



Interminable rain hammering squalor. Pools of dirty water leaping in pocked roads. Tin fences clattering untidily under the barrage. Litter everywhere. Occasional street lamps struggling to throw pallid small light on little that anyone wanted to see. Slime mould clouds, heavy, glum and perpetual.

8 a.m.

Start of the working day.

Thumb print, voice trace and retina scan vary within acceptable parameters. Good morning Dr. Martin. You may enter security zones alpha blue through yellow. Please do not enter other areas. The guards have orders to shoot intruders on sight. Thank you for your co-operation, and have a good day Dr. Martin.

Every day the same. The same slickly artificial female voice. The same routine. The same warnings.

He stood before the armour plated glass door that was the symbol of his privilege, his freedom and also his bondage. Privilege because he actually had a job, which was

relatively rare these days; freedom, because it meant he could pay some of his bills; bondage because he had no choice.

The door parted soundlessly. He sighed. Hesitated. Looked back momentarily towards the destitution outside, not sure if he was happy to leave it or not, then stepped through into bright warmth and polished marble. A world that was clean, clinical and corporate.

Armed guards watched him suspiciously as he walked to the reception desk to pick up a security tag.

They've seen me every day for seven years, he thought, but to them I'm still an intruder. To the corporation too, I suppose. Tolerated only so long as I'm useful.

The nearest guard hitched the shoulder strap on her maser carbine. He looked at her and she stared back, like a pub brawler laying down a mute challenge, inviting any response from her would-be victim that gave her an excuse. Maser carbines, he reflected, designed to cook your brains from the inside out. No mess. No blood. Just a neat corpse easily disposed of. He shrugged and looked away and down. No excuses for early retirement today.

Security zone alpha blue, otherwise known as the Cryogenic Operations Department. His department. Cod. And he was Com; Cryogenic Operations Manager. As he entered people looked up at him. Most smiled.

'Hi John.'

'Hi. Good morning.'

The same routine, practised endlessly, with no variations.

He made his way towards his office, passing heavy bronze doors in retro Art Deco style. Attractive, but like everything else in the building built with security in mind. He knew, as did everyone else there, that should the need arise these attractive decorations would turn rapidly into impenetrable, and ultimately deadly, barriers.

'John!'

He turned to see who had called. Helen Sampson. Technically his boss, but actually a friend and colleague. She was short, attractive, young. But aged unfairly by the self doubt and pressure that the corporation deliberately, and artificially, maintained, amongst its workforce cynically claiming that it was motivating. It certainly kept people quiescent, and motivated by self preservation, but it was really a mockery of motivation designed only to maintain control.

At one time Helen Sampson would have been at the peak of her profession, lauded and celebrated for her talents. A gifted and committed neurosurgeon with a quick intelligence and empathetic imagination she would have been a senior consultant at least, he thought, with prestige, power and respect. Now? Despite an impressive title, which included the designation 'director', she was merely a third tier technician wedged uncomfortably beneath general business managers and accountants. The chances of her ever bridging the abyss between third and second tier were negligible; she was indelibly marked as a professional, and these days that meant 'unrealistic', incapable of

understanding the 'real world' pressures of business. She was not a businesswoman, and therefore perpetually barred from the Valhalla of commerce where the great and the good dwelt, allegedly.

'John' she said again as they neared each other. She frowned. 'You look preoccupied. Is something wrong? Nothing medical or ... '

'No. It's all right. I've just got some things on my mind, that's all.'

'Good' she said. 'That's important. Your contract comes up for renewal in two months, and I thought I should warn you. The snoops will be checking your work performance in detail from now on. Don't slip up will you? It's critical for you to come out within your top performance percentile. And watch out for your health. You know what they are ...' She looked embarrassed, and delicately drew his attention to the data stick in her hand. He thanked her, knowing clearly what she wanted to say but daren't. The stick contained his profile; everything about him, including his sexual habits and propensity for catching cold.

He continued to his office, and was met there by one of the technicians.

'Morning Pat. Anything important?'

'You know how it is, another stiff another dollar,' Pat grinned, but stopped at the answering grimace. 'Sorry. We've got three new ones in, so there'll be a nice fat productivity bonus at the end of the month.'

'Brain, head or full body?'

'Two female scheduled for head internment; a male wanting full body treatment.'

Martin raised his eyebrows, 'Must be loaded. Who is he?'

Pat shuffled the hard copy records, squinting myopically at the printed names.

'Here it is. Some stiff, ... sorry, customer,' Pat corrected, 'called Hal Ostoo.'

'Ostoo? The android manufacturer?'

'Um. Yeah, looks like it. He's described as a bioelectronic entrepreneur. So I guess that's what he is.'

'Spends his life trying to create biomechanical immortality, and now comes to us to get some for himself. I wonder why. What's it say on his dead sheet?'

Pat held the sheets so that Martin could see them. 'Looks like some new kind of cancer affecting the immune system. Sheesh! What a way to go.' Pat's mouth twisted in distaste.

'Hm. I wonder why he's come to us. I thought Ostoo's lot were working on full intellect transfer to android bodies?'

'Well actually they aren't android bodies, strictly speaking. They are, if I may quote from the literature, "bioengineered clonal systems which fully replicate the natural human body." Except for the brain, but they don't mention that in their glossy brochures. They can't get it right, and have to rely on psionic brains, the ones they put in androids. But they don't work. When they've tried uploading a human mind the results are always bad. They usually end up with a moron on their hands.'

'Guess the great man wants to wait until they get it right then?'

