

Murder,
Myth
&
Tea

Introduction

The first thing that struck me about Alice Kerrow was how old she looked. Of course, when I later found out how old she was, I realised how young she looked for it.

She was there when they let me out into the world for the first time – hers was the first face I ever saw, and mine the last she ever saw.

Her husband wasn't there when we met – he was off-planet, at some diplomatic meeting with a woman who was the daughter of the man who killed her in the end. She even sent away the servants for my arrival, so that it would be her that I met, and not the Empress.

She was not particularly tall – five foot seven at the most – but on that day she felt far taller. In my mind's eye, she seems to tower above me, although I, in the body of her long deceased secretary, was only a little under six foot myself.

The first thing she told me was how much like Frankie I looked. It didn't matter to her that I had Frankie's genes, and that physically I was an exact copy of the woman; I was as brand new to her as I was to myself. She led me to her room, and put an ancient iron pot, filled with water, onto a flame, and made tea. I had never seen tea made before, I had never seen anything before, but I had been manufactured to know how it was normally made, and it wasn't like this.

She heated the water until it billowed steam, and saw me staring. She smiled, and bade me come closer.

“Have you ever tasted tea before?” she asked of me, and I shook my head. I knew what it tasted like; a dull flavour, if it could be called a flavour at all, and depending on the type, accompanied by an altogether unpleasant bitterness.

“They don't make tea much these days,” she sighed, spooning a few spoonfuls of a strange, crumbly substance into a curiously shaped porcelain jug, before adding the boiling water. I attempted to stop her, fearing for her safety, but she simply laughed and ignored my efforts, before covering the jug with what resembled an old-fashioned winter hat, “In fact there's only one planet left in the galaxy where they grow it.”

I resisted the impulse to laugh. I knew that tea was not grown, it was a manufactured cocktail of various chemicals, particularly lactose and tannic acid, and it was not made with this strange, earth brown solid and boiling water. It was prepared for consumption by placing the capsule in a vessel and striking it with the end of a spoon until it broke, upon which the capsule should be removed and recycled.

“Another rarity,” my clearly deranged charge informed me, “cows' milk. I happen to own a particularly fine herd on one of the warmer moons.”

Cows I had heard of. Large, heavily built bovine animals which produced a lactose rich substance referred to as the afore mentioned milk, nearly extinct in this sector, but very common in some of the more old-fashioned ones, used not only for their milk and it's various derivatives, but also for their flesh, which had long been linked with the greatly reduced lifespan of our ancestors.

"And it's ready," Alice Kerrow pulled off the hat – which I now know is called a cosy – and poured a rich, red-gold liquid from the jug into two large, ceramic mugs to which she had only just added a small amount of milk; "sugar?"

"Sugar is a disaccharide carbohydrate utilised as a sweetener, produced in vast amounts in Andromeda systems seventeen through to eight hundred and sixty-five from the monocotyledon sugar-cane, and also from various beets in smaller quantities on Milky-way systems seven to ninety-six thousand. It is widely used in most galaxies, despite being highly explosive and also extremely fattening if taken in large amounts." I was puzzled by her question.

"No," she laughed, "in your tea. Do you want sugar in your tea?"

I considered. Tea was manufactured containing a small amount of the healthier monosaccharide galactose, which produced a similar taste to sucrose without the fattening effects.

"I do not want sugar in my tea, but thank you for the offer," I replied.

"Very wise. It tastes much better without it," she handed one of the ceramic mugs to me, and sat herself on an earth-wood chair with a red velvet cushion over the seat and backrest, before sipping at the now grey-gold liquid in her mug. She sighed contentedly, and bade me to sit down.

"Well, drink up, or I shall be offended," the woman gestured as I watched her sip the tea. I hastened to pour the liquid down my throat, but it was too hot. I closed my eyes, and concentrated, before raising the mug to try again.

"No!" she exclaimed, "you'll scald yourself if you drink it like that!"

She proceeded to give me careful instructions on how to drink the liquid, and settled back into her chair as I began to emulate her and sip the liquid carefully.

It was a strange taste – nothing I knew. Better, in an unassuming way. I cannot quite describe the way the flavours delicately unrolled onto my tongue, for there is nothing in this universe that I can compare it to. It was sweet only in the very mildest sense, with a rich, but subtle, warm flavour, and I knew in the tasting that at any other temperature, these flavours would be disgusting but now, with a temperature too hot to gulp, but not enough to sting the roof of my mouth, they were the most delicious that I would ever sample.

"So, do you have a name?" she asked of me, refilling her own mug. I sat silently, not realising I had been asked anything for a moment, so absorbed was I in the exquisite aroma of the tea. At length her words seemed to occur to me through my almost dreamlike trance, and I sat up suddenly.

"Name? No! I have no need of a name; I am but a piece of paper –"

“I know what you are. But a name stands for who you are. Do you want one?”

“Who I am? I am anyone you wish me to be – within reason.”

“I want you to be my friend,” her face was troubled for a moment, and she sighed as she stood and went to the window, where a long gone landscape of fields glittered beneath an alien sun, “God knows I have few enough.” She stood there awhile, and then turned back to me: “And a friend must have their own name. What name do you want?”

I was puzzled by this. Want, you see, was not a concept I had been created to understand. Well, I had, but not my own. I was only brought into consciousness knowing of my master’s wants, and that I must do what I could to satisfy them. I only later learnt that all genetic replicas have the same bit of information drilled into them from when they are first able to dream, although as they develop the nature of the wanting they must satisfy becomes different depending on their function.

“Well?” she pulled a book off the shelf, and I saw to my amazement that it was one of the fragile, wood-based ones. It was darker than I expected, for I did not know how true paper yellows with age, and it did not hold together in the way all sensible tools do. “Why don’t you have a glimpse through here?” she offered, and, passing me the book, she sat back down.

I perused the volume for a few minute before I came upon a name I liked.

“This one!” I exclaimed, and she stood with a smile to see which name had excited me so. I don’t know why I liked it – I suppose it may have been one of Fate’s cruel tricks – but it seemed to me to be simply perfect. Her smile died like a burnt out candle as she read it – flickered uncertainly as she thought I might be pointing to one of the adjacent names, and then was finally extinguished as she realised that my printless finger pointed precisely at that one. Not fully in touch with emotion at this stage, I failed to recognise the dismay upon her features, and instead read it out like an excited child:

“Gerta,” I told her happily, “It is a nice name. It sounds strong, and yet quite content –”

“Very well,” she replied, a touch of coldness to her caring voice, “Gerta Kerrow it shall be, then.”

There were a few moments of silence in which I repeated my name to myself in my mind, trying it out on my tongue, before the conversation continued.

“Is there anything you want to know?” she asked as she reboiled the ancient pot. There were at least a thousand questions presented themselves to me instantly, but most of them – they seemed so important them – I can no longer remember. I suppose they were irrelevant to my function, and so I was made to forget them. I remember the answers, but they are such everyday things to me now that I cannot tell which were the questions I asked and which I learnt through life.

Only one question sticks in this head of mine. It was the simplest to ask, but I should think it was the hardest to answer. A single word that embodied all the most important things I needed to know about Gerta Kerrow, to be her:

“Why?” I asked her. I think now it was the last thing she had to be prompted to tell me, but I cannot be sure.

I remember she sighed, and her blue eyes caught mine, and I saw for a second the pain that lay beneath their blinding brightness, before she smiled and replied.

“The end makes everyone think about the beginning, Gerta,” she glanced at the long-lost landscape outside the window, and I frowned, confused. She shrugged; “It is the end. After what I have done, it must be the end. And I –” she hesitated, “I suppose I’m afraid. After putting death to one side for all these millennia, I’m not sure I have the courage left to face it.”

In these words, I have tried to tell you who Alice Kerrow was. I fear I could never do her justice – she was as beautiful a person as could ever have breathed air, and even that cannot describe her. What follows this is my attempt to justify my existence, and ensure that, although her body has been burnt and its ashes scattered with her husband’s into the darkest corner of the universe, she cannot die. What follows is my vain attempt to tell you what she was.

Part I – History

Chapter I

Alice Kerrow was born on the seventeenth of December, one thousand, nine hundred and seventy-two years after the alleged son of God, Jesus Christ, was allegedly born.

Her father was a man named Arthur Gormon, his seventeenth name, which he had used for the previous sixty-three years. As far as historical records can show, he was the earliest true werewolf, although his symptoms showed little similarity to later werewolves, except those few which survived his brutal attacks and became werewolves themselves. His blood, when it was drawn, ran sapphire blue as opposed to the red which, if allowed to settle, separates into red and silver, as shown by all modern werewolves.

He caused the creation of the modern curse of Lycanthropy, however, by biting one of the twin daughters of the witch Aragia in the early seventeenth-hundreds, in southern France. The witch, in a fit of rage aimed at the world rather than the malicious man who had seduced and then destroyed her, created the curse which currently afflicts all of the universe's surviving werewolves. On the second attempt, she succeeded in attaching it to the moon so that, when the moon was not seen on the thirteenth night of any month, a silver snow would fall at the stroke of midnight that would be absorbed through bare skin, giving the owner of the skin to suffer the disease.

Arthur Gormon continued, up to the meeting of Alice Kerrow's mother, Penny, to maim and kill hundreds of innocent humans, always with the same method. He would attach himself, appearing as a handsome man of little over thirty, to a woman, usually but not always single, and he would kill everyone connected to them – starting with distant relatives, and those with whom the bond of friendship was weakest, and slowly working his way into the smaller and smaller circle of friends and family. If she figured out who it was, he would cease his murder, and settle for her – either turning her into a werewolf or killing her. If she submitted herself to him, as was common of the petrified women, he would kill her, but her surviving friends and family survived. If she fought him, as occurred in only three cases throughout his history, he would turn her into one of his kind. On one occasion the woman that suffered this killed herself, on one she attempted to kill him some twenty years later, and he killed her at last.

Aragia was unique in that he failed to follow his methods. She had seven family members, and no friends. Of the seven family members, he killed five, but she heard nothing of it until the fifth, which was her sister. He then came to kill her twin daughters, intending to kill Lauren first, as Lauren was not her favourite, but mistakenly attacking Shannyn. Aragia, knowing at the moment of her sister's death that Gormon was responsible, repelled him, and saved her daughters and herself from any further misery at his hands.

Penny Gormon, christened Penelope Anne Black, was a blonde, blue eyed girl who, at the age of sixteen, became the singer in a small band that never did very well. Penny's parents were very disappointed, as they, along with most who knew Penny, expected her to go to university and study either history or music, for she was an intelligent, middle class girl, and they imagined her becoming a wealthy wife – doing something worthwhile with her life, they called it.

At the age of twenty three, she met Gormon. He had seduced the sister of one the keyboardist, and had slipped into the band's carriage on a train to the midlands with the intention of killing them when the keyboardist made one of his frequent trips to the lavatory to smoke marijuana. However, he fell into conversation with Penny, and found himself incapable of doing her any harm. They were married within six months and, for a short while, her band was moderately successful, while Arthur Gormon was more content than he had been.

Penny became pregnant after a year of marriage, and it became apparent that she was to have twins. They were delivered in Saint Bartholomew's hospital in London, and the stronger, Alice, was given up for adoption when it became apparent that with Penny's band broken up, it was impossible to care for both children in an adequate fashion, especially as Penny soon fell ill with a brain tumour, and the vain attempts at curing it took up most of Arthur's salary.

Penny died six months after Alice was adopted, and Arthur was left to care for the weaker of the twins – although they were genetically identical, the first-born was clearly weaker than Alice, and so Arthur Gormon devoted all his attention to ensure that his last link with his beloved wife was not severed.

Alice, meanwhile, was adopted by Matthew and Erica Kerrow, who had lost two children of their own, but decided not to inform Alice either than she was not theirs, or of the fates of their two unborn children. They were equally deceived, as Arthur had failed to inform them either of his condition, which fortunately was not passed on in his genes, and also that both he and Penny possessed some limited control of supernatural forces – although Penny had never recognised it, they were both witches.

As such, Alice Kerrow was always going to be a witch. The extent of her power was only established when, as a toddler, she fell ill, and a woman passing her in the street, herself a healer, cured her of the genetic disease that had been passed on from her mother.

The weaker twin was not so fortunate. By the time she was seventeen, the tumour that grew in her brain had all but destroyed her motor functions, and she was confined to a hospital bed. Arthur Gormon stayed by her side as a devoted father, but her knew that even his own disease could never have conquered this one.

She died, by medical records of the time, on the twenty-ninth of February, nineteen hundred and ninety two. In fact, she disappeared from her

hospital bed on the twenty ninth of February, and she died on the second of March that year. Her body was never found.

Her name was Gerta Ann Gormon, and now you know the foolishness of my choice of name.

Alice Kerrow was sent to a small private primary school in Wimborne, where it quickly became apparent that she had neither the photographic memory of Matthew Kerrow, nor the mathematical ability of her mother. By the time she was eight, her teacher had realised that the only explanation for her being so completely ignorant was that she was adopted. Fortunately for her, she kept this theory to herself, and Alice Kerrow was none the wiser.

In reception, her teacher told her parents she was spirited. In year one, it became cheeky. In year two, it turned towards excitable, before settling on impossible in year four. She kept this reputation all the way until she moved school for first form. She, after being told that she must improve or else her pocket money would be stopped, made a conscious effort from her first day there onwards. She became known as “Suckup” Kerrow, alternated with “lighty”. Her schoolmates believed that she became drunk extremely easily – however, she would have danced on tables at school if it wasn’t for her father’s insistence that she *would* get perfect reports in every subject, whether she lost friends for it or not.

Her choice of men tended to reflect better the false personality she showed during school hours than the excitable girl she was as soon as the eyes of her superiors ceased to be upon her. Her first crush was the fencing and chess champion of the school, and her first boyfriend was well known for only sleeping three hours a night – the rest of his spare time was given over to study.

With the probably positive influence of her total of seven emotionally retarded boyfriends, she passed her O levels moderately well – she achieved five A grades, three B grades, and three C grades, which was less than her teachers expected, but more than her parents did.

Her grades were sufficient for her to be sent away to Wellington School in Somerset to study Biology, English, History and Physical Education for A-level, for which she achieved three As and a B. She also joined the school choir for a while, only to discover that she was in complete disagreement with everything she was singing.

After her A-levels, she travelled for a year, before beginning a History course at Cardiff University. She dropped it after six months, in favour of training as a policewoman. After a year in Nottingham, she returned to Wimborne and became a Dorset Homicide Detective.

She would later say that she decided that she wanted to be a detective because she had had enough of hearing about all the bad things that had happened in the world, and wanted to do something about them instead. In fact, it was because History proved to not have enough of the “exciting” bits, and was all about “boring civilisations that probably just bored themselves to death”. She wanted something that would keep her on the edge of her seat, preferably with a good bit of gore from time to time.

Naturally, this meant that she did not want to do the paperwork. She befriended a young stenographer, Francesca Innmaster, and between the two of them they convinced Kerrow's boss that she required a secretary, even if this meant her pay being halved.

Between the two of them, they were almost unstoppable. Kerrow was frequently called to deal with murders as far away as Newcastle and Hull, and of course Frankie went with her. Between the two of them – with Kerrow's possibly unethical interrogation skills and logical mind, and Frankie's memory, there was little that eluded them.

And then Kerrow met her father.

On Werewolves

Werewolf is a general term that refers to any human who may on any occasion turn into a wolf. As such, many witches and shapeshifters were, in the past, referred to as werewolves, but witches with such power as to turn themselves into another creature are now all but extinct.

As such, werewolf is most commonly used to refer to any creature afflicted with the werewolf curse, and as such belonging to the species *Homo lupus*, which, as previously mentioned, was created in a fit of rage by the eighteenth century witch Aragia. The curse presents in various ways – it was at one time thought to depend on blood group, but recent experimentation confirms that this is not the case. The most common form in humans is as a human with a silver fluid making up ten percent of his or her bodyweight, who at every night of the full moon becomes a wolf. Historically, they were unconscious in this state – in other words, they had no control over their actions. After about 5076 AD, this trend was reversed, and the majority of werewolves were aware and in control of themselves whichever state they were in.

A much rarer form was present for a few decades after Aragia first created the curse, in which the sufferer changed into a wolf, body and mind, every night. However, such werewolves tended to be incapable of passing on the curse, and generally they were also incapable of passing on their genes. As such, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were none left on the planet.

There is a final kind, which appears to become apparent randomly through history, where the victim slowly gains control of the curse. These werewolves tend to live longer than most humans, although whether this is due to the curse or some supernatural predisposition, no one can be certain.

The curse is capable of afflicting any warm-blooded chordate, although outside of humans cases are extremely rare. Most have sufficient covering of fur or feathers to prevent sufficient absorption of the silver snow, and in most bird species, no natural cases have been noticed. In non-human species the curse presents in various different ways which are too numerous to be described here – however, there are only three surviving non-human animals suffering from the curse to date, all of them horses.

Three closely related horses, all descended directly from the stallion owned by Aragia. In horses, uniquely, the curse is passed on not only through the bite of the animal in its transformed state, but also through their genes – all three were born with the affliction. Also uniquely to horses, the curse does not limit them to one transformation, and control over their body in their transformed forms is partial, whereas in human sufferers control is either present or absent.

As all three surviving horses with the curse are descended from Aragia's stallion, it is impossible to know whether this would be the case for

all horses, or if they have also inherited some other magical influence bestowed upon them by the witch.

Chapter II

After Gerta died, any trace of humanity in Arthur Gormon disappeared, and the savage beast that had been smothered by Penelope Black finally resurfaced. His target became unclear, and there was little of the art that his earlier methods had shown. He killed savagely, attacking adults and children with as much savagery as any man could ever have mustered, and killing all he could. However, without the arduous research he had put into his previous conquests, he often didn't do a clean job of it. England, previously relatively free of werewolves, had a two-hundred percent rise in werewolf related attacks in the ten years after Gerta's death, and then he met Amy Weaver.

With her, art was the only way. Her dedication to her husband was what drew him to her initially – he recognised a challenge, and did his best to seduce her. Drawn to him by something she could not explain, she resisted his approaches and, as far as she knew, they became friends.

After three years of this, he grew weary of his delicate approach, and killed her husband, before raping her. He left her a few days to be blamed for her husband's death, and then came to her prison cell to kill her. However, with Weaver prepared for the attack, he found it impossible to do her any harm, and he suffered instead.

He was caught on the third attempt, and, to his delight, he was placed in the holding cell next to her – it was not known that he was trying to get to her, and he certainly wasn't saying so.

She almost killed him. The guards were uncertain how she came by the silver pocketknife, although to them it was just a knife. Kerrow, simply because she had a week to kill, was given the case, and so she met Amy Weaver.

It was perhaps unfortunate for Gormon that she hear Amy Weaver's story first. Amy, recognising that there were some things even someone as open minded as Kerrow couldn't easily believe, left out the part about Gormon being a werewolf, and it wasn't for several years that she found it out for herself.

Having heard Weaver's story, Kerrow went to the hospital to find that Gormon was already recovering, and questioned him.

He recognised her mother in her immediately, and to her irritation he was caught dumb and, after three cups of tea provided by the nurse, she decided he wasn't talking, and went home.

The next week was hectic – as she collected evidence from the Weaver household, the announcement was broadcast that America had attacked Japan. She was swabbing blood from the kitchen floor as it was explained that the RAF had been deployed with the latest “humane” bombs to retaliate against America. Japan, decimated by the attack, followed suit with less humane bombs, and by the time Kerrow heard about it, France, Germany, India and the Sudan had declared war on America, and Iran and Pakistan had followed suit.

Gormon was released from hospital to free beds for high-priority patients being flown back from across the world, and for the weeks that followed, Kerrow found her job almost impossible. She found herself dealing with racist attacks on Australian-born citizens, for their countries neutrality, and Gormon seemed to vanish into the woodwork.

By the time, six months and five billion deaths later, the war ended, she hardly expected to see him again. She hoped, deep inside her, that he hadn't been killed – and she knew it was likely, as there had been very little damage to any of the surprisingly well defended Britain. She also knew that it would be better for the world if he was dead, for she had, by now, worked out that this was not the first time he had killed someone, but she desperately hoped that she would have the power to, one day, put him into the gaol where he belonged.

In fact, he had moved to the decimated city of Madrid, where he met the beautiful, troubled Elisa. An Italian woman, married to an unfaithful psychiatrist, she was considering divorce before her youngest son was in one of the areas devastated by one such bomb. When her eldest was shot down in a plane dropping a so called human bomb on Tennessee, it was the end for her marriage. She and her middle son, Georgio, left her husband and, with Gormon, came to Wimborne, where Gormon rapidly found the address of his surviving daughter, and began watching her.

In an attempt to avoid being noticed by her in a bad way, he kept his head low, and didn't harm his new fiancée. However, his nature got the better of him eventually, and he attacked a family a little way down the road.

Kerrow was called to investigate, and she soon drew parallels to the death of the Luke Weaver, although Amy Weaver, due to a lack of cooperation, was still being held in the most comfortable cell at the police station. On the evidence that Kerrow presented, it was decided that Amy Weaver was innocent, and she was to be released. Then someone pointed out that although the weapon was the same, the method was vastly different, and so in the holding cell, Weaver had to stay.

There was another murder a few weeks later, and it was agreed that whoever had left no more than a few strange hairs at the last scene was responsible for this as well, but as it was on the beach, it was a very fragile crime scene.

Kerrow, at the beach with the forensics crew, found herself rather redundant, and did her best to keep the crowds away as the coroner bagged the body. It was as the body was carried away that a small fragment of the rain-sodden cliff above the scene decided to crumble away, bearing an unwitting horse and boy down off the bridle path on onto the edge of the blood splatter below.

The horse died instantly. The boy was luckier – his companions that had been with him at the top of the cliff called an ambulance before he'd even finished falling, and by the time he was conscious, the horse had been taken away, presumably to their expansive home, and he was in hospital with his shattered leg in a cast.

This was the first time in Kerrow's life that everything really started to become bizarre. Frankie told her she was going crazy when she told her the story the next day, and it was some years before she was herself certain that she wasn't.

