

NumbaCruncha
or
Dystopia meets Utopia

A Cautionary Tale of the Future

By

Rigby Taylor

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The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it
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Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
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Other titles by Rigby Taylor

Sebastian
Rough Justice
Dancing Bare
Dome of Death
Time to think
Jarek

Cover: *'The Tower' by Salvador Dali*

Men! A land of men, in spite of everything.

The one manly quality, undying, acrid fearlessness.

The eternal challenge of the un-quenched human soul.

Perhaps too acrid and challenging today, when there is nothing left to challenge.

But men—who exist without apology and without justification.

Men who will neither justify themselves nor apologize for themselves.

Just men.

The rarest thing left in our sweet Earth

Aaron's Rod ... D H Lawrence

NumbaCruncha

The tale begins with a chilling peek into the near future when Sebastian and Jarek, now in their eighties, confront a particularly vile religious autocrat, whose reign of terror has led to the destruction of their laboratories, but not their secret weapon.

We then take a thousand year leap to a future city-state in which the human aptitude for duplicitous and unjust social schemes has reached its logical culmination in Oasis, a flesh-crawlingly evil dystopia ruled by the most unpleasant gang of conmen and women you're ever likely to encounter.

A couple of young scientists who have recently invented a new means of transport, begin to question the morality of the Oasis social order, and decide to do something about it, despite the tremendous odds.

Meanwhile, back in the forest, Sebastian and Jarek's secret weapon is patiently waiting.

NumbaCruncha is a thoughtful, perhaps shocking, certainly controversial, at times amusing, and always cheeky assessment of the apparently intractable problems facing humanity. Although the future for life on planet Earth seems hopelessly bleak to people who care about the destruction of the natural world in which Homo sapiens evolved, NumbaCruncha suggests there might be some hope ...but only if...

1: Somewhere in Far North Queensland Towards the End of the Twenty-First Century

‘Make sure there’s nothing left to salvage, or tomorrow there’ll be nothing left of you.’ The priest’s twisted smile, more venomous than his customary frown, underlined the threat. Ignoring the nervous nods of his sweating acolytes, he turned, raised an imperial finger in warning and waddled back to his limousine, slashing the air with his stick to ward off mute offers of assistance from heavily armed bodyguards.

After passing silently through the gates the black car stopped to allow the priest to gaze back through tinted windows. Impassive, he watched as the splendid old buildings exploded in a gigantic fireball that briefly rivalled the sun. This wasn’t the first such establishment he’d had the pleasure of demolishing, and wouldn’t be the last. Releasing a wheezy sigh of satisfaction he nodded slightly and chewed thoughtfully on his bottom lip. There were few pleasures to match erasing the stench of Roman Catholic blasphemy, nonconformist freethinking tolerance, and secretive research by ungodly intellectuals bent on disrupting God’s plans. He tapped on the bulletproof glass and the chauffeur drove smoothly away, leaving the once grand edifice’s executioners to ensure all had been destroyed.

After poking at ashes and embers long enough to ensure nothing useful remained, the demolition team drove noisily away in three small matt black trucks bearing the same gold logo of intertwined crosses as on the doors of the priest’s limo.

Forty kilometres inland, two elderly men were attempting to relax on the wide verandah of a house nestled in a luxuriant garden that merged with dense surrounding rainforest. The leaner and taller of the two snapped his phone shut with a sigh.

‘That was Lindoro. The Research Institute is no more. Brother Dominic has just left so we have about half an hour.’

‘Half an hour. You say it as if it were a lifetime. You’re always so positive, Sebastian.’ Jarek’s sigh was even deeper than his friend’s. ‘I know we’ve been expecting it, but it’s still a shock to know the party’s finally over.’

‘It’s not over till we’ve given the fat priest the welcome he deserves.’

‘I wish I was fifty years younger.’ Jarek levered himself to his feet, opened a concealed panel in the wall and pressed a switch that triggered lasers to reflect off multiple mirrors, creating tiny pinpoint points of light at strategic locations throughout the forest. ‘We may not be much use, but at least the guys will be ready.’ He turned and leaned against the railing, staring thoughtfully along the driveway, mentally preparing himself for their unwelcome guest.

Sebastian stood beside him, equally pensive. ‘The mad monk’s done us a favour—saved us having to close the place ourselves. At least we’ve avoided depressing farewells.’ He shook his head in despair. ‘It feels odd knowing I’ll never see the place again. That’s where I found my father. Then when I lost Reggie and thought my life was over, you turned up. Since then every moment has been the best possible.’ He grunted a short laugh. ‘It’s strange that memories of seventy years ago are as clear or clearer than those of last week.’

Jarek nodded and smiled softly. ‘I can’t believe we’re both eighty-six! If I don’t look in a mirror my head still thinks I’m a young man.’

‘We *are* young! Sagging skin’s simply a clever disguise.’

‘If only. Did Lindoro say if anyone was hurt when the school went up?’

‘He fears so. They’d been expecting the attack so last week they took away everything that was still useful. He’s been hiding in the old house for the last few days to get video evidence of any attack. Arnold turned up this morning looking for something. Lindoro warned him to stay clear, but he went in not long before the wreckers arrived and didn’t leave, so he must have hidden when the demolition gang arrived and died in the conflagration.’

‘I hope that fucking priest didn’t get his hands on him first!’

‘It doesn’t bear thinking about.’

‘It’s all over then.’ Jarek turned and peered into the rainforest as if searching for something, then shrugged and raised his eyes to the massive western escarpment several kilometres away that seemed to float above the treetops. Large birds wheeled in thermals and dense clouds accumulated beyond the towering cliffs. He sniffed the air. The storm wouldn’t arrive till evening. Meanwhile a pitiless sun rendered outside activities dangerous. The oppressive heat infected his mood.

‘I can hardly bear to leave. This wonderful house you built; the memories, the work, the fun...I’m glad no one will live here after us—it would be sacrilege.’

‘Coming from an atheist them’s powerful words.’

‘You know what I mean. Are you sorry to be leaving?’

‘Not if I think about it rationally. We’ve had an excellent life. I’m not greedy, and politically we know it’s impossible. My brain wouldn’t mind hanging on for a bit but my body and common sense tells me to get out while we can.’

‘So this is the end.’

Arms linked they wandered indoors to the relative cool of the lounge.

‘Only the end of the beginning. Now the exciting part is starting.’

‘But we won’t be here to see it.’

‘Thank goodness. Things are going to get much messier than they already are, so I reckon we’re quitting at the right time. You’re not having second thoughts?’

‘No way. Even if things remained as they are I’d not want to stay. We’ll deal with Dominic, bid farewell to the guys and...’

‘You think they’ll survive?’

‘No question.’

A car horn gave three sharp blasts.

‘Ah ha. We have visitors.’

They watched through the window as a large black car crunched over the gravel and parked directly in front of the house. Two guards in glistening black leather sprang from the rear doors and crouched each side of the car, assault rifles at the ready, heads and eyes flicking from side to side, noses thrust forward as if to smell danger. When satisfied it was safe, the driver got out, crossed to the verandah, tapped on the wall with his rifle and shouted, ‘Everyone outside! Now!’ underlining his order by firing a volley into the air through the verandah roof, startling a flock of kookaburras into maniacal laughter as they flew off.

Jarek and Sebastian wandered out, hands in the air. The driver patted them down, told them to keep their hands on their heads and wait in the centre of the driveway. The sun was searing and they began to sweat while he made a thorough search of the house. Eventually he returned and signalled to the car. A fat man in black emerged, shuffled to the verandah, hoisted himself with visible effort up the steps onto the deck and sank into the largest of the rattan armchairs. A casual flick of fingers summoned the two elderly men who stood and stared at their unwelcome guest; faces devoid of expression.

‘We meet at last. From the reports I’d expected a pair of giants, not a couple of scrawny old men. You look as if you’ve suffered a famine.’

‘You look as if you caused it.’

‘Touché.’ The fat man’s lips drew back in a humourless smile. ‘OK, where are they?’

‘Who?’

‘The mutants you’ve been breeding.’

‘We haven’t been breeding anything; we’re too old and neither of us have ovaries.’

Brother Dominic leaned forward and slashed at Sebastian with a whip he'd concealed in his surplice, nicking him on the cheek, drawing a trickle of blood.

'Before disposing of that charnel house of yours, I had a chat with a young man who, after a little persuasion, told me everything. Arnold I think he said his name was. Unfortunately, having no lips made him difficult to understand, so I thought I'd visit you to clarify a few details.'

'You fucking bastard.'

'My vows of celibacy preclude fucking, and both my parents were married.'

'What about your gentle Jesus meek and mild Christian vows? Don't they preclude the use of torture?'

'He who sees evil and does nothing is also evil. One of my multitude of burdens is to rid the world of evil. According to what that unfortunate individual told us, you've been playing God.'

'We wouldn't contemplate emulating the incompetent, vengeful, vain, infantile figment of your imagination you call god. According to your beliefs he designed and made you. We, on the other hand, have brought into this world creatures of wisdom, sensitivity, grace and beauty—as unlike you and your ilk as it is possible to imagine!'

The fat priest smiled; he'd angered them. 'Your passion is commendable and increases my curiosity. Arnold was only able to give me a vague idea of what's been going on before he gave up the ghost.' Brother Dominic's phlegm-filled chuckle failed to elicit the response he desired so he continued in placatory tones. 'If you tell me everything, and convince me that the results of your work do not pose a threat to the State, there's no reason not to let your protégés live.'

The old men remained silent.

'Be reasonable,' Dominic cajoled, 'you've nothing to lose and everything to gain.'

Jarek and Sebastian looked at each other, shrugged, and nodded.

'Can we sit down?'

'Of course. Of course.' The priest flicked fat fingers at the driver who brought two straight-backed chairs from inside and placed them facing his boss. The old men sank gratefully onto them, thought for a bit, exchanged glances and wry smiles, then nodded acceptance.

'It's a long story,' Sebastian cautioned.

'I've an hour to kill.'

'A foolish expression.' Sebastian sniffed his distaste and cleared his throat. 'Sixty-three years ago, instead of closing the School because of falling rolls, my parents decided to use the facilities for research into social change. Philosophical and practical solutions to the abundance of problems facing humanity were solicited from all over the globe. Millions of responses were computer crunched, analysed, sorted into ideas and mulled over by the philosophers, scientists and medical personnel who had become interested in our project and joined the institute. It soon became clear that because human problems stem from the way humans think, we can't expect to think our way out of problems our thinking has created. So we adjusted the question and ran it through the computers again. The solution at first surprised, then after consideration made sense. We would have to eliminate some things that once ensured survival, but are now destroying us along with the environment in which we evolved.'

'And what did your computer suggest you eliminate?' Dominic's sneer irritated, as he intended.

Sebastian smiled equably. 'Two genders, and brains that can be taught in infancy to believe nonsense, despite evidence to the contrary, simply because the person wants to believe it.'

'What nonsense?'

'Things like believing there's an invisible, omnipotent, omniscient superman in the sky, or that democracy will ensure good government...that sort of thing.' Jarek replied, face a picture of innocence.

'And you want to eliminate sex?'

'No—merely the duality.'

'Quit the smart-arse act. Cut to the chase! What are you talking about?'

‘It’s obvious that the qualities of both sexes are essential, but having two different sexes is an evolutionary compromise. It worked in other animals, but in humans is a recipe for conflict because of our ability to see ourselves as individuals rather than part of a pair or group. The different desires and expectations of males and females...’

‘Give an example of these different desires,’ the priest interrupted brusquely.

