



OMNESCHAADE

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Book One

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THE MARROW

It was a time of unusual phenomena across the universe.

If you were to drift in silence in the darkest void of the furthest reaches of space and listened very carefully, you would hear the faint wail of an eerie intergalactic therimin as the magnetic flux variably compressed and stretched the cosmos.

It was a time of slightly odd events.

The Great Derridean Slug was imploding slowly and the Venerable Seer of Tomorrow was unable to recall what he had been up to last night. The fabric of space-time was bobbling like an old cardigan and woolly matter was forming randomly across solar systems and nebulae.

It was a time when nothing-in-particular needed to be done, yet there were people prepared to do it anyway.

It was a time of peace with a nervous twitch.

One man who was prepared to scratch that universal itch resided on an oxygen-breathing planet in a quiet corner of the Galaxy of Light, in a village called Bibble. Famed as the inventor of the Mk9 Quantum Accelerator, pioneer of cheap-but-cheerful space travel, and subject of the minor cult film classic *Big Chemistry* – that man was Professor Henry Alison Cortex ...

This time!

Across the test tubes, across the vats of noxious fluids, across the electrical cables, sat the test area and yet another attempt at the experiment that was currently frustrating Cortex's mind. A feverish determination

animated the lines on his face as he snapped on protective goggles over his steel-rimmed glasses. He looked at his young lab assistant, a flop of greasy black hair standing by.

“Now, Carl.” he rasped, the tension choking his vocals.

Carl Feldman stretched out an arm, grabbed a decaying wooden handle, and threw the enormous power switch fixed to the wall, splashing showers of sparks as the rusty metal contacts crashed together. Crackling and hissing. Incandescent flashes of electricity strobed in surging arcs through the shadowy laboratory, with gain in frequency and intensity, as plumes of billowing smoke filled and obscured the test area ...

Things calmed, and settled.

Stopped.

The scientists moved forward, slowly approaching the experiment, carefully, wafting away the clinging smoke to get a clearer view of the test subject.

Carl looked at his employer and mentor with sympathetic disappointment, “Well, Professor ... you ain’t gonna win no prize cucumber competition with that.”

MONKEY BUSINESS

The silent monks of Qom had granted Daniel Webster full access to the deepest recesses of their theological library and their most sacred scrolls, an unheard-of concession, which had given him the deepest respect for the far-reaching influence of his employer. Or, perhaps, his employer's dark arts. After all, there were rumours about his employer's shadowy interests, of disturbing practices. Webster felt uneasy to be working for a person with such a dubious reputation, and he had delayed for several days before responding to the initial offer of work as he explored the boundaries of his moral conscience; but, in the end, he was a passionate archaeologist and the theological library of Qom was heaven, so he had compromised, or, more accurately, given way to temptation, and accepted the commission.

He had been working at Qom for several months, spending long hours in the vaulted archives of the library, pouring over the innumerable dusty volumes found in its nooks, soaking-in ancient lore to greater depths than he had previously anticipated or fathomed, marinating in the swamping sea of doctrine and myth found in browning pages.

Then, the dreams began.

They were dreams of no colour or form or sound, of no reality as commonly understood. Yet there was a presence in the void with whom Webster somehow conversed each night, and he knew with certainty that he was in commune with the Omneschaade of legend.

On waking, he would consider this absurd. Surely his work in the theological library was permeating into the subconscious of sleep?

Nonetheless, Webster arranged to transmit a request to the administrators of the C9605gT, the immense reference computer in the Lux system. He requested that its vast database be searched for all mention of Omneschaade legends, as well as information on as many analogous myths and synonymous names as he was able to recall – the Dark One, Beelzebub, Inspector Nobby Sharpe, etc. Being across the galaxy, the response time of the C9605gT had a transmission delay of days; so, in the meantime, he continued his researches.

And every night he dreamed, if they could be called dreams. The meaning and content of the nightly convocations were obscure, dissolving in his mind; but contact was real, of that he had no doubt, even though he could not explain.

Webster became increasingly obsessed and his focus changed to the sections of the theological library on demonic lore, pouring over restricted manuscripts on the various mythical incarnations of the Omneschaade to be found in the Qom archives.

Six days after he had signalled the C9605gT computer, the dream changed. He saw:

Rising up through mists, on an uncharted planet with an atmosphere poisonous to all forms of life, was a tower made of hewn black stone. A building where none should exist, constructed by sentient beings on a grand scale.

Webster understood.

A sensible man would have been afraid.

A sharp, insistent knocking roused him from dream. He fumbled out of sleep and bed, snagging his legs into lazily strewn trousers from the

floor, and drowsily stumbled to his room door, opening it with a sleep-feeble tug. Waiting outside was a cowled monk of Qom with his hood pulled low, his face hidden. The Silent Ones never left the sanctuary of the monastic grounds, not even to the nearby town where his hotel was situated? Webster's curiosity was immediately peaked.

From within folded robes, the monk produced a pocket-sized leather-bound book and handed it to Webster. Then, extraordinarily, the silent monk spoke:

“Here is what you look for.” he said, with a tone of voice that gave a creep to the skin, “The True and Sacred Incantations of the Dark Lord, and a star map for where you go. Leave today, Daniel Webster.”

