The Order shall be respected as it is stated: The Re...." Oh God! He'd almost committed the cardinal sin by beginning at the top. But a deep breath and a long pause set him back on course. "The woman of the draff; the man of the draff; the woman of the Deadlands...." His memory locked in and he continued to ascend the list until finally: ".....and The Recorder General in his magnificence."

A hollow, patronising chuckle. "You're a survivor, I'll give you that. Let's see how you fare with The Balance."

It ought to be easy - it was just part of the knowledge everyone received at the moment of death, continuing as instinct. Vallande, however, was cursed with knowing the truth and just hoped his conscience would take a back seat while he recited a few blatant lies by rote: "The Balance is that between our world and the one from which we are all reborn. For both to exist there must be joy, love and peace on the one side; misery, hatred and conflict on the other. Lonfay has been charged with the preservation and continuance of the latter. All are bound to uphold the traditions of fear, mayhem and inhumanity. Our duty is to suffer in this life. Our reward, which shall be in death alone, is to return to the comfort of the next. Failure will end all life, everything! We must not fail. We *will* not fail. The Balance will be preserved."

Not merely perspiring, he was drowning; legs like jelly, head swimming. *Please God, just a little more strength.*

"Well done, Vallande. And what part do you desire to adopt in this the most worthy of causes?"

"To tend and monitor The Balance. To ensure that absolute power is always sought, yet never attained. Save by one, Your Eminence. It is my earnest and humble wish to be invested as a fully accredited recorder."

A long, long pause. Then: "You are dismissed, Vallande."

"Your Eminence.....?" What had he done wrong? He'd followed instructions to the letter. It would be a formality, they'd said. Now this! "I don't understand. Why?"

The Recorder General's image trembled with impatience. "Because you have work to do, miserable wretch!"

"Work, Your Eminence?"

"Yes, work! You've been idle long enough. Now, go out there and repay the year your mentors have lavished on you. You say you wish to preserve The Balance. So, do it!

.....Recorder."

Recorder! He'd said it. Vallande, the recorder. It sounded so.... dignified? So incredible. It was the most amazing, the best thing that had happened to him. What he'd been hoping and striving for. And now it was here, he was so overwhelmed that he was numb.

The euphoria lasted but a moment. Then the Recorder General's image was dissipating, and before he knew it, Vallande was padding his way out of the Arena, hating himself for his misplaced pride!

Once into the pink light of day he vowed never to be coerced again by the tyrant of Lonfay. He was not its lackey, but a champion of Nova, the true Afterworld. And one day, somehow, he would be its hero. In the meantime he would do and say what was required of him, would respect and serve this artificial dictator. Until he found the way to destroy the parasite it hid somewhere behind its illusions.

The mere thought of that pleasure would make the days and years bearable, would lend strength to failing courage. He might even be able to ignore the inner man which was starting to rue the day he had ever been reborn.

CHAPTER ONE

1

Attendance was fair for a Monday. The chic lady on stage oozed confidence, unlike the one hundred and thirty lesser mortals who absorbed her lecture in apprehensive silence. She was well aware most of the men would be eyeballing her, and some women. It went with the territory, was kind-of flattering that they'd given up their lunch of a chicken salad sandwich and a Coke in the Mall for the privilege.

And not all of them would be ogling her exclusively. Not when there was an inviting cleavage to glimpse in the chair on their left, and a spunk in a blue suit two rows down. Then there were the squirmers distracted by various discomforts and itches which had remained dormant until they sat down. One or two worried about incontinence, or flatulence and kept darting nervous glances at the exits.

In the main, though, she was guaranteed a reasonably captive audience. Most devoured the salient points of the lecture because they were either too greedy or too desperate not to - business people with a lease on the future; unemployables who had none. A few, unfortunately, were lost before they even walked through the door. They made up the numbers as they sat and tried to look clued in.

Richard Olsen was a special case: an intelligent man who might have understood had his mind not been elsewhere. He had a client to see at 1.45. Unless the lecture finished dead on time he wouldn't make it, not if he stayed. But if he left now he'd never know what she was talking about. And he'd paid \$80 for an hour of salvation.

The sign outside said: SUCCESS - YOUR LAST CHANCE! His name had been omitted, but he'd felt that the message was for him personally. That was why he'd paid the money - for a tailor-made solution. Not this off-the-peg, pseudo-intellectual rubbish she was wholesaling to the masses. Despite this, he stayed.

Eventually, the speaker concluded her offering and made a reluctant theatrical exit. As she passed behind the curtain, sedate applause died an ignoble death to be replaced by the scraping of chairs and shuffling feet. She shucked her head at the noise and added a self-satisfied grin. "I actually think I got through to some today."

Her manager, a squat, oily man, was juggling figures in a note book. He shrugged. "At seven grand an hour clear, who cares?" Then he turned on his heel and slithered away. The woman watched his retreating back, his rolling gait, and she thanked God their arrangement was purely business.

Towards the front of the building a closing door nudged Richard's shoulder as he misjudged the exit to the street. He wasn't thinking. His mind was still in the auditorium, but on what he wasn't sure. Fragments of the lecture were all he seemed able to recall. Criminal when he needed to convince himself that he had gained \$80 worth of positive motivation.

A car horn blared followed by a yob-yell: "Dozy Bastard!" Richard jerked to a halt, fresh perspiration bleeding from his forehead. A faded yellow ute streaked past shaking a fist. A sign across the road said: Don't Walk! Richard supposed he had. Then a surge of pedestrians drove him forward and he accepted it as a temporary respite to his motivation problem.

On his way down to the lower-level car-park beneath his office he actually remembered something:

"There are two Universes - a positive and a negative."

Bright sunlight gave way to a diffused neon gloom - definitely negative.

The sedan next to his had been broken into. Beads of glass from the shattered side-window spread a jewelled carpet beneath his feet. There was no option but to walk on it. The crunching caused him to feel involved somehow as if he was destroying evidence, desecrating remains. As he climbed into his own car he was careful not to bump the victim's duco with his door. Probably the least he could do.

Driving off the ramp to the street, he almost collected a passing vehicle. It was the same make and model as his, only black instead of white.

"Nothing can exist without its opposite."

She'd said that too, hadn't she? Without night there was no day; no good without evil. There had to be losers otherwise no-one could win. He was going to lose, for sure: his dash clock said 1.43; his appointment was in two minutes! Goodbye new client, goodbye junior partnership. Step up and get your medal, Clive, you slimy, adolescent boot-licker!

"Matter is balanced by anti-matter."

That was why there had to be people like Clive. Richard wore dark suits over white shirts; Clive was loud, trendy, had his hair permed. He ate Chinese, Mexican, Italian; Richard had to mind his ulcer. Richard's wife of fifteen years was mousy-plain; whereas Clive's tastes....?

Traffic ahead of Richard had banked up. He braked, almost made the mistake of checking the clock again and searched for something outside the car to concentrate on. Anything not connected with time. Not much that wasn't: even the busker on the footpath probably had commitments, deadlines. Anyone who had a future did.

Hidden from Richard's view and approaching the same intersection at right-angles was a Harley, gleaming chrome and showroom-condition black, cream fuel tank with the distinctive icon. The driver wore a faded vest and tattoos, his woman passenger a scarred leather jacket. Both had on holey denim jeans. No stack-hats, though. On a Harley? No way! Bystanders followed the bike's passage, some with admiration, some envy. Many resented it as a blatant display of vulgarity within their upper-middle class sanctuary. Richard had no opinion. Yet.

A horn blast invaded his preoccupation. Vehicles ahead had pulled well clear of him and were already crawling through the intersection. There was a gap of at least forty metres between Richard and the back marker. As he started up, a stream of opportunistic pedestrians waded across the road and cut him off. So he waited. The horn beeped again, very irritable. He fretted until it was clear to go, then accelerated towards the lights. They began to change as he was approaching the line. A glance in the rear-view mirror confirmed the car behind was sitting right on his tail. He was committed. At least the intersection was clear. For a second.

Just then his fringe flopped over his eyes. It was always doing that. He tossed his head to clear his vision, had a brief premonition of something wild and bearded flying at his windshield. Richard simply froze.

The sound of impact didn't travel far: the high-rise baffles and a seething human carpet muffled it. Those closest were deafened, shocked. Only a block away heads turned slightly and wondered whether they'd heard something.

Further away still - seventeen K's into the suburban sprawl - Richard's plain, mousy wife heard nothing beyond her own erotic gasping as she rode the window cleaner like there was no tomorrow. Unlike Richard, he was young, athletic. A *big* boy.

"Nothing can exist without its opposite."

She finally rolled off her stud and lay gazing dreamily up at the ceiling. "That was...." she started, ending with a deep, satisfied sigh. Gary paused to mumble an unintelligible response, then resumed gagging in an attempt to regurgitate a hair in his throat.

After a coffee, he started on the front windows, giving Janet the opportunity to enjoy the after-glow. She was comfortable with the arrangement now; at the start it was like cheating. Not that there was ever much love between her and Richard - she wasn't even sure she knew what real

love was - but it took a while before she stopped thinking of herself as a tart. Then she figured, if Richard didn't know and she was happier, who really suffered? Not Gary, that was for sure.

He finished the windows and they were having the lunch she'd made when the door-bell rang. Janet answered it, still in her bathrobe. That, added to the flush on her cheeks and the truck parked in the drive, prompted a furtive, knowing exchange between the police constables on the step. But they covered it better than she did her guilt and went on to explain about her husband's accident. After which, they waited in the car while Mrs Olsen put some clothes on, then drove her to the hospital.

Gary eventually left by the side gate. He paused at the mailbox to slide in his account. Even though he ran a strictly cash business, he bent the rules for his regulars.

2

Light - so intense it masked everything. It *was* everything; yet nothing.

The Void.

And cold: an eternity of winters breathing simultaneously. A shivering stroll through liquid nitrogen, it was as impossible to describe as it was to tolerate. But she was doing it.

Something accompanied her - a feeling of detachment. She wasn't who she was. And yet, although she had changed, she was essentially the same. She had simply become *negative*.

The light held her back, bore her on - influential ambiguity which whispered of everlasting peace and eternal misery in the same breath. Only a fool would take the dangerous option, so she pushed on, expecting the light and its magnetism to grow stronger. But the power of the contrary forces continued to increase in tandem, tugging at her like some prize both needed to seduce. And they contested more than her body. Her mind was a confusion of temptations - love, hate, comfort, pain; grouped mainly into two distinct camps: Lonfay and Nova. Were they places, philosophies, what....? Which was better? How could she choose without knowing what either would mean to her?

The forces seemed to sympathise with her quandary and eased slightly, allowing her to take stock. She became aware of new information: integrated with the dense white were patches of black. At first she had a feeling they were only there because her rational mind needed the contrast, but as she advanced cautiously to take a closer look, the black became mottled with grey, was occasionally tinted by another colour - brown, maybe. And, not only did it seem more tangible, but she sensed it was pleased she thought so. Colours expressing gratitude.....?

Possibly - the white light was hovering in the background, sadly disappointed. When she turned away from it, she found herself standing before a wall. It stretched left and right and up as far as the eye could see. It looked solid enough to touch. And she knew it was.

How did she know that?

The same way she knew about Lonfay and Nova, she guessed - whatever they were. She left theorising to concentrate on the wall. It was moving, slowly distending and contracting like a huge flat belly. Like a womb.

She reached out gingerly, expecting the wall to feel soft like an elastic diaphragm. It was. Her fingers made a small indentation as the surface responded to her touch. Then it pushed back as if it were alive.

She snatched her hand away and giggled in nervous surprise. Then she was walking along, touching it occasionally, testing a growing confidence. Holding her palm against the wall she could feel something beyond - movement, writhing. She shuddered. The white light sighed mournfully.

Next, a warning. From the opposing forces or her own intuition, she wasn't sure. But whatever its source, the alarm was too clear to ignore - she was not alone. Someone else was in the Void with her. And they were coming closer!

She quickened her pace as she looked for a place to hide, not questioning why she needed to, knowing only that she feared being exposed. But there was nowhere. Just the light which continued to beckon gently. She was tempted, but at this moment kindness took second place to something solid.

Maybe the wall had a crevice, or a door? She continued to stumble along it, glancing behind frequently. Her breathing was shallow. Perspiration welled on her forehead, trickled down her temples. Also down her sides from weeping armpits. The sensation was strangely arousing.

She wasn't really aware of the current until it intensified significantly. The force was back - only one this time - dragging her parallel to the wall. Suddenly she knew she wanted the light and she reached out for it. But for some reason it didn't take her hand. As if it considered her already beyond redemption.

She lost sight of its brilliance as she concentrated on straining against the invisible magnetic tide. Everything was becoming so negative. The light was fading, the dark had hold of her, and the dangerous presence was still coming.

Yes, *there!* Just a glimpse. Enough to recognise the silhouette of another human being - a man. She hesitated instinctively. Very briefly. Then, the current changed direction and slammed her against the wall. She found herself pressed against it and tried to push away, but the elasticity simply absorbed her efforts. Softness began caressing her, moulded to her features. She could feel herself melting into it.

Trapped though she was, in a strange way she felt safe for now. From the man, certainly; but also from the voice. She could hear it drifting through the Void towards her. Like someone calling to her. It was familiar, reassuring. But something - another voice deep inside her head - warned it couldn't be trusted. *She* couldn't be trusted.

She? Listening more intently, she could tell now that it was a woman's voice. It was saying: "Richard, it's me - Janet." Then the sounds became suddenly distant as if this Janet person had turned away and was talking to someone else: "He can't hear me, can he, Doctor? But his eyes are open. What does that mean?"

Does anything mean anything?

In the light she was woman. Yet, though the voice called to a man, she knew it called to her. She was Richard. At least, she had been. Probably would be again if she went back. Back to Janet, the woman Richard didn't trust.

And don't forget the man in the Void. Don't forget him! Who was he, anyway? She seemed to know him, but in a detached way like a passing acquaintance. Not a pleasant experience, as she recalled. Painful, even. If he found her that might mean more pain. She didn't need it. Didn't need any of this. So she pressed further into the wall.

The membrane began to tear. One arm was through, then a shoulder. The rent was widening. Suddenly desires no longer mattered: she was falling and choice was irrelevant.

Implosion. It felt just like that. One moment an inner self, growing, spreading outward... testing... sensing. Next, the thought of being swallowed.

Of swallowing herself.

"I'm afraid your husband's in a coma, Mrs Olsen."

Janet watched the full lips working in a soft, pink face. Doctor Holder was little more than a boy. Richard wouldn't have been impressed. For his money, experience came with age; and

the top people wore suits, not lab coats. He wouldn't have complained, though, even if he'd been able. He was all for the quiet life. Maybe he was content at last, laying there, glassy eyes staring unblinking at the ceiling, safe within a womb of eternal boredom.

She noticed Holder watching her, his expression betraying misgivings. About what - her sincerity? Perhaps she'd overdone the brave-little-wife bit and ought to display more concern. She turned away for a moment and tried to imagine how a husband in a wheelchair might affect her life. "What are his chances?"

Doctor Holder watched her shoulders rise and fall in time with her breathing. Once or twice she shuddered as she exhaled. Trying to keep her emotions in check, he supposed. God, he hated this part. Years of training and he couldn't tell her any more about her husband's condition than the damned ward orderly! He tried to inject compassion into a response that always seemed like a cop-out: "Once his condition stabilises we'll know more."

"Stabilises, yes," mumbled Janet. She looked down at Richard. If he were any more stable they'd build a high-rise on him. "I suppose all we can do is wait."

"I'm afraid so...." His pink, tightly-manicured fingers played the dangling stethoscope like a rosary. What price a diversion to get him out of there? Ten Hail Mary's...?

A freckled nurse's face pushed around the curtain. "Cubicle five, Doctor - stat!"

Relief flooded Holder. He edged past, squeezed Janet's arm gently on the way. "I'm sure he'll be fine."

