

SILAS
MORLOCK

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Prologue

From A Shade Primordial

MY name is Elzevir. That's not my real name of course. You don't need to know who I was; that's not important, only what I have become since they started burning matters now.

Madness, it is. Utter madness, but you cannot reason with true believers, especially when they are backed by the powerful. And people have come to believe so hard that our works are the source of the sickness.

The HazMat teams have been busy, scouring and torching our precious legacy; it's all become so indiscriminate. The police are mobilised against us, too: hard to know who to trust these days.

Still, there are a few of us now; we're beginning to get organised. We've found places where we can hide, gather, build a safe haven to survive for better times. We're taking what we can underground; there's a warren of tunnels and forgotten structures beneath London. We can hold out down there; we must hold out.

Let the politicians get into bed with this MorTek Corporation, this 'Conqueror of Silicon Valley' as they're calling it. Why not, they might think, as its rapacious appetite acquires so many of the battered corporates that managed to survive the war's calamity, but what else—who else—does it seek to conquer away from the public gaze?

From their perspective, this emergent superpower must seem a Godsend to help stitch our world back together, but it will be a dark and sterile place without the precious seeds of our growing knowledge of what we now seek to save.

So, let them build their new city. Let them regenerate the shattered skyline with MorTek's bio-engineered towers and sweet promises. Yes, those towers already maturing are breathtaking to behold; maybe as they multiply they will cleanse our air and harness the sun's power, as we are told, to heal the

Earth's hurts and deliver us to salvation. Maybe they'll do all that, but to my mind there is something about them that is not quite... right.

No matter. We head into exile. We will build our own citadel beneath their feet and wait for the promise to fail. As it will, I am sure, and allow us to someday return humanity's birthright back into the light of day.

My guess—no, my hope—is you're reading this long after I am gone (of old age preferably). You're living in the better times we're holding out for, and curious about these strange days.

Good. So let me share this with you. It was given to me by a man who claimed to have salvaged it from the ruins of the British Library, a few pages of an otherwise lost typescript, as seemingly crazy as the man who delivered them into my care.

On first reading it, I confess, I considered it metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, but he seemed to believe it important to our cause. Since then, it's come to haunt my thoughts. The more I read it, the more I wonder if he wasn't right. Perhaps I too am becoming a believer...

"SOME say that the Universe will end in eternal darkness. Not this universe of quarks and neutrinos and photons and all the other cosmic components that curdled into stars and planets and living things, but the other universe: the one that knows itself.

"So it shall. Some day. And so it began. With a darkness that had nothing to do with a deficiency of photons, with a shade unknown and unknowable until something emerged to divine its creation.

"Such a time arrived late in the 'pre-history' of the Universe, when a strange bipedal creature covered in matted hair shivered under a star-filled night.

"This organism knew nothing, then, of the minor world it occupied, of its place in a mediocre galaxy orbiting an insignificant star, but here in this stellar backwater it was about to do something profound.

"It struck two flints together.

"The sparks ignited a fire. Not merely the kind that consumes kindling, but the kind that unravels reality. For in those sparks, Mind was born. And with it, crawling from the primordial shade emerged Soul. The Universe awoke and became aware of its existence.

"Something else, however, was born with that primeval spark. The antithesis of Mind. The equal and opposing force. The 'Siamese Sentience' forever bound to its twin by the umbilical cord of the Soul.

"It stirred in the heart of darkness and was drawn to its coruscating sibling. Yet it could never breach the physical and metaphysical event horizon that was the mental light.

"So it watched from the shadows.

"Watched. And waited.

"Patience eternal.

"That is when the Dark came alive in the primordial ocean of potential: when Evil, as some call it, was born to existence.

"So Mankind took to the fireside, for warmth, to cook, for the light to see, for protection from predators. Yes, they took to the hearth for all the mundane treasures of fire, but also for so much more.

"Flame danced as the physical metaphor for another firelight shared around the hearths: the flickering tongues of human stories. The fires of spiritual awareness, bright against the dark skies of death, grew the brighter for every re-telling, to repel the lurking shade of evil.

"Yet even the brightest flames perish when left untended..."

FIRE, as we know to our cost, burns to destruction; the flames can also illuminate. The choice is ours. But for those few of us who seek haven underground, Humanity has chosen the fire that burns, and so our story nears its end.

Unless... unless the madness ends first, but I cannot see tomorrow, only rue the present and hope hindsight offers you the understanding that evades me today. Until then, we can only do what we must to survive.

My name is Elzevir, and I am a dead man, as are all those who illuminated the path before, but as I head into the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, only embrace the light.

It really doesn't matter who I was—only that I carried the torch. Yes, I believe.

The First Folio

And In The Darkness, Find Them

CAXTON was late.

Only, Caxton was *never* late.

Still, there was always a first time. Adam tried to stay calm amidst the maelstrom of anxiety. Anything might have upset the man's punctuality. This was *Terapolis*, after all. He just didn't need this shit. Not here. Not now. Not *ever*. Not with the *hunger* making macramé out of his guts.

The brutal music pummelled his skull. He took another shot of cheap vodka and tried to look casual, just another patron smouldering at the sight of feminine meat writhing to the rhythm. On any other night, for sure; the sybaritic display of lithe bodies was one of the few genuine attractions to the place, but tonight he wasn't up to that game. Not even sexual frenzy held any favours.

He needed another release; one only the *Man* could provide. Desperate was not the word. Still worse was the paranoia chaser: the Constabulary might be here already. Mingled with the crowd. Watching. Waiting for the moment. The bastards liked to draw it out, he knew. Hit on the junkie just as the pain really started to maul.

He shivered. Took another hit of booze. The glass was nearly empty now. He didn't relish the thought of squeezing to the bar for another, so he decided to nurse it and lurk in the shadows, just like he was taught.