A burning pair of yellow eyes transfixed Webster, long after the monk had gone.

The planet identified on the monk's map was located in a vast uninhabited region of space; a part of the universe devoid of any aesthetic, intrinsic or economic value in the considered view of all-and-sundry. The journey would be easy – Webster's ship was top of the line, fitted with a Mk9 Quantum Accelerator – but it would still take a couple of months, and he would be travelling off space-piste. There would be no supermarkets from which to pick up supplies or breakdown services to rely on. And he would have to use the Mk9 Quantum Accelerator. He instinctively distrusted the quantum phasing of acceleration, the tingling sensation of conversion into sub-atomic energy and wave pulse, and the apparently instant waking, thousands of light years and several weeks away, with compulsive laughing (it was a peculiar side-effect, the laughter: ‘cheap-

but-cheerful space travel' indeed!)

Two months later, Daniel Webster was not laughing.

He adjusted the oxygen flow on his encounter suit to accommodate his nervously increased breathing, and carefully wiped the toxic moisture from his helmet visor to get a cleaner view.

There it was.

Rising up through the mists in front of him, on an uncharted planet with an atmosphere poisonous to all forms of life, was a tower made of hewn black stone, sepulchral, a home to unquiet shadows and wraiths. A building where none should exist, constructed by sentient beings on a grand scale.

Webster felt dread.

It was exactly as he had hoped.

Cautiously, he progressed inside.

As Webster entered the Black Tower, across the universe every ordained Minister of Umshackalacka stopped what they were doing and trembled. Seated with three of his fellow Ministers, Wilbur J. Hox said quietly, "The alarm has been tripped."

A short while later in the Lux system, the C9605gT reference computer produced a response to an enquiry from a Daniel Webster, which mystified the technicians. The output had taken a disturbingly long time to issue, yet it was just two words:

HE COMES

MESSAGE RECEIVED AND MISUNDERSTOOD

Jim Hobbes was inexpressibly bored.

Most sentient beings would find Hobbes' apathy hard to fathom, given the fact that he was one of the richest men in the Galaxy of Light. Operating under the generic trading name of Vid-e Universal Enterprises, his communications empire included five of the top ten companies on the GoL stock market, and his many and diverse media arms reached across the stars. For over two hundred years he had built-up each of his business interests in turn; and, having now placed every subsidiary into the hands of reliably ambitious and greedy CEOs and Boards, all he had to do was spend his money and enjoy. And he certainly partook of pleasures. He had travelled the breadth of civilised space and seen sights that most could not even conceive of. His palate had broadened to encompass the finest arts, edibles and narcotics; as well as more and more adventurous sexual practices with the numerous women attracted to his surgically enhanced good looks and inordinate wealth. But experiences that would normally be considered extraordinary had become mundane to his increasingly jaded appetite.

Relief from boredom was a precious commodity to Hobbes.

And so it had been on a meet-and-greet to one of his tele subsidiaries on Gravalax, at one of the tedious receptions his employees always thought a good idea (incorrectly) – a necessary evil in his role as the public face of Vid-e Universal Enterprises – where he was being introduced to this head of department and that rich local fucker (yawn) ... when he saw the woman that would change his life, in no way paying

attention to the guest of honour, sitting apart, apparently bored by the whole thing (yawn). A kindred spirit.

Hobbes immediately asked for an introduction.

Her name was Melody Chicane, and her off-hand manner and sublime curves were positively intoxicating. But she was unimpressed by him, notably exhibiting a lack of interest; and he had to admit to himself that his status rather than his conversation usually impressed. It was a refreshing change to be treated in such a diffident way, and he told her so. She told him bluntly that she was a guest not an employee and he should try harder. And thus their conversation flirted and spiralled for a magical eternity, an inconsequential conversation, full of gentle sarcasm, playfully bouncing from one topic to the next with a metaphorical elbow-in-the-ribs and lateral connections, until they eventually landed on the subject of his boredom. She was of the opinion that the man who had ‘seen it all’ was kidding himself if he thought he had seen it all; and then expounded on various shady and hedonistic practices beyond his knowledge, in graphic and shocking detail, describing extremes that cannot be written down for fear of their promulgation. Admiration was too light a word for how he felt.

She had a profound effect.

Long after he had moved on to other places and pleasures, that conversation stayed with him. Thoughts of the depraved and forbidden rituals that she had described turned him on. So, he brought all his wealth and power to bear, to facilitate the kind of carnal rites that were preying on his imagination; and indulged in diverse depraved acts many times and often.

Perhaps he was inadvertently tapping into a subconscious social craving or the deeply secular societies of the known worlds considered it a joke, but, to Hobbes' astonishment, no one cared about his perverse activities, even though he lived his life under a lens. One of the benefits of being ridiculously rich, he supposed.

He became attracted to progressively more obscure and deviant entertainments.

Jim Hobbes was still inexpressibly bored.