The horse wasn't taken to their house. It was taken to the nearest zoo by the owner of the pickup truck – who, unfortunately, also happened to be the man responsible for finding animals that had died of injury or age for the large predators at the zoo to eat. He couldn't bear the thought of all that precious meat rotting away below ground, and so instead he took it to the zoo, where it was put in with the lions.

The boy first found out about this when Kerrow called his older sister to ask her what to do with the man. Jennifer was all for forgiving him, but Jack was furious. Although at the time the man was fined a little under two hundred pounds, he died under mysterious circumstances some eighteen years later, and it was Kerrow who had organised it.

But that was yet to come. After the news, the boy went to sit in the animal's stable, whereupon it returned home, and he later, in a clearly delirious state, told his sister that it had flown home and then turned into a wolf and bitten him.

It wasn't long after that that Kerrow realised Gormon was living next to the boy, and applied for a warrant for his arrest, when a voluntary interview proved fruitless. She was denied this, on the basis of lack of any real evidence – what little evidence had been present had vanished shortly after Gormon himself, following the beginning of World War Three. She saw very little of the boy after for a month or so, except when his sister called her in hysterics to say that the horse had reappeared, and Jack's leg was no longer broken.

On *Homo sapiens*

Homo sapiens. The species from which the eight modern species of human evolved. It was, for a long time, the only species of human in existence, but by the year 2023, it had been realised that there were at least two.

These species, it must be noted, do not always follow the rules of other species, in that they are not always incapable of breeding to produce fertile young – in fact, *Homo lupus* children are rarely born to *Homo lupus* parents, and it is often considered that people classified as *Homo lupus* are in fact members of other species, simply suffering from the werewolf curse – after all, can merely being bitten truly change one's species?

Homo Sapiens is a fairly variable species – the skin colour varies to some extent with environment, to the extent that surviving members of the species have skin of any colour from a very pale pink to a brown so dark to appear black. The eye colour is more limited – the eyes are usually brown or blue, but frequently they may be green or grey, with amber or red being rarer, the latter confined to albino specimens, and on extremely rare occasions, the eyes may be violet. Short of injury, disease and surgery, *Homo sapiens* specimens have relatively symmetrical faces. Although *Homo sapiens* populations have largely become extinct, those that survive are often considered to be among the most physically attractive species of human.

There are a number of biological features unique to *Homo sapiens* and *Homo lupus sapiens*, which rarely become apparent in other species. The first is the appendix. This small projection of the small intestine, which serves no known function in the species, is roughly the size of a thin finger. It has been lost in all other species, presumably due to its redundancy. The species also has 23 chromosome pairs – written as 23 + 17 in *Homo lupus sapiens*, which, as with all subspecies of *Homo lupus*, has seventeen pairs of chromosomes which are normally found in the cytoplasm of the cell, but if cells are taken from a specimen while it appears as a wolf, these seventeen pairs will be found in the nucleus of the cell instead. Unlike the other 23 pairs, these seventeen pairs follow no evolutionary path, but are found, exactly the same, in every animal suffering from Aragia's curse.

Returning to *Homo sapiens*, the most notable feature is the species' adaptability. The skin colour and height take as little as a thousand years to adapt to the environment, compared to a minimum of eighteen thousand years in other species. The thirty two teeth found in the adults of the species are of three main varieties those designed for cutting, also known as the incisors, those designer for tearing, or canines, and those designed for crushing and chewing, which are referred to as the molars or premolars. As well as having the most teeth of any *Homo* species, their bodies harbour the greatest variety of bacteria. As such, the bite of *Homo sapiens* is almost as dangerous to other humans as that of *Homo lupus*, provided that it does as much physical damage to the tissues, and medical help isn't available.

The bacteria does allow the species to survive more easily – modern specimens are relatively insensitive to bacterial infections, and as such they are found on some planets where other species are unable to travel without risking infection and death.

Of course, the species, adaptable as it is, is extremely sensitive to environmental change. It is largely because of this that populations adapt so quickly: if individuals unsuited to the environment die more rapidly, those suited to the environment become more obvious more rapidly.

However, this feature is nothing compared to the greatest strength of the species – variable haemoglobin levels. On planets where there is little photosynthetic life, iron intake permitting, the bone marrow produces a greater number of red blood cells, and the transport of oxygen around the body is greatly increased. On planets where photosynthetic organisms abound, such as the twin planets Jade 2 and 3, oxygen levels are much higher, and the marrow reduces the production of red blood cells, reducing the strain on resources. This feature is not found in any other modern species of human, and is not fully understood.

For a long time, this was believed to be the cause of *Homo sapiens* particular resistance to chemicals and venoms toxic to other humans, but it has recently been found that this is due instead to genetic adaptations which are not present throughout the species, and were lost in other species as their ancestors found themselves dealing with more specific toxins. A similar situation is found in psychological evaluation of the different species: specimens of *H. aquatica* tend to have phobic reactions to oil and the main aquatic predator, if there is one, of their planet; *H. nocturnalis* and *H. haemophilica* have similar reactions to bright light; *H. lupus* may be phobic of silver; *H. solus* is frequently phobic of reptiles; *H. Sedentus* is generally phobic of heights. *H. vulgaris* is, apparently, always phobic of needles. *H. Sapiens* is the only species to react phobically to spiders, crocodiles, scorpions, snakes, sharks, deep water, heights, fire, knives, and darkness. Of these, only heights, deep water and fire are frequently encountered, and even then rarely pose any serious threat, and as such it appears that these phobias stem from the distant past, when such creatures still posed a serious threat.

Aside from its peculiarities, *Homo sapiens* can clearly be seen to be the ancestor of all the other species. It has some webbing on its digits, but not a great deal, it has some hair, but again, this is a fairly moderate amount. It has the ability to digest most, if not all, of the foods consumed by the various species, and its blood temperature is found, in healthy conditions, between 36 and 39 degrees Celsius. Height, which shows greater variety than any species, is, in adults, between four and eight feet, and weight varies from 35 kilograms to, in exceptional cases, 500 kilograms, again in adult specimens.

Chapter III

Before she called a mental institution, Kerrow felt she was duty-bound to go and confirm that the girl was quite mad, but when she reached their home, she was astonished to find that the boy's leg was indeed out of plaster, and a horse that, according to later DNA tests, was exactly the same horse as the one she had physically seen the remains of at the zoo.

When the boy, Jack, came to the police station the next day, she felt unsure of what to say to him. There was a long, awkward silence after he handed her the invitation to his sister's engagement party, and it was him who broke it, to explain that Jennifer hardly knew anyone in the town, so she was inviting everyone whose name she knew.

She nodded dumbly, and noticed something strange in his eye as Frankie gave him a cup of tea, and she found, after he left, that she hadn't touched her own cup all the while he'd been here.

Hearing Frankie's footsteps in the hallway, she guiltily slurped the entire mug of lukewarm tea down her throat, and put it down just a little too late to deceive Frankie.

"Good looking boy," Frankie commented. Kerrow denied this a little too quickly, and Frankie chuckled.

She next saw the fifteen year old when she went to his school to give a talk on policing as a career. Someone had been teasing him all through the talk, and then, on his way out of the hall, the same boy was kicking his ankles. Jack had spun and lashed out, and Kerrow had rarely seen one punch do so much damage.

There was a mock investigation by some trainee community police – the only reason Kerrow heard about it was because the trainees, not knowing it was an unnecessary investigation, sent a blood sample to the DNA lab, where one of her childhood friends, Lucy, was left to analyse it. There was nothing from Jack, but in the case file, there was a photo of the knuckles that had smashed the other boy's nose and fractured an eye socket. There wasn't even the slightest bruise.

Of course, the other boy was better off for it. Jack paid him £100 in apology, and his older sister, as a way of showing off, paid the tease £2000. Kerrow grew sick of the rich sometimes.

She would later say that it was curiosity that drew her to attend the engagement party. In fact, it was more a fascination. She could not understand the boy, and she had to.

She saw Gormon briefly as she lingered at the cocktail bar, watching the boy and his girlfriend across the room. Gormon had seen her just a few seconds earlier, and frozen. He was unable to decide whether to talk to her or leave, and so he did neither until her drifting eyes caught him, and in the split second of contact, she recognised him.

She struggled through the mass of people that Jennifer intended to decide whether she liked or not, but by the time she had reached the place where she had seen him, he had left. She looked around for a minute, but she couldn't catch another glimpse of him.

Gormon, meanwhile, had left, and, in an attempt to extinguish the turmoil of emotions that her glance had sent through him, had broken into a nearby house and killed the two middle-aged Germans he found there. He was arranging them when their twenty-year old son came home from the engagement party, and so absorbed was he in his work that he didn't notice the son until the police had been called. He attacked the boy, made a hash of it, and left the family in a puddle of their own blood.

Their adopted daughter, unbeknown to him, was still at the engagement party, kissing Jack goodbye. When the kiss ended, she realised that her parents wouldn't want her walking home tonight, and so she stayed the night in one of the spare rooms – Jennifer stayed awake the whole night watching out for traffic between that room and Jack's.

And so it was that Kerrow knew before the girl that her parents were dead and her brother was comatose in hospital. Kerrow took the case, and to Gormon's distress households were no longer as loyal as they were when he was young. Elisa's son, now engaged to Jennifer, had been in the hall when Gormon came home, and hadn't hesitated to tell Kerrow this. Gormon was arrested, and, proving troublesome, he was locked up in the cell next to Weaver.

He found it impossible to lie to Kerrow in the interrogation room, and so it wasn't long before, to everyone's relief, Weaver was released. Cleared of all charges, she resumed her career as a barrister, and she began to join Frankie and Kerrow for their lunchtime tea.

For a short while, Kerrow's social life took over. It was an alien, but not altogether unpleasant feeling. It started when Amy invited her and Frankie to tea at her now refurbished home, and then suddenly spiralled out of control as she found herself having to choose between invitations to dinner, and put off paperwork. She started going to the pub with Frankie after work, and found herself drinking almost as much Guinness as tea.

She even started meeting people. The first few relationships were fairly short, and she found herself not interested in them, and they were just too obsessive.

Breaking up was the highlight of such relationships. "Hard" men didn't take it well. Some of them tried, but most of them failed. She was ashamed to admit that she was disappointed when they didn't cry, but she was rarely disappointed. Kerrow had a curious way of making people hurt more than anyone else could, and so a group of her former lovers started calling her "the witch" behind her back. They didn't really mean it, though, and somehow they found themselves unable to say no when she began to restart a relationship with them.

As Kerrow became more sociable, Jennifer Hanov Himmerden was becoming more withdrawn. As her fortune grew, despite her efforts to dissipate it, her paranoia also grew. Kerrow, in light of how stand-offish the girl was becoming, was rather shocked to be invited to the wedding reception, but for some reason which she didn't want to fathom, she was quite pleased to be invited, and decided she must find a proper man for the event.

To her good fortune, just such a man presented himself to her. His name was Mark Johnson, and he was a trusting, friendly man – the sort that never said no, and you were fairly certain would never have a criminal record. Rachel Harrick, the semi-plastic receptionist at the local prison, commented on what good genes he had, and Kerrow decided he would make the perfect partner to impress the Hanov Himmerdens.

She spent two days choosing her clothes for the reception – asking and forgetting Mark's opinion every twenty minutes or so. She finally settled on a sleek, silver cocktail dress that came down to just below her knees, and showed off her figure without seeming too flirtatious or attention demanding. She did think that the lower cut, red one suited better, but it wasn't quite so modest in appearance.

As with everything the young billionaire did, everything was drastically over the top, but nobody minded. She even had the village hall rebuilt to make the venue she wanted. Her wedding dress was quite hideous, although Kerrow hadn't the nerve to tell her so, and concentrated on the taste of the food instead of the taste of the dress.

It was near the end of the celebrations, just as Kerrow, feeling very full but mildly dissatisfied, was about to leave, that the evening got truly interesting. Jack's girlfriend screamed, and everyone turned to her, and Jack. For a moment Kerrow thought it was Jack she had screamed at – for a moment, she saw something inhuman in his face, but she only glimpsed him before she noticed the window. There was a bloody smear down it, and something twitched weakly against the low glass.

The only thing Kerrow was always sure of after that was that it was raining. Her dress had managed to get covered in blood, but she remembered that the rain had washed it off her as quickly as it had washed the smear off the window. The source was a girl in Jack's year, a girl called Emma Lewis, who was quite well known for being the sort to injure herself. When she woke up, in hospital, she insisted that she had not done so, and that Sally was missing. It emerged that there were in fact two missing girls – Sally Trent, Emma's closest friend, in the same year, and Pamela Brown, in the year above, who had from childhood been a cause for dislike amongst most of Jack's year. Forensic analysis of Emma's wounds confirmed that she had not inflicted them upon herself, and she fell under suspicion of murdering Pamela, with or without the assistance of Sally, who was somehow dispatched during the act. Then it emerged that her wounds had been inflicted by a machine, and the case grew stranger.

As officers from the station went from door to door looking for witnesses, it emerged that a great deal of people had vanished over the past few days – people of whom it was expected routine. Frankie, out of curiosity more than anything else, compiled a database of dates and names on her computer, and found that people had been disappearing at an unprecedented rate since early September that year, some three months ago.

A skeleton found pushed into the leaves on the edge of a rarely used footpath behind the graveyard added a gruesome note, if it really was linked to the case. It turned out to be the body of a boy who had gone missing only two months ago, after a family argument. His parents hadn't thought it particularly important, as he was given to storming off for a few days after such events. Suspicion fell immediately on them, and then on the girl who had recently moved into the house closest to the body – her back gate was about seventeen feet down the footpath from the spot. Her name was Millicent Hanov, and she made no attempt to hide her fascination with the occult. The strange marks on the bones helped to imply her, and the fact that the boy had been her boyfriend in the days before he disappeared was not lost on the general public, either. Something about the girl told Kerrow that, however dark and dangerous she acted, she wasn't capable of this.

It was unfortunate for Millicent that the next high profile victim was Jack's girlfriend's rebellious older brother. The girlfriend, Jade, and her friend Kathleen found him pinned to the ceiling of his temporary room in the Hanov Himmerden house – the silver knives that were used showing that someone knew what he was. Kerrow had been managing to make that particular aspect of her crumbling town just a figment of her imagination until they found bluish streaks in the boy's blood which held Arthur Gormon's DNA. The boy, when he was in a fit state to speak, spoke of a black-hooded group of people, with crucifixes and Latin incantations. The position he had been pinned in certainly suggested some religious influence, and so Kerrow began investigating cults. Emma, meanwhile, escaped from hospital, and ran to the police station, saying her stepfather had attacked her.

Kerrow assured her that she was dreaming, and drove her back to the hospital. The next day, Frankie told her that the man had fallen from an upstairs window under suspicious circumstances. Emma was speechless, and merely gestured at Millicent Hanov, who had been visiting her at the time. Millicent claimed that the man had attacked Emma, and she had sought only to protect the girl, and had accidentally sent the man through the window. Kerrow, however, had seen an earlier case where someone had been thrown against a window in the same hospital and died – they had broken on the window, which hadn't sustained more than a hairline fracture itself.

It was as she was driving Millicent to the police station for questioning that the girl started fitting, and her wail as Kerrow drove her back to the hospital became a low muttering, and she said something about Mark, and the fit ended. Kerrow was slightly disturbed by the episode, but thought nothing of it until she reached her home and found that he hadn't left a message for over

twenty-four hours. She hurried around to his house, and found that it had been broken into, and he was gone.

Her investigations led her nowhere, although Millicent told her on multiple occasions that he was underground, she merely shouted at Millicent that if she was just going to try and heighten Kerrow's misery, she wasn't welcome at the station.

Jack disappeared next, and it seemed that he had been the target when Jade's brother had been attacked. Kathleen and Jade went to Kerrow, and then to Millicent, who had recently taken up residence on a mattress in Emma's room, and then the four girls disappeared.

Kerrow immediately began hunting for any place that they could have been taken to, and as she marched around town in frantic thought, she caught sight of a slightly ajar manhole. She had been intending to close it when she realised that, although she walked along this road very frequently, she had never seen a manhole here before. Sure enough, the concrete it was set into was still a little sticky to the touch. Without further hesitation, she scrambled into it, and climbed down a ladder.

As the powerful smell of sewage hit her, she considered the possibility that there was nothing odd about this manhole, but then she saw the door.

It was definitely not supposed to be there. It was almost like a church door, set a few feet above the highest point the water-mark reached, with new slate steps up to it. She wrapped her fingers carefully around the brass knocker, and pushed it open, reaching for her radio to call Frankie for backup.

She didn't get that far. The stench of something like a body hit her, and it was all she could do to stop herself from vomiting as she hurried past the heaps of semi-liquid green-brown mud.

Once she had pushed this open, she found herself facing what looked for all the world like a deserted, twentieth century train station – the only difference was that the ticket barriers had thumb-pads instead of ticket slots. She hesitated for a moment, and vaulted over one of these.

She managed to take a few steps before the wooden floor swung away from beneath her feet, and she was dropped into a freezing pool of water.

Salty water. She estimated how far she had walked down steps, and how far she had fallen, and knew that there was no possibility at all that there was an underground loch this far inland. The altitude was still a little too high, for one thing, and, incompetent as the government were, she was fairly sure they would have noticed it.

It was also too warm to be part of any English body of water, especially this far into the winter. She trod water for a few minutes, and waited for her eyes to accustom to the darkness.

She spotted a wall not far away, and swam carefully towards it, trying not to jump as she heard something splash in the distance. She put her fingers onto the top of the wall, and realised that she was in a massive fish-tank.

Had she taken a moment, she would have noticed that, although there was a drop on the other side of this glass wall, she was going to land in water.

However, she didn't take that moment, and the first thing she knew of the water was the relief when she hit it instead of a hard stone floor.

She touched what she assumed was the bottom with her toes, but then the bottom moved suddenly, and she did her best not to scream. She succeeded, and, after a moment's hesitation, struggled towards what looked less like the wall of an aquarium, and more like a sandy bank.

She was nearly out of the water when something moved behind her. She spun, and to her amazement, she saw a very large crocodile rear its ugly head out of the water at her.

The crocodile was unfortunate in that Alice Kerrow was a very quick-minded and quick-handed woman, and Alice Kerrow was fortunate in that, although the temperature was not as low as the air outside, it wasn't as high as the water the animal belonged in. She leapt backwards as she pulled her handgun from its waterproof holster, and as it caught itself and swung its massive head to her, she shot it through the head.

It was the pain that stopped it, not any real damage. Thick as its scaly hide was, the bullet was unable to get to tiny brain, but the power of the gun was enough to blast a small hole into its skull, and shear its optic nerve before halting in a sinus.

As the first crocodile vanished into the water, others, alerted to her presence by the commotion, appeared around the bank. She glanced around, and spotted the edge of the tank, only separated from the far end or the sandbank by a few feet of air. She gripped her gun tightly, and ran for it.

She had never been good at jumping. She was alright at it, but inconsistent – if her feet were a little bit off, her left kneecap twisted as she kicked off, and she crumpled. Of course, in an emergency situation such as this one, she didn't have time to calculate the steps. She swore inwardly as she tumbled into the shallow water, and sprang back onto the sand. She launched herself at the glass, and pulled herself up onto the top of it by her fingertips.

She drew her legs up and, once bitten, twice shy, she glanced down the other side.

No water. Not much of anything for about thirty feet, actually. She swallowed, and pushed herself carefully to her feet.

On Crocodiles

Crocodiles belong to one of the most ancient vertebrate families in the universe. They originated on Earth, where there were, at the time of our species departure from the planet, 17 living species of crocodile, and several dozen extinct species with DNA available to science.

At that time, it was assumed that crocodiles would be left, alongside other less popular animals, in their natural habitats. However, the branch of the Anglo-American government responsible for security secretly smuggled the eggs of six species onto the ship *Citadel*. On *The Freedom*, one of the later ships to be stocked, the biologist Frank Nitkh insisted on bringing his DNA library, which included, along with over ninety percent of living species, all of the existing species of crocodile, as well as seven then extinct species.

The Freedom is famous not for this breach of galactic law, but for being the first, and only, of the city ships to crash. *The Freedom* lost control of its steering near the watery planet Azurite 4. As, in the last few moments, its inhabitants evacuated, it became clear that Nitkh and his followers had disabled the steering after the president's refusal to allow them to land on the planet and set free their prepared life forms. As the ship crashed into the shallow alien oceans, Nitkh and his fellow mutineers were killed, and it was assumed that the engineered creatures had been as well. However, when, some two hundred years later, people returned to Azurite 5 and 4 to consider development, it was discovered that somehow, the animals hadn't. In amongst the wreckage of the city ship, now covered in shimmering green sand, they were beset by extremely well fed salt-water crocodiles.

These animals originated in Australia. Extinct on Earth by 2019, they were the largest of the crocodile species encountered by man. On Earth, they reached, in exceptional circumstances, nine metres, but in the fertile waters of Azurite, where there were very few large predators, and a myriad of fast breeding amphibious life-forms, the crocodiles were easily able to double that.

Further investigation of the planet discovered that five species of crocodile, three species of turtle and seventy-eight species of fish had survived the crash. The smaller life-forms had either been trapped in the wreckage, or consumed by the diminutive Azurian predators.

From the five species of crocodile, and their various new subspecies, crocodiles were re-introduced into a number of waters across the galaxy. The main reason for this was accidental – young crocodiles became popular as a novel pet, and with their modified growth genes, nobody particularly minded. However, even without growing to more than a foot long, crocodiles lived for a very long time – generally longer than their civilian owners. They slowly became an infestation as people grew bored and careless with their almost harmless pets, and the tiny crocodiles found their ways into the waters of over twenty planets, where they bred and, occasionally, produced eggs which grew into larger animals. As they were considered harmless, this went unnoticed for

more than a thousand years, by which time the animals had either gone extinct or reached their natural proportions. In the dwarf crocodiles, this wasn't too much of a problem, but in the larger, more popular species, this was deadly.

By now, there are over seventy-thousand species of crocodile in the known universe. Most of these have been produced using accelerated time fields to produce species, usually with some control on the accelerated environment, and thus the resulting animal. This has been used to produce all the herbivorous, arboreal and bipedal crocodile species. By the vast differences in our planetary water systems, further species have developed – from the thirty-seven metre, deep sea animals found throughout the inhabited planets of the Sapphire system, to the seven inch, aerial crocodiles of Galena 4.

