

SIDDHARTHA

3.2

ALL THE WORLDS AT ONCE

PART 4

15. Munyeen Ohrmuz and the Crisis on quite a lot of Earths.

13.59 Event minus 00.03.

Security contacted Munyeen Ohrmuz on the grounds that she seemed to have established some kind of rapport with Debra and Rachel, though Munyeen herself harboured some doubts on that matter, however, as long as Security didn't confuse 'rapport' with 'like', then perhaps they were right.

The call came at an inconvenient time for her, catching her as it did in the middle of simultaneously bathing both her son (age two and half) and her daughter (nine months).

She yelled, "Daniel, it's the emergency call, I've got to get it. Can you take over here?"

Daniel Morgan came into the bathroom, his hands covered in flour. "Suppose so," he said. "The cheese scones can wait." By the time he'd completed the brief sentence, Munyeen had long since left the room. "Daddy's babies!" he cried gleefully.

"I'm not a baby," said his disgusted small son.

"Ohrmuz. What is it?" Munyeen said.

"The dynamic dyke duo have lit the blue touchpaper," said a man's voice. "Should we be concerned?"

"Probably," Munyeen replied. "They found us after all. Where?"

"A north London sports club run by someone who's recently been added to our watch list. His name keeps popping up in too many sensitive places."

"Oh, you mean Hannison," she said. "Well he's not a known paranormal so we should be thinking magic user. I assume a team has already been put together."

"Yes, but we value your input. We told Affleck for her and Green to stay outside and wait."

Munyeen laughed. "That would probably have the same effect as me telling my Laurel to stop crying. She'll do what she bloody well wants and so will they. How long since they called?"

"Thirteen minutes now. Why?"

"Because," she said, "if my experience of them is anything to go by, the shit has already hit the fan and you're probably looking at a cleanup operation. I –holy fuck!"

14.02.01 Event plus 00.00.01.

Something suddenly hit her inside the head and she felt like a computer powering up with a new super fast chip. She heard Daniel yell from the bathroom at the same time.

"Munyeen! Munyeen, what is it?" yelled the voice on the phone.

"A disturbance in the fucking force," she answered. "Something's just stuck a live wire in my brain." Crap, she was shaken, she hardly ever swore these days, not with the kids around anyway.

She said, "I think something very serious has gone down."

"I've got to go," said the voice on the phone, "we're suddenly getting reports of major Shadow incursions. Dear God, it might be worldwide."

The line went dead.

14.07 Event plus 00.05.

But not for long.

"Yes?"

"Jamie Hall at the Institute," said a woman's voice. She sounded as if she was trying to keep control of herself. "You're not going to believe this but the third floor has been replaced."

"Replaced?" Munyeen said. "What do you mean, replaced?"

"Replaced as in replaced by a different third floor populated by paranormals we've never seen before. And the director seems to have had a stroke at home. Munyeen, we need you now."

"Christ on a crutch," Munyeen muttered. "Daniel, go next door and get Lucy. Pay her whatever you have to. Have sex with her if that's what it takes, as long as it's quick. Just get her here to look after the kids."

"Is the world coming to an end or something?" he asked from the doorway, a towel-wrapped child in each arm. When he saw her expression, he said, "Oh dear."

“When we’re ready,” Munyeen said sombrely, “bring the gun.”

14.17 Event plus 00.15

Before they could leave, the phone rang again.

“It’s Jamie again. The newcomers, they want to talk to you. They won’t come downstairs and their own phones don’t work so I’ve given them this mobile. I’m handing you over now.”

“Madam Ohrmuz,” said a masculine voice but in an accent she’d never quite heard before. It had elements of Estuary English but with an indefinable additional lilt. “My name is Garth Trensham. I’ll get to the point as I don’t know how much time we have. Yes?”

“Speak,” said Munyeen.

“My world has contact with others and we have heard of the Event before. It is relatively localised, a small pocket of multiversal space-time. It is temporary in nature, a few hours perhaps. Some changes will be permanent, others will not. I believe, I hope, that we here will snap back and your people return and it could happen at any moment which is why I have sent your people back downstairs. There will be much devastation and many will die and your world -both our worlds- will be changed because the walls of your world will have been weakened. There is a good chance that paranormals will...”

The line went dead.

Daniel shouted, “Munyeen, there’s a helicopter overhead. I’m going to see what they want.”

Ending the call, Munyeen moved to the window and watched Daniel sail into the air, rising swiftly towards the helicopter two hundred feet above.

As did at least fifteen of their neighbours that she could see.

The mobile rang.

“Yes.”

“Get in the copter. Bring your children, we’ll take them with you to a bunker. But we’ll need you and your husband active.”

“No problem there. Daniel’s so active he’s just flown in full view of the neighbours.”

“We don’t care. Just about every cat is out of the bag. Our job now is to save lives and contain incursions. Maintaining secrecy is the least of our problems. Hurry.”

Daniel came back in the room, put his daughter into a carrier which went over Munyeen’s shoulder with the child facing her chest, then he grabbed Munyeen’s and Robbie’s hands and pulled them outside. Picking up Robbie and cradling him in his arms, he said to Munyeen, “Get on my back and wrap your legs around my waist.”

“You can’t...”

“The copter can’t land here and, yes, I can carry you all. I feel like I’m burning with energy. Do it!”

Munyeen did it. Daniel was not a noticeably assertive person rather a collaborative co-operative personality type, a team member not a leader. But when he did take the lead, everyone else followed, including his dominant wife.

They rose swiftly to the sound of Robbie’s delighted squealing.

14.18 Event plus 00.16.

On Mars, a rose bloomed on the slopes of Mons Olympus where it would be discovered, thirty five years later, still alive and contained within an impenetrable force field. Six months after that the rose and force field would disappear. No-one would ever know why. Just another of the Event’s many mysteries.

On a busy street in Haringey, London, a three girl old girl ran away from her mother. She ran across a busy road straight in front of a speeding car. Seconds later her mother saw her, unharmed, standing on the other side of the road and when she reached her daughter the child wanted to know where all the horsies had gone.

14.30 Event plus 00.28.

Munyeen hated leaving her children at the bunker but she had no choice. In the absence of Director John Claremont, she had become designated an *essential person*, a key operative in the event of a major disaster, and she knew the procedure. The kids would be well looked after along with all the other children of essential personnel.

When they had landed, and after being separated from their tearful children, both she and Daniel had been given earpieces by which they could receive priority messages. She was getting one now.

Jamie again. "Munyeen, our talents have gone off the charts. Every one of us in the building has received a massive power boost with no adverse affects. Heart rate, temperature, neither have changed. Blood pressure has probably gone up with the stress. It's like we've turned into super..."

"Don't say it! And don't start thinking like that!" Munyeen warned her sternly. "All it means is that we could be more useful. I want every paranormal outside the Brit and Hampton Parva located. If you have time, have testing started on your talents. Unless you have urgent information, wait for me to contact you."

Within minutes Munyeen and Daniel were inside an underground complex, their children secure in some sub-basement crèche hundreds of feet below. Munyeen left Daniel in a room with several other people while she was hustled away to a briefing.

14.59 Event plus 00.57.

There were twenty people in the briefing room. Tables were arranged in a semi circle with a single table in the centre. Sitting at it was the Prime Minister.

An aide proffered Munyeen a cup of coffee which she took automatically and sat down. It seemed she was the last to arrive as the Prime Minister began to speak.

"I'm pleased you all arrived here so quickly," he said. "We have important work to do. Internal Security is now in charge of all military and civil resources for the duration of this crisis and is responsible only to me. Each of you here is either in charge of one of these resources or has expertise that we consider vital.

"I have had information passed on to me about the nature of this crisis. Ms Ohrmuz, please explain your role and what this information is."

She stood. "Munyeen Ohrmuz-Morgan, Acting Director of the Institute for Paranormal Affairs." She heard a sharp intake of breath and realised that some people here had not known about them. "I have two germane items of information.

"The first is that the Event has caused an exponential increase in paranormal abilities. For example, my husband can self levitate but at no greater speed than he can walk or run and for a similar duration. Vertical flight has been a maximum ceiling of fifty feet, twenty if he's carrying another human being. Less than an hour ago he carried myself and our children up over two hundred feet to a helicopter and wasn't even out of breath. I mention this because it is likely that paranormals can become a useful tool in this crisis.

"Secondly, I have been informed by paranormals from a Shadow incursion –involuntary on their part- that this Event, as they called it, no matter how devastating, will be of relatively short duration –hours rather than days, though I believe mopping up the results of the incursion will take far longer."

"Another genie out of the bottle," the Prime Minister sighed. "Those of you who did not know before have already been given information that the world is not quite how it is usually perceived. Fuller information will be provided when you take your posts. You will all be in one room and served by the best communication systems available. You will be fed news from your people and will communicate relevant information to members of this group which will be headed by the chief of Internal Security. Some secrets are so secret that, alas, I can't tell you his name because even I don't know it."

Polite laughter followed the PM's joke though Munyeen was perhaps only one of three people in the room who knew the PM had spoken nothing but the truth.

He continued, "What you will do with your expertise is to allocate resources according to need. You, either on your own or after brief discussions with your new colleagues, will decide the priority. Above all, you *must* be decisive because we have no time in this crisis for vacillating, dithering, or buck-passing." The Prime Minister stood and said solemnly, "May God be with you all. Now go and save our country. Make me proud."

Munyeen was stunned; the man meant every single word.

15.10 Event plus 01.08.

My life, Munyeen thought as she opened up a video link to the Institute, has never been predictable.

"Jamie," she said looking a squat plump blonde girl. "Ability ratings."

"We've tested fourteen people and we're looking at average ratings of 6.5."

"Good. Feed me the rest of the data to the link I've sent you. I trust it's all categorised."

"Yes, Munyeen."

"Building status?"

"Everyone came back. Complete power disruption on the third floor but technicians have arrived and are doing emergency repairs. We've also requested a plumber."

"You need power but the plumbing will have to wait. You've got plenty of liquid refreshment, food, and you can use buckets for the other if it comes down to that. Keep this channel open. I'll speak to you later."

She turned to the room. Eighteen people all sat at communication arrays, all, like herself, wore headsets.

"Information confirm" she said.

"Go ahead," said the chief of Internal Security.

She repeated the results of the paranormal tests and explained. "The scale is similar to that of the Richter scale for earthquakes, that is three is twice the size of two, four twice the size of three. The most powerful paranormal talent so far measured is 2.1, and that is Director Claremont. The average is 1.3. The results so far indicate that, in earthquake terms, if paranormals might once have shaken the sideboard they can now demolish the house and possibly the entire street."