'I suppose. Let them experiment on some other poor sods before his precious intellect gets downloaded into one of his own creations.' Pat's nose wrinkled in disgust. 'That's our lords and masters for you.'

'OK, Pat. Go down and see to the preliminaries and I'll be along later.'

'Aye, aye, cap'n.'

Martin sat at his desk. God almighty, he thought, how on earth did we get ourselves into this mess? He reflected on Helen. And Pat, another talented doctor reduced to medical labouring. And himself. He snorted and looked down sadly to his hands. A man, he mused, with a medical degree and two PhDs; a specialist in neurology and psychophysiology, earning a crust freezing rich stiffes so that they can avoid the consequences of their own indulgence and selfishness. Why? How did we come to this?

He knew the answer. The deliberate and unremitting assaults on the principle of social medicine in the 1980s and 1990s, all in the name of efficiency, started it. Then the soulless grinding of economic privilege, and a population too tired and too demoralised to care, had created a 'health service' that catered more or less exclusively to the cosmetic conceits of the ultra rich. Otherwise it merely acted as a policeman to the rest of the population. And the universities, reduced to mere cyphers of big business and the state which these days were indistinguishable. Now, instead of pursuing research or the welfare of the population at large he, and others like him, worked for a so-called 'health corporation', its very name a sordid perversion of meaning, that had little or nothing to do with health and everything to do with economics. Health care was for the rich. Only the rich. Even workers at the corporation were obliged to make do with a modest service, enjoyed, if that is the word, at the cost of extortionate medical insurance. What the corporation provided was there simply to keep the workforce useful. Chronic illness was, by statute, a sackable offence. The poor got no health care at all, except in the countryside where herbalism and folk medicine were being rediscovered or reinvented. Sadly that was barely adequate because the blasted and poisoned earth was hardly capable of sustaining even meagre growth of once vigorous weeds. That was the biggest and sickest joke of all. Despite government posturings about 'the environment' and 'eco friendly energy', and all the rest of the hooah of the early twenty first century, the net result had simply been a tightening of surveillance, increasingly draconian laws designed to curb people's 'intemperate appetites' and 'bad health habits', and a 'crack down' on behaviour likely to reduce the 'competitiveness of the economy'. And meanwhile business kept on raping the environment for its own ends. God rot all economists, he thought.

'Dr. John Martin,' he said out loud, 'refrigeration mechanic to the privileged.' He sighed again - sighing had become a kind of involuntary tic, covering a deeply engrained helplessness - then mentally chided himself for self pity. It won't change anything, he thought, so I'd be better occupied freezing Mr. Ostoo. He rose and left his office.

The journey home was as tedious as it always was. Rain soaked and gloomy. Public transport was a thing of the past, and he couldn't afford a car, so he walked. Broken pavements, litter and meagre light struggling from the few remaining lampposts in working order. Once the journey would have been highly dangerous, but even the criminals were now too apathetic to bother. No one walking was ever rich enough to make the effort worthwhile.

As he climbed the steps to his front door, he could see, over the ruins of his neighbourhood, the brightness of Portillo, the gated suburb where the rich maintained pieds à terre for the working week. Heavily guarded, impenetrable to all except the chosen and their friends, deadly to intruders, Portillo was the epitome of the economic dream. There the commanders of commerce could enjoy the fruits of their exertions in peace, without interruption from the envy of the lumpen masses.

Martin found himself sighing again, and irritably shrugged off the reverie. Stepping past the heavy, weather stained door, he entered the hall and put on the light. 40 watts of equivalent brilliance, just enough to make out the coat peg. He lived alone in a large Victorian town house, once the pride of some earlier captain of industry, now practically derelict except for the small nest that he sustained against the encroaching entropy. He threw his coat onto the peg and entered the living room, automatically switching on the comset on the way in. The damp patch beneath the window was getting worse, he noted. Broken plaster, black mould, and the carpet now sodden where the intrusive liquid accumulated. The perpetual rain made it impossible to repoint and weather proof the outside walls. Besides he couldn't afford it even had he wanted to. No point worrying about it, he thought, can't do anything about it. He moved towards the kitchen to make coffee and food.

... the trade war between the Osaka League Nations and the Pan American Economic Union appears to be hotting up. Dr. Yoshitaka Kotoku, speaker for the Osaka League, ...

Damn! No coffee. He moved over to the comset, the combined communications, information and entertainment console, and toggled to land line communications. A young and androgynous face appeared on the comset screen.

<City Central Supplies. Kevein speaking. How may I help you?>

'John Martin here ...'

<Oh, hi Doc>

'Hello, Kevein. I need some coffee. Dark roast.'

<Your account's a bit stretched Doc. Can't let you have the real thing. Will Ersatz Blend do?>

Real thing! Martin snorted mentally. We haven't had real coffee for over a decade. It's all ersatz blend.

'I'd rather not Kevein. Can't you stretch a point? I'll be paid in a few days.'

<Well ... OK, Doc, just for you. But Mr. Salter says we can't afford to give people credit no more.>

'Thanks, Kevein. Oh, and can I have a bottle of Bourbon too?'

<OK, Doc. It'll be around in five minutes.>

'Thanks, Kevein.' He disconnected.

... declared today that shipments of biochips, upon which the Pan American Bioelectronics industry depends, will be halted within the next week unless ...

While he waited, he punched the codes to scan for stored messages,
No messages stored. Sorry Dr. Martin

then switched to scan the newlines. He downloaded a couple of articles for reading later, and flipped the comset back into default mode.