It has long been considered that crocodiles receive an unfair amount of dogma, and many a biologist has claimed that over ninety percent of deaths attributed to the various crocodile species were actually caused by indigenous predators. After all, Sapphire 2, which was previously inhabited by nothing more than photosynthetic, snail-like creatures, has had very few crocodile based deaths in the last century, despite having an abundance of extremely large crocodiles throughout its oceans. However, this is probably due to the extremely safety-conscious nature of the planet, where human feet rarely touch ground without species-specific walls being set up around the area. In fact, with the extreme safety measures, it is perhaps more remarkable that people have been killed by the crocodiles at all.

However, crocodiles do, on many planets, have an important function. They are farmed for security purposes on at least eighteen planets of our galaxy, and are even more popular in less peaceful galaxies such as Andromeda. They are also farmed for meat and their skin, and there are several dozen catholic planets whose staple meat is from the eight-tonne basking crocodile, *Crocodylus giganti*. On over three hundred planets, far smaller species of crocodile are used to control populations of herbivorous fish, as well as removing the bodies of other aquatic animals from waterways. There is one recently developed species in which the webbed forelimbs are large enough for true flight, and this animal has proved invaluable in providing transport between cities on the mountainous planets of the Galena system.

When asked his opinion on the reptiles in a recent, broadcast interview, the president of the united galactic council claimed that, had Nitkh's biological library not been recovered, the responsible thing to do would have been to capture crocodiles from Earth and introduce them into their environments. He went on to comment that "animals of the genus *Crocodylus*, and their descendants, terrible as they may be, are the most useful species our universe has to offer."

Chapter IV

Meanwhile, Gormon had made a primitive crossbow. He'd had to use magic to do it, but with the way the other prisoners had been disappearing, he reckoned that the exhaustion he now felt was worth it.

It was as that suspicious looking receptionist was fiddling records that a sudden wave of an emotion he rarely felt hit him. Love. Not for the suspicious receptionist woman – for her, he felt only disdain – but for someone not here. It didn't take long for him to surmise who that someone was, and it wasn't difficult, when the woman came close enough, to shoot her through the silicon left breast, snatch her keys and leave her unconscious on the floor as he cursed his bad aim.

As luck would have it, that was the least of his difficulties. He knew Kerrow was in trouble, but his magic wasn't even half powerful enough to tell him where, so he had to find out the old fashioned way.

He had every intention of torturing Frankie when he reached the police station. Unfortunately, she wasn't at her desk, so he had to use his nose, and a familiar face wandering into a firing range is less conspicuous than a wolf wandering in. She shot him first – and Frankie used silver plated bullets upon Kerrow's insistence. He yelped, and became human again, and she was surprised to accept that her boss wasn't bonkers. She shot him again, and he scrambled away from her approaching stilettos. She demanded why he wasn't in a cell. He lied. She shot him through the hand before the last shot had the chance to close over properly. He told the truth, and wondered why her aim was so much better than his. She responded that Kerrow was wandering around in a huff because a bunch of devil-worshipping girls had vanished. He asked where, and she confessed that they didn't actually worship the devil. He persisted, and she handcuffed his left arm to his right leg, gagged him and put him in the boot of her car.

She spun the car in circles in the car park to disorient him before driving to the dead willow on the river bank behind the Anchor family's house. She then, uncertainly, uncuffed him, and pointed her gun carefully at his now canine head.

With his nose, it wasn't hard to find out where the girls had gone. She told him he was a freak, and he turned back into a human to pull open what wasn't really a chest in what wasn't really a canoe. She repeated herself, and followed him uncertainly into the dark tunnel.

Kerrow, meanwhile, had landed harder than she meant to, and was hoping she hadn't broken anything. She rolled over carefully, and stood up. She moved each of her fingers in turn, and then moved on to her toes. No serious damage done, then. She glanced around to take her bearings, and, her hand on the steel frame of the enormous tank, began to look for a way out.

Presently, she heard something scuttle behind her in the darkness. She swore, and hoped she was dreaming as an extremely large, dripping, spider-

like creature appeared to rise out of the floor. She fled as quickly as she could as the thing scuttled vaguely towards her, and to her relief she presently reached another large, ornate door. To her irritation, the door was alarmed, and a digital voice told her to enter her alarm override code immediately. She shot the source of the noise, and hurried onwards.

Presently, she heard screaming from up ahead of her. She closed her eyes, and focussed on where the noise was coming from before reopening them and running towards it. She stopped outside a large stone archway, and peered through.

There was some kind of fight going on. Four girls, one of them unconscious, were huddled in the corner of the room while about ten men and a very neatly dressed woman battered each other with table legs, fists, high-heels and the butts of guns. The woman saw Kerrow as a man behind her pulled out a knife, and in the moment of recognition, Kerrow froze. The knife slipped forwards towards Frankie's back, and Kerrow scrambled to pick up her gun, and stood up and fired a shot.

As the bullet left the gun, she heard the loud cracking of the man's neck, and a double thud as he hit the ground and the late bullet hit the man who had snapped his neck. He glanced at the hole, and looked at Kerrow.

"Ow," Gormon commented, as the bullet fell out of his chest. One of the girls screamed again, and Kerrow ran forwards just as a man behind her thrust a knife at her.

She clipped the back of his head with the butt of her gun, and he fell to the floor. She dropped into a squatting position as she reached the screaming girls, and glanced around at them.

"Are any of you hurt?" she began to ask, before she noticed the blood on the unconscious girl's wrists. Then she recognised them – the two doing the screaming were Emma Lewis and Jade Hanover. The unconscious girl was Pamela Brown, and the one that sat intently watching the conflict was Millicent Hanov. Kerrow frowned, and turned to kick a man who was running towards her, before she was swamped by four more.

As she was drawn into the fray, she saw a pair of red-robed men moving towards the girls, and one of them clamped a hand over Jade's mouth as the other snatched Millicent's wrist. Emma shrieked like a banshee and attacked the first, but Millicent was dragged, struggling, towards the door.

Kerrow battered heads desperately with a table leg Gormon had dropped, but she knew as the man pulled out a knife that she couldn't reach him in time. A great anger welled up in her chest, and Millicent's scream was lost as the air seemed to be filled with flying pieces of metal.

When the air became still again, there was a terrible silence, and Millicent was rubbing a tiny cut on her neck. The man who had attacked her – indeed all the men who had been there, apart from Gormon, were nowhere to be seen. Kerrow's heart seemed to her to be the loudest thing in the room, and then there was the loud crack of a drop of liquid hitting the stone floor. Millicent raised her head, and looked mildly surprised, and Kerrow, following

her gaze, saw where their attackers had gone. Seventeen men hung silent and still in the air, with table legs, some metal, some wooden, sticking into their chests. Kerrow looked back at Millicent, knowing that the girl had always claimed to be a witch, and Millicent saw the disgust in her eyes.

“This is disgusting,” Kerrow told her, her eyes on the table leg in the girl’s hands, “You are as bad as them, now.”

“I didn’t do this,” Millicent told her, and they could all hear the honesty in the girl’s voice. Kerrow refused to trust it, and glared at her as Gormon picked up Pamela, and Frankie helped the two dazed fifteen-year olds to their feet.

“Kathleen,” whispered Emma, “she went to find –”

Frankie nodded, and turned to Kerrow as Jade followed the man who had murdered her parents out through the archway.

“I’m going to make sure Gormon doesn’t eat any of them – do you need one of them to stay with you and show you the way out?”

Kerrow glanced at Millicent again, and then back at Frankie.

“Not her,” Kerrow pointed at the witch, and Frankie nodded.

“Emma?” Frankie reached for the girl’s hand, “can you show Alice where Kathleen went?”

Emma nodded uncertainly, and Kerrow was left alone with her as Millicent followed Frankie away.

“She didn’t do it,” Emma said nervously. Kerrow glanced at her as she limped into the corridor, and then back up at the slowly dripping bodies. She closed her eyes to convince herself that she wasn’t going crazy, and they thudded to the ground as she walked out of the room.

She followed Emma along an unbelievably long corridor, kicking open the doors to see if Kathleen or Mark was anywhere to be seen. She only saw one other person, and knocked them unconscious with a sharp punch before they had a chance to call for help. She peered at the woman, and recognised her as a cashier from the cafe down the road.

After perhaps twenty minutes, she kicked open a door to see Mark lying in what seemed to be a glass coffin. She bellowed, and before the three men standing around him could react, she had knocked them to the floor, and smashed the glass.

She leapt back as a thin, silvery fluid fell with the glass, and stepped carefully over it before pulling Mark out of the wreckage, and onto his feet. He moaned, and more of the fluid fell out of his mouth to splash onto her shoes.

Emma called out suddenly, and she lay him carefully on the floor before going to investigate. A girl that Kerrow didn’t recognise was leaning against a wall just inside an open door, her eyes flickering as she struggled to remain conscious, and Emma was staring at her with a mixture of fear and relief. The girl was bleeding from the same six places Pamela had been, but someone had bandaged the wounds with the shreds of a cardigan. As Kerrow entered the room, she saw the horse – a black filly that Jack had been training when he went missing – and the other girl. There were seven broken bodies, all adult

men, on the floor, and held to a wooden cross by silver knives was a hideous, twitching thing that might once have been human. Kerrow never forgot the way her stomach turned when the girl pulled what looked like a giant, two-pronged fork out of the thing's mouth, and laid it gently on the ground. Then the girl pulled the knives out of the creature's limbs, and caught it as it collapsed off the cross.

As its eyes gazed blankly towards her, Kerrow realised that it was Jack. He murmured something, and the girl brushed her hair out of her face. Kerrow was relieved to see that she was the girl she was here to find, but was unable to move to tell her this.

"Jade," he whispered, and the girl smiled almost bitterly.

"I'm here," she whispered, and she kissed him. Kerrow tried to forget the jealousy that stabbed at her heart then, and Mark, slowly regaining consciousness behind her, always told himself that what he saw was just a figment of his imagination, and nobody ever told Jack. Kathleen glanced up as Jack stopped bleeding, and there was silence as she wiped his blood from her mouth.

"We're going home," Kerrow said eventually.

On Witches

Witch is a very misleading term which refers to any person possessing any form of magical ability. However, many people tend to make the distinction between those that have such power and those that do not, and this is where any confusion arises. According to a recent study by Lichsten (70597), all people possess some limited magical ability, even if they never become aware of it. The actual level of this power is determined by various factors – genes are an important factor – the child of two powerful witches, even if raised by people who never become aware of any magical ability, will normally become aware of magical ability at some point in their adolescence. There have been cases where a latent gene has become expressed and the child of two persons with almost no magical ability somehow develops a powerful magical ability during the normal period.

The most important factor, by far, is the amount of magic they are exposed to during early childhood. It is rare for a powerful witch to have been uninfluenced by magic during childhood, and all of the very powerful witches through history have, during the first five years of life, had their lives significantly altered by magic.

According to an older study by Lichsten, any witch powerful enough to be considered an Otrin, a thirty-second century term meaning “human god”, must have had a natural death prevented during their first six years of life.

However, later historical studies find that, of the eighteen hundred or so witches of such power that have been recorded, three rarely recognised witches actually developed such power within their first three years, which can only be attributed to the emotional turmoil of their similarly powerful mothers just before their births. The best known is Jennifer Hanov-Himmerden, a twenty-first century billionaire who actually altered significant portions of the earth’s crust through her unconscious desires, and it appears that she unknowingly became a billionaire through her own magical power – and act that would now be considered illegal under the magic and the occult act, 3048, which covers Andromeda and the Milky Way equally. It was through her own conscious desires that her adoptive brother, Jack, survived his premature birth and, as far as records show, is still alive today.

The other two, perhaps more striking, cases, are of two twins generally referred to as the Raven and the Crow. Crawling from the womb of their slaughtered mother in sixteenth century Peru, they in fact never developed beyond the sixth year of life, but nevertheless, they were able, from the time they were first born, to raise the dead, physically, spiritually, or both.

Other factors which appear to play a part are diet, particularly before the onset of puberty, gender – as ninety percent of witches are female – and mental stability. A historical review, by Copanti (70698) found that ninety percent of people who are aware of their magical ability suffer from bipolar depression,

schizophrenia or bulimia. Of the remaining ten percent, three percent are known to have suffered, at some point, from unipolar depression. Furthermore, Seng-Smith (70673) found that ninety-eight percent of modern catatonic schizophrenics are witches aware of their own magical ability – as such, they must have at least second level (slight) magical ability.

Magic, for those who are not aware of it, is often misinterpreted as involving various parts of animals and plants, or incantations. Words can add direction to magic, but are not necessary to do so – most witches who use incantations merely do so out of habit. While some animals and plants do possess magical properties, it is dubious as to whether these properties can be utilised after their deaths, and any effects of so called magic potions are either due to chemical effects or instilled by the witch's will, as opposed to the ingredients contained within them. Magic is a form of transferrable energy which, unlike most, appears limitless. It has been postulated that magical power is stored within the areas of the brain not normally used, but many studies appear to contradict this, and the source, if it exists, of magical energy is yet to be ascertained.

Chapter V

After the teenagers and Mark were taken to the hospital, Kerrow and almost all of the local, as well as some not local, police officers were used to clear up the case. A total of seven hundred arrests were made, with six-hundred and eighty convictions. Most of those were for conspiracy to commit murder, as well as cannibalism. It emerged that the criminals were a religious sect that emerged during the Second World War, and they believed that, to truly remember Christ, they had to drink real, human blood. The Nile crocodiles, cub sharks and giant spider crabs that Kerrow encountered were used to keep unwanted visitors out, and dispose of the evidence. Kerrow wasn't alone in finding it impossible to believe her eyes as the animals were brought out, sedated and carried off in military trucks to various aquariums and zoological parks across the country. By the time Jack, miraculously healed of all his wounds, was released from hospital, it had emerged that the crocodiles, some of which were over six metres long, were breeders from a reptile farm in Suffolk. The owner of the farm was arrested on the same day that Pamela Brown, comatose and brain-damaged, finally died.

For a short while, she and Mark didn't speak, and she could only believe that it was his own horror at what was happening to him for a few nights every month. It was when Jennifer invited, among relatively few guests this time, Frankie, Kerrow and Mark to her house to keep her company as Jack's friends celebrated his birthday, that they spoke again. It ended with her telling him she loved him, and he wanted to believe her. He made himself believe her, and she made herself believe her. She told herself that her infatuation with the boy was just sympathy, and she believed that, too.

In fact, it seemed to her, as she avoided Jack, that all she had to do was marry Mark to prove that she didn't love Jack. So she suggested to him that he proposed to her, and he agreed. They were married before her thirty-sixth birthday, and for a blissful month, they were happy. And then, a week after his seventeenth birthday, Jack got himself into trouble again.

At least, that was the way she saw it. What really happened was that his sister vanished. This wasn't the same as the vanishings earlier in the year, which could be explained by people with sick minds kidnapping and murdering people. There was no reasonable explanation. CCTV footage saw the woman's car smashed into by a four-wheel drive on a country road; it saw her run from the scene, followed by the driver of the car. It saw her stop, exhausted, near a multi-storey car-park, and it saw him pull out a gun and shoot her.

And after that, it didn't see her at all. Her car was found abandoned on the road, but the four wheel drive was nowhere to be seen. The bullet that had shot her was lodged, completely clean, in a concrete pillar behind where she had stood. As the bullet had hit her jacket, though, her image on the CCTV had vanished.

The next day, Emma vanished as well. Lucy from the DNA lab, and her husband Matt, from forensics, were involved in a car crash, but no trace of them could be found at the scene, and the other car had been sent to a scrap yard and melted down into dog-food cars seventeen years earlier.

The next person to vanish was Arthur Gormon. At first, Kerrow thought he had escaped, but the CCTV showed that same as it had with Jennifer- a man walked up to the outside of his cell, and shot him. He vanished as soon as the bullet, which was found stuck in the wall, touched him, and when security had tried to capture the man who had shot him, they claimed that their fingers went straight through him.

As Kerrow told the whole story to Mark over a cup of tea, he went through their post for the week, and found a curious invitation to the house of witches. She glanced at it, and threw it in the bin, whereupon it reappeared on the table.

She decided it was worth investigating, and Googled it. One apparently post-traumatic schizophrenic girl in London came up a few times in newspaper cuttings, and Kerrow decided to pay her a visit.

Somehow, Jack found out, and because of his involvement in the case, Kerrow agreed to let him come with her to meet the girl. For some reason, Jade insisted on coming as well, and as Kathleen, Sally and Millicent added themselves to this list, Kerrow felt like she was running a school trip.

Weaver, out of curiosity, agreed to drive some of them there, but Kerrow insisted that she waited outside.

The girl looked pretty when her mother let them into her room, but as she turned around, they saw that the right side of her body was in tatters. Her right eye had been replaced with a convincing glass one, but the reconstruction of her ear and cheek were less convincing. Her bionic right arm was realistic, but her right leg was currently being upgraded, and her skirt flopped helplessly.

She screamed. Her vocal cords had clearly survived the accident. Kerrow followed her gaze not to Jack, but to Jade, and something struck her.

The girl, Henna Jaimeson, had been kidnapped along with thirty other young children when she was eight years old, by the notorious child murderer, Amy Cardiff. Cardiff was a redheaded, green-eyed, cherub-faced woman that, when she was arrested, nobody could believe was responsible for the murders. And Jade was the spitting image of her.

Henna soon stopped screaming, and stared at Jade. Jade backed away hurriedly, and Kerrow introduced herself, and asked about the House of Witches. Henna glanced at her reproachfully, but somehow knew that Kerrow didn't think she was schizophrenic, and told her the truth.

The truth. It was strange, but Henna had been told so many times that it was all a bad dream, and she mustn't pretend it was anything else, that she wasn't really sure what the truth was any more. There had been a bus, and then the driver – a young man with eyes that hurt – and the conductor. She didn't like the conductor from the moment she got on the bus, the woman was a sweet-faced thing, but she was as black and twisted as if she had been buried in

the roots of a cypress tree, and it had grown through her until she was but a mass of tangled and knotted roots wrapped around a crumbling skeleton. She had stuck the teacher with the knife she took from her bag, and his shirt had turned red before the woman tossed him carelessly out of the car and watched as he rolled into the river. She had turned to the children and laughed a wicked laugh, and Henna Jaimeson had known within her that the woman would kill them.

She didn't remember much after that, just the darkness that came, and the screaming in the night, and the man looking angry with his hurt eyes, and the woman was mad, mad and evil. Then there was pain, and then – then there was none. A kindly woman picked her off the ground, and she found herself in a strange house. The woman whispered her into calmness, and told her she was special.

She gripped the woman's hand over the next few days, and followed her as the woman showed her a world of things she could not believe – and Henna glanced at the awkward boy who had come with the jealous woman, and knew that here, too, was something of that world. For a moment, she puzzled over him, for her mind, so quick, had betrayed her, and wouldn't tell her anything beyond what she could see, and she struggled not to drown in her silence.

The kindly woman had never told them why they were there, and eventually, more people came – until there were thirteen, and then there were more. More that weren't right – they weren't bad, but they wanted to hurt, but to them it was normal, and Henna couldn't understand. And then there were less people, and the people that weren't bad had taken everyone, but they couldn't find Henna and the kind woman, and then they had to wait to get back to earth.

But when the people who weren't bad went, it came. The thing that came from beyond the gate, a thing that burned and screamed and bellowed, and the kindly woman tried to stop it. She had smelled of lavender, but as she grappled with it, the smell went, and all Henna could smell was bacon, and then she felt pain, and as she ran from the thing and the kindly woman who wouldn't get up, she stumbled, and she landed at a policeman's feet, but not all of her did.

There were sirens, and a darkness that came and went. Then there were faces, and questions, and she saw the black and twisted woman as the face of an angel fell off her and the devil screamed at the world from behind it. And the beds, the beds where the kind people came from, they weren't empty anymore. There were lots of children, children like Henna, with blood and burns and bruises, and she had known them, but they didn't recognise her, and they got better, and she didn't.

Henna Jaimeson stopped, and the jealous woman looked at her with something like pity in her eyes. But beyond that, something like fear.

Kerrow asked her why, and Jaimeson turned her ugly side away from them, and smiled in the way only her beautiful side could.

“I don't know. But you will soon enough.”

Kerrow hesitated, and walked out of the room. She bade Mrs Jaimeson farewell as she passed her, and went outside to tell Weaver and the three girls that were with her about the encounter.

Jack hesitated, and Henna caught his eye. Brown and green, like the kindly woman.

“Shannyn,” she said eventually, “she was your mother.”

He glanced at her.

“No. She died before I was born.”

“Burned?”

“Hanged. But Shannyn wasn’t your kindly woman. She wasn’t kind.”

She watched him go, and wondered what would have happened if she hadn’t been ruined. He wondered how Jennifer’s mother had got to the house eight years after she finally got her comeuppance, and Kerrow wondered why Jade looked like Amy Cardiff.

Weaver, meanwhile, glanced up at Henna Jaimeson in the window, and wondered whether or not to tell Kerrow about her own invitation.

They drove back to Wimborne in silence, and Jade wondered when she would have to tell Jack.

As it happened, Weaver’s car swerved to miss a girl crossing the road, and as the girl vanished and the car wrapped itself around a lamppost, the three of them not in Weaver’s car had no time left to worry about it. Kerrow braked as quickly as she could, and parked across the road from the steaming wreck before running to her friend’s assistance.

The only person left in the car was Kathleen. The girl was strapped, unconscious, into the passenger seat, and although her head had gone through the windscreen, there wasn’t a cut on her.

That, as far as Kerrow knew, didn’t make sense, as she knew that the girl had found an invitation to the house of witches on her pillow, and reported that someone was spying in her. Perhaps there were false ones.

The fire at the station the next day crashed all her hopes that she could sit this one out, and as she and Mark’s visiting niece crouched behind her desk, she swore to herself. Ellie was rather shocked, and then the desk caught fire.

On The House of Witches

The House of Witches is a mythical place that appears here and there in literature dating as far back as medieval France. The idea is that God, having given people the power to be their own gods, to care for each other, had created a rift between those that knew that had this power, and those that didn't. To stop the destruction of those with power, a haven was created.