He sat in his comfortably padded mookchair watching a preview vid of the forthcoming adult entertainment show on his Primetime Showcase channel, smoking the psychedelic and highly illegal drug 'ERB.

Boring, boring.

He pressed the relevant button on his controller, and text scrolled across the foot of the interactive vid screen. The usual dull screed of invitations ... requests for authorisation ... updates ...

... Arriving Turnsday ... Webster ...

“All passengers for the seventeen fifty flight number ZQ-187 to Cello Minor, please make your way to Gate 10 immediately. This is your last call. All passengers for the seventeen fifty flight number ZQ-187 to Cello Minor, please make their way to Gate 10 immediately. This is your last call.”

Wilbur J. Hox sat in the main terminal of the Delta Prime spaceport, trying to filter out the whine of the tannoy from his perception: an impossible task given the pinpoint hearing of his predator's ears. He wore the formal black and red robes of the Order of Umshackalacka, the gold

fish emblazoned on the breast setting off his furred face and carnivorous teeth. He released a barely audible growl as the tannoy made another grating announcement. A perverse form of torture, it would be several long hours before his connecting flight was ready to depart.

Around him, thousands of multi-coloured travellers milled about as they passed their wait by visiting the spaceport shops and eateries.

“Excuse me?” solicited a female humanoid, who had appeared in the empty seat beside him. She handed him a laminated leaflet with bold typeface, which said: JESUS WEPT. “Have you Faith in God?”

Wilbur J. Hox chuckled gently to himself: “Does a lamb like the smell of mint sauce? I am a Minister of the Order of Umshackalacka. The Order was founded by the Large Ones of T’ing in the times of darkness, and we were founded to bring light through rational understanding. We have absolute faith in the power of logic, and we believe in experiencing the pleasures of living so long as karma is chilled to kelvin. We have no god, and I have no need to follow any religion. Thank you.”

“Just makin’ conversation y’ pompous git!”

The voice and appearance of the woman had shockingly changed, her skin gathering mottle and wrinkle: “You fuckers are all the same – *ya da ya da ya da* – think you know better than everyone, doncha? Well listen to this, fuzz-face: stay out of our fuckin’ business or you’ll end up a fireside rug!”

Wilbur J. Hox extended the claws of his right paw.

“None of that!” she cackled through something where a mouth should have been, and was gone. Vanished. He stared at the perfectly

normal, empty seat beside him.

Momentary confusion was replaced by action as he swiftly stood up and scanned the area for unusual signs, activity or persons ... unfortunately, pretty much everything was unusual in the spaceport of Delta Prime.

In the diminutive yet cosy study of The Lodge, volumes of journal, encyclopaedia and reference book lay randomly, half-open and dog-eared. Professor Cortex sat at his luxury fakewood desk by the bow window, scribbling and erasing in equal measure, figuring through his latest complex equations. Tutting and tsssking, he tugged at his hair, distressing and puzzling.

From far off, in both space and thought, the doorbell sounded: “Not now, no.” he muttered quietly and impatiently, “Answer the door, Carl.”

Carl Feldman was quietly tidying up the debris of a recent experiment in the laboratory and, being in another room entirely, could not possibly hear what the Professor had mumbled; but he knew his job, and made his way through the beamed and rustic rooms of The Lodge to unbolt the oaken front door with a creeeak. Waiting outside was the Bibble village delivery agent for Intelligent Parcels Ltd.

“Postman Ted. How are you?” Carl greeted the android, “Do you have something for me?”

The artificial postman smiled artificially, “Nothing for you, Mr. Feldman. I have a registered telegram for the Professor though. You have to sign for it, so I rang the bell. Or did you think this was a social

call? I wish I could spend the time, but I have a sack full of mail to deliver. It's my duty to deliver the mail through wind, through rain, through sleet, through snow, through pain, through fire, through meteorite shower, through time and space, through and through, up and down, over and under, round and round ...”

“Where do I sign?”

Carl duly signed and pressed his thumb on the Print Ident secondary check box (where indicated).

“Well, I'll let you get off through the wind and rain and so on.” he said, softly shutting the door in the android's face.

As he sauntered through The Lodge to the study, Carl read the telegram to decide whether it was important enough to disturb the Professor in his work (and out of pure nosiness). It was from the producers of the tele show, Astral Discovery, which covered the latest developments in science, technology and space exploration. They had invited the Professor to appear some while ago, and the Professor had somewhat absent-mindedly agreed. The telegram confirmed the date and time of the tele recording. In a couple of weeks, they would be travelling to Weird City, the largest population centre on the planet and one of the leading centres of culture in the galaxy. They would stay in the best of hotels and eat the finest foods, all at the expense of the tele company. Perhaps, even, a glamorous night out with the stars. He found the prospect immensely exciting.

The Professor, on the other hand, could not have been less interested.

“From Astral Discovery.” he said softly, depositing the telegram on

the Professor's desk and quietly leaving the study.

Cortex continued working as though Carl had never entered.

PIECES OF MIND

The planet of Regina V was an unscheduled stop; but, following the incident at the Delta Prime spaceport, Wilbur J. Hox felt it a necessary detour. It would add several days to his journey, time he could hardly afford, but he needed the assistance.