‘Males are usually content with a simple life as long as they feel useful. Left alone we would still be relaxing in the Garden of Eden. Females drive change by demanding ever more impressive evidence of their partner’s ability, demonstrated by the Adam and Eve story in your bible.’

‘So?’

‘So humans are in a constant struggle to get more and more, bigger and better, regardless of whether it is useful or essential for survival. We swapped paradise for a work camp. Instead of remaining in the natural state in which we evolved like all other animals who only do what is essential for their survival, leaving the planet fresh, clean, and able to provide in abundance, we’ve become slaves to our unquenchable desires.’

‘What rubbish! Our ancestors could have remained in a state of nature if they’d wanted.’

‘I disagree. You see humans don’t have a cut-off switch. They aren’t able to say, “I’ve got enough, so I’ll stop for a while.” Once the climate stabilised, men’s problem-solving brains allowed them to indulge their insatiable desire to impress and provide for the insatiable desires of females. This led to agriculture, cities, heavy industry, commerce and wars with increasingly powerful weapons. Increased security allowed women to breed more, and medical interventions have permitted most children to survive. Twelve thousand million people now eke out an existence in a death struggle for survival on a tiny planet that our evolutionary impulses have rendered virtually uninhabitable.’

‘If the characteristics you describe are indeed human nature, then I’m living a natural life.’

‘Sadly true. You’re a living example of how humankind’s natural behaviour contains the seeds of our extinction. Your insatiable desires have led you to excess in everything. You’ve become the most powerful person, the most feared, the most cruel and hated. You’re a vile, obese monster whose selfishness and unconcern for others knows no bounds. You’re the result of ten thousand years of civilization in which men grabbed, killed, conquered, made slaves, built empires, multinational conglomerates...and so altered the planet that it’s no longer a benign environment for most living organisms.’

‘Only ten thousand years?’

‘That surprised you, didn’t it? For the first two or three hundred thousand years of human existence, Earth’s weather was too unstable to allow civilization to develop, and humans remained as they evolved—hunter gatherers living in precarious balance with nature like all other animals.’

‘It’s human ingenuity that enabled you to do your research. You’re no better than the people you criticise. Where do you get these stupid ideas?’

‘They’re far from stupid. There have always been a few humans throughout history with the ability to observe the world objectively, think about what they see, and by understanding how nature works, suggest ways to live well without destroying everything. But they’ve never been able to influence human behaviour. Instead of facing facts, the overwhelming majority of humans believe what they want to believe instead of the truth because of childhood conditioning and constant propaganda. So now we’re living with the result—a filthy, degraded, overpopulated, overheated planet. Few humans will survive the collapse of civilization.’

‘What a Jeremiad! The sky’s falling in—civilization is collapsing! Rubbish! There’s no limit to human resourcefulness; civilization is far from over!’

‘Half the city that used to be down the hill from here, is either under water or a suppurating, lethal swamp.’

‘Which begs the question, why haven’t you offered sanctuary to refugees?’

‘Our forest has been designated a sanctuary for displaced non-human animals.’

‘That will change! Surely you don’t consider animals as important as humans?’

‘More important than the current crop of humans, which is why we embarked on our research.’

‘Ah yes, your creation of a superior breed of human. You were about to tell me what your computer advised.’

‘In essence, it said we should do nothing and let nature solve the problem by allowing most humans to die, leaving a few to revert to the prehistoric state. If they didn’t die out, in another million years or so they might evolve into a species able to live with nature instead of fighting it—but the chances were they’d just repeat the mistakes of the past as they’ve always done. That gave us the idea of shoving evolution along by tweaking a few genes and creating a race of humanoids different enough from us to survive and flourish in a future of wildly unstable weather.’

‘You decided to play god.’

‘Are you a creationist?’

‘Unless you’re a masochist I suggest you stop wasting my time. What did you do?’

‘The entire human genome’s been mapped, so it wasn’t difficult to modify both behaviour and physical attributes.’

‘Physical attributes...you mean you...?’

‘Yes we made an androgyne.’

‘How?’

‘The default state of a human foetus is female. At various stages throughout pregnancy the embryo’s xx or xy chromosomes cause the mother to release hormones that trigger changes in the way its body develops. If the foetus is destined to become a male, doses of hormones at specific times cause what could be ovaries to descend and become testicles, and the clitoris to lengthen and curl into a tube, which then conducts urine, and by a complex arrangement of finer tubes, sperm. Other doses of hormones remain dormant till puberty when they trigger the growth of breasts and the menstrual cycle in females, and such things as enlargement of the voice-box, hair growth, and, in both genders, the way they perceive the opposite sex.

‘Errors can and do occur. For example, in about ten percent of the population an insufficient or poorly timed release of hormone affecting the potential adult male’s perception of females will result in an otherwise perfectly normal male reverting to the default state and seeing males as sexually arousing. What your religion still hasn’t accepted is that a person’s character, sexual identity and gender is hard-wired in the womb, and there’s no way they can change it, any more than they can change the colour of their eyes.’

‘How convenient.’

‘No, it’s just the way it is.’

‘Where did you get the foetuses? Whose eggs and sperm? Surely the donors didn’t want you to experiment on their offspring?’

‘We developed an artificial womb capable of growing a genetically modified foetus and administering the required doses of hormones to create exactly the result we desired. The first spermatozoa and eggs were donated by my father and stepmother. Both were the finest people I’ve ever known and fully supportive of the program. Importantly, both come from exceptionally hardy ethnic stock—Australian Aborigine and Melanesian.’

‘You’re not black!’

‘Half. My mother was a European of the most vile sort, which is why I would never contemplate using my sperm.’ Sebastian turned to Jarek. ‘Can you finish this off? I’m suddenly very tired.’

Jarek took Sebastian’s hand, smiled and looked the fat priest in the eye, daring him to comment. ‘There’s not much more to tell. We succeeded in breeding a race of hermaphrodites who, while looking exactly like perfect human males, have a womb with ovaries as well as functioning testicles. The womb opens into a vulva in the usual place for females, the penis still serves as a conduit for both urine and sperm, and the pelvis is modified to allow easy birth.’

‘Why choose the male body? Personal preference.’

‘Pragmatism. Males can move faster, are stronger and more flexible, have greater endurance, and higher tolerance to pain. In all other respects our New Men are balanced individuals who exhibit the best characteristics of both genders.’

‘How many of these...these monsters have you created?’

‘They’re not monsters, they’re quiet, intelligent, charming, thoughtful people who know how to live in harmony with their environment. They are also well equipped to defend themselves against the stupidity and ignorance of people like you. Our tinkering with genes has worked better than we hoped. The tension that normally exists between the two halves of a human couple has been eliminated. They are Aristotle’s complete man.’

‘I asked how many!’ Brother Dominic snapped nastily.’

Jarek wasn’t intimidated. ‘Enough to ensure their survival,’ he said with a slight smile.

‘All you’ve done is create a gang of queers who’ll be fucking and screwing and murdering each other in jealous rage. Ha! Live in harmony? I’ve never met a single queer who even understood the meaning of harmony, let alone lived it.’

‘Yes you have.’

‘When?’

‘You’re looking at them.’

Brother Dominic stared at his two opponents in silent fury.

‘As for screwing each other, they may, but not for the reasons women get men to fuck them. They’re able to self fertilise as well as cross with other New Men, but will only conceive if the conditions for raising a child are perfect. As there can be no sexual tension within individuals, relationships with others are for friendship, and sexual congress becomes no different from sharing any other activity.’

‘How can you be sure of that?’

‘We’ve been monitoring them for the last fifty-four years.’

‘If they fertilise themselves, that’s inbreeding—a recipe for idiocy. There’ll soon be a gaggle of idiot clones cluttering the planet.’

‘Wrong again. It’s line breeding, as practiced by all pedigree breeders. If you start with excellent stock there’s seldom a problem. If the occasional child turns out imperfect, then it will be killed at birth. As for clones, you’ve been misinformed. Siblings are the progeny of the same parents, but usually they’re only slightly similar because the genes of the egg are different from those of the sperm and every time they mix in a different way. Over the years we’ve been able to secure twenty other superbly suitable egg and sperm donors, so the gene pool is more than sufficient to keep the race healthy.’

‘How long do they live?’

‘No idea, no one has died yet. They don’t age because we eliminated the design fault the rest of us have—the telomere that loses bits so that after half a century or less our DNA forgets how to repair organs properly, and so we age. Not suffering the debility of ageing means they won’t need care as they get older.’

The priest sat staring at his clasped hands for several minutes, then looked up. ‘Why did you do this?’

‘Because the idea of a sentient, rational, reasonable, sensible, self-aware creature that bases their life on observable facts, not wishful thinking, is too beautiful to let go. We hope they will somehow be able to counter the destruction of Homo sapiens. All religious texts, including your bible, admit that humans are fallible—born in sin your bible says. Yet as Sebastian mentioned, throughout the ages there have been wise men pleading with humans to behave differently and live within their means and leave the world richer and better able to support life than they found it, understanding that more than enough is too much. Instead of listening to these sages and changing their ways, humans have continued to demand unsustainable profits.’

‘A race of rabid individualists.’ Dominic sneered.’

‘Of course, because only independent individuals value themselves and others. Societies and relationships based on dominance and servitude can never be happy, productive or stable.’

‘What about values?’

‘All wise men not infected by religious dogma have advocated kindness, generosity, consideration, affection, honesty, hospitality, compassion, charity, humour, gentleness, equality, listening, egalitarianism, love of children and diligent respect for the land, plants and animals. These are sensible behaviours owing nothing to imaginary gods, and our Homo novus appear to embody these virtues.’

‘I want to see one of these paragons of virtue.’

‘We thought you would, so we asked Primo to stand by.’

‘Primo? I suppose he was the first?’

‘The first successful New man, yes. Primo,’ Sebastian called softly.

A slim young man appeared in the doorway where he stood and stared speculatively at the visitor. He was of average height, devoid of both fat and hair, well but not heavily muscled, with all the usual male sexual apparatus. Totally at ease, he emanated calm self-control.

‘The man who organised the destruction of our laboratories and tortured and murdered Arnold, would like to meet you.’ Sebastian’s voice was unnaturally harsh.

Dominic gazed from Sebastian to Primo and back. ‘I can see the resemblance—how remarkable. He is much darker than you, and more symmetrical, but despite your age difference there is something of you. How old is he?’

Primo’s voice was low and soft, yet uncannily penetrating. ‘If you wish to know anything about me, ask me.’

Visibly taken aback, Dominic uttered a surly grunt and repeated his question.

‘Fifty-four.’

‘But you look...’

‘That has already been explained to you.’

‘Why are you naked?’

‘Why should I wear clothes if I don’t need them?’

‘Will you show me your...other genitals?’

‘If you ask.’

‘You aren’t shy then?’

‘Of what should I be shy? They’re perfectly healthy, clean and normal. Are you ashamed of yours?’

‘No.’

‘Then show them to me.’

‘No way! They’re private.’

‘That’s a relief. Your body is physically repellent and I imagine your genitals are no better. I have no desire to see them; just thought I’d see if you were truthful. Now I know you’re not, I shall modify my behaviour. Well? Do you want to see between my legs?’

‘Yes...please.’ The priest was unaccountably nervous. He had never felt this way with another man.

Primo lay on his back on the floor in front of the priest and raised his legs, exposing a tight vulva between his anus and scrotum. ‘I suppose you also want to see how I self fertilise,’ he stated with a slightly bored sigh.

The priest nodded; overawed.

