

In The Web

by

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SFcrowsnest.com:

"A really good story set about 300 years in the future... Very well written!"

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"This was an effective story about a bleak future that ended on a positive note and a very good read."

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It was very quiet on the berm above the tideline. Mertin sipped his beer while he watched the rhythmic flow of the breaking waves. Slowly his mind numbed and the painful thoughts receded to a whisper.

Three hundred years ago this had been a thriving seaside resort. Nobody came here anymore, there was no point. The seas were dead and the air carried all the usual global contaminants.

Behind him the sloping walls of the Mega-Plex ziggurat surged for eighty floors, dominating the coast for miles around. The bright lights spilling from its windows threw harsh shadows, casting everything into sharp relief. Rooftop searchlights constantly scanned the approaches from the Ramsgate slums.

Mertin watched as Ben strode up the sand to join him. He chugged some more beer while his friend settled down. "In a few months it will be very different here." he said.

"So we're celebrating, right? You sounded a bit odd earlier. Everything was OK with the St Mary Hoo boys?" Ben asked.

Mertin nodded: "Yeah, it was a long journey and I'm just a bit tired."

"Sooo, come on, tell me. What happened?"

"It took all morning to get past the vetting committees, but I was finally allowed to see Alexander after lunch." Mertin answered, completely deadpan.

"Whoa, the Chief Scientist? They made you pitch the idea to him?"

"Yes. They said the capital investment was too risky. They were going to turn us down so I insisted on seeing him."

"What is he like?" Ben asked, wide eyed.

"Pretty normal. He's fatter than he seems in the news updates, his hair's greyer too, but his mind is very sharp. He grilled me on the project for an hour and a half."

"Extreme! And he liked it, of course?"

"Eventually, yes. He's put his personal stamp on our designs for the new fermenters. Building starts on the oceanic tanks immediately and we should be producing the new protein molecule within three months."

"Well done, Mertin! You know what this means, don't you?" Ben said, pointing behind them at the Mega-Plex. "Only promotion to level twelve and quarters with outside balconies!"

"Right." Mertin replied, unable to keep a sad edge from biting into his voice.

"You don't seem very excited." Ben said. He held Mertin's gaze for a long moment until a whistling sigh finally emerged from his friend's lips.

“My father just died.” Mertin told him.

Ben looked concerned. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “He was a good man; we’ll miss him.”

Mertin felt anger boiling in his guts. Seconds later it rushed up his neck to join the barely buried fury that was pounding behind his eyes and his feelings took control of his tongue: “He was a complete bastard.” he spat.

“What?” Ben recoiled, looking shocked. “What do you mean?”

Mertin finished his beer and popped another can open for a chaser; it didn’t even touch his sides on the way down.

Ben kept quiet, waiting for an answer.

Eventually Mertin had to speak: “He always made out like he was some kind of ethical martyr.” He twisted his voice into a mockery of his father’s posh twang: “Always do your best, Mertin. The Mega-Plex is depending on you, Mertin. You’re everything to me, Mertin; don’t let us down.”

Mertin locked eyes with Ben; “You know what he was like.” A statement; everyone knew that his father was an uncompromising perfectionist.

“Yes. He could be very demanding but he always wanted the best for you and the people.”

“Bullshit. I was sifting through his stuff and found his collection of pictures and old video recordings.”

“Yes?” Ben asked, uncertainly.

“In one of them a girl was opening a present while a very little boy was singing ‘happy birthday to you’. She looked about seven years old and was wearing the biggest grin I’ve ever seen. Off camera a man said ‘Give Ashleigh a hug, Mertin’, and I saw the boy wrap his arms around her.”

Waving his finger vaguely at the slums, Mertin let him have the punch line: “I had a sister; might still have a sister, out there. And the bastard never told me. Can you believe that?”

Ben gulped hard but managed to keep eye contact. “Yes, I can.” he answered.

“What the hell?”

“I used to work in the Citizen’s Registry. I completed the records when your Dad brought you in. He told me about her but I had to keep it from you, it’s the law.”

Mertin’s look of utter contempt scared Ben. “Look Mertin, your Dad had a very hard choice to make. Thanet is a small ‘Plex. Very few places come up each year for Outsiders to join

us, you know that. Only the best can come in. A spot was offered for you and uniquely the 'Plex allowed your Dad to continue looking after you. He had to choose between keeping you all together or giving you the best chance in life. He chose for you."