... There are new developments in the AIV scare. Reports coming in from Reuter's indicate that the alleged pandemic ravaging the African Continent is spreading towards Europe. Our correspondent in Kusake ...

A rap on the door.

'Dr. Martin? Your supplies.'

He left the comset and retrieved his groceries. Thanked the delivery girl, and apologised that he couldn't tip her.

'It's OK, Doc. We know. Don't worry about it.'

The night stretched uncomfortably ahead. Few friends visited. Few people ever visited anyone. Most, like John Martin, contented themselves with artificial spirits and the comset. He'd eaten a constituted chemical mess that purported to be vegetable lasagne, pleasant enough with its many artificial flavourings designed to excite the brain's pleasure centres, but hardly food. The best that could be said for it was that it filled the aching void of hunger with artificial bulk. Now he sat before the comset screen, full from his meal and muffled in a bourbon haze, flipping channels until he found the *War Movie Channel*. '*Relive those exciting days when men were men and women knew how to love them*'. Jesus!, he thought. It's enough to make you puke! But he didn't change the channel He had a weakness for war movies because, he reasoned to himself, at least they showed life with action and danger, and all those old fashioned concepts like honour and mercy and heroism and, and ... It was, he knew, an excuse, a way to escape from the misery that threatened to engulf him at every waking moment. If he had had the courage he might have killed himself. But he didn't, so he lost himself in images of other people's bravery. These days he didn't even read any more. It all seemed like too much irrelevant trouble. So, torpor strangling his mind, he found himself watching *The Longest Day*, again. Bread and circuses, he mused. We haven't got the bread, but we've sure got the circuses.

Dr. Martin to Cryogenic Facility Seven immediately! Dr. Martin to Cryogenic Facility Seven immediately! Dr. Martin to ...

'Shut up!' he thought. 'I've got the message!' He ran through the gleaming corridors to the area they called the fridges. Something must be wrong, he thought. Oh, God! Not now. Not when my contract is up for review.

He entered the large refrigeration area. White, gleaming, sterile. Sterile! In more ways than one!

'What's wrong, Pat? What's happened?'

'Oh, nothing serious. Damned security people always assume that every call is urgent. Sorry if I frightened you, John, it's just that I thought you'd like an update on Mr. Ostoo there.'

Martin gripped his temple, hard, with his left hand. His heart pumping. Eyes screwed shut. Frowning. Relieved. Frightened. He breathed heavily to calm himself from his anxiety. Pat scrutinised him with concern.

'John, what's the matter? You don't usually get so worked up. You ill or something?'

'No, Pat. I'm just a bit stressed. My contract, and ...'

'Oh. Sorry, John. Yeah. I'll be more discreet next time. Yeah ...'

They stood nervously. Pat looking around for something to break the tension.

'What's going on with Ostoo, Pat? Anything to worry about?'

'Not at all.' Relief. An excuse to fill the space with minor technicalities. 'He's cooking nicely.'

Cooking. The term used by the technicians to refer to the freezing process. Irony. People still had a sense of humour. It kept them sane, if cynical.

'The kelvins are dropping at a steady rate,' Pat continued, 'and the life signs are steady.'

'The magnetic field OK?'

'Sure. The fluctuation dysfunction was sorted last week.'

'Helium levels?'

'Hunkydory.'

'What about the Crawford-Thompson readings?'

'C-T levels holding steady at standard deceleration. Mr. Ostoo, there, is currently at zero-mark-four-two. Pretty good, I'd say.'

C-T levels. The principal measure of life, devised by an engineer and a physicist. The Crawford-Thompson scale was universally applied to assess the presence of life, from accident victims to newly discovered planets. 1.0: fully alive; 0.0: dead.

'How long?'

'Mr. Ostoo can expect to be in his coffin by the end of the week.'

'Good. Thanks, Pat.'

Martin turned to leave, but Pat stopped him with a hesitant gesture.

'Something else, Pat?'

'Well, yes. I don't know whether it's important, but have you looked at the Incoming Inventory today?'

'No. Why? Anything unusual about it?'

'Well, I don't want to complain about the extra bonuses, or anything, but we seem to have had a bit of an increase in the numbers. Full body, too.'

'A few rich sti... clients succumbing to over indulgence?'

'Well, no. The dead sheets don't make sense. They're all different, but some of them list complaints that can be cured. Why would anyone want to go deep freeze when they can get a cure? And another thing. A lot of them list addresses in Portillo. Do you know what's going on?'

'No, Pat, I don't. I'll to talk Helen and see if she knows anything about it.'

Helen Sampson sat behind her desk. Her expression made it was clear that she intended to keep it between her and Martin, reinforcing the formality of the meeting.

'No, Dr. Martin, I don't think there's anything unusual going on. Admittedly it is a large rise in new clients, but as you know we do get these fluctuations from time to time. It's all perfectly normal.' She raised her eyebrows, indicating the small red dot over her left shoulder. Eavesdropping, huh? he thought. So something is going on.

'Thank you, Dr. Sampson. That's what I thought. But I thought it worth checking any way, just in case we needed to make arrangements.' He turned to leave, hesitated, and turned back.

'Would you come and verify some of the documentation on Mr. Ostoo for me? Pat, er, Dr. Aronson, is quite pleased with the progress, but there is the continuing problem of Magnetic Field Disparity which we would like your opinion about.'

'Of course, Dr. Martin. I'll be along in half an hour. Would that be acceptable?'

'Fine. Thank you, Dr. Sampson. We'll be in Facility Seven.'