Then she was alone and the tears finally came. For herself, she guessed, because she was really starting to hate Richard for turning her life into such a bloody mess!

They power-walked: running was taboo, even in an emergency.

Holder snapped irritably: "What?" He felt like a junior exec ordering a damage report. A few shifts on casualty had that effect. You learned to leave emotions at home. Speed, some skill and a heavy bedside manner were better substitutes.

The nurse managed: "The girl - we're losing her." Then they were ducking into five.

Holder jerked to a standstill, totally becalmed. He'd expected a nurse or two and, of course, his patient, the one from the same accident as Richard Olsen. But there larger than life was Agostini leaning over the cot, de-fib paddles still in his hands.

Holder hated Agostini's guts. Doing rounds with the professor was like the Spanish Inquisition. The man was a bastard. All attitude.

The figure straightened, handed the paddles to a nurse. A lean, swarthy mask turned, dressed Holder down. "I'm not poaching, Holder. Just passing through."

Liar.

He walked up to the younger man, stood waiting for him to step aside. "Breathing's still erratic. Not conscious yet. Manage alright now, can you?"

Holder nodded. "I think so, professor." He needed to swallow, wouldn't give Agostini the satisfaction of seeing how intimidated he made his staff. "Thanks for holding the fort."

Agostini grunted. Holder went to the cot praying the egotistical bastard wasn't going to stand there reviewing him like a board of inquiry. As he stooped over the girl, he glanced backwards beneath his arm. Agostini had gone. Holder gulped.

Following a cursory examination, he mumbled to himself: "Why do they do it?"

The two nurses pulled faces at each other. One of them said: "Do what, Doctor?"

"Ride motor bikes without helmets." He was annoyed having to explain what to him was obvious.

The nurse shrugged. "It isn't cool."

Holder gazed down at the face on the cot. She was pretty, beautiful even. "Neither is life as a vegetable," he growled. He stood upright, gave the nurse a patronising stare. "Let's try our best to beat the odds on this one, shall we?"

4

Finding his way through the light was exciting, wicked. Like a trip. Was he on one? It felt that way.

Emotions were confused: on the one hand welcoming the danger of the unknown; on the other, praying for a return to convention and predictability. Even his identity was an enigma. What he could see and touch was the body of a man, but inside he felt like a woman. Even faint recollections were particularly feminine.

He continued to wander in amazement. Never had he seen so much light, so much nothingness. This was the trip of all trips. What kind of hit could produce this? Not smack or crack, no designer drug he'd - *she'd* - ever tried. Nothing *she'd* ever done before.

These were thoughts from another time, another person. The man he was now - or had become - would never take drugs, despised them. The woman inside was at home with them and he loathed her for it.

When he found the wall he stuck close, regarding it as a tangible security blanket within the Void. Next, there was someone up ahead and he started towards them. They had gone in a flash. Imagination - it must have been. Unlike the stream of negativity which came from nowhere, sucked him in and began drawing him along like a rip-tide! What now? He snatched a breath, held it, head spinning. Maybe he was coming down. Maybe the hit was wearing off. *She* didn't want it to, needed to experience more; but *he* was relieved.

The wall and the sensual attraction seemed allied, so he didn't struggle. Just floated in the hopes they would lead him to somewhere or something he could readily identify with. Maybe the person he thought he'd seen.

The negativity increased. Not just on the outside, but drawing something from deep within him. From the past maybe. An exorcism. Would it be too much to ask that he was losing this vile female which haunted him?

The experience continued, was almost erotic verging on orgasmic. Definitely irresistible now. Drifting along in the flow became that ultimate fulfilment he couldn't have denied himself if he'd wanted to. It provided all he needed, would ever need: complexity and bare simplicity. Alpha and omega.

Then the speed of the current picked up and he was moving faster than he could think. A man should try to break free so that he could weigh the odds before finally committing himself. But it wasn't the kind of option you could select then turn off if it didn't suit. This trip was for the duration, no rain-checks considered.

The rip-tide looped him out from the wall briefly. Then he was turning, streaming towards it. He saw the lesion coming at him, a large tear in a plastic curtain. As the energy dragged him through he grabbed at the flapping sides, could find nothing to hook his fingers around. Another second and he was being consumed.

Here was pain, an agony like nothing he had ever felt before. Crying out was futile because his screams weren't as loud as the pain. But he cried anyway.

He was still screaming, even after the pain had stopped. And he knew it had because he could hear himself. God, that was terrible, he thought. Yet part of him felt exhilarated. A decidedly female part.

He lay where he had fallen, stones pressing into his naked flesh, tasting grit. The light was now a soft peach glow, the surrounding air warm. Without even questioning how he knew, he thought: *I'm through. I'm in the Canal.*

Canal? A strange word. Why had it come to mind?

Rolling, he pushed up onto an elbow, peered at his new environment to find himself confronted by desolation - nothing but sand and stones. Behind him lay cool oblivion in the trip of a lifetime; here was warmth in a canal without water. Stark reality after the dream-like Void.

He was in a crater ringed by dunes. From the top of any he cared to choose he would be able to view the Canal and see that it was all the same. This kind of knowledge had nothing to do with memory. This was in-bred, instinctive.

Memories he'd had in the light were to do with civilisation - wild rages, heavy trips, screwing. Or at least *being* screwed: he couldn't recall ever screwing a woman, only being screwed as one! Despite being obnoxious to the man he had become, these thoughts were, nevertheless, memories of ordinary things, real people and places. But this barren wilderness....? He'd never been here before, or any desert come to that, so how did he know what it was like, what to expect? How could he know what was beyond the dunes? He couldn't know. But he did!

Struggling to his feet, his legs felt weak and trembling. The altitude produced nausea. Sweat prickled his body. He tottered, fell, attempted to right himself again. Then, he quit trying and crawled. He worked his way up the closest dune nursing a monster thirst, finally collapsed on the top, chest heaving.

Recovering sufficiently to raise his head, he looked out across the plain. More sand, acres of it. Then more dunes. No sign of water.

But there *were* people!

He saw three, walking alone as if unaware of the others. It seemed stupid: people were social animals, they needed companionship. They should be banding together, co-operating to find a way out of this bad trip.

If that was what this weird scenario was, he'd be only too glad to swear off drugs completely. *He* didn't need them. What he needed was someone to talk to. Someone to share his confusion, his fear.

Was he really afraid? You bet your sweet life he was! Especially since he'd just realised something. He'd just figured out why this trip was so different, so intense: the silly bitch, the person he used to be, must have OD'd.

She was most likely DEAD and she'd taken him with her!

5

Almost out of the Canal now, the woman whose memories were those of a man was wishing she could remember her name. It seemed important, as if she was about to meet someone: an insane notion, considering where she was - at the end of an empty pass gazing into.... the rest of it!

Ridiculous, but it was what she felt - the *end* of a pass! If she was at the end, there wouldn't be any more of it. There would be plains, or.... something else, anyway. But there *was* more. More pass and more dunes lining it on either side. So, in effect, she was in the middle.

In which case, why did she believe she was almost through? And where was the reception committee she somehow knew would be waiting? She couldn't see them. The entire area was deserted, but she was certain she would soon be meeting people. Crazy.

Crazier still, the name thing. She was stark naked, about to front complete strangers. That in itself should have worried the hell out of her, but she was more concerned that she couldn't remember her name! It was all that mattered - just her name.

The only one she could think of was Richard. She glanced down, brushed sand from a breast, slid a hand over her belly to her pubic area, touched a mound of crisp hair. If she said her name was Richard, they'd look at her and laugh.

Whoever *they* were.

A movement caught her eye. A man was approaching along the pass from the direction she had come. She wasn't worried that he might see her, not now. There had been a couple of them back in the desert, a man and a woman, both heading in the same direction towards the passes. Neither had taken the slightest notice of her, or each other.

She figured they were from the Void. Where else? But they didn't seem as alive as she herself felt. Maybe they weren't. Or conversely, maybe they were and she wasn't! Now, that was a thought.

This latest joker continued up to her then walked right past, staring straight ahead without even glancing at her. It was the closest she'd been to one of them. She hadn't tried to make contact before, didn't bother now. What was to say? Apart from being naked, she had nothing in common with them. Even their respective personal bubbles were different: they couldn't see beyond theirs and she was outside hers.

The man had reached the point where she'd hesitated because she hadn't been able to remember her name. He must have known his because he walked right on. Like over the line. She was sure she saw his foot disappear first. Then all of him had gone.

She stared along the pass. He should have been walking still, making his way towards the end. But, as she'd observed before, this was the end. The pass had finished, despite what her eyes told her. Pure illusion and he had become part of it. He had crossed the line, was on the far side. Probably saying his name.

How? Another membrane? It seemed logical in a crazy kind-of way: an invisible membrane. Maybe she had to walk through like she did the first time. But to where? Two names sprang to mind - Lonfay and Nova. Maybe they were places after all, and she was on her way to one. What if she didn't like it - could she start again, pick the other? She had a feeling the choice had already been made. Something to do with destiny. You paid your money and took your chance.

Like all the other suckers. Another one was coming along the pass. She simply stood watching. No need to hide: he wouldn't notice her. If he saw her at all he would take her for another sleep-walker.

An immature thought crossed her mind, mischievous. One hand went to her breasts, began caressing them. The other stroked down over her belly, slid inside a thigh. Her eyelashes fluttered, lips pouted. Hello, sailor. Then she tensed.

He'd stopped, seemed to be looking at her. Couldn't be, of course: the others hadn't. Maybe he'd just lost his direction momentarily. Even lemmings must do it sometime. She laughed to herself - an uncertain giggle to renew a confidence which didn't quite return in full.

The man had started up again, internal compass back on track. He walked awkwardly as if he was limping. As if the stones hurt his feet like they did hers. Every so often he hopped, stumbled. Then he hobbled on.

Was it possible....? No. He was just another zombie. She quit her visual seduction. Not because she thought he could see. Just because. Put it down to boredom.

Thirty paces off he paused, looked, started hobbling again. Twenty paces and one hand dived to cover his genitals. There was a further brief hesitation. Following which, the other hand rose above his head, hung there uncertainly as if awaiting instructions. Then he smiled nervously and waved.

Christ! He sees me!

She fled in panic. Simply turned and ran along the pass. Only, the pass had finished. She was at the end.

And she was crossing the line.

The spot where the woman had been standing felt warm to his touch. Wishful thinking, of course. This patch of sand was the same temperature as the rest, the people he'd seen not warm at all. Sushi, that's what they were. Except for her, maybe.

He stared at where he'd seen the woman disappear, felt an urge to see her again, a desperate need. He had to go after her. Nothing seemed as imperative. Were these his thoughts, or those of the woman inside? My God, perhaps she was a lesbian! How would that affect *his* feelings?

He walked forward, took a deep trembling breath, froze. Then he went for it. Momentary blindness stunned him. Air exploded from his lungs. Something rammed into him. He clutched at it to prevent himself from falling. It was soft, warm. It squirmed. And it was yelling in his ear.

His sight cleared quickly, his mind too, and he realised *it* was a *she*. They parted, scrambled to their feet. He stood. She crouched, her eyes ablaze with bestial intent, her fingers curled like claws. Words failed him, so he tried an apologetic smile.

"Pervert!" The word was a rasp from a constricted throat that she hadn't used in a while.

A roar filled the air - cheers, catcalls, whistles. The pair spun, found themselves gazing at a huge crowd milling behind bands of green laser-light. An electrical barrier of some kind, its mere existence seemed at odds with the strange assortment of humanity it held at bay. Less than futuristic, these people were positively medieval, dressed like peasants from a bygone era.

The naked man gawped at the spectacle, at the out-moded clothing of the noisy rabble. "Good Lord!" he gasped.

She said: "Shit! So many! I never figured...."

A tumbler dropped. He stared at her. "You *knew* they'd be here?"

A sneer curled her lip. "Didn't you?" She bowed her head, dug fingers into her hair, massaging brain cells, thought: *What the hell's my name?* Then a comment to the man: "Someone's going to ask in a minute and I can't bloody remember...."

He was blinking, totally confused. "I don't understand any of this. What is this place?"

She watched him, tried to be objective. If anything, he was more afraid than her. Terrified, even. His eyes were all over the place, shivering like those of a cornered animal. Then they'd found something, locked onto it - something behind her. She turned, calmly, avoiding sudden movements. Don't want to fire up the natives. One was coming towards them - dark flowing robes, hood covering the face. Monkish. "You want to know where we are? Ask *him*."

It was meant as a facetious suggestion, but her naked companion didn't read it that way, obviously thought it was a good idea. Prick! He stepped forward, extended his free hand - the other was still doing fig-leaf impressions. He said to the monk: "Look, there must have been some mistake. I really shouldn't be here."

The hooded figure stopped before them, had either not heard or was choosing to ignore. His interlinked sleeves parted revealing hands of parchment stretched over lean talons. One cradled a small black box. A slim finger descended, tapped the box. The hood inclined slightly, not enough to reveal a face. "Name?" creaked a male voice, an old voice.

He was "looking" straight at *her*! Oh, God! Her jaw dropped. A gagging hiss emanated from her throat.

"Name?" repeated the holy man. No longer bored, he was growing impatient.

She appealed to the naked man at her side. Useless bastard was just standing there! Come on, man! Gimme a name, any name! Who the fuck am I? She only thought this.

He must have picked her body-language, blinked rapidly a few times. He was starting to wind up, mouth opening and closing like a fish. "Mireille," he said eventually.

"Not you," grated the monk. His extended finger pressed the black box again. The hood turned almost imperceptibly. "You - *woman!*"

She twitched. Her mind was blank. She'd forgotten the bloody name! "I__"

"I told you," said the man. "Her name is Mireille."

"Can't she speak for herself?" grumbled the old man irritably. He tapped his box. Then paused, finger hovering. "And *your* name?"

The newcomer was on the back foot momentarily, then said: "LaRoche." It was a breathless reply. He felt the need to repeat it in a more composed manner. "My name is LaRoche." Uncommon names, Mireille and LaRoche. He had no idea why they'd come to mind.

The robed figure tapped away on his box for a full half-minute, pausing occasionally to shake his head before continuing. His hood wagged in frustration. "There's something wrong. You shouldn't be here."

LaRoche sighed. "You see! Didn't I tell you that?"

The hood rose. Still no features were visible, just the glint of eyes buried deep in the shadow. They certainly resented the innuendo. "According to my calculations neither of you are ready yet. There is alternative life within you. You can't be reborn if you aren't dead."

"Who's talking *dead*, for Christ's sake!" Mireille had been wondering: what if she was - actually *dead*? Suddenly faced with the possibility, she went right off the idea. "Do we look like fucking corpses?"

LaRoche placed himself between the woman and the monk, was extra careful not to touch either. "If you'll just tell us how to find our way back we'll gladly go."

The frail heart beneath the woollen robe was racing. Dangerous for a man of his age, as were the thoughts tumbling through an excited mind: *Why do I hesitate? The rules are clear. A man would be a fool to disobey. And yet....* He watched their faces intently, derived little from his observations. *Even so, a few more moments wouldn't hurt. Surely?* He consulted his log again, spared another few seconds to weigh the risk. Then he'd decided. "You must remain here until you return."

Mireille groaned. "Tell us something we don't know. Like what happens *if* we stay. And how the fuck we split if we don't." She received no reply, only a slight fidgeting beneath the robes as if he didn't understand plain English. "What are you, some kind of fucking retard?"

A sigh emanated from the depths of the hood. "Am I to assume that you wish to die?"

Mireille was shocked. "Listen, creep__!"

"My name is Vallande."

LaRoche cut in again. "Brother Vallande. Nobody wants to die__"

"I am not your brother. I am a recorder."

"I'm sorry. Recorder Vallande, then."

"Just Vallande will do," muttered the hood.

"Jesus Christ!" spat Mireille in exasperation. "Who the fuck cares? If you two want to start up a debating society can we do it some place else? I feel kind-of exposed here."

"Yes," added LaRoche. "Is there somewhere we can go to sort this out?"