The place was dark and loud: the way Caxton liked it. But there were still too many eyes for Adam's liking. Any of them might belong to the Cons or their informants.

"Relax." Caxton's voice was strangely soothing, even as a memory. "Always do business in a crowd. The herd is a good hiding place. Among the *Gestalt*¹ fodder nobody cares. I could gut you here and nobody would flick an eyebrow. That's the beauty of this place."

Beauty. Not the word he'd use. The place was a basement bar somewhere off the edge of *Locus Prime*² in a pocket of Old City that somehow managed to survive beneath the towers of *Terapolis*. Hundreds like it existed in *L-Prime* alone, but this one just happened to be Caxton's. Not that he owned the place; it was just one of his regular haunts. A place for business. Nothing more.

Adam found it easy to imagine nobody owned this place. The people turned up, the booze materialised from the shadows and the bouncers coalesced from the garbage in the alley. If the bar had a name then nobody bothered to remember. The place was nothing but raucous amnesia. A place for the unknown and the lonely, the silent wanderers lost in the shade of the night, a haven of chemical cocktails, noise and sex. Here's where the friendless and alone gathered to silence the pleading voices of self-perception, the *Gestalt*-exiles unable to afford a night's trip in a G-Spot.³ They came to lose themselves in the only way left.

So what did that make him? No different. Except what he craved was better than anything he might know in the *Gestalt*. Far better. But he needed Caxton for its deliverance. Sometime, like *now*.

He scanned the place for any sign of the man. That's how his roving eyes located the woman. She was sat on a stool by the bar,

where her alien calm in the midst of this meat maelstrom captivated his vision. The breath caught in his throat. Her allure stroked his cravings into temporary submission; she was the mongoose, mesmerising his snake until it raised its cowled head to the rhythm of the mood. Adam let his eyes linger. A hormone-chaser to let his mind idle off the smouldering ember of addiction and – who knows – one score to follow the other just to complete the night. She was certainly worth it. Her dark hair, cut in a razor bob, framed a slim face that glowed pale milk in the shadows of the bar. Then she smiled and completed the vision. A flash of moonlight silver gleamed an invitation from her opal teeth.

A large man with a beard appeared from the herd and began to mock his fantasy. The intruder slipped an arm around her waist and leaned in to suck on the nape of her neck. The other hand reached to grope her breasts while his crotch rubbed against her hip. More meat.

Adam turned away. His interest sagged; the cravings peaked to offer no solace. The vodka burned in his belly like disappointment, and left an oily taste in the back of his throat. The sweat on his forehead no longer had anything to do with the heat and perspiration of crowded lechery. He gritted his teeth and cursed. The roller-coaster ride of addiction burned towards another peak of pain.

“Come *on!*” Tight-lipped. Face ache.

His insides writhed like a nest of angry snakes. Each bombastic thud of the bass was a grenade making war inside his skull. The high-pitched caterwauls were strummed from his taut nerves. He needed his fix fast. Caxton or the *Gestalt*. One or the other, if he was to get on with living in this cauldron’s brew of a city.

The woman at the bar again. She stared with the tight beam focus of an accomplished sexual predator. He felt himself stripped naked to his very soul. Something about her was familiar, something that provoked a nagging unease. He’d seen her around, a face in the crowds, seen in too many places for coincidence. Or

was that just paranoia? She knew him. She *knew* what he was. What he *needed*. Exposed, he couldn't move. She had him and all he could do was wait for her to spill his shame.

Then she giggled. Her head fell against her consort's shoulder. The dread connection snapped as her companion's hand groped. The woman's mouth opened with a silent shriek of pleasure.

So normal, until *things* tumbled from her gaping mouth. Maggots. Rotten, *disgusting* maggots. Adam blinked, felt his stomach flip. He swallowed the nausea even as the maggots were regurgitated down the man's back. They wriggled and bounced over the floor, over and under people's feet to be trodden into sticky mulch.

Revolted, he looked away. Shock and fright pummelled his cravings into acquiescence, but the phantasms of pain and paranoia hadn't finished. Not by a long way. *They* were back. Death-heads grinned at him from the dance floor, from the nooks and crannies, the tables and seats, from the crowds filling the empty spaces. Flashing in stop motion in the strobes, the dead watched – and laughed at his unfulfilled cravings.

“Join... usss! Joooiinnn... uuusss! Beee... onnne... wiiith... usssss!”

The words – rasping, laboured – made a dreadful chorus of whispers audible over the musical tempest. He was losing it. He had to be *fucking* losing it. The chant filled his ears; the dead writhed and danced and pointed and laughed until his head began to spin.

The glass cracked like a gunshot when he slammed it down. He groaned and put his face in his hands. The room started to spin. He was definitely losing it. Too much alcohol shit and the taught *need* raging berserk in his brain.

“CAXTON! Where the fuck are YOU?”

He hadn't realised he'd shouted. He looked up in alarm. A couple of dead-eyed glances from nearer patrons, but that was all. He was still background. Flesh in a flesh bar, nothing more. No

laughing damned. No corpses. Except those of a chemical kind. A trickle of sweat tickled his upper lip and he wiped it away.

“Keep your fucking voice down!”

Shock. Pleasure. Relief. They washed through his nervous system like a purgative. Caxton squeezed his large frame into the seat across, briefcase quickly slipped out of sight beneath the table. Adam felt so relieved he actually reached out and grasped the big man’s hands, but Caxton brushed him off.

“Cax! Man! Where have you been? I’m *hurting* here.”