The advantage of meetings in the Cryogenic Facilities was that the high density magnetic fields made electronic eavesdropping practically impossible. The corporation tried to disguise the fact by installing cameras and microphones nevertheless, but the technicians working there knew better. Knowledge still had its advantages.

'So what's up, Helen?'

'Sorry, John. I can't tell you.'

'Can't or won't?'

She shot him a vicious look. 'I could take offence at the implication there, John.'

'Sorry.'

'You should be. We're still friends, I hope, and I would hope that you trusted me enough to know that I'd tell you what I could. The plain fact is that I don't know what's happening. But something's up. Have you looked at the newscasts recently?'

'Well, off and on. I don't pay much attention any more.'

'Take a look. Tonight.' Her tone was commanding, urgent. 'There's been a lot of activity over at Portillo in the last week. Lots of traffic in and out. Increased security. The top brass,' she jerked her head upwards, 'know something, but they're not telling. John, I think you should be careful. Have you looked at any of the new incomers yet?' He shook his head. 'Then go and look.'

She squeezed his arm gently, then turned and left. As she crossed the threshold of the Cryogenic Facility she swung round and shouted: 'Thank you, Dr. Martin. The readings seem fine. I think that little problem has been solved. So carry on as normal.'

He waved at her.

Later, in the preparation lounge, he stood looking at the bodies of five new clients. All full body jobs. Naked and inert, but still breathing. Pat stood at his shoulder.

'What do you reckon, Pat?'

'Nothing. Can't see anything unusual.'

'Let's have a look, then.'

The two of them moved up and down the row, checking details on portable electronic notepads. Normal behaviour. The manager accompanying a technician on a routine inspection. The manager up for reappointment, concerned that his technician is doing a thorough job. All in order. Nothing unusual.

'John! Here. Look at this.' Pat was pointing at something. Martin moved closer.

'What is it?'

'Look.' Pat's voice was low. Conspiratorial. Martin looked. What he saw was a small red patch on the client's inner thigh. It was the size of a soya bean, but perfectly circular. Neat, red and ... potentially lethal. Martin's stomach lurched.

'What is it, John?'

'I'm not sure. But if it's what I think it is, we're in deep shit.'

Martin stood biting his lip, brow furrowed, his mind working in fragmented whorls. He cleared his throat, then turned to Pat. 'It's time,' he said under his breath, 'to do some research I think.'

Over the next three months John Martin and Pat gathered what information they could. Surreptitiously, carefully, like thieves casing a target, using their own comsets to download material from the medical networks, but always using search terms that disguised as far as possible what they were looking for. Whenever possible they met in the Cryogenic Facilities, as if examining the latest client, talking in whispers and gesture. All apparently normal, they hoped, to outsiders, and eavesdroppers. When they thought it safe they shared what they had found with Helen, but that was risky for all three of them so they kept it to a minimum.

Meanwhile, the number of clients increased each day, until it was difficult to cope

with the influx. Full body internments. Rich people. The red patch ominously frequent.

The faces around Martin began to change. The guard that had mutely threatened him weeks before was no longer there. The receptionist that handed out his security pass had left. Even members of his own department were missing. But he was too preoccupied to notice. Until ...

He was sitting at his desk reviewing some routine papers, some of which needed clarification. He punched the comset code for Helen Sampson's office.

'Helen, I need ...'

A male voice interrupted:

<Dr. Sampson is no longer with us. Would you please come up to the office, Mr. Martin, I would like a word with you.>

'What? ... What do you mean she's no longer with us? Where is she?'

<Mr. Martin, if you would come up to Dr. Sampson's office. We need to talk.>

'Who are you?'

<There is little to be gained by procrastinating, Mr. Martin. Please come up to the office immediately.>

Worried, and irritated by the peremptory summons, Martin left his desk without disconnecting the comset, and ran to Helen's office. He pushed through the door without knocking, and found himself confronted by a small, neat man in a business suit sitting in Helen Sampson's chair. Martin walked to the desk and, with his hands set on its edges leaned across until his face was barely a foot from the little man's nose.

'What do you mean "Dr. Sampson's no longer with us"? Where is she?'

'Dr. Sampson retired. ...'

'Retired? Retired? What do you mean "retired". She was a long way from retirement. What have you done with her? What have you done *to* her?'

'Please sit down, Mr. Martin.'

'Answer me!'

'Dr. Sampson and the corporation reached a, ah, an understanding. And she has left us. Sit down Mr. Martin.'

'*Dr. Martin! Why has she left?*'

'Mr. Martin, that is none of your concern. It is a confidential matter between Dr. Sampson and the corporation. Sit down, if you please. Now then, I need to talk to you. I understand ...'

'I do *not* please, and I demand to know what has happened to Dr. Sampson.'

'... that your contract is due for review shortly. Sit down, Mr. Martin, sit down *now*.'

Martin sat angrily. Only now did he look properly at the man confronting him. A small, colourless, man in an anonymous business suit. Neat wire rimmed spectacles perched accusingly on his nose barely disguising the hard unkind eyes behind them.

'Who *are* you?'

'I am Mr. de Pravée, Cryogenic Operations Chief Accountant.' He smiled thinly when he saw Martin's look of recognition. 'Ah. I see you know the name, Mr. Martin. Yes.'

We have corresponded, but never met.'

'And I am *Dr. Martin*. What are you doing here?'

'I am temporarily assuming *Dr. Sampson's* position until we can find a replacement, *Mr. Martin*.'

'*Mr. de Pravée*, my title is *Dr. Martin*.'