With practised dexterity Primo massaged his flaccid penis until it was long enough to bend between his legs and insert into his vulva. Then, squeezing his legs together, he worked his stomach muscles. ‘My penis is now erect and has penetrated far enough for me to fertilise myself,’ he said quietly. ‘However, as I have no desire to do that, I will withdraw.’ Spreading his legs he reached between and carefully pulled about twenty centimetres of turgid penis from his vulva. Sebastian and Jarek could scarcely control their laughter as Dominic, open-mouthed in what looked like lust, watched the erection return to normal.

‘Have you any children?’ Dominic asked huskily?

‘Yes, one.’

‘Boy or girl?’

Loud, musical laughter burst from Primo as he got to his feet. ‘Both, you stupid, stupid witchdoctor! You’re as dumb as most of your species.’

‘How much do you know about humans?’

‘Do you imagine I’ve lived in this forest for over half a century without curiosity? Like all my people I’ve spent most of my life among you lot, all over the country, working in various jobs, meeting as many humans as possible. We’re well aware that if people knew about us they’d demand our elimination. If we hope to survive we have to know the enemy.’

‘The enemy eh? You seem to have a low opinion of Homo sapiens.’

‘Homo sapiens! Ha! A misnomer if ever there was one. Homo destroyer would be nearer the mark. They’re little more than clever toolmakers. Like the other animals that evolved alongside them, humans have neither awareness nor respect for their mother.’

‘Do you mean the virgin Mary?’ the priest asked in surprise.

‘Nature, you stupid man. Just as a field of goats will unconsciously eat everything and create a desert, humans have turned the entire planet into a toxic and dangerous semi desert that will remain hostile to them and most other mammals for millennia. Coastal cities are partially under water. Millions of refugees are starving, homeless and rioting. The entire country is in violent chaos, ruled by insane warlords like you using a combination of physical terror and irrational fear of a supernatural god seeking vengeance. But you’re not winning. You think it’s bad now—well let me tell you the horror has barely begun. You think the weather’s wild now? You haven’t seen anything yet!’ With a contemptuous shake of his head he quit the verandah as unobtrusively as he arrived.

Jarek broke the silence. ‘Well? Are you satisfied?’

‘I am,’ the priest replied, ‘and have made my decision.’ As he heaved himself to his feet, three vehicles similar to those attending the destruction of the research laboratories pulled up in front of the house and disgorged a dozen Kevlar clad, heavily armed men who joined the priest’s two guards and stood in a circle facing outwards, bodies and assault rifles ready for trouble.

‘You’d made your decision to eliminate us long before meeting us. You’ve just been satisfying your curiosity and wasting our time.’ Sebastian stated pensively, gazing off towards the mountains. With a shy smile he turned to the Priest. ‘We’d also made plans before allowing you and your goons to be the first people outside the research team to learn about and see the result of our work.’

He turned towards the driveway and watched impassively as the invaders appeared to freeze then drop to the ground, gloved hands scrabbling at their faces.

‘Kill these two whores!’ Dominic shouted to his driver. But like his fellows on the drive he too had sunk moaning to his knees, clawing at his eyes, body in spasm.

‘Whoever designed those uniforms should be fired,’ Jarek observed calmly. ‘Eyes need as much protection as everything else. Don’t worry, they’re not dead,’ he added, ‘a tiny dart in the eye has dissolved and released toxins that zipped along the optic nerve to the brain where they’re interfering with muscular coordination.’

‘My god but you’ll pay for this!’ Dominic shrieked hysterically. ‘It had better not be permanent!’

‘They’ll be able to see through the other eye if someone props it open for them, and they’ll be able to hear, but never able to hurt anyone again.’ He turned to Primo who had reappeared beside him. ‘What’ll we do with this blubbery pawn of his malignant god, Primo?’

Primo stepped forward and gazed coolly down at the quivering heap of fear. ‘Do you think we should do unto others as your henchmen do unto us?’ he asked the priest seriously.

Dominic’s eyes widened and strangled noises issued from slack lips. Primo slammed him across the face with the back of his hand, breaking his nose. Blood gushed.

‘Answer me!’

Dominic nodded.

Primo raised his hand again. ‘I said answer me,’ his soft voice adding menace.

‘No.’ The usually strident voice a mere whisper.

‘Tough luck. During my visits to your world I heard many, many tales about the methods you use to punish those who oppose you. You are now opposing me and my people so I reckon it’s time to balance the equation.’ He turned. ‘Do you agree, Sebastian and Jarek?’

‘We do.’

With a cry of terror Brother Dominic heaved himself from the chair, only to be felled by a casually administered light chop to his throat. With no apparent effort Primo dragged the inert lump by one foot down to join the oddly jerking guards by their vehicles, and held him while Sebastian fetched a chair. After dumping him upright in it, Primo stood back and watched Jarek bind him firmly in place with thin rope. Sebastian produced a small, sharp, skinning knife and handed it to Primo who waved towards the trees that bordered the driveway. The priest groaned and gazed in horror at the crowd of New Men that was gathering around them.

‘What...what are you going to do?’ He croaked through his smashed voice box.

‘If I did even an eighth of the things you and your henchmen have done to others, you’d die, and we don’t want that, do we?’

The heavy head shook slightly and the eyes registered a slight flicker of hope.

‘No, it’s important to us that you remain alive and fully aware of the horrors perpetrated by you and your regime. We want you to live for many years so you can fully comprehend the enormity of your foulness. Therefore I’ll only remove your fingers, lips, nose, ears and eyelashes, and peel the skin and hair from the top of your scalp. Each of those things are excruciatingly painful and bleed messily, but the blood coagulates quickly enough to prevent serious loss, so your only long-term problems will be infection and keeping your eyes from drying out.’

He stood back, took the knife from Sebastian and tested its sharpness.

Jarek stood behind the priest and tousled his hair as if he was a child. ‘You’ll miss these pretty locks, I suppose, but luckily for you you’ve banned voluntary euthanasia, so no matter how you plead you’ll be looked after until the day you die. That should give you at least thirty years to think about the meaning of it all. And your paralysed and semi-blinded guards will create loads of useful employment with their requirement of constant care and attention.’ He glanced at Primo. ‘But I’m wasting time. OK, Primo, over to you.’

Shock and pain such as he’d never before experienced prevented Dominic from uttering more than a high-pitched wail as his torturer performed the operations with exquisite skill, casually tossing skin, hair, and the amputated bits and pieces over his shoulder into the dust and grass as he worked. When finished he wiped the blade on his bloody victim’s clothes and handed it back to Sebastian.

‘We haven’t long,’ he said urgently. ‘There’ll be a back-up force arriving soon because their headquarters haven’t heard from these guys for a while, so I reckon we’ll be off. Will you two be OK?’

‘We’ll be fine, thanks.’

Primo sent a couple of his brothers to drag the guard from the verandah onto the drive while Jarek and Sebastian briefly embraced each New Man.

‘My dear friends,’ Sebastian said calmly, ‘it’s time for you to take total control of your lives, owing nothing to, and depending on no one except yourselves. You will never be safe among Homo sapiens, so take the greatest care to avoid all contact. Jarek and I are also leaving. We love each of you as our sons and wish you success, contentment and enough happiness to make your lives a pleasure. Goodbye.’

The air filled with the deep rumble of two hundred and thirty voices bidding their mentors farewell, then as silently as they had arrived they vanished.

Suddenly exhausted, the two old men returned to the verandah. Sebastian took a flask from a cupboard, poured the contents into tumblers, offered one to Jarek and sat in the chair beside him. After raising their glasses in a brief toast they tossed back their potions, then held hands and relaxed into armchairs, smiling for the last time into the eyes of the person they had loved above all others.

Ten minutes later, five black SUVs surged up the drive and disgorged twenty Kevlar clad warriors armed to the teeth. Their astonishment at the plight of their comrades turned to disbelief at the sight of the screaming, bloody skull of the fat man who, judging by his clothes, could only be Brother Dominic. Several crossed themselves—not because of the horrific spectacle—they’d inflicted similar wounds themselves on many occasions without compunction or compassion; the problem was what to do with him. The second in command raised his rifle to put the fellow out of his misery, but was stopped by his superior officer before he could fire.

‘What are you thinking?’ he snapped. ‘Only God may take the life of this holy man. He must live and serve as an inspiration to us all, spurring us on to even greater sacrifices in our battle against the forces of the devil.’

The discussion was interrupted by a gigantic firebomb erupting in the centre of the house.

2: About a Thousand Years Later

‘You’ve been gone dangerously long.’

‘It was worth it.’ Peteru removed the headset and rubbed his eyes. Even the muted daylight that seeped into their room seemed overwhelming after five hours of ‘seeing’ through digital pulses fed directly to his brain’s sight centre. He detached the tabs from the base of his cranium, stood, stretched and grinned.

‘It had better be worth it!’ Uretep growled. ‘You know that three hours attached to that thing is the absolute max! I was going bonkers! Five hours you were away! At least have something to eat.’

‘Not hungry. Perhaps later. Sorry to worry you, but I chanced on an archive and had to explore.’

‘What was so exciting you felt compelled to risk permanent brain damage?’ Uretep couldn’t keep the irritation from his voice. He’d all but given up hope of seeing Peteru alive again.

‘Look out the window—what do you see?’

‘What’s to see? Same old same old...’

‘Humour me. Look, and describe what you see.’

Uretep wandered to the window and stared out at the familiar scene. About a hundred metres below, people in greyish-brown, coarse hooded overalls swarmed with no apparent aim around and through a vast space dotted with small shrubs, freeform sculptures, kiosks, park benches and pavilions. Nothing unusual. Pressing his nose against the glass he peered right and then left. The walls of the vast edifice he called home curved away into the hazy air, completing its circle a kilometre away. Details of the facades on the far side of the structure were impossible to make out through the shimmering fog.

He had no idea of the identities, occupation or any other details of the people in the park—not because it didn’t interest him, but because the system decreed that there should be no social interaction between castes. In his entire sixteen years the only parts of the great circular city he had visited other than the floors of the module in which he lived, were Central Park, and the Arena. He had even less idea of what it was like outside the city. He knew it was a very dangerous place, but that was all. One day he’d ask someone. At the moment he was contented and comfortable enough living where he was with Peteru and working together on their research. He didn’t even enjoy the company of the other Science Aristocrats who inhabited the same levels of their apartment module. As far as he was concerned, the noisy, crowded, compulsory public functions in the Arena were more than enough contact with other humans.

Since the age of six, the two young men had been given *carte blanche* to research and investigate whatever they felt like. Funding had never been a problem and their request five years previously for their own superbly equipped facilities attached to their private apartment had been granted without a murmur, despite the existence of magnificently equipped, state of the art laboratories only a floor above them, which they could share with other Scientists and have all the technicians they desired. In his youthful ignorance, Uretep imagined everyone in the city of Oasis lived like him and Peteru in relatively luxurious surroundings with good food, enough living space, privacy, the right to choose celibacy or companionship with whoever they pleased.

Although he’d never been there, he knew the top dozen floors of the Aristocratic module were the preserve of the Mages, where security was impenetrable and few were invited. Below the Mages lived the Emperor and his entourage in, according to vidgrams, fairytale splendour. Beneath them, and for several levels above Peteru and Uretep, were the offices and residences of the Aristocratic Chiefs of the various arms of administration that ensured the peaceful running of Oasis:

maintenance, health, education, breeding, accommodation, employment, transport, surveillance and enforcement.

The bureaucracies and living quarters of the Overseer Aristocrats charged with the day to day running of Oasis were arranged in descending order of importance—population control, nursery and education, food, sanitation, work, and transport.