The big man stared past him and into the mirror on the wall behind, milking it for detail like some kind of surveillance camera. His eyes, bright orbs glaring from a dark face, drank up the bar and its sordid milieu. The man’s dreads were flecked with rather more grey than Adam remembered from their last meeting, and a few lines had settled into the skin around his eyes, but whether these indicated age catching up with the old dealer, or the rigours of his mysterious trade, it all meant little right now. All he wanted was the man’s goods; blessed release from the *Gestalt’s* haunting cry.

“Been doing the rounds,” Caxton said. He fumbled in a pocket and withdrew a tobacco pouch and papers, finally looking away from the mirror to roll a cigarette.

Caxton was a powerful man with a deep, resonant voice. This he seldom raised; he rarely needed to. His words conveyed strength and authority. Even in the decibel hell of this skin saloon, he could hear every word the man said. Caxton was that kind of guy; he’d make himself heard even at the end of the world.

Adam looked down at the table and clasped his damp hands together, contrite now for his impatience and lack of faith. The old dealer’s presence was like a soothing balm, calming his nerves, settling his fears. Safe, now the man was here, safe and protected from the necrotic visions.

“Things are bad.” Caxton glanced up from his half-rolled cigarette. “You been shouting your mouth off?”

“No! No!”

“You’d better not have.”

“Have you got it? I *need* it!”

“Keep your voice down.”

“I don’t care about them. I *need* it, Cax, real bad.”

Caxton stared hard, as though really seeing him for the first time. Adam flinched under the gaze, not used to the scrutiny. “You look like shit. You’ve been Gacking.⁴ I told you about that.”

“I know. *I know*. Have you got it?”

With a deep sigh, Caxton reached under the table and a few moments later a package was tapped against Adam’s leg. He reached underneath and they completed the transaction. As discreetly as his trembling hand allowed, he slipped his fix into a deep pocket of his jacket.

“Thanks, Cax,” he said, the relief tangible.

“You got a double hit there. Don’t rush it, okay?”

“Double?”

“You won’t be seeing me for a while.”

“But –”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find you when the time is right. Just go easy on that stuff. Pace yourself. Savour it. And stay off the *Gestalt*, it fucks with your sense of reality. I mean it; it’s not my shit that’s tearing you up right now – it’s the *Gestalt*. They don’t mix.”

“Sure, yeah, but why are you –”

“They’ve been following me, but I can play the game better. They’ve been following you, but you’re not so good. You brought them here.”

Adam started with fresh fright. He scanned the crowd for staring eyes. “What? Who? Cax... I’m *sorry*...”

“Forget it,” he said, rolling his tobacco tube into shape. Then he flicked his head to indicate, the gesture so minimal, as usual. He licked the cigarette complete and placed it between his lips. A flare of dazzling flame, then the tip glowed red and smoke funnelled through Caxton’s nostrils. Through the coiling haze Adam glanced in the direction of the nod. The woman and her consort.

“Cons?” He almost choked on the word.

“Try again.”

“Then who?”

“Bad couple. Marla Caine and Otto Schencke. *Morlock’s* people.”

Morlock.

The name pummelled his mind with fear’s hammer, though he couldn’t say why the name filled him with so much dread. Silas Morlock. Master of *MorTek*, the world’s largest company, creator of the *Gestalt*, the keeper of humanity’s every desire and dream.

Except one.

“What are we going to do?”

“Lie low for a while. Make some new arrangements. That’s why you got a double dose.”

“But why... what do they want?”

“Right now? To keep tabs on us. That’s why I’m not worried. If I was, you’d still be playing solitaire. I’ve been playing this game with them for a *long* time, but I haven’t seen this level of interest for years. Something big is going down. We can’t take them for granted any more. And you – you gotta get *smart!*”

“They followed *me?*”

“Probably. They might have found this place themselves. That doesn’t matter. We just gotta deal with them.”

“But what do they want with us?”

Another inhale, followed by a plume of smoke. His eyes glared infernal through the tainted haze.

“*MorTek* owns the *Gestalt*. Every human dream, every craving, every want and desire, is either controlled or influenced by Morlock. Except for my organisation. We push the most powerful drug ever used by Mankind. He doesn’t like that.”

Caxton wasn’t always this talkative. When he was, the words were fascinating. Adam waltzed on the sense of trust and confidence they conveyed in him, *him*, a mere contact, a mere body

to relish his goods. But what he said now, scared him. Now he wished he'd gone for a night in the nearest G-Spot.

“What am I going to do?”

“Remember what I told you. Don't go straight home. Take the long way, hide in the herd, stick to crowded places – but don't do anything to draw attention to yourself. *Be the herd*. It's me they really want. With any luck they'll follow me when I leave. I'll let them. You just get home, get yourself sorted. And remember go easy on that stuff. *You got to make it last*.”

He nodded, dumb.

“Good,” Caxton growled slowly, finishing his cigarette and stubbing it. “Now go. Don't come looking for me. I'll find you, when the time's right.”

* * *

JUST like that, Caxton switched him off. Adam rose reluctantly and struggled out from under the table. The lights dazzled. The alcohol weighed heavy in his arms and legs, making him stumble as he clambered out. He stopped to steady himself, to say something to Cax, to prolong the haven, but the man was already constructing another roll up and paid him no attention.

Adam felt stupid, standing there. The fix shifted in his pocket, spurring him to move. The children of the night howled and babbled in his ears. The herd. The hiding place. He plunged into the flow of *Gestalt*-fodder and tried not to think about the dead things mingled with them; they were just a stress-addled vision from a precocious imagination. That's all. Nothing more – *right?*

Living or dead, drunk or stoned, sober, or just lost, he squeezed through the density of flesh and tried to look normal. The dazzling lights, the swirling thick fog, the shadows that moved with a life of their own. Bodies crowded and shuffled and moved in a cocktail of claustrophobia. They made him dizzy; they moved him where he didn't want to go.