"Through the neuro-fence," Vallande advised casually.

"Right, the neuro-fence." Mireille began a visual search of their surroundings. "Sounds good to me. Which way?"

The recorder's arm came up, bell-sleeve drooping, parchment finger pointing. Straight at the laser barrier and the seething mob beyond.

Mireille said: "Ah. *That* neuro-fence."

LaRoche groaned. "No other way?"

"None," said Vallande. "Not unless you prefer to die."

LaRoche was horrified. "No, no. We don't want that. Do we?"

He was staring at her, pleading. The bastard had made his decision, but he wanted her endorsement. Mireille pondered the sand between her bare feet. "If this turns out badly, just remember it was your idea."

Her eyes rose to find LaRoche's waiting. They displayed no sympathy, no compassion. Only cold accusation. Like it was all her fault. "You don't have to come," he droned resentfully.

"Pig's arse! What else am I going to do - stand here and frig myself?"

"It's decided then." The recorder turned, began to walk away, paused and waited for the two initiates to catch up. He spoke softly, less officiously than he had up till then. "Keep together. Stay close to me. When we pass through, the draff will taunt you. Ignore them. And Mireille - try to be a little less profane. Such language is uncommon in Lonfay. It will attract unwelcome attention."

Lonfay! She'd been half expecting it, but it still came like a bolt from the blue. The old monk must have noticed the stunned look because his hood was still aimed in her direction. Did she ask now? No, she decided: better to hang loose. Mireille concocted a scowl and jammed hands defiantly on her hips. "Anything else? Maybe BO or bad breath?"

Vallande waited in silence. When there were no further complaints he said: "Come," and started forward again. He'd acquired the habit of drifting lately, employing a trudge not so much solemn as weary. Occasionally the heel of a sandal snagged the hem of his robes. He'd given up worrying about it, accepted the fact that he was shrinking and simply ignored the annoyance. If he had achieved nothing else, he had learned to tolerate the minor discomforts of old age.

Approaching the barrier, he began to tense. Here was one irritation Vallande would never cease to detest. Being imprisoned within a cage was bad enough, but the neuro-fence was the trainer's whip, restricting the little freedom left to them. Touching it was like having all your teeth pulled at once without anaesthetic. The spectators stayed well back, milling around, grinning, slobbering, jeering.

He stopped before the fence to enter the code in his log. A break appeared in the bands of light. He started through, waited on the far side.

LaRoche and Mireille followed, their eyes darting nervously. The crowd leaned towards them. A hand snaked out, groped in the direction of Mireille. Vallande waved vaguely at the leering faces. "Behold the draff. The salt of Lonfay. The scum of time immemorial. Just treat them with the contempt they deserve and they'll love you for it."

This side of the fence there was nothing to keep the crowd back except for an apparent respect for Vallande's unknown powers. As the recorder walked, the mob parted, seemingly afraid of him. Less so of the new arrivals. They allowed Mireille and LaRoche to pass, then closed in behind.

Paws groped, especially for Mireille. She spun. "Scumbags!" The draff jumped back, laughing mouths open, eyes glittering with lewd thoughts. She selected a particularly filthy male in the front who was standing astride thrusting his hips at her. In his tights and short jacket, he reminded her of an overgrown garden gnome. Taking a step towards him, she swung her foot up hard into his crotch, watched him crumple to his knees gasping. Her belligerent glare scanned the crowd. "Anyone else need instant relief?" Apparently not. So she turned and walked on.

LaRoche whispered desperately in her ear. "That was incredibly stupid. We should make a point of not antagonising these people."

Okay for him - wasn't his tits and arse they were grabbing! She could feel herself beginning to tremble. "Quit bitching and get a move on. I think I'm going to be sick."

This was wrong, thought Vallande. *I am wrong.* The rules concerning transients were clearly defined - immediate return. Only the dead of the other world could enter Lonfay. The living had

no place here. As soon as he'd recognised these two initiates for what they were, he should have summoned the duty executioner, ordered them terminated on the spot.

But he hadn't. Admittedly, transients weren't an everyday occurrence. Vallande himself had only come across seven in all his years as a recorder, so no-one would expect his response to be immediate. But to take five minutes to institute a course of action....? He couldn't justify such a delay by pleading a simple lapse in concentration.

He had *wanted* them to live. Otherwise he wouldn't have offered them advice. *Advice!* Such a consideration was unheard of. The Recorder General would never understand. Worse: he wouldn't even try.

So why now? Were these two any different to the seven he'd already returned? He could think of nothing specific. Just a feeling really. There was an aura about the woman which engendered hope, revived youthful impetuosity. And time, he felt, was no longer on his side. If it ever had been. To pass up yet another opportunity, to continue ignoring intuition in favour of waiting for a perfect solution which might never present itself, that was cowardice.

After all, hadn't he been preparing for this very occurrence these twelve months past? Of course he had. He'd doctored his log to sideline the mere hint of a transient so that the information wouldn't be transmitted immediately back to Central. Then, at least, the choice was his - to re-input as fresh data, or cut and paste into his own personal epsilon memory. Once there, no-one would know it had ever existed. Easy, provided he didn't delay too long.

Which he had already. So, why the doubt? He'd decided, hadn't he? His moment of glory had arrived and all he had to do was....

His eyes widened as he watched his hand descend on the log. The fingers trembled, hovered momentarily, then dived. Tap, tap, tap. The read-out flickered, returned to normal.

He swallowed, closed his eyes, praying. There was no reassurance forthcoming, no voice in his head to tell him he'd done the right thing. Or whether it had worked. So he hopped back onto the Network and called up the status of the two new arrivals to find out.

Just numbers - an arrangement of zeros and ones interspersed with the odd space, dot, or dash. Nothing to the uneducated; a readable language to Vallande and his fellow recorders. Interpreted simply:

reborn 729581....female....22yrs....mireille

reborn 725588....male....27yrs....laroche

Reborns! Both of them. Who would know anything different?

The old man took a deep breath, felt a young man within dancing a silly jig around his fluttering stomach. Then he exhaled and the rattle in his chest brought him back to reality. The die was cast. There was no alternative now but to see it through to the end.

8

Mireille watched the monk diddy-datting on his black box. A strange thought popped into her head - was Vallande's hand-held IBM compatible? What did it mean? Where had it come from? She had no idea and dismissed the nonsense to concentrate on her immediate surroundings. The filthy, chanting mob; the lingering sunset - or was it a sunrise? - that stained everything red. Nothing blue, no yellow, nor even white. So much sameness. Apart from the green-tinged brilliance of the neuro-fence which was artificial anyway. "*At least it's complementary....*"

There it was again - a peculiar voice she was not only hearing, but could actually *feel!* And inside her, from within her head! It definitely wasn't her: she didn't think that way. It was too *male*; too bloody serious. The voice went on the defensive and Mireille found herself trying to stay neutral while Richard replayed a similar argument he'd/they'd had with Janet. Bullshit!

This was nothing to do with her: Richard was the one with the wife and the problem. Not that either of them were real - Richard was just a dream she'd had in the Void. *"You're the one who's not real!"* whined the voice in her head. *"I've got enough worries; I don't need you complicating them. Go away."*

She could have retaliated, but what was the point? She'd only be getting uptight with herself. Whatever had caused the spack-attack, it would probably fade out soon enough. And just in case he was a bit more than imagination, she thought: *"Go get fucked, Richard!"*

She must have been holding up the proceedings because she noticed the recorder shooting her what appeared to be an impatient backward glance. "What?" she demanded belligerently.

"I think he expects us to keep up," warned LaRoche.

Now, this pain-in-the-arse was real. He could almost have been Richard. She snarled at the naked man beside her as if he was in collusion with the old guy. "Why doesn't *he* try walking without shoes?" It was loud enough for the monk to hear which was exactly her intention.

LaRoche groaned. "Provoking this man isn't smart," he hissed. "I think he wants to help us."

"My feet hurt and I'm pissed off," she grumbled sulkily.

"Just suffer in silence for a while longer," LaRoche pleaded. "For both our sakes. Please."

Mireille snorted, tutted and stumbled on, her lips pinched tightly together. Then LaRoche was whispering to her again: "Where do you think we are? How did we get here? It's like a nightmare."

She couldn't help laughing. "What - you reckon you'll wake up in Beverly Hills with Julia Roberts' hand round your dick?" She straightened her face, added a slow, condescending blink. "Get real, man. Did you ever have a dream this coordinated?"

He fought silently with the logic of her argument for a few moments, finally shook his head. "I can't believe what seems to be happening."

She halted, stood on one leg and hooked up a foot to check her sole. It was filthy and bleeding. She showed it to him. "Believe it."

LaRoche didn't have to inspect his own feet to know they were a mess too. "If this isn't a dream, where are we?" He was desperate for a solution he could cradle and feel comfortable with.

"The man said Lonfay, wherever that is. At a guess: locality of Shit Creek, or somewhere like. And this is probably the best part."

Depression swept over LaRoche clouding his already grim expression. He had stopped, was gazing about, seemed to be toying with insanity as a convenient escape route. "But I don't understand. How did we get here?"

"How the fuck do I know." Mireille choked off her irritation, aware of its self-destructive potential. If she could only stay cool maybe she could cope with this weird gig. Unlike a certain pathetic excuse for a man who had all-but given up. Still, if nothing else he made *her* look good. Might pay to take him along for the ride....

She slid an arm through his, began guiding him. Obscenities poured from the crowd. She ignored them. "Listen, maybe you're right and I'm wrong. Yeah, sure I am." She hugged his arm tighter, trying to encourage him out of his depression. "In a minute all this will have gone. You'll find you've had a wet dream. Then you can sneak out of bed without waking the little missus, duck into the bathroom to wash your PJ's before she springs you. And I'll bet if you open the window and look out there'll be little piles of dog crap all over your nice front lawn. If that's what you need, it'll be there waiting for you. See if I'm right."

He was desperate, wanting to believe. "You really think so?"

She offered a reassuring smile. "Would I lie to you?"

Spectators had previously been pushing and shoving, jostling to keep pace with the reborns; at least, the new arrivals they *thought* were reborns. Now they held back, not daring to enter the clearing ahead. Vallande, however, continued on. Mireille and LaRoche hesitated at the edge of the crowd, unsure whether the intangible sanction applied to them as well as the draff.

The recorder was up ahead, flapping a sleeve at them. The voice of the mob urged them on with gibes and obscenities. Mireille spun and they jumped back. A sea of medieval faces watched and laughed. She waited expectantly - maybe Sir Anthony Hopkins in tunic and hose, complete with hunchback would come blundering towards her pleading for water. Then someone would call: "Cut!"

The thought was double-Dutch, but an associated feeling inside was clear enough - this wasn't real; in a moment sanity would return and all would be revealed. Both hopes were non-events. The faces were starting to jeer, seemingly disappointed that she hadn't offered some outrageous response to their baiting. So, she gave them the finger. They puzzled the gesture, obviously had no idea what it meant. "Dorks," she muttered, then continued to guide LaRoche clear of the stinking herd towards Vallande.

They had entered a narrow strip of sand extending between two hills a kilometre apart. Ahead was an uneven carpet of low, rusty-coloured scrub. It was all the same, right to the horizon. Boring, Richard reminded her. She quite liked it - out of principle.

There were others in the clearing, small groups of naked people each with its own recorder. "The ones from the Canal," whispered LaRoche, eyeing up the closest group without seeming to be peering.

"Reborns," Vallande clarified, then added in a conspiratorial hiss: "*Genuine* reborns. They will know instinctively what to do." He studied his two charges in turn. Were it possible for a shadow to express dismay, the one beneath Vallande's hood did just that. "But you don't, do you?"

LaRoche stared dumbly. Mireille said: "We learn fast. Just tell us."

"I only wish there were time." The recorder stepped closer, lowered his voice. The scent of aromatic herbs drifted from the cowl as he spoke. "Past this point you are on your own. Be guided by instinct. Do what you must to survive. There are no laws in the Deadlands except those *you* choose to make."

Mireille dug LaRoche gently in the ribs. "Sounds neat, huh?"

"That's hardly the word I would use," said Vallande flatly. "This is no game, Mireille. Nor a dream, as you would have your companion believe." He dipped his hood at the man. "I'm afraid she was humouring you, LaRoche."

The truth was the kind LaRoche didn't want to hear. He glared at Mireille as he pulled his arm from hers. "You promised me! Just a dream, you said!"

Mireille shrugged. "Sue me." She spoke to Vallande: "What gives now?"

The hood rose a little, paused while Vallande translated her alien phraseology. "I assume you mean what happens?" His body-language drew attention to the outlying scrub; and something more particular and a little closer. "You see those weapons?" There were a number of curved swords like wide-bladed scimitars sticking up out of the sand. "Sabrettes," explained the recorder.

Mireille released LaRoche's arm, wandered over to take a look. "Be warned, Mireille," said Vallande hastily as he bustled after her. "To take up the sabrette is a sign that you accept the Commission."

Too late. She had already stooped, had gripped a sword by its hilt and was plucking it from the sand. The draff roared. Mireille's eyes lit up. She turned to face the mob, brandished the sabrette aloft. The spectators went wild. "Hot shit! What did I do?"

"You took up the sabrette, Mireille." Vallande still spoke quietly, but a hint of pride had crept into his tone. "You have accepted the Commission and should now pledge to respect The Order and preserve The Balance."

Hell, maybe things weren't so bad. This bit seemed cool. The crowd revved her on and she loved it. "Yeah, right on. I do, I do." She held the sabrette higher, punched the air with her other fist. "Woo-hoo!" The draff responded with hysteria. "Hey, is this cruel, or what!" She rushed back to LaRoche's side. "Come on, man. Join the party. Everyone should be a hero sometime."

Vallande stepped closer and waited. "It is your choice, LaRoche. Take up the sabrette or become one of the draff." The recorder waved a contemptuous arm at the crowd.

The naked man's thoughts were a mess. He didn't know what to believe any more. "Is there no alternative, no way out of this God-forsaken place?"

"Only in death. How soon you embrace it depends on you."

LaRoche remained silent. Mireille caught his arm, dragged him towards the arrangement of swords. "Take a punt, man. What have you got to lose?"

"I__I d-don't know." He bent limply, grasped a hilt and pulled out a sword. He'd taken very little notice of them before. Now, a particular feature caught his attention - a pair of wicked-looking spikes protruding from the reinforced back of the blade. He touched a finger to one. The point stabbed the skin. LaRoche snatched his hand away quickly and watched a globule of blood form.

Vallande raised his voice so that he could be heard above the roars of the draff. "Do you, LaRoche, swear to respect The Order and preserve The Balance?"

The finger was still bleeding. LaRoche continued to stare at it in horror. Mireille grasped his wrist, helped him raise the sword above his head. "He does," she said.

Vallande listened to the draff. He couldn't remember them ever being this noisy. It was as if they shared his apprehension, his childish excitement at doing something totally unconventional, even dangerous. Had they known of his complicity, they might have cheered *him*. And wouldn't that have raised the Recorder General's hackles!

Still, despite the fact that they were little more than cattle, the draff always appreciated something out of the ordinary. The woman was certainly that. Not since Isabella was reborn had there been the like. Such spirit, such charisma. It warmed his heart to know that attributes of this magnitude could surface again bringing hope to the forlorn of these dread times. Provided she could first survive the Deadlands. He didn't doubt she could. On her own, anyway. But dragging LaRoche with her....?

Whatever transpired was meant to be, he decided. Mireille's life, LaRoche's. *His*. All three had been cast into the crucible. Now it was up to a power beyond human understanding to make what it would of them. He waved an arm at the scrubland. "Now you must salute the Tree."

Mireille scanned the countryside. "Yeah, great. Which one?"

They couldn't see the Tree! Was this a warning? Were they less than special? Less even than ordinary? Vallande dispelled the doubt, recovered quickly. He had already tested normality, trusted it to no avail. Time to put his faith in the abnormal.