‘What am I looking for?’ Uretep asked impatiently.

‘Look up.’

‘OK...I’m looking up...’

‘What do you see?’

Uretep stared without interest at the softly glowing beige firmament that filled the world with a diffused, warm amber light creating no shadows. He turned back to Peteru. ‘Only the ceiling.’

‘Why’s it called that?’

‘Who cares?’

‘I do.’

‘Well I don’t! What’s this all about—I can usually guess what’s going on in your head, but today you’re an enigma.’

‘Things are not what they seem...’ Peteru’s voice trailed away.

‘Peteru, I’m renowned for my patience, for my understanding. I know you as well as I know myself—at least I should! But I’m tired, so tell me why I am staring out the window at the world? As far as I can see it hasn’t changed in the last hour, and will probably remain the same for the next thousand years.’

‘That’s it! The sameness. There’s something not right. Something we have to learn—to understand...’

‘Not right?’

Peteru shook his head as if to clear it. ‘I’m not sure what, but doubts about everything we assume to be reality are clogging my thinking. After what I’ve seen today I know there’s something wrong with this place...this life...It...’

‘What?’

‘It’s unnatural.’

‘Unnatural? How can the ideal environment for humans to develop and live be unnatural? Nothing could be *more* natural.’

‘You reckon? Today I learned that the word ceiling comes from an ancient word, ‘ciel’ meaning all the gasses outside Oasis—above and beyond the ceiling.’

‘There’s nothing outside but barren rock, poisonous air, lethal solar radiation. No life, nothing.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Everyone knows it. It’s why we live in Oasis and no one leaves.’

‘No one *knows* it—they *believe* it because the Mages say it is so. They also tell us we were chosen by gods Domino and Domina to inhabit this barren planet as a test of our worthiness, so that after we die we will return to the land of our ancestors. Everyone *believes* this; but a belief is what you have when you don’t know something. No one *knows* what’s outside. No one knows what happens after death. At least no one I know knows.’

‘Keep your voice down!’ Uretep’s voice held an edge of panic. ‘You said you learned it today? Where? How? What were you doing so long in the hood?’

‘When I told the Grand Science Master I’d like to research prehistoric relics he sneered and said to go ahead because the greatest minds haven’t been able to break the codes, or work the machines of the ancients, and neither would I. The consensus among the Elite is that the artefacts aren’t scientific tools, but artworks—fake implements built for decoration by our ancestors in previous ages.’ Peteru’s grin merely increased Uretep’s anxiety.

‘But...?’

‘But I discovered a way to read them.’

‘And?’

‘They’re the most amazing records of the distant past—our history.’

‘You haven’t told anyone?’ Uretep’s voice held an edge of panic.

‘No way! They’d destroy the machines in case other people learned to read them, began to think, and then challenged the beliefs!’ He fixed Uretep with a solemn stare. ‘We’ve been lied to! The real ciel is translucent blue during the day and you can see the source of our heat and light. It’s called the sun and it’s like a great ball of fire floating in space, but its radiation hasn’t always been lethal to life. At night the ciel is black and anyone looking up can see millions of tiny lights called stars that are other suns.’

Uretep was unable to conceal his nervousness. ‘This is blasphemy, Peteru. Too dangerous to even think about. We were given permission to do research because we convinced them it might be useful for NumbaCruncha. You’re risking everything by studying myths and legends that undermine the great truths. You know the punishment!’ His voice had sunk to a whisper and he looked around in fear of eavesdroppers.’

‘Nobody would believe I managed to read the old records, because they’re convinced it’s impossible, so stop fussing. I want you to join me and see for yourself.’

‘I’m not sure I want to know. Anyway, we’ve only just time to put something in our stomachs before we’re due to give the demo! Have you forgotten?’

‘Of course not. Stop being such a fusspot. Everything’s prepared.’

They showered, drank a bowl of sweet soup and were checking the contents of the demonstration trolley when, with scarcely a pause between light knock and entry, Augur, the red-faced, beefy young Mage with whom they’d been liaising in preparation for the demonstration of their invention, burst in and glared impatiently from one to the other. ‘You’re not ready!’

‘We are. We’re just checking we’ve got everything.’

‘Have you a death wish?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re not wearing your cloaks! Have you spent so long cloistered in this room you’ve forgotten the penalty for exposing yourselves in public? Get yourselves decent! Their holinesses are waiting!’

‘Of course we hadn’t forgotten, it’s just so hot everywhere nowadays because the air conditioning’s so often on the blink, it’s more comfortable working like this.’ Peteru’s voice betrayed his irritation.

Augur’s eyes became slits of fury. He drew a hissing breath in preparation for a severe rebuke.

Uretep quickly interrupted, his voice earnest and placating. ‘We apologise sincerely, Mage, for keeping you waiting.’ Peteru had never been good at remembering to grovel to people more powerful than he, usually leaving it to Uretep to extricate them from the gruesome consequences of annoying a Mage.

Augur sniffed irritably while the young men slipped their feet into soft shoes, pulled fine fabric gloves onto their hands, enveloped their bodies in long pale blue cloaks and concealed their heads with matching blue hoods. With only their faces exposed they turned to the increasingly irritable Augur, ‘OK, let’s go.’

He eyed them up and down, grunted satisfaction, reminded them to be silent unless spoken to, and to show suitable gratitude at being granted special security status to visit the Upper Levels.

The two young men nodded, unwilling to risk pointing out that surely they were the ones owed gratitude, not the other way round.

‘I sincerely hope, for your sakes, that this... thing you’re demonstrating is a hundred percent safe, especially as the Emperor and Empress will be the first to demonstrate whatever it is you’ve been working on, in front of all their subjects.’

‘Its perfectly safe, but how you’ll convince the plebs, let alone the Mages that it’s a good idea beats me.’

‘That’s because you are not a Mage,’ Augur snapped. ‘Hurry along, everyone’s waiting!’ He stalked out of the room.

‘I wish the little runt would wash,’ Peteru whispered.

‘Mmm... smells like death. It’s odd; he looks young but acts like a cranky old bastard. I hope the rest are less obnoxious or it’s going to be a long afternoon.’

‘Nervous?’

‘Shit scared, actually.’

‘Me too.’

Dragging the trolley they followed the irritable little man along a short corridor to a ne grav chute that disappeared above and below into the shadows. Augur entered a code, they stepped into space and were thrust swiftly up fifty floors to the domain of Domino and Domina and their human representatives, the Mages.

3: A Demonstration

Hewn from solid rock, the enormous circular Council Chamber was shadowy and dim. Concealed lighting illuminated thirteen throne-like seats arranged on a slightly raised dais opposite the entrance. Behind them, luxuriant drapes patterned in writhing shapes of deep green and amber, covered the bare stone wall. A powerful floodlight springing from deep recesses in the high domed ceiling set granules of mica in the polished granite floor sparkling, and brought to life the only other piece of furniture in the vast space—a six-metre diameter, midnight blue circular carpet in which an intricately woven pattern of gold thread appeared to writhe in sympathy with the drapes behind the thrones. The absence of all other furniture or decoration suggested brute strength and unlimited power.

Eleven Mages, all but their faces concealed by a variety of colourful, shimmering robes, lounged casually on their thrones to either side of a slightly larger central throne on which a statuesque Mage wearing a scintillating black, tent-like garment and a high pointed hat, slumped; chin resting on his chest as if asleep. On entering the chamber Augur softly told his charges to leave their trolley by the arched doorway, then when he was seated, walk with bowed heads across to the Mages and wait humbly in front of the central throne.

The two young men could scarcely refrain from nervous giggling as they walked the forty metres from the entrance, bowed, then stood silently, gazing at their feet. After a couple of minutes, curiosity won and they raised their heads enough to see what was happening. The Mages paid them no attention. One scratched his chest; another fiddled with his hood. A third adjusted his buttocks as if farting. One had kicked off a slipper and was scratching the sole of his foot. With bodies concealed by voluminous garments, their age and sex were impossible to discern. Some were obviously overweight, others looked in need of a feed. Their faces were dull, ordinary, uninspiring, unmemorable—nothing like they'd expected of the most powerful people on the planet. The impression was more of decay, ennui and somnolence than ebullient health and fitness. And what they had assumed was meditation in the immobile ones, was looking more like sleep.

In mounting fear of failing to observe correct protocol, Peteru and Uretep again bowed respectfully in the hope of a response, but had to wait another ten minutes before the obese person on the central throne waved an airy hand and jolted everyone awake by screeching, 'Proceed!'

The entire room snapped to attention. The young men decided the Chief Mage must be female, bowed again then sprinted back to the entrance where they placed four thin, thirty-centimetre-square flexible mats on the floor beside the trolley, then carried another fourteen mats back to the Mages, placing one about three metres from the front of each minor throne and two in front of the Chief.

In the unnerving silence they explained that their invention, NumbaCruncha, could revolutionise how humans moved around Oasis, at the same time saving energy because of greater efficiency and security.

NumbaCruncha had been Peteru and Uretep's invention, and the complex programmes involved in its functions sprang from their fertile brains. They worked excellently together because each always seemed to know what the other wanted, was doing and would do. This perfect understanding and communication in their professional lives was repeated in their personal. Since beginning work on NumbaCruncha at the age of eleven they had deliberately avoided all social contact with others, working without the assistance of either Freeman technicians or Vassal assistants. Neither missed the company of other humans or wanted to change their lives, realising

intuitively that if you have the perfect working partner, friend, and companion, then only a fool would risk diluting the relationship. Despite their youth they were certainly not fools.

‘What exactly does NumbaCruncha mean?’ asked the Chief, this time in a pleasant contralto.

‘Number crunching is jargon for what a computer does when it solves equations. We couldn’t think of a better label, and it’s sort of what our little gadget does quite spectacularly, so the name stuck.’ Peteru took from his pocket a tiny, silvery capsule the size of a grape, held it up for all to see, and explained that it was a computer that sent wireless directions to the mat, where embedded electronics processed them.

‘What mat? What directions?’ someone asked impatiently. ‘Get to the point!’

Uretep took over. ‘When a person wants to be transported, they stand on a mat and whisper a number or destination into the computer. The computer sends a signal to the ensee mat the person is standing on and to the one he wants to go to. The mats have nano computers woven into them that then analyse every living particle and it’s position in the body that’s standing on it. This information is converted to a digital formula, the numbers are crunched, and sent as coded neutrinos by the most direct route to the receiving mat, which reassembles the original living object.’

‘Neutrinos?’

‘We chose neutrinos as carriers because having virtually no mass they ignore what is usually thought of as solid matter, passing through rock, water and even planets as if they didn’t exist; not stopping until ‘caught’; in this case by the target mat.

‘Hang on,’ someone interrupted. ‘First you said mats, then *enseemats*... is there a difference?’

‘No, when I’m lazy I just call them mats. Ensee stands for the letters n c—NumbaCruncha.’

‘So, you can’t use a mat unless you have one of these shiny little computers?’

‘That’s correct at the moment. In future, if you approve of this means of transport, mats will be placed in permanent spots with a wireless relay to a central computer a million times more powerful and therefore larger than this little demo model.’

‘What do you mean, a wireless relay?’

‘Just a simple wireless signal, nothing complicated. The large central computer will handle all the traffic. All the relay does is transmit the number or the name of the place that whoever is on the mat wants to go to, and the computer then tells both mats to go for it.’

‘What about people like us who don’t want to go to public places?’

‘Special people like you would have their personal mats and computers like this one so they can use them as they like. All your mats will, of course, be off limits to unauthorised people’

The questioner nodded, satisfied at being labelled a special person.