"Balls!" Mertin snapped. "He should have told me."

"Perhaps, but that was the choice he made."

Mertin pointed towards the slums; "What about everyone out there? Don't they deserve that chance too?"

Spreading his hands, Ben tried to calm him down: "We need those people working the land to provide raw materials for us." he said quietly.

A light breeze was carrying the smell of smoke from open roasting pits in the slums. Mertin caught the scent of burning wood and roasting flesh in his nostrils. In the late night films it wasn't always animal flesh being cooked on those searing flames. "They live in squalor out there. If you can call it living." he said.

"I know. We all know. But what can we do about it? We can only support the current Megaplex population at the standard of living you enjoy."

"But it's not supposed to be that like that!" Mertin insisted. "Every capable person outside is legally entitled to join the Megaplex; he should have got her in!" He lay back on the sand, his energy draining away.

"Look, Mertin, just grow up here will you!" Ben snapped. "Face reality, the old industrial world is dead! Everyone can't enjoy all the privileges of the old society, but some of us can. You can! You can either live here with us, or out there with the savages."

Mertin just sank further into his own dark thoughts.

"Be careful. Any more of this and the council might decide to disenfranchise you!" Ben said.

Mertin knew that was an honest warning. "We'll see." he replied.

"Yes, we will." said Ben.

Somehow Mertin pulled himself up and forced a brave, 'looking towards the future' expression onto his face. "Look, thanks for thinking about me." he said. "I know you're right. I just need to think this all through, OK?"

Ben slowly nodded; "OK, Mertin. Look, you need some rest. Let's get back inside. I can drop by tomorrow and help you start to sort things out."

"Thanks, I appreciate that." Mertin said, turning away from his friend so he wouldn't see the tears welling up in his eyes.

The two men walked back along the beach towards the seafront security doors.

'She is out there and it's wrong, but what can I do about it?' Mertin wondered.

#

It was the dream again.

He was outside, sat amongst summer flowers on a patch of wasteland. She was playing with him, making daisy chains and singing nursery rhymes. The little girl often appeared in his dreams. He felt happy and safe. She always looked after him.

This time the dream was different.

A dark shadow played across the ground and pulled her away from him. She was kicking and struggling but nobody paid any attention. He was crying but nobody was there to ease his pain. She was dragged beyond the walls of the wasteland before giving a single scream.

Mertin woke up drenched in sweat with his heart pumping fast.

This was eating him up. He had to know if she was still alive. He got out of bed and splashed some cold water on his face.

Mertin hadn't found anything about their lives outside the 'Plex while he searched his father's belongings, but he had found his logon details. His father had been a senior level scientist with a high clearance level. 'If I get caught they will throw me out.' Mertin thought. 'But if I don't try now they will cancel his logon and I'll never know. I have to try this now!'

Before he had time to change his mind, Mertin went into his study, plugged into the web port and swiped his father's credentials. There was a long enough pause for him to start to panic that his illegal logon had been detected before the familiar lurch to his senses announced his transition into the bio-web.

Mertin's vision rippled and then slowly cleared as the web projected data blocks and access-control boundaries onto his optic nerve. He knew he'd pay for this later with the usual headache that seemed to be reserved for people born outside.

Huge corporate data structures towered over everything, leaving little room to move about. He kept his distance from them to avoid the physical pain warnings projected by their security protocols. He found the huge 'Plex population register and started his search.

'Please enter biographical and biometric search parameters.' the web-portal said.

Finding an 'outsider' would ordinarily be close to impossible. They typically avoided contact with the 'Plex and gave false details when they used public services. With only her name and a picture it would be nearly impossible to find her. But he had the best possible clue to follow, their close-matching DNA.

Mertin attached his DNA record from the central registry and set it to filter the public service records: 'Use linked DNA profile. Scan for familial matches on Outsider medical, educational, food relief and drug monitoring programs.'

He hoped she had taken *something* from the 'Plex recently. She could be anywhere, or dead; but he didn't want to think about that.

'Searching.' the system confirmed.

#

It was oppressively dark in the maintenance corridor. Mertin did not usually talk to support staff, least of all the Civil Guards. This meeting had taken days to arrange and he still wasn't sure about the man in front of him. "Have you got it?" he asked.