'Ah, yes. You are an educated man indeed, and no doubt cultivated as well. You understand the civilities, of course. But you see, *Dr. Martin*,' the thin smile again, 'I don't have the benefit of your extensive education. Sadly my own university experience stopped at the Masters level. ...'

'Masters level? MBA you mean? That hardly counts as a degree,' *Martin* sneered.

'Well, ...' *De Pravée* spread his arms, 'perhaps you are right, *Mr. Martin*. But who lives in *Portillo*, *Mr. Martin*?' Again, the smile, but this time with a smug and sinister satisfaction beneath it.

'*Mr.*, sorry, *Dr. Martin*, I have had some disturbing reports about your activities. First, we note, over several weeks, that you sometimes arrive for work with excessive alcohol in your system.'

Martin started. 'What? ...' Then he realised 'Ah. The toilets.'

'Precisely, *Mr. Martin*. Had you forgotten our routine analyses of employees' urine and faeces for, how can I put it, unfortunate indicators?'

Martin shook his head, for his own benefit rather than *De Pravée's*. He never could come to terms with the kind of intrusive petty-mindedness that led some people even to examine another's piss and shit. You can't fight this sort of rubbish, he thought.

'It is surprising to me that *Dr. Sampson* didn't report it to us. It's a very serious matter. But,' that smile again, 'I am quite prepared to overlook it, *Mr. Martin*.' He paused to observe the effect he was having on *Martin*.

'We on the top floor are more concerned about another matter,' he continued. 'We understand that you, and one of your associates, *Pat*, ah, ...' he made a show of consulting an electronic pad before him, '... ah, here it is, *Aronson*, I think, have been accessing information about *Portillo* and,' he paused again, frowning, 'the AIV pandemic. Why is that, *Mr. Martin*?'

Martin surged: 'You've been tapping my lines?'

Of course they had. He knew it, that was why he took pains to try and disguise what he was doing. But he was angry, more with himself than with the corporation snoops. But he had a convenient target for his fury before him, so he used it.

'You shits! You bastards! How *dare* you! ...'

'Calm down, *Mr. Martin*. Merely a routine matter of company security. I'm sure you appreciate how ...'

'You *bastards!*'

'*Mr. Martin*. Please calm down. Although we regard your activities as a grave breach of security...'

'What? Accessing public information about a city suburb? Accessing public

webcasts about a world health problem? Where's the breach ...'

'Mr. Martin. You know, and I know, that some of the sites you have been consulting are, shall we say, subversive at the very least, and probably seditious as well. We don't encourage our employees to consult illegal sources.' De Pravée wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief.

'Be reasonable, Mr. Martin. How can we trust an employee who wantonly resorts to subversives for his information? And what about your pathetic and furtive little meetings with Dr. Aronson and Dr. Sampson in the Cryogenics lab. Did you really think we couldn't monitor what you were up to? Dear oh dear, Mr. Martin. And you an educated man as well.'

Martin was about to reply, but De Pravée continued before he could speak.

'I was hoping to keep this until later, but ... We, ah, on the top floor, would like to propose a mutually beneficial accommodation with you. We would like you to drop your enquiries. In return, we will overlook the breach of security. In addition we would be prepared to make you Director of Operations.' He paused and looked at Martin. Martin was too angry to notice the concern on de Pravée's face. 'If, however, you continue your research, ...' he spread his arms again.

'What? *What?*'

'Think it over, Mr. Martin. Take the rest of the day off, and think about it.' De Pravée was sweating discreetly, but Martin didn't notice. 'I'll be in touch. Good morning, Mr. Martin.'

Martin, unable to speak, outraged, stood where he was. Unfocused. Confused.

'A word of advice, Mr. Martin. Stick to the War Movie Channel. It's better for your health. Good day.'

A guard appeared, took Martin's arm, and led him none too gently back to his own office.

He took a long time to calm down. And when he did his head felt like a grape in a steam press. Leaning forward, elbows on his desk, he rubbed his face hard with both hands. Fatigue permeated his soul. His head felt too heavy to carry unaided.

He shook his head. Focused. Punched the comset code for Pat's portable communicator. The corporation's slickly female artificial voice answered:

We are sorry, but that code is no longer operative. Dr. Aronson retired from the corporation yesterday. Thank you, and have a good day, Dr. Martin.

'Oh, Christ.' He felt sick. 'Pat as well?'

De Pravée had given him the rest of the day off, so he took it. In point of fact he was given no choice because a security guard had insistently accompanied him to the front door. So, splashing through the streets he made for Helen's home. He must talk with her.

The journey was long and sodden. A police vehicle passed him on the way. An unusual sight outside Portillo.

Turning into Helen's road, he stopped. Part way along he could see the spiteful blue haze of security screens set up on the pavement. He knew what it meant. He just *knew* it. But he didn't believe it.

As he neared Helen's house, his stomach knotted tighter. Each step confirmed what he feared. The screens, barriers impermeable to anything, living or dead, surrounded Helen's home. She was sealed in; he was sealed out.

'Why, for God's sake? Why?' He spoke to the air, which responded with rain.

Drawing level with the barriers, he saw the official notice. These were mandatory on all domestic confinements, explaining who had been confined, and why. But this one explained nothing at all. It merely bore the conventional symbol for a biohazard. Beyond, shrouded in the blue haze of energy, Helen's house glistened. For the first time in years no rain battered its walls. It was efficiently, effectively, and totally isolated from the rest of the planet.

Frustrated, but helpless, there was nothing to do but leave. He set off for Pat's home, hoping to find something there.

He did.