Slowly, he migrated towards the exit. The sign flickered briefly overhead, a beguiling mirage of promise. He stopped and turned, managed to squeeze through. Then he found a space leading by the bar and towards his source of freedom. He rushed into the vacuum.

Only to find *her* waiting.

Marla Caine turned in her seat and presented herself full on. She leaned back against the bar like she was taking aim with her jutting tits. Then she smiled, as if she'd just heard the thought. The dance light glowed on her face, playing through the rainbow. A face both young and old, he saw. Artificially rejuvenated and almost convincing, but attached to a body still capable of quickening a man's pulse. Adam felt his accelerate now, but not with any erotic appreciation. Not now he knew *what* she was.

He swallowed, before he drooled, and tried to overcome the rigour those eyes cast in his limbs. Marla crossed one elegant thigh over the other and raised her arm to inhale a breath of smoke. She breathed the plume across the distance and Adam felt the aromatic haze caress his face. He felt sick; not from the nicotine smog, but from the knowledge he'd just been marked.

Slowly, without averting her gaze, Marla moved to flick ash from her cigarette. Not one of Caxton's asymmetric roll ups, but an elegant tube, finished by the contrast of the ebony holder. One slender digit rose to tap and the cluster of burned tobacco seemed to fall forever.

"Be seeing you, *Darling*," she mouthed. Then she blew him a tantalising kiss.

The ash hit the floor and crumpled. Adam felt released. He turned in panic and felt his shoulder slam into solid flesh. The blow wrenched his spine, and almost spun him to the ground. He looked up into another personal fright. The face was bearded and grim.

A curt nod of the head and the man – Otto Schencke – stood aside.

Adam felt both sets of eyes stare as he scurried for the exit and the freedom of obscurity. Only then did he remember to breathe.

NOT that way, he silently urged.

Too late.

Marla had him.

The lad froze like a sailor caught in the siren cry, and all Caxton could do was sit and stare at the scene in the mottled mirror. The observation caught in his throat and tightened his chest; the rising tickle, the gurgling of deep-seated phlegm was combining to overthrow his impassive exterior. The condition was growing worse, stealing his precious time, but he must not succumb.

Not here. Not now.

Iron will just managed to surf the pneumatic wave. The embryo death rattle remained only a gurgle, the itch surrendered to a harsh clearing of his throat. The throttling embrace of his chest muscles eased. A little. The turmoil in his mind refused to let up as he watched the glass sheet that formed the eyes in the back of his head. The tableaux painted a sorry story: the lad might hang them all yet.

Outwardly, he managed to remain steadfast as a rock. Had to; there was no other way to survive in this town, but the emotional stress still played out its physical manifestation. A tiny tic beneath his right eye, a faint ripple in the flesh of his arm was the only outwards sign of the internal turbulence. The ripple dislodged ash from the tip of his cigarette. Anger crushed the ember tip in the ashtray.

Caxton watched. There was no sign of Otto. It almost revived the morbid raptures gathering strength in his body, but he held firm to his composure. He let his eyes scan the image, taking in Marla and her captivated prey, the seething crowd, the frenzied dancers oblivious to this feud taking place in their midst. Ghosts

belched from the smog machines and writhed in the barbaric light show, but no sign of Marla's accomplice.

Left to their own devices, his fingers reached for the tobacco pouch and began to assemble another ticket to the grave.

Don't just stand there. *Move*. He didn't enjoy the feeling of the helpless observer, but in this encounter the boy was on his own. This was no time for liabilities, he knew this too well. Better prospects had already been cut loose to face a harsh fate. Many had failed to survive. That was an unfortunate drawback of the business; get a man hooked, then cut him loose without further supply. It put him on a par with a snowflake on a hotplate. Little chance for the lad, then, if the worst came to the worst.

Events hadn't reached that desperate phase yet. There was still a chance for him to measure up. Always a chance. Adam broke free of Marla's audience and scurried for the exit. A couple of heartbeats and he vanished from reflection. Otto calmed Caxton's mind further when he appeared from the crowd and engaged Marla in conversation.

The tension faded from his rib cage. Now the play was back on script, he could linger and give the boy some time. Time to reach safe ground, or safe as possible in *this* city that is. He watched his old adversaries. The façade of the decadent *Terapolitan* fell away as they presumably talked shop. Lips moved in mime. Marla listened, head cocked, a smile on her face. Caxton hadn't moved throughout the drama since his fingers completed their unbidden task. Now he relented with a silent curse at addiction's drive and ignited the patient tip. Smoke billowed like a tiny fog machine as he drew on the intoxicant material, but he took care not to inhale. Not so soon after an episode. Instead, he took his nicotine the cigar-smoker's way.

When the fog of exhalation cleared, he resumed watching, patiently permitting the seconds to carry Adam further away from this dangerous game. Marla and Otto remained locked in conversation. No interest in the little fish, he mused. That was

something. He flicked ash again and watched as Marla's eyes suddenly swivelled to meet his gaze in the mirror. He felt the connection crackle live between them with the energy of too many unburied ghosts. He held the reflection's gaze, his own face stern.

Marla raised her glass in mock salute. No good pretending he hadn't seen. A curt nod of the head acknowledged the gesture. She held his eyes a moment longer, then returned to her mimed conspiracy.

OUTSIDE, a passerby would never know there was a bar lurking in the shadows. Sure, the music throbbed underfoot, but the sound lacked any specific point of origin, or even the strength to drown the spattering noise of Adam's retching stomach.

The thin trickle of resurrected vodka washed over the ground while the stale alcohol smell flooded his nostrils. The half-hearted but insistent flow went on and on until his stomach creased in pain, but it voided none of his fear. From the shadows behind, a muttered comment and sniggered barb pricked his pride.