"In practical terms."

"As far as the Event is concerned, limited. Only one category will be useful in search and rescue, marginal in terms of offence –telekinesis. Some can levitate objects, others can self-levitate like my husband who, and I'm guessing here, can probably now fly at about fifty miles an hour and probably has a range of a couple of hundred miles. A levitator who could move a couple of pounds may now be able to lift half a ton."

"I'd question the marginal offence. No matter. Have you locations for individuals with these powers?"

Munyeen had already transferred the data to the communal database and said so. She tapped a key and a map of the United Kingdom came up showing clusters of paranormals at a variety of locations.

She said, "I trust they won't be shot at when they go into action."

"Arrangements have been made."

15.11 Event plus 01.09

The volcano, Mount St Helen's in Washington State, erupted without warning and three thousand people died in the first two hours.

At Mevagissey in Cornwall a platoon of armed German-speaking soldiers wearing swastikas appeared in front of the town hall. They panicked and began shooting, killing forty people in the first wave of firing. After two hours and twenty three more deaths, they were surrounded in a pub they had taken over. Refusing the opportunity to surrender they were killed by the SAS.

For half an hour, Dublin found itself in the middle of another world's civil war as hundreds of British soldiers, wearing a uniform unknown in this world, battled heavily armed Republican forces. Thousands of Dubliners died in the conflict from gunfire and bombing before the two

opposing forces disappeared but leaving their dead behind.

A giant lizard over two hundred feet high appeared in Mowbray Park, Sunderland. A blast of energy from its mouth completely disintegrated the Winter Gardens and over thirty visitors inside the glass structure. Then it too disappeared.

15.14 Event plus 01.12.

A man looked up, "I don't believe I'm saying this but, there are pterodactyl-like creatures flying over London."

Munyeen said, without an instant's hesitation, "Arm Daniel Morgan and send him out." I have to use everyone I need, she thought. Everyone and anyone.

15.20 Event plus 01.18.

A grim-faced woman tightened the body armour around his chest. He was given goggles, a leather helmet for his head but declined the gloves. He wouldn't be going that high and needed his hands unencumbered to fire the gun. On his way out he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror; he looked like an aviator from the 1930's.

Cool, he thought.

"Don't try to be a hero, handsome," said the woman. "Be effective."

Daniel grinned. All paranormals were members of Internal Security and had undergone self-defence and weapons training. In regard to the latter, he'd proven to be a particularly good marksman.

He took to the air. No superhero gestures like arms over his head, Daniel simply raised himself into the air, gaining altitude slowly but steadily. It felt effortless and it had never felt like that before.

He stopped rising at three hundred feet and moved east towards the West End where the creatures had been reported. The gun hung heavy in a holster at his hip and he could feel its weight trying to drag him down. Cobblers, he thought, that's nerves.

Heading down Regent Street towards Piccadilly he saw the first of them. It was gaining altitude with a piece of red dripping meat hanging from its jaws.

And it wasn't a pterodactyl.

Daniel had seen enough images of them to realise that this is what they might have evolved into. Its body was leaner and more supple, the long beak of its ancestors had shortened, becoming birdlike. It seemed too to have greater control of its flight than the original flying reptiles were supposed to have. It also bore a crest of blue feathers from the top of its head down the back to the base of the spine and then out along the tail. Daniel could just make out what looked like a small posing pouch around its groin.

"It's fucking intelligent," he said aloud.

"What?" asked a voice in his ear.

"It's a sapient predator. And it's seen me."

Daniel stayed where he was, hovering.

Below, the streets were almost empty following the government's declaration of a state of emergency and immediate curfew. Of course not everyone did as they were told, particularly the media and the pseudo-pterodactyls had brought them out in force. Two hundred yards away and circling was a BBC helicopter.

The creature ignored the helicopter and glided towards Daniel from above then arced to the right to sail round him. Daniel rotated his body, keeping the thing in view, the pistol now gripped firmly in his right hand.

It came so close, less than twenty feet away that Daniel could see its torso had tattoos. It suddenly screeched and lunged at him.

Daniel performed the equivalent of a sidestep causing it to miss him by several feet. Its speed rendered it unable to turn until it had gone well past him.

It was very agile, he realised, but it stood no chance against him because it couldn't fly like

he could.

It screeched again and came for him, diving down. Daniel waited until the creature was committed and couldn't pull out of its course and then he moved.

Almost right into the flight path of a second.

Daniel dropped like a stone, hand-like claws nearly raking open his scalp, missing by less than an inch.

They know we're intelligent too, he thought, and they don't care.

When one of them came again, he shot it through the mouth. The back of its neck exploded and it fell to the earth. Daniel could hear scattered cheering.

The survivor flew off and Daniel followed, pursued in turn by the helicopter. Now he arrowed through the sky like a diver, the pistol gripped in both hands. He fired once but missed.

The creature was fast but not faster than him, though he began to feel the energy burn beginning to take its toll as his heart rate increased. Could it have more stamina than he had? Daniel had really no idea what his own new limits were.

The thing headed towards Buckingham Palace where, and Daniel could not believe his eyes, the younger of the two heirs to the throne was standing outside on a balcony and had been watching the approaching pair through binoculars. By the time the moron realised he might be in danger it was too late to dart back indoors.

The pterodactyl landed lightly on the balcony and grabbed him before he could get inside. Turning swiftly, it jerked the prince in front of itself using him like a shield. It was not only intelligent but its reactions were faster than a human's. The creature was also smaller than a man but with longer arms. Talons clutched the young prince's face, drawing blood.

Daniel could see its bony crest but not its head which was hidden behind its captive's shoulder.

It began to drag the prince to one side, moving towards the edge of the balcony. Daniel didn't know if it was strong enough to fly with the prince clutched in the talons of its feet but he couldn't take the chance.

"Fucking thing understands what a gun is," Daniel said to his listener. "But it doesn't know I'm a good shot."

Hovering in front of the balcony, Daniel pressed the trigger and shot the prince in the left shoulder. The bullet passed straight through and blew his captor's large right eye and all of its brains out.

Daniel, alas, had no time to congratulate himself because the third pseudo-pterodactyl was on him.

He only just managed to twist his body in time to avoid claws slashing at his face.

Twisting his body again, he got his left forearm up as the short toothy beak attempted to close on his throat. Tangled together, they fell fifteen feet to the ground.

With Daniel on top.

Recovering more quickly than his assailant, he grabbed hold of the head by crest and beak, wrenched savagely and broke its neck.

Daniel sank back breathing heavily.

"Report!" shouted a voice in his ear. "We've lost the BBC feed."

"Okay," he said. "Three dead Shadows, one wounded prince. What the hell, he's in the army; he can take a bullet in the shoulder. Just one other thing. There are still tourists outside the palace grounds all armed with cameras. Guess who is going to be on the Internet in five minutes."

The adrenalin surge ebbed away and Daniel rolled over and was violently sick.

15.45 Event plus 01.43.

The King and Queen of Ice and Snow and their retinue appeared on the planet Neptune and were instantly frozen. They were discovered by terraformers five hundred years later, revived and

returned, bewildered, to their very changed reality.

On Mars, a dozen tentacled creatures suddenly found themselves in an environment hostile to life and died within minutes.

A hotel on the outskirts of Oban in Scotland was attacked by a pack of a fourteen dire wolves. They simply appeared on the steps of the large hotel where four of them pounced on and began eating a guest alive. The remaining eleven charged inside to attack anyone they found. By the time they reached the bar, two of the guests who had been drinking coffee had armed themselves with shields, an axe and a pike they had pulled from the wall and attacked the beasts as they burst in.

Between them the couple, honeymooners Colin and Maggie Henderson, accounted for seven of the wolves before someone found shotguns and dispatched the remainder of the pack. Colin and Maggie suffered numerous but not life threatening wounds and were quickly taken to hospital.

Dire wolf packs also appeared in several other parts of the Highlands and were responsible for nearly a hundred deaths. Only three were caught alive.

16.04 Event plus 02.02.

Munyeen sipped the hot black coffee. Kenyan, she decided and thought, from the southern slopes of Kilimanjaro, and smiled. She hadn't a clue where it bloody came from but it was strong and bitter and that was what mattered.

Daniel was okay and being debriefed. She knew because she was watching him on a monitor. When a Security officer asked him if it had really been necessary to shoot the prince and Daniel had replied, "Not if you wouldn't have minded him going through life with no face," Munyeen jumped up and applauded. Her man was generally easy-going but fuck with him and he could be a bastard.

She had to take her pleasure where she could. Not everything else was going so well. For ten minutes another Moon appeared fifty thousand miles closer to Earth and caused God alone knew what damage before it disappeared. Apart from the Event-caused natural disasters as a result of tidal swells, mine working collapses, freak tornados, five minute hurricanes, flooding, and the like which caused structural damage but relatively few fatalities, most of the loss of life came, so far, from either armed humans suddenly thrust into a world nothing like their own or from animal incursions. Many of the animals were extinct in this world, or had never existed here, but one pack of otherwise ordinary wild dogs appeared roaming London's docklands. In the space of half an hour they had attacked, bitten and probably infected over twenty people.

After several hundred years, rabies had returned to mainland Britain.

Despite the bloody curfew. Despite the curfew people still went outside where it was dangerous. They still didn't seem to understand the nature of the incursion.

"Can't you ram it home more on the TV, dammit!" Munyeen yelled.

One of her colleagues turned and said, "Full scale panic could kill even more people than the incursions. Let's face it, nowhere is safe for the next few hours because anything could happen."

"Yes," she said, "yes, of course it could. All the worlds at once, all the Shadows revealed, and all our sins unhidden."

"What was that?"

"Oh nothing," she said, "just waxing poetical."

"Keep your mind on the job," said the Chief of Internal Security.

16.25 Event plus 02.23.

A raven flapped onto the floor of a north London sports club. An upstairs window had been shattered and it had taken the opportunity to seek refuge from the flying things. It strutted along the floor looking for something to eat and found an eyeball. The raven picked it up in its beak, crunched down and swallowed.

Next it spotted some raw meat in an eye socket and plunged its beak inside. The solitary corpse was the only edible thing it found in the room.

Shortly after that it was eaten by a plant.

16.30 Event plus 02.28.

In Sunderland, five people, whose lives revolved around an involuntary relationship, felt a great deal of concern. They did not know what was happening nor why. They suspected the single entity that their gestalt comprised might know but he, she or it showed no signs of wanting to emerge.