The young inventors explained that nothing had been left to chance during development, and after experiments on rats they had themselves used the device several times with no ill effects—apart from one minor oddity that they would demonstrate if the Mages would permit them to remove their hoods.

Permission granted they removed their headgear, exposing shiny bald heads. A thin Mage laughed rudely. Uretep smiled to conceal his irritation at the impertinence, and explained that NumbaCruncha only transported living matter. Thus hair, which is dead, and such things as dead skin cells and clothes remain behind.

‘Are you telling us whoever is transported by this thing arrives stark naked?’

‘Yes, but as you will be aware, temperatures have risen steeply in Oasis over the last year and it is much more pleasant to be naked than wrapped in all these cloaks and hoods or overalls. One of the surprising effects of using NumbaCruncha is that such things no longer bother you. There’s no embarrassment whatever.’

‘People’s embarrassment is hardly the question!’ a female Mage sneered. ‘We are talking about the laws of Domino and Domina!’

‘I think we can discount those for the moment, Irene,’ the Chief said equably. ‘The main difficulty I foresee is that if you arrive naked you can’t take anything with you.’

‘At the moment people seldom bother to take anything with them when they go anywhere. In shops all things are paid for using handprint credit, and all doors they have the right to enter open

with their handprint. OK, so they can't carry purchases back home, but they can simply check them in at a negrav chute before zapping themselves up and arriving before their goods.'

'But I like to wear jewellery,' a man protested. 'Nothing grandiose—a few rings, a chain or two...that sort of thing.'

'I agree,' several people said irritably.

'Stuff your jewels you fat faggot!' a stout female voice interrupted. 'We'll have to leave the tiny silver computer thing behind too as it's non living, so how do we get back again with nothing to whisper instructions to?'

'As I mentioned, there will be computer terminals at every enseemat station.'

'But what if I want to be private—go somewhere not on the public circuit? To the apartments of other Mages, for example?'

'An excellent question,' Peteru responded with a winning smile. 'Non-living things can be transported as long as they're fully enclosed inside a living organism. Food you're digesting, implants, false teeth, for example—so people must remember to keep their mouths closed.'

'That doesn't answer my question!'

'Sorry. If you are using your personal mat to go back and forth somewhere private, the computer terminal is so tiny you pop it under your tongue so it goes with you.'

'What if you forget?'

'The mat remembers the last mat you visited, so simply touching the wrist chip will send you back.'

'What chip! How many more things haven't you told us? Why can't you explain things properly?'

'This is the only other thing.' Uretep replied patiently, 'A minuscule chip which is painlessly implanted in the wrist, allows the mat to analyse the body and transport the person standing on an enseemat to the destination of his choice.' Both young men offered their wrists to the Mages for inspection, then stood respectfully waiting for a response.

'It'd better not hurt,' someone snarled.'

'She's right. And holding stuff in your mouth sounds bloody uncomfortable.'

'Transporting is virtually instantaneous so you only have to hold things for an instant. For larger items we've designed an easily inserted capsule.'

From his pocket he produced a black ovoid about twelve centimetres long and five centimetres in diameter, narrowing to a blunt point at both ends. With a flick of the wrist it opened and he withdrew a fine gold filigree collar and a rolled up document. 'As you can see, there's plenty of room for more. We're very proud of this capsule,' he said with a shy smile. 'The surface feels slimy, although it is perfectly dry, caused by the fact that you are not actually touching it; always there is a nano-gap between the surface and whatever surrounds it. With a little practice it is easily inserted in the rectum, and as easily removed on arrival. For women, larger versions will be available for insertion in the vagina. We envisage that practised users will be able to accommodate even larger capsules in both orifices.'

Hearty guffaws of slightly embarrassed amusement issued from most of the Mages as the resealed capsule was passed along, everyone exclaiming about the bizarre slimy feel and it's total lack of dust, dirt or odour.

When it was back in his hands, Peteru grinned. 'This capsule and its contents have travelled many times enclosed in my rectum, but I assure you it is totally sterile and as pristine as it looks because it has literally never touched my body—just as it hasn't come into contact with your hands. For that reason it doesn't need washing—indeed cannot be washed because it doesn't allow water to touch it's surface.'

'If you don't touch it, how can you open it?'

'Sensors respond to the twisting motion of warm hands and activate the mechanism that opens it. The same thing happens in reverse for closing.'

Several Mages began muttering about insubordination, having touched something that had been up a commoner's arse, but the Chief turned viciously on a narrow-faced man in purple. 'Job!

If Peteru is telling the truth, which I think he is, then you have not touched the capsule that's been up his arse. So shut the fuck up!

'I'll have an independent laboratory check his claim and if he's lying he's dead meat!'

The Chief turned to Peteru. 'Are you worried?'

'Peteru smiled and shook his head. 'No, your worship. No one in this room has touched the capsule, as he will discover.'

'Good. Now how easy would it be for me to use NumbaCruncha?'

'It's foolproof, your worship,' Uretep said quietly, hastily adding, 'not that I'm suggesting you're...'

'I realise that,' she snapped.

The Mages muttered together for several minutes, then resurfaced and said they'd wait till after the demonstration before asking any more questions.

'Bring in the volunteers,' Augur called, and four men and four women dressed in hooded dun coloured overalls walked shyly in, accompanied by a handsome, colourfully gowned and hooded man of about forty—the Emperor's Physician. Despite their nervousness at finding themselves almost within touching distance of the Mages, all stood tall and straight and gazed around with clear, intelligent curiosity.

'What are they?' the Chief demanded.

'They're Freeman workers from the energy department, your Worship.'

'Have they all been checked for health?' someone asked.

'They have, Your Worship,' the physician replied politely.

'Then proceed.'

All the Mages leaned forward to watch Peteru and Uretep implant microchips in the volunteers' wrists and were rather obviously relieved that it seemed to be painless.

'Begin,' boomed the Chief.

The eight Freeman returned to the trolley beside the entrance, where they were given instructions by Uretep. One by one the four women mounted the mat, each whispered a different number into the shiny little computer held by Peteru, touched their wrists and disappeared, reappearing almost instantly on four different mats in front of the female Mages—naked and hairless, slightly surprised but certainly not upset, smiling and touching themselves intimately.

'Why are they smiling? What are they doing?' someone demanded.

The physician conferred with the women and reported that they felt a very powerful but pleasant sensation in their sexual areas, akin to an orgasm.

The men were then transported to the mats in front of the male Mages, arriving hairless, naked, powerfully tumescent and blithely unconcerned. They stared down at their rampant penises in amusement and, like the women, began quietly masturbating. On seeing this, the women ran to them, fondled their erections, then dropped onto hands and knees, presenting swollen vulvas. Three men needed no further invitation and mounted eagerly. The fourth declined the offer, instead fondling the scrotum of one of the sexually engaged men, who allowed him to penetrate him, making a threesome. The remaining woman shrugged and made do with her fingers. Noisy rutting continued for several minutes until the men were satisfied. The women, however, appeared insatiable, cajoling the men to fuck them again until they were pushed laughingly away. Unabashed, they set about pleasuring each other in every imaginable manner for another five minutes, watched by the Mages and four slightly bored, but unembarrassed Freeman.

As suddenly as it had arrived the sexual urge dissipated. The women got to their feet, ran their fingers through non-existent hair and smiled as if they'd enjoyed a very pleasant experience. All eight, lean, fit, healthy people submitted calmly to the Emperor's Physician's diagnostic tool, which declared everyone completely healthy and unaffected by their experience.

'Leave!' the Chief snapped abruptly, spoiling the atmosphere.

Before being led away a woman asked sweetly if they would be rewarded for their performance.

‘How dare you speak without permission!’ growled the Chief Mage. ‘As promised, when you leave this room you will be released and rewarded.’

Eight symmetrical, handsome faces relaxed into grateful smiles. They stood straighter, if that were possible, and marched proudly from the room, not bothering to pick up their clothes.

4: Peteru & Uretep Show How It's Done

'Close the door.'

Uretep jumped to obey the command leaving Peteru to shake his head in confusion. 'Isn't NumbaCruncha supposed to remain a secret until the unveiling?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'But...surely those people will talk?'

'I said they'd be released and rewarded,' the Chief Mage said with a shallow smile. 'I didn't say what they'd be released from. They have been led to a chute marked 'exit' and halfway down the negrav-lift will fail. When they hit bottom they'll be going so fast they won't have time to suffer their release from the cares of this world.'

'You mean...?'

'They'll immediately be rewarded with eternal life by becoming part of the nutrient soup that feeds the algae that feeds everyone.' Her condescending smirk shocked Peteru and Uretep to open-mouthed silence. 'What?' the Mage laughed. 'Their fate disturbs you? They're only Freeman, not Aristocrats, perfectly replaceable; isn't that so, Ethel?'

'Of course.' Ethel was on the small side, at least compared to the Chief, and unlike her superior, exceedingly neat and smart. 'The energy department had become over staffed, so this has been a convenient redistribution of personnel.'

'But... ' Peteru felt compelled to protest. It was the first time he had seen anyone naked apart from Uretep, and he'd been amazed at how beautiful they'd all been. Not so much their faces, although none were unpleasant to look at, but their fine, clean-limbed, lean and honed bodies exuding health and life.

'Enough!' the Chief's voice was dangerously strident. 'You will never again question the actions of a Mage. Is that clear?'

Peteru bowed his head in submission. 'Yes, your worship.'

'Good. It's question time.'

Hearts hammering, Peteru and Uretep faced their inquisitors.

'Why the sexual arousal? Does it happen to everyone? To you too?' demanded a powerfully built woman wearing an electric-blue gown.

'Yes, Your worship,' Uretep answered nervously, 'and it's very pleasurable and not in the least embarrassing. As for why, we're not sure, but tests suggest that being transported excites the part of the brain that deals with sexual responses. As you saw, it's not permanent. The urgent desire to copulate only lasts till the person is satisfied, and then he or she resumes normal behaviour. Far from having any ill effects, subsequent sexual pleasure and potency appear to be permanently increased.'

'That doesn't explain why they performed with such abandon and yet seemed completely unembarrassed.'

'Our theory is that during digital transportation some learned behaviours that are against the natural order of life, are deleted from the brain.'

'What do you mean... learned behaviours?'

'Behaviours such as embarrassment and nervousness about public nudity and sexual activity, are probably only the most obvious of the unnatural inhibitions that are removed during transport. Reproduction is the essential activity of all life, so it is unnatural to feel any inhibition or embarrassment about related activities. I imagine there's a socio-political reason for the laws proscribing those behaviours in Oasis, which I assure you we are not criticising, however, after

being transported by NumbaCruncha, consensual sexual activity seems as natural as eating, breathing, seeing or thinking, and not the slightest cause for shame or embarrassment. No doubt we will encounter more evidence of this effect in other spheres of activity as more people begin to use NumbaCruncha.'

'Is it like that for you and Peteru?'

'Yes.'

'And is the effect permanent?'

'Yes.'

'So you and he would feel no embarrassment if we asked you to have sex now, in front of us?'

'None whatever.'

'Do it then.'

'If you insist...however we'd prefer not to because we don't want to be used as objects for other people's curiosity. It's important to understand that after transport the desire for sex, although strong, is not a compulsion. One can decide not to do it. You saw the men became reluctant, not from embarrassment, but because they'd had enough. Sex is more tiring for them than women. The decision about whether to indulge in sexual activity is based on things other than embarrassment.'

The Chief nodded thoughtfully, turned to the others and said with a smile, 'I needn't tell you what a bonus this unexpected side effect will be! It almost makes me believe in divine intervention.'