Of course, none of this can ever be known. The destruction of the house of Witches on the 28th of February 2010 makes it impossible to know much about the house. All that can be considered is what the survivors recalled, and what was brought to Earth.

The house was found in the Aurora Borealis, in fact, it is claimed that it was the Aurora Borealis, although the fact that the aurora did not disappear as the house was destroyed tends to quash this argument. It comprised largely of a shimmering, gossamer material that repeated – as such, leaping out of the house merely caused the leaper to land on the roof of the house after a two-hundred foot fall. The garden was a small part of Heaven that was apparently once on Earth – The Garden of Eden. Eden was in fact an early Iranian Witch of incredible beauty, whose glance made everything as beautiful and wild as herself. As such, her home was the most beautiful on Earth. When she died, the garden was preserved, but the desert tried to creep into its walls. It was moved off Earth, and, when the house of witches was created, so was a path for humans to the most beautiful Garden in existence. The Garden returned to Earth in 2010, where it could be reached by closing one's eyes before walking into the garden behind Ellie Johnson's mother's house.

Eden had a gate at the end of her garden which led to the outside world. However, after she died, the gate became her way back into the garden, and so it led to the two worlds of the dead – the left path led to heaven, and the right to purgatory. The gate was locked so that only Eden could open it, but once mandrakes had found their way through, and colonised the rooms below the House of Witches, the spell became less predictable. For every visitor to the house, at least one of the lower Gods or demons, depending which culture you came from, would find its way into the House of Witches through this faulty gate, and some mere spirits managed it as well.

Inside the house, there were a number of other oddities, many of which did not survive the destruction, and so can never be known. However, amongst the incredible spells and artefacts that the building held, there were two things that didn't die with it.

The best known of the two is the genus *Elusa*. Of this genus, there are four species that went extinct almost as soon as the dinosaurs appeared on Earth. The animals are unique in that specimens are not always alive. In fact, it is not unheard for something inanimate to become a member of the genus simultaneously, or for an animal of the genus to become an object equally rapidly. The animals are vaguely reptilian, usually about two feet in length, and

extremely agile. Their appearance earned them the title “dragons”, but true dragons are not naturally found in this universe.

The most common members of the genus are the wind dragons, *Elusa aeris*, but they are rarely noticed, as they occur at random in any atmosphere, and lack any natural pigment. The other three species are rarer, but they are far more frequently seen, and most people have seen at least one by the time they die. Often, people are not pleased to see their possessions turn into a dull brown, sweet smelling creature that imprints on them and follows them around for a few years before either flying off, or turning back into furniture, but it is not too much of a problem.

The less well known surviving feature of the house is the breath of life. This is actually the breath of the heaviest non-marine reptile ever to be found on the planet Earth. Mayan legend claims that the animal, a yellow anaconda, took so much life that it began to leak out into its lung, but whether this is true or not, the animal appears to be indestructible. It was captured before *Homo sapiens* left the planet, and it appeared quite passive. It was quickly established that any relatively complete remains could be reinvigorated by encouraging the animal to breathe on them.

Impossibly, it is still alive today – it was until very recently in the private collection of Alice Kerrow, and a study of its tissues was used to produce the drug which allowed Kerrow and hundreds of other politicians to hold onto their youth long after they should have died. After Kerrow was taken from this world, it was moved to the Institute of Zoology on the planet Sapphire 5, where it was recently measured at 119 feet, with a weight of a little over twenty six tonnes. Biologically, it is an enigma – the crocodiles that are fed to it do not disappear, and yet it continues to grow, albeit very slowly, and, although its own weight should crush its bones, it is able to move efficiently on land. It has not been conclusively determined whether the animal is male or female – a genetic analysis suggested that it was male, and yet it has, on more than one occasion, produced eggs which have hatched into yellow anacondas of more natural proportions.

I fear I have allowed myself to get carried away with that which fascinates me, not what I intended to write. As such, I shall move on, and explain the last known feature of the house.

Something about the house allowed witches to use a power that was not their own – when those who were called to it against their will were released, they were able to create one spell that was beyond their own normal power – they were granted a wish, as my mistress so naively put it. This was what allowed three people to be brought back to life: the first, a psychotic, bitter woman named Shannyn Hanov, who died three times in total before she finally stayed dead, a young man named Simon Black, who took one hour to know that he loved Gerta Gormon, and a four year old girl who died in the year of our lord nineteen hundred and ninety seven of renal failure.

Chapter VI

Alice Kerrow, after she woke up in Mark's bed to the sound of his shock and relief, could remember very little of the house of witches. Mark quickly confirmed that she had been missing for the past few days, and the other twelve people who had been there – Jack, Jennifer, Weaver, Ellie Johnson, Kathleen, Emma, Sally, Millicent, Lucy, Matt, Gormon and a Cameroonian girl from Ellie's dancing class by the name of Hannah Mbegalowe – all confirmed that they had been there. She remembered, and Gormon confirmed it, that her sister had been there, and she hadn't known she had a sister, and the girl called Gormon her father. And the girl had been alive, hadn't she?

The girl appeared on Kerrow's doorstep a few days later, and soon everyone knew that Kerrow was Gormon's daughter. Kerrow wasn't sure that she cared, but she wasn't going to admit it if she did. He may have fertilised the egg that split into her and Gerta, but he wasn't anything more than that to her.

She wasn't sure why she visited Henna Jaimeson. Perhaps it was because Amy Cardiff was on steady medication and was due for release from a mental hospital, or perhaps she just felt the girl needed to be told she wasn't crazy. She got into a conversation with the girl, and she had so much trouble talking to the ugly side of the girl's face that she couldn't help wanting the figure to all be as pretty as the left side. She didn't notice the tendrils of healthy tissue creeping through the broken face at first, but when the glass eye tumbled to the floor, she couldn't stop herself from noticing that there was a read only growing in its place. She hurried, speechless, from Henna's room, and never saw her again.

It was a few days later that Jack ran into her office and gabbled out all the things that Amy Cardiff had done, and where should could be found, and that she had to be stopped, and she wouldn't want him to tell this, and he knew that he would be executed as well, but she hadn't told him about their daughter, and she had to be stopped before she really killed the girl.

Kerrow hesitated, and Ellie Johnson slapped the door open.

"Alice, I left the gate open," she said. Kerrow was quite amazed how quickly she surmised what had happened from just those six words, and she called for help.

Steven Likker had been Cardiff's helper in all the murders, and it was known that he had once got her pregnant. He had killed himself shortly before she was caught, and Kerrow was aware that he had never known that the baby had been born, and given up for adoption. Ellie had been very taken with the Garden of Eden, and presumably, her wish, which Kerrow had by now established all of them were entitled to, had been that the garden continued after the house was destroyed. She asked to be shown it after she had secured Jack in the room, and told Ellie what had happened while she was in the room.

Likker had somehow escaped from the world beyond this one, and had somehow become trapped in Jack's body without realising it. As such, he had access to all Jack's memories, and all the memories of Jade, which could easily be recognised, to one as close to Cardiff as he had been, as Cardiff's child. He had somehow forgotten that he was dead and as such thought to get revenge on Cardiff for her lies, even if it meant that his life had to be sacrificed in the process.

But his life had already been sacrificed, and so justice was no longer the problem. Disentangling him from a relatively innocent child was now the priority.

By the time she had returned to the station, he was gone. He had read the paper, and told Frankie that he needed to get to London very quickly.

After a few days, he reappeared with a bizarre, horse-like animal that he called a unicorn, and Henna Jaimeson called Kerrow to tell her that he had saved her, but she thought he was going to kill Amy Cardiff. Amy Cardiff, released from the mental hospital, came to visit her daughter in Wimborne, and according to Jack, who was now acting like Jack again, the woman had threatened Jade.

Two days later, Jade fell unexpectedly into a coma, and Amy Cardiff was found floating down the river with the bruises of a rope around her neck. Kerrow suspected Jack, or Steven, whichever one it was now, but when the rope with Cardiff's epithelial cells on it was found, it was Henna Jaimeson's skin that had been in contact with the rope. Before Kerrow had the time to decide what to do, Jade died, and Jack killed himself. At least, the amount of his blood they found said that he'd killed himself – there was no trace of him or the unicorn, just ten pints of O negative with silver streaks and Jack's DNA in the white blood cells, beneath a tree in the back garden. There was a short investigation, but the forensic evidence suggested that he had died and been consumed by the unicorn, which Jennifer confirmed was carnivorous, but Jennifer doubted that it would have eaten him, as it seemed quite attached to him.

Jennifer pointed out that he had lost that much blood before and lived, and so they declared him missing, instead of dead. Kathleen Anchor knew something, but there was nothing Kerrow could do to get her to tell her where the animal and the boy had gone.

On Unicorns

Unicorn is a term used for either of the two heavy, five-toed ungulates of the genus *Paraequus*, originating in Peru, and spreading from there to most of South America and parts of Central America. Around 4000 years before the alleged birth of Christ, they appeared in Eurasia, and spread, but by 1000 AD, they seemed to have disappeared from everywhere but South America.

It is now known that these animals, which are so far impossible to kill, were not wiped out by human hunters, but migrated to Iraq, where their affinity with the dead allowed them to reach Eden's garden through the ruined version of it that remained on Earth. Once Unicorns had reached the Garden of Eden, they had very little trouble getting past the gate, as all members of the genus *Paraequus* are capable of extremely sophisticated thought.

The animals managed to remain unknown to science until 2009, when, with the technology that was developed in the arms-race leading up to the third world war, it became possible to subdue, if temporarily, the powerful creatures. The problem previously had been the anomalous behaviour of the animal – although it is large, and not particularly rare, it possesses not only an excellent array of senses, but also has no qualms about eating human flesh. It has been argued that, with their knowledge that something continues after death, they needed to feel no guilt or moral implications for killing animals on a similar plane of thinking to themselves, but it is generally accepted that they did not care. After all, many humans still deny the existence of any form of God or afterlife, and yet think nothing of killing and eating animals which have no intention of harming them, so why should we expect another species to have qualms about doing the same to us when we intend to harm them?

Having been identified as a distant relative of the horse, eleven specimens of unicorn were taken to facilities in Helsinki, London and Boston, from where most of them escaped before any serious research could be carried out. As such, it was only after *Homo sapiens* left the planet that much was known about the peculiar nature of the animals.

One of the most interesting points about the two known species – *Paraequus vulgaris* and *Paraequus giganti* – is that they can actually be killed with no more difficulty than any other highly intelligent predator. This may seem to make them less unusual, but without this, their truly unique behaviours would never have become known.

They cannot stay dead. If they are burnt, their ashes gather, and in a hiss of oxygen, the animal is reformed. If they are electrocuted, a few moments of unresponsiveness are all that shows they were ever dead. If they are beheaded, and the head and the body separated, the body will find its way back to the head. Drowning and suffocation do not work, being placed in a vacuum or blown up are rapidly reversed, and the parts of the unicorn regather. If in a vacuum, curiously, the water of their cells does not evaporate again after they revive. Although it is rather disturbing that such experiments have been carried

out, the point at which the body gives up is, if it exists, more than seven thousand years. Of course, by this time, the bodies are extremely emaciated, but once they reach a certain limit, they cease to lose any further muscle tone, and accelerated time fields have yet to tire them out.

Their diet is completely carnivorous – although they are not harmed by taking in vegetable matter, they are unable to digest any unprocessed plant or fungus. They appear, when calm, to be not unlike horses, with a coat that ranges from red and purple to black. They are very rarely white, and their feet are not small, delicate hooves, but large and heavy hooves that, when the animal is attacking, separate into five claws which can then be extended to a little over seven inches. The single horn is up to eight feet long in normal specimens of *P. vulgaris*, and up to thirteen feet long in the somewhat more powerfully built *P. giganti*.

Paraequus vulgaris is by far the more common of the two species, and it seems to be more closely related to animals of the genus *Equus* than to the other species of unicorn. It is able to interbreed with the domestic horse, and has done so frequently through history. It is considerably larger than the average horse, with shoulder height generally being greater than six feet, and in exceptional specimens being up to ten feet. The mass of adult specimens is between 500 kilograms, in extremely emaciated males, to three tonnes in active, well fed females. Their speed is considerably greater than that of their larger cousin – they can reach around 120 miles per hour in exceptional circumstances, although there is some consideration that this is not through normal running but primitive teleporting. They have larger brains than *Paraequus giganti*, but both species are capable of telepathic communication according to a study by Sinuk et al (30978). There has been limited telepathic communication between human telepaths and unicorns, but little more than the general mood of the animal could be conveyed without a greater understanding of what behaviourists have sentimentally dubbed Paralingo.

The rarer species, *Paraequus giganti* is not known to venture into purgatory, although this may be due to the fragile nature of the dimension more than a lack of ability. They are in appearance more similar to twentieth century rhinoceros than to horses, aside from their pelt. Their horn, which, as previously mentioned, may reach thirteen feet, is up to a foot in diameter at the base. They tend to be black, although dark red specimens have been reported, with a far more pronounced musculature than their smaller cousins. Their bone system is considerably more solid, as well, estimated to weigh approximately one metric tonne by itself. They are rarely less than ten feet at the shoulder when fully grown, and specimens up to twenty feet have been measured. They are considered the heaviest predatory land mammal ever to have existed on Earth, with the heaviest being a relatively tame specimen captured in 2132 which, before it was released, was found to weight seven metric tonnes.

Unlike *P. vulgaris*, they are not able to breed as rapidly as the shorter-lived ungulates, and females are only on heat once every few centuries, for little over a day. For an animal with eternity available to it, this is not too much

of a problem, but it does cause them to have significantly smaller populations than *P. vulgaris*. A thirty-seventh century survey of a particularly populous area of Peru found that ninety-seven percent of the unicorns passing through were *Paraequus vulgaris*, and considering that at least ninety percent of *P. vulgaris* adults are found in purgatory, this suggests that less than 0.31 percent of unicorns are *P. giganti*.

Having been carried away once again on the irrelevant details, I shall now try to explain the most useful, and relevant, abilities of the animals.

Once they have been killed, they usually become obedient to whatever killed that – as such, the dark red *P. vulgaris* that returned to Wimborne with Jack, once Jack had killed it, was harmless unless he allowed it to be otherwise. The communication from unicorn to human is, as previously mentioned, still very basic, but they are able to understand all our languages perfectly – the best explanation of this was offered by Rossi (70699), who claimed that, as unicorns communicate largely through telepathy, they are responding to our thoughts instead of our words. She goes on to point out that as thought is not our natural way of communication, we cannot pick up the semantic layers of their thoughts, but as we do think naturally, our thoughts are enough for them to understand us by.

Once a unicorn has been “broken”, a further use becomes apparent. For fairly obvious reasons, this has not been used often, but a few cases were reported in Andromeda just two centuries ago.

Paraequus vulgaris possesses a unique ability to identify individuals from a mass – if, for example a ship was sinking, and several thousand people were in the water, it would only take seconds for a nearby unicorn to reach the person for whom its breaker was most concerned. In purgatory, they are able to find any soul that has not yet passed onto heaven, even if that soul is possessed by another spirit, or in the furthest reaches of the lowest levels of the dimension. However, it doesn't stop here – once the soul is found, the unicorn can then find the ever moving, ever changing centre of power for purgatory and heaven – God, if you like.

But travelling in the lower levels of purgatory is not something unicorns choose to do. They can only be induced to do so by a ritual which involves, simultaneously, the death of their breaker and their consumption of a meal nourishing enough to last them until they can find an adequate mandrake colony to nourish them.

Once the unicorn has consumed the body of their breaker, the spirit of their breaker is bound to them, and vice versa. The spirit cannot enter purgatory without the unicorn, and the unicorn cannot leave purgatory without its breaker. Once the unicorn has found, and recovered, the lost soul, their breaker must reason with the overriding power, and, if the power sympathises with them, the lost soul will be returned to the living world, and the unicorn and the breaker will return to Earth. If not, the breaker will begin the return journey to Earth, and, provided the ritual was correctly carried out, they will be returned their physical form once they reach their place of death.

Chapter VII

Kerrow was sitting cross legged on the ground next to the spot where Jack had died when it happened. She had been feeling responsible for his disappearance, and gone for a walk, only to find Kathleen watching the leaf covered place that her friend had expired on a little over two months earlier. Kerrow had put aside her natural dislike for the girl, and sat down beside her.

“He’s not coming back,” she told her. The girl laughed, and Kerrow thought perhaps there was yet another person in the neighbourhood in need of psychiatric evaluation. But no, Kathleen was perfectly sane, if anyone as love struck as she was could be called sane.

“They were going to have children,” Kathleen told her, “That was his wish. That it would all work out between them, and they would have children.”

“Wasn’t it already working out?”

“Jack’s not a confident person,” Kathleen frowned, “I’d have thought you’d noticed that.”

Kerrow hadn’t she remained silent for a moment, and then Kathleen gasped.

“Did you see?” she pointed at the earth, and Kerrow saw only leaves and acorns.

The leaves twitched, and fell away as the earth swelled towards the sky. Kerrow backed away uneasily, but Kathleen reached out and touched the brown earth as it formed a face, paled to flesh and skin, and gasped for breath.

Kerrow looked away hurriedly as Kathleen helped the naked boy to his feet, and led him back to his house before he “caught his death”. Kerrow wasn’t sure whether to laugh at that or not.

While his sister fussed over him – making him tea, smothering him in blankets and trying to get him to speak, he sat and smiled weakly, and looked out of the window. After about half an hour, the unicorn appeared down the road, and Kerrow decided it was time to say goodbye, and left. He murmured something, and she glanced at him in surprise, almost horrified that it was her he had spoken to. But why not, she reasoned on the way home, hadn’t she become almost a member of his family over the past few years, with all the grief and general mind-numbing terror they had experienced together. He had certainly had more chance to bond with her than he had with his mother, so there was no reason to believe that he didn’t feel that she was part of the family. And Goodbye wasn’t exactly a declaration of undying love or anything.

For about a month, he didn’t say much more than that, and then Jade reappeared. Nobody seemed to notice this, except Kathleen, Jack and herself, the three people that had been standing in the hallway what Jade appeared standing over the spot the coma had come over her in. She didn’t seem to be aware that she had been away, and the white marble gravestone next to her parents’ graves was gone.

But, of course, with that family, nothing stayed happy for long. Kerrow was investigating a fairly routine homicide for once when she saw a thing climbing up the outer wall of their house, that summer, and if her sister hadn't stopped her, she would have rushed in and been as badly damaged by it as Jack was. Jade managed to knock a bookcase over onto it, and Jack used one of the antique swords that were all over the house to stab it through the heart. Kerrow and Gerta reached it as Jack and Jade pulled the bookcase off the shrivelled carcass of a horse, and Gerta nearly vomited.

For a few months after that, everything was fairly peaceful – Jade fell pregnant, Jack proposed to her, and Kathleen Anchor did her best to cut her wrists. Kerrow thought she knew why, and cornered the girl as she sat staring at the place where Jade's grave had been.

"You love him," she challenged the girl, who looked up in surprise. She shook her head, but not to deny it, and Kerrow launched into her explanation of why you must sometimes accept that friendship is all you can ever have with someone you love, because anything else would just cause too much pain. Kathleen ignored her, and unwrapped the bandages around her wrists to show the policewoman.

"Jack saw me cut myself. My mother saw me cut myself. I remember cutting myself, but I just can't seem to do it right."

Kerrow stared at the clean wrists, and Kathleen stood up. She lifted the blanket of ivy off the gravestone she had been sitting on, and showed Kerrow. Upon close inspection, Kerrow was surprised to find that it was the gravestone of one Kathleen Anchor, who had died some fourteen years previously of sudden and unexpected kidney failure.

They sat in silence for about half an hour, before Kerrow asked if Kathleen knew how this had happened.

"My mother," the girl had choked, "My mother couldn't bear that her only child had died, and she wished that I hadn't. Just after she came back from that cursed house."

Kerrow waited for the girl to stop crying again before she asked how long it had been. Kathleen checked the gravestone, and told her that it was three months. Kerrow didn't ask if there was still a skeleton in the grave – that, she knew, would be insensitive.

The girl recovered in very little time, but Kerrow's natural dislike of her didn't. She couldn't be jealous of the girl for a kiss she didn't really want when the girl had so much more to worry about than who she loved.

Kerrow also found that her like for Mark had turned to something else. It wasn't the uncontrollable desire she had for the boy, it was a much warmer, closer love than that. She didn't feel awkward around him – she could talk to him without feeling sick at the thoughts that entered her head without her wanting them, and she didn't have to concentrate on something that wasn't part of him in case she went red – they could talk, and they could laugh, and they could kiss, and they were very good friends.

But she didn't dream of him. Every few nights, she would dream of Jack – not anything serious, just talk, and an attraction that, in her dreams, was mutual. She would feel sick when she woke up, and dread what dreams she might have had that she didn't remember, and prayed that she would never remember them.

It was perhaps a blessing that, since that family moved here, there was never a moment's security. Jack's girlfriend's older brother, this time, was being a vandal, and Jade was pregnant. Jack and Kathleen made things worse by, when Jennifer found, not far from one of her emerald mines, a literal lake of amber, suggesting that she polish the amber down to the myriads of organisms inside.

She followed their advice, and then, somehow – nobody knew quite how – the creatures inside, which were mostly juvenile prehistoric reptiles and adult prehistoric insects, broke out of their stony prisons.

Not many of them had survived, but that any of them had baffled scientists. Then they found a chemical in the broken shards of amber that, in the absence of oxygen, fixed all organic molecules into whatever state they were in when it came into contact with them. When it was exposed to oxygen, it decayed, and the organic molecules were able to interact again. Cryogenics gained a new chemical, and dilute solutions of the chemical were used in anti-ageing products. What Kerrow was more concerned about was that populations of long extinct reptiles and some even longer extinct arthropods were popping up all over the world, and there were a great deal more than Jennifer had inadvertently released.

The media predicted Armageddon as a long-lost ecosystem was re-established alongside the existing one. What actually happened was a burst in ecological diversity, and the sudden disappearance of poachers and their products from many of the areas invaded. The hunting industry suffered next – a family from the area vanished while hunting in Kenya, and Lucy and Matt, who knew them quite well, went to help the investigation. They found the bodies, or rather the digested remains of them. Something big had swallowed three members of the family, and nobody had any question as to what.