A pale, yellow sun gave everything a refreshing lightness as he strode across the Grand Square at the heart of the city state of Unification C.R. From the marbled grey paving flags to the triple-headed fountain jetting delicate sprays of water to moisten the air, every detail of construction was finely wrought and satisfyingly exact in its placement. Elegant, white stone buildings rose on all sides of the square, becoming ever more impressive and spiralling higher towards a crescendo of spectacular architecture at his destination: the majestic dome and minarets of the Great Cathedral of the Unification.

A Blindesite priest emerged through the cathedral's huge door, discreetly, as he approached; the priest's pale blue skin unmistakably marking him as a telepath of the sixth classification, if you were to be aware of such things.

"Wilbur J. Hox, you are welcome. The Hyvve Priestess is expecting you." the priest greeted him.

He focused his thoughts: *Have you been reading my mind?*

The priest showed no sign of responding to the mental query, so he asked directly, with his voice: "How am I expected? Have the Hyvve taken to scanning their visitor's minds?"

The Blindesite looked blankly at him: "As a telepath of the sixth

classification, I am simply unable to read minds ... although I can sense you are feeling ...” a confused pause, “I am sure the Hyvve Priestess will explain all.”

“I am sure she will.”

Her fabulousness, Tracy the Hyvve Priestess, reclined on a chaise longue in the reception room of her extensive private quarters at the rear of the cathedral. A flowing pastel orange chiffon gown wafted in the breeze of her four gently fluttering wings, exposing the fine lines of her six translucent yellow legs. Wilbur J. Hox found her inexpressibly alluring, for an insect. He caught himself from instinctively grooming the fur on his face, took a deep breath, and addressed the business at hand.

“Hyvve Priestess, my gratitude for granting me an audience at such short notice. I appear before you on pressing business, of which this Minister of Umshackalacka beseeches your aid and advice.”

“Yesss, yesss. Lessss off ththe pleasssantriesss, pleassse, Minnisster. I would ssspeakk fffreely withth yyou.” her sibilant insect voice whispered like a distant radio signal.

“Very good.” he took a risk, “In that case, can you speak so freely as to tell me why the Hyvve have seen fit to scan my mind?”

“Aaaahh, yesss. Owr doctrine off nnot rreading mmindsss wwithout permissshion,” the Hyvve Priestess spoke in a measured voice, a vessel through which others also distantly spoke, “but owr doctrine issst ththat off generral princssiple, yyou undersstand-d? Not lawww. Wwwee wwould be fffoolishshsh not to usse owr advantage ssssshould ththe need-d-dictate, wwould wwe not-t?” The lustrous shine of her black

compound eyes reflected the diffuse daylight penetrating the room, each lens separately refracting the sun's rays into a dazzling spectrum of subtle colours that was the whole; eyes which evoked gazing wonder and stirred a profound admixture of feelings, from revulsion to delight, yet gave no indication of the emotions beneath. "Yyou are, howweverrr, ann honouredd guesst, Minnisster. Please accept-t owr apologiesss. wwwWe shshall revieww owr poliscy on exemptionssssss. Yyet yyou wwill undersstand-d, wwwe arrre c-c-currrent-t-ly in-n a ssssssstate of emerrrgencyy; ppossib-bly related-d to yyour vvvisst-t, perrrh-hapss?"

"Hyvve Priestess, your insight is legendary. And correct. I am on an urgent mission of utmost significance to us all, which I have no doubt is somehow related to your current state of emergency. So when I ask about the use of your telepathic prowess on me, it is not borne out of indignation. I am, in fact, pleased to hear that the Hyvve is using the full potential of its abilities, as I find myself in pressing need of those same peculiar talents. I have come to Regina V to request of you a telepathic escort to protect me from psychic probe, the means by which I have been recently attacked by our common enemies."

"Yessss-sss-sssss." Her great, black eyes stared empty back, exaggerating a gap in their conversation to an eternity, "I musst lookk innto yyourr mmind to vvverrrify yyour wwwwordsss-s and needsss; if yyou wwill perrrmit-t mme, fffurry onne?"

"If you can assure me that any confidences unearthed will not be communicated further."

Wilbur J. Hox ceased to be independently aware.

According to the technical manuals, neurological activity did not occur during quantum acceleration. In theory, a spaceship and all its contents were transmitted as a wave pulse of energy through an alternative quantum plane of reality, at speeds multiple times faster-than-light, enveloped by a tenuous and poorly-explained shape-holding field. Its genius lay in the fact that there was no molecular resistance to impede acceleration in the alternate quantum dimension(s) or, for that matter, no reality as generally understood. For the passenger, quantum conversion meant nerve receptors ceased to function as the body phased, and familiar physical existence had little meaning. This was all theory, of course, as the controlled observation of practical experiment was impossible due to the vanishing effect of phasing. No one could actually be absolutely sure how it worked. But it did.