Everyone laughed as at a private joke.

'I'm not sure if the Emperor will be so sanguine,' laughed an athletic and almost handsome Mage. 'He's not very well endowed in that department.'

'And you're speaking from experience, Justinian?'

'One slightly disappointing experience,' Justinian's sigh was theatrical. 'I demanded the right to sample the new head of state's virility and discovered that the man may look like a stallion but that doesn't mean he's hung or acts like one.'

'You were hoping he'd be hung like Fabien? Talk to him nicely and you never know...'

'No way!' the lean and cadaverous young man called Fabien laughed, 'Xanthippe would never forgive me for filling another man's hole, would you dear?' He turned to an equally tall and scrawny woman who ignored him, merely remarking that the Empress always seemed satisfied.

'Fortunately,' a previously quiet woman giggled, 'their personal guards *are* hung like stallions.'

Laughter. 'Alice! How would you know?'

'Because,' she continued, 'like Justinian, I too thought it essential to inspect the incoming head of state, but I sampled the bodyguard as well.' More laughter.

'It was no surprise to me that the women's urges lasted twice as long as the men,' an ancient crone in purple announced with an audible sniff. 'You men are such pathetic creatures.'

'Are you trying to start a fight, Nell?' An overweight fellow asked lethargically.

'As if she'd pick a fight with a great tub of lard like you,' a tall scrawny woman snarled. 'If it was left to men, humans would have died out millions of years ago. A quick play with themselves and they lose interest. As always it was the women who had to initiate fucking. Your people in the breeding centre had better remember that, Elbert, if you're counting on reintroducing natural breeding.'

'Xanthippe's right! If a woman wants a child she has to be aggressive. Remember all those terrible fights, maiming and murders we used to have before putting chemicals in the food to remove their sex drive?'

'Of course I remember, Ethel, but the program was only successful because of my breeding programmes! If we hadn't done that, the women would have worn all the men out. They're bloody dangerous when aroused. Apropos of that, Fabien, when we go back to natural breeding I hope your enforcers will be up to it. I don't want male-female disputes disturbing the peace we've enjoyed for so long!'

‘Elbert’s correct, Fabien. Are you ready? With his breeding work and my early education programmes we’ve always produced exactly the number, sex and type of progeny we need, when we need them, with no fuss. I hope that isn’t going to change!’

‘Don’t you get sick of blowing your own trumpet, woman?’ Fabien snapped irritably. ‘You stick to what you know and I’ll do the same!’

‘It’s your trumpet that needs blowing up! I can’t remember the last time you were hard enough to be useful!’

‘You mean I’ve been jealous of your monster for nothing?’ a potbellied, homely young man laughed. ‘Come to my bed, Xanthippe if you’re looking for a good reaming of your bore hole.’

‘Ha! Your pathetic little dick wouldn’t even touch the sides of her cavern, Melvyn.’

Cheers and encouragement from the other Mages were replaced by a sudden silence as all eyes turned to the puzzled frowns and observant eyes of the young inventors.

‘Young men,’ Elbert said with a forced smile, ‘hadn’t you realised Mages are human?’

‘Yes, your worship, and I’m very relieved to see it.’

‘Relieved? Why?’

‘We were worried the Mages might have difficulty accepting the side effects of nudity and liberated sexuality, but I realise now you are enlightened and forward-thinking rulers, as I should have expected knowing how well Oasis is governed by your worships.’

‘Ah! The sweet music of flattery. However, gratifying as it is to be worshipped, I have to confess there’s not much about us to worship.’ He turned to the others for confirmation. ‘Is there?’

‘Certainly not much about you, although that young Vassal girl you’ve been bedding lately obviously worships your rod at every opportunity.’

The genial atmosphere was restored and everyone laughed until the Chief raised her hand and turned to Peteru. ‘Don’t worry that you’ll be following the volunteers down the exit chute after we’ve picked your brains; we know you’re trustworthy. In fact, we know more about you than you know yourselves.’ She laughed dryly and turned to the others. ‘If there are any more questions let’s have them, and then I’d like the boys to demonstrate their apparatus, with the charger full of jewels. After that we’ll have another session to ask about anything we don’t understand. But first, I want the seats rearranged so everyone has a good view and no one has to shout.’

Despite no obvious signal, hooded and cloaked Vassals appeared and moved the heavy thrones to form a tight half circle on the stone floor around the edge of the central carpet, before disappearing silently. Peteru placed one ensemat in front of Ishbel’s throne while Uretep arranged the other mats to complete the circle begun by the chairs. When the Mages were seated, the two young men stood quietly in the centre of the circle.

‘Well, get on with it!’ Ishbel was already impatient.

‘Certainly, your worship.’

‘As Elbert said, forget the worship nonsense. My name’s Ishbel.’ She sighed at Uretep’s expression. ‘I suppose you imagined I’d be called Oggbog or something equally exotic? I guess it’s time I came clean and confessed what you’ve already guessed; Mages are not gods, and at this time we need you more than you need us. Oasis is old, run down, falling apart at the seams, on the verge of collapse due to a variety of problems. We have plans well underway for the future, but until your NumbaCruncha people-moving invention we were stuck for solutions to a variety of immediate concerns, which we’ll discuss after you’ve been inducted into the Mage-hood.’

‘But...!’

‘Relax. It’s merely protocol. Legally, only Mages are permitted to attend our discussions and meetings and make decisions, therefore you’ll have to become honorary Mages for the duration of our association. OK?’

Uretep and Peteru nodded thoughtfully.

‘You see,’ Ishbel continued with what the two young men thought was a little too much breezy insouciance, ‘there’s nothing exotic or mysterious about running a business, making a profit, and ensuring stability by keeping the people of Oasis in line. If NumbaCruncha is all you say it is, then your genius deserves to be rewarded handsomely, and it will be. Today you move up to the top

floors with us. Meanwhile, how does one enseemat know to send you to another one? And how does that one know to receive you?

‘And when everyone has their own implant and wants to go to one of a thousand destinations in Oasis, how will it work?’ interrupted Xanthippe.

‘The central computer will organise everything. This...’ Peteru held up the tiny metallic sphere, ‘is only a prototype able to handle about a thousand enseemats. When the system’s up and running, it’ll be replaced by a powerful computer able to handle millions of commands simultaneously. I apologise for not being clearer—I’d be a useless teacher. So, to recap...before going anywhere, the traveller stands on an enseemat, and then selects a destination by speaking a number into this little sphere. You saw each Freeman whisper, they were telling it which enseemat they wanted to go to, which is why they all ended up on the correct mats—females in front of women, males in front of men. Then when the wrist implant is pressed, a signal is sent to both the enseemat he is standing on, and the destination. The range at the moment is probably about twenty kilometres.’ Peteru smiled expecting a snort of disbelief, but there was no reaction.

‘What happens if there’s someone else on his way there or already arriving?’

‘Once a destination has been selected, that enseemat broadcasts a blocking signal preventing the computer from sending further passengers until it is empty. So it is essential, and polite, for the traveller to step off immediately on arrival.’

‘But suppose everyone wants to go to the same place, for example, the Arena?’

‘We will embed an enseemat into every seat, then either program the Arena to accept all arrivals and simply drop them in the next available seat—first in first served, or there can be pre-booking of specific seats so friends can arrange to sit together. With this system individuals could be banned or restricted to some areas...the permutations are unlimited. And as the process is virtually instantaneous it would eliminate queuing to both enter and leave the place.’

‘I calculated,’ Uretep added quietly, still somewhat in awe of his imminent promotion to Mage, ‘that we could fill the entire Arena in less than five minutes, and clear it as fast.’

‘And how would they get home?’

‘That’s as simple as leaving. Let’s call this the ‘home’ mat,’ Uretep said, pointing to the one in front of Ishbel. There will be one in every apartment. I’ll leave ‘home’ and go to the gymnasium, for example.’ He whispered into the computer that Peteru held for him, stood on the mat, pressed his wrist and almost before his clothes had hit the floor, arrived on a mat in the circle. ‘Now, Peteru also wants to go to the gym, so he does the same, but I stay on the mat.’

Peteru followed the procedure exactly, but nothing happened until Uretep stepped off. Instantly, Peteru, also naked, hairless and sporting a proud erection, was transported to stand beside Uretep.

‘To return to the last visited mat, press the wrist sensor once. To return to your home enseemat from wherever you have gone,’ Uretep explained, ‘press the wrist sensor four times quickly.’

Peteru held up his hand so everyone could see, touched his wrist four times and reappeared in front of Ishbel.

‘That’s easy enough to remember,’ Fabien grudgingly conceded, ‘But if you want to go to a new mat, you have to tell the computer thing?’

‘Exactly.’

‘OK. Now demonstrate the charger.’

Peteru took the black ovoid from the pocket of his robe on the carpet in front of Ishbel and with a cheeky grin held it beside his erection. The charger was slightly larger. Still grinning, he sat, lifted his legs so everyone had a clear view, then effortlessly slid the object far enough into his rectum to enable the sphincter to close tight. Then, standing on the ‘home’ mat, he touched his wrist and reappeared beside Uretep. After walking easily back to the carpet in front of Ishbel, he again sat with his legs apart and demonstrated how easily the charger could be ejected.

With a grin he offered it to Ishbel who called his bluff by calmly taking it, holding it gingerly to her nose, and declaring it perfectly clean. Peteru then snapped it open, placed the gold collar

around his own neck, and handed the document to Ishbel, acknowledging the total lack of applause with a self-deprecating bow.

Uretep had meanwhile fetched a soft waterproof bag containing a gold ring and a heavy gold bracelet, which he put in his mouth. After transporting himself to the home mat he removed the bag from his mouth and presented the contents to Ishbel.

She laughed in delight and attempted to slip the bracelet onto his erection. It was a tight fit over the firm ridge of his glans, and despite her tugging and squeezing would slide no further up the shaft. Laughing wildly, she turned the young man so everyone could admire the perfectly proportioned, muscular, dark brown body—naked perfection enhanced by the subtle glitter of gold encircling his monument to manhood.

5: *The Mages Do It*

‘Yes, Ishbel, your young man looks very fine,’ the slim young man who had sampled the Emperor said spitefully. ‘Can we get on with business please?’

‘Jealousy doesn’t become you, Justinian,’ Elbert, laughed. ‘Both young men are excellent proof of the high standard of my breeding program.’

‘Indeed,’ said Alice, with a hint of lust. ‘Which makes it a shame to have to go back to the old lottery of natural breeding.’

‘It may not be as bad as you imagine,’ Elbert replied. ‘You saw the excellent proportions and health of the Freemen who demonstrated NumbaCruncha for us. Centuries of careful breeding and genetic manipulation have ensured all Vassals and Freemen now look like that, so there will be no monsters.’

‘Too late to worry, anyway,’ a female Mage stated irritably. ‘We need NumbaCruncha to prevent transport catastrophe, so let’s all get used to it because we’ll be using it more than anyone when the new city is populated.’

Murmurs of nervous agreement.

‘You’re sure we can’t just disappear and never be reconstituted—or whatever it does?’ asked the potbellied young man.

‘Getting nervous, Melvyn?’ Laughed the quiet woman.

‘Aren’t you, Angie?’ asked a thin man who hadn’t spoken before.

‘I find it hard to believe there’s no sensation whatsoever,’ Fabien said. ‘I’ll try it.’

‘You just want to make us jealous,’ the thin man remarked dryly.

‘We’re all going to do it, so hold out your wrists!’ Ishbel snapped, out of patience with her subordinates.