The problem was catching the beasts and killing them. As about thirteen hunters tried and failed to bring down the three large theropods in the area, succeeding only in feeding them, it was recommended that people avoided dangerous activities until a better way of defeating the animal could be used. The only people who had been attacked were those killing for pleasure, and so the Kenyan hunting industry dwindled and collapsed. Across the world, similar incidences occurred until hunting was something people only did for food.

Tourism to the tropics fell with hunting, and holidays to colder places boomed - Wimborne saw three new hotels built in the space of seven weeks. Sally Trent, Emma Lewis and Millicent Hanov took the opportunity to start a band, and invited Kathleen to play the keyboard for them. Jack was invited to join a week later, and they made a fair amount of money.

Kerrow, although she disapproved of the music, found herself more drawn to Jack than before – now, he wasn't just an eighteen-year old boy living off his sister's fortune, he was a young man trying to make his way in the world before his family really began.

Kathleen, Kerrow saw, was recovering from her crush on him, and was going out with Jade's suddenly repentant older brother.

Jack's first child, Cat, was born on the day that Kerrow bought a copy of the band's first album. She had to say that she didn't like the stage image the band had built up – dark, angry and over pierced. That the tattoos were temporary and the piercings were mostly clip-on did little to make her like it better, and she had never really liked music that involved so much noise.

She worried that she was turning into a grandmother, and her fears were not helped by being asked to be the girl's godmother. Her bloodthirsty little spark had abandoned her.

She reflected on this after the christening of the girl. You would expect that a higher tourist population, all listening to a very dark, aggressive band, would mean higher crime, but no, they seemed to petrified to act. Perhaps it was the unicorn – it was always at the show, and Jack always announced that it would eat anyone who didn't "play nice". She had to say, his treatment of the guitar was hardly playing nice, but that was rock, wasn't it? She'd enjoyed it when she was younger, so why shouldn't they?

The unicorn never ate anyone – not that she knew of, anyway – but you would expect that she would have something to deal with. There had always been problems.

It was while she reflected upon this that Jade walked into her office, and she glanced up to tell her to go home and be with her baby.

It wasn't Jade. She couldn't remember what she was saying when she realised that it was too tall, and that there was certain maleness about the boy who stood before her, but she was fairly sure that she had mentioned was something about looking after babies. The male version of Jade asked where a Jade Hanover could be found, and, without thinking, Kerrow told him.

He turned out to be Jade's half brother – Cardiff had, apparently, had a child before she met Likker. His name was Rob Cardiff, and he and Jade seemed to get on almost too well.

He also got on a little too well with the now heavily pregnant Jennifer – to the point that he was written into her will. Kerrow told herself that she only smelled a rat because she wanted to.

However, the stench of treachery became almost unbearable when James Hanover, who would have received one thirtieth of Jennifer's wealth in the event of her death, was hacked to pieces on the night that he married Kathleen Anchor. It ruined the celebrations of the other couple, but Kerrow wasn't too upset by that. Jack and Jade weren't right for each other, she was certain. He would leave her soon enough, and then – and then nothing. Kerrow was trying for a baby with Mark, and she was determined that nothing should come between them.

She began her investigation into the horrific murder knowing its end, and, years later, she blamed her failure to find anything concrete on this precociousness. Kathleen Anchor, who turned out to be innocent, should have been interrogated further nonetheless. It was strange that the girl had woken up, unscathed, to find her husband in seventeen pieces beside her. Kerrow suspected that this was simply a lapse of the murderer, and she felt that the blood-spatter that had been observed on the sheets confirmed that Kathleen had slept through it. It must have been quick. The shattered sword told Kerrow that someone had tried to kill Kathleen, but she couldn't report that. Nobody would have believed that sort of thing in those days.

Rob Cardiff beat every test of guilt she threw at him. She grew frustrated, and almost killed him herself after the pregnant bride broke down in front of her and sobbed for the first and only time. They both knew who had done it, but Kerrow couldn't say because she had no proof, and Kathleen couldn't do anything because, without anyone confirming her suspicion, she couldn't take another of Jade's brothers away.

She maintained her demeanour, and the band didn't break up during the investigation. Kathleen's baby and Jade's second were born in a small hospital in Arkansas, as the band toured America on horseback. Jade returned to England, and Kerrow, now chief of police, who didn't trust Rob to be alone with Jade, planned an argument with Mark so that she had to move into one of the many spare rooms of the house. Mark played along, and, once she was in their home, she was extremely irritated by the complete lack of suspicious goings-on.

The band, at least, was finished by the time they returned to England. Something had attacked them as they toured South America, and Sally Trent had to be airlifted from Peru after her throat was scorched away, along with her voice. While Jack's third child, a boy, was born, and he became "honorary father" to Kathleen's son, the four remaining members of the band managed to make enough money to keep themselves going, but Sally's sweet voice and its interaction with Jack's harsher vocals had been the real reason people bought the albums. Millicent's and Kathleen were good enough for backing vocals, but their stage presence couldn't replace Sally.

It was perhaps ironic that, just after the band gave up, Sally was returned her voice. A doctor had managed to encourage the healthy cells around the area to regenerate the missing parts, and Sally, Millicent and Emma began planning the band's revival.

Jack was struggling with an almost normal job – assisting his sister's agent, a vegetarian mandrake known as Nirvana, in the day to day running of Jennifer's jewellery empire. Jennifer wanted everybody to be able to afford her jewels, and so they had to make it possible. Jennifer wanted a solar powered jet, so they had to pay someone good with computers to deal with it.

Before he quit, he copied Kathleen and bought a motorbike. Kerrow had to say, the twenty-five year old looked very dashing in his synthetic leathers.

She thought real leather would have been more dashing, but that wasn't popular these days.

She felt a little overshadowed as, on the day she became the local MP, Jade was killed in a car-crash.

She was fairly certain that Jade had been a werewolf, though. The only silver in the car had been on the door handles, and Jade had been killed when something, apparently glass, sliced open her brachial artery. She had Matt test the glass for silver compounds, but he found none. She wasn't sure what upset Jack more – his wife's death, or the fact that he couldn't do anything about the murder of his wife, and the attempted murder of his three children. In fact, it was basically murder, for if Millicent hadn't told him that his children needed him, he and Kathleen wouldn't have been in time to help Sam or Emily. As it was, Emily was in a coma for some time, and Jack was so preoccupied with her that he didn't notice that Kathleen was doing her own investigating. Kerrow thought that it was a great pity that Millicent couldn't be used as evidence, otherwise the case against Rob Cardiff would be bulletproof.

It was Jack that blew his top first. It had looked to be Kathleen, at first, but she was a perfectionist, and had to know exactly what had happened, even if that was nearly impossible. Rob came to visit Emily in hospital, and mentioned that he wished he could take care of the other two children. It was a stupid phrase to use, but he hadn't thought about it. When Jack arrived home with Cat and Sam that day, he put them to bed and went for Rob.

Jack was too furious to kill Rob to begin with – he just wanted to cause him pain. Kerrow cornered Kathleen as she walked to the house, and told her what she thought was going to happen. Kathleen seemed quite unsurprised, but, with a little persuasion, agreed not to interfere. The persuasion was punctuated by a pair of handcuffs, which even Kathleen seemed unable to deal with.

Kerrow, and Frankie, who didn't have binoculars watched from a safe distance as a large black wolf hurled Rob into the river. Jack stood up after a while but he must have realised that Rob wasn't dead, because he looked down the river, and then vanished.

Kerrow drove to the cliffs above the mouth of the river and, struggling between the legal requirement to help Rob and the human need to help Jack, found herself still watching as first Rob, and then Jack, pulled themselves from the water and engaged in one of the bloodiest fist-fights Kerrow had ever seen. She saw Kathleen melt the handcuffs, and saw the girl take a crossbow out of her bag, but was loathe to interfere. Then Robert pulled out the dagger that hadn't been found after James's murder, and Kerrow turned to Kathleen and bellowed, "Now!"

Jack's hand went up to block the silver dagger as Kathleen let the bolt fly, and both men screamed as the blade tore out of the back of Jack's hand, and the bolt went through the base of Rob's spine.

Kathleen was scrambling down the cliff as Jack pulled the dagger out of his hand and threw it away, and Kerrow watched in fascination as Jack's bloody hands suddenly conjured a twin pair of eighteenth century swords.

Rob was looking up at him, but Kerrow knew that Jack was deaf to the prayers that poured from the coward's mouth. The swords swung back, and like scissor blades they came down and took Rob's head clean off.

Frankie was being sick by now, so Kerrow chose not to cheer as the pulsing fountain of Rob Cardiff's blood petered out and stopped like Burtonesque fireworks, but watched in silence as Kathleen helped Jack to roll the body into the sea, and then she threw a rope down. Justice had been served, and that was all that anyone needed to know.

On Mandrakes

Mandrakes – *Homo nocturnalis* – are one of the earliest races to evolve from *Homo sapiens*. They have been known to exist for an extremely long time, but until the twenty-first century, when a few became part of normal society, they were not fully understood.

Of all the species in the genus, they are the most specific. They are genetically incompatible with all other species – they are unable to produce even infertile offspring with *Homo sapiens*, their closest relative.

They separated from *Homo sapiens* in around 70,000 BC, when genetic mutation as a result of ultraviolet radiation caused a sudden rise in the number of albino children. These children, due to their sensitivity to sunlight, became active at night, and tended to become closer to one another than their dark-skinned relatives. They married other albinos, and their children tended to be born with similar characteristics to themselves.

Eventually, the diurnal and nocturnal humans became two separate societies, and by 30,000 BC, they were probably a subspecies. They had a greater amount of meat in their diets, as sleeping animals are easier to kill than waking ones, and they slowly became predatory.

It was around 20,000 BC that they first found a route into purgatory, and found that, while there, they were sustained by the atmosphere. It became the world of the elderly and the sick, which made easy prey for the unicorns in the absence of their healthy relatives. Colonies of healthy mandrakes entered purgatory to deal with this, and, by 700 AD, there were very few mandrake populations left on Earth.

It was around this time that they realised how very different they were to *Homo sapiens*. It is not known which species attacked the other first, but by the time Columbus landed in America, European mandrakes saw the killing of *Homo sapiens* as a respectable sport. They developed a number of rather unpleasant tricks, one of which involved the removal of the intestines and diaphragm of babies, which were replaced with loose earth, and then a tree, normally a young oak, was planted in the dead child's brain. The idea was that, when someone pulled up the sapling, up would come the dead baby, and the earth would fall away, making the lungs expand, so the baby would scream. The person who had pulled up the sapling would fall unconscious, and could then be killed, cooked and eaten.

By this time, the body of the mandrake had been greatly changed. Their hands were webbed between the thumb and forefinger, with a very tough, insensitive patch of skin that could be used as an effective gag. Their fingers tended to have claws rather than nails, although as these had become retractile, it was not something one noticed about them. Their canine teeth had an average length double that of their incisors, and their pupils could reach almost twice the size that human pupils could reach.

There were, and are, considerable internal differences as well. Mandrakes have much greater numbers of mitochondria in their cells, which allows them greater strength, speed and stamina. Their digestive tract is approximately half the length of that of *Homo sapiens*, and they have a great deal more enzymes for the breakdown of meat. Their brains are slightly less bulky, and their bones are more elastic. They have, interestingly, lost the ability to throw up, and so the expression “it’s enough to make a mandrake sick” was coined in the late thirty-second century by the androgynous biologist, James Elizabeth Li.

The tension between mandrakes and humans came to a dead end in the eighteenth century, by which time, any mandrake populations on earth were very secretive, and the only mandrakes humans came into contact with were the root vegetable from which *Homo nocturnalis* derived its common name. Mandrakes were not seen in Earth for until 2010, when the aforementioned Nirvana was found unconscious on the bank of the river behind Jennifer’s husband’s holiday home in Cornwall. Although Nirvana was not an aggressive individual, even for a human, her appearance on earth marked the beginning of mandrakes being expelled from purgatory, which was over by the time, aged twenty six, Jack lopped off Rob Cardiff’s head. For about five years, there was violence from both species, but *Homo sapiens* had learnt something from its earlier experiences with apartheid, and the two species grew to accept each other. By the twenty-second century, there was intermarrying between the two species, but children were never born of such marriages. Mandrakes remained carnivorous, but technology had developed meat substitutes that were close enough to the real thing to fill any gaps that modern farming left in their diets. By now, they are almost as common as *Homo vulgaris*, although significant populations can only be found on a tenth of the inhabited planets in our galaxy.

Chapter VIII

Wimborne's MP, as well as its chief of police, heaved, and Jack scrambled over the edge of the cliff. Kathleen followed, and Kerrow had never seen two so different expressions on the faces of two such close friends. Jack, covered in Robert's blood, was crying, and every now and then, a retch shook his frame. Kathleen was calm and composed, gazing sternly at the blood on the bolt of her crossbow, until the blood turned to dust and was gone.

Kerrow knew that they had committed a crime, and she knew that they really should pay, or else Frankie would suffer. But MI5 had been having people killed for aeons, and nobody had ever prosecuted them for that.

An idea struck her. She spoke to Weaver, who she knew would not disapprove, and the two of them, a high court judge and a respected MP, met with the prime minister over tea to discuss the issue. She thought she made a convincing argument, but it was weaver who really won the man over. She pointed out that several hundred police officers had been killed in the line of duty just that year, and if there were agents that were considerably harder to dispose of, it might decrease this. There had, she said, been a trial of such agents – it was, strictly speaking, a crime of passion, but they had freed England of an intelligent and dangerous man. If the two persons in question were to be granted amnesty for their crime, they could be hired for the capture or, if necessary, disposal of criminals who, under the laws revised in 2018, faced the death-sentence anyway.

The prime minister agreed, if hesitantly, and Kerrow rushed out of the room to call Frankie. Frankie was uncertain about it – she said it was condemning Jack and Kathleen to live with blood on their hands, but Kerrow pointed out that they would also have the knowledge of how many people they had saved, and, reluctantly, Frankie accepted.

The motion was passed, and she hired Jack and Kathleen. Kathleen, she thought, almost seemed to enjoy it, while Jack almost certainly didn't. But he was good at it, and he knew it, and having something to do took his mind off Jade.

At first, all Kerrow could see was that she had done it – murder had fallen by seventy percent in the first year alone, at the cost of thirty-seven lives taken without trial. She was elected head of her party, and for a while all she saw of Jack was what was on the television. Then she had a phone-call from Frankie, who told her about Jack's latest victim, the owner of a theme park who, after dark, produced snuff-movies and child pornography. He deserved to die, Frankie told her, but did he really deserve to have his body turned into a puppet to Jack's magic and walk Jack and Kathleen out of his residence?

Kerrow tried not to imagine the image, and told Frankie she was certain that they had had no choice. Frankie didn't talk to her for a while, and it was her sister and Jack's sister who told her the next few dozen stories, each one

more gruesome than the one before. Slowly, as the two became worse and worse, Kerrow knew she had created at least one monster.

The problem was that they were perfectly amiable when they weren't at work. Psychologists, who the two were told were there for routine evaluations, found nothing wrong with them, and Kerrow had to say that Jack seemed in a far healthier state than he had been when the band collapsed.

Kerrow wasn't quite sure why she won the 2020 elections, but when she did, she began to understand why Jack and Kathleen had gone so far. It was so easy to do a little more than was necessary when you had so much power, and it generally had greater effect. She had more power than any earlier prime minister, especially as it was common knowledge that Jack and Kathleen answered to her as well as Frankie.

World War Four began when diplomatic immunity got in the way of Jack and Kathleen's work. Kerrow failed to tell Kathleen that, although the man they were supposed to "dispose of" was English, his companions were all either Chinese or South African.

This wouldn't have been a problem if one of them hadn't realised that the well dressed couple near the man were the ones responsible for turning him to stone, and shot at them. He hit Jack in the lung, and was dust before he saw whether his bullet had hit Kathleen or not.

Of course, it was difficult for anybody to prove what had happened – but that meant little to the international community. They wanted Jack and Kathleen dead. Kerrow pointed out to the leaders of China and South Africa that this was pretty much impossible, and so they demanded she hand them over anyway. Kerrow couldn't risk the murder rate, which was currently at approximately seventeen a year over her whole country, and so she refused. Alliances got in everyone's way, and seventy-three separate countries began a race to build the biggest and most destructive bomb to make their enemies too frightened to use theirs. It took all of three hours for Kerrow to decide what to do.

The fifty-eight countries against her were leaderless by a week later, and Jack and Kathleen were back in England. New leaders for the countries were hard to come by, and they feared for their own lives if they dared fill a space Kerrow's two pets had created. After a few months, Kerrow found herself in control of those countries, and, quite quickly, the list grew. Her methods may have been a little illegal, and frequently dangerous, but it was generally recognised that countries under her rule did better.

To her surprise, one of the first countries to willingly join the new British Empire was the United States of America. Although they had supported Britain in the fourth world war, even if it didn't involve much, there hadn't been a very good relationship between the two countries in a very long time. The president who submitted the country to her rule was not thanked for the move – in fact, he was assassinated only a few months later, but the next president admitted that it had been a good move.

One of the things Kerrow thought made her such a good leader was her openness and level-headedness in making laws. That, at least, was what the king told her. The most probable reason people wanted her to lead was to avoid the possible consequences of disagreeing with her.

By the time she and Mark had begun medication to slow the ageing process, there were only three countries outside of her empire. She was a little upset by this, but the introduction of tariffs on goods from outside her empire attracted them in as well.

She realised then that she had gone a little too far, but she felt powerless to stop herself. She had only one thing left to conquer – the universe. With cryogenics and space travel both honed to such a point that there was no limit left, she wanted space.

Her problem was time. She wanted space, but she didn't want to lose Earth, and in the time it would take for her to get anywhere worth getting to, there could be any amount of change to Earth.

And then people lost their fascination with their peacekeepers. Jack and Kathleen's agelessness was no longer seen as a good thing. Kerrow, even, could hardly bear to see them, still young as she grew slowly older. By 2050, she had reached the physical age of sixty, and they still looked and acted like twenty-four year-olds, and Jack's son had died in a motorbike accident. Jack was laid off for being a werewolf, and that marked the beginning of the discrimination against werewolves. Within a year, it was a crime to be a werewolf, and Kerrow met with her obsequious horde of prime ministers for an informal discussion of such matters.

They began talk of executing werewolves, and she was ashamed to say this didn't ring any alarm bells in her head. It was her sister's undead husband that set them off, but she couldn't let on.

"This is ridiculous," he exclaimed, "Werewolves are just people. You can't kill them for something they can't help. Alice, have you forgotten that you love a werewolf?"

He meant Mark. She was startled, but couldn't let on.

"I never loved Jack," she lied, "he was useful, in his way, but we have all seen how dangerous he is."

He hesitated, almost correcting her, but her glance silenced him. She knew, though, that he wouldn't be silenced for long, and she would have to deal with him.

She told herself afterwards that she would have talked to him. She had intended to just stop him from leaving the country before she got the chance to warn him off. She had simply forgotten that, with Jack fired and Kathleen on leave, her agents were unable to capture people. It wasn't her fault that one of her agents killed him.

She felt guilty for a little while, and then her sister came to her house for a while. She acted as if she knew nothing of it, and her sister seemed convinced. She comforted her sister through her own guilt, and her sister's grief blinded her to the lie.

Of course, it couldn't stay that way forever. By the time lycanthropy, or being a werewolf, had become a crime punishable by exile, she had almost forgotten the man's second death, but her sister had not. Her sister, like the now late Jennifer Hanov Himmerden, had grown paranoid after the loss of her loved one, and, instead of setting up a home in a deep-sea observation station, as Jennifer had done, Gerta became determined to solve the mystery surrounding his death.

The investigation, she had learnt, had been broken off unexpectedly – which could only be explained by an agent of the empire being involved. It wasn't difficult for her to look up Millicent, and ask her which agents had been active at that time. Millicent trumped her by telling her which agent was responsible, and where to find him.

The man, who had been coming up for retirement at the time, was now old and senile, and it didn't take long for her to prompt the answer out of him. Having heard his stunted tale, she refused to believe that her sister was responsible, and it kept until after Kathleen had quit, and plans to leave the planet had begun.

They left the planet on the ship *Citadel*, but for the first hundred years or so, they and the rest of the politicians were held in relatively primitive cryogenic pods, until they reached a planet. It was something Kerrow said to Mark about his own safety that made finally Gerta believe the now long-dead agent. She took a month to work up her courage, and contacted the planetary news station to schedule an announcement.

They replied that she had been fitted in on the eighteenth of July, which was in just over four weeks. She wouldn't regret leaving the message open on her personal screen to go to the bathroom, because she still didn't realise quite what her sister would do to protect her own reputation.

Kerrow, packing her and Mark's luggage into preservation pods as they prepared, went into Gerta's room to check for her possessions. She saw the screen open, and, had she not caught sight of her name, she would have thought nothing of it. As it was, she read the message, deduced the rest, and hovered outside the bathroom door as she considered her options.

It was Gerta who suggested the walk when Kerrow finally burst in on her and shouted. Kerrow was, by this time, desperately thinking of a way to redeem herself, and it was only as they approached the cliff that she realised that her sister was going to get revenge, one way or another.

In retrospect, it was selfish and stupid – Gerta could have been talked out of it, and a little consideration of her sister's character would have told her that there was no way Gerta would resort to physical violence or cause anyone harm. Perhaps that was why she put up so little resistance when Kerrow caught her mid speech, and hurled her over the cliff and into the water.

She didn't look for the body. By the time she heard the splash, her mind had filled with guilt and regret.

She told her husband that Gerta had slipped, and she had been too late to catch her. They dredged the salty lake for the body, but it wasn't found, and

it was assumed that one of the native hree must have eaten her. Kerrow acted the mourning sister to perfection – not even Amy Weaver, who knew her so well, saw through it. But then neither Amy nor Frankie had seen through her when she had Kathleen laid off for being too dangerous, when actually it was because Kathleen knew too much about her and Mark to be safe anymore.