He cleared his throat, straightened "Face outward and raise your sabrettes, then walk past the.... just walk," he corrected.

The woman turned. The man had lapsed into some kind of coma. Vallande stepped up to Mireille. "Watch out for him, Mireille. His life is in your hands now."

"No sweat, Pops."

"And be prepared to defend yourselves immediately you step through," said the recorder almost as an afterthought. "The scavengers will be waiting."

"Scavengers....?" Mireille's new-found euphoria suddenly fizzed out. She lowered the sabrette, eyed it suspiciously. "Let me recap where you're coming from. These swords - they're not just symbolic, are they? I mean, this sounds like the real thing. You know - heavy aggro."

Vallande nodded. "The scavengers will try to kill you. After them there will be others."

"Oh, hey.... just.... time out, here. Where'd all this talk of killing spring from? I thought we had some kind of deal!" Mireille was fidgeting around on the spot feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

"We agreed we'd be into this respect-and-preserve-the-environment shit. But, I mean, like I thought we were talking re-cycling cans and bottles and newspapers and, you know, public-nuisance stuff like streaking the Super Bowl! Hell, we even came dressed for it."

"I don't understand your words," said the recorder solemnly, "Only your reluctance towards violence. I, myself, am basically a man of peace. Unfortunately, this is Lonfay. I am here and wear the habit. You are here and have taken up the sabrette. Wisely or not, we have both chosen our fates."

"I refuse to kill anyone," stated LaRoche woodenly.

"Then you will *be* killed," Vallande added with finality.

Something snapped in LaRoche and raw emotion boiled up through the self-pity. "Damn it, I will not kill!" He threw his sabrette down at the recorder's feet. An immediate hush fell over the draff.

"Pick it up!" hissed a stunned Vallande. LaRoche remained stiff, defiant. "For pity's sake, LaRoche! The draff!"

Mireille turned, saw the anger in the grimy faces, the animal slaving as the mob began to edge beyond the invisible barrier which had held them at bay. She scooped up LaRoche's sabrette, thrust it at him. He took it, but only because he wasn't thinking.

"Which way, man?" Mireille's voice was a hoarse rasp. Vallande pointed at the bushland. She extended him the briefest of nods. "We're outta here." She snatched at LaRoche's arm. Then she was trotting, dragging the bewildered man along behind her.

Vallande watched them stumbling towards the border. As she passed the sabrettes still sticking out of the sand, Mireille released the man to gather another into her left hand. Vallande felt a tug of anguish inside, was about to protest - highly irregular: a reborn was entitled to a single weapon only. Then he relaxed, remembering that Mireille wasn't a reborn. Neither of them were. So the rules didn't really apply.

As the two transients disappeared before his eyes, he realised he hadn't wished them luck. Remiss of him. Unpardonable under the circumstances, considering he had adopted the role of unofficial - very unofficial - guardian. But, then again, good fortune wasn't a thing one could bequeath to another. Not here. In Lonfay each man made his own and each woman needed twice as much as a man. As to how much was enough for Mireille and LaRoche, only God knew the answer.

CHAPTER TWO

1

Time dragged slowly in casualty. For the patients in agony who thought they'd been forgotten. For those accompanying them who were sure of it. Especially for the medical staff not yet half-way through a double-shift who were doing their best and were convinced everyone else reckoned it wasn't good enough.

For Doctor Glen Holder who had already used up his second wind and was working on his third, time was no longer an issue. The elliptical orbit he followed had become a rut worn

between cubicles five and nine. His sense of perspective had gone. Sometimes he wasn't sure which patient he was treating, the symptoms were so similar.

Just moments after the girl had been resuscitated, Holder was called away again: now the man, Olsen, had gone into cardiac arrest. And who should have been passing his cubicle at the time? None other than Paulo Agostini! Deja-vu had never been this cruel before.

A divine conspiracy couldn't be ruled out. Maybe he'd been a bad lad in a former life, or walked on someone's grave. If Nurse O'Brien suddenly burst in and announced she'd missed her period he'd know his run of bad luck wasn't mere coincidence. When both patients went into convulsions within minutes of one another, he had to let his paranoia run riot because he was too busy catapulting between cubicles to argue logic.

It was during a break - unsweetened decaf and a blueberry Danish with a million calories - that he tried dropping a little closer to Earth. Among his reflections on this pig-of-a-day were three words which both the man and the girl had spoken. Void - they'd kept on about "the void". And the other words were as baffling: "nova" and something that sounded like "longfay". They'd said more, but it was either inaudible or garbage. These three words, however, had seemed clear enough and had been repeated too frequently to be misheard. As to meanings, they were as unknown to Holder as he had been led to believe the patients were to one another. Apart from being victims in the same accident, they apparently had nothing in common, were total strangers.

Before he could resolve the puzzle, Holder was back in the thick of it. Olsen had 'developed' a lesion. That was the message, anyway. He stormed out of the rec room, cursing under his breath. Sheer carelessness, he was thinking. Patients didn't *develop* lesions: someone inflicted them. And that someone's head was going to roll. As well as his, no doubt, when Agostini got to find out.

The problem was a fresh wound on the man's upper arm, a deep cut which had bled all over the sheet. In a low growl that couldn't be heard beyond the screens, Holder ripped shit out of the male nurse on duty at the time. Rightly so, he thought: only someone who came down in the last shower would believe the cut had *'just appeared'*.

It wasn't until he was examining the wound and actually witnessed a graze forming on Olsen's elbow before his very eyes that he began to re-evaluate. He jerked back with a start and muttered: "Jesus!" After that his mind went temporarily off-line. Like it always did at the sight of a naked Nurse O'Brien advancing on him in his one-room dog kennel. Perhaps the cramped conditions tended to accentuate their enormity, but, apart from Mary's size eighteen breasts, this incredible appearing graze was the only other miracle he'd seen.

As the second wonder of his world, however, being able to watch the skin kind-of disappearing from Olsen's elbow and blood rising through the subcutaneous tissue, was far less appealing than having to fight for breath with his face buried between a pair of gorgeous knockers. One thing was for sure - he didn't fancy having to explain either to anyone. Least of all, a board of sceptical Agostinis.

"Very strange," said Jackovitz, the male nurse, condescendingly. He was due an apology which he was unlikely to get, so he proceeded to rub it in: "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes...."

White noise filled Holder's head: the deafening roar of blood pounding in his ears. A female voice was calling to him beyond the cacophony. The faint words eventually crept through: "Doctor Holder! Quickly!"

Holder's brow was knit in a tight painful frown. "What now?" He gazed in the direction of the voice, noticed a head poking around the curtain, couldn't make the face.

"Cubicle five." Sister Emery was breathless and concerned.

"What about it?" Holder didn't need this. Surely someone else could handle it? Where was Agostini when he was actually needed?

"I can't explain." Emery was growing pedantic. "You should see for yourself."

A huge lump rose up and lodged itself in Holder's throat. No sounds would pass.

"I can attend to Mr Olsen for you if you wish, Doctor." Jackovitz was already pulling on a pair of surgical gloves. The smile had mutated to a leer. "Nurse Calloway can assist."

Holder went blank. Then he nodded and pushed his way out of cubicle nine to stumble after the Sister in a daze.

There was blood on the pillow-case of cubicle five also. This, from a slash across the girl's cheek. And at the very instant Holder entered, a red stain spread through the sheet where it dipped between the patient's thighs.

He frowned at Sister Emery. "What the hell is happening here?"

The Sister was staring at the sheet. She turned wearing a dumb look and merely blinked at the Doctor.

2

Scavengers Vallande had called them. They ran upright on two legs, waved two arms. All brandished weapons - clubs, sticks, spears, swords. But the screams and roars they emitted were more bestial than human. Faces were hard to see because of the dirt and hair. Only the eyes shone - fires in the depths of Hades.

Mireille's breath had caught in her throat. The automatic reaction was to turn and run back the way they'd come. Bad move: there was nothing but desolation behind. No sign of the other initiates, nor the old guy. Not even the noisy obnoxious druff. All gone. It had taken only a quick glance to confirm that freedom of choice was an illusion like any other in this nightmarish world of Lonfay.

She managed to gasp out: "Over there!" LaRoche was stumbling hesitantly, seemed to be in a trance. She dragged him towards a strange outcrop of rocks, crystalline in formation. What interested her more than mere composition was the sheer face and height - protection for their backs, at least. "For Christ's sake!" Her mouth was bone dry, dusty. She spat. "Wake up, or we're dead!"

The leading scavenger was almost on them. More were right behind him. Too many for them to handle, even if LaRoche got his act into gear. Fear gripped her and she panicked, rushed for the mass of rags and hair, slashing wildly with both sabrettes, her mouth stretched wide, overflowing with obscenities.

The startled individual went down screaming, one arm completely severed at the elbow, the other hanging off at the shoulder. Mireille gasped in amazement at what she'd done. Whack, whack, take that, Mac! Jesus! Then more were coming and regrets had to be put on hold.

A spear-point glanced off her arm, sliced through the flesh in passing. She was too busy hacking to feel much. "LaRoche!" she yelled. A club missed her body by inches. "Help me!"

LaRoche's eyes were unmoving. Just the lids were blinking. He hadn't drawn breath for over thirty seconds, couldn't remember how. All he knew was that he was having the worst nightmare of his life and was positive he was going to die in it.

Searing pain burned his cheek. He gasped, slapped a hand to it, examined the palm. Blood! His blood! Then his back was against a hard surface. Shuffling sideways next, he was feeling his way with his bare feet as he fended off an attacker with random slashes of his sabrette.

Mireille was yelling, barbaric and frenzied; butchering anything that moved. Her own momentum hurled her against the rockface. She slid down it raking skin from an elbow. A sudden movement and a flash invaded the periphery of her vision. She jerked upright, flung herself in the opposite direction. Sparks flew as an axe-head ricocheted off the rock a whisker from her shoulder. A shower of flying chips stung her cheek. Her teeth were gritted, grinning. Hissing.

LaRoche couldn't identify with the expression. Surely she couldn't be enjoying this? He wasn't, just felt sick. The weight of the heavy weapon was dragging his arm lower with each swing and he knew he didn't have much more to give. A shadow crowded him. He cowered instinctively, put up the sabrette to shield himself as the lumbering savage tripped and sprawled. They fell, LaRoche underneath.

Gagging, struggling, fighting for room to move, air to breathe beneath a foul-smelling bundle of filthy rags and disease-ridden flesh. No response. His attacker was motionless like a carcass of rotten meat. LaRoche struggled, wormed his way free, rolling the scavenger onto his back in the process. The eyes were wild and staring, the mouth agape, a trickle of blood staining the lips before disappearing into a tangle of matted facial hair. LaRoche's sabrette lay across him, the back-spikes buried in his chest.

As he struggled to his feet, LaRoche noticed a wound of his own on his inner thigh. It fed a river of blood snaking its way down his leg. He couldn't feel a thing: too much mental anguish to be aware of physical pain. All he knew was that he wanted to run, to be free of the killing, the prospect of death, this entire bizarre fantasy. But even when he blinked hard and sincerely, it kept on coming.

His hands grasped something - a pole, he thought. The attacking scavenger was holding it across his chest, trying to shove it up against his throat and he was starting to choke. Tightening his grip, he pushed back, could feel a softness beneath the rags of the creature's clothing. A woman's breasts? He stared into the face. It was dirt-encrusted, the black hair matted and crawling, breath fetid, features a blur. But he had no doubt it was female.

The realisation shocked him. He didn't know why he'd assumed the attacking scavengers were all male. To be otherwise didn't seem right, put him at a disadvantage. Fighting a woman seemed wrong somehow. Until he inhaled deeply and found he could smell her. Not just her breath, but her body, everything! Then the bile rose in his throat again and revulsion overcame chivalry. He thrust the putrid individual away, held onto the pole, discovered that he had full control of it.

She was at his feet, snarling and spitting. He swung at the face with one end of the pole, only noticed it had a sharp point when the female's mouth became a red slash and gushed blood.

Stepping over her, he ran at a concentration of scavengers, took to jabbing and swinging the spear. He was a man at war with himself, blind to the suffering he was inflicting, seeing his victims merely as abstract symbols of an unbearable internal pain which had to be defeated at all costs. To hell with principles!

By then, Mireille's adversaries were backing off. She'd been shuffling along the cliff face, concerned only for the frontal attack, had reached the end of the crystal outcrop without realising. Aware she was falling, she jerked through a hasty backward roll and was on her feet ready to defend. Two seconds gone, maybe three.

Time enough. Too long, really. But the attack never came. Scavengers were there alright - threatening, yelling, brandishing weapons - but for some reason they appeared reluctant to advance into the narrow canyon in which she found herself. She snarled at them, swung a sabrette. They lurched back.

Then she remembered LaRoche. Oh, Jesus! He was out there on his own! She charged, slashing with first one sabrette then the other. A fearsome display, no doubt, which had more of an effect than was reasonable to expect. The scavengers at the mouth of the canyon, however, were suitably impressed. They turned tail and ran. The unexplained show of panic spread and Mireille found herself outside still slashing and yelling, but no enemy even close.

LaRoche was a few metres along the rockface battling a crowd of ragged individuals. For someone who abhorred violence, he was giving a better than average impersonation of a man born to kill. His attackers knew it. They were having to stumble over and around his victims

while dodging the spear he swung, jabbed and slashed in such a crazed random flurry that it was impossible to predict where it would strike next.

Mireille jogged to him, hacked at the scavengers on the fringe and forced her way into his killing ground. He swung at her in passing. No animosity, nothing personal: she was simply another target. "It's me!" she screeched, had to jump back as he went for her again. She spun, drove a spike up under the chin of one savage, spitting tongue, palate and brain. With the other sabrette she took off a head and watched a fountain of blood spurt high in the air from between the shoulders. "LaRoche, you fucking maniac! Remember me - Mireille? I'm on *your* side!"

LaRoche gave her a glance. Not a smile, nor a grimace. Just a reproachful, what-kept-you? look. She swung her arm over, a windmill-action because LaRoche had moved close, was cramping her. Contact jarred her wrist as the blade cleft a skull and stopped at the bridge of the scavenger's nose. At the same time another fell, LaRoche's spear buried in his gut. The scavengers took it as a sign which declared their offensive to be all-but lost. The remaining rabble turned on its heels and dashed for the safety of the scrub.

LaRoche didn't appear to notice the retreat. He blundered on, swinging and jabbing with the spear, grunts and snarls issuing from between trembling lips. Mireille caught his arm. He shrugged it off. "It's over, LaRoche." More jabbing, slashing, muttering. "LaRoche, they've gone. We've won."

He stuttered to a halt, frowned deeply. "Won?" Turning slowly, he surveyed the carnage. Corpses littered the ground. A severed hand clutched the shaft of a club. A head stared at the body to which it had once been attached. Movement, moaning: a couple of the scavengers were still alive, blood draining from wounds into dark, sandy pools beside them. Before she could stop him, LaRoche strode to them, stabbed each in turn through the heart with the spear.

When Mireille reached him he was staring down, trembling all over, the spear dangling loosely from a hand at his side. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words never came. Just a stream of vomit.

3

LaRoche was squatting at the mouth of the crystal canyon. Mireille was off somewhere. Foraging, she'd said. She seemed to have been gone for ages and he wished she'd hurry up. There was no sign of scavengers, not yet, but it was too much to ask that the war had been won in the first skirmish. When they did come again, he wasn't sure he could repeat his earlier performance.

Not that courage was failing: he'd never had it to start with. Just some irrepressible urge to survive. It had welled up inside accompanied by a voice, sometimes very clear; at others, just a whisper. Familiar, like a ghost from a past, that had retreated behind a thick fog. It kept reminding him of his duty, especially to himself. He had to live, it said, because if he died, so would the future and he had no right to be that selfish. So, he'd fought, mainly to stay alive, figuring he could sort out the airy-fairy ulterior motives later.