"Yeah," the guard replied. "Payment?"

Mertin handed him a slip of paper that read 'Store 12B, corridor 57 level 3. Code BF884G.'

"Twenty litres?"

"Yes, it's all there." Mertin knew the stock chemicals wouldn't be missed for at least a week. It had been hard to brew the drug up without anyone finding the reaction vessel but luckily store 12B had been tagged for a refit. Only the dealers would know where the GbDL liquid had gone. "And my stuff?"

"Here." the guard passed him a small pouch of documents. "Remember, I don't know you." he said. "You get caught, you're on your own. You squeal and you will die quickly and painfully."

Mertin nodded: "Understood."

"You go that way," the guard said and pointed behind him. "Don't come back here." He pocketed Mertin's slip of paper and quickly left.

Mertin watched him go and then opened the pouch. The map and access codes were all there. He tucked them in his shirt and started along the corridor. It ended at a security door with a single entry pad. He entered the code he had already memorised and waited. A few seconds later the door opened. He stepped through and closed it behind him.

He was in a narrow room lined with fourteen identical grey lockers along each side wall. 'Locker 6,' he remembered. He walked straight to it and put on the rough clothes and boots he found inside. The training he'd absorbed from the bio-web came like a reflex to him. He picked up the custom Tactical-2411 pistol, checked the action and slid in a twenty round clip. The gun fit snugly in a concealed pocket at waist height on his left side. He ignored the other weapons that the civil guards used on raids in the slums. If this gun didn't keep him out of trouble he wouldn't live long enough for anything else to make a difference.

Mertin put a note on top of his clothes in the locker before closing it. At least they would know that he had chosen to leave and wouldn't waste efforts on a rescue. He would either find his sister or he'd die out there.

At the far end of the room was the door to Outside. He entered the code and it opened immediately.

Mertin stepped out into the crisp night air: 'That's it.' he thought. 'The second part of my life is over but at least I made that decision for myself.' He was surprised to find that he felt happy.

The door sealed closed behind him with a dull clang.

Nobody would come looking for him. Nobody would help him.

He was truly alone out here.

#

The road was choked with rubble but the map said it was passable. He was resting in the crumbling shell of a small house. The roof was missing and the curving rampart of the Mega-Plex overpass loomed high above him. The walls on either side sagged inwards like two eavesdroppers leaning to hear a particularly juicy tale. The route ahead was marked by collapsed walls and piles of rubble for at least five hundred metres.

A neon sign from the overpass was throwing out bright reminders about birth control and other health initiatives into the slums. Its blue light merged at ground level with flickering orange flames from further down the nightmare road in gyrating columns of seething anxiety.

'Nowhere to go but forwards.' Mertin thought.

#

He eventually reached the junction with 'Newington Road', the main thoroughfare. His web-search had shown that Ashleigh must be living in this area but he couldn't narrow it down any further.

So far his questioning in other, quieter areas had earned him a stack of verbal abuse, a punch in the face and a very fast run away from a pack of feral children. But someone had to know her; he'd just have to keep trying.

He wasn't sure about this area though; it was much busier with people, and so far they hadn't been friendly out here. He waited in the shadows for the right moment to step out. When it seemed reasonably quiet he moved into the light and took a spot leaning against a lamppost.

A wide pavement extended either side of him. On his left was a small parade of shops. Loose tarpaulins covered their wrecked upper stories and flapped in the wind. A

hairdresser was advertising itself as “Sweeney Todd’s” (‘mess me about and find out why’). A drug store was tightly locked up behind iron shutters while the food store next door was still open. There was a slightly queer smell of cooking meat coming from the open doorway; Mertin didn’t know if he should feel hungered or repulsed by it.

Two people were approaching from his right. He heard them laugh as they jostled each other. They were wearing strange, hairy brown coats and brightly coloured rubber shoes. As they drew close Mertin could see they were a big man and a woman. He took a step forward and held up friendly hand; “Hi there,” he said, “Can you help me? I’m looking for Ashleigh Dourif. Do you know where I might find her?”

They didn’t speak but slowly stared at him from head to toe. Once again, Mertin started to feel threatened.

“Yerz out late, Whitey.” the man said. “If yoz lookin’ for a party Iz got the girls.”

“No, I’m not here to party,” Mertin answered. “I’m just looking for Ashleigh.”