Once the spasms subsided, he stood up, unsteady, sucking air into his lungs to cleanse the stench. The air smelled of the city: of oil, garbage, ozone and the ever-present emanation of mould, but it was virgin fresh compared to the smoke and perspiration that passed for air inside.

Heat tickled the back of his neck. He turned to where memory told him the entrance to the club lurked. Fear expected to encounter Marla Caine's malevolent stare, but only weak light glowed from the entrance. Just enough to reveal the bouncers as spectral figures, their eyes gleaming points of suspicion in the weak glow, faces nothing but a luminous sheen in the shade. Fear subsided. His heart slowed. Adam shrugged his jacket into a more comfortable fit, and turned up the collar against the cold.

"*Fuck. You,*" he said, but not too loud in case the words carried. Then he turned and began the winding walk through the alleys.

Broken glass scraped beneath his feet. Scraps of rain-sodden paper and food packaging squelched. A soft breeze rustled overflowing bags of garbage, mouldering far from the redemption of a *necrolyser*⁵ belly. Adam walked through the mildewed remains of the Old World like one of its ghosts, proud of himself for blending in, until his foot caught an empty beer bottle. It clattered with a heart-stopping sound, then surrendered its existence against a wall with a crash. His heart mugged his throat. He turned to scan the shadows, fearful of potential predators lurking beyond sight.

At least here the darkness was honest. A straightforward lack of light rather than the neon-haloed shadows of *Terapolis* that seemed to have a life – no, a *presence* – of their own.

Only the rats scurried around. This relic was their city after all, and he was the alien intruder, but they reminded him so much of the denizens of the bar; flesh eking out a torrid existence in the detritus of urban squalor.

At the end of the day that's all life was; humanity built its monolithic spires of hopes and dreams and tried to believe that the whole sordid mess actually meant something. Life meant nothing, never had. Until the *Gestalt* came along to show humanity the real way to meaning. And even that faded, compared to the wondrous existence hidden in his pocket. No wonder Morlock hated it.

Caxton's 'shit' was something far more glorious and fulfilling than anything gained from *MorTek*'s wares. And that's why he had to cling to the shadows to hide, or merge with the flow of humanity in the streets: 'hide in the herd' as the dealer put it, pretending to be something he wasn't. At least not completely.

Meaning. Yes. Only his package held that. The only meaning he had ever found in this sombre city. Otherwise, there was none. None at all, except perhaps for his companion rats. For them the city meant food and warmth and dark places to scurry and hide. But they didn't thank humanity for any of it. They didn't erect effigies and monuments to their ignorant benefactors. They just ate and shit and fucked and bred and got on with living.

Just like people, really. Rats of a larger breed, but cursed with an overblown sense of what they might aspire to be. *Gestalt*-fodder. Or Caxton's. That's all they were. Why else did he crave the shit in his pocket? Why else did he surrender to those cravings, even though it was dangerous and singled him out against the herd?

As if he really needed an answer. It softened the *Gestalt's* urgent pleading that beguiled to the seat of his soul. That's why. It offered him something this world couldn't give, something he never truly found inside the *Gestalt* or the other escapes he used to squander life. No, this was something beyond all that. It made him larger than life, greater than the cosmos, brighter than the most apocalyptic supernova, more angelic than the angels, and more devilish than the devils of the Old World. It uplifted him from the gutter of baseline⁶ existence and took him to meet the stars. It was love and life and creation, and it made this drab existence in *Terapolis* bearable.

For that, Caxton's gear was worth all the risk. It had to be. He felt it move in his pocket to nudge him home. He almost heard its urgent voice on the breeze: "Hurry. Hurry. I *need* you."

He obeyed the command, eager to be *needed*.

CAXTON stepped into the cool night and nodded to the bouncers as he passed. He paused a moment to re-ignite the remains of a dwindling roll-up and then turned to walk up the alley.

Moments later Marla Caine and Otto Schencke emerged from the club's lurking entrance. They watched Caxton's retreating silhouette, then moved apart and sloughed away the signs of apparent inebriation.

"Always watching, Darling. When will it *ever* end?"

"Be patient, Marla. You've waited all these years. The time will come."

She nodded, only slightly mollified. "Caxton's *mine*. You take the whelp."

Otto looked stern in the weak light. “Better I follow him, Marla. He’s better at this game than you.”

She frowned and turned to him. Her elegant face moved close to his bearded one as though to kiss, but her teeth playfully nipped his lips. He winced, and she pulled away with a girlish giggle.

“There’s no time to argue, Otto, Darling. He *is* mine.”

She turned and stalked up the alley. Otto shook his head.

“Marla. My dear, vicious Marla ... when will you ever learn?”

He watched her vanish into the night, and then turned to trace the boy’s steps. Inexperienced. This one never varied his routine. So, there was no need to hurry. Once they hit the crowded streets of *Locus Prime*, then he could close in and observe.

“Too easy,” he complained to the shadows.

The bouncers watched him leave, their eyes filled with bored incomprehension and a longing for the *Gestalt*.

AN *aquavein*⁷ had burst somewhere overhead while he waited for the old dealer. Now the water cascaded in a liquid curtain that gleamed with an iridescent rainbow of distant neon.

He walked into the waterfall, letting the heavy drops batter his cap and his shoulders. For a moment, he paused to remove his cap and raise his face skywards. The water was cool and cleansing. It felt good against his skin. The pattering impacts massaged his tired muscles. There was something irresistibly clean and pure about the flowing cascade, so long as you ignored its source of ruptured flesh.

When he replaced the cap and stepped through to the other side of the veil, it took him from one world to the next; the shimmering liquid some kind of event horizon separating two distinct realms. Behind him, the dark alleys of Old City. On this side, the glistening hive of *Terapolis*.