When everyone had been given a number and an implant, and had remarked that it didn’t hurt even a bit, Fabien stepped onto the pad, whispered the number and pressed. A pile of glittering garments fell to the floor and a tall, scrawny fellow appeared on a pad at the edge of the circle, six metres distant. He was smiling, naked, hairless and sprouting an alarmingly thick, but average length erection with a large fist-like knob. ‘Come on Xanthippe! Join me,’ he called, stepping off the mat. ‘I’m desperate for a fuck.’

Giggling like a schoolgirl, Xanthippe arrived on the mat beside her lover, so thin it would seem impossible for an instrument as vast as Fabien’s to find space inside, yet within seconds they were locked in feral rutting, Fabien’s grunts only outdone by Xanthippe’s yowls of pleasure. When they came up for air both laughed easily. The eleven other Mages suddenly found the courage, stepped onto their mats and, discarding all inhibitions along with their clothes, joined the developing orgy of carnal lust. Peteru and Uretep didn’t know whether to laugh, cry or be sick.

The men were shoving their appendages into any available orifice or fold of flesh. Augur and Justinian were noisily slurping, having buried their faces in each other’s groins.

Not one of the Mages was physically attractive. Men and women alike were almost transparently pale and either flabby and obese, or scrawny with dry, sickly skin. When dressed, their faces had given no hint of the body’s decrepitude, instead suggesting a gelessness, something akin to youth. Stripped of its robes, Ishbel’s blue-veined blubber bulged like a soft elastic bag of fat that bounced, sagged, flowed and quivered. Her tiny half-circle of chin dissolved in concentric rings of fat into her neck, and massive breasts capped by distended nipples hung diagonally to each side of the gigantic belly whose navel was as large as a saucer.

As with the Freemen, the men were soon exhausted while the women kept demanding more. Having thrown Melvyn off, Ishbel was sprawled lewdly on her back, legs apart, thrusting a red

velvet slipper into her voracious vulva while bellowing for more cock. Ethel, still managing to look neat, was tugging at Elbert's flaccid manhood while attempting to insert the poor man's foot into her orifice. The other women were no more decorous in their attempts to achieve satisfaction.

'You were right, Peteru,' Ishbel said with incongruous hauteur, abandoning the effort at masturbation, rolling onto her belly and heaving herself onto all fours. 'I could easily have decided not to be screwed, but then I thought, why not? It's perfectly natural. And there's no embarrassment whatever.' With a hoot of laughter she crawled around grabbing at the wilting penises of the six depleted men as they staggered back across the soiled carpet to their thrones where they sat with idiot grins watching seven sweaty women writhing over each other; fingers, tongues, toes searching for sensitive places to stimulate.

Peteru and Uretep turned away to conceal their disgust. These people were repellent; pale unhealthy maggots that looked and smelled unwashed. Yet they clearly considered themselves the cream of humanity. The rightful rulers of the world.

'It's true what they say,' Peteru whispered. 'Scum floats to the top.'

'I feel sick,' Uretep whispered. 'It's the stench! They smell like rotting carcasses! I'm sure that scrawny one has dags! The stench is...' He raced to the edge of the chamber, concealed himself behind a curtain and vomited.

After what seemed an eternity the rutting, sucking and slurping ceased and the most powerful people on the planet—thirteen sweaty, smelly and exhausted representatives of the gods—replaced their clothes and sagged onto their thrones. After a short minute of respite Ishbel recovered and imperiously summoned the two young men.

'Your gadgets and demonstrations are persuasive. The Mages will now confer and decide on the next step.' She picked up the *enseemat* from the carpet in front of her throne. 'You called this your 'home' mat. I'll take it up to my apartment with me now. Tomorrow morning you will be summoned to complete our investigation and learn of our plans for the future. Access to the Mage accommodations is shielded, guarded, and blocked to outsiders. You have never been to my apartment and don't know where I live, so the final proof of NumbaCruncha will be when you both arrive there after travelling through more than forty fused granite floors and ceilings.' She nodded coolly, led her flagging entourage to a negrav chute and disappeared heavenward.

'Gadgets! She called NumbaCruncha a gadget! I could throttle the sow.'

'You'd never get your hands round her throat. She's a fuckwit...they all are. Whether they acknowledge it or not they're physically, and probably intellectually, inferior to just about every other human in Oasis, so they bolster their egos by putting everyone else down. Remember the way the head scientist used to rubbish everything we did when we first started working in the main lab? Yet they're still using our techniques because they're better than anything they could think of. Their egos had to be salvaged by rubbing ours.'

'You're right, as usual.' Peteru pecked his friend on the cheek. 'OK, let's get going.'

Having, as always, refused the use of Vassals, they repacked their clothes, jewellery, mats and control box in the trolley, then dropped to their apartment where they carefully checked and stored everything safely.

After scanning their rooms for bugs, a precaution they'd begun taking when another scientist seemed to know more than she should about their activities, they meditated for twenty minutes then discussed the events of the afternoon.

'Who'd have guessed?' Uretep shook his head in disbelief. 'Rutting like rats. Mad as hatters the lot of them and ugly to boot. I can't believe these are the *crème de la crème*—the rulers by divine edict of all humanity.'

'Not only ugly, but decadent as well. Did you feel their emptiness? The pathetic sense of ennui?'

'I know what you mean. They don't seem to care about anything except keeping their cushy lifestyle. Those poor Freemen who volunteered to demonstrate NumbaCruncha! I feel as if I've murdered them!'

‘They want us to move up to their quarters,’
‘So they can keep an eye on us.’
‘As if we’d want to be honorary Mages! Complicit in their degradation!’
‘Only until they’ve drained our brains,’
‘Exactly! Then it’ll be dishonourable Mages. Goodbye Uretep and Peteru, you’re past your use-by date. The algae beds need fertilising.’
‘You’re right—we already know far too much about them.’
‘So what’s the plan?’
‘First a swim and a hard workout at the gym; I feel filthy by association.’
‘Me too. And then?’
‘A meal, bed and a cuddle with the sexiest man on the planet, to flush this afternoon out of my head. Then to sleep.’
‘Yes indeed...sleep. We have to remain alert, watch our backs and be smarter than them.’
‘The last won’t be too difficult.’
‘Never underestimate the cunning of people with no moral sense. We’re at a disadvantage because we’re decent.’

As usual they had the Scientific Research Level gymnasium to themselves. Mirror-lined walls made the already generous space seem four times as large. Loose shorts and t-shirt were the regulation attire, but having exercised naked since their first visit aged four, Peteru and Uretep had continued to do so—another source of animosity from their peers.

The centrepiece was a hundred-metre-long, freeform swimming pool surrounded by artificial grass and warmed by sunlamps. A jogging track hugged the mirrored walls and every possible type of fitness equipment was attractively arranged in separate areas screened by hedge-like algal growth.

After a more than usually hard workout of all the major muscles, the young men swam ten lengths then relaxed on the side of the pool, the lamps relaxing tired muscles while replenishing vitamin D.

As they were about to leave, Vero, the Chief Scientist, sidled up and demanded to know why Augur had been in their apartment and where they’d been all afternoon. They deflected the questions with vague explanations that not only failed to convince but also fed suspicions.

Annoyed by the secrecy about NumbaCruncha that was already making their lives difficult, they returned to their apartment, wondering who’d been spying and why the Mages were keeping the Aristocratic Heads of Industry in the dark. After all, Ishbel’s engineers would have to organise the making and distribution of all the computers, enseemats and implant chips, and pot-bellied Melvyn’s Aristocratic underlings would be dealing with propaganda and other social issues arising from public nudity... They’d have to ask the Mages in the morning.

Before sleeping they analysed the day’s events and decided to pretend ignorance about everything in Oasis, and keep inventing reasons for the Mages to need them until they had an escape plan.

‘They’re as thick as the granite blocks this place is made of so it shouldn’t be too difficult to stymie them,’ Peteru said sourly. ‘What beats me is how those scum became the rulers of Oasis! Until today I was proud to be a citizen, now...’

‘I agree. It’s made me realise how smart you were in refusing to use Freeman technicians and Vassals. I reckon you’ve a sixth sense.’

‘I have—and a seventh yet to be discovered. But what if they ask to see all our detailed plans and specifications?’

‘We’ll say we’re upgrading them in the light of new knowledge, and drip-feed them the information as and when needed. We can leave a few disconnected formulae and calculations, working drawings for apparatus and so on lying around. They’ll mean nothing to anyone.’

‘Good one, but for sanity’s sake don’t let on you’ve been deciphering old records! And we’re not making any more virtual trips into the archives till this is over. I don’t trust that fat tart Ishbel or

scrawny Xanthippe. We have to keep our wits about us, stay ahead of the game and convince them we're not revolutionaries; we're model citizens still believing the crap we were taught as kids.'

'Right. So if either of us seems to be putting our foot in it, the other will interrupt and head things off.'

'Absolutely! And we'd better get an official pass to visit every place in the Oasis complex—apartments, social centres, work places, warehouses, shops...you name it, and meet as many Vassals, Freeman and Aristocrats as possible to ensure the NumbaCruncha network is complete and functional.'

'And we'll refuse to move up to live on the Mage's level, saying we can only work from here. I'm not having them breathing over my shoulder all the time.'

'And we'll put a lock on our apartment door and never let each other out of our sight!'

'Definitely! Where one goes the other goes too, so they can't use us against each other. I can't get the image out of my head of those brave Freeman being thrown down the chute into the algal beds.'

'I reckon their suffering would be nothing compared to the misery of being a Mage's Vassal.'

They kissed to seal their bond, gazed into eyes that registered love and trust, then, after a refreshing tumble on top of the bed, fell into dreamless slumber.

6: *Breakfast with the Mages*

The shrill vidcom alarm dragged them awake. Ishbel, in a vast tent of shimmering turquoise, demanded their presence immediately.

Cold showers took thirty seconds, then clasping each other tightly they stepped onto an ensemat and a nanosecond later were plunging their feet into the deep-pile of a gruesome red carpet in the huge and hideously decorated apartment belonging to the Chief Mage.

Astonished silence greeted them. They looked around and grinned.

‘You didn’t believe we could pass through tons of fused granite, did you?’ Peteru asked quietly.

‘Don’t get above yourself!’ Ishbel snapped. ‘All you’ve done is your job. And everything else you’ve promised had better be true or you’ll be dead meat!’ The Chief Mage obviously wasn’t a morning person.

‘Yes, you’re clever kids,’ Justinian added with a disparaging sneer, ‘thanks to my breeding strategy and Xanthippe’s education syllabus. I suggest you show a little humility and don’t forget to whom you owe your present position.’

Peteru and Uretep hung their heads, suddenly nervous at this bizarre turn of events. ‘Yes, your worships, thank you,’ they said with what they hoped was sufficient humility. ‘We will remember your advice.’

‘See that you do!’ Ishbel sank back into her armchair as if exhausted.

‘What surprises me,’ a miserable, exhausted looking fellow said waspishly, ‘is that each time you appear you both look so irritatingly fresh, fit and healthy—your skins glow! And those erections!’

‘Do I detect a hint of jealousy, Job?’ jeered Xanthippe. ‘I seem to recall your little stick didn’t last very long yesterday.’

Embarrassed and worried by the blatant display of animosity, Peteru quickly interrupted. ‘Skins seem healthier, Job, because every time you’re transported all the old dead skin cells are left behind. And don’t forget that hairlessness makes our cods seem larger.’