Then, simultaneously, all five felt a tremor within themselves.

One of them had time to say, "Oh no," and then it happened.

It was a week before the bodies were found and they were not what those who entered the house expected.

On the floor of the living room were the corpses of five children who had died thirty years ago.

16.34 Event plus 02.32

In the Outback, the Dreamtime returned to shroud the sacred mound Uluru, what whitey called Ayres Rock. It stayed there for four hours and in that time many strange creatures were seen and encountered, many visions were experienced, worlds were visited, and not everyone returned. Those who did were changed forever.

After the Dreamtime folded back in on itself and vanished from all human forms of measurement, the Aborigines insisted it still remained. But then they also insisted it had never gone away in the first place.

16.59 Event plus 02.57.

On Venus, the great armies of the Dinosaur Kings prepared to march on the human invaders. But their wet world disappeared substituted for scorching heat and unbreathable atmosphere.

All two million died within seconds.

On their home world the humans soon reigned supreme in the dense primordial jungles.

More incursions passed without notice and without significance.

Countless small innocuous creatures such as mice, voles, rabbits, rats, jay, sparrows, all those and more, species too numerous to name, appeared in a world that was not their own. Some died because the climate was wrong, or from predators, or simple shock. Many survived, adapted, and bred. Many returned to their own worlds unaware of any change. Some new species remained, adapted, and thrived.

21.03 Event plus 7.01.

Lights flickered on in the Starship Kaiser Wilhelm. Electronics hummed. Coffin lids creaked open with a hiss of gas.

Despite having only just woken, Winston Churchill was well aware of the zero gravity and carefully eased himself out. He inhaled sharply and a grimace flickered across his flushed face as stale air flooded his lungs.

He growled to himself, "I suppose it's too much to hope for that that fucking kraut died in his sleep."

"Alas, *mein leiber herr*," said a man of about forty standing behind him, "I'm afraid that fucking kraut has been awake five minutes longer than you. I do hope you are going to be more civil."

"I damn near killed you in the war, von Richtofen," Churchill said.

"And yet you are the one who still bares a grudge. No matter, shall we check the controls and see if we are where we are supposed to be? Shall we go for a swim?"

Without waiting for an answer, the German flicked a hand and began gliding along the

corridor to the control room. Without a word but resenting the fact that von Richtofen had taken the lead, Churchill followed his co-commander.

The starship came to life around them. Lights flickered on, instruments hummed and beeped, the voices of men speaking in English and German grew louder.

The two leaders pulled themselves into their seats.

Von Richtofen said, "Computer, report ship's status."

A staccato machine voice answered him. "Ninety five per cent operational, five per cent systems failure, none essential to life support or landing."

Von Richtofen laughed. "Ninety four years and only a five per cent failure rate. Not bad, eh, Winston?"

The computer continued, "Eight per cent of crew and colonists have not revived."

Churchill said, "As you say, Manfred, not bad. We were anticipating a fifteen per cent revival failure. Computer, report ship's position."

"We have just passed the orbit of the third gas giant. Target planet is one hundred and eight point three million miles distant. Probes report breathable oxygen nitrogen mix, mass estimated point nine three Earth norm, land to water ratio approximately two to three. Temperature range variation exceeds norm by plus/minus three degrees Celsius. Early prognosis suggests the temperate zones are well suited to human habitation."

Churchill sighed loudly. "I wonder if anyone is still alive on Earth, if they actually managed to put the climate change into reverse."

"Let's call and ask them," suggested von Richtofen. "Of course it will be a generation or more before we'll receive a reply, should any come."

And that is what they did.

While they waited, they began their colonisation of an alien planet.

When the reply did arrive it was not what they were expecting for what neither of them knew was that both they and the planet had winked into existence from two separate universes just moments before they had been revived. Had they not then they would have died for the star system of neither the universe they had left nor the one in which they had arrived had hitherto possessed an earth-type planet.

22.02 Event plus 08.00.

It had been dark for nearly three hours now, at least in the United Kingdom.

The army, the territorials, armed police (all police were now armed), all patrolled the streets. The message had become: anyone found outside would be presumed to be a looter and would be shot. Anyone who had to go outside because of an emergency had to call the appropriate service. Needless to say, the calls were backed up despite all hospitals bringing in all their staff and as many with medical qualifications as could be traced.

Burning buildings lit the night skies in many towns and cities.

But the shadows were numerous and no-one knew what might come at night. What were myths on this world might be reality in others and just might become incursions in this. Whispers talked of ghosts and zombies, of vampires and werewolves, of things unknown and unimagined whose names were unsayable. On this night all things could be possible and those who patrolled did so nervously. Did something slither or hiss in that alley? A scream! Was it human?

Inevitably the local weres attempted to take advantage of the situation to indulge in a little rape, a little torture, a little murder. Inevitably some succeeded but many more were shot dead.

The long night wore on but of the monsters of myth there was, surprisingly, no sign. The few Fey, as surprised as anyone by the Event, kept their heads down and waited for the storm to pass or, as happened with several individuals, took the opportunity to help wherever possible. In one case, a recently-married fey princess lay wrapped in bandages in a hospital bed next to her equally well bandaged husband.

00.00 Event plus 09.58

Midnight, Greenwich Mean Time. Elsewhere it ranged from one in the morning to eleven at night.

Across the world there were a number of documented sightings of: Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Indira Ghandi, Stalin, and hundreds of far less famous people who had died in this world. Some appeared to be the age they would have lived to be had they lived, others were younger. Of those actually spoken to before they disappeared, which all happened within two minutes, their general response was, "Where the hell am I?"

00.36 Event plus 10.34

During the last few minutes of their descent the crew of the venerable space shuttle Clement Atlee of the Anglo-Australian Space Force lost contact with their base and had to depend on their skills to get down safely. They made it, of course, rough as it was; they'd practised for emergencies like these many times over. Glancing at each other, they all knew they'd be joking about it over a cold beer in the bar that evening.

Then they had a closer look outside.

"Skipper," said the communications officer to the captain, "I don't think we're in Kansas any more. Woomera just isn't Woomera."

02.00 Event plus 11.58

Munyeen yawned and stood up. A momentary lull, though lull was a relative term. Across the UK disasters were being fought, lives were being saved, and people were dying. Daniel was currently on patrol with the army and sitting in a jeep, ready to take to the air as and when called upon to do so. She went and poured herself some strong black coffee.

"This is a new one," said a male voice. "Forty ornately dressed people all speaking Latin have appeared outside Canterbury Cathedral. Oh, and now they've gone. What a shame."

By the evening's standards that qualified as light relief.

Munyeen wondered what was happening to the rest of the world. No-one had told them, no-one would tell them. They were being kept isolated so they could focus on events in the UK.

Munyeen returned to her seat. She spoke a name and called for a report. Listened, gave orders, spoke another name. And on and on towards the dawn.

06.00 Event plus 15.58.

Contracting as rapidly as it had expanded, the quantum sphere was within light minutes of earth and across the world the incursions kept coming.

For the previous half hour Loch Ness indeed had a monster which had come on land and killed and eaten five people.

An invading force from the United Outer Planets appeared in the skies above the Earth and vanished within twenty seconds. (They later lost their war against the fascist regime of the Terran Authority.)

06.02 Event plus 16.00.

The quantum sphere disappeared from our universe. The incursions stopped.

Everything had changed.

16. Aftermath: The Soft Places of London.

Munyeen woke in a large bed being cuddled by Robbie who was being cuddled by Daniel who was managing to cuddle them both and Laurel was wrapped in Munyeen's arms. What a perfect way to wake up, she thought.

She might then have gone on to think: it was all a dream.

Had not the austere room reminded her that they were all several hundred feet below London and the most important people in the country probably weren't that far away.

That and the fact she still wore an earpiece.

"Time, please," she whispered.

"Twelve twenty-two pee em," came back the immediate response.

Five hours sleep, she thought. Could be worse.

"Daniel?" she whispered.

"I told you you snore," he said. "Doesn't Mummy snore?"

"You snore, Mummy," said Robbie into the small of her back.

Munyeen closed her eyes and drifted back off into a deep sleep.

She woke alone two hours later.

"Status," she said.

"Your husband is patrolling above London. Your children are being looked after. You have a briefing slash debriefing session at sixteen hundred hours with the Prime Minister and the essential personnel team. We would recommend a shower, brief exercise and a light lunch."

"Piss off," Munyeen said.

"I shall take it under advisement," said the voice.

Munyeen got up and felt better than she had any right to do. Making the most of it, she had a shower and washed her hair, brushed her teeth, and, still naked, followed that up with some light callisthenics.

"Where do I eat?"

"You can have food delivered to your room or eat in the canteen. What would you like?"

Munyeen thought for a moment, then said, "Pot of black coffee, grapefruit, preferably tinned, runny scrambled eggs, well done bacon, toast with butter and marmalade, fruit juice -orange. Here."

"Fifteen minutes, Major Ohrmuz."

"Major?"

"Salary backdated to April first."

"Anything else you can tell me?"

"Our country has survived, Major. Thank you."

All too soon she was back in the briefing room with the rest of the team and the Prime Minister who looked worn and weary as if he hadn't got any sleep at all.

She knew there had been a lull which allowed them to get some rest. But it would prove to be but a brief moment as if the world and everyone on it paused to take a deep breath. Then it would begin again.

"A little over twenty four hours ago," the Prime Minister said, his voice heavy and echoing the exhaustion he visibly felt, "I asked you to save our country and to make me proud. You have all succeeded admirably and from the bottom of my heart and on behalf of the people you have served and saved, I thank you. I only wish that everyone would be able to know what you have done but that is the nature of the beast. But rest assured, although you may not get public acclaim, you *will* be recognised.

"The worst is over. Together you have co-ordinated the country's resources and together I have no doubt that your efforts have contributed significantly towards saving the lives of millions of our people. Sadly, the death toll, we estimate, to be in excess of half a million but this, according to our latest intelligence, is proportionately far less than in many other countries across the world.

“Holland, effectively, no longer exists. San Francisco and much of what used to be the west coast of America does not exist. Hundreds of Pacific islands no longer support human life if, indeed, they exist at all. Perhaps three hundred million people or more across the world have died and the toll is still rising rapidly. The final total could reach or even exceed one billion.

“It isn’t yet over. There are still Shadow incursions to deal with and we still need to coordinate our efforts and so I must ask you again to return to your posts.”