The funeral was miserable. Frankie, who was dying from a reaction to the chemicals she had been frozen in, didn't talk to Kerrow, and everyone was silent and sullen. Kerrow may have always been a great ruler, but it had taken both Mark and Gerta to keep her safe, and nobody knew if Mark alone could do it.

Kerrow's goddaughter arrived late, and Kerrow was startled to see her lie thorned pink roses on the memorial. Thorned roses were only found in one place in all the galaxy, a place where humans couldn't go.

Cat had been to Earth. Kerrow could no longer be sure that Cat didn't know what Mark was. Cat was not as forgiving as Gerta, either. She still hadn't spoken to Kerrow on anything but business since Kerrow had fired Jack.

She looked more like Jack now than ever. Her Black hair had been cut short, and she had finally mastered the quietly confident air that Jack had always displayed in public.

Mark had noticed, too, but he kept looking at Kerrow for reassurance that it was alright to see her goddaughter in this new light. The young woman stood quietly and proudly beside her husband, Kathleen's son, as the priest blessed the absent body, and then the memorial rock was lifted, and carried to the place Gerta had fallen from.

There was a small gathering afterwards, and Kerrow, speaking in subdued tones to Weaver about her own solar system, noticed Cat and Billy talking to Mark. Billy left them, and went to talk to the miserable Frankie who, after a while, began shaking her head. Kerrow turned her attention back to Mark as Cat handed him something and went to leave.

"What is it?" she demanded of him as they lay in bed that night.

"It's a chemical. They heard about Frankie's condition, and she and her lab came up with a drug to stop ageing without the freezing process."

"Does it work?"

"They haven't done much testing, but they've begun a course of it."

"Will it help us?"

"No. We're too old. It was for Frankie."

Kerrow personally felt that this was more Cat being selfish than anything else, but said nothing.

On Universal Hierarchies

There have, through the long history of the colonisation of this universe, been a number of ways power has been divided. When humans left Earth, they copied the method they had already been using onto each planet – a president ruled a planet, and each country was ruled with a prime-minister, and then there were ministers who answered to this. Then Royalty was reintroduced, with the descendants of long dead Earthly monarchs. There would be one royal family that was common to a solar system, and had little power, but was a recognisable symbol of that solar system.

It was soon discovered that such systems left a lot of room for improvement. With nothing to unite them, each solar system turned against its neighbour, and wars broke out, with the occasional planet getting blown up in the process. It was actually Alice Kerrow who dealt with that.

By this time, there were only seventeen solar systems that had been colonised, all of them within the Milky Way, and well under a month's travel apart, if one used a diplomatic shuttle.

They introduced a board. Each solar system had its own Crannik, or head president, who was elected from the presidents of all the inhabited planets, by the same presidents. This Crannik represented his or her solar system on the united democratic board, under which each had equal say, except for whoever was voted Hisgar, or chairperson, who could veto any movement.

This worked for some time, but eventually, as transport became faster, and the colonised fraction of the universe reached several thousand solar systems, it became difficult to communicate all the necessary ideas at such meetings.

And so the idea of Stellar Provinces came into being. A Stellar Province consisted of around one hundred inhabited solar systems and their Cranniks. They had one Hisgar, and a Hisgarion was a gathering of these Hisgar.

Over the Hisgarion, there was a Stellar President. This president was, initially, a man named Gunther Racht, who killed himself after two hundred years of the job.

By the year 40,000, faster than light travel had been developed to the point that every planet of the Milky Way that could be inhabited was inhabited. This made it necessary to alter the system once more, and Stellar Province was renamed Stellar Locale, while a hundred-strong Hisgarion became the new Stellar Province. A hundred Stellar Provinces became a Sector, and the forty-eight Sectors of the Milky Way were governed by an Emperor or Empress.

This Empress, for although the first was a man, it has been a woman ever since, was elected from the Arche of each sector, and each Arche was elected from the Faroe, which each Stellar Province had one of. This Faroe, in turn, was elected from the Stellar Presidents that governed each Locale.

For more than thirty thousand years, this system has remained almost unchanged, save for the very top position. The Empress became answerable to

the Intergalactic Justice Board, which was made up of one civilian from every Sector of every galaxy. This rather large board has no one ruler, and every member has equal power, which, effectively, is none. This may be a good thing, as they are elected by televised voting, in which every town puts forward a candidate, and from all the candidates in a planetary province, one is chosen, and so on until each Sector has chosen just one of their billions of candidates.

They do have certain non-political powers – for example, in the interests of justice, clones are programmed to survive their termination conditions if so instructed by any member of the board wearing a badge displaying their status. They also get reduced travel fares for themselves and their family.

In general, therefore, power is distributed, in ascending order, to:

Civilians, who have the least power and are individual voters who are rarely frozen.

Soldiers of any rank may command civilians, within reason, in most situations. They generally travel frozen, except when on leave.

Governors rule towns of civilians, and create rules for towns to follow.

Electorates rule over planetary provinces, and a board of them decides the laws for a country.

Ministers preside over the electorates of each country, and are answerable to Prime Ministers.

Prime Ministers govern continents, and are elected to their position.

They are answerable to the President, but may be demoted by the ruling Monarch of the solar system.

Presidents are in charge of planets or moons, and may be fired by the Monarch or the Crannik.

At this point, the longevity of the ruler changes. Cranniks tend to stay in power for at least one hundred years, providing that they are not assassinated. They used to be kept frozen, but with modern medicine, they simply have their physical age reversed and fixed to their mid-thirties. They are answerable only to their Hisgar, who tends to reign for twice as long.

The Hisgar is expected to deal with most problems expected to have a long-term impact – pollution, technology, armaments and population laws in particular. The people above them – the Stellar President, The Faroe, the Arche and the Empress, are all concerned with evaluating the economics, ethics and sustainability of the actions of whoever is below them. The Intergalactic Justice Board is concerned with ethics, but particularly legality. Its primary function is to act as judge and jury for everyone too powerful to be tried in a planetary court, as well as in any situations where a crime is serious enough to be on intergalactic evening news. Uniquely for persons of this level of political importance, their life spans cannot legally be extended beyond the civilian average of 120 years. As such, the body of the Intergalactic Justice Board is constantly changing, and it doesn't stagnate in the same way that Hisgarion have been known to.

Chapter IX

The next time she saw Cat, a few weeks later, it was on rather happier terms. Cat was too ecstatic to remember that she wasn't talking to her godmother, and for this, Kerrow was grateful. Cat had lost her controlled manner, and gabbled about how, soon, that silly little law that they both hated so much might be scrapped within a few years.

Kerrow had to admit that she did hate the law. She might have been the one that proposed it in the first place, but it had been coming anyway, and to stand in its way could have made people suspect her husband. She congratulated Cat, and asked what she was trying.

Cat had obtained permission from the Galactic Environmental council to set up a small city on one of Jupiter's moons, Europa, for the purpose of communicating with the werewolves of Earth and improving relations between the two "cultures" as she called it.

Of course, little did Cat know that she would still be on Europa, fighting for peace, forty thousand years later.

It was just after their meeting that Frankie, having refused to have any more chemicals pumped into her system, died. She was buried next to Gerta's memorial, and Kerrow could only pray that Frankie would never be that close to Gerta in the afterlife, and hear the truth about Gerta's death.

About twenty years later, having been frozen while doctors worked out how best to tackle her breast cancer, Cat came to see Kerrow again. The two of them had changed almost beyond recognition in that time – they both looked the same age as they had before, but the guilt of Gerta's death had diffused, and allowed a little light back into Kerrow's eyes. Cat, meanwhile, had been struggling with laws and medicine at the same time, not to mention her husband teasing her for having no magical ability. She was now the Crannik of "the dead system" – Fera. Cat didn't refer to the planets by their modern names, preferring the original Earth, Mars and Venus for the habitable planets. Kerrow sympathised with Cat, but was secretly glad that she hadn't yet made it legal for a permanent human ambassador to be posted on Earth, for if they spoke to Jack, who knew what they could learn?

For the next few thousand years, things went by slowly. Kerrow and Cat found their ways up political ladders, in between being frozen and defrosted. Neither of them had children, but Kerrow was well past it and Cat was planning on it. As Kerrow moved halfway across the galaxy to settle on the glass planet Hisgar 5, their relationship deteriorated somewhat – technology that Europa used as a bargaining chip for changing laws could have sent Cat there in only a few minutes, but the distance made it seem too time consuming. At any rate, the entire Hisgar system was centred on politics, and most of the politicians on those planets were narrow-minded, detached sort that Cat frequently discredited in her televised interviews, and she would most probably have been assassinated within minutes of reaching the planet.

Kerrow was elected Faroe by 50,000AD, and Cat, who had recently been demoted to Hisgar, was still fighting for equality, but without having to get frozen in between. They were on good terms, on the occasions that they did see each other, and Kerrow found herself asking, more and more, for news of Jack. Jack, it seemed, was behaving himself lately – at least compared to Kathleen, who had of late, been executing people left, right and centre. Occasionally something amusing happened to him, and Kerrow was sent a message that had her and Mark laughing for weeks afterwards.

And then there was the girl. It was just after a synthetic moon had been constructed to orbit the planet, and Kerrow was fairly certain that the “floating supermarket” wouldn’t have any effect on Mark. Unfortunately for both of them, it did, and someone saw him change. She came to warn Kerrow that Mark had been turned into a werewolf, and Kerrow found herself panicking again. She thanked the girl, and told her that it would be better if this was dealt with privately. The girl agreed, and over the next few weeks, Kerrow fretted over what would happen. The girl might want to keep the secret, but the thing about secrets is that they’re most exciting when you share them with someone, and the girl would.

She couldn’t risk it. She couldn’t risk Mark coming to harm, and so, after freezing him on the morning before the moon had reached the same spot, she went to find the girl, and walked with her across the glassy landscape until they reached the sea. It was easy work for Kerrow to snap her neck when she turned to contemplate the horizon, and she was fairly certain that it had been quick enough not to hurt. She apologised as she pushed the body into the water. The ocean, some people said, went all the way through the planet, and so hopefully the body would be pulled to the centre and sit there, undiscovered, until she died or the planet was destroyed.

Then the body washed up on the other side of the ocean, and Weaver saw Kerrow’s expression as she heard the news. Kerrow had never been so terrified. Weaver wouldn’t say what Mark was, but she wouldn’t let anyone, not even a close friend, get away with something like this. Kerrow had to act, and she had to act fast, but it was Weaver. There was nothing she could do to stop Weaver, except the one thing she couldn’t do.

In the end, she had to. Weaver would have told, and the motive would have been discovered.

Weaver was expecting it when it came, three hours later. The bitter end had never been so bitter, and Kerrow sobbed over the knifed woman as she became a knifed corpse.

But, bitter as it was, it was really only the beginning, because Weaver didn’t die properly.

Her spirit left her body, true enough, but her spirit didn’t go where most spirits go. Every spirit takes some time to be pulled to purgatory, and some take centuries. Weaver has taken several millennia so far.

The first sign was on Kerrow’s door. She had forgiven Kerrow for her own death, apparently, but not for the girl. The name appeared, etched into the

metal, with the date of birth and death, and, cut so deep into the metal that they went right through, the word “murdered”. Everybody thought that it was a ridiculous prank, and Kerrow stood up to investigation – she had always known that ex-cops were the best criminals, and now she found out from the other side. The girl had been walking to meet her lover when Kerrow had distracted her, and so the woman who had waited for her all night fell under suspicion instead. It had been the wrong time of day and year for there to be witnesses, and the only thing against Kerrow was the door that was swiftly replaced.

But Kerrow had nightmares, too. She saw Weaver, every night, crawling her way back out of the ocean, throwing off the diving belts that Kerrow had tied to her lifeless corpse, and staggering to Kerrow’s door to stab her right back.

Kerrow knew that the only thing for it was to move, and so she did. It was painful to leave the planet that she had left her oldest friend on, but it was even more painful to stay.

That was when Weaver truly showed her colours. She had always been one for justice, but now there was nothing that escaped her. Kerrow suspected that she found death an improvement, by the speed with which the charges appeared.

They weren’t formal, but they prompted investigation. The scratching into the door of the murderer saying the name of the person killed, and the date, and the word murdered. Always that word.

The investigations tended to prove the scratched doors right, and after a while, they became considered evidence that a person was guilty. Some people tried to forge them, but somehow it was always obvious which were genuine and which weren’t.

As a wave of guilt spread across the galaxy, Kerrow worried for her own safety, but by the year 68,000 she was still waiting. Her opponents had been crumpled, and it seemed you had to have murdered someone to be Faroe or Arche, and then the Empress came under attack for a murder she had committed when she was plain old Hannah Mbeagalowe, and Kerrow was the only candidate whose red hands weren’t seen by the public.

It almost seemed as if Weaver was paving the way for Kerrow, perhaps thinking that the higher she got, the more people would scrutinise her. It wasn’t exactly like that – the higher Kerrow rose, the less she felt she needed the power, and the more she deserved it. She was a person for the people, and I can safely say that there was never an empress as good at it as she was. Any sins she had committed in her life paled in comparison to the good she did. She led the galaxy to a peace unlike it had ever had before, and, after she assumed the role of Empress for the first time since she had left Earth, violent crime toppled almost to nil in our great galaxy. This time, though, it wasn’t the fear of her wrath that kept the galaxy obedient to her. As Jack faded to the back of her memory, beneath all her other guilt, something changed in her, and she didn’t have to fight anymore. She gave love and if anyone else had seen her the way I

did, they would have known that she was the closest to God they would see in this life.

But it couldn't stay that way. Jack, living on in ignorance of the damage the thought of him could do to the galaxy, wouldn't stay forgotten forever. It helped that Cat, who intended to have children soon, had taken to being frozen the traditional way again, to make sure that when she got pregnant, her children wouldn't be chemically stunted. But she also created the worst reminder that Jack was still there.

Kerrow didn't care at first- she couldn't care. She literally didn't have time to care. But she had to know, and every few days, for a few short moments, she would remember.

It wasn't too bad for a few years, in the preparatory stages. Jack was still alive, and she had liked him – loved him even – when she knew him. That was nothing to upset her. She loved her husband very dearly, and she would never be unfaithful to her vows.

And then the ambassador set up residence on Earth. Unfortunately for Cat, the only man that wasn't a sympathiser who was willing to take the post was the sort of man that one really didn't want interfering when you were working for peace. At least he was unlikely to learn about Mark's condition, by the way he acted.

Kerrow was unaware that the reason he had been placed in roughly the same place as the city of Olympia had once stood in Washington was that Jack was currently living there. It was Cat's idea that he should be placed near Jack – at first for his own safety, as Jack was, by anyone's standards, not a man to be messed with. After Jack discovered, on one of his visits, that the man had killed at least three werewolves and, to Jack's disgust, roasted and eaten them, it became handy for the complete disposal of the man that Jack was in the area. Jack and Kathleen watched from a distance as the man brought his gun out after dark, and sat in a tree, waiting for a werewolf from the nearby village to approach.

When one did, it was Jack. Jack, as a witch, was quicker than many of the werewolves, and the man hardly grazed him. Then Jack used magic to knock him out of the tree, and hunted him.

When Cat told Kerrow this, Kerrow was unsure whether the girl was proud or ashamed. After she heard the conclusion, she decided that it was a bit of both.

Jack had grown bored of stalking and dodging bullets after about an hour, and leapt upon his weary prey before devouring the man. Kerrow could, in a twisted way, understand Cat's ambivalence. The man had become a taste of his own medicine, but it was a little upsetting that Jack had become a cannibal, if only briefly. Jack himself apologised to Cat, admitting that he had got carried away.

Kerrow had thought, in the agonising moments when she knew that she had taken a perfectly normal, perhaps even gentler than normal, boy and turned him into the monster, that Jack couldn't make her hurt any more.

In the year 70689, a few days after his sixty-eight thousand, six hundred and ninety sixth birthday, his voice appeared in her head.

She had thought, as she lay there trying to sleep, that it was just her imagination filling in the spaces where her brain wasn't fizzing like ginger beer, but it invaded even the busiest of her moments. She considered telling her psychiatrist about it, but then she would risk divulging too much to the comfortable man, and making him break his doctor-patient confidentiality.

She kept it to herself, and wondered what it was. After a while, she learnt to block it, and slowly it dawned on her that she really was hearing Jack, talking to someone.

He didn't know it was her. She was glad, and she did her best to forget it.

Then she realised that he wasn't just talking to one person. He was talking to everyone, and it was only a matter of who could hear. She knew it was only a matter of time until he told them what Mark was, and so she had to have it debunked.

The best thing for it was to never let them know that they weren't the only one hearing the voice in their head. That way they might think that they were imagining things, or having schizophrenic episodes. There was also a furrier headed for Earth, illegally, that she could turn a blind eye to. She returned her attention to ruling the galaxy, and his voice stopped as the furrier left Earth for Alpha Centauri..

But then, in the middle of an important meeting about whether it was sensible to start searching for other universes that someone had recently detected overlapping our own, one of the delegates from Andromeda froze, and started talking in Jack's voice. Saying things Jack would say, too – the same attitude, at least. The same very unique attitude that she was fairly certain couldn't be put on – being positive but only because being negative was hopeless. It was more specific than that, but she could describe it to me.

She decided something had to be done. He had clearly survived the furrier, which was a relief, somehow, although she couldn't explain why he had been silent for so long. Suddenly he was very noisy, and there would be a weekly report of someone collapsing and talking in a young man's voice, about things not of this world, and, after a while, not even of this universe. Then there was silence for a while, and after a year, the voice began again and this time it was angrier. She decided it was time to stop the voice altogether, and so, once it had returned to Earth, she deployed her staggering army to silence him.

In June 70699, they reached Earth. They had one simple order – to get rid of Jack. This translated as get rid of werewolves to most of them, but as soon as she heard that Jack was dead, they would leave, and not before.

It seemed to be going so well. They even had him captive for a while, and she thought she could settle the whole thing without killing him. But then all the messages from the army stopped coming, and Jack was still talking.

He stopped talking. He was still there, he just didn't need to talk to someone he couldn't see any more. She was happy that she could leave it at that.

But then every now and then, like the furious messages from Cat, she felt a surge of anger when he saw the damage the war had done to "his" planet. She wasn't sure what frightened her more – Cat's fury, or Jack's. Jack could touch her from where he was, and although a list appeared on Kerrow's door of all those who had died in the war, people were still loathe to believe a voice in their head, even as they checked for the name of a loved one on the ever-growing list written by a ghost. Cat wouldn't hurt Mark – which Jack wouldn't intend to do – but that was assuming she stayed sober. Cat might not have been as dangerous as Jack when she was drunk, but she was definitely angrier. She didn't care about anyone but herself when she was intoxicated, and Mark could easily fall victim to her tongue.

Cat, though, seemed to be staying away from drink. Her attacks on Kerrow were mute when you considered that there had been werewolf outbreaks on a moon and a planet. Defence of her people could excuse Kerrow from any shame, but there was nothing that could excuse Mark from being a werewolf.

So Jack had to be dealt with before anything else could be done. She deliberated on it for a month, and then she entered the missile access codes, set the coordinates, and blew up the planet.

Her pregnant Goddaughter contacted her later that day to disown her. Cat finished the message with a bitter laugh that was somewhere between happiness and fury, and Kerrow was left to puzzle over it as someone else told Mark. He couldn't stay – he told her he would tell someone soon.

And so, left alone at the head of the galaxy, Kerrow ordered me.

On *Homo spp.*

I have previously described the species *Homo sapiens*, *Homo lupus* and *Homo nocturnalis*. I have also made reference to the other five known species in the genus, and, no time like the present, I I, but as mankind was once considered “the pinnacle of evolution”, it is relevant to any history of our kind.

The most common species is, as its name suggests, *Homo vulgaris*. It has no specific environment, but it is a fairly specific animal to describe.

An individual could easily be mistaken for a specimen of *Homo sapiens*. However, the variation within groups of *Homo sapiens* is far greater than that in *Homo vulgaris*.

Their weight, when fully grown, ranges from sixty-seven kilograms to eighty-nine kilograms. Their skin is a greyish brown that can appear green at a glance. Their hair is a dark brown, and slightly wavy. Compared to *Homo sapiens*, they have very little air – what they have is restricted to their heads and their navels. Facial hair is absent in both sexes, as is any noticeable external differences, beyond the actual reproductive organs. Both sexes develop breasts at puberty, and when a baby is born, both the mother and the father lactate – this is unique to this species. There is only one eye colour – a dark brown that often appears black – and bodily shape is very similar in both sexes. Both male and female have relatively wide hips and shoulders, and there are several races where the males appear to be able to become female, should they be deprived of female company for long enough.

One of the key features used to distinguish this species from all the others is the nose. While *Homo sedentus* shares features of the nose, in all other respects it is easy to distinguish from this species, as will be described later.

The nose of the other six species has a bony ridge for a short distance, before either cartilage or just flesh forms two nostrils. In *Homo sedentus* and *Homo vulgaris*, however, the cartilage ossifies as adulthood approaches, and from birth, both nostrils are fused into one. As *Homo vulgaris* is also the smallest species, this makes them easy to distinguish from all other species, aside from the corresponding subspecies of *Homo lupus*, which is almost absent from the historical record.

Due to *Homo sapiens* preference for watery planets, *Homo aquatica* evolved quite early in the colonisation of the universe, and many believe that the species had already begun to develop before *Homo sapiens* left Earth. They are, as such, one of the more distinctive species, and appear to be incapable of successful breeding with any other species.

They appear, facially at least, to be relatively similar to *Homo sapiens*, although there has been a great deal of adaptation to suit their environment. Their noses have become flattened, not beyond the extent that some *H. sapiens* noses are, but it is fairly noticeable, and they have greater control over a number of muscles in their face, allowing them to close their nostrils at will.

Their ears, which are in some subspecies absent, tend to be rather smaller than most other species ears, although, once again, such ear sizes are not unheard of in *Homo sapiens*. They have thinner lips and shorter eyelashes than their ancestors, and have only twenty teeth when fully grown – eight small incisors, four needle-like canines, and eight large molars. Their jaws are extremely powerful, to the point that they are able to crush most small clams between their molars, and they are able to bite down hard enough to shatter the bones in the average human arm.