According to the technical manuals, neurological activity did not occur during quantum acceleration, yet Daniel Webster spent his journey back from the black tower in psychic communion with the brooding presence of the Omneschaade. To be fair to the technicians, he was not actually conscious in the normal sense of the word. He could make himself understood and understand, but not through word or image or sound. It was as though the dimensions of communication had changed along with the dimensions of existence. Like a dream.

The Omneschaade had plans, elaborate and grandiloquent in their immaculate conception, expounded upon through circular arguments and wandering digressions of intricate detail. S/he/it required Webster to provide a particularly unusual service. But Webster was no fool. He realised he had been contacted, or chosen, because of his unique position,

and his price should be relatedly high.

Negotiations continued throughout the journey.

TIRED OF LIFE? TRY THE VID-E ENERGISER

Jim Hobbes' private space station was the most secure facility in his property portfolio. It was responsive to his biogenetic signature alone. The station's construction had been compartmentalised, to maximise security by ensuring that no worker or designer had full knowledge of the entirety of its secrets. It was equipped with state-of-the-art systems in every nook and cranny. Sensors were embedded in the walls, floors and ceilings: unauthorised access could be detected immediately, trip the automated defences and be met by deadly force; the area of intrusion hermetically sealed, the artificial atmosphere evacuated, lasers lethally targeted, and so on. In addition, long-range scanners monitored the surrounding space for approaching craft that, should the need arise, could be met with warheads from launch tubes that peppered the external shell of the space station. And, as the last resort, the central core was fitted with a Mk9 Quantum Accelerator and it could detach and convert into a high-speed interstellar cruiser within five minutes, in case escape was necessary. Some would consider it excessive and paranoid, but Hobbes felt it a relatively small and sensible expense for a man of his wealth and unconventional behaviours.

From the orbiting station, he gazed down upon the verdant planet of his birth with distaste: a rock of verdigris hurtling through space, populated by the brain-dead. Yet his nerve ends gently thrilled with anticipation of the unknown gifts that Daniel Webster was bringing on the ship currently docking alongside the station. Perhaps something that could even wake up that lifeless ball below?

Reflexively, Hobbes took out a smoke of 'ERB and lit it, drawing deeply on the potent narcotic, feeling the hit.

Suddenly conscious of his compulsive drug-taking and aware of the need to be *compos mentis*, he immediately stubbed the joint out again, switched comms to emergency alert only, then headed off along the brightly lit main corridor to welcome his guest.

Daniel Webster was feeling tense about the forthcoming meeting with Hobbes. He pondered the variables, as his ship docked with the space station and the atmosphere of the interconnecting lock was oxygenated and compressed.

The Omneschaade had assured and reassured him of his/her/its insubstantive nature, impossible to detect by normal means. But Jim Hobbes was not a man of normal means. Webster had been on the space station before and was only too aware of the wide diversity of lethal systems on board. Was there something that could see the unseeable threat of the artefact he carried? And how was he going to get Hobbes to do the necessary? One slip of the tongue or an over-anxious approach could lead to suspicion and failure.

Hobbes needed to do what the Omneschaade expected.

What if he didn't?

Best not to think about it.

He would play the weary explorer bringing a rare gift from his travels for his wealthy patron, as instructed. If truth be told, the real issue for Webster was whether he could go through with it. Deep down inside, he knew it was wrong. It was more than wrong. He would be unleashing

a malign presence on the universe. Pure and not so simple. The reward was incredible, but even so.

The door of the airlock opened to reveal Jim Hobbes, grinning like the fool he was.

Clearwood was only found on a remote planet in an uninhabited system at the fringes of the Galaxy of Light. There was little reason to visit the star designated as F23 (a catalogue listing because no one had ever shown enough interest to give it a proper name) except to see the extraordinary forests of transparent trees on its fourth planet. And people did not visit, as the region of space was just too uninteresting otherwise. For light years around, the few sentient beings to be found were on tours of duty for the Clearwood Corporation. Such a tour of duty meant a galactic standard year spent exploring the copious entertainments library of your individual survival habitat dome, as the machines outside went about the business of farming and harvesting the wood. Occasionally, the monotony would be broken by a visit from a fellow ‘worker’ from one of the small number of other domes dotted around the planet. Otherwise the only activity was the annual service check of machines, which were virtually indestructible and really just required a clean. Few people wanted to do such a tedious job, but wages were absurdly high to attract the right calibre of person and compensate for the tedium. The tour year would end with the arrival of a cargo ship, bringing replacement staff and collecting the harvest that was always much too small to meet demand (it is the wont of trees to grow slowly). The remote location, the high labour costs and the low-yield harvest all contributed to making clearwood rare and precious; but

its chic desirability as naturally see-through furniture was what made it one of the most expensive products in the universe.

Daniel Webster looked at the mug rings stained into the top of the clearwood coffee table, reckoned that they must reduce its value by at least a million credits let alone deface the ethereal beauty of the finely carved diaphanous wood, and no longer cared what happened to the man opposite him.