“Shez a special bang, eh Whitey?” the man asked. “Shez gone, but myz girls are clean.”

“Another time,” Mertin said, moving back slightly. “Sorry to have bothered you.” He turned to walk away.

“Yoz disrespectin me, ‘Plex-man? Iz don’t like that.”

“Yeah, heza not likin the goods, Jakey.” The woman said. “Say wez take his stash anyway?”

Mertin backpedalled fast; “No, no need for that,” he said.” Look, I’m going.”

He turned to run but a group of people emerged from the food store, blocking the way. They abruptly stopped talking and closed around him.

Mertin stepped to stand with his back to the wall. Their eyes burned with expectant confrontation within the long hoods of their padded coats. The figure to his left spoke up with a grating rasp of a voice: “Jakey, Whitey bothrin yoz?”

“Hez dissin’ the girls, Samz my man. Hez a need some educatin’, right.”

“Iz hear that.” Samz said, not taking his focus off Mertin for an instant. “Whyz yoz here, Whitey?”

“What? Sorry?” Mertin didn’t understand what Samz was saying.

“Yoz getting funny, Whitey?” Samz said, shoving him on the shoulder.

The figure to his right started to spin a thin knife between his fingers. “Nice creps, Butters. Yoz be handin them here.”

Mertin shifted to face the new voice, trying to keep his back to the wall. "Sorry, what do you want?" he asked.

"Yoz Poh-leece, Butters? All alone? Want some shank?"

Mertin saw the cold blade flick in front of his face. He pulled his gun and shoved it right into the knifeman's hood: "Back off scummer." he commanded.

The knifeman stood rock still.

The other Outsiders waited expectantly.

"I'm just looking for someone." Mertin said. "I need some help."

Mertin didn't expect the next voice. It barked commands at the others in a tone that expected obedience. But it also had a softer quality that held a promise of gentleness. "Leave him. Hez no Poh-leece. Iza deal with this one. Yoz feel me?"

"Sure, Jen. Yoz always buggin uz, eh?"

"Shift it, Samz."

"Kay, kay; wez goin."

Mertin looked at the girl who had intervened, "Thanks." he said.

"Come with me, Whitey. Maybe Iz help you." The girl gestured for him to follow and led him off the streets into the warmth of her home.

#

When Mertin awoke he heard visitors in Jen's flat. She was teaching simple number skills to angry teenagers, using patient assertion to keep them working. A while later he heard words of thanks from people who had found work after learning from her. A child was brought in suffering from flu and she eased its symptoms.

When it had quietened down he stepped out of her bedroom to find her.

"You're awake then?" she said.

"Yes. You've been busy today."

"Busy every day, Whitey. There's a lot of people to look after here." She offered him a mug: "Here, drink this. It'll pick you up."

"Thanks." He took the cup and took a cautious sip. The liquid was hot and sweet, with a strange leafy tang. "Hmmm, what is it?" he asked.

"Herbal tea," she replied, "nothing special."

"It tastes fine to me." he said, smiling.

She sat quietly by him while he emptied the mug.

"You're not much like your friends." Mertin said carefully.

"How do you know what I'm like, Whitey?" she replied.

"They would have killed me last night. You didn't allow that; you helped me. Will you help me now?"

"Why should I?" she asked. "You've got it all Plex-man, do you know that? Do you know how many people get into the 'Plex each year? Do you?"

"No, I don't." he confessed, confused by the sudden challenge in her voice.

"None."

"What? That can't be right. We hear on the news all the time about people who have been reintegrated into society!"

"Who needs reintegrating, Whitey?" she demanded. "Who says your society is the good one?"

Mertin didn't want to argue but she was suddenly pushing this. "Look at how you live." he countered. "You are cold and short of food. Your houses are falling part and who knows how many diseases are filling your bodies?"

"That doesn't mean we are bad people! Maybe you all need to share more with us."

"What more do you need? We already provide free schools and hospitals; all you need to do is take advantage and learn enough to contribute something to society!"

"There are no teachers in the schools and no medicines in the hospitals!" she said, prodding him in the chest for emphasis. "Seven hundred and fifty thousand people live outside the Thanet Megaplex. One hundred thousand live inside it. Do you contribute enough? I gave you help and brought you into my home; do you really think you're better than us?"

Mertin felt shame pull at his conscience: "No, I guess not." he replied.