The water splattered behind him and sluiced over the *pedederm*⁸, washing grime and detritus on its way. More of the spillage dribbled down the base of the towers that forever imprisoned the

world he had just left behind. The liquid skin adhered to the city's living integument like heavy sweat.

The water splashed underfoot as he followed the rills and puddles down the incline of the street. On the skin of the towers and the *derm*, thousands of lipless mouths mimed 'O' at his passage. Roughly child-sized, they sucked water into the flesh of the city, but not enough to stop the flow coursing down the street. Eventually the water pooled in the gutters where it gurgled into the sucking mouths of the drains.

Terapolis was claustrophobic in a way unlike the old alleys. They were narrow, tight-packed. Here, the architecture vaulted high overhead. A sense of vast space and flowing air, but it still enclosed him like a subterranean cavern. A place that was gloomy and lightless but for the bio-luminescent lamps and neon signs glowing from the heart of *L-Prime*.

Far above his head, if he guessed the time right, the sun was still a brilliant fire in the sky, diving headlong towards true night. The almost-mythical dusk was hidden from his eyes, here at *Terapolitan* baseline, for the towers were too tall for its light to flood the ground. Barely a trickle penetrated this deep into the urban enclaves, where it was overwhelmed by the city's inner luminescence.

He looked up to the starscape of illuminated windows glittering like constellations; the nebulous shimmer of bio-luminescent street lamps, the phosphorescent aura of neon signs. An Earthbound Cosmos glittering against the city's dark hide and clinging shadows.

There was a haunting hum of mingled sound emerging from the heart of the urban organism, a miasma of many human voices rumbling at once. Even the rush and whine of traffic on the causeway, suspended overhead, did nothing to drown the babble of human appetites.

As Adam trudged up the street, he felt a deeper rumble vibrate through his feet. He looked up. The web-work of roads and utility

shafts and suspended plazas seemed to tremble from a heat haze. He was just able to make out the distant transit tubule. It gaped like a gagging mouth poised to vomit over the streets far below.

A shriek, still ear-piercing despite the distance, a sonic boom and the tubeworm⁹ leapt into the urban void. They were terrifying in their power. Still, a sight to behold. Red neon gleamed from the carrypods¹⁰ embedded in the tubeworm's muscular carriage: each jammed with passengers hurtling towards their destiny. The worm-like chassis undulated and writhed in suspended space, then located the junction pod and dived into the required tubule. Even from the distance, Adam saw the plume of compressed air and filth blast from the tube mouth. Moments later, sound caught up with light and his ears were bombarded again. The rumble died as the tubeworm vanished into the orifice and continued on.

Adam continued his pedestrian journey, but the sight of the tubeworm had set his mind to work. He wanted *home*. He wanted to hide away with his package and relax. Ten minutes to the south there was a tubeway opening. Not long at all. West was central *L-Prime*, where Caxton told him to lose himself in a circuitous route. He felt the subversive pull of home, and started to look into the shadows for the welcoming maw of the desired intersection.

Keep it together. Don't expose us. Hide in the herd. Be the herd. It's me they want. Keep it safe and make it last. Caxton's voice haunted him with its desperate disappointment.

Damn this fucked up addiction.

Damn this fucked up life.

Damn Caxton.

But he was right. As always.

Adam almost wept as he thought of the maelstrom of *L-Prime*. Far worse than the bar. He just wasn't in any state to cope. Here, he was exposed and vulnerable. But there, the long route, he could hide among the surging waves of flesh. Again, there was no choice in his life. He abandoned the tube, and walked onwards to the place he least wished to be.

Suddenly, he yearned to see the city silhouetted against the sky, a true cityscape. Something that might reassure him there was more to the world than all this. Not the occasional haunting glimpse of something that *might* be a patch of cloud.

There existed only a few places where a *derm*-dwelling *Terapolitan* might actually see a little sky. In every corner of *Terapolis*, the monoliths of *MorTek* provided that unique insight. Each *MorTek* spire formed an axis in a city without an orbit, without a centre. Each pinnacle stood within its own clearing in the forest of soaring monoliths. These served to create a light well deep into the base of the city. Only there was the sky blue, only there was the sun a burning brilliance, only there were the clouds revealed as graceful sculptures drifting aloof far beyond human concerns.

This detachment was something the clouds shared with *MorTek*. Alone in its plaza, *MorTek Prime*, or any of its daughters across the globe, stood detached from the city and its denizens. It was the calm eye around which the maelstrom of *Terapolis* whirled.

From there, the tower stood as a symbol and a living testament to the ascent of Man into the glorious mysteries of the *Gestalt*. In the *MorTek Plaza*, even the sun, from its rise in the East to its descent into Western slumber, orbited *MorTek*. That was a lesson learned early.

Maybe someday he'd take a pilgrimage to *MorTek Plaza* and revisit the lost sky. But not this day. Not with the precious gift hiding in his pocket and begging him for salvation.

TERAPOLIS was home to billions. But for all that the city's spread had globalised its urban embrace; the inhabitants had grown insular and parochial. Adam knew he was much the same, and it rankled; he wanted to belong, yet at the same time he wanted to be himself, something *more* than himself, but all he knew was this darksome pocket of a city beyond his comprehension.

Many of its denizens knew nothing else but the enclosing towers and sullen streets of their own *Locus*, cared less for what

went on beyond. In any case, there was little to see in a city that had subsumed and smothered the diversity of a dead world, even less to captivate the curiosity of a race long-since absorbed in the allure of the *Gestalt*.

The older generation had known of other places, of course, but in the unified world of the *Gestalt* the memories they carried were dim. Maybe they had good reason to forget the past, to let torments fade into forgetfulness; bad things belong buried. Maybe it was something about their new reality that was Adam's tired normality; it didn't encourage memory to stick around.