They were sat in comfortably padded mookchairs in the ornate reception room of Hobbes' personal living quarters on the space station. Luxury oozed from every inch, dripping off the walls in hand-crafted tapestries and gilt-framed oils painted by modern masters, dropping down in a myriad of twinkling crystals that created a stalactite chandelier across the ceiling, and washing around their feet in the form of inch-deep carpet made of meresloth hair. Two filled, fluted glasses stood on the coffee table next to the donor bottle of Fphiszz; and alongside these the artefact that Webster had recovered from the Black Tower had been placed for exhibit.

“So ... it's a therimin?” said a puzzled Hobbes, sceptically.

“Mmmm ... not quite.”

“What do you mean, ‘not quite’? It either is or it isn't?”

Black and white thinking from such a degenerate, mused Webster: “Well, it works like a therimin. I think. The documents I found at Qom talked of manipulation of fields of energy by hand movement, and an unearthly sound; but I've been unable to get it to function as yet.”

He reflexively passed his hand beside the antenna of the artefact as evidence, to no discernable effect.

“So you’ve brought me a broken therimin?”

“No.” said Webster in a deliberately polite tone, “It is much more than a therimin if the legends are correct. I have just been unable to get it to function as yet.”

“And what do the legends say, then?”

“That it is a sonic key. Admittedly, a rusty key that could do with some 3-in-1 oil. The ancient scrolls speak of it opening a gateway to the astral plain, to Heaven and Hell. Of course, this is utter nonsense if we take the religious content literally, but it begins to make sense if we consider it through the lens of modern science. After close reading of the ancient texts at Qom, I am convinced that this key will open a portal to other dimensions. That is what the scrolls mean by Heaven and Hell: other dimensions, quasi-rationalised by the myth-making of primitive minds. Unfortunately, although I discovered a map to its location at Qom, I found no instruction manual and its operation continues to baffle my best endeavours.”

“You’re telling me that some long-lost civilisation found a way of travelling between dimensions, a possibility that remains only a theory in our own time despite the massive body of knowledge of the known universe at our disposal? And you have no proof apart from some old scrolls and a knackered therimin?”

“You could see it that way, I suppose.”

Jim Hobbes sat back into the padding of his mookchair and folded his hands on his lap, looking less-than-impressed. There was significant silence, during which Webster resisted the temptation to fill the gap with explanatory detail: the trap had been baited, and he needed to wait in

patient quiet to avoid spooking the animal.

“Ok, I’ll play.” said Hobbes, eventually. “You know, I would’ve considered flushing you out of the airlock for wasting my time and money a few years ago; but it’s not as though I have something more interesting to do ... Tell me about the hieroglyphics on the base?”

Webster coughed to clear his throat and unblock the accumulated tension: “I believe the base is the control unit, and the glyphs relate to the pitch, frequency and power of the energy fields emitted by the antenna. The therimin comparison is quite apropos there. But this is conjecture, of course, since I haven’t been able to get the thing to work.”

“A field generator must need power,” pondered Hobbes, “have you tried plugging it in?”

“One of the first things I thought about.” said Webster, suppressing the sarcasm he felt, “I think the circle with a vertical line through it is the on/off switch, much like our own symbol for the same; but there is no discernible power input socket. Before entering the oblivion of quantum sleep for my journey here, I did attach a couple of electrodes and ran a few low voltages through it, to no effect. But I went no further as I didn’t want to damage it, which is your prerogative as the investor and de facto owner. Given its great age, electricity is not the obvious power source anyway, which I would suggest is more likely to be the universally available energy of solar radiation: even the most ancient civilisations knew about the power of the sun.”

“Let’s put some juice through it then.” said Hobbes, “This station runs on five types of power – if one fails, another picks up – the best money can buy.”

What a show-off! Webster had only visited the space station once before and had heard this fact at least five times. Still, that was why the plan was going to succeed.

Wilbur J. Hox looked sideways at the bulbous head of his escort.

At least the Hyvve Priestess had seen sense to provide him with a humanoid, as they were travelling into human space. The light blue skin of his escort shouldn't be a problem, he hoped, in the cosmopolitan spacefaring systems for which they were heading. After all, he was going and his ursine features were much more likely to draw attention.

His companion was Kwezjipo Farghlul, a telepath of the fourth classification, adequate for defence against telekinetic shades but of limited mind-reading capability, able to see surface thoughts but only emotions at a deeper level. He was ideal for the current purposes.

“So, what is our purpose?” asked Kwezjipo, as if he had read the mind of Wilbur J. Hox, “It would help to know what I am doing ... and why I am doing?”

“It should be sufficient to know that the Hyvve Priestess believes my mission of high importance, and your role is to protect me from psychic shades.”

It was fortunate for Wilbur J. Hox, both earlier at the Delta Prime spaceport and now in the company of the Blindsite priest, that he had been trained to control his deeper thoughts as part of his initiation into the Order of Umshackalacka. No secrets should slip out. He scanned his eyes over the passengers on the space shuttle, checking for any debatable characters looking his way: *That man, over there, is he staring?*

“Relax, Mr. Hox. I can sense no malign presence on this shuttle. The long journey should be uncomfortable enough without your constant anxiety bombarding my senses. Perhaps you can pass the time by telling me what you can about our journey?”