She stared at him in something between disgust and sorrow.

"I'm sorry." he said. "Will you help me?"

The argument seemed to drain her. "What do you want?" she asked dully.

"I'm looking for someone."

“Who?”

“Ashleigh Dourif.” he answered. “My sister. I know she’s somewhere near here; she took a pack of antibiotics from a mobile hospital three weeks ago.”

Jen watched him carefully. “Ashleigh, eh? She taught me how to help people; to teach them their words and numbers. To try and make them better when they’re sick. Do you know why she wanted those drugs?”

“No.”

“A young boy was shot during a ‘Plex security raid. They were looking for the crew who’d broken into a fuel store and came in guns blazing. He was just six years old but they still shot him, maybe it was a stray bullet? Who can tell? Any case, it messed his leg up real bad.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Mertin said.

“So was he. She saved the leg but some infection set in. She sat with him day and night until he was well enough to leave.” Jen fixed him with a withering stare of anger; “Ash never said anything about having a brother in the ‘Plex though.” she said.

“My father broke our family up when I was very young. Maybe she gave up hope.”

“She’s given up more than that, Whitey.” Jen sounded sad.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s out.”

“What do you mean? Out where?”

“Out of the slums.”

“Where is she?” Mertin demanded.

“I don’t know exactly. Samz will know for sure.”

“The boy from last night?”

She nodded. “He took her to join with the web.”

“What do you mean? Join the web?”

“Nobody escapes from the slums, Mertin.” she said. “But the web is a way out.”

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“You think you’re so smart, don’t you? Looking down on us all from up there, ruling over us like evil lords.”

“I’ve never done anything to you people!” he insisted.

“Not ‘you people’, you ignorant pig! We are the same. We are all good people, all of us!”

“I’m sorry.”

“You must spend your whole life being sorry, Mertin. You’re lucky. We’re reminded every day of how wealthy you are. Your lights shine on us all the time. You travel over our heads in your luxury cars on roadways we cannot reach, to visit places we’ll never see and work on things that are so different to our lives that you might as well be aliens.”

“I’ve never thought about that.” he answered.

“No, but people down here do, all day, every day.”

“Sorry.” he said.

They sat in an uncomfortable silence for a moment. Then, keeping his eyes on the floor, Mertin humbly asked his next question: “How does the web help you get out?”

“You people like a thrill don’t you?” she answered. “Some of you like to creep here for fun and pay for your pleasures. Money is no good here, but your technology is good currency.”

“And?”

“Web-jackers prostitute people for the gene therapies needed for linking directly onto the bio-web. With enough ‘earnings’ they’ll link you to web-spurs that they grow on the backstreets. That’s the way out. Your body dies but your mind lives on in the bio-web.”

“I didn’t know.” he said.

“No, you didn’t. But she did, and now she’s gone!”

“She’s dead then?”

“Maybe. Probably.”

“Will you take me to Samz? Please?” The honest begging sound was clear in his voice.

“Alright,” she answered. “But you will have to be careful. He’ll probably shoot you before asking questions.”

#

Jen led him from the safety of her flat back onto the streets. Things looked even worse in daylight. He could not understand how anyone could survive for long here. The pavements

were crowded with people while noisy wagons made from the remains of autocars were dragged along the broken roadway by teams of dejected horses. Piles of excrement from the animals lined their route and he told his imagination not to dwell on where the pavement piles had come from.

She barely spoke to him while she dragged him through the rat's maze of alleys and walkways that carved up this world. All the time the glistening glass and chrome floors of the Megaplex dominated the skyline ahead. She left him in the remains of a community centre opposite the boys' house and walked quickly away.

Mertin watched quietly for ten minutes. The front door was open but nobody came or went. When the road was momentarily clear he ran across and ducked inside.

It smelt stale and dusty in the hallway. Stairs rose to an upper floor in front of him. A narrow passage to their side led to other ground floor rooms. He cocked an ear to listen for any sounds of habitation. There was a creak from upstairs and some muffled laughter.

Mertin eased his foot onto the second stair and started to climb two steps at a time, keeping his foot close to the wall to minimise any sounds from his ascent.

Thirty stairs later he was stood on a small landing. The boys were in the room to his immediate left. He slipped the gun into his hand and concealed it within his sleeve. Then he took a firm grip on the door handle, twisted it sharply and thrust the door open.