This time Munyeen remained there for eighteen hours, fuelled by food, coffee, and drugs, her lengthy session broken only by visits to the lavatory and infrequent bouts of light exercise.

There was so much data to absorb, so many facts, so many problems. The team had two spheres of operation –containing the incursions which remained, and dealing with the after effects of the original incursions. This could be summarised as: destroy, capture where possible, contain, search and rescue. Later, much later, would come the rebuilding.

Extra sensitive hearing would have been a useful talent under these circumstances for a paranormal but that didn’t exist. As she had said a day ago, only the telekinetics were of any use. Paranormals like Daniel, her husband, patrolled the skies, relaying information about fires and suchlike and occasionally dealing with physical incursions –shooting strange creatures from twenty feet in the air might not have been sporting but it was very effective. Other telekinetics raised material from collapsed buildings faster and more safely than any machine. Munyeen sent them where they would be most effective and didn’t see Daniel again for a week as need required him criss-cross most of England as his ability was put to best use time after time after time.

Eventually it was over, as far as anything like this could be said to be over.

No more hostile Shadow-related activity had been reported for twenty-four hours –all the monsters and human hostiles were either dead, captured or had gone to ground. All Event-related disasters had been contained. No-one was left to rescue.

For a week the country mourned and buried its dead, and watched images of the rest of the changed world on television.

Then, collectively, it sat up and said: “What the hell has been going on?”

What they got was sanitised information, generally accurate but always slanted. Familiar phrases included: “only recently”, “we have just found out”, “we had to avoid a panic”, “we do not know why this happened”.

Some secrets were secrets no longer. Paranormals existed, though their Event-enhanced abilities, which remained enhanced after the Event, were played down even as their role in the Event was played up. Daniel Morgan, whose identity was never formally made public though just about everyone in the media –not to mention all his neighbours- knew it, nevertheless became a public hero. The still-recovering prince, whom he had shot, publicly professed great admiration for his brave unknown rescuer, though privately his opinion proved less than complimentary and involved ‘getting him (Daniel Morgan) on his own in a dark alley’.

And, as always, the real secrets –such as the fact that paranormals had been government slaves for over thirty years- remained hidden.

Everything had changed and everything stayed the same.

Despite all the disasters, all the deaths, British society, far less hidebound and traditional than its image would have it, recovered and continued, adapting and reinventing itself as it had always done. The United Kingdom survived, shaken but intact. Trade slowly and hesitantly resumed with the rest of the world. For a time there were varied shortages due to crops in particular areas being wiped out, but no-one went hungry, not even the poor or the dispossessed of which there were now far more than ever.

Behind the scenes, the Event-caused changes were studied, analysed, and assessed. New accommodations were made, as were new friends.

Eventually time was even found to investigate the cause of the Event itself.

As the world had changed, so too had London, both less predictable, less known. Here be, not

tygers, but the soft places, nexi, the gateways to other worlds, and a worrying strangeness.

Much was still surmise, guesswork, with hard facts difficult to come by, at least at first. London, like the rest of the world, was struggling with a new reality, that it had new borders and none easily defined or even always identifiable.

The King Edward Sports Club was one such place, a soft place and a bad place, nexus to an unknown number of unknown worlds and all of them seeming to be dangerous. The club and the immediate area surrounding it contained dozens of cameras. At night the area was floodlit. At all times it was patrolled by heavily armed soldiers working in teams and who also carried, apart from conventional high-powered weaponry, swords (hacking a hungry ambulatory plant proved more effective than shooting it), silver bullets and flamethrowers.

Things came out of the King Edward Sports Club.

In early March, two helicopters landed twenty members of the SAS onto the roof. In less than thirty seconds three men were beheaded by a fast-moving plant. Using a flamethrower, the SAS burned it to ashes. Then they moved inside and headed down a narrow stairwell. By the time they had reached the bottom, they had stabbed, shot, or squashed under foot a variety of small unpleasant looking creatures which were variously insectile, reptilian, and rat-like.

Using powerful torches, they made their way slowly along the dark corridor, growths over the windows effectively, shutting out most of the light, occasionally letting off short bursts of gunfire as a warning to anything else that might be lurking, before finally arriving at club secretary Hannison's study.

Inside they found the remains of Hannison, two skeletons in a cupboard (a source of several black jokes from the soldiers) and, wrapped from head to toe in a porous gauze-like cloth, Debra Affleck and Rachel Green.

Both women breathed lightly as if asleep. The cloth resisted all attempts to tear or cut by knife-wielding gloved hands. Only when one of the soldiers jokingly attempted to kiss one of the 'sleeping beauties' –it happened to be Debra- by pressing his mouth to the material above her lips did it begin to suddenly decay. The shroud rotted to dust within a minute and was later, and somewhat obviously, assessed to be sensitive to human dna.

Within ten minutes, the still-unconscious Debra and Rachel were strapped to stretchers and carried carefully up the stairs to the roof from where they were airlifted to safety, but not before another two soldiers had been killed by something with tentacles and fangs.

Twenty four hours later, Munyeen Ohrmuz sat in a room with the Chief of Internal Security and other senior intelligence officers.

They had all been given a preliminary report concerning Debra and Rachel and were trying to decide what their options were.

Finally Munyeen said, "Send them to Hampton Parva and put me in charge of them."

"Please explain your reasoning, Major Ohrmuz," said her boss, "just for our colleagues."

"It is one of the safest places in the country," she said. "Not even the Event did any damage to it. It is also one of the most secure. It's a natural environment –or at least a good facsimile of one-relaxed and unthreatening. The medical facilities are excellent and I'm sure experts can be flown in to help out. I'm volunteering myself because, as Director Claremont is nearly back to full fitness, I can be spared, and also because of who and what I am. You know I can be trusted to do the right thing."

"On that score, I have no doubt whatsoever, Major," came the surprisingly kindly reply.

"One more thing. I want my family with me. Call it a working holiday."

"Agreed. You had better start packing, Major Ohrmuz, you leave in four hours."

17. Rachel Green and the Judgment of Munyeen Ohrmuz.

Wrapped in Daniel's arms, Munyeen murmured, "Today's the day."

"Mmm hmm," Daniel said and slid a warm hand between her legs, "How about now's now?"

"Mm, tempting." His fingers rubbed seductively against her. "Yes, very tempting, but having sex when in a few hours time I might be executing two women doesn't exactly put me in the mood."

"If that does happen, you certainly won't be in the mood afterwards."

"Don't be a pig, Daniel," she chided. "That's unworthy of you."

He muttered into her neck, "Didn't mean it."

"I know."

"You know me better than anyone on earth and you still love me."

"Yes, because you are better than nearly anyone on earth, that I've met that is. Why can't you accept it?"

"Because I don't feel worthy," he said.

Such a baby, she thought, such an insecure baby.

"I suppose if you did," she said, "then you wouldn't be you and I wouldn't love you. Go and make the breakfast and try not to wake the children."

"Tyrant."

"That's 'Mistress Munyeen' to you, slave."

Daniel laughed and slid out of bed.

Munyeen closed her eyes and then opened them again. Wide awake, she thought, too much on my mind.

She climbed out of bed and drew the curtains to look out on the early morning sun flooding the garden where flowers were blossoming as late spring began to edge hesitantly towards summer.

I love the spring, she thought. I think I know what's going to happen but I can't be sure. The tests... So many tests and ultimately it comes down to my judgment. Today, Matthew, I'm going to be God.

"How are you going to play it?" asked the psychiatrist.

"By telling them the truth."

"And how do you think they'll take it if they're genuine?"

"That's the problem. Exactly the way they'd take it if they weren't. Come on, let's get them prepped."

Munyeen turned to the rest of the room where a dozen men and women waited on her word. They stood or sat by arrays of monitors and screens.

She said, "Now is the time, ladies and gentlemen, after all our hard work, it is time. You all know what to do, you all know the keywords that I may or may not say. So listen to every word that I utter with extreme care. Never take your eyes off them for a moment or off the screens for a second. I should be able to anticipate anything they do but it isn't impossible the instruments could detect anomalies before I can. Truthfully, we don't really know what they could be capable of once they're in their right minds. So get it right! Get it wrong and you won't be very happy for the next few years." She added ominously, "That's if we survive."

She glanced down at Debra and Rachel who lay, clothed, on trolleys, and nodded. Two nurses removed needles from their arms.

Five minutes later they were in another room, not obviously part of the hospital. Debra and Rachel were slumped at opposite ends of a brown leather couch. Munyeen was alone in the room with them.

"Okay," she said. "Wake them up; and may God have mercy on our souls."

I shivered. I wasn't cold, I just shivered. I felt tired as if I'd slept too long but I wasn't in bed. I

opened my eyes and realised I was half sitting up on a couch. Just two feet away Debra was slowly sitting up and yawning. She turned, saw me, smiled, and then we were kissing and hugging. We were alive. We didn't know how, but we were alive. I wanted to cry.

"Hey babe," Debra said in the same way she always said it when we woke up together, as if surprised and delighted. Then she said, "Where are we?"

"I can answer that," said Munyeen Ohrmuz.

We jumped apart and looked at her. There she was with that smug thin-lipped smile, looking cool in a loose navy blouse and navy slacks, her black hair loose around her bony shoulders, little makeup other than a touch of lipstick and maybe a hint of eye shadow; but her eyes always looked dark to me. She stroked her wedding ring with an index finger. A sign of anxiousness, I thought and didn't believe that boded well for us. Or perhaps, and more likely, she'd done it deliberately, to send us a signal.

We were in a warm lemon-painted rectangular room with two doors, one to our left which obviously opened into another room, the second next to the bottom right corner behind us and which opened on to the outside of the building.

Where were we?

On either side of the long room were windows. Through those on the side facing us we could see a variety of green-leaved bushes. Through the windows on the side behind us lay a path that meandered between grassy areas down to a lake a couple of hundred yards away. There were at least two windsurfers on the lake. Woods came down to the edge of the farthest shore and I fancied I caught the glimpse of a deer in the shadows. But it was just a fancy.

The furnishings in the room were spartan. Other than our couch and a small coffee table, a thirty two inch flat screen television hung from the ceiling angled downwards and towards us. On the low table in front of us was a pot of –sniff- coffee, good coffee, a rack of toast with butter and marmalade, some fresh fruit and a jug of iced water and three glasses. Munyeen herself stood behind a translucent lectern that was just about as high as her chest.

"We've been asleep a long time," Debra said. "It was still autumn when we killed Hannison. That's spring outside, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Munyeen simply and without elaboration.