Wilbur J. Hox considered this, and came to a decision on an issue that had been fretting him since they had set off from Regina V. Who would take forward his mission should he be incapacitated before completion? Surely, the Umshackalacka were too far away to send another in time to act?

Now was a good moment to share.

But not everything.

In a heavily shielded corner of the space station was a science laboratory or, to be more accurate, a rich man’s toy chemistry set. Despite access to its advanced and sophisticated equipment, they were making no progress and Hobbes was becoming increasingly touchy about it. Why was he bothering with this worthless piece of junk? X-rays and other scans had revealed nothing more than an antenna on an empty box. They had connected or bombarded it with every type of energy and radiation and achieved nothing. It was looking more and more pointless as, one by one, they were running out of options. At Webster’s suggestion, they had just fired neutrinos at the artefact; and, with a look of bored resignation, Hobbes pressed the supposed on-switch and wafted his hand alongside the antenna.

Nothing.

Hobbes pressed some different hieroglyphs on the base and wafted

his hand again. Nothing. “This ...” he said, absent-mindedly touching the antenna ...

As Hobbes made contact with the antenna, there was a strange noise. Webster could sense the change. The presence that had been with him since his first dream in Qom was gone. Or, rather, displaced.

Webster felt trepidation.

“Thank you, Daniel.” said the Omneschaade from the mouth of Jim Hobbes, a barely quantifiable alteration in the pitch of voice making the speaker unmistakable. “Bless the gullibility and solipsism of man! It amuses me that it did not even cross his mind – to which I now have access – that the gateway was in, not out, and the machine was mine. The very idea that the ancestral species of your universe could create such a thing! Ha! He should have met those idiots.”

Webster edged backwards, sulphurous notions whiffing through his brain.

“Don’t be afraid, Daniel. We have a bargain and I am a creature of my Word. You should rather be afraid of my enemies, who will not be happy with what you have done. However, the memories of Jim Hobbes tell me that I now have a private security force at my disposal, which I can use to protect us both. Perhaps you should stay around for a while? It would be in your best interests to remain until my plans are consolidated and safety assured? You could help me adjust? An eternity has passed since I last possessed form in this universe and much must have changed.”

“As usual, you are persuasive ... erm, what name should I call you by?”

“Hobbes, I think. Mr. Hobbes. It will be important to maintain a

masquerade, assuming the transference process has not altered this body's genetic code and locked me out of his accounts. Let's try this on the space station. If this facility recognises me, then we should be good elsewhere."

"Is Hobbes dead?"

"No. Not quite. His 'soul'" the Omneschaade made inverted commas in the air with his fingers, "is contained in another dimension. In essence, he is a prisoner being punished for his many sins, to give it the good old religious bullshit slant. But, in reality, he is unaware of his situation and feels no pain – he is unwittingly in my service, after all; so I shall not make his existence needlessly untenable."

Something was wrong.

Wilbur J. Hox sat up in his seat on the space shuttle.

"What's the matter?" asked Kweszjipo Farghlul.

Wilbur J. Hox furrowed his brows, "Nothing we can do from here."

SOMETHING

He sits in his armchair, in his front room. The wife that he does not have is sprawled on the sofa, reading Hot Celebrity. The room is tidy, with house proud ornamentation. Jim Hobbes opens a copy of Big Car Monthly, looks at a cool glossy photo of a Fireball Turbo, then stops, puzzled, trying to remember something he needs to do.

“Haven’t we forgotten something?”

Distant, his fake wife continues with her magazine: “No.”

*Hobbes raises his magazine;
then, he lowers it again.*

“Did I mention? I saw the mad woman from no. 36 on my way back from the shops earlier.”

She continues reading.

“She was leaning on her gate in that tartan dress and a shocking pink wig. She said something to me.”

Pause.

Hobbes resumes reading Big Car Monthly.

“So **what** did she say?”

“Er ... what?”

“What did she say?”

“What?”

“What did the mad woman **say** to you?”

“The **mad woman** from no. 36? Oh, nothing ... she said **something.**”

“**Yes**, but **what** did she say?”

“What?”

“**What** did she say?”

“The mad woman? She said something.”

“**Yes**, but **what?**”

”Something, she said **SOMETHING.**”

“She said “**something**.””

“Yes.”

“What a strange thing to say?”

“Well, she is mad.”

There is a knock at the front door. He gets up to answer, fumbles with his buttons, frowns, and sits down again in his armchair, in his front room. The wife that he does not have is sprawled on the sofa, reading Hot Celebrity. The room is tidy, with house proud ornamentation. Jim Hobbes opens a copy of Big Car Monthly, looks at a cool glossy photo of a Fireball Turbo, then stops, puzzled, trying to remember something he needs to do.

“Haven’t we forgotten something?”

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WHEN STRANGE STRANGERS CALL

“You’re funny!” she flirted outrageously.