As he stepped into the room Mertin took in the sight of Samz reclining on a sofa, drink in hand, flanked on either side by two friends.

Samz was the fastest to react. As Mertin stepped forward the boy leapt up and threw his glass at him.

"Yoz chose the wrong crib to bust, my man." Samz shouted. He mashed one set of knuckles into the palm of his other hand: "Gonna ghost yoz good."

Mertin pulled the gun out and adopted a firing stance with natural ease. "One move is all it takes, my man." he said. He glanced at the other two boys: "One move from anyone."

The boys stood frozen in place with their eyes locked on the gun.

"You look uncomfortable there, Samz." Mertin said. He gestured with the gun; "Why don't you sit back down?"

Samz carefully lowered himself back onto the sofa. "I know you, Whitey." he said.

"Yes, you do."

"Yoz don't afraid uz. Yoz gonna waste us, Whitey?"

"Talk plain English, Samz. I know she taught you how."

“What do you want, ‘Plex-man?”

“I’m here for Ashleigh.”

“You bangin’ her?”

“No. I’m here to help her.”

The boys shared a look and burst out laughing. “She don’t need no help now, ‘Plex-man. She’s a gone.”

“I know.” Mertin said. “Take me to her.”

Samz leant forward on the sofa and Mertin was careful to keep the gun steady on the boy’s chest. “She *escaped*, Whitey. You know what I mean? She’s out of it.”

“Where is she?” Mertin was getting frustrated and unbalanced. He sensed the boys pulling together to rush him and quickly took a step back to increase the distance between them: “Just stay calm there and nobody gets shot. Got it?”

The boys slowly relaxed again. “OK, Whitey. We’re cool. Best you leave now, eh? We can’t help you, ‘less you’re lookin’ for a bang with Juggles here!” He pointed to the boy on his left and the three of them started to laugh.

“No. I’m not here for sex.” Mertin said. “I’m here to see Ashleigh. She is, was, my sister. I just want to see her. I can pay you to take me, will you do that?”

“Woz you tradin’, Whitey?”

“I’ve got two hundred High-D tabs in my pocket. Take me to her and they’re yours.”

Samz laughed. “Well bro, why didn’t you just say that? We’re cool.”

“OK. You lead and I’ll follow.” Mertin told him.

“Sure thing, my man.” Samz said. He slowly got up and moved towards the door.

“Your boyfriends stay here.” Martin told him.

Samz paused and his smile faded before flicking to full beam again: “No problem, Whitey. Juggles, Matty, you stay here, OK? I’ll be back for yoz.”

“Sweet, Samz. No problem.” Juggles answered.

Mertin let Samz lead him out of the house and carefully made sure they weren’t followed. At street level he pulled his gun hand back into his sleeve. “I’m right behind and the gun is always on you. Just remember that Samz and you will be two hundred tabs up at the end of our little walk.”

Samz walked on like he didn't have a care in the world.

#

Samz led him through the maze of alleys and narrow streets, down 'Boundary Road' before turning to face 'Alma Road'. The walls pressed in closely here and Mertin doubted that it had been a roadway to anywhere for decades.

Piles of crashed masonry filled the walkway between the oppressive buildings. Strange shadows moved in the dark hollows between standing walls and collapsing ruins. Weeds grew strong and tall as far as he could see, and the only sign of human habitation was a flaring brazier that had obviously been abandoned as they approached.

"Yoz be careful here." Samz told him. "Yoz stay close a me in the roadway, leave them cribs well alone."

"Why?" Mertin asked. "I don't see anyone."

"They seez yoz, my man. Yoz wanna add to themz bones by the fire, man?"

Mertin looked more closely at the brazier. A hunk of meat was roasting on a spit over the flames. The sweet smell of cooking flesh reached him, carried in harsher tones of burning wood and benzene. But that pile of bones nearby, were they from animals, or something else? "Yes, let's move on." he told Samz.

The boy led him down the ruined street, over piles of long-abandoned detritus and accusing rubbish. They crawled over a large mound of bricks and timber that filled the road from margin to margin, the remains of a home that had totally succumbed to the decay of the slums. At the top they had a clear view of the way ahead.