It was sealed in as well. The same barriers. The same biohazard warning. The same total isolation.

'Oh, God. What's going on? Dear God, won't someone explain what's happening?' Bewildered, he staggered away, his direction random.

Anxiety drove; he merely followed. Incapable of knowing where he was going, he wandered aimlessly. Noticing nothing. Even the rain failed to penetrate his distraction.

Portillo loomed, bright, clean and untouchable. Dimly, it registered in the far recesses of his mind that the place was also distracted. But, even had he cared, he knew too little about the enclave of the rich to recognise the change in its tempo.

By degrees, by autopilot, he found his way home. Entered. Turned on the comset automatically. And searched for a bottle of bourbon.

... Arnold Harness, speaking for the Interior Ministry, has issued a statement denying rumours of disorder in Portillo. He says that the excitement there is simply an expression of anticipation at the forthcoming visit of Angela Forgaine, CEO of Eurocom, our most successful manufacturing ...

Manufacturer? He snorted into his glass. Europe hasn't manufactured anything for decades. We just assemble bits from other places ...

Great wracking sobs took him, and he wept.

Anger woke him next morning. He was slumped in the chair before the comset. Stiff.

Feeling dirty. Damp. Still in his wet raincoat. An empty bourbon bottle nudging his foot.

... and there was relief when the Health Ministry confirmed earlier this morning that the AIV scare was a hoax. AIV, the so-called Airborne Immunodeficiency Virus is now officially dismissed as an invention designed to destabilise the economy. The statement emphasised that the hoax had been engineered by a group of extremists ...

He eased himself to the bathroom. Still wobbly from the bourbon. Managed to wash and shave. Rummaged in the wardrobe for the least dirty shirt.

... AIV was alleged to be a virulent mutation of the HIV virus, but both infectious and contagious. Had this been true the Ministry pointed out, then the human race would have been extinct by now. So, we can all sleep soundly in our beds, thanks to the untiring efforts of a team of government ...

Torpor still clung doggedly around him, but he needed answers. Friends are hard to find, and I'm not losing two that easily.

... more excitement in Portillo today about the impending visit of Angela Forgaïne ...

He stepped to the comset. Entered the code for stored messages. Helen's face appeared on the screen. A green override message flashed at the bottom:

This message has been encrypted. Please enter the code for decryption. State security has already noted the contents. You may proceed ...

He punched savagely at the keypad: 'Damn them all.'

<John. I'm so sorry. I haven't much time. They're putting up the screens now. I never had time to tell you how I cared for you, John. Too late now. The Portillo people are using us, look in my ...>

The message ended abruptly with a security service flag:

The rest of this message has been redacted for reasons of state security.

Hot eyes. Tears easing. He sniffed them back. Time to act. Time to cry later.

He planned his journey to work to pass Helen's again. Vain hope merged with anger. She may be officially untouchable, but the mere human presence behind the screens would, he hoped, give him courage. His leg itched.

Helen's street. He turned the corner expecting blue shimmer. It was gone. Hope thundered through him. Light headed, he moved quicker. Began to run. Please. Please let it ...

The house was gone. There remained only a neat black patch. Surgically precise. Neat and empty. Rain hammering the ash. Whatever the reason, Dr. Helen Sampson, his friend, had been erased along with all traces of her existence, a fate usually reserved for

the most dangerous criminals.

Tears ran freely down his cheeks, insignificant additions to the deluge battering from the sky. Life. A tear drop washed away in the rain.

'Nooooooooo!' he wailed. 'Nooooooooo!'

Thumb print, voice trace and retina scan vary within acceptable parameters. You are two hours late this morning, Dr. Martin. We hope that you are not unwell. Upon entry, please proceed directly to office Ab794, where you will receive details of your new duties. A guard will accompany you. Thank you for your co-operation, and have a good day Dr. Martin.

He entered the corporate womb. Picked up a security tag, and followed the guard to what had been Helen's office. His resolution began to ebb, what, after all, could he actually *do*? But things began to register.

There were fewer people. Faces he had known for years were gone. The guard, he realised, was an android. So was the receptionist.

His leg itched.

The corridors were hollow. Sporadic people emerged from dead offices. No-one smiled. No-one waved. The thinned population moved in earnest focus, carrying bundles of files, boxes of computer chips, records. He thought of *The Longest Day*, and German Staff Officers burning inconvenient archives.

Office Ab794. The door plate read: *Dr. J. B. Martin, MA., MD., PhD. Director of Cryogenic Operations.* The guard angled him behind the desk and departed. A light winked on the comset. He pressed for access, and the corporate voice spoke:

There is a confidential message for you. Please hold. ...

<Martin. We on the, ah, top floor have decided to promote you regardless. ...> Martin saw the lines of worry on de Pravée's face. He looked sick and frightened.

<We, ah, feel that you are the best person to replace Dr., ah, S-Sampson. ... You will therefore take up your d-duties imm-m-mmediately. Your instru-u-uctions will be given to you when this message ends. As a gesture of, ah, goodwill, we have backd-dated your salary inc-c-crease by six months. The money has already been, ah, ah, credited, ah, to your acc-count.>

... Message ends. ... Instructions follow. ... These instructions are confidential, Dr. Martin. Hard copy client inventories are being downloaded to you now. Please see to the necessary arrangements, and destroy these documents when you have finished. Further instructions will be given to you later. Thank you for your co-operation, Dr. Martin.