It was not his wit that appealed to her. Sutcliffe Armstrong was the Chief Executive of Vid-e Media Inc. and possessed the allure of all rich, powerful men. But it was more than that. He was sophistication incarnate with a smoothly genial way about him, and he had a pretty tasty body too! She could eat him. Cinderella Black giggled and leaned forward, just enough to direct his attention to her tightly-packaged, ample breasts. His gaze kept pulling downward as though her mammaries and his eyes were magnetic poles and, sweetly, he was clearly making an embarrassed effort to resist the attraction and look her in the face as they talked.

“I have to go.” he said reluctantly, “I need to grab Edgar before the Risk and Audit Committee . . .,” he lowered his voice so no one could overhear, “... and I shall see you tonight, by which time I could be desperate.”

She giggled some more, knowingly.

As Armstrong disappeared behind the closing doors of the lift to the top floor, two unkempt and irregular looking men entered the main doors of the Vid-e Media Inc. offices and approached the RECEPTION desk, behind which Cindy was calculating the possibilities of her evening date. Her duty colleague took charge, as the security guards in the lobby area looked on, watching the scruffy visitors intently.

Cindy glanced up from her half-reverie-half-planning and, with a start, recognised one of the visitors as Jim Hobbes. The founder, owner ... whatever he was meant to be referred to as (who knew? he’d never been

to the office before). She made a mental adjustment and put on her best formal receptionist's face.

"I trust you know who Mr. Hobbes is?" asked the other visitor, indicating his companion.

Cindy cut across any reply from her colleague, "I will let Mr. Armstrong's office know that Mr. Hobbes is here immediately. And your name is . . .?"

Sutcliffe Armstrong put the phone back in its cradle, and then stared into vague-space for some time.

Why the hell had Jim Hobbes shown up at Vid-e Media Inc?

What was he going to say to him?

He wasn't even sure how to address him, unused to subservience.

This was his boss!

He stood and walked to the office door, opened it, and popped his head through. His personal assistant was typing a letter, just beyond the door.

"Jean," she looked up at him, "I'm expecting visitors. Pretty much immediately. Jim Hobbes and some other fellow. Cindy's showing them up now."

"What?" she puzzled, "THE Jim Hobbes?"

"Yes, THE Jim Hobbes. So don't stand on ceremony and send him straight in when he gets here. No waiting. You understand? Don't even bother letting me know he's here, just show him in. OK?"

He popped his head back into his office in a state of agitation, standing in thought that was not forthcoming. He sat down upright on

the lightly-sprunged and padded mookchair behind his desk, with his mind racing for several blurry minutes.

What could he want? He could think of nothing.

What could he want?

It was like meeting royalty, he was so nervous. Why was he so nervous?

Relax, he told himself.

Easier said than done.

Relax.

It was probably nothing, just a visit.

There was a gentle tap at the door and Jean entered, followed by two men, one of whom was immediately recognisable as Jim Hobbes. Armstrong caught a glimpse of Cindy outside, peeking through with curiosity.

“Can I get you any refreshments?” asked Jean dutifully as she was backing out of the room again (she was a professional assistant).

“Some tea and biscuits would be nice.” said Hobbes, “Digestives. It’s been some time since I’ve had the opportunity for a good dunk.”

“And anything for you, Mr. Webster?” Jean deliberately used his name to inform Armstrong.

“Oh, erm ... the same. Thanks.”

Armstrong stood and advanced as Jean shut the door behind her, to offer his hand to shake. First, “Mr. Hobbes.” then, “Mr. Webster.” He smiled ingratiatingly.

“Please take a seat ... how can I help you?” he asked without really meaning the offer.

“Well, Cliff,” the Omneschaade deliberately used the most familiar variation of Armstrong’s name as he knew it would nettle him, “I’m working on a little project with Mr. Webster here, and we find ourselves in need of some specialised scientific equipment. So, as we were in the region, I thought, if this memory serves me right, the R&D department of Vid-e Media Inc. has the equipment we need.”

“Of course.” assented Armstrong with pseudo-deferential consent, “Although we may need to stop some tech work to accommodate you.”

“Oh, I don’t think that will be an issue. Our activities should not affect the station’s work, just put a couple of researchers’ noses out of joint. I’m sure you’re quite capable of handling that.”

“Yes,” agreed Armstrong, trying not to sound impotent, “yes.”

“And we’d appreciate an assistant, someone familiar with the company and building, to show us around and help us out, so we can find what we’re looking for.”

“Of course.” said Armstrong, well-and-truly nettled. This was not the dilettante of repute, this man had focus. And who was this Webster person with him?

“And another thing.”

Here we go. thought Armstrong.

“I’ve been reading the tele schedules for the coming weeks and I’m interested in one of your programmes, Astral Discovery ...”

Carl Feldman was quietly tidying up the debris of yet another experiment in the laboratory, when the doorbell rang. So, he made his way through the beamed and rustic rooms of The Lodge to unbolt the oaken front

door with a creeeak.

“Is this the residence of Professor Henry Cortex?”

Carl was taken aback. Waiting at the door were two of the oddest people (if they could be called that) that he had ever seen. The one who spoke was a dominating grizzly of a creature, and the more humanoid other had sky blue skin and a strangely bulbous head.

“Erm, ye-es.”