While Mireille had been gone, he'd tried, but, although the voice hadn't entirely deserted him, it had become even more distant and oblique. It seemed to be staggering through his subconscious like a drunk, bumping into things, stimulating responses he'd never instituted. One time, he'd felt a sudden urge to make love and Mireille's image had popped into his head. The thought had embarrassed him. The voice said: "*What are you - some kind of fag?*" His conscience, maybe? He'd have liked to think so, but he had a feeling it was more than that - like there was another person in his head. What was wrong with him? Was he going mad?

Hugging his knees to his chest, he tried thinking of something pleasant, but his memories only related to this place and the scavengers; nothing before. And all he really knew about himself

was his name, one he'd thought up in a moment of panic - a meaningless label on an empty box.

Mireille made it back. By this time, a light ground mist had rolled in to carpet the area. Definitely spooky. LaRoche was growing up out of it like a fungus, hunched over and dozing. Just as well scavengers were apparently stupid. She threw down the bundle she was carrying, exploding the mist and frightened the shit out of him. He began scrambling around for his weapon in panic. Then he saw who it was and tried to snarl resentfully. "You took your time."

"I stopped for a pee, alright?" She lobbed a swollen water-bag none-too-gently on his lap. "Tastes like puke, so don't drink too much at once."

He was leaning over, rummaging through the pile of material. "Is this the best you could do?" He held up a blood-stained shirt. "My God! You've been robbing the dead!"

"What was I supposed to do? K-Mart was shut."

"But they're filthy!"

"Jesus Christ! We needed clothes, I got us clothes." She scanned the area. "Hurry up and get dressed. I'll stand watch."

LaRoche continued picking through the garments, sneering in disgust. He flinched, slapped at his arm, brought the hand in front of him to examine the creature pinched between finger and thumb. "Fleas! These rags are alive with them!"

"For Christ's sake!" She snatched a leather coat from the top of the pile, began fumbling her way into it. Then dragged on a pair of woollen trousers and hide boots. All had seen better days, none of them the inside of a laundromat. "There!" She stooped, collected up her weapons, glared at him. "If I can put up with it, so can you."

"It's unhealthy," LaRoche continued. "We could catch something."

"Like what? AIDS? Clap?" She was aware of tickling in her pubic region. Something crawling through the hairs. *Crabs?* "Don't be such a wimp." The itching increased - more of the little sods - but there was no way she was going to let him see her scratching. She shuffled a few paces and turned her back. "Get your skates on. I want out of here before those bastards come back."

She hoped she sounded confident, in total control. At least LaRoche seemed to think so. It was as well he couldn't see past the aggressive, hard-nosed exterior. Beneath the facade she was having problems.

It was the voice in her head: bloody Richard; too persistent to simply write him off as imagination. So, what was he? Her alter ego, she guessed. Did LaRoche have one? At the moment he was probably too screwed up to even notice.

Richard had been doing his best to dump her in the same funny-farm. He said he was in hospital, at death's door, in case she was interested. The least she could do was show a little consideration and stop trying to get herself killed. Didn't she realise she was part of him? What happened to her directly affected his wellbeing! And another thing - aside from any sense of responsibility she ought to feel for him, there was the moral aspect. Killing was wrong. Didn't she know that? After what she'd done, didn't she feel the slightest bit dirty?

"Screw you," she moaned under her breath. Why should she feel dirty? She'd actually enjoyed it! The fear, the danger, the victory. *And* the killing. Especially that. Able to spare a life, or snuff it out with a single blow - that was the power civilisation had stolen from the majority of the human race. For a few precious minutes there, she'd taken some of it back. Anyway, what had he expected her to do - just lay down and die?

He seemed to go quiet. Didn't have an answer to that one, she supposed. She used the cease-fire to check out LaRoche. He was easing himself into a pair of breeches, attempting to keep the filthy material away from that cut on his leg. His concern annoyed her. "For Christ's sake! Are you going to take all day?"

LaRoche didn't look at her. "I need medical attention. This is a very deep cut."

"What do you want, a sympathy card? Call 911."

"There's no need to be facetious."

"There's every need, you dumb prick. Look, either put the bloody pants on or leave them off. I don't give a fuck. But if you're not ready in thirty seconds I'm leaving without you!"

The amazing power of an ultimatum. In two minutes LaRoche was dressed and they were padding cautiously across the open area towards the edge of the clearing. As they approached a gap in the surrounding vegetation Mireille tensed to be ready for an ambush. LaRoche was looking back at the rocks, wishing he'd never left them.

There was no attack. No sign of life. The narrow track wound off into the countryside and what they could see of it was deserted. She gazed into the distance - sparse, low-lying scrub as far as the eye could see. Petrified, by the looks of it. "Welcome to the Deadlands, campers."

LaRoche stared vacantly. Dismally. "Why are you so chipper?"

"Chipper!" she jeered. "What kind of a word is that? You a dictionary in your former life, were you?" She laughed.

"I don't know what I was," he mumbled sulkily, "I only know I don't like surprises and this place seems to be full of them. I have to assume you don't share my opinion because you're obviously enjoying yourself."

She was, wasn't she? Like a devotee of the supernatural who'd just discovered there really was a twilight zone. Like she'd stepped into it and been immediately rejuvenated. "Bet your balls I am! Jesus, LaRoche, it's not that bad. Chill out. Go with the flow."

"Why? So that I can turn into a savage like you?"

What annoyed her more than his complaining was the fact that he was right. She couldn't believe she'd let her self-control slip that far. "I'm trying to stay alive, just like you." She turned back, wounded and resentful. "I seem to recall you weren't exactly the pacifist back there, so don't start lecturing me on morals. We're only doing what the old guy said. No rules, remember?"

LaRoche was gazing despondently. "Except those we make ourselves." He frowned, thought deeply for a moment, then shook his head.

"What?"

He blinked, looked vaguely at Mireille as if he expected to find the answers on her face. But there was only impatience and condescension. "You wouldn't understand."

She let out a defeated sigh. "I'm sorry I even tried. You're a lost cause, LaRoche. Do what you fucking like." She spun on her heel and began stomping off, hesitating after a few paces to look reproachfully over her shoulder. LaRoche was weird. He was turning on the spot, gazing about as if this was all totally new and he'd just arrived. Completing the 360, he saw her and it confused him. Mireille took it for embarrassment because she'd caught him behaving like a wally. She gave up on him and started walking again.

He was suddenly running after her. "Don't go! I've just had a...." He paused to frown. "I've seen something amazing!"

He seemed genuine, but how could she tell? Maybe he was simply trying to con his way back into favour again. "I'm listening. Make it good."

That stumped him. "I-I can't remember.... For a moment it was so clear, the reason for all this, for me...." He was suddenly filled with inexplicable wonder and was looking up into the sky, saying: "Yes! It's happening! I can feel it!"

Mireille wasn't the least impressed. "I'm really glad for you. Now, are you coming, or not?"

His eyes closed and he drank in the air slowly. Bliss. She thought maybe he'd died on his feet. He didn't move, wasn't breathing as far as she could tell. A hefty slap across the face was what he needed. Instead, she reached out and caught hold of his arm.

Then she was wishing she hadn't!

4

"I'm losing her again!" Holder couldn't believe how his patient's vital signs had taken a sudden dive. No warning. Nothing to indicate a complication. It was just as if she'd decided to slip away and die. No reason except maybe to be plain bloody-minded. Unless it was the drug abuse. She was a user, that was obvious. But they'd allowed for that. Hadn't they?

Too late to worry about cause now. He took the paddles from the nurse, waited for her to squirt gel on, then rubbed them together. Another second and he was stooping towards the still body on the cot. "Clear!"

5

Whump!! Sudden impact. And Mireille was flying backwards in time at incredible speed. Then she'd stopped and it was like a dream, because what she could see was alien - she was on a bed in a room with curtains for walls. And her head was thumping fit to burst. Bringing up a hand to cradle it, she felt a stab of pain from her wrist and looked. A clear tube extended from beneath a square of tape stuck to an arm that wasn't hers - a man's arm! A female voice was saying something, but before she could interpret the words, she was flying through the Void again.

More words, this time deeper - a man's voice. And a shadow looming above her, a silhouette against a pink light. The voice cursed her and she recognised it. "LaRoche?"

He stood over her, fuming. "You had to interfere, didn't you?"

"What happened?"

"You touched me, damn it! Just when I was about to receive it!" One fist was clenched in anger, the other gripping the hilt of the sabrette tightly. He turned on his heel, strutted a few paces, then stomped back. "I could kill you, Mireille. I honestly could."

She was utterly confused. "I don't understand."

LaRoche was bemoaning his fate to no-one in particular. "I felt it coming. I know it would have been wonderful. It was mine." He glared down at her. "And *you* took it away!" He kicked the dirt like a spoilt child. Then clenched his teeth and swung wildly with the sabrette, taking off the top of a stunted tree.

Mireille struggled to her feet, looked around for her own weapons. Not that she really expected to have to defend herself, but he seemed pretty close to his limit of being simply pissed off. A glint of polished metal caught her eye and she went for it. But as she stooped, LaRoche's boot appeared and trod the blade into the sand. "Leave it!"

She backed up a metre. "This is bullshit, LaRoche! I'm not your enemy. I didn't do anything to you. Whatever it is you think you lost, I haven't got it. Search me." She spread arms from her sides and waited.

The anger regressed to pained acceptance: he was the only sane man in an insane world. With a sad shake of the head, he turned and began walking off into the bush.

As she hunted in the scrub for her other sabrette, Mireille thought seriously about leaving LaRoche to his own devices, but she felt she ought to tag along. She told herself it was about looking out for him like she'd promised the old recorder, but that was an excuse. She needed to feel close to another human being and he was all she had. Like there was someone else once - a man, she thought, one she'd known intimately. But he'd gone and left a terrible emptiness. What really concerned her was that she couldn't remember anything about him. Or anything before just now.

She began trooping after LaRoche, giving him space. What had happened back there? He must have hit her. It was the only explanation that made sense. But why? According to him he was having an aberration and she'd interrupted it. Maybe next time he should hang up a sign.

He did. And she was so pre-occupied with her own thoughts that she almost missed it. LaRoche, however, was on the ball and ready for her. He was standing astride, his sabrette raised ready to strike. And he had that crazed look of expectation and excitement again. "Don't come any closer," he rasped, then closed his eyes and seemed to be fighting for breath. "If you try to touch me this time, I'll kill you! I won't be robbed again....!"

6

Holder stared from his patient to the ECG willing one of them to show a response. Damn it! What was wrong? She'd come back before. Why was now any different? Holder knew without really having to ask: last time Agostini had performed the resuscitation. How come God always seemed to favour arseholes?

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a second. Praying, maybe? Wouldn't hurt. Nothing else seemed to be going right for him. He stooped over Karen, brought the paddles in. "Clear!"

7

LaRoche gasped, straightened with a jerk. His back arched. He bucked, effected a spastic pirouette. Then he was jack-knifing, pitching into the scrub. He lay where he had fallen. Face down. Unmoving.

Mireille hesitated briefly, then was advancing on him cautiously. He looked dead. She nudged his boot with her own. What was she afraid of? They were soul-mates, right? A minute ago she would have laughed at the notion. Kneeling, she reached out to place fingers against his neck, feeling for something - she wasn't sure what. There was a slight throbbing like a bug trying to get out. Without knowing why, she took it as a sign that LaRoche was alive.

She tried to turn him over. He was dead weight and just flopped back into the sand. The second time he was almost over when the ground beneath her started to give way. Like subsidence, quicksand. Suddenly, the bottom was dropping out of the world.

She recalled crying out, falling, grabbing a handful of crumbling soil in passing. Then something hit her. Or she hit something and time seemed to stop.

8

It was dark, pitch black. Yet she could see. Weird - like a reverse Void.

Nothing can exist without its opposite.

She could feel something too. No place in particular. Just around, everywhere. An ambient nervous sensation more than anything. Like.... the tingle of an approaching orgasm! She felt warm within it. All-over warm. Inside-warm. And she felt weightless as if she was floating.

She wasn't, though. She was sitting on the ground. Or at least something that supported her weight. Something soft. It seemed to move beneath her, rippling sensually. She giggled. The sound left her mouth, went nowhere, was stunned in mid-flight.

Now she knew how it was to be deaf. Just as well she hadn't lost her other senses. She could see, sort-of. And taste - the flavour of rancid fat. She could also feel more acutely than ever before. Her nerve-endings were alive with sensations, growing hungry for more.

The clothes were a hindrance, so she began to strip, revelled in the excitement as the pungent, humid air found her naked flesh and caressed it. Wow! Was this slick, or what?

Then she seemed to be drifting. Forward, back; within time and without. A neat experience. She was young, and everything was new, untried. Yet her memories were those of countless seasons. The fresh chill of early-morning dew sprinkled her feet as she ran through fields of gold stretching to eternity. There she loved, laughed, belonged. Where or when was a mystery. Her own special place, though. Had been once, perhaps? Or would be one day soon.

"Where am I? What am I doing here?" she whispered. The intangible ambience devoured her voice, sighed in answer to it. "Am I dead, or what?"

"So many questions." Another voice! "So little time."

Thoughts should have been confused under the circumstances, yet were as clear as those halcyon days she knew so well. "LaRoche." No surprise. She'd been expecting him, took his outstretched hands. "Is this why we came to Lonfay - for this moment alone?"

LaRoche crooned softly: "And more. Whatever is meant for us, we will do."

She moved into his arms, pressed herself against him, felt the charge as their bodies moulded together. "Yes," she hissed. "Destiny shouldn't be ignored."

His lips enveloped hers, kissed gently, broke away. "Neither will it be."

The strength of his hands was sliding down her back, over her buttocks. She tensed. He gripped her thighs and lifted her. Curling her legs behind him, she tipped sideways slightly, reached down and felt beneath her to position him. He lowered her gently, gently until she had taken him completely.

Then he began to raise and lower her. She held him close, kissed him, murmured to him. And, needing to be a part of this wonderful act, she rode his hips with her thighs. Each time she tensed, he sighed. Each time she relaxed, he thrust deeper.

Her head was starting to swim. Ecstasy spiralled inside her. She hugged him closer, kissed more passionately, rode him harder. And he thrust deeper. Faster.

Soon they were beyond control. Senses took over, a million years of evolution too strong to resist. Panting, squeezing, moaning, thrusting, crying out. Almost.... almost....

They climaxed in a sudden surge of emotion, held each other tightly, afraid to let go. Not wanting to. Never.

Then they were coming down, the involuntary spasms decreasing in intensity. That magical tingle was fading, but there. She continued to work her muscles around him, caressing him hungrily, hoping that maybe he might....? But that was being greedy, selfish. It was too soon for him. She knew it was because she'd felt the same. When she'd been a man....?

He started to lift her. She clamped herself tight, wouldn't release him. "Just a moment longer. A few more seconds, please." He relaxed. She relaxed. "Thank you," she whispered.

They were in a tunnel, or a long narrow cave.

Presumably the ground had swallowed them up and they had fallen into it. It was also logical that if they climbed through the hole in the roof, always assuming they could find both or either,

they could continue their journey through the Deadlands. The prospect was uninviting compared to the alternative. When a situation was close to idyllic, why change it?

Mireille was content to proceed at a leisurely pace, exploring their strange new subterranean environment, stopping frequently to satisfy a growing sexual appetite; unaware that LaRoche's needs were slightly more complex.

He kissed her lips gently, drew away from her and smiled. "Haven't you ever wished for adventure? We're a great team, Mireille. Mine is the vision and you have the skills to make it happen."

"Why do we need a vision?" Her eyes had become used to the dim light now and she was able to study his expression. He was a small boy effervescing with excitement. It wasn't easy for her to share his enthusiasm. "Isn't just being together enough for you?"

He became moody, but with intent, probably soliciting for sympathy. "Yes, everything I've ever dreamed of, but...." He hesitated merely for effect, had already decided what came next. "I.... we were sent here for a purpose. We have a duty to follow our destiny."