The comset blanked to the default screen saver; an animated version of the corporation's trade mark. Martin leaned over to the inset microphone: 'Get me de Pravée's extension.' The corporate voice returned:

Mr. de Pravée is currently unavailable for security reasons, Dr. Martin. In the

interim, I have been instructed to assume responsibility for the management of the facility. You will therefore receive your instructions directly until further notice. Please carry out the instructions you already have. Thank you for your co-operation, Dr. Martin.

He leaned over and lifted the client inventories, dead sheets, from the desk printer. They were marked 'Highly Confidential: Do not circulate'. Another stiff, another dollar, he thought. I wish Pat were here. His leg itched.

Without interest he looked at the first sheet:

Name: *Theodore Kragen*
Position: *CEO, Abatis Health Corporation*
Status: *Leukemia*

Kragen? Leukemia? That was easily curable.
He leafed through the remaining sheets:

Name: *Anton de Pravée*
Position: *Executive Director, Abatis Health Corporation ...*

Peters, Brollachan, Thatcher, Lubbard, Stuart, Blare, Hedley-Kow, ... The whole top floor. The corporation's senior executives. All of them. All in for full body internment.

He spoke to the microphone again: 'What's going on here?'

You have your instructions, Dr. Martin. Please carry them out.

'Why are all the executives going forward for internment?'

That is classified information, Dr. Martin. Please carry out your instructions.

'Who is doing the prep?'

We have acquired androids from the Ostoo Corporation for the purpose of preparation, Dr. Martin. We hope that doesn't inconvenience you. Please carry out your instructions, Dr. Martin. Timing is critical.

'Where has everyone gone?'

That is confidential information, Dr. Martin. Please do not worry about the details.

'Where are Dr. Sampson and Dr. Aronson? Have they both retired?' he couldn't quite keep the sarcasm from his voice. 'Where have they gone? Why did they leave?'

Both Dr. Sampson and Dr. Aronson have accepted posts with other corporations, Dr. Martin. Please carry out your instructions.

'There aren't any other corporations, not for their kind of work. Why did they leave?'

That is classified information, but we understand that they have both taken positions with a corporation in the Osaka League.

'Bullshit! Stop giving me the run around! I want some straight ...'

Dr. Martin. I have analysed the composition of your perspiration, and detect excess

alcohol. I have determined that this accounts for your distraction. A guard will bring you a preparation to metabolise the remaining alcohol. Please drink it at once, and then attend to your duties immediately.

The comset link was severed. Martin sat alone, confronted by an unfriendly android insistently proffering a glass. His leg itched.

His home felt more like a nest than ever. He was tired, demoralised, confused. His leg itched badly. The comset was still on from this morning. He looked for a bottle of bourbon. There was only an empty bottle. He scratched heavily at his leg.

... great news for the people of Portillo ...

Jeez, I need a drink.

His leg was insistent. Angrily, he unfastened the belt and let his trousers fall to the floor. He looked. And saw a small red patch. The size of a soya bean but perfectly round. He vomited.

Vomit clinging to face and hair, he lurched to a chair which obligingly propped his weight and held him like a deformed dummy, coughing, retching, choking.

'Oh dear God, no,' he gagged. 'Not that. Not *that*.' Heaving, sobbing, choking. Tears of rage, grief and trauma.

It was a long time before he calmed down sufficiently to collect what was left of his thought. Diagnosis: AIV infection. Prognosis: a month if lucky, six if not. Either way, 0.0. Dead.

He punched the code for landline transmission.

<City Central Supplies. Kevein speaking. How may I help you?>

'John Martin h...'

<Sorry, Doc, but Mr. Salter says you can't have any more until you pay us something. I got a real bollocking last time, you know.>

'I can pay. Look. I can pay. Wait a minute. Look. It's credited all ready. See it? ...'

<I see it, Doc. Sorry about that. You know how it is.>

'I know. It's OK. I know. Give me six bottles of bourbon and two hundred cigarettes.'

<You trying to get me hung, Doc? You know you can't have six bottles. That's way over the permitted limit. And you're not a registered nicotine user, so you can't have cigarettes either. I can let you have marijuana. Cheap. Just got some Brazilian in, on offer.>

'OK. OK. Just give me what you can. But quick. Make it quick.'

<Doc? You sick or something? Never seen you like this before.>

'Yes, I'm sick, Kevein. We all are. We're finished.'

<Doc?>

'Don't worry about it, Kevein. Just bring me my stuff. I'll give you and, ... what's her name ...?'

<Who? Amanda? The delivery girl?>

'Yeah. Amanda. I'll give you both a personal bonus.'

<Hey, Doc. I know your finances aren't good. No need. You don't have to, you know...>

'It's OK, Kevein. It doesn't matter any more.'

John Martin was lucky. The final agonies lasted barely three-and-a-half weeks. He had dragged his bed into the living room, in front of the comset. While he still had strength he flipped endlessly through the entertainment channels, and drank bourbon. He watched *The Longest Day* five more times before he died.

The end was a final, gross indignity, capping a working life of degradation. It was merciful that he was, by that stage, too delirious to realise that he was lying in the filth and stench of his own vomit and excrement.

No-one ever found his body. There was no-one to look. Amanda, still dreaming about how she would spend her fifty from Martin, died a week after him. Kevein died two days after that.

The rain still beat hard. The damp patch got worse.

The comset was still on

... For technical reasons we can no longer bring you up to the minute news coverage of domestic and world events. We apologise for the inconvenience, but hope that you will enjoy our twenty-four hour schedule of light entertainment programmes ...

The news reader, who looked very unwell, died two weeks after that.