Even Caxton, who seemed to hold some familiarity with the ghosts of history, kept his recollections concealed; just enough let loose here and there to stir a desire for more, much like the contraband he pushed. Well, though he had gleaned only precious little, still Adam had learned enough to be utterly bewildered by the alien world that had gone before, to wonder how it all came to this netherworld beneath the shadows of *Terapolis*.

"They were beautiful once, the towers, when they were few and far between," Caxton had said, his tones now a memory replayed to the background noise of the urban milieu. "*MorTek* offered us a miracle of bio-engineering – that's what they were called – that'd save us from ourselves, and we were always such suckers for the latest technological wonder. Yeah, we were suckered in and here we are. The towers spread, *Terapolis* grew. It absorbed the cities of history, swallowed entire nations, embalmed continents, and somewhere along the line we stopped noticing; we had the *Gestalt* by then – and Morlock had us all. Well, not quite all... Hey! You listening to what I'm saying?"

Adam smiled and nodded. No, he hadn't been listening, not really. Then he woke up to where he was and what he had to endure before he found the sanctity of Caxton's goods. The tension returned, tightening his shoulder muscles, clenching his bowels, as he recalled he was no longer quite a part of the *Terapolitan* herd; that the old dealer had pulled him into the fringes

of a world that set him apart, that singled him out, that made him a memory of a bygone world he did not comprehend.

Suddenly, he wished he'd paid more attention to Caxton all those times, but it was far too late for any of that now. He was still a long way from home.

THERE was no turning back now. This was the torrential storm of human existence crashing through the streets and byways of central *L-Prime*. Adam struggled against the tide of pushing, jostling bodies. He sweated with the effort, bewildered and dizzy by the sensory flood of faces and bodies and smells and sounds.

Millions of people coagulated into writhing, fragmenting, condensing knots of flesh. Waves crashed against the base of the mighty towers, sluicing and splashing down the avenues and streets, erupting from vestibules and foyers in a frenzy of activity. Human magma, boiling white-hot, gushing through vents and fissures in the canyons of corruption.

And somehow he was supposed to keep his cool in the midst of this frenzied ecology of raw vice. Caxton had to be *fucking* crazy. He winced at the disrespect, but it *was* easy for Caxton to say. In truth, Adam was scared. He felt naked.

Nobody paid him any attention; just another burden to shift aside. An obstacle in the pursuit of the cherished goal of pleasure and release. He was alone. As utterly isolated and alienated as only a being can be when washed away amongst the sea of strangers.

All those faces, bland masks of skin that blurred and flickered in his vision. Dark faces, pale faces, young and old, man and woman, boy and girl and those somewhere in between. Dressed in the height of fashion, or the street attire of the youth tribes and the *G-Tek*¹¹ junkies. The neon made all appear the same.

He scanned the ashen crowds with eyes that darted like a cornered mammal beneath the gaze of its predator. The herd paid little heed, but something was out there. It battered its way into his senses; an aura of dread that even managed to crush the addictive need.

Somebody was *following* him.

Somebody was *watching* him.

He gritted his teeth against the urge to hide. Swallowed the tide of nausea rising in his belly. This was no place for that weakness. Caxton relied on him; he had no option but to get through this.

A sudden sound above his head made him look skywards. It wasn't the thud of bass music from some club or bar. It wasn't the roar of a million vehicles racing on their circular route to nowhere. It wasn't the combined animal bellow of the multitudes marching towards their empty tomorrow.

No. The sound that cut through all this was a leathery creak. A slithering sibilance emerging far overhead, in the deep shadows that clotted out the distant roof of the world.

Adam felt cold, despite the heat of so much sweating flesh. He struggled to move faster through the cloying bodies of his own kind. Followers of *G-Tek*. The minions of *MorTek*. Barred by momentary circumstance and fortune from the *Gestalt*. All of them searching for *their* next hit; in the bars, the clubs, the arcades, the brothels, the opium dens, whatever fancy offered the chance to drown the self and stifle the haunting lure of what they craved most of all.

Through all of that, still something watched him.

He had to get away. Had to get out. He was suffocating. Drowning in sweat and heat and liquefying faces. His feet picked up the pace. He felt the beginning of panic override sense. *Keep it together*. He tried. Really he did, but he was feeling himself beginning to unravel. He gritted his teeth and pushed his way through, until he found the brooding shadow of some musty alley. Hardly Old World, but clear of people. To Hell with being part of the herd...

He lunged into the maw of shadow and mildewed mist. The voice of the *Terapolitan* maelstrom faded into a bluebottle buzz. Feet picked up the pace and matched his own hurried footfalls, surely the proof his paranoia needed to shout down sanity's

suggestions they were only echoes. Far overhead in the deeps of utter black, the leather thing shuffled and slithered. The unseen menace kept pace, enveloping him in some unfathomable aura of observation that made the sixth sense squirm. What could possibly rationalise *that*?

A sharp whine of terror burst from his throat. The package danced macabre in his pocket. Adam ran through the dark, as if his heart might stop if he didn't run harder, faster. His precious package shrieked its own urgings from the womb in his jacket.

Help me! Help me!

Adam tried. He ran, until there were no shadows left. Just the sickly lights of home, and the swirling blobs of colour oozing across his exhausted vision. He panted and coughed like a terminal consumptive. The light washed away the lingering murk of the city, but not all of his trailing apprehension.

Sweating hard, and trembling, he glanced back at the dark alley and tried to peer into its depths. There was something there, he was sure, but his eyes detected nothing. The package whispered seduction. He forgot about the moments of terror, staggered into the orifice of Otranto Towers, and hoped that today the lifts were operational. After this awful night, he must be due some kind of break, however small. Tonight, he might get lucky. There was always a first time.

THE shadows were old friends but they lacked the capacity to mask the panting exertion. The unexpected break from routine was a welcome exhilaration, even if it reminded of encroaching age.