As a result of living with constantly changing landscapes and seascapes, and the battering many of them receive from waves, the bones of this species are rather less easy to break than most – their spines and skulls remain as solid as any other species, but most of their other bones are only partially ossified, and thus maintain a great deal more elasticity.

They are not, as many believe, carnivorous – over seventy percent of their diet is made up of algae and similar protists, with up to fifteen percent, in the more amphibious clans, being made up of terrestrial vegetable matter. The remainder is made up mostly of fish and other aquatic vertebrate-like animals, but in a few clans, their diet is supplemented with chalk-like deposits from the sea floor.

There is not one race of *Homo aquatica* that is entirely aquatic, despite their name. Although the babies can swim, they are born in shallow water, and raised to the age of about three years in a seashore dwelling before they take to the water, and it is not unheard of for individuals to spend their entire lives on land, despite the detrimental effect this has on their bones.

Homo sedentus, the second most common species, is also ill-advised to spend life imitating *Homo sapiens*. Although it is perfectly possible for a *Homo sedentus* individual to do this healthily, it is extremely unusual.

The unusual thing about *H. sedentus* is that, although they are the heaviest species, their bone mass is the lightest. They typically have extremely slender skeletons, which, for any sessile animal with the frailties of any mammal, is extremely dangerous. However, due to their immense amounts of bodily fat outside of this skeleton, it is extremely difficult for them to come to any serious harm from any but the largest predators.

They originated on one planet, Hisgar 8, which, like several of the other planets in the system, is composed largely of water and glass. Hisgar 8, unlike Hisgar 2, 3, 5 and 6, Hisgar 8 also has ice.

As such, its inhabitants spent a great deal more time inside their homes, and the society adapted so that everybody could do everything short of reproduce without moving any more than their heads and arms. At first, this just meant a very lazy planet with a high rate of coronary disease, but, after a few hundred years, it became apparent that the obese of Hisgar 8 suffered far less from such diseases than the obese of any other nation, and in fact, their coronary health suggested what their appearance immediately debunked – that they weren't fat at all.

It is perhaps interesting to note that *Homo sedentus* and *Homo vulgaris* have never existed in isolation of each other on that particular planet. They were first identified as a subspecies of *Homo sapiens*, believed to have originated somewhere in Andromeda, and a small fragment of the original population was relocated to the Hisgar system when the law prohibiting the spreading of mutations was passed in Andromeda, which has long been known for its aversion to human evolution.

Their mutations, which included their unique noses, allowed them to survive on the colder planets of the system – however, as time went by, they became further adapted to this, but in different ways.

The human population of Hisgar 8 then developed two completely different strategies of coping with the temperature – some, at the age of around eighteen, would become almost morbidly obese to minimise heat loss. Others developed extremely rapid metabolisms to produce enough heat to cope with the extreme temperatures. The latter, when classification changed, were found to have relatively similar genotypes to the physically identical populations of *H. vulgaris* on other planets, while the former, it was found, were an entirely separate species.

At their adult size, it is physically impossible for intercourse to occur within *H. sedentus*, and so this fascinating species has developed a strategy to cope with this – they ovulate only from the ages of twelve to eighteen, but do so copiously in those years. If intercourse should occur, then the maximum possible number of eggs will be fertilised, and all but one or two will be stored, fertilized, for up to fifteen years.

As soon as the womb is empty, the first fertilised egg to start dividing will grow into another child. As such, until there are no further eggs left to develop – or more commonly, the eggs are no longer viable – the female will find herself in a constant cycle of pregnancy and childbirth, regardless of how recently she has had intercourse.

The last two species, *Homo solus* and *Homo haemophilica* are both very rare, and also, interestingly, have the highest internal body temperatures. It is largely because of these temperatures, not genetic difference, that interbreeding with other species is impossible.

H. solus originated on the small planet Aurum 2. Aurum 2 was only colonised when Aurum 3 became inhospitable to human life due to the accidental introduction of malaria. The surviving inhabitants fled to the arid neighbouring planet for lack of a nearer refuge, and then suffered the effects of the sun.

The technology of today would have prevented the evolution of the species, and, by the cost it came at, that could have been a good thing. Of the two billion humans who survived the malaria and fled to Aurum 2, over 1.8 billion were dead within a year. The rest died slowly, giving them enough time to have children before leaving the children to those who suffered the heat least. The children suffered unprecedented mutation of DNA due to their overexposure to ultraviolet rays, and the second generation of children born on

the planet were as different to their brothers and sisters as to their least related schoolmates.

To this day, the *H. solus* lifespan averages thirty years, and the rate at which the species changes remains faster than any other. Today, though, there is an accepted norm:

They are dark skinned, and have three times as many hair follicles as *H. sapiens*. They are the shortest species, but they have extremely sturdy bones, which is generally attributed to evolving on a planet with such great gravity. Their appendages are all greatly enlarged, and both the females and males have far more curved figures than any other species. Individuals either lack pupils completely, or have far greater control over the size of them, so that in daylight they appear almost pupiless. Their eyebrows and facial hair grow three times faster than those of any other species, providing greater protection of their eyes and mouth from the blistering sunlight, and testing on cultures of their skin cells has revealed that their skin cells actually offer better protection against ultraviolet than any manufactured product.

There is only one accepted species rarer than *H. solus*, which is the controversial *Homo haemophilica*. Although up to several million may have existed at one point in the history of this universe, there is, to my knowledge, only one alive in it today. His name is Karl Smith, and it is unfortunate to note that as he has, due to his recent actions, had a reward put on his head, it is unlikely that many studies will ever be conducted on him.

From my various sources, I have managed to glean a small amount of information about the species, and the source of the species.

It is a generally accepted fact, outside of the pure sciences, that the witch Aragia is responsible for the existence of *H. lupus*. It has been suggested that her existence was a common feature to a myriad of universes, and in our universe as well as at least one other, the people of Carmague aroused her fury before Gormon did. They did this by burning her daughter, Lauren, to save the child's soul from the corruption her mother would bring. Aragia saved the child, but was unable to prevent the flames from changing her, and, as she struggled to keep her helpless baby alive, she cursed the townspeople so that the whole world would be impassable to them.

In that stroke, she created the four types of dragon. This was displayed differently in the two universes where this is known to have happened. In our universe, the creatures are all but harmless, lizards which can appear at any time, from anything. In the universe in which *H. haemophilica* originated, they were far more terrible – creatures whose eggs were as small as grains of sand, hatching as soon as they were exposed to their element, and devouring the creatures of their element. In that universe, Aragia and her healthy daughter, Shannyn, were themselves killed by air dragons, and only Lauren, her blood boiled away to leave room only for the fire that the magic could protect her from, but never take out of her body, was left alive.

It became apparent to the struggling population of that Earth that, while the water could suddenly devour them, it never tried to harm Lauren, and so

she became useful to them. As she grew, she became wary of fire, and increasingly thin.

The family that had been looking after her began to behave oddly by the time she could walk, and soon, water wouldn't harm any of them. Little did their neighbours know that they were experiencing the dawn of a new species, until they found themselves as that species.

Unlike *H. lupus*, *H. Haemophilica* adults bear *H. Haemophilica* children, and it is impossible for breeding to occur between *H. Haemophilica* and any other species. As with *H. lupus*, the characteristics of the species can be transmitted through a single bite, although, interestingly, *H. lupus* is immune to the bite of *H. haemophilica*, and vice versa.

The physical characteristics of this species are fairly straightforward, if inexplicable: Their eyes alternate between red and any of the colours that *H. sapiens* displays, they weigh seventy percent less than any other species, although the difference is less when they have just fed. They have greatly enlarged canine teeth, and an extremely high internal body temperature.

Part II – Arrivals

On Ursula 5

Ursula five has long been considered a bit of an enigma, geographically, at least. The planet is almost identical to one in one of the less explored regions of Andromeda, but the behaviour of its systems could not be more different.

The planet is largely composed of water – the most recent estimates (Lekhart et al, 70699) put it at around 97%. The land of Ursula five is composed almost entirely of salty deposits from this massive body of water, which was once far warmer than it is now. This partial salty crust is covered, by this day, in about sixty metres of organic waste from the planet's unicellular inhabitants.

Quite how these creatures – which, under close inspection, resemble green snowflakes – managed to survive in the salty oceans remains a mystery, but not nearly as mysterious as the planet's behaviours.

The most apparent anomaly is that the planet never has any rain. The geographical structures of the planet suggest that it should, and in the tropics the humidity is consistently high, but records show that nobody before me had ever seen so much as a raindrop on this planet. The closest to rain is in the polar winters, when a small amount of snow will fall, only to melt and run back into the salty sea within a few weeks.

Instead of rain, the planet gets its freshwater from dew. In Ursularian mornings, the condensation on the ground is sometimes enough to turn roads into rivers, and any items left outside over night will be carried to the sea and sink. As the sea is bottomless, it has a natural tendency to attract such objects to the core of the planet where, should they survive the corrosive effects of salt, they are collected annually to prevent the formation of a solid core, to the detriment of all the planet's inhabitants.

Towards the beginning of the colonisation of the planet, a solid core did begin to form, allowing currents, for the first and only time in the history of the planet, to swirl through the depths. The volume of the water involved gave these currents greater power than any other moving body of water in the world, and they began to wear away at the bottoms of the salt floes. Within a matter of years, several countries had sunk below the waves, taking thousands with them, and one continent soon followed suit.

With a greater amount of the ocean exposed to air, winds tore across the surface of the planet, in places tearing away the organic surface and allowing devastating salt storms to sweep through cities, killing anyone caught in the open. By the time scientists had worked out the cause of these disasters, the planet's population had been reduced to a little over one million.

Those one million were evacuated, and, more to see if they could than anything else, a team of a little over seven hundred embarked on a tour to clear the debris from the core and use it for development elsewhere in the system. Their descent to the core was hazardous, to say the least, but nothing could have prepared them for the changes that their actions brought about. Because of the friction around the aggregate core, they had little indication of the

behaviour of the currents, but as they returned, what had been the core compressed and stored, they discovered that the currents were no more.

The winds persisted for a little longer, perhaps fifty years, before the continents expanded to fill the gap left by the disasters. That gap was quarantined until two years ago, in 70699AD, by which time the saline structure was considered stable enough for brief excursions, although development is still forbidden.

When the salt-burned cities were rebuilt, and people returned to Ursula 5, the throne of the Milky Way came with them. In a stroke of eccentricity, the woman whose backside occupied this throne ordered that the island she inhabited should be developed to form an almost perfect replica of the island she had inhabited on Earth, and much of the rest of the planet followed her lead, creating replicas of historical cities now buried in Earth's polar ice-caps.

Unusually, the natural inhabitants of Ursula 5 – which are mainly the already mentioned producers, as well as some fairly enigmatic ionic structures that behave as if they are more than just a ball of corrosive salts, have thrived in the presence of humans. The organic life forms grow like mosses over anything that doesn't move, and the salty enigmas have been found grazing on abandoned machinery. This has led to their integration into waste disposal systems across the surrounding solar systems, although their captive life span is greatly reduced.

Chapter I

Kerrow's history was far longer than that which I have told you. I may have been genetically programmed to remember everything, but there are more faults in my memory than there ever were in Kerrow's. She seemed to have the scripts for every conversation she had ever had buried somewhere in her mind, and I can tell you first hand that remembering everything can be extremely upsetting.

Kerrow, of course, coped incredibly well with it, and over the next few days, she kept her emotions so well hidden that it was hardly possible to remember how much she had cried when she told me that Earth was gone.

I know that normal humans base their attitude towards a person almost entirely on their immediate impression, but Kerrow was at fault when she believed that I was the same. Far from recognising that she was in desperate pain still, I believed that the first impression she had given me was the facade.

It took two weeks from the Monday morning that she finished telling me her history, a week after I had arrived, for her to resurface, and now I shall tell you why.

At seventeen minutes past nine, according to the twenty-two hour clock of the planet we were on, she closed for the first time. She sighed, stood up, picked up a tissue, and wiped away any last traces of her tears, before marching to her bathroom to clean her salted face.

When she returned, her face was an almost cold, emotionless mask.

"You had best get some breakfast," she told me curtly, reaching for a hairbrush, "we will be travelling to the Sapphire System to inspect their new laboratory at eleven thirty."

I sat in shock for a few moments as she, completely ignoring my presence, combed the tangles from her silvery blonde hair. She glanced at me briefly, and I stood up to go.

"Good morning," she said with a false warmth as a young man walked in, "Gerta, you may leave. You cannot travel on an empty stomach."

Obediently, I left, and I heard him discussing transportation as I found my way to the dining hall.

"That's simply unacceptable. I require her presence at all times, Jones, and you will ensure that a suitable vehicle is available."

The man protested, and their voices were drowned by the clattering of a pair of hand-made, oak tanned cultured leather shoes on the polished floor.

"Clone," a voice shouted, and I glanced up to see Kerrow's obnoxious butler running towards me, "The Empress must be informed that her Goddaughter will arrive on the planet shortly."

I stared at him.

"Do they teach you no manners when they make you?" he snapped, "It is your purpose in your semblance of a life to follow orders. Now inform the

Empress that her Goddaughter from Europa will be arriving on the planet within three hours.”

I turned up the stairs, and the young man to whom Kerrow had been talking nodded to me.

“Your excellence, Catarina will be arriving on the planet today. Do you wish for me to arrange someone to greet her?”

“Have a man available to serve her should she wish it,” Kerrow replied, “and tell Chrytofurse not to address my personnel in that manner.”

She continued to refer to me as her personnel whenever questioned, and never by the name she had given me. I felt like little more than the piece of equipment that I was, standing by as she inspected the new safety facilities on Sapphire seven, while she awaited the arrival of the Sapphirian Monarch.

She stood without any emotion as she watched footage of the carnage on the beach, a mere seven days ago, when deep see crocodiles had come ashore to lay their eggs on a popular tourist beach. I could see the same beach from where I stood, and although I could see the monstrous animals still arriving to lay their eggs, there was none of the bloodshed of the days before.

“Your excellence,” a young man bowed deeply to me, and Kerrow snorted harshly.

“Wrong woman, young man. I am Alice Kerrow. I understand that you have made a significant development in reducing these attacks.

The young man blushed, and bowed to her.

“My apologies, your excellence, my eyesight isn’t what it ought to be.”

“Can you not have it fixed? In your position one injection could make the difference between a job and a career.”

I glanced down at the beach, and wondered just how it had come to be that humans were walking around the crocodiles today, standing by as the thirty metre animals dug pits big enough to bury a small whale in before depositing their eggs, when just a week ago the crocodiles would have merrily devoured them.

“Your highness, if you would care to accompany me to the beach?”

“I do not lightly put my faith in technology, boy, so I’d rather not.”

“Very well. The new barriers work on the basis of Hart’s genetically programmed restraints, whereupon, although the prisoner can be fed through the barrier, they are unable to penetrate it to cause harm, as their own genetic sequence will cause the barrier to temporarily solidify, preventing them from escaping. However, we have altered the fields so that there is a shield around anything with genes within normal tolerance of human.”

“My species as well as yours?” Kerrow asked coldly, and he nodded.

“If you look closer, you will see that the shield is being tested by clones of *Homo vulgaris*, *Homo sapiens*, and *Homo aquatica*.”

I glanced away from the face that I had only just noticed to be different, and saw a young woman getting into the water. She swam out a few dozen metres, and then was picked up and carried off by one of the smaller, twelve

metre crocodiles, without even a scream as she was dragged into the crystal depths.

I have to say, I was so distraught by the sight that I failed to notice Kerrow stiffening beside me.

“It isn’t yet fully functional in deep water,” the man frowned, and turned his attention to me, “Not to worry, they’re just out of date clones.”

I turned to Kerrow in something akin to horror, but her face was, yet again, an expressionless mask.

I turned back to the young man.

“Is that going to happen to me, one day, then?”

He jumped as though startled, and turned to Kerrow, whose eyebrow twitched in what could have been amusement. He stood, uncertain of how to resolve the situation, for a good five minutes before Kerrow put him out of his misery.

“How rude of me, James, not to introduce you. Well, better late than never – James, this is my new assistant Gerta, the only clone of the late Francesca Innmaster, Gerta, this is James Hookdean, the young head of biosecurity for the Sapphire system. A hint of a smile crossed her face, and she turned to James.

“What about emergency procedures?”

“What sort of emergency?”

“Power failure,” she replied after a moment’s hesitation. James, his posture now considerably less confident, paused to glance out of the windows, and then at me, and, allowing me to hold his gaze for the briefest of seconds, at Kerrow.

“We have shelters every ten metres along all the major beaches, which will open as soon as there is a failure in the shield within three miles,” his hand hesitated halfway to his mouth, his thumb activating the radio transceiver implanted in his forefinger, “do you want a demonstration?”

Kerrow’s eyes gained a wild humour, and she allowed his eyes to flicker from me to my fellows on the beach for a good few minutes before she replied.

“That won’t be necessary. I must ask to speak to you in private, however, concerning the recent alterations to our constitution, particularly the chapter on the rights of artificially produced life forms. Gerta, can you find your way to the cafeteria?”

I nodded, betraying as little emotion as I could, before following my instinct and my nose to the large room, and sitting to wait for her.

I don’t remember what I thought about while I sat there, but I know that it was ugly enough for me to have a whole thirteen seat table to myself. I decided that was the reason that approaching engineers and biologists turned away and looked for another table, as my manufacture was apparently not obvious to normal humans.

Eventually, as I sat there smouldering, Kerrow appeared, and stood behind me for a moment.

“I suppose I had to be reminded what standing to attention was eventually,” she sighed after twelve and a half minutes, “did you not notice me, or are you ignoring me?”

I stood up as slowly as I dared, and turned to face her.

“What do you wish me to do now, mistress?” I stared down at my stupid black shoes and wished that I have never been made. People like this were so high a price to pay for life.

I didn’t expect any human to move that fast. It seemed that before I had finished speaking, one of her hands was wrapped around my right wrist, and the other clutched at my chin, forcing me to look into her eyes.

“I don’t expect you to follow many orders,” she hissed, and I could see all the people she had ever killed staring at me, warning me, from her suddenly cold blue eyes, “But I do expect you to stick to some basic, basic principles that even the most primitive of brains could be wrapped around with a little effort. My name is not mistress, ma’am or any other title these human buffoons may stick to me. My name is Alice Kerrow, and it doesn’t matter which one you use so long as you use one of them. Understood?”

I said nothing, and her expression changed to desperation as her knuckles whitened and her perfectly polished nails dug into my wrist.

“Gerta Kerrow,” she murmured, “You do not have the human excuse of a malfunctioning vocal cord. I know firsthand that the donor of your DNA could talk both hind legs and probably the tail off of a donkey, so do you understand me?”

I stared up at her with the closest thing to hatred I have ever felt for her, and nodded. Her grip slackened almost immediately, and her expression settled back into cold, calculated elegance.

This hateful expression was all I saw for the rest of the day. There were tiny moments when it would have been obvious that her iron grip on her expression slackened, and a little of the hurt showed through, but I saw them as her repulsive attempts to continue the lie that she had a heart.

We reached Ursula 5 as the sun set, and in the fading light, we walked not to her home, but to a small, smoky building near the centre of what I would eventually learn was an almost perfect copy of the town where she met Jack. She went up to the man behind the long, oak table, and looked at him with baleful grey eyes.

“I want rum, Eddie, and I want a lot of it.”

Chapter II

The morning after she drank over two pints of rum, I awoke to find that Kerrow was still in bed. I turned off her alarm and did my best to rouse her from what seemed a drug induced slumber. Eventually, as I was contemplating calling for a doctor, she stirred and put a hand to her brow. A low moan escaped from her mouth, and she opened bleary eyes. They closed again rapidly, and she waved her free hand at the curtain grumbling incoherently about the light. Dutifully, I closed the curtains, and tried again to rouse her.

“Make a note, or whatever it is you do, never to let me drink again.”

I assumed that she meant it, so that night, after seven informal meetings with intergalactic diplomats, a visit to the eight hundred year old pope to inform him that, due to his pressure on the Catholics of the galaxy to avoid contraception and other “unnatural infringements upon human life”, he was being taken to court for the crime of gross hypocrisy, as well as eighteen court appearances, I stood in front of the door to the pub with my arms spread, and refused to allow her to enter.

“Gerta, I am practically fuelled by alcohol. You’re putting yourself in a very dangerous position.”

“I have been given orders not to allow you to drink alcohol.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, woman, I was joking,” the empress of the galaxy stopped trying to pull me out of the way, and stood almost as still as a statue. She breathed in once, and turned around, and I felt a strange pride that I was preventing this cold creature from drowning any of her remaining humanity in alcohol. The idea that she was double crossing me never occurred to me, and so, even if I had known just how fast this woman could move when there the nightly corruption of her liver was at stake, I wouldn’t have been unable to prevent her from getting back into the pub.

“A triple rum, Eddie, and don’t you dare make it a low proof,” I heard her say as I turned around to try and stop her getting back through the door. By the time I was in a position to stop anyone from getting into the pub, she had drained that glass and asked for another.

I resigned myself to the fate of supporting a woman I despised as she staggered back to a palace to puke in a toilet just in time for Eddie, coming back inside after a breath of fresh air, to catch her head as she crumbled off her bar stool. He righted her slowly, and placed her arms on the bar to balance her.

“Ma’am, it’s time you went home,” he told her as she attempted to ask for another drink, “you just try and stay there for half a moment. You, clone – could you just mind that nobody steals anything from the bar while I’m gone?”

I stared at him, and Kerrow mumbled something about me having a name.

“I don’t think that I’m qualified to –”

“And you think I’m qualified to carry this woman home? I’ve probably done it enough times to be qualified to do it, but that doesn’t mean that I’m

legally allowed to. All you've gotta do is pour a drink if someone asks for it, and the computer will tell you about it if they ask for a cocktail."

With that, he picked Kerrow up off her barstool as if she were his child, and carried her out of the door.

I watched as they disappeared into the dusk, and half worried that he would kidnap her. After a while, I asked myself if I minded, and, so oblivious to how falsely I was seeing Kerrow, I decided that I didn't, and the bar required tending.