Pot holes full of dirty rainwater and clusters of straggly weeds stretched down the road; except for a singular patch about ten metres across. The ground there was completely bare. In its centre a silver-grey, ribbed trunk emerged from an exposed pit. It had to be at least four metres thick and was topped by a cluster of iridescent blue blades that reminded him of palm tree fronds.

At least a dozen tendrils wormed across the ground from the trunk and disappeared through nearby windows. They glistened with a light grey sheen, as if they were covered in a thin layer of dew.

"She's hooked to one of these?" Mertin asked.

"Yeah, Whitey."

"Show me."

Samz led him down the mound and into a building that still looked relatively stable. "We goz up." he told Mertin. "Mind yoz step, thez stairs is bad."

They moved carefully up the stairwell, spreading their weight across their hands and feet and using the more solid-looking boards.

At the top of the stairs the door to Ashleigh's room stood open.

Mertin shuddered when he saw her body lying on the bed. His stunned gaze flitted from one shocking metamorphic union of her body to the portal to the next.

The right side of her face was clear and the eye was closed. The other side was sunken and covered by a knobby growth that sat as a slowly pulsing lump across her mouth, nose and left eye. The lump was connected by a white-grey gristly mass to a braided flexible tube that was about as thick as his arm.

Her left arm was closest to the window. A cluster of tube-growths extended from mid-forearm and completely replaced her hand. They joined with the flexible tube from her face at a large bony knuckle that linked this Dying Room to the trunk outside. A patchwork of smaller tubes grew around her abdomen and emerged through tears in her shirt, while another larger cluster shrouded her thighs and wrapped around her shins like a perverse sleeping bag.

"She paid for this?" Mertin asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, Whitey. She was pretty girl, it didn't take too long."

The confirmation of Ashleigh's fall from grace bit sharply in Mertin's mind. For a moment he felt disgusted then he realised that it didn't matter; she was his sister and he had left her alone here. He had no right to feel ashamed of her.

Mertin reached into an inner jacket pocket and retrieved the bag of High-D tablets. "These are pure," he told Samz as he handed them over. "I made them myself. Nobody will get sick on them."

"Thanks, Whitey. Yoz wanna me stay?"

"No. You can go. I'll find my own way out."

"Your funeral, man, that's for real." Samz stuffed the bag into his shirt and left.

Mertin heard Samz retreat down the stairs and scramble back up the street. Sitting on the floor with his back to the window, watching Ashleigh, he waited until he couldn't hear any more movement outside.

Low clouds had settled overhead and a steady drizzle was falling. Spatters of murky rain fell through the window onto his head and shoulders. He ignored them.

Ashleigh's body seemed to have fused with the bed. Closer up he could see a layer of web tubing that spread over her chest like a fungal filigree. The web spur was slowly digesting her body, using her tissues as food.

In the silence of his sister's tomb he was slowly overwhelmed by her death.

A short sob caught in his chest and surprised him. He didn't expect to cry here.

A longer sob shuddered through his body. He tried to push it back down.

An animal grief erupted within him and he howled with the pain of his loss and her suffering: 'Aaaaagh!'

'Why did she have to die?' his mind screamed. 'Why was I saved?'

Mertin fell forwards onto his hands and knees. Great gulping agonies of terrible suffering consumed him. He hugged himself tightly while tears poured from his eyes.

Slowly his crying diminished to shocked snuffles and he lay on his side in the dust. A web-node dangled in front of his face. 'Her body is dead, but is *she* still in there? Is her *mind* in there?' he wondered.

'Does she have a soul?' He hesitated at that penultimate thought, almost afraid to acknowledge the final question: 'Do I have a soul?'

The rain eased and a shaft of sunlight swept across his sodden hair to settle on her face. She looked calm in that golden light and her extended, tuboid arm seemed to beckon him. He considered the vacant nodes hanging from Ashleigh's trunk.

'Will I survive?' he worried. 'Does it matter? I'm here. She's here. She was prepared to give up everything to escape to something better. All I have to do is trust that she was right.'

His body was already bio-engineered to make the hormones needed for a bio-web connection. He grabbed the node and eased it into his wet-port.

This was no normal connection.

Mertin felt the bacterial payload start to surge through his body, depositing new gene sequences into his stem cells, forcing the production of very aggressive bio-web receptor nodes. His temperature was rising fast and he was getting thirsty. He grasped the vacant nodes hanging from Ashleigh and sighed as he slipped into sleep.