"Is this going to be a game of Twenty Questions?" I asked, referring to a radio quiz show.

"No," said Munyeen Ohrmuz, smugly. She folded her slender arms and stared at us, her eyes flicking snakelike between us.

"Have we been asleep here all this time?" asked Debra.

"No you haven't," replied Munyeen. "As far as I'm aware it's been two months."

"As far as you're aware," Debra said.

Munyeen nodded, barely a twitch of her head, surrounding herself with stillness.

"Are you doing this to be annoying?"

Munyeen answered her, "No, not specifically, my attitude is designed to be more in the nature of eliciting responses. Informational or emotional, right now either will do."

What's the date?"

"May twenty-third," came the flat reply.

Ten minutes ago we were fighting Hannison and bleeding to death. Then somehow six months had passed. What the hell has happened to us, I wondered. What's happened to the world?

"Cut the crap," I said. "Munyeen, what's been happening? Did we save the world or not?"

"The jury is still out on that one. The simple answer is: yes and no. Why don't you tell me what happened, what you did?"

I said, "Turned out Mr Secretary of the sports club was a paranormal who happened to be a genius, and a Discordian or so he claimed, and certifiably insane. He wanted to make everything possible at once. We killed him but not before he'd brained Debra and skewered me umpteen times with a rapier. And then the fucking thing went off anyway even after we'd trashed it."

"In that case," Munyeen said after a moment's deliberation, "you almost certainly saved the multiverse but the local effects were somewhat harsh. I have a lot to tell you and to show to you."

I poured coffee, buttered and marmaladed toast and got stuck in. I was suddenly feeling hungry. After a pause to glare at Munyeen, Debra did the same. As for Munyeen she seemed content to wait on us. Eventually she came to the table and poured herself a glass of water. I couldn't help but envy both her graceful movements and her stillness, even if the latter was a mask.

After two slices of toast, I said, "That television is there for a reason. Going to tell us what it is?"

"To tell you about the world," she answered. "We call it the Event. It lasted sixteen hours and everything has changed. Natural disasters caused by the Event and the shadow infestations it brought with it have killed over eight hundred million people, half a million in this country alone. The full tally isn't in yet as disease, starvation, and civil wars take their final toll."

The unbelievable numbers crashed on me like the rocks of Los Gigantes.

"Oh God! Oh God!" I said, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"You weren't responsible," Munyeen said. "We believe that without you both it would have been unimaginably worse. Now I'm going to show you video footage recorded during the Event and the aftermath. I'll keep most of my explanations for afterwards. First, however, you'll see one of the most documented encounters with *pterandon sapiens*. The human being is my husband, Daniel Morgan."

We watched the footage, an intercut mixture of security cameras, news footage and amateur work.

Munyeen paused the television and said, "*Pteranodon sapiens* are intelligent but not by much. We reckon their i.q.'s to be around eighty on a human scale. They appeared across the world, not just in London, but only a dozen or so were taken alive. They are either incapable of, or uninterested in, learning a human language. They will be prisoners until they die."

She pressed the resume button and we saw the results of a series of natural disasters, rescue work, and rebuilding.

"Most, but not all, incursions were negative. In Madagascar, one hundred thousand acres of rain forest were replaced by one hundred thousand acres of rain forest. Contained within this new expanse were a variety of plants, trees and animals unknown to us, and also these."

I went, "Aaaahh, they're lovely."

They were what looked like the descendants of lemurs. Their bodies were covered with thick brown fur, they had prehensile tails, slightly pointed faces with high foreheads, wide eyes, and hands with opposable thumbs. They stood erect in a comfortable bipedal stance. At least one carried a bow and arrow, several had spears, all carried knives strapped to narrow belts, and they lived in houses built into the upper reaches of trees.

"*Lemurensis sapiens*," Munyeen said. "The adults are about four feet in height. Their diet is primarily vegetarian supplemented by insects for extra protein. They have a language and a culture, display great curiosity, and are generally friendly except when threatened. They are physically unable to speak a human tongue but are beginning to understand us and they learn quickly. Unlike the pteranodons, we believe them to be of approximately human level intelligence.

"The United Nations has declared their territory to be an independent nation and UN troops are doing everything they can to ensure this is respected. We estimate there are about three thousand of them spread among four tribes, more than enough to establish a viable population.

"Two siblings, a boy and girl aged seven and eight respectively, were introduced to them. The lemuroids immediately recognised them as our young and made a great fuss of them, their own young even more so. The children cried when they had to leave and so, amazingly, did their own new friends. The whole world is fascinated by these beings, including me I confess."

"I'm in love," I said.

"It would take the bitterest of hearts not to be enchanted by them. They have brought a little light to a grey decimated world. Sadly, they are the exception."

Munyeen flicked her remote and we watched a montage of images of the results of shadow incursions, only rarely the actual events themselves.

"Iraq and Iran have imploded into religious anarchy. Holland is mostly under water.

Volcanoes have rendered large parts of Iceland virtually uninhabitable. Almost all low-lying Pacific islands have been scoured of life by tsunamis. San Francisco is gone and the USA has a radically altered western seaboard. There were several nuclear disasters in China and India.”

Debra and I watched in horror at the parade of disasters which extended far beyond those places Munyeen had named.

“Every economy in the world has been knocked back because markets have either disappeared or shrunk drastically. The new car market is virtually non-existent everywhere but the USA. Petrol has increased in price by several hundred per cent so that even Americans have taken the hint and small economical cars have become the rage over there. Unemployment rates have shot up, though this is partly offset by government sponsored rebuilding programmes –again, I’m talking on a world wide basis.

“Here, public transport has never been so popular for seventy years. Self sufficiency -growing one’s own vegetables, keeping poultry- has suddenly become highly popular, indeed almost a necessity. Greenhouse emissions have dropped by a third, a decline which is not slowing down, though sea levels have risen by several inches, at least in the short term. As for longer, no-one knows.”

She flicked the television off.

“So many of the secrets that governments have tried to hide are now known. Paranormals are known and, thanks to careful manipulation, are numbered among the heroes of the Event, not least due to the part my Daniel played.

“That parallel worlds exist is known and that magic –or what appears to be magic- works on some of them is known. There are now gates or soft places which are easily accessible to about a dozen of these worlds and we are tentatively setting up diplomatic relations. Your friends the Fey are foremost among them as they are hardly strangers here. Indeed they have already opened an embassy in Newcastle under the auspices of Princess Margarethe and her Earth-human Newcastle-born Lotto-millionaire husband.”

Debra smiled, snorted out a laugh and lightly slapped me on the shoulder. At least one happy ending.

Then I thought: our families.

Munyeen must have read me like a book because she said, “Rachel, your parents and your brother and sister are alive and well. Debra, I’m sorry but your mother died in car accident three months ago. She was killed by a drunk driver. It had nothing to do with The Event.”

I turned to Debra who sat there, a shocked expression on her face. For what seemed like a long time but can’t have even been a minute, she said nothing. Her chest rose and fell as she breathed through her nose. She stared at Munyeen and, without looking, stretched out a hand towards me. I took it, held it, our fingers entwined.

Finally Debra said, “Whatever strength I have I got from her. My father was a self-centred shit who only cared for his own pleasures. My mother was strong and dignified. There were times when I hated her but I never stopped loving her or respecting her. Whatever is good in me comes from her.”

She lowered her head but would not cry.

“I wish I could be merciful and end this here,” Munyeen said. “But whatever is to be done, whatever is to be decided, has to be now.

“Let’s have a look at your changes, shall we? Let’s see if we can discover what has really been happening to you.”

“I’m not sure I care for your tone,” Debra said, recovering quickly as the mood abruptly changed.

“You’d do well not to,” replied Munyeen. “You see, I decide what is going to happen to you. I’m not going to tell you any lies either. But first of all, I want you to examine your own bodies, preferably without touching each other.”

A joke? Was that a joke, I wondered.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Just what I said.”

We were wearing, and I honestly hadn't paid much attention to this until now, thin loose pale blue cotton pyjamas. I shrugged, pulled the trousers up over my legs to above the knees. No change there. Someone had even been shaving my legs while I'd been asleep. And my armpits, as I discovered a moment later.

I slipped a hand inside the top and touched my breasts. A little smaller, tauter, I thought, but then I'd been out of it for about four months so it would hardly be surprising if I was little thinner, except I wasn't. If anything I seemed to be in better shape than I was before it happened.

I was about to slide a hand down my pants when—

“Jesus fucking Christ!” yelled Debra. “I've got a cock!”

To which my immediate reaction was to laugh and shout, “Aiyah! My dream's come true.”

Only it wasn't funny.

Debra wasn't laughing and she looked horrified.

I said, almost redundantly, “You're not joking, are you?”

Munyeen explained. She said, “It is a functioning penis hidden, as you've just discovered, in an extended genital slit. It is used for sexual purposes only and your other organs remain unchanged. It is not an enlarged clitoris but a completely new organ designed solely for the transmission of genetic material. You could, and I wish there was another word for it, ‘father’ a child.”

I said, “If Debra's got one, then... “

I slid my hand down towards my crotch and encountered the slit a little sooner than I expected. Gently I eased my finger inside a new hole. It felt tight but not uncomfortable. Then I realised my finger was moving up the shaft of this penis. I moved my finger slowly around it. Certainly wouldn't offer most men competition, I thought. Then it twitched like a worm.

I made a gurgling noise and pulled my finger out.

“Can I have a drink, please?” I asked.

“No,” said Munyeen. “I want your reactions untainted by alcohol.”

“I've had shocks in my life,” I said, “but this has got to be one of the worst.”

She said, “You think?”

“There's more?”

“Damn right, there is,” said Debra harshly. She moved along the couch and put an arm round me. It felt nice so I leaned my head against her shoulder. “And I'm sure the nice lady will be only too happy to explain in lurid detail.”

Debra said to Munyeen, “You said you knew we'd been comatose for two months. That means to me that you've been keeping us that way.”

“Yes, we have,” Munyeen agreed, “but not comatose. Drugged. Sedated. Fed a drug which suppresses memory—a rohypnol variant. We've examined you from top to bottom, inside and out. Your bone, blood, flesh, muscle, nails, stomach contents, dna, and more have all been sampled and analysed. We know more about your bodies than just about anyone else's in the world. Sometimes we brought you back to a nearly fully conscious state and interrogated you.”

“You've raped us,” Debra said and stared at the television. “Who's watching us? Doesn't matter. You, you've all raped us and you're doing it now.” She glared intensely at Munyeen. “How dare you do this, Ohrmuz?”