I have to confess that it was about twelve minutes later that I first breached the law. A clearly intoxicated group of women asked for a round of tequila sunrises, and, finding to my surprise that it looked quite appealing, I made myself one after they had paid. I was drinking it when Eddie appeared, and I put it down quickly.

"It's illegal for clones to drink alcohol," he told me, "I should have you terminated."

I hung my head, and he put it back into my hand.

"This is Ursula 5, clone. Nobody obeys the law here."

I glanced up at him, and realised that while I had thought he did not despise me, he merely lived in a society that was expected to.

I considered this for a moment. To a human, it might have been offensive that he would show a false face to the world, but to someone who hadn't been raised to the same morals, it was what was really there that mattered.

It was in this moment that I realised that I had been so wrong about Kerrow. I turned to Eddie with genuine concern, and demanded to know where he had left her.

He laughed briefly, and sat on his stool behind the bar.

"She's in her bed, and I very much doubt she'll be out of it before midday."

"I must go and make sure she's safe," I stood and put the now empty glass on the bar, "I'll pay you if I ever have money."

He laughed again, and nodded to me as I hurried out of the door.

I took an unusual route home – I had noticed it the day before, and decided that it would be quicker than going along the high street and halfway up church road. About twenty paces outside the pub there was the arched entrance to a long, dark alleyway, and a sign outside it indicated that it was the way to the graveyard. I knew that a path outside the back entrance to Kerrow's home also led to the graveyard, and so presumably, the two paths met.

I was not possessed of the human fear of ghosts – my manufacturers, while recognising that some humanity added character, had decided that such irrational phobias were more of a hindrance than anything else. I felt no fear, as such, when I hurried past the graveyard, and not even a flicker of panic as I found myself unable to see in the patches of complete darkness created by the coniferous hedge.

I paused, and glanced up at the massive, ancient archway, imported from Earth centuries ago. The stone carvings that had once adorned it had been all but destroyed by aeons of weathering, but one statue remained visible – a lone angel, standing tall and proud on top of the archway, her arms folded across her breast and her eyes surveying the world beneath her.

I stopped walking a few moments later, wondering what stone she was made of, for in my memory she had seemed to shimmer a little more than the starlight should have allowed. I turned back to look at her, but she was gone, and the needles of the hedge crackled with a strange laughter.

I don't think that I panicked then. I think that I managed to get inside Kerrow's home before it really sank in that she, whoever and whatever she was, had been watching me. Quite why she had been watching me, I was unaware, but the laughter had not held the softness that an angel's laugh had in my mind, and I knew that she did not wish me anything good.

Frightened for the first time in my life, I ran up to Kerrow's room, and found her snoring loudly on the bed, with her shoes neatly on the floor, and her sheets tucked carefully over her clothed body. I risked touching her face to see if she would wake, and when she didn't, I carefully removed her nightdress from under her pillow, and dressed her for bed.

I turned to the windows, and glanced out. I almost thought that I saw people moving in the shadows of the street, but the movement activated streetlamps assured me that there was no one there. I closed my eyes to pull the unlock code for the windows out of the depths of my panicked mind, and, once it had come, I cracked the window open just enough to peer out.

I heard an engine cut out in the distance, and then there was nothing to hear but Kerrow's snoring.

I stood there for hours, watching for anything that might be watching me, not knowing whether I was more afraid for myself or for Kerrow, and uncomfortable when it felt like the latter. I had never felt so much concern for anyone else in my short life, and the feeling was alien. I tried to rationalise it by pointing out to myself that my manufacturer had program to expire as soon as she did, but that wasn't enough to justify my concern. I desperately wanted her to wake up, so that I could tell her I was sorry, and that I understood, but she slept and, eventually, so did I.

Unlike the last time she had decided to wage war on her liver, she woke before I did. The first I knew of it was that I felt arms around me, prising me from the cold that I had shared the night with.

"Careful, now," she murmured as she lay me in her bed, "You'll get the view imprinted on your cheek if you stay there too long."

I struggled through the barriers of sleep to resist her attempt to tuck me in, but she was surprisingly strong for a woman of her age, and I was pinned helplessly to the pillows as she set her hair straight.

"I shouldn't look upset. She'll take it as a sign of weakness, and she'll pounce – at least no-one can say I don't know her, even if she does hate me now. It's a pity, isn't it –"

She rambled on for several minutes, and I, struggling in my mind with whether I should do my best to escape not only the impropriety of the situation, but also the very stubborn sheets, or enjoy the warmth of the most important bed in the galaxy.

“You should sleep,” she told me gently, “You really shouldn’t be there to see her. She’s a real siren, I tell you – takes after her father, I suppose. She’ll break your neck as soon as she’d turn your head, and believe me, that is fast.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured eventually, by now thoroughly convinced that the sheets were under a spell.

“It’s not your fault that my relationship with my goddaughter is in tatters, so you’ve really no right to apologise. Now, where did I put that hairpin she gave me three Christmases ago?”

The thought crossed my mind that the Empress of the Milky Way was in fact completely insane, but threw it off as I finally defeated the bed sheets, and finished my sentence.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so foul. I didn’t understand you.”

She snorted, and tucked me forcefully back into the bed.

“It doesn’t matter,” she assured me, and I surrendered to the authority of the soft white sheets, “I’ve been angry with too many people to be angry with you. Now, I’m going to try and salvage something – anything – from the fallout of my stupidity, and it’s not going to be pretty. The Cat smashes things when she’s cross, people included, so you might want to get out while you still can. I’ll send Eddie a little money, which should just about take care of anything you fancy for a drink. There’s a door in the kitchen – chef’s been reprogrammed to let you go through the kitchen without turning you into pork pies – is there anything else you need?”

I shook my head, and she handed me a small black box.

“This belonged to Frankie, when we worked together. It should just about cover that brand, in case there’s an inspection while you’re in the bar. Don’t be back too early – she should have finished throwing chairs by eight this evening, so the house should be safe by nine. There’s a short cut back, past the graveyard – Eddie will show you, if you want, and now I really must go.”

“Alice Kerrow,” a voice turned poisonous with restrained anger called up, “Is it customary here to leave diplomats standing in the doorway?”

“You really should go,” she whispered, kissing me on the forehead like a child, and leaving the room hurriedly.

“Catarina,” her voice said warmly, “It really is such a pleasure. Do forgive the delay – the time-freeze on the doorstep is going to be repaired later today.”

“So I have been told,” retorted a cold, young voice, “Personally, I prefer to make my way to the doorway immediately rather than freezing the guests while I take my time. We have an issue to discuss.”

I heard little more as I worked my way out of the sheets and slipped down the stairs to the kitchen, careful not to look in the direction of the livid

voice of Kerrow's Goddaughter. Unfortunately for me, as I reached the bottom step, she spotted me.

"Kerrow," the cold voice dropped almost an octave with disgust, "Is that a clone of who I think it is."

"That's Gerta," Kerrow replied stoically, and I heard something smash. I glanced around to see Kerrow looking back at a scattering of porcelain shards, and the Cat saw me.

It was not difficult to see why Kerrow had referred to her as the Cat. Her hair, pulled back into a waist-length plait, glistened and twitched as it were alive, and the almond shaped eyes – one golden brown, the other crystalline green – could have been staring at me from the whiskered face of a Siamese cat. The face they did stare out was as white as marble, but somehow the stony carved features still radiated a volcanic fury. Her race was almost impossible to distinguish – it seemed to be both Oriental and Indian at the same time as being the purest shade of Celtic there could have been. At a little under six feet tall, she dwarfed Kerrow, and unlike many of her height, she did nothing to conceal it. I cowered in her unfaltering gaze, and she turned back to the most powerful woman she would ever know with nothing but disdain in her face.

"And I thought that you respected Frankie more than that."

"Now, Cat, this isn't her fault –" Kerrow began to protest, and succeeded only in stoking the flames.

"And I don't blame her," the woman roared, almost dancing over to where Kerrow stood to loom her, "I blame you, you filthy, power crazed, genocidal two faced scum!"

She did go on for rather longer, but I fear that to relate it is beyond me. I was enthralled at the musical way in which she cursed everything about Kerrow, and everything that Kerrow had ever touched, but as Kerrow's predictions of airborne furniture came to fruition, I thought it best that I should leave.

Chapter III

Eddie wasn't much of a conversationalist. I found myself sitting in silence for much of the day, listening to the conversation of his patrons just to have something to think about. It wasn't much – interplanetary politics may not have been beyond me, but it was far beyond my interest, when it didn't concern my mistress.

"Lonely?" a voice asked at last, and something in me told me that the voice meant me. I didn't even have to look.

"Bored, rather," I replied carefully, "you?"

"Lonely." He sat down next to me, a man who was so like Cat that he might as well have been her brother.

"You were married," I told him, noticing the tan line on his finger.

"One of the oldest traditions in the species," he smiled, "The wedding ring. I'm not married in the eyes of God, apparently. You?"

"No. Not likely, either." I examined my naked fingers with a little sadness. One thing so very human – the tumultuous world of relationships – was forever beyond me. Clones can't love.

"You're a clone?" he wondered, considering the array of hard liquors behind the bar.

"No, sir, she's not," Ed interrupted, "We wouldn't serve a clone alcohol in here, not even if God himself told us to."

"What're you drinking, then?" he picked up my glass and sniffed it, "Rum and coke? A classic."

"What'll you be having, then, sir?" Ed sat behind the bar and glared at the man.

"I think," he considered, "I'll have an orange juice. Can you do orange juice."

"I can do orange fig-juice," Ed shrugged, "but no citrus."

"Wrong soil," the man nodded, "Just water, then."

"Salt, sugar or ethanol?"

"None. Just water. From the tap."

Ed's eyebrows nearly reached his short fringe, but he complied. I could tell that he rather resented serving drinks that brought no income, especially to someone who so clearly came from a different planet.

"Why water?" I asked the stranger.

"I like it," he replied, watching the droplet at the bottom of the tumbler break free of its compression cube and swell to fill the whole glass, "it's clean. Honest, even."

"No drink is honest," I snorted as he fished the dissolving remains of the compression cube out of the water and placed it on a coaster, "they're inanimate solutions." I took another sip of my drink.

"Fine," he shrugged, "what's in your drink."

“Rum,” I shrugged, “put down at the turn of the century for Lord Fennington’s distillery. And Coke, bottled just two months ago.”

“And what’s in them?”

I hadn’t really thought of that. I turned the coke bottle on the counter around to find the ingredients, but there were none.

“No,” he agreed with my silence, “nobody knows. Nobody except Coca-cola, the oldest and most powerful company in the galaxy, and Lord Fennington’s Distillery know exactly what is in their products. A few millenniums back, everyone could find out, just by looking, but now that’s privileged information. Water, on the other hand—”

“Minerals. Different minerals, wherever it comes from.”

“And you can taste them. Iron oxide, for a start. This city has an old-fashioned system of pipes for the transport of the raw product. Sodium salts, not completely filtered out. Sulphur from acid rain. And just a hint of fluorine, added for the health of the population.”

“How do you know that there’s nothing else?”

“Because I’d taste it.”

“Nobody can taste everything.”

“I can in water. It’s honest.”

I snorted, and considered how best to leave this rather tedious subject.

“Why’d your wife leave you?”

“I never said she did.”

“I deduced it.”

He sighed, and looked at the tan line. It was in that moment that I realised that my deductions were getting out of hand, and that I might have edged into cruelty here.

“She was killed.”

I swallowed, and mixed with the last of my rum and coke, a by now familiar feeling of guilt filled my gut.

“It was a long time ago,” he admitted, “An eternity ago, even. I just didn’t believe it for a long time. I suppose I only really accepted it when I lost the ring.”

“Did you look for it?”

“I’ll tell you if you say nothing more about her,” he shrugged.

“That means she didn’t mean enough to him for him to look for it,” Ed interjected while shaking a cocktail.

The stranger considered him coldly, and, as soon as the cocktail was poured, left.

“It was nice meeting you, Gerta,” he called over his shoulder as he left, and I turned to Ed.

“Was that necessary?”

Ed snorted.

“He wasn’t interested in your personality. Predators come in here all the time, looking for their next trophy wife. Helps them up the political ladder to have pretty faces on their pillow.”

“At least he was talking. And I’m sure I can look after myself. I’m not a child, you know.”

He said nothing, but gave me a look that said quite clearly that I was, and all the hope that he had accepted that I was just another person vanished from within me, and without it, I felt strangely hollow. Over the evening, I tried to fill the space with drink, but I just got hollower and angrier. Through the haze of the alcohol, I glared at the clock, daring it not to reach nine before its time, but I had no power over it. If anything, it took even longer to reach the hour (I knew, deep down, that it was going at exactly the same speed, but my mind’s processing speed had sped up a little when I focussed on its pixelated hands).

Finally, the hour came, and Eddie ignored the list of what I, and thus Kerrow, owed him for the drinks of the day, from coffee, and something that tasted nothing like Kerrow’s tea to rum.

“If you wait a minute, I’ll walk you home,” he told me, getting out plastic glasses as a group of the teenage offspring of various visiting politicians bullied their way in.

“I can find my own way back, thanks,” I replied a little too hastily.

“She’ll not be happy with me for letting you walk in the dark when men like that are in the area.” It was not the best way he could have put it.

“I’m fine,” I snapped, and left. I wasn’t going to accept his charity for being hers, if only because I had thought that he was starting to see me as a person. I suspect that it was a form of adolescence that I went through, stripped of either a clear function or a past to lean on.

I walked in silence for a few minutes, fuming at his falseness. When I gathered myself to take my bearings, I discovered that I had found my way to the graveyard without a problem, but it seemed that I was on the wrong side of it. I told myself that the path would come out on the same road, albeit a couple of hundred metres along it. I discovered a few moments later that this was a lie, as the path ended at the back gate to the cemetery. I suspect that if I had known as many curses then as I did now, I could have mustered a little more than “bother”, but as it was, even that felt rather rude, and I was a little proud to have uttered it.

I considered my options, and the light of the moons gave me the courage to push the mock-iron gate open, and walk into the graveyard, with a view to finding my way across it. I could see the angel, tall and proud, not far away, and I had no qualms about walking over graves.

It was only when I reached the angel that my alcohol fogged mind remembered the way the angel had vanished with the wickedest of laughs, and I might not have remembered at all if she hadn’t been nowhere near the archway. She stood atop a tomb, a smile playing over her perfect face, and then she looked at me.

“Hello,” she smiled, and her voice held itself on the edge of laughter as she watched my face crumple in surprise. Any confidence the alcohol might

have given me vanished, and she broke into a wicked laugh before vanishing into the stone lid of the tomb.

I wasn't tempted to look at whose tomb it was, and I certainly had no wish to see if she was sitting inside it, or had simply vanished. I did my best not to look at it as I passed, and instead I found my eyes, and my imagination, concentrating on the dark grove of cypress trees that stood between me and where I expected the gate to be.

It was typical, really, of the people from whose blood I had been made, to have all sorts of natural instincts about plants and completely ignore them. In all my existence, I have never come across any plant so obviously sinister as cypress trees, and no darkness as deathly as that below one. As I breathed in deeply and stepped into their shadows, I tried not to picture the poor people buried in layers six deep below them, twisting, turning silently and desperately in their death as they tried to escape from the unstoppable onslaught of the twisted roots, working their way around rotting coffins, forcing their way through linings of lead and cotton to tear into the helpless dead and pull everything out, leaving nothing but a skeleton, I could see the skeleton now, the chest empty but for the heart, pathetically trying to beat even though it had given up years before, being slowly crushed by roots that snaked around it and crushed even the mockery of life from it, the skull already broken, crushed by a root that had found the eye-socket and force its way in.

If it hadn't been for the horrible pictures that went through my mind as I stumbled through the trees, I'm sure that what followed would have been dealt with perfectly logically, but when what should have been the statue of a horse moved, every fibre of logic in me abandoned me, and I fell into a blind panic.

Panic is simple. It was one of the earlier reactions of the brain to be understood – in essence, your brain decides that something is frightening, and your pituitary gland and autonomic nervous system have a hey-day sending messages to your adrenal glands, which produce adrenaline and noradrenalin to get your heart pounding, and a number of natural steroids to keep you from burning out within ninety seconds.

Some people go against the evolutionary function of panic and freeze like a rabbit watching its death approaching in the shape of a weasel. I am not one of those people, and, within seconds, I couldn't tell what I was running at, I was just running to the light.

I felt my legs hitting gravestones, but I wouldn't feel the pain until my heart stopped doing its best to smash its way out of my ribcage. I found a hedge – by found I mean I went through it without stopping, and my fingers wrapped around the mock iron bars of the fence. I could hear someone moving nearby, and I screamed as the hedge started to move behind me. Before the scream had died on my lips, I had scrambled up the fence, and landed heavily on the stone path on the other side of it. I stared at the fence for a moment, trying to work out if whoever was there had come through the hedge, and then I noticed the man watching me.

A dark haired man with dark brown hair, standing quietly as I panted and panicked.

“I can hear your heart beating,” he told me quietly, “are you alright?”

“There’s something – someone – in there,” I gasped, “someone chased – me –”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” he assured me, “there’s no-one there now, is there?”

I realised that he was right – there was no movement whatsoever moving aside from the two of us, and no angel watching me from the top of the archway, thirty feet further down the path.

“No,” I agreed, straightening up and feeling my legs for the first time, “I think I might have broken something.”

“The way you landed, I’d not be surprised. Let me have a look – I know someone who’s good at this sort of thing.”

I hesitated, but he seemed kind enough, and I have to say that he didn’t look like he could be much, if at all, stronger than the body I had inherited from Frankie. With this in mind, I rolled up my left trouser-leg to show him the part of my shin that hurt the worst.

“I would suggest going into the light,” he joked, “but there doesn’t really seem to be any. ’Scuse my hands.”

I yelped as his fingers found the sore part, and he swallowed as he continued to feel it with his strangely warm fingertips, and then he took them hurriedly away.

“You’re bleeding,” he told me slowly.

“I know,” I replied, “I caught my leg on something in the hedge.” I noticed then how nervous he had become, and rolled the trouser leg back down, “sorry, do you have a phobia?”

“Not exactly,” he murmured, but his face, what I could see of it in the shadows, at least, seemed to disagree, as if he was doing his best not to smell the iron that had found its way through the broken skin.

“Could you walk me home?” I asked him, and he remained silent, his eyes closed, so I tried again. Despite his aversion to blood, he felt safe, and I needed that, as well as something to lean on until I got into the hands of Kerrow’s doctor. I put my hand around his wrist, and he whimpered, childlike, as he tried feebly to pull away, “Please?” I whispered.

“Please just go,” he swallowed again, and his eyes opened. For a moment, I noticed only that their expression seemed to confirm his phobia, and then the red that glowed within his eyes took all my attention.

“What are you?” I demanded, and his mouth opened to try to explain, and his teeth did all the necessary explaining. I may not have known much about the various species of hominid then, but I had the good sense to be able to recognise that his canine teeth weren’t designed for the same purpose as mine or Kerrow’s, and I fled.

I heard another whimper from his mouth as he became a memory, and when I turned the corner onto Kerrow’s road, his silhouette was still there,

crumpled against the wall with a hand covering those inhuman eyes. The doorstep was there, just a few metres away now, and I would be inside, and the door would be locked, and there would be a cup of tea.

But then I heard it. A rhythmic knocking on the pavement, coming from the other side of the door. The first thing that came into the light was its head, and the two pale blue eyes staring at me, definitely watching me, from the silvery-red face of a horse.

In daylight it would have been nothing to be afraid of, I'm sure, but in the night, in this night, with the black horse that had moved in the graveyard, and the man who wasn't quite a man, even the slightest of oddities was enough to push my terror up yet another notch, and I hurried back out of the light as it walked into it, and as the rising dew sent a thrill of cold into my foot, I screamed.

Lights turned on, and the horse glanced up at them before fleeing more quietly than it had arrived. I took my opportunity, and half-ran, half slipped through the deepening puddles of dew to Kerrow's front doorstep, and curled my hand into a fist to knock on the clean wooden door.

I don't have much faith in coincidences, and so I maintain that something was having a good ethereal laugh at my expense, because there was a sound not unlike fingernails on dry wood, and the surface of the door crackled and tore before my fist could touch it, and, by the time I had stopped my legs shaking, the streetlight lit a myriad of names scratched, almost too small to read, into the surface of the wood, and, just below my eye level, Two triumphant words that might have been hacked in with a machete – "Not Jack."

Chapter VI

It seemed to me that I had been pounding on the door for hours before it swung open and I fell sobbing into Kerrow's arms. For a moment she was silent, and I felt her moving to push the door closed. She hesitated as she saw the writing, and then decided that I was the priority. The door clicked shut, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"There you go," she whispered, "it's alright. Whatever it was, it can't get you in here. You're safe here. There you go." I could see the clock, and it wasn't even ten yet, but I remember thinking that the clock must have been broken, because I knew that I had been out there for much longer than that, "Now, I think you need a good cup of tea," she rubbed my back and kissed my forehead before leading me through to the drawing room, and leaning to the light switch.

"Juda, I need a first aid kit and some clean nightclothes for Gerta to the private drawing room. Quickly, now."

Kerrow sat me down on the sofa, clucking over my wounds until the serving girl arrived with a cloth dipped in a precious solution sold by a healer in the distant reaches of Andromeda, and I felt my wound wiped clean away as Kerrow boiled the kettle and made a fresh pot of tea. As Juda helped me out of the tatters of my clothes and into the nightclothes, Kerrow got out three china cups and, at the shake of Juda's head, put one away before settling into the couch to watch my progress.

"All done," Juda smile, folding the remains of my clothes, "Goodnight, ma'am. G'night, Gerta."

"Thank you, Juda," Kerrow nodded, "See you on Monday."

The girl curtsied as I thanked her, and wondered why the cuts still almost hurt, despite being gone.

"There," Kerrow put the cup in front of me, "nothing better for the nerves than a good cup of tea."

I suspected that there was little, if any, scientific evidence for this, but it certainly calmed me down. Kerrow picked her own cup up, and came to sit next to me, "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

I shook my head. I didn't want to think about what happened, because I knew I would realise how stupidly I had behaved.

"That's alright," she smiled, "It's alright. And Cat's not going to blow the planet up, which had to be good news, doesn't it?"

I nodded slowly and sipped the tea.