And still the world beat on, and on, and on. And so it would, in perpetuity. The machines. Those clever, self repairing, self replicating machines would go on for ever. Keeping things running. Attending the rich who weren't there. Checking, adjusting, repairing, maintaining. On, and on, and on ... Courtesy of the Hal Ostoo Corporation.

John Martin awoke in his own bed. He felt well. Light. Energetic. Happy.

Happy?

'Hi, John.'

He looked round. 'Helen?' It must be the delirium, he thought. The end must be soon, then.

'You're not delirious, John. You're dead. 0.0. No life signs.'

'Dead?'

'I waited for you, John.'

'Helen? ...'

'Come on, John. I want to show you something.'

'How ...?'

'Later, John. Later. Come and see.' She took his hand and lifted him from the bed. He could see the comset through her arm. He could see ... Dr. John Martin. Filthy, degraded, dead.

'Leave it, John, it doesn't matter. It's just a dead shell. Come on.'

Together they left his home for the final time. Hand-in-hand through the door.

Literally.

'We don't have to walk, you know.' She lifted him gently, ever so gently, into the air. To ...

Portillo.

'Take a look. See how the other half lived, and died.'

Portillo was silent. Nothing moved, except the occasional robot street cleaner. Into the houses. Everything neat. Everything tidy. Everything dead. Corpses. Neatly arranged in their beds. Scrubbed clean by fastidious domestic robots. But dead. Dead, dead, dead. Waiting for the undertakers who would never arrive. Portillo was empty of life. All that was left was a mechanical soul.

'They're the lucky ones,' she said. 'Now come and look at this.'

They moved towards the Abatis Health Corporation facilities. The place where neither they, nor anyone else, worked any more. It was as clean, clinical and corporate as ever. Punctilious, but unimaginative, androids bustled. Android guards shouldered maser carbines against no threat they would ever encounter. Everything was spick and span. Efficient, effective, and *working*.

'Come on,' Helen urged. 'Up.'

Together they soared into the air, towards a knot of others.

'John, I think you've met Anton here.'

Martin looked. Anton de Pravée. Small, neat, naked. And very, very frightened. Hands imploring, De Pravée tried to move towards them, but was jerked sharply back as if tethered.

'Dr. Martin. Help us. Please help us.'

Martin looked at Helen.

'Look,' she said, pointing. 'Look closely. From the back of his head.'

Martin peered, and saw a painfully thin cord stretching from the base of de Pravée's skull. 'What is it?' he asked.

'They're trapped,' said Helen. 'Trapped.'

'Why? ...'

'They're anchored. And look. Don't you see how insubstantial they are.'

He saw. De Pravée, and the others: Ostoo, Kragen, Brollachan, Blare, all of them,

were like gossamer things. Thin and insubstantial. And all scared.

'This is the way it is, John. They, the whole Portillo crowd, knew the truth about AIV. So they should. One of them brought it here as a memento from a business trip.'

'Dr. Martin. Please. Help us,' de Pravée pleaded. He struggled against his leash. His wail was taken up by the others. Martin looked puzzled. Helen sneered.

'Shut up, you poisonous little man!'

'They kept it quiet,' she continued, 'and rushed themselves into storage. A nice piece of cynicism. You and I, and everyone else at the facility, in the rest of the world, was expendable. They knew, they *knew*, that we'd all die. That just preparing them would be our death sentence. But they didn't care. A few more grunts on the scrap heap. It didn't matter as long as they escaped the plague. But they miscalculated. They forgot that cryogenics only makes sense if someone's there to thaw them out later, when there's a cure. But AIV's killed everyone off. *Everyone*. Except, of course, for the selfish bastards in deep freeze. Isn't that right Mr. de Pravée?' She prodded his nose with her forefinger, and smiled.

De Pravée looked ill. 'Can't you get someone to turn the machines off? Please?' He reached towards Martin. Missed.

'There's no-one left,' said Helen. 'You killed them all off.'

'Look,' said Hal Ostoo, 'get us out of this jam and I'll make you both vice presidents of the Ostoo Corporation. What about it? And I'm sure that Mr. Kragen over there would be pleased to put you on the board of Abatis ...'

'We're dead, Mr. Ostoo. There's nothing we can do. Even if we wanted to.'

'What's wrong with them?' John asked.

'They are still attached to the material world. We aren't. Don't you realise it yet? While their bodies live, they stay here, just as they are. A purgatory of their own making. They lied, stole and cheated to own the world, now it owns them. They are secured to those infernal machines below. And if Mr. Ostoo's boasts are true, they will be for a long, long time.'

'So what? They're here. We're here. What's the difference?'

'No, we're here. *They* are there. We can go. They must stay. Like characters in a book, theirs is a different plane of reality. The author can change their fate, but we are just the readers.'

'You haven't seen the best bit yet,' she continued. 'Come on.' They began to drift away.

'Dr. Martin! Please. I'll make you Chief Exec. of Ostoo Corporation.' Ostoo grabbed wildly. 'Don't go. Please. Come back and help us, Dr. Martin.'

Helen turned, momentarily. Raised the middle finger of her right hand, and jerked it in the air.

'Come on, John. Someone else waited for you too. Pat stayed behind to mark the way.'

'Pat!'

'Pat felt as much for you as I did. Three lonely people who loved each other. Sad, isn't it?'

'You know,' he said, 'I often wondered if Pat was male or female.'

'Does it matter, now? Did it ever matter?'

'No, I suppose not.' He realised that nothing mattered any more. Perhaps nothing ever did.

For the first time in years he felt like laughing. So he did.