Munyeen spoke softly, almost regretfully. “It wasn't difficult at all, Debra. I don't like what we did to you and, you are correct, it is a form of rape. I'm sorry but it was necessary.”

“But why?” I asked.

“To try and decide who you really are,” said Munyeen Ohrmuz of Internal Security. She had changed again. Sympathetic a moment ago, now it was as if she'd raised some kind of aspect. Standing there, she seemed to have grown in size. Her voice was utterly commanding, her gaze unrelenting. Frankly, at that moment, she scared the crap out of me.

But not out of Debra.

“If we aren’t us,” she said, “then who the hell do you think we are?”

Again Munyeen answered without hesitation, speaking rapidly. “Aliens,” she said. “Shadows. Outworlders. Invaders. Another incursion.”

She said, “Listen, this is what we know to be true.

“Fact: both of you engaged in a fight that resulted in serious injuries. Debra had the back of her skull crushed which would, at the least, have left bone fragments in her brain, with her suffering from serious concussion, and very likely to die from the injuries.

“Fact: Rachel suffered from several deep puncture wounds resulting in major blood loss. The wound to the stomach would undoubtedly result in peritonitis if not treated quickly and assuming the blood loss didn’t kill her first. Hannison had taped it all, including the two earlier murders. We found them after we recovered you both.

“Fact: if you had lain there for two months you would have been as bad as the remains of Hannison’s desiccated and largely eaten corpse which we did find.

“Extrapolated fact: you were removed from that room shortly after receiving your injuries and taken to another world, another universe. The tape ends –is cut short- before your disappearance.

“Extrapolated fact: you were returned to the room minutes, or even less, just before the SAS team found you.

“Extrapolated conclusion one: you are who you seem to be, just physiologically changed.

“Extrapolated conclusion two: you are not whom you seem to be and are in fact shadow incursions, motives unknown. Unknown but not unknowable.”

Ohrmuz poured herself another glass of iced water from the jug and sipped it slowly.

She put the glass down and took a deep breath.

“Let’s examine the possible motives for your rescue.

“Altruism. You were seen by shadows to defeat someone who would have destroyed the multiverse and at the cost of your own lives. They rescued you to reward you.

“And what a reward it is. There are more changes to your bodies than making you genuine bisexuals. Your bodies have been improved considerably. You are about the level of Olympic athletes in terms of strength, speed and endurance. If you trained you would probably be stronger, faster, and possess more stamina than almost anyone on earth. Not superhuman, just that bit better than the best.

“Your immune system has amazing recuperative powers. You both threw off an unpleasant influenza variant, which would have laid most people low for ten days minimum, within half a day. And, yes, we did infect you with it.

“Your body heals faster and, oddly as we don’t understand why, your metabolism is slower. You could live, in prime condition, to over one hundred and fifty years.”

All the deaths weighed me down and her talking about an extended life span hit a nerve. “Big deal,” I said unimpressed. “A hundred and fifty years out of eternity is a piss in the ocean.”

Munyeen went, “Hmm. You don’t believe in God, do you?”

“Why should I? He’s not going to tap me on the shoulder. You aren’t going to bring him in as a surprise guest, are you?”

She stood with her left arm flat across her chest tucked under her right armpit as she cradled her chin thoughtfully on her closed right hand.

She said, “We’ve learned from other realities certain things which have surprised us. This is not the first time someone has attempted to merge the multiverse and always an individual or individuals have been there to stop it. Sometimes it has been prevented completely, more often though there has been a limited weakening of the walls between a number of worlds and resulting in The Event.

“It is conceivable that you two, and the two people who failed to stop Hannison, have been the agents of God.”

At this point I threw my head back and simply guffawed. I laughed and laughed for nearly two minutes and by the end I was bent double, the tears were rolling from my eyes and snot was dripping from my nose.

I looked up, swallowed air, and gasped out, “Man, that was funny. Know any other good jokes, huh?”

I drew a sharp breath and said. “Are you a total fucking moron, Ohrmuz? Do you really believe that shit? There is no God. There is no First Cause. Existence is constant cycle of death and recreation. No beginning. No End. No God. We all die forever. Universes die forever. There is nothing else.”

“I never mentioned a First Cause,” she said. “But consider this: an infinity of multiversal creation and recreation. The end of one universe and the birth of another. Who is to say that, in the course of this infinite cycle, an entity might not evolve that can transcend the death of the universe, which can add order to the creation of the new? Not an omnipotent god, not the primitive Judeo-Christian-Moslem patriarchal image, but a transcendent living creature.”

“Supposition,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied, “but there is some evidence to back this up. The recurring stories of protectors, for example, stories which travel from world to world. And do you think, that this near-infinitely old intelligent creature, this God, would not want the same for its creatures as it has for itself?”

“More surmise,” I spat. But then, as Munyeen had mentioned, there was that other couple who had also visited Hannison that day.

Munyeen said, “Yes, it is surmise, but a surmise more plausible than the religions we all grew up with and it answers questions which atheism can’t.

“And there is something else. The Tenerife Incursion you experienced which seemed almost like a preliminary to The Event. Some theoretical physicists believe that what happened there was initiated by The Event. A wave moved back in time to cause the collapse of Los Gigantes – specifically to fully trigger your demon’s gift. They believe that if you had been somewhere else, some kind of disaster would still have happened where you were. This is just too much of a coincidence and implies an operating intelligence.”

I shook my head, not in disbelief, but in confusion. I didn’t know what to think any more. The idea that an atheist could be one of two (or four) agents of a God she didn’t believe in was simply too much to take in. I neither believed what Munyeen was saying nor disbelieved.

To get away from it, I said, “Move on. You were telling us why you think we aren’t human.”

“Did I say that? Rachel, don’t you realise this is an assessment?”

“And if we fail it?”

“You die,” she said.

“It would be nice,” Munyeen continued, “if you really had been given a gift for services rendered but it seems somewhat unlikely. We are fairly sure, though by far from one hundred per cent certain, that you are actually you. You aren’t cloned bodies with alien minds. You were kidnapped and taken to a shadow world, or *interworld* as some people have taken to calling them. You were probably very close to death or perhaps had been not long dead when you were taken. Once there your lives were saved. We found traces of well-healed scarring on your body, Rachel, and signs of recently healed damage to your skull, Debra.

“Then you underwent physiological reconstruction. It doesn’t appear to be the result of surgery so we suspect an artificial virus which would restructure your body. We have consulted the Fey who know something about bioengineering, but this is far in advance of anything they can do. The very biotechnology itself is alien to them..

“Now it’s clear why your bodies have been enhanced –the Fey can do that part, albeit with different biotechnology to that used on you. But what was at first puzzling was why the sexual alterations?”

“Because that’s what they look like,” I said. “They did it to themselves.”

“Yes,” Munyeen said, “that is what our experts concluded. But why? Why did they do it? Why not simply rebuild you and leave your genitals alone?”

“I’m afraid you aren’t going to like the answer but this is what they believe and it makes sense to me too. Genetically they are identical to us, they have to be for the alterations to work. Despite your physiological changes, you have both remained genetically female, genetically human.

“We believe that some time ago their society was extremely repressive on grounds of gender to such an extent that the women rose up and killed the men. They may have kept some alive for breeding purposes until they developed the means by which they could procreate with each other by exchanging genetic material –not parthogenesis or cloning- but by a female version of the penis.

“They are aware of other worlds and that all of them have two sexes. Their experience with men has made them, their entire society, paranoid. They are pathologically afraid of mixing with dual sex societies. If you had been male they wouldn’t have touched you. It’s possible they hate societies like ours, of men and women. Their culture and psychology couldn’t allow them to envisage you returning home unaltered. In their eyes they were giving you a gift. At least that is one scenario. It may simply be that it was all part and parcel of your physical enhancements.”

Munyeen drank more water, took a breath, and brushed a light sweat off her forehead.

“However, they are so paranoid and secretive that no other interworld we know of has heard of them, though it would seem unlikely that this is the first time they’ve tried this because it worked too well. It’s possible their world is a long way away from ours, though again we don’t understand concepts of distance with regard to the interworlds. But what they have done to you, they have done extremely well.

“If either of you made another woman pregnant, your genetic material would almost completely dominate. Not to the extent of being a clone, but the child would be created along the same lines of your bodies, your bi-sexual bodies.

“It is possible that this is their attempt at a very slow invasion and believe me it would be extremely slow given that even if you impregnated every willing woman you met, it would take thousands of years before you become even a noticeable proportion of the population given that it would be mostly lesbians who would want to have sex with you.”

I could have made a joke then but somehow I didn’t feel in the mood.

“The other possibility is,” Munyeen said, “that you are Trojan horses. I’m sure you believe you are you and you probably are you, though it is possible that your personalities have been destroyed and new ones implanted. It is more likely, however, that you have personality implants, buried deep down in your subconscious perhaps, but probably aware. If you are indeed alien, then we can’t afford to keep you alive. We don’t know what you could be capable of and you could be a threat to humanity as we know it. We don’t even dare take the risk of letting you live completely isolated from human contact, never mind the cruelty involved in that choice.”

“Looks like we’re buggered,” Debra said.

“Not necessarily. All this is supposition. What is true is for me to determine.”

“I know what you can do about reading body language,” Debra said, “but if these personalities are buried so far deep down you’ll never see them.”

“And that is what you believe, Debra,” said Munyeen Ohrmuz. Suddenly she’d taken on her aspect again, becoming dominating and cold.

“Remember what I told you about paranormal powers being enhanced? I was the best before, so what do you imagine I can do now? I can smell the adrenalin in your bloodstream, Debra. I can see you’re thinking, not seriously, but you are, nevertheless, considering the possibility, of trying to escape.

“Forget it. Move towards either door and you are dead. Move aggressively towards me and you are dead. Attempt anything which can be even remotely considered as hostile or flight and you will be dead in seconds.

“Listen to me. I can understand every involuntary twitch of a muscle, the movement of blood through every vein and artery that I can see. I can tell if you’re even slightly unwell. I can read expressions you don’t know you have and I can see any secondary personalities no matter

where they are hiding.”

Munyeen’s voice rose to a crescendo, compelling, dominating. She towered over us like a storm.

“Do you understand me, Debra Affleck? Does the alien inside you understand me? Are you still the person who bearded me in my own den or have you been taken over? I can see you. I can see everything about you!”

She turned and spoke directly to me and said, “Rachel, I’m sorry.”

And then she spoke two final words.