His thoughts were off somewhere else. She could sense it. Not casually floating either: they were flying, leaping, racing. Without being told, she knew he was back in the Deadlands, the place he had hated and couldn't wait to get back to. "There's no future for us out there, LaRoche. We'll die. You know we will."

He became sullen. "At least we'll be doing something, not just wandering aimlessly the way we are." He shook off the maudlin thoughts. "Anyway, we're not going to die. I know we aren't." He was climbing to his feet, then starting off down the tunnel. "Come on."

She hurried to catch up. "Where are we going?"

"Who knows? Out of these caves for a start." He paused, extended a hand towards her. She came to him, reluctantly at first. He knew she needed reassurance, so he wrapped his arms around her and held her to him. She was trembling. He squeezed her gently. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

She wished. But that didn't make it true. Maybe she was expecting too much for life to be predictable, comfortable. It had been. For a brief moment.

When they finally parted, it was too soon for Mireille. LaRoche, however, was itching to begin his journey of adventure and discovery. He watched her eyes. "Are you alright now?"

She looked away and nodded, lips pursed. "Mmm. Couldn't be better." She omitted to add that she didn't expect it to last.

If they weren't sure how far they'd walked in the tunnels, a desiccated corpse disinterred in the process made it pretty clear it wasn't far enough. They had surfaced somewhere in the Deadlands. And as a bonus, they'd returned near a large band of smelly scavengers. Twenty or more of the filthy, unkempt mongrels were in a clearing, relaxing, talking, eating. The closest, a small group - three men and two women - were engaged in a bawdy wrestling match. None, apparently, were expecting trouble.

Mireille and LaRoche scrambled out of the hole as quietly as possible and watched from behind a clump of bushes. She felt nauseous. Her head was throbbing fit to burst. It had to be the air which was so fresh in comparison to that in the caves that it made her eyes water. LaRoche didn't seem to notice. He was deep in thought, studying the scavengers. She never guessed he'd do anything but look - unarmed and outnumbered, the only sensible option was to back off and hope they weren't spotted.

When he started rising she tried to catch hold of him, but he shrugged her off. Then he was walking, spreading his hands like some evangelist embracing the masses! If nothing else, it

was a diversion. The scavengers didn't know what to make of it. Their indecision provided an extra moment or two of grace and Mireille grabbed it with both hands. Springing to her feet, she rushed for the pile of weapons.

Afterwards, she had vague recollections of screaming, the clash of steel, and blood. A great deal more, it seemed, than the first time. Apart from that, the confrontation might have been a dream, were it not for the spoils - new weapons and "fresh" clothes stripped from the corpses.

She watched LaRoche selecting his wardrobe and shivered. He'd pitched in eventually - didn't have a lot of choice - but it was the way he'd fought. Fearless, cold and vengeful, as if everyone was to blame for him having a bad day. Especially Mireille. He'd glared at her occasionally, usually after a particularly brutal attack - see what you've made me do! Whoever he'd become, this man was unlike the LaRoche she thought she knew.

Coming to another body, he nudged it with his foot, then squatted to open the woollen shirt a fraction at the neck. He tensed, ripped it down to the waist. The scavenger was a woman. Young, judging by the size and firmness of her breasts. LaRoche gazed for a while then shot an accusatory glare at Mireille. "Waste! You're becoming a liability, Mireille."

That part of him hadn't changed - he was still blaming her for his cock-ups. She brooded in silence, watched as he rose and scanned the area. He heard a whimper, glanced in the direction of the sound and nodded at the dying Scavenger. "Ask him if you don't believe me."

Blood rushed to her cheeks. "Fuck you, LaRoche! If you'd kept your head down, none of this would have been necessary."

"The Gospel according to stupidity?" he sneered.

"Chaos rules," she countered unconvincingly.

He paused to pick up a broad-sword, fingered the beautifully crafted hilt and the keen edge, tried it for balance. Then he held it out before him with both hands like a crucifix. It seemed to calm him and a satisfied smile spread across his lips. Next, he was scanning the bodies until he found the one he was looking for.

It took him a minute or so to remove the full-length hide coat and a little longer to wipe the blood from the shoulders and collar. Finally, he put it on and strode around pretentiously.

"What do you think?"

"You look like a flasher." Mireille was feeling sick again and he wasn't helping.

He swaggered over. "There's a lesson to be learned here." He turned on the spot, displayed the front panels like a salesman. "Hardly a mark on it. That's planning."

"You struck lucky, that's all."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. The head was always the target. Anything lower would have damaged the material." He stroked the collar. "Pity about the blood, though."

"And you reckon I'm the cold-hearted butcher!" Mireille looked around for something to do, decided to scout for water bags. LaRoche followed, still admiring the way his coat flowed around him, flourishing his sword occasionally. Nothing practical. She put up with it for a while, then turned on him. "What's happened to you? Was it the caves?"

He gazed off into the distance. "Before then, I think. I only know I feel...." He frowned, puzzled. "....different."

She studied his expression, came to the conclusion he actually believed his own bullshit. "So, where does that leave me?"

LaRoche shrugged indifferently and resumed admiring his coat again. "Wherever you want to be. No doubt you'll decide for yourself soon enough."

Light was fading. Perhaps night was approaching, if such a time existed in this place. There was no sun to set, but despite this the temperature had dropped considerably and was still falling. A cooling breeze had whispered in without notice at first, but was now intensifying by the minute. A buzz tingled over the goose-flesh on Mireille's bare arms and she shivered. Her choice of the sleeveless jerkin obviously wasn't a good one.

LaRoche noticed, but chivalry wasn't on his agenda. He closed the front panels of his coat against the chill and smiled quietly to himself - planning was everything. It would get him what he deserved with a minimum of effort. Someone else could do the donkey-work. Like Mireille. She was certainly conscientious - taut as a bowstring, anticipating an ambush at every turn. Unnecessary now, as it happened. He was feeling benevolent for some reason and said: "Forget the scavengers: they'll be scuttling off to their holes by now. We'd be better employed looking for shards."

His casual lack of concern annoyed her. Plus this air of superiority he'd adopted. Like she was always dumb and he was suddenly smart! How did he know what scavengers did of an evening? And what the hell were shards? She put both questions to him. He stared at her as if he couldn't figure where she was coming from. Then his head was shaking despondently and he was walking again, grumbling: "Just accept that one of us has a brain that's functional. In the meantime, find some shards, or we'll be stuck out here in the open."

She stumbled along behind, growled at his back: "Maybe you hadn't noticed, but open's all we've got!"

LaRoche ignored the negativity and strode on. He seemed to know what he was doing, exactly where he was going. Couldn't, of course. They were both new to all of this. Yet, along with his obnoxious attitude, he seemed to have acquired a certain amount of uncanny knowledge. Like the shards: according to him they were crystalline formations, which marked a source of food, water and shelter. He was surprised she didn't know that.

She stopped him. "The point is, how do you know? Who told you?"

From his frown and vacant stare, it was obvious he had no idea. Then he was fobbing off the question. "Women don't have a monopoly on intuition." He turned into the wind, tasted it, wiped dust from his lips. "Keep looking. There isn't much time."

Though he refused to elucidate, she could see some sense in his theory, misguided or not. The wind had picked up considerably and was starting to drive sand and dust before it. They needed shelter. If he could find it for them, she supposed LaRoche's smug arrogance was a small price to pay.

The sky was a deep pink directly above deepening to almost purple on the horizon. Night was definitely closing in and there was still no sign of the formations LaRoche was looking for. As a consequence, his confidence seemed to be waning. "I didn't think they'd be so hard to find," he moaned dismally.

"Better dig out your prophet's handbook again. Maybe speed-reading wasn't the answer."

He stopped and scowled moodily. "I didn't ask for this, Mireille! Being chosen is a heavy responsibility."

"Oh, spare me!" She caught a mouthful of sand and spat. Then turned her back to the wind. "Who picked you from the pile of shit, God?"

"Maybe She did!" The words were out before he could stop them. He averted his gaze.

"She?" When he refused to respond, Mireille tried pushing. "How do you know God's a *she*? Don't tell me you've had a visitation!"

He'd said too much already. "My beliefs are none of your concern." He turned and began wandering off into the storm, paused long enough to add: "Goodbye, Mireille. It's been an enlightening experience."

Mireille called after him, was about to follow when a strong squall hit, blasting her with sand. By the time she could see again, there was no sign of him. She could just hear his voice ululating on the wind. A desperate plea, a name. But not hers. "Karen," he kept calling. "Speak to me...."

His voice was drowned by a sudden roar as the wind intensified. She sank to her knees, head down, uttering her own prayer to someone she felt could maybe help her. But she couldn't even recall where the name Richard came from.

CHAPTER THREE

1

Vallande paused to brush dust from his robes, tapped his shoes against a rock. It was only right he should take as little decadence as was humanly possible when he entered. Before him, lay the Avenue of Shards, a crisp, neat road through a dense clump of transparent crystals, some as tall as three men. Of all the natural phenomena in this dying world, the shards had probably succumbed the least to decay.

Naturally, man had endeavoured to correct the oversight. A pathway had been carved through them and a space cleared deep within the crystal outcrop to make the Rondelle. For the greater good, the latter-day engineers had thought. Vallande knew different. Theirs was probably the gravest of mistakes.

He paused on the threshold as he often did, stroked his hand down one of the smooth surfaces. It was cool to the touch. So too, the distorted images within the prism. Visually, anyway. They weren't unattractive, but it struck him that they seemed mournful and isolated. Incarcerated really, trapped within their see-through pinnacles. Vallande could sympathise, knew what it was like to be confined. Until his job was finished here - or he was returned - it would be that way for him, for everyone.

He walked into the avenue, treading carefully, reverently almost, for it was obvious he was stepping on the polished stumps of crystals removed during the cutting of the path. He listened to the flap of his sandals underfoot, cringed as the shards picked it up collectively then broadcast the amplified sound as a hollow metallic echo along the avenue. It was unnerving because it announced his arrival and he would have preferred to make an inconspicuous entrance. As it happened he was lucky: the Rondelle was deserted.

A ragged circle, the clearing was, he guessed, in the centre of the crystal forest; or as close as made no difference. Walking off the path, he entered a brilliant spectral circus. Not yet at its darkest, the evening firmament still radiated sufficient illumination to work its wonders. Refracted light speared out of the shards in dazzling rainbow colours across the floor of the Rondelle. The levelled stumps gathered it, launched it skyward, recreating their former glory as ghostly holograms, a veritable smorgasbord for one whose staple diet had been so red for so long.

Vallande gorged himself until his eyes hurt. Then he tugged the hood down to shield them from the brightness and proceeded to the centre. There he halted before a rectangular hole in the ground, gazed down the stairs to the portal at the bottom. A travesty, really. Looking up, he squinted at the multi-coloured shards for a moment, then back into the dull, angular pit. Ugly by comparison. Whenever man contested Nature he was destined to failure.

Still, as typically human as it was, he didn't mind this particular feat of inventive genius. It helped save his legs and shortened his day considerably. Better to use the portal and the labyrinth of subterranean passages to which it led than to traverse Lonfay on the surface. Far safer. It was one of the few advantages of being a recorder.

Had he left immediately, he might at least have begun his journey in peace. As it was, he was so deep in thought that he didn't hear the approaching footsteps. By the time he suspected he might have company, it was too late.

"Ah, Vallande." The voice, like its owner, was full and round. "Didn't expect to see you here at this hour."

Vallande's eyes closed tightly as he cursed himself. He turned, waited for the portly figure to roll up. "Nor I you, Alexis."

A chubby hand rose, tipped back the hood to reveal a bloated, laughing face, cheeks ruddy from excesses of one kind or another. "Business to attend to," explained Alexis. He added that familiar cough of his which precluded further discussion of the subject. Then he stroked the shaved head as if to smooth the imperfections of another half-truth. "You know how it is - there's always something can't wait till tomorrow."

Vallande didn't need to say anything. It was common knowledge that the moral fibre of some recorders was decidedly weak, a failing the loose men and women of the draff were only too willing to exploit for a favour or two. The practice was frowned on, of course, but a wise man turned a blind eye in a world where even fickle friends were scarce.

Alexis went to the stairs, paused at the top. "Coming?"

Vallande could have declined, but that would have been to invite awkward questions. He nodded and began to descend slowly. Alexis clop-clopped along beside him. Before they'd reached the bottom, a log was already in the man's pudgy hand. He arched plucked, pencil-thin eyebrows at his fellow recorder. "Do you mind?"

Vallande shrugged. "Not at all."

Alexis grinned, pointed the black box at the floor of the pit, reached out a fat finger which hovered trembling with childish excitement. "I love this bit," he said almost apologetically. His finger touched the box and the floor exploded in a dazzling kaleidoscope. Just briefly. Then it disappeared revealing a continuation of the staircase illuminated by an eerie red light from below. "Amazing!"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

Alexis tucked the log into his pocket. "You take things too seriously, my friend," said the fat recorder as they carried on down. "There's more to life than work. You should get out and enjoy yourself once in a while."

"At my age pleasures are of necessity simple, yet pleasant nonetheless."

Piggy eyes rolled in the melon head. "Then I hope I never live to be your age."

They were proceeding along a tunnel now which twisted and turned, walls of glowing, rope-like sinews. Considering the design of the portal one would have expected the underground passageways to be arrow straight. Alexis had asked about it once. Vallande said he had no idea - one of the few lies he had ever told.

It seemed logical to him. The tunnels were roots, the arteries of the parasite - vessels which continued to pump life-blood to its hiding place somewhere in Lonfay. He could feel it beneath his feet. All who used the transvector rode the swell in speed and comfort, courtesy of the beast itself. Also thanks to those naive engineers who had cleaned and scraped them of the one thing that might have set them all free - the disease of the shards.

He was sure of it. Or as certain as anyone could be. He'd even toyed with the notion of cutting a large sliver from one of the crystals and thrusting it into the heart of the creature. Might still do that, if he ever discovered the location of such a vital organ. Assuming it had one at all.

But this was a private vendetta not to be shared with the likes of Alexis. And anyway, the air in the tunnels was warm. Too humid to concentrate on anything other than placing one foot in front of the other. And that faint acidic taste - unpleasant to say the least.

The corpulent recorder seemed oblivious to all but his own thoughts. "How old *are* you, by the way?" He glanced at Vallande. "You don't mind me asking, do you?"

Vallande sighed. He was confused enough. The buzz of superfluous nonsense suppurating from this wagging tongue was merely adding to his mental turmoil. "Not at all," he droned and hoped he sounded bored. He was anything but. In truth he was angry and embittered. In Nova, his body, at least, would still have been relatively young and he would have been appreciating the pleasures of middle age, a season of his life which, in Lonfay, he had experienced briefly at thirty almost without notice. "I'm forty-two."

Alexis coughed. "*That* old? Well!" His head shook and he pondered silently for the next few paces. "I never imagined anyone could live to be as old as *that*. I hope I don't."

So do I, thought Vallande. Another minute would be too long. "It's not so bad," he droned. "Longevity has its compensations."

"Name one," challenged the fat man laughingly.

A frown spread beneath Vallande's hood. It was a stupid thing to say. Now he had to justify it. And with what? He shrugged. "One sees changes, progress."

"Boring, boring," sang Alexis. "If that's the best you can come up with I think I prefer youth and ignorance."

In Vallande's opinion this fool already had a head start. How he ever became a recorder was a mystery. Probably too lazy for the Conflict and just smart enough to avoid the draft.

"I saw you today," said Alexis casually.

Vallande groaned inwardly, thought *how nice for you*, said: "You did?"

Alexis nodded. "With those two reborns who were giving you a bit of trouble."

Heart failure wasn't something he had experienced. At that moment, however, Vallande suspected he might have had a small attack. "Trouble? I'm not sure I recall....?"

"You must remember," urged the fat man positively. "That scrawny little spitfire and the coward who threw his sabrette away. I'm surprised you didn't have them terminated."

"Oh, them." Vallande tried to sound apathetic. "I didn't see the need. The scavengers will have returned them by now."