#

Mertin felt sick. He had no sense of direction but sensed all directions at once. He had no sense of smell, but when he chose to smell he was overloaded with all the possibilities streaming over him. He had no sense of sight but his eyes overflowed with colours from across the electromagnetic spectrum.

No up. No pull of gravity. No sound, smell, sight, touch, texture, roughness, silk, slime.

All ways, pulled all around, all sounds in his ears, all feelings.

Where, when, why, who was he?

In all the sensations sweeping over him he almost missed the single thought shining on him like a gentle caress of love in a frenzy of despairing excesses: 'I am here.'

Mertin focussed on that soft thought. The pain of universal experience receded and he started to make sense of the sensations crashing over him.

In between the huge corporate data towers were small meandering pathways. He'd missed them at first because they were so overwhelmed by those immense knowledge stores but he slowly became attuned to their calming fragrance.

Mertin followed the soothing thought and stepped onto a very obscure pathway between the Tesbury and civil guard towers. As he moved forwards the constant shriek of the data streams fell away and he could hear a soothing sound of wind blowing across grasses. He could feel the caress of sunlight restoring his vitality and drank greedily after a shower of finest rain.

Thought molecules of Ashleigh illuminated his path ahead.

He slipped easily through chalk downland, moving from grasses to ragwort, to daisies and wild blackberries. Her thoughts caressed his aching feet: 'I'm so glad you came. Do you see the beauty?'

He did. But the path ahead scared him and his fright reared up like an impenetrable barrier of thorns. Beyond lay an arid barrier, stirred only by harsh blows of sand that stung the rugged flesh of thorny survivors clinging to life by a shallow thread. How could he pass through that?

Ashleigh's face shimmered above the desert floor, dancing in the heat haze: 'I was here.'

She had passed here. All he had to do was trust.

Mertin forced his fear to abate and clung to the love that was building in his heart. First one step forwards, then another.

The thorny plants lived very slowly but it was cool and calm within their fleshy walls. He slipped through roots and chloroplasts, into flowers and between plants. Progress was slow and his body was sometimes shrivelled and sometimes bloated.

He reached the margins of the desert and eased into the ocean beyond. Cool fronds of seaweed washed to and fro in the upper waters and relaxed him as he moved through their supporting warmth.

'Are you happy?' her thought molecules were dense here and felt like subtle strokes on tired muscles. 'Why did you come?'

'I came for you. It is all for you.' he thought in return.

Mertin crept out of the sea and slipped through common plants and vital crops to follow her unique radiant trail.

He filtered slowly into the essential tissues of an olive tree; rising slowly from the root hair zone into a radicle and onwards into the trunk. He slid around the xylem, constrained by the outer gnarled whorls of the bark and eventually found an ancient core to rest in.

'Hello Mertin.'

'Where are you?' he wondered.

'I am here and everywhere.'

'I came to find you.'

'I am home now.' she replied. 'I searched for a long time and finally found a Love in these trees that I did not find anywhere else.'

'Where are we?' he asked.

'An olive grove in Gethsemane.'

'Why have you brought me here?'

'You brought yourself, but it is too late to return now. You travelled for eighty seasons to find me and your body is long dead.'

The thought of bodily death terrified Mertin at first and he thought he might go mad. Then he realised that he was still alive in these trees. 'I am alive.' he told her.

'The bio-web connects us now. It is *alive*, Mertin. It draws us all together and helps us to share our experiences.'

'Why here?' he asked her.

'These lovely trees have seen happiness and sadness, the rise of great peoples and the debasement of human folly. They have felt our sadness and our joy when our hearts swell with goodness. I am content to sit here a while and learn from them.'

'Can I wait with you?' he asked, his love bridging the gap between their boles.

'Why did you give up so much to be with me?' she asked in return.

'I am ashamed that we left you outside. I wanted to help you. I saw how you had helped all those people in the slums; I wanted to thank you and ease your burden.'

Tears flowed down the face he no longer possessed and he was moved to silence when he felt her finger tips dry his eyes.

'Quiet now.' she told him. 'I am at peace here. Let me soothe the pains in your heart.'

The trees grew for another thousand years. Their trunks slowly converged and supported each other. Every day priests would carefully attend to their needs and in return they offered gentle shade for any visitor wanting to spend a little time under their boughs.

The end