Now he lurked in the shadows of a disused commercial doorway and watched his quarry pause outside the habitentary's¹² foyer. The boy was staring hard into the shadows, but he clearly detected no hint of his presence. Not this time. Perhaps not at any time during their little game of *follow my lead*.

So, what prompted the boy's hurried flight? A propensity to panic was not a sound survival trait in this city, but it was a

question that was not his to ponder. Just complete the observation, and return to make his report. The old game. He shook his head at a flurry of uncommon feeling.

“I pity you, boy,” he breathed, “this game will be the death of you.”

The target staggered into the habitentary and passed beyond further consideration. Otto Schencke remained a component of shadow for a few moments more, then slipped away. Behind him, the darkness swirled as if it were smoke.

THE stairs got steeper every time, he was sure, but now he was back home. Safe and secure in his private universe, where he didn’t need to worry about who – or what – was watching.

The door slammed shut and he leaned against it, taking in deep breaths and letting his heartbeat return to normal. The darkness enclosed him like a secure womb. A hiding place, far better than any claustrophobic crowd.

He straightened, ready to take his fix into the living room where they might become better acquainted. Then something slithered in the darkness and bunched his heart into a fist.

HE led. Marla followed.

Caxton took her first through the maze of Old City, then into the quieter streets around it. Now he was moving inexorably towards central *Locus Prime*, ready to leave his tail chasing amorphous shadows and might-have-beens.

They’d played this old game many times on and off over the years. Marla was getting better. Clearly, Otto tailed the boy. Well, there was nothing to be done about that. Adam was on his own. Consider it part of the learning curve. He frowned. Lessons didn’t adhere if the student was dead. But no, this was an observation mission. Follow and report. Nothing more. Otherwise, by now, Marla’s deadly intention would be clear of its holster.

He paused outside a restaurant lit up like an oasis in this desert of shade. He peered at the menu on the window. His mind ignored the human banality inside. Instead, he let his eyes focus on the reflections in the glass. He stared long and hard, building a mental map of the glimmering beacons of street lamps and shops and the gloomy pools of night between.

Where was she?

Ah! There. She lurked in the shadows by the street corner he had so recently vacated. She was not in deep enough, he noted. The light of a street lamp caught her pale face and made it glow like a ghost's visage. An opponent's errors were always a blessing, but it was dangerous to take them for granted. Especially when the opponent was Marla Caine. What she lacked in skill, she made up for in murderous intent. She had been schooled harshly.

A sombre thought. It created a cascade of memory from the back of his mind. Memories long buried. For a moment they shouted loud enough to reach the seat of conscience.

"Ah! Marla," he sighed. "It should have been so different. You will never forgive me. I can never forgive myself. But perhaps I can atone yet."

No time for regrets. He slammed the door on the thoughts before they could crack his composure. Soon it would be time to lose Marla. He turned away from the menu, glanced at his watch for effect, then tightened his grip on his briefcase and its precious contents as he paced towards the centre of *Locus Prime*.

AFTER the death-rattled gurgle, a shimmering iridescent light invaded the murk. Adam stared at the *simulacomm*¹³ as its fluid molecules began to sculpt the recorded message. The esoteric substance slurred into shape, like a bubbling glob of gleaming mucus lit from within.

A face emerged. He recognised Claire as the colour swarmed across her features. The eyes snapped open. A recording it might be, but the eyes still glared contempt from the re-animated effigy.

“*Hey shit head! I don’t like being stood up!*” Gobs of ‘mucus’ wobbled across her features, as the device tried to stabilise the animate. “*They warned me at work about you. Well, I’ve had better pricks than you, pal, so if that’s what you wanted to show me just forget it!*”

The head glared a moment longer, lips drawn tight to underline her anger. Then the dimensioned-recording dribbled back into the plinth.

Adam breathed again. “*Shit!*” Clean forgot. Some date.

There was nothing to be done about it now. He pushed himself off the door and wondered whether to ’comm her back. This was no time for smarm or charm. Even less a tongue-lashing. Best leave her to sweat. The package nudged him as he leaned over the *simulacomm*. “Forget her,” it might have said, “let me do that *special* thing...”

The voice dripped with honey and guile.

Adam responded. Excitement charged him up. He took it out and weighed the package in his hand. His mouth watered in anticipation. The excitement was a tingle in his chest. He stumbled through the dark towards the living room, all else forgotten.

Light flickered into frail existence as a sluggish presence sensor detected his existence. The insipid glow vaporised the shadows, revealing the worn out furniture, the peeling wallpaper and the seedy carpet. Probably the place had never been done up since its origin as an Old World apartment. Now it was just another relic consumed into the living substance of *Terapolis*. The backdrop to the mess of his living. None of it mattered right now.

He reverently placed the package on the coffee table and shuffled out of his jacket.

Hurried now, sweating with anticipation, he sat down and reached out for the package. He ripped off the wrapping. The smaller packages within slid out onto the table. Caxton had promised him a double dose. And he wasn’t joking. One was a fat promise, bursting with gratification. He reached for the slimmer dose first. Told himself to take it steady. He had to ration himself.

Keep it together. Control. Keep control. But the addiction was no longer prepared to be patient.

He raised his salvation to his nose and savoured the scent. Already, his own small world and the wider world beyond collapsed into the singularity of a forgotten thought. Now his universe consisted only of this frayed armchair, the light, and the contraband he held.

This was his world, and in his world there was no such thing as forbidden pleasure. There was only the moment and the momentous joys that lay beyond this portal. A very *Gestalt* sentiment, but he was beyond caring now, beyond anything but the need his fix possessed for him.

He opened its battered cover and settled back to read; with that first precious sentence, the words transported him to a place where he was truly free.