"I don't know so much." Alexis was obviously far more interested than he had at first intimated. "The man, maybe.... but the woman....? I fancy she had the winning spirit." When no argument was forthcoming, he added: "Have you checked?"

Breathing was becoming harder. Vallande could feel the dampness of perspiration over his entire body. "They're dead. Forget them."

Alexis put out a hand, stopped Vallande in his tracks. "Go on. Let's have a look, just for interest's sake. Tell you what - we'll have a wager on it."

"A pointless exercise," snapped Vallande, unable to contain his growing anger. "Anyway, I'm not a betting man."

The piggy eyes narrowed. "What are you afraid of - that they're going to make it through to Vasteplage?"

"Don't be ridiculous! The reborns died the moment they set foot in the Deadlands. They were no match for scavengers."

"Prove it, then!" This was more than a challenge. Alexis had issued an ultimatum.

Vallande grunted, fumbled reluctantly in his habit with agitated fingers. Dragging out his log, he vigorously tapped in a set of commands. In a second he was viewing the read-out. His chest was tight again. The longer he stared, the heavier the burden of disappointment became.

"Well?" urged Alexis impatiently. "Let me see." A withered hand thrust the log against his enormous swollen belly. He peered down, turned the box so that he could view the read-out.

"Oh."

Vallande pulled back the log, cleared the screen and returned it to a pocket. "Does that satisfy you?"

Alexis shrugged. "You were right," he mumbled sullenly.

Yes I was, thought Vallande sadly. So damned right. It would have been nice to be wrong for once, to have been forced to doctor the read-out for the benefit of Alexis. To have lied, even. Because the knowledge that Mireille and LaRoche and his own dreams were all alive and well was worth the loss of a little self-respect. But he knew of old: the worst that could happen usually did.

Already had, it seemed.

2

They were passing beneath the fringes of Vasteplage in a matter of thirty minutes, no more. Vallande was only too pleased. If not for the transvector he would never have made it. The surface route would have taken twenty days for a younger, fitter person, had they been allowed to travel unhindered. Not that anyone could.

The recorders emerged from the portal on the edge of the main business district. Alexis chose it, said he fancied a stroll because he needed the exercise. A truer word was never spoken, even if it was a fabrication.

The streets, although not as crowded as in day-time, were still quite busy and radiated a sociable atmosphere, albeit one not to be entirely trusted. Keeping to the main thoroughfares was safest. These were relatively free from the unsavoury element which tended to gravitate towards the disreputable inns and warehouses of the backstreets.

Alexis departed at one such street. "I have to check on one of my reborns," he said, consulting his log. "He's duelling tonight. Might as well watch him in action before I log in."

Vallande nodded, smiled to himself. Maybe the excuse was true; more likely Alexis had caught the scent of wine in his bulbous nostrils and the temptation was irresistible. He watched the straining bag of wind shuffling and rolling into the alley and breathed a long-awaited sigh of relief.

He had to pass his own dwelling on his way to the Arena and, like Alexis had been, he was also tempted by the small comforts it had to offer. But the day had been long and Vallande felt sure that to sit now would sap what little energy remained. Better to relax later, knowing there was nothing more to do that night.

When he arrived at his destination, another recorder was entering the Arena. Two more were coming out. Even though to pass through was no inconvenience - simply a code entered on his log to shut off the neuro-gate - he was grateful that someone else had done it for him. He couldn't recall feeling this tired before. So weary. Even to think clearly was an effort.

Raising his head was just as hard, but as he trudged out of the race he did look up. The Arena was empty now. Only the deserted steps of the public terrace watched over the huge expanse of well-trodden dirt which was the muster yard. No armies massed there now. No commanders negotiated alliances. The cheers and encouragement of the rabble were a ghostly memory. Except for the humble recorders going about their business, the Arena was devoid of life.

In three days it would be different. Then the place would be filled with noise and people. Few could stay away when the Conflict was in session. They came to witness or participate in the sport of humans butchering each other during a staged contest of military warfare. But that wasn't the real tragedy. The fact that troubled Vallande most was that they did so voluntarily and with apparent pleasure. And all because they knew no better. Because they were tricked into believing it was morally acceptable. A bounden duty, in fact.

The other recorder had completed his offering, was taking back his log, now decrypted and re-formatted. He walked straight past Vallande, no sign of recognition. What was to say? The old man shuffled to a standstill before the Gate, extended a humble bow to the shimmering image

framed by the massive archway. "Your Eminence," he muttered and reached out to place his log on the shelf provided.

He stared at it: a plain, metal shelf. Clearly visible, unlike the hologram in which it appeared to be set. Reality out of illusion - a contradiction in some ways. To Vallande it was proof positive of the truth behind the deceit; confirmation of the parasite - that monstrous living, breathing organism he had come to destroy. And if he was ever tempted to believe the deceptions and forget the peril beyond, this simple slab he could actually touch would set him straight.

He watched as the shelf retracted, drawing his log into the hologram. Both objects disappeared behind the dazzling facade. Vallande swallowed nervously and waited.

In a few moments his log would be released. Then he could take it and go back to his warm house and his dumb servant girl. God willing.

The few moments passed. A few more after them. It was an unusually long wait. Vallande began to fidget beneath his robe. At last the shelf appeared and presented his log.

This was the part he loathed - the coating of mucus on the instrument. Imagination, he'd thought the first time. But the slime had proved real enough and he'd fought back revulsion long enough to return home to wash both hands and log thoroughly. Since then the cleansing had become a ritual. Yet, though it was offensive to him, it was a further reminder that behind the illusion was a beast of substance. And whereas an apparition might be invincible, a creature which fed on human flesh to survive was, itself, just as mortal.

An encouraging thought. A dangerous one. Vallande was glad the Recorder General - the beast - couldn't read minds.

The log waited. The old man reached forward, withdrew it from the shelf and glanced habitually at the screen. Usually it was blank. Not this time, however.

He felt another kick in his chest as he read the message: *001011 11*. Simply translated, it meant *stand by*. But the final two digits made a world of difference changing the sentiment from a matter of routine to one of crucial importance. Presumably he was in trouble again. Why else would he have to *WAIT FOR AN ORAL DE-BRIEFING?*

He stepped back warily, wondered what he'd done wrong now? A silly question: he'd been worrying about the transgression all day. Naive of him to think he might have gotten away with it. Ah well. No-one could say he'd fallen in the first wave.

After a minute, a gaseous hiss integrated with the static. The image of glittering particles began to fill with mist, solidifying the shape they represented. It formed from the inside - a brain, a spinal column, vital organs first. Then a mantle of flesh. Finally clothing. This illusion wasn't as perfect as some, but it was as real to Vallande as the threat it posed.

The lips moved. "Your report was incomplete, Vallande." The voice was still artificial. Oscillating.

"I can assure you, Your Eminence__"

"Of course you can, and if I were the cretin you take me for I'd believe you, but we both know you always hold something back. I've tolerated it in the past because it suited me to indulge your idiosyncrasies, but this time you've gone too far."

He knew. *It* knew! "I - I'm not sure I understand."

"You understand perfectly well! You're scheming something and I want to know what it is."

"I, scheming, Your Eminence?"

"Don't play the innocent with me, Vallande. Can you deny you've had clandestine meetings with Saint Aumand?"

Vallande was taken aback. This wasn't what he'd expected and there was no time to re-group his thoughts except by delaying. "With Lady Isabella? We did converse on one or two occasions...."

"Conspiring, more like. And don't try telling me you were trading sexual favours. Not at your age. Certainly not with a whore who can afford to be choosy and just happens to be General of

an army which may well hold the future of both the Conflict *and* The Balance in her delicate but greedy hand."

What a relief! No mention of transients. Just a simple matter of a professional nature he could clear up in a minute. "I admit my actions could have been misconstrued, Your Eminence, which is what I'd hoped for."

The image fragmented momentarily, re-formed and leaned belligerently towards the old recorder. "You dare play games with *me*?"

"Not with you, Your Eminence. With Isabella's rival."

"With Bracken! Now I'm totally confused. What does Lord Walter have to do with this?"

"It is he that is building his forces with, I believe, the intention of sweeping all before him in the Conflict to win a final and decisive victory."

"Bracken wouldn't do that!" remonstrated the Recorder General. "A cruel, vulgar man he may well be, but he respects The Order. He would not jeopardise The Balance."

"Humble apologies, Your Eminence, but I believe you're quite wrong: the only balance Harelip.... er, that is, Lord Walter cares for is one tilted in his favour."

"You're sure of this?" Astonishment.

Underlying fear would have been nice also, but it was too much for Vallande to hope for. "Enough to trick him into believing I was helping Saint Aumand," he explained, a little more comfortable now. "Assuming intelligence of my.... er, meetings with Isabella are brought to Walter's notice as they have been to yours, he ought to be seriously considering delaying his offensive for the time being."

"And then?"

Vallande shrugged. "A word here, a whisper there. As you so wisely observed, my motivation was political. In such an environment progress is often slow. Sometimes we must go back to advance, and the end may only be the beginning. You above all people would know this."

Disquiet. The extremities of the Recorder General's image was fading slightly. "Of course I know! You don't have to patronise me, Vallande."

"I'm sorry, Your Eminence. I didn't mean...."

The hologram was flapping a hand of dismissal. "For pity's sake don't start grovelling like the other clones. Just do what you have to. Remember: the Conflict must continue. It is why we are here. The *only* reason we are here. Preserve The Balance, Vallande. And next time keep me informed. Understood?"

"Perfectly, Your Eminence...." The mist within the hologram was beginning to swirl. In a few moments it had dissipated completely leaving Vallande gazing at the former sparkling illusion. The old man bowed, turned and began walking across the muster yard towards the exit.

3

Vallande's residence was provided as part of his remuneration - 500 ducats a year, plus an expense account for clothing and other essentials. With regard to security and stability it sounded ideal, all a man could ever want or hope for. In reality it was a subsistence package. Prices doubled or trebled when merchants discovered their customer was a recorder. And as for the dwelling, it was a tiny clay and timber box with four rooms.

Nevertheless, he was always glad to return. His reason, perhaps the only one, was hurrying to the door as he entered - Teresa, his housekeeper. A plain, yet not unattractive woman of twenty years, he had found her wandering the streets of Vasteplage in a daze following a particularly brutal assault by her former master. Vallande had gathered as much from her painful re-enactment, the only way she could communicate since her voice parts had been crushed by strangulation.

She still couldn't speak, a state of affairs which Vallande considered more of a talent than a disability. For the past eleven months, Teresa had kept house and tended to his needs. An occupation he liked to believe she followed out of choice: he had offered her freedom on numerous occasions and each time she had declined emotionally as if afraid he was going to toss her back into the street.

She led him to the fireside where the obligatory wash bowl sat waiting for him to cleanse both his hands and his log. First, however, there was a prior duty for her to perform. She began untying the cord around his waist. "That's alright, my dear. I can manage." Even Vallande noticed the tired slur in his voice so he wasn't surprised when she picked up on it. Teresa was shaking her head as a sign that she would not take no for an answer. A few curt grunts of reproach confirmed her determination. "Very well, I won't argue."

Vallande let his hands drop. One of them dipped automatically into a pocket. The woman's eyebrows kinked in a deep frown. "I'm just getting my log," he explained. The severity melted from her face and she continued to undress him.

In minutes he was wrapped in a soft, woollen gown and seated by the hearth, gazing at dancing flames, soon to be mesmerised by them. Teresa squatted beside him ladling stew from a blackened pot suspended in the fireplace. She turned, placed the bowl on the table next to his chair. He pondered it gloomily - globules of fat swimming on a steaming orange slick. Not her fault: good meat, any meat, was at a premium these days whereas honey-jack was cheap. It was actually fungus cut from the walls of the underground root-system and by eating it he felt he was, in a small way, getting back at the parasite; but the fact that *it*, in turn, survived by eating *them* allied the practice to indirect cannibalism. Perhaps that was why the first mouthfuls always stuck in his throat. Vallande swallowed and closed his eyes. "I really don't think I can."

She produced a smile of gentle persuasion and pushed the bowl a little closer. After a moment's hesitation he nodded. "For you, I'll try." The woman sank back on her heels as if a great weight had been lifted from her. Then she watched him eat, a mother overseeing her child. One old enough to be her father.

Although he couldn't manage it all she was satisfied. And he had to admit to feeling better with a full stomach. Afterwards he talked - to himself really - while she attended to the chores. He spoke of matters he would confide to no other in the knowledge that she would rather die than betray his confidence. Not that she ever could; not verbally, anyway.

When she had finished she came over to him, a cup in her hand and that sheepish look on her face. "I've told you - you don't have to ask." He reached for the carafe on his table.

That frown again. She dived for the container, caught hold of it the same instant he did. Vallande refused to give it up. "You do so much for me already. Let me at least pour your wine. Here - give me the cup. Sit by me. We can dream of better times together."

Easier said than done. His mind was locked into the present and he talked less of joy than he did of sadness. However, with Teresa now sitting on the floor with her head nestled against his leg, his ghosts seemed wary of testing the additional strength her closeness gave him and he felt he could be more subjective. "I know it was a foolish whim," he droned sleepily. His fingers stroked her hair absently. "But there was something about them which lit a fire in my belly. They were an unknown quantity, you see. Not like the other transients. If anything, those two seemed more alive."

He nodded to himself. "Ridiculous, I know, but that was how I felt." He took another sip of wine. "And I thought: if they are different in some ways, why not in others? If they aren't bound by the laws of nature as true reborns or even "normal" transients are, then why should they be *answerable* to such laws?"

She glanced up at him with those hypnotic dark eyes, passed comment with a smile. There - she was agreeing with him! The silent encouragement drove the tiredness from his aching

bones. "Or any law, come to that. Maybe through them I could have found the black heart of this evil parasite. Even the way to end its tyrannical rule."

He paused to drink a toast to this latest dream. "Yes, I was right to do what I did. My mistake was in being unprepared. There will be other transients - perhaps this year, perhaps next. And I will be ready for them." Despite his exuberance, reality began to dawn and caused a maudlin dropping of the head. "I doubt there will be another like her, though. A pity...." The puzzled frown became a misting gaze staring into nowhere.

As he stirred, Teresa lurched to a sitting position, shot a look to see what he was doing. She had scooped up his log before he was even half-way to laying a hand on it and was presenting it to him. He took the box, studied her expression. "So perceptive," he observed. "Sometimes I think you can read my mind. And yes, my dear, something has occurred to me which may lend hope. If not for now, then for the future."

He began programming the log. "Though Mireille and LaRoche are dead, their lives in Lonfay are still here in my files. As well I thought to hide their true status from the Recorder General. Everything - all data - should still be intact and unprocessed. It's simply a case of decryption and re-assembly. I only hope I can re-locate it. Somewhere in the jumble could be the secret which will help keep the next transients alive long enough to__"

Vallande was suddenly sitting bolt upright. Teresa was on her feet, anxiety radiating, concerned noises emanating from her crippled larynx. "Well, I'll be....!"

Her hands were on his shoulders, fingers squeezing gently, her expression asking: "*What? What? Are you ill? Dying?*"

He ignored her, tapped another command. "My God, I don't believe it!" Now he looked at her, a Vallande still old yet ten years younger. Twenty even. "See, Teresa!" The log was off his lap, wavering in front of her. He pointed at the read-out with a trembling finger. "They're alive! Mireille and LaRoche are still alive!"

There was little to see - the subjects were too far from the scanner to be any more than two dots at the end of a string of digits; but the fact that they were there at all was confirmation enough. For Vallande, anyway; to Teresa they were merely strange lights on his black box. Nevertheless, his excitement caused her anguish to melt. If her master was happy, then so was she. Following a moment's thought, she poured two cups of wine, handed one to Vallande.

He expressed further surprise. "You gave yourself something without asking! Two miracles in one day - more than anyone deserves in a lifetime. Let's drink to both."