“Purge them!”

Pain spasmed through my stomach. I opened my mouth and fell forward.

I

18. The HotGirl and the Werewolf from Another World.

Tourists and Londoners alike, all made way for the six foot tall black haired hotgirl clad in loose expensive tattooed blue-grey People-made leathers and with the world drowned out by the music in her head as, arms wind-milling and body and the People cape twirling, she danced and sang her way through the crowded West End streets packed with gawking tourists and sightseers visiting the most exciting cosmopolitan city in the world.

London, the Interworld capital of Earth, with more soft gates to strange places, more Interworlders, more examples of Interworlder culture than anywhere else; home to more mystery and romance and strangeness, and home to crazy hotgirl in her prime, the luscious, the eminently desirable twenty-five year old but still sweetly deceptively looking sixteen –and let’s hear it for!- Alice-May.

Yum!

Alice-May who was in a high fine mood because she’d just called her number one passion, Leilang the gorgeous petite Chinese-Sumatran sweetie, about going on a *tri-date* that evening with Josh, the highly edible Jewish boy she’d just met at the Interworlder asylum-seeker enclave in Clapham, and Leilang had agreed but made no commitments on *tri-sex* afterwards which was cool with Alice-May as a girl had to keep her options open and Josh and Leilang might not even connect on any level, though she had a feeling they would.

So Alice-May danced through the crowds, pausing at the window of a Fey restaurant, where inside a lean Fey fiddler played and danced, to bow, put the heel of her right hand to her chin and blow a kiss at a pretty waitress who smiled back. Alice-May didn’t know her, she just thought she was a sexy girl, and, hey, you never do know. Another time, eyes might meet as the waitress places a drink in front her and before she leaves they are tongue-tasting. Maybe cinnamon and lime, sharp and sweet the way the hotgirl likes it.

Alice-May danced on as if in a music-druggy haze, just another hotgirl in old-new born-again Interworld London town, heat in her loins, lyrics on her lips, and not a thought in her head. No-one would guess the only drug she’d taken had been caffeine –though some softies later would always be possible- and that she was actually tracking an Interworlder werewolf turned industrial thief.

Go, Alice-May, go!

The human werewolves were regarded by Interworld *weres* as degraded and, if the opportunity arose, they killed them. Interworld (formerly Internal) Security turned a blind eye to this, regarding it as a favour. Real werewolves, who came from at least three Interworlds with which the United Kingdom had established diplomatic relations, were organised in clans with customs and rules and proper codes of behaviour and did not hunt, kill or eat humans, unless legally sanctioned. Inevitably this meant that some individuals or even entire clans would come to London and claim political asylum and they weren’t the only Interworlders to do so. England, even more than the rest of the UK, had a long tradition of taking in, if at times publicly grudgingly but in practise with tacit acceptance, refugees. This produced a culture both flexible and accommodating. Alice-May’s mother, latterly something of an expert in this field, had made sure her eldest daughter was well informed in such matters.

Alice-May had to be. She was the only licensed private detective who dealt solely with cases involving Interworlders, a license usefully valid on more than one world. She also happened to do a sideline in bounty hunting which, as her mother had also pointed out, had never been legal this country in her day. So lucky me, thought Alice-May, more string to my bow, more charge for goodies.

Alice-May had been on this case for three days. A pharmaceutical company had approached her, telling her that they suspected Interworld industrial espionage. They were in the final stages of testing a drug which cured a painful, ugly, but non-lethal skin condition found on four Interworlds, thus a potentially large market. Despite tight security they were concerned and as Alice-May was

known to have some expertise on the subject they agreed a modest price for the hours she actually put in, with an extremely large bonus if she located any weakness in their security and apprehended the person or persons responsible. Alice-May was good with this as she preferred being paid by results. If successful, it enhanced her reputation and credit rating, if not, she didn't deserve the big bucks. Alice-May had her own very strong moral code.

Clients never saw her in hotgirl mode, though that was as much a real part of her on her downtime as her professional side when she wore glasses (with plain glass) and a *don't fuck with me I mean business* business suit.

So she'd worked the company, rode the data streams, flashed leg and tit and cash, and asked the right questions till the greedy needy people answered and got fingered but not before a sample of the drug had been stolen only minutes before she arrived.

Shit and hot god damn! That was quantum fucking annoying.

The formula would have been easier to transport and harder for her to find, but no-one would get into that company's databanks. The one seriously major advantage (it also had seriously medium and minor advantages too) that homeworld Earth had over the known Interworlds was in computer tech, so the real thing it had to be.

Alice-May didn't hang about and grabbed a mag-rail for the West End. When she got off at Tottenham Court Road, to her great surprise and relief, so too did her suspect. If there was such a paranormal power as extra-special luck, then Alice-May had it.

She knew who the thief was through a visit earlier that day to the Clapham Interworlder Enclave which had happily resulted in her meeting Josh Campbell who, despite his name which suggested a large ruddy macho type, was a slender black-haired heterosexual London Jew of Alice-May's age, possessor of an engaging woman-melting smile and Alice-May just wanted to have him for breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner, supper and breakfast again. From his smiles and helpfulness he was hardly indifferent to her either. Business and pleasure, the best of both worlds, on any world.

Alice-May provided a likely profile and Joshua produced the likely suspects and one had just left –Malachi of the Scrapton-set, a werewolf near the bottom of the hierarchy of a self-exiled clan, who nevertheless possessed the larcenous skills which suited him perfectly for life on a human world. The holograph naturally enough showed him in his human form and Alice-May quickly skimmed through the fact sheet. Despite being a *were* she doubted if he'd prove too much trouble. Being female alone gave her an advantage as his particular clan was fiercely patriarchal with archetypal male values –*wankers!* It would never occur to him that, despite his low pack-ranking, Alice-May, being human and female, could possibly be a threat.

He might have been harder to catch up with had private transport not been banned in central London and that taxis had a habit of avoiding the Enclave with its large numbers of none or not-quite human residents. Taxi drivers tended to be prejudiced against things with lots of hair or scales, fangs and claws, that growled or hissed a mangled version of English. Alice-May was sure some entrepreneurial Interworlder would set up a taxi service for other Interworlders in the not too distant future. In fact it might even be worth using some of her capital to invest in one and she made a mental note to investigate the possibilities. It would also provide easier access to their comings and goings. Win-win. Alice-May strikes again!

Her soon to be new best friend Malachi was heading for the Soho nexus but taking a somewhat circular route so as to make sure he wasn't being followed. He saw her of course, as Alice-May made no attempt to hide, dismissing her immediately as just another empty-headed hotgirl with whom, under different circumstances he might have liked to have a consensual interface. Eventually he took a left off Oxford Street and headed inwards.

Soho, once a notorious sexzone had now, because of its Interworld nexuses, become the closest thing to an Interworld freezone. Streets and shops blended into a bizarre brightly lit meld of cultures, all offering a range of goods, primarily clothing, cultural items, and foodstuffs.

Music was a popular item from worlds where iconic heroes and heroines hadn't died young, as were alternative versions of iconic movies. Hear young Elvis Presley and his idol Robert Johnson duetting on "Sweet Home Chicago", Jimi Hendrix, Jerry Garcia and rest of the Grateful Dead

jamming on a thirty minute version of “Gloria”, Albert King and Stevie Ray Vaughan trading red hot blues licks, Sandy Denny and Vashti Bunyan’s third collaboration. Watch Stanley Kubrick’s “Star Wars” or Sylvester Stallone and Jerry Lewis in “Raging Bull”. Enjoy art and artefacts from wildly different cultures. Street traders yelled, music played, smells of cooking and cooked exotic foods and perfumes mixed with tobacco (smuggled from worlds where it was still legal) permeated the air in an aromatic almost narcotic haze.

All of it watched by the Security forces. There wasn’t a square foot not regularly scanned by cameras linked to sophisticated computers. Nothing illicit and no illegal immigrants ever got out of the Soho zone except in the possession or custody of Security.

Inbound was another matter. Security had no reason to stop Malachi the werewolf, though he would have been scanned and logged just as Alice-May was scanned and logged. So the dance of hunter and hunted continued.

Now, as she moved, Alice-May began to discard the superficialities of her hotgirl mode. Her People-made cape and skirt came off as she walked and, not without wincing, stuffed them into a shoulder bag. What lay underneath was also leather but treated and as tough as body armour and as flexible as silk until something impacted on it.

She followed the wiry werewolf down the packed street and saw him heading, literally, for the shadows. Nexuses moved, not far, but their location varied and, in order to travel from one world to another, they had to be sensed. If they weren’t, they effectively didn’t exist. Malachi had been looking for a specific nexus and sensed it at the same time as Alice-May.

Alice-May went into action. Dropping the bag, her feet hit pavement hard as she ran forward and grabbed the werewolf by an arm, dragging him with her and then harshly jerking him round and slamming him against a wall.

“Far as you go, baby fur,” she said as she backed away to give herself some space. The adrenalin surge heightened her state of mind and caused her breath to rasp. She eyed him cautiously now. He wasn’t much shorter than her and probably matched her for muscles. Of course he also had something she didn’t, namely potential fur and fangs.

She said to him, “Got something I want, honey-boy.”

“You mugging me, hotgirl?” he asked, a long tongue licking his lips. “Could be fun. I like it rough.”

“Reclamation job. You give me, I don’t hurt you.”

“*You* don’t hurt *me*?” he said in disbelief. “Hotgirl, I don’t have time for this shit.” He snarled, showing fangs and claws as he began to change. He leapt at her, powerful legs propelling him into the air.

Alice-May quite naturally froze in fear as he began to transform. At least that’s what he expected her to do.

She didn’t. While he went high, Alice-May went low, falling backwards onto her shoulders, bringing her feet up to catch Malachi in the stomach and propelling him further than she intended to send him sprawling across the still cobbled road.

He recovered quickly and tried to jump her again as she was getting to her feet. Malachi was clearly not a swift learner.

Alice-May caught his wrists, leaning backwards as she did so, and pivoted on her heels, swinging him round and once again slamming him into a wall. This time it was horizontal and his entire back hit brick.

“That hurt,” he said as he got, somewhat shakily, to his feet. “That really hurt.”

At least she presumed that was what he was saying as his face no longer resembled anything human.

“C’mon puppy a’mine,” she said, “let’s play some more.”

Alice-May stepped forward and punched him on the snout, following it up with a knee between his legs. Then she went in close to hammer at his kidneys with several sharp blows. Stepping back before his claws could get her, she kicked him in the stomach, twisting her foot at the moment of impact.

The werewolf went down and coughed blood.

Next thing he knew the hotgirl, who clearly wasn't, had straddled his back and put a knife to his throat.

"Turn back, baby fur," she said into his left pointed and hairy ear. "Or mama cut."

He allowed his vocal chords to return to human form and said, "That knife isn't silver it's steel. Sure you can cut my throat but it won't stay cut for long and I'll be really pissed off."

Alice-May said, "It's steel now, Malachi of the Scrapton-set, but that thickness is measured in microns. I touch a button and the steel melts faster than you can turn. Now what do you think is underneath, hmm? Could it be cold iron? No. Could it be gold? No. Could it be platinum? No. Could it be sil..."

Malachi transformed back into human, no fangs, no claws.

"Good boy," she said. "Maybe I'll get you a nice juicy bone. Now give me the drug you stole from those nice people who are going to pay me lots of money for its return."

Malachi the werewolf lived by a code of honour and Alice-May knew what the code was. He said, "Okay. You beat me fairly. You can have it. Let me go."

Alice-May stood up and he rolled over and got to his feet. He slid a hand into a jacket pocket and brought out a small steel box which he handed to her.

"Thank you, Malachi," she said, "it's nice we can be civilised about this."

"You don't know the shit I'll get when I return to the pack."

"I should care?"

"Like I would if the positions were reversed." He shook his head resignedly.

"Now," she said, "who were you getting it for?"

The werewolf took a pace back. "Oh no!" he said. "That you don't get. You don't get it even you put that knife to my heart."

"Wasn't thinking of it," Alice-May said as she casually bounced the back of his head off the wall and spun him round. "There's another way," she said.

With one hand pushing his forehead firmly against the wall, she used the other pull down his trousers and then his pants.

"You've been fucked a lot to be of such low status so I think you're used to it. Gonna make you my bitch and then you'll tell me."

Malachi said, "You're female, I know, I can smell you. You're a day off menstruating."

"Got that right, dog breath," she said.

"A dildo doesn't count."

"Wasn't going to use one," she said as she forced his shoulders down and pulled his bare backside against her groin.

"What?" he said, then, "Ow!"

"That's five inches of pulsating womanhood inside you," said Alice-May as she thrust against him.

"Now I know what you are," said Malachi. "I've heard the stories."

"That's right. Alice-May Affleck-Green, Interworld Private Investigator. You my bitch yet, honey-boy?" She thrust into him again for emphasis.

"Yes," he said, "my oath on it."

Alice-May withdrew and velcroed herself up. When she showered later she would pay particular attention to that part of her body.

"Good. I didn't like doing that to you even if you do consider it on the level of a casual slap. Now, who is your employer?"

He told her.

The night was young and pretty just like Alice-May who had plenty of time. Dusk had not long fallen as she sat at a table outside a café specialising in exotic Interworlder coffees. She sipped a dark strong blend which managed to combine the best of Turkish and Java, adding just a few grains of sugar to it to take the merest edge off the bitterness. The falafel on her plate looked particularly

good too and she licked her full red lips. Alice-May was feeling very smug and self-satisfied. She was back to wearing the attention-getting People leathers which her sister Bronwyn had sent her from Madagascar. On loan, until her return, God dammit.

Bronwyn was the only person Alice-May felt jealous of in the whole world. After gaining a first class Honours degree in Anthropology at Cambridge at eighteen, she had completed her doctorate by the age of twenty-one (which had been published to great acclaim in rarefied anthropological circles and bored the shit out of Alice-May who gave up after page thirty), and had been selected to spend a year with The People in Madagascar.

The People's home universe had never been found and Interworlders were just as fascinated by the intelligent lemuroids as anyone else. The BBC, the only broadcasting company allowed to make documentaries about them, and then only once every five years, had made billions as a result. The People's Madagascan rainforest was an idyll, a dream where a sentient species lived in harmony with its environment yet still managed a vital creative and progressive culture. No wonder they struck a chord among the inhabitants of a dozen worlds. Even the Fey, who had a cultural superiority complex akin to the Japanese, adored The People.

Lucky Bronwyn.

But all her sisters were pretty cool, she decided, which was amazing as she had thirteen of them aged from three to twenty-four and Debra was pregnant again, (and deliberately ignoring weird Judith who called herself Jake and identified herself as male).

A lot of people she knew got all squirmy at the thought of their parents' sex lives but with Debra and Rachel it was damn near impossible to ignore as one of them was usually pregnant every couple of years and she and all her sisters knew not to enter their bedroom when the door was shut. When either of them had been away on a trip and got back, that door could be shut for two days. Amazing, especially as monogamy was the last thing on Alice-May's mind. Not that she was complaining; she thought it was great that her parents loved each other so much, just that she couldn't understand the idea of only wanting to have sex with the same person for the rest of your life. Besides, Alice-May and every one of her sisters (who had started having sex and except for the weird male-identified Judith/Jake) all found both males and females equally sexually attractive.

She remembered reading the account Debra and Rachel had written together. She'd found it when she was fourteen and had just lost her virginity. When Bronwyn lost hers, Alice-May gave her the small printed book. Since then, reading it had become a rite of passage in their family and every one of them, except Judith-Jake of course, had loved it as it explained so much.

Then a cute tight-trousered guy with a great arse walked past and smiled and distracted her. The break in the train of thought also reminded her that she still hadn't finished the job.

She rang her employers, told them her location and asked for a security team to come and pick up the goodies. She also told them which of their employees had been involved. The bonus, they informed her, would be in the designated account in the morning.

That done, Alice-May then phoned her real employer.

"Hello darling," she said looking at the receptionist. "Interworld Security Agent Alice-May Affleck-Green reporting in."

"Yes, Alice-May, I know it's you, your bios check out. Enjoying the falafel?"

"That's not in range," she said.

"Not of *your* phone."

"You got me. Any chance of speaking to Aunt Munyeen?"

"Commander Ohrmuz-Morgan is unavailable but you may report to me and I'll pass the information on. You are secure, no-one is listening in."

"Who wants to listen to a hotgirl chatting vapidly with her chums, hmmm, agent Ariel? Anyway, I was right. It was Minister Lombard of Queen Mab's court behind the heist."

"Heist? Your lowbrow taste is showing, Alice-May. Thank you anyway. I shall pass this information on to the Commander. I'm sure she'll be pleased."

"Give her my love."

"I don't believe I have the seniority for that Agent Affleck-Green. Ariel out."

Alice-May laughed. It had been a while since she'd seen Munyeen whom she regarded as a pretty cool person and Alice-May never tired of hearing the story about how she'd got her own back on Mum and Debra for that time they shot up the paranormals' pub by not explaining that the two-word phrase 'Purge them' meant activate the antidote to the poison that was already in their bodies, thus purging the poison not actually purging them. Munyeen had cruel sense of humour which, although she didn't share it herself, she certainly appreciated.

Job done, coffee drunk, falafel eaten, Alice-May wrist-scanned the bill then hit hotgirl mode again as she headed home for her apartment. Just enough time to change and shower –the werewolf hadn't bathed in a couple of days, yeuch!- then out to tri-date with Leilang and Joshua. (Nana Green would approve of him.)

Delighted with her life, Alice-May, head full of music and excited at the thought of great sex to come, danced along through the busy crowded noisy kaleidoscopic streets of Interworld London.

It was the best of times ...

Yes it was!

Epilogue: Rachel's Story.

It's almost over now and I wonder if you'll ever read this. It's written for you, Alice-May, curled up inside me for another two months, for you and for your sisters yet to come. I wonder if I'll let you read it, if I dare expose to you the rawness of the truth about your parents and their role in how you and your world came to be. Perhaps when you're old enough, say when you're fifty or sixty. Or will you have found it by then and passed it around your siblings like a guilty secret, embarrassed by the rawness of our need for each other and ashamed of our weaknesses?

Oh well, whatever it is, now it's time to wrap things up, put this all behind us and get on with our currently extremely hectic lives.

I wiped my mouth, flinging sticky ropes of saliva away with the back of my hand, not looking or caring where they went.

I stood up and stepped gingerly over the pool of my own vomit, looked Munyeen in the eye and said bluntly, "You are a vindictive cow."

"I never claimed to be perfect and I always get my own back," came the dryly amused reply. "You two really pissed me off that night. Not wise, Rachel, not wise at all. Let's say we're even now."

Ignoring her, I pulled Debra to her feet. Debra's fists were clenched and rising.

"Stop that," I said, placing my hands on top of them, pushing them down.

Then I put my palms on the sides of Debra's face and, indifferent to whomsoever might be watching, kissed her lingeringly on those gorgeous full sensual lips of hers.

"I love you," I said clearly, realising as I spoke that this was a small part of history and so I made sure my words weren't mumbled and indistinct but loud and clear enough for any monitoring equipment to pick up. "Whatever we have become and whatever we are going to become, we're alive and we're together, and that's all that matters and that's all that will *ever* matter to me, my love." I would have preferred to say 'babe' but this was a formal occasion.

Gently taking Debra's hand, I tugged her in the direction of the door. "Come on," I said. "It's over. They aren't going to hurt us now."

Subdued and unspeaking for once, Debra let me lead.

Glancing back at Munyeen, who had finished playing her role and would soon return to whatever passed for normal life for her, I could see from the quiet smile on her face that she understood, even if Debra didn't yet, that this was to be a symbolic gesture. They can be so important, darling. Never forget that.

I opened the door and looked out on the spring day. The sun warmed our faces. We heard the wind and the songs of birds and the sound of water lapping the lake's edge and the animated voices of children, still unseen, coming out of school.

For sure the storm would come soon enough, but it then –the turmoil now engulfing us in this rapidly changing world- lay unknown and in our future. Now it was Spring and everything had been born again; us and the world.

We *are* reborn, I thought as Debra slid an arm round my shoulders and squeezed reassuringly and I knew we were seeing the same thing. Standing together, our faces raised to the bright warming sun, we had been reborn, just as you, Alice-May, are soon to be born, into a world of infinite possibilities, and, far more than I ever expected, a transcendent world of ultimate hope.

Apart from my never-ending love, my daughter, I can give you nothing better than that.

Of course when you're older, if you'd prefer to have an item more tangible and expensive, you might care to consider a tasteful while discretely ostentatious gold necklace encrusted with diamonds. I'm sure I could arrange something. We'll talk.

What?

Did you think I'd gone soft in the head? Oh please, this is Rachel Green talking here.

No matter, for now-

an ending.