He raised his cup, waited until hers touched it. "To us, Teresa. To our new understanding. And to Mireille and LaRoche. May the true God bring them safely to the gates of Vasteplage."

He drank deeply. One cup, then another. Teresa merely sipped her wine and waited for the inevitable reaction. Having downed a third refill, Vallande placed his cup noisily on the table. "Now I feel much better, rejuvenated. We should go out, celebrate." He lurched to his feet.

Teresa was ready, clouds of warning darkening her complexion. Her head shook demonstratively. She indicated the bedroom with a censorious nod. "But why?" protested Vallande. "I'm not tired. I feel perfectly fine." He took a step towards her, tottered unsteadily. Teresa's lips pursed condescendingly as she caught hold of him.

Vallande sighed. "I suppose you're right, as always. I'm just a foolish old man."

She scowled. Her head shook again. Taking his arm in hers she cuddled up to him as she led him across the small room. He felt even warmer now, if that was possible. He smiled. "Not too old for some things, though," he murmured, "Not yet, thank God."

Mireille was blinded, unable to breathe as a roaring gale blasted her with sand. It was everywhere - in her eyes, her hair, her mouth. She turned her back on it, sank to a crouch. Coughing and gagging, she tried pulling the jacket over her head as protection. Though stuffy inside, the leather kept most of the sand out. And she could breathe again after a fashion.

A hell of a dust storm, she was convinced it was no illusion this time. It was too physical, too genuinely frightening. What about LaRoche - how was he coping? Where did he think he was going in this - to look for his stupid shards? He'd have been lucky to see his own feet! She tried calling out, couldn't even hear her own voice above the din. Finally she decided self-preservation came first. Not that she didn't care about him, but if *she* wasn't going anywhere, neither was LaRoche. She sank to her knees, head almost touching the ground and stayed like that. For ages.

On occasions the storm seemed to be dying. Moving her makeshift cowl slightly proved otherwise. Mireille huddled down again and prepared to wait out what promised to be a very long night.

She wasn't wrong. Time had no meaning. Minutes or hours, there was no way of telling how many of each had passed; how many more were to come. She'd begun counting at one stage, recalled reaching two-hundred and something, must have dozed off in the process. After that she cat-napped frequently, was generally awakened by trickles of invading sand and pressure where it had started to build up against her body - a dune in the making.

It was obvious she couldn't afford to remain stationary for too long. Still hunched over, she shuffled around, waited, shuffled some more. Until inevitably she slept.

And dreamed. It was one of those situations where she had to escape. From what or whom wasn't clear, but she ran anyway. At least, she tried to run. Speed was both imperative and impossible. She was caught in a time warp where motor functions were sloth-like. Her environment was invisible chocolate fudge which was slowly solidifying around her. Then she was stuck fast, unable to move a muscle. And the danger was almost upon her.

Sand trickled through a gap in the jacket, clung to the sweat pouring down her face. She gasped herself awake, inhaling grit and dust; tried to thrust upright to free herself; couldn't! It was like she'd gained weight. Heaps of it! More sand cascaded in. The weight wasn't hers: it was the sand. She was chest deep in the stuff. Being buried alive!

Panic gripped her and the sudden dread of suffocation loomed as the worst of deaths. Agonising. Slow. Terrifying. The thought of waiting to die while in a state of paralysis was a shock to the system. She heaved up, yelling to extract maximum strength from her cramped legs.

The weight surrounding her shifted. Just marginally. Sand began pouring into the jacket. In a second it was up to her chin. "Oh God!" she managed to gasp. Then her mouth filled again. Spluttering. Heaving. Muscles tearing....

Free!

From the waist up, anyway. She tore off the coat to experience the freshness of the wind on her body. It felt great, enough to declare: "Thank you, thank you." Presumably to those deities she'd been cursing not too long ago. Breathing was easier too. There was still sand and dust in the air, but not so much that it choked her, mainly provided something to chew on.

Clouds of dust continued to limit visibility. She could see a ratty-looking tree growing out of the drift which had backed up at the base of its gnarled trunk; here and there some mounds of sand. Very little else. And it seemed to be getting lighter. Had morning come by any chance? Was that too much to ask?

When she heard the clash of steel her heart missed a beat. Was that LaRoche? Had to be. Probably tripped over his own feet, dumb bastard. His name was even on her lips as she craned to look back over her shoulder. No LaRoche, though: only a small band of scavengers.

Only? Shit! She was alone and unarmed. Where the fuck were her sabrettes?

She was still digging down through the sand in which she stood when they fell on her. Maybe she was lucky - they could have killed her outright. Then again, a quick death might not have been such a bad idea. Not that they were cruel, merely clumsy. And they weren't fussy where they put their filthy hands, either.

Mireille slapped a paw away from her breast, squirmed as chipped nails raked her belly. Fingers clawed their way into her breeches. She pressed her thighs together. Useless! God, hadn't the bastards heard of nail-clippers!

Flesh clamped over her mouth stemming a flow of obscenities. She bit down hard, tasted blood and other more revolting flavours.

Then something - not pain: too quick. Mainly sound.... and blackness.

The scavenger patrol decided it amongst themselves: the reborn was Drago's. The only one who voiced any real objection received a broken nose for his trouble. He trudged behind, a bloody rag held to his face, peering through watering eyes at the unconscious woman hanging over Drago's broad shoulder. Her flesh was so clean and white, almost unblemished. The dispossessed scavenger could only imagine what might have been, his one compensation the fact that Drago had cut today's patrol short.

5

Less than a kilometre away, a much smaller band of scavengers than Drago's cowered behind low scrub, gawping at the clump of shards in awe. Eyes popped and hands grasped weapons tighter as the strange sound was repeated. They knew it was more than the wind howling over the crystal pinnacles. This was bestial. Or - dare they think it? - perhaps even spiritual! But, afraid or not, the chance of witnessing some early-morning magic transcended natural cowardice.

From their vantage point, they could see along the avenue to the hole in the centre of the Rondelle. If anything was about to happen, this was the likely source. Rumour had it that the pit was the door to the Nether World where demons practised unspeakable witchcraft. At nightfall they would rise to cavort in a dance of fire while casting spells. So it was said. But there were never any reports of goings-on at daybreak! So, what was coming? Gasps were stifled as a shape began lumbering up from the portal!

LaRoche coughed and spat sand from his mouth. The sound echoed as a reverberating bark around the Rondelle. He paused, amused by it. Then he clapped his hands and giggled childishly. Finally, turning on the spot, he spread arms in a welcoming gesture and called out, "Hello."

It speaks! The trembling scavengers continued to watch as the creature in the shards brushed sand from its clothes. It looked human, but what nature of man consorted with spirits? Only recorders, as far as anyone knew. Yet this was no recorder! It was dressed like a scavenger and carried a sword. And it was coming out!

Beyond the protection of the rocks, the wind was still fierce, but not a patch on the storm he had survived. He gazed outward and thought about Mireille. If she had taken him more seriously, she might be alive now, maybe even grateful. Water under the bridge - caught in the open, she would have perished. Only a miracle had saved him. But it wasn't just *only*, was it? He turned back to face the shards. No, it was obviously meant to be.

A rustle caught his attention. He looked in time to see a scavenger flailing about in panic. The sorry individual had got himself snagged by his clothing on a bush and the more he struggled, the more his rags became ensnared. LaRoche advanced. The scavenger collapsed in the shrub and began wailing and sobbing, eyes widening as the "demon" from the shards came on.

Close up, it was plain to see that this was a woman, a young one, perhaps quite pretty beneath the grime. LaRoche studied her for a moment, scanned the bush for any comrades and noticed a head duck down some metres away. He smiled. "Fortune, it seems, favours both

of us today." Terrified eyes followed the sword as he raised it on high, shut tight the instant the blade started down. Then opened again; but slowly and accompanied by a puzzled frown. LaRoche hacked again at the shrub, then discarded the sword and reached down to help the woman out.

Though he had spared her, she was still ready to bolt, but he held onto an arm. "No need to be frightened. I just saved you, didn't I?" She was darting a look for the other scavengers. They continued to watch from a distance. He beckoned them with his free hand, calling for them to approach. They elected to stay put. "Tell you what - I'm going to let you go. Assure your friends I don't want to hurt them. I'd just like to talk."

The second he released her, she was off and he was beginning to regret the decision. Next, she had caught up with her friends and his self-confidence improved as he watched her arguing with them. Then she was bringing them back and he felt his arms spreading out towards them as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Or, the most supernatural thing in Lonfay. At least, he was hoping that was the way it might seem.

6

Smoke was in the air as they ambled into camp. The wind had dropped sufficiently for fires to be lit. Drago could smell food cooking and he was famished. Anticipation always did that to him - before a battle, or a new woman. She was different, this one. On the lean side and wiry, but she had a spirit he would enjoy taming. If she performed well he might even keep her. For a while, anyway; always assuming she lived. Maybe he'd hit her a bit hard.

His regular woman was just climbing out of a hole - the entrance to his underground cave. She saw him approaching and fell to her knees beside a pathetic excuse for a fire, set about blowing and fanning it, shooting anxious glances towards him. It wasn't easy to control his temper in the face of such provocation. Tossing the reborn onto the sand, he glared at his woman. His foot swung through the fire showering her with smoking sticks. "Dead wood, I told you, lazy slut! Go and look for *dead* wood!"

The woman scrambled to her feet expressing a combination of profound apology plus abject terror. Drago snarled and helped her on her way with a boot. Jealousy flickered in her eyes as she scuttled past the unconscious prisoner. His mind on other things, Drago failed to notice.

He sank to his haunches, stroked a hand over Mireille's breasts. They looked smaller than he remembered. Hopefully her other attributes would be more to his liking. He began fumbling at her waist, trying to untie the cord of her breeches. The string pulled tight, knotted. Temper flared. Hooking both hands into the waistband he ripped it apart with a growl.

A boot came from nowhere, slammed into the side of his head sending him sprawling. He was grappling for his dagger even as he fell, just managed to clear it from the scabbard when it was kicked from his hand. The blow to the head had scrambled his brain and blurred his sight reducing the image of his attacker to a vague shape looming over him. He cursed it as he fought to sit up, aborted the attempt when a sword-point jabbed at his wind-pipe.

"Animal!" The voice was harsh and clipped, authoritative. Few women in Lonfay commanded respect of any kind; fewer still the level afforded Magda by her band of scavengers. Not that they didn't resent having to extend it, some almost as passionately as Drago. She was fully aware of this and leaned on the sword a little. Drago's eyes widened. He seemed to be getting the message. "Reduced to ravishing corpses now, Drago?"

He tried to speak, gave up as the sword-point twisted one way then the other. His sight was clearing. He could see her full, dark lips curled in that cruel smile of hers, eyes sparkling. Taunting as they often were, they seemed to beg for the opportunity to run him through. Drago didn't like the odds and slumped back.

She snorted and eased the pressure on the sword, finally withdrew it, but continued to stand over him for a moment, just in case he was feeling reckless. Satisfied that he was on his best behaviour - the best she was likely to get - she went to examine the prisoner, heard Drago grumble: "She's not dead."

"Doesn't look much alive to me."

Drago moved, began reaching out towards Mireille. "She's still warm. Feel." He heard the swish, grunted as the flat of a sword slapped his hand away, was only grateful it was still attached. "What's it to you, anyway?"

"If she's still alive, I want her," declared Magda stonily. She knelt to feel the body. Drago was right - still warm. Withdrawing a dagger she held it under the captive's nose, turned it a couple of times to confirm a faint misting on the polished blade. Then she rose, pointed at Drago with the knife. "Bring her to my cave. If she's dead on arrival, so are you."

Drago did as he was told. Eyes were on him as he carried the unconscious reborn through the camp. He would remember the faces behind the looks. Later they would be instructed as to where their loyalties ought to lie. Later still they would have no doubt. For the time being, however, Magda thought she was in control and he wasn't about to argue the point. Not until he was good and ready.

She was waiting in her subterranean cave. Light flickered from lamps hung on the walls. Heavy, acrid smoke of root oil floated up to hang in a dense pall against the roof. Two bodyguards stood near Magda, another beside the entrance. Sometimes she kept as many as five. Numbers hinged on the mood of the camp. Today she judged it simply bore watching.

Drago came stumbling down the slope. As he entered the main cavern he tripped, thudded onto one knee dumping the prisoner unceremoniously on the floor. Magda's eyes rolled. "Oaf!" She motioned to one of her attendants. "Check the reborn." The bodyguard knelt, employed the knife test. He nodded. Magda allowed her gaze to slide up to Drago. "Lucky you." She waved at the exit with a gloved hand. "Now get out."

Once he'd gone, she rose and began a purposeful stroll towards a narrow opening at the rear of the cave. "Bring her. And find that wretched healer. I want her here now!"

7

Three days Magda stayed in camp, handing command of the raiding parties over to Drago. Like his brain, his strategies were fairly basic so the pickings were small. Casualties, on the other hand, were heavy. She'd anticipated both results, regarded the latter as part of her hidden agenda. Not because she particularly wanted her band depleted, but she figured a few dead and some extra battle scars might convince the survivors that life under Drago's banner wouldn't be the joy-ride he'd no doubt promised them.

Exactly when he'd bring his challenge into the open only Drago knew. One thing was certain - Magda didn't intend making a present of her leadership by turning her back on him in the field of battle. If he wanted to take over as top dog, he was going to have to work for it. Preferably on her terms.

Then there was the ulterior motive for staying behind - the reborn. The woman interested her. Perhaps Magda saw a likeness of herself in this one - hungry, tenacious, uncompromising. She hadn't seen the woman fight herself, but according to reports, another Isabella had taken up the sabrette. Now, the budding legend was here under her roof. That was fortune of a kind. Whether good or bad remained to be seen. Knowing more about the newcomer couldn't hurt and this was the ideal opportunity.

She wandered over to see how the healing was going. *Healing!* What a joke: it was doubtful this festering hag's powers were any more special than Magda's own. She towered over the hunched figure. "How is she?"

The old woman was muttering, waving charms - the skeletal remains of a human hand and a stick with hair tied to it. Magda repeated her question impatiently, a warning creeping into her tone. It stopped the chanting dead.

The crone shook the bones over Mireille's face once more, reclaiming lost status. "The blow almost killed her. Drago is a strong man and it has taken much power to heal, but see - in just three days I have drawn the wound together." Another shake of the desiccated hand.

Magda could see, only too well. "Not your doing, you old bag of dung!"

"Of course mine!" cackled the healer. "Who else has attended her?"

"The Gods maybe, but not you, witch!"

"Truly, Magda," the hag assured her. "Last night while you were asleep. If you had only seen__"

"Damn you, I'm not blind! Look at her arm, her shoulder, her breast! She had those wounds when she came, healed in the same way. Fresh ones crone, stitched together as if by thread."

"Yes, thread." A glimmer of hope languished in the old woman's misted sight, a chance to redeem her reputation. "Exactly. Made from the gut of.... Well, I can't tell you that: it's a secret known only to a few. Another powerful healer must have tended these other wounds, but I__"

"Liar! You can't even sew your own rags together! If you did this, show me the thread you used."

"I - er.... It disappears once it has been...."

Magda cuffed her away with the back of her hand. "Get to your stinking hole, lying wretch! The only reason I don't have you run out of camp is that some poor fools out there believe in your quack remedies. But in future stay away from this woman and out of my sight."

The healer scrambled to her feet, shuffled close to the exit. There she hesitated, began muttering under her breath, shaking her charms. Casting some terrible spell, presumably. Magda snatched up a clay pot and hurled it. "Out, I said!"

She watched to make sure the old woman left, then turned and sank down beside Mireille. A rag was draped over the neck of a pitcher near her. She reached for it, dipped it into the water and used it to bathe perspiration from the reborn's brow. Then she sat back, began fingering the mole on her cheek absently, thoughtfully. "Who are you?" she whispered in her dark, husky tone. "*What* are you? Just another reborn?" Magda's head shook. "No. Much more, I think. Perhaps you'll let me know when you recover. If you ever do."

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