‘You’re just pathetic narcissists!’ sneered the pot-bellied, balding young man called Melvyn. ‘Strikes me as very suspect that you ogled us in action yesterday, but didn’t join in. Think you’re too good to have a bit of fun with us?’

Murmurs of angry agreement rumbled around the room.

‘Of course not!’ Uretep protested. ‘The opposite! We thought our positions were far too inferior to even contemplate socialising with you.’

‘The fact remains,’ Fabien snarled, ‘that you’ve seen us at play and doubtless made judgements about us, but we’ve not had a chance to judge your performance.’

‘I assure you, sir, we were both impressed and even jealous of the uninhibited way you all embraced the effects of transportation. As Ishbel said, you were all perfectly capable of overriding the urges, but you chose not to, and that proved your superiority to us. We are not so psychologically balanced and confident as you Mages. We hope to learn from you.’

‘Prove it!’ snapped Alice, the outwardly shy woman who’d bragged about sleeping with the Emperor’s bodyguards. ‘Fuck each other now!’

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck...’ everyone chanted as if repeating a mantra as they shifted in their seats to get a better view.

‘Certainly, your worships,’ Uretep said with a deep bow. He turned to Peteru and began softly kissing him on the lips while caressing his nipples.

Hisses of disapproval from their audience.

‘They want it rough like they do it,’ Peteru whispered urgently, ‘Prepare to suffer—or at least act as if you are.’ With that he grabbed Uretep’s by the throat and hurled him to the ground. After what appeared to be a strenuous struggle, Uretep had Peteru on his knees, right arm up behind his back while he fucked him mercilessly. Peteru broke free and within seconds was forcing his erection into Uretep’s mouth. They ended up with Uretep on his back while Peteru, impaled on his manhood, ejaculated over his lover’s chest.

‘OK,’ Ishbel said grumpily, ‘A bit wimpish, but at least you’re not just voyeurs.’

A Vassal appeared and wiped Uretep clean with a towel before disappearing as silently.

‘If you want to cover yourselves, Vassals can bring robes.’

‘No thanks, Ishbel, it’s warm in here and we’re more comfortable like this—it’s how we always work; we’ve found that physical freedom also frees the brain.’

‘Well, it’s time for breakfast. Hungry?’

‘Very.’

‘Then follow us.’

Closely followed by her grumbling entourage, Ishbel waddled through an archway and along a short hallway before turning sharp right through a narrow doorway set in metre-thick stone walls. The two young men trailed nervously after them at a respectful distance, only to become transfixed by astonishment and fear as they crossed the threshold—they were outside! In the open air! Curiosity replaced nervousness as they raised their eyes to a pale blue sky dotted with pinkish clouds. A light warm breeze caressed their skin and an instinctive self-protective urge made them back up against the wall from where they gazed in astonished curiosity at the vastness—the emptiness—the openness! It had to be fake; but intuitively they knew it wasn’t. Filling their lungs with the cleanest, freshest air they’d ever breathed, they eventually relaxed enough to look around.

The Mages were watching them with interest, as if they were laboratory specimens.

Peteru’s illicit investigations had hinted at the existence of such a vast emptiness, but the reality was not to be imagined by minds trapped since birth in a giant granite cylinder filled with recycled air. So much light! So much space! So much odourless, fresh, clean air that seemed to fill their bodies with vigour.

‘The sun’s coming into view as the planet turns,’ Ishbel announced as if she had personally organised the event. ‘Don’t be alarmed; there’s enough atmosphere between us to diffuse harmful rays. It’s safe to look at it now, but in a couple of minutes it’ll be a different story. Then it’ll make you blind.’

Nervously, they grasped the railing at the edge of the balcony and gazed in awe at the brilliant orange disc heaving itself over the horizon, unable to take their eyes away as it turned yellow, then white, causing the previously monochrome landscape to reveal a multitude of green textures separated from the observers by a flat brown plain. Gaining courage they peered over the edge expecting a thousand-metre drop. Instead, reddish soil dotted with low shrubs only a couple of metres below their feet, spread into the distance. They turned and gasped. Their entire field of vision was blocked by the vast, shallow, pale, dusty dome that enclosed the city. Unable to speak they turned again to the railing and gazed blindly around until their eyes learned to focus on distant objects and they realised that the dense, dark-green wall in the distance was made of plants. But what plants! Accustomed only to herbs and shrubs in small pots, they had never imagined such giants.

‘There’s plenty of time to gawk!’ shouted Ishbel impatiently. ‘Come to the table, breakfast’s served.’

Reluctantly, they joined the others who were already seated under a large awning at a table laden with food. Food that although looking exactly like their normal fare, tasted entirely different. So delicious was it they ate more than usual until, appetite assuaged, Peteru could no longer contain his curiosity. ‘What food is this? Why is the ground so close? How...?’

‘The food is natural,’ Augur snapped, irritated at the interruption to his gobbling. ‘The vegetables are grown by Vassals on balconies like this, and the meat is from animals we breed for the purpose.’ He returned to shovelling his food.

‘Everything’s delicious!’ Peteru said between mouthfuls.

‘The reason the land is only two metres below us,’ Ishbel explained, spraying half-chewed food at her listeners who didn’t dare duck, ‘is that Oasis is an underground city. As Chief engineer I decided it was easier and safer to excavate down, than to construct above. Only the Mages apartments are above ground because we can appreciate the freedom, having been raised in it.’

‘Enough questions!’ shouted Melvyn. ‘You’ll give me indigestion! For goodness sake let us eat in peace!’

Having eaten more than enough the young men were forced to sit and watch the stomach-churning spectacle for another ten minutes; the perfection of their first alfresco morning marred by the slurping and slobbering of thirteen gluttonous Mages. When everyone had finally stuffed themselves to bursting, Vassals appeared, removed the table and its contents, and replaced them with fifteen armchairs—thirteen in a half circle with two facing them.

While waiting, Uretep and Peteru walked back to the railing and gazed in stupefaction. ‘The fact that we’re standing here means ambient radiation has dropped to safe levels, so rainwater, air and soil are no longer toxic and solar radiation is no longer lethal.’ He said softly before turning to his hosts. ‘That means everyone can go outside!’

‘Everyone?’

‘Yes.’

‘You want Aristocrats, Vassals and Freemen to run away?’ Fabien sneered, moving to the railing and draping his arm around Uretep’s shoulders, drenching him in the stench of sour sweat. Justinian and Elbert also joined them at the rail, looking at the view as if they’d never seen it before.

‘Why would they?’ Peteru asked innocently.

‘Fuck you’re stupid.’ Fabien shrugged and wandered back to the armchairs.

Uretep turned to Elbert. ‘Fabien said that everyone would run away if they knew it was safe to go outside; why would they do that?’

‘Theoretically,’ Elbert sighed, ‘Xanthippe’s educational brainwashing prevents all desire for freedom, but no matter what we do, humans always retain a cunning streak. They’re devious bastards—you never know what they’re thinking. Better to be sure than sorry is our motto, so as far as the rest of the population’s concerned, solar radiation is still lethal.’

‘But you’ll tell the Aristocracy it’s safe?’

‘Why?’ snarled a heavily made up woman through lipstick-smudged teeth. ‘Will it make them happy? Will they still be content to let us Mages run things? Of course they won’t!’ she snorted, answering her own question. ‘They’ll set out to claim land, grow food as we do, take their Vassals and Freemen with them, breed, build cities and armies and attack us and each other until the world is awash in blood! Is that what you want?’

‘No, of course not,’ Peteru said hastily. ‘But surely...’

‘She’s absolutely right, Peteru,’ Uretep interrupted. This must remain a secret if we are to preserve our way of life and prevent the horrors this wise woman speaks of.’ He turned to her. ‘Forgive our ignorance and inexperience. We have a great deal to learn.’

‘You have indeed, so sit down!’ Ishbel bellowed from under the canopy, indicating the chairs facing the rest of the Mages who were returning to sprawl over their armchairs.

Three young women in hooded white shifts appeared and served everyone drinks. As Peteru and Uretep took the crystal goblets they smiled and thanked them.

‘They’re Vassals!’ Ishbel shouted angrily. ‘Invisible! We don’t acknowledge their existence. Remember that when you’re honorary Mages!’

‘But they can see and hear everything,’ Uretep said, confused.

‘They can see so they don’t fall over. But their eardrums and tongues have been removed so they can’t tell tales. They never leave this apartment and when I’m sick of them they take a ride down the exit chute. Once this ceremony is over you’re eligible for a dozen of them—any sex you like, to do with exactly as you please, so learn to treat them properly.’

7: Peteru and Uretep Learn About Oasis

The Vassal who was filling Ishbel's long-stemmed glass stumbled, knocking the fragile thing to the floor where it shattered. The girl sank to her knees in front of her mistress making apologetic noises.

With a face devoid of expression, Ishbel picked up the stem of the goblet, removed the Vassal's hood, dragged her head towards her by the curly black hair and stabbed the jagged crystal five times into the smooth brown neck. Blood gushed from a severed artery and spilled over Ishbel's lap onto the floor. The dying girl's wail was replaced by soundless shuddering as the other two Vassals attempted to lift her gently away.

Ishbel's swinging fists caught them both on the sides of their heads. They cowered in abject terror as she pointed first to the Vassal's hair and then to the edge of the terrace. They dragged the wretched girl by the hair to the edge, then retreated inside.

A pouting young blonde who looked no more than fifteen, wandered casually over, poked at the twitching body with her sandalled foot, then put two fingers in her mouth and let loose with a shrill whistle. Neither Peteru or Uretep could recall seeing her the previous afternoon, but got to their feet with all the others and joined her at the railing as if waiting for something exciting to happen. A few seconds later two giant, slavering dogs raced around the corner, barking furiously.

Lips twisted in a faint smile, the teenager jammed her foot against the dying girl's hip and pushed her under the railing and over the edge into the razor teeth of the dogs below. Peteru and Uretep found themselves glued to the railing in horror, unable to move. Forever after they could recall the growls, the sound of bones crushed between massive jaws, slabs of bloodied flesh being slammed against the granite below, and worst of all the cruel, dissatisfied smiles of Mages bored to the edge of insanity.

Her authority demonstrated, Ishbel's sour humour mellowed and she turned a sly smile on the young men. 'I've been meaning to say you're an exceptionally handsome and well built pair and certainly look better naked than clothed.' Her laugh was lewd and laced with vitriol. 'You'll need to be careful in public among thousands of sexually aroused citizens emerging from NumbaCruncha... Rape is on the cards, don't you think?'

'I think,' Uretep replied carefully, 'that while violence used in the interest of self preservation is a natural reaction, unprovoked violence like rape, derives from social conditioning, like embarrassment about nudity and sexual activity. That means transit by NumbaCruncha will probably decrease its incidence and make public places safer.'

Ishbel was spared the need to respond by the arrival of a Vassal with new robes. She assisted her mistress to change while someone else cleaned the carpet. When her soiled armchair was replaced, she sat, accepted another crystal chalice of whatever it was they were drinking, sipped, then in a seductively mellow contralto announced that the initiation ceremony of the two temporary Mages would begin. 'Kneel in front of me and look up into my eyes.'

Peteru and Uretep did as bidden. Ishbel picked up the goblet and emptied the contents over their faces. Everyone laughed as if it was the funniest joke ever.

When she finally stopped laughing enough to catch her breath, Ishbel stood and pulled them to their feet. 'Sorry boys, there's no prescribed ceremony, as this has never happened before, but it seemed as if there should be so I invented this myself. All that's required is your signature on a document that says you will obey the laws of the Mages. And that's no big deal because we make the laws.'

More laughter that seemed too wild, verging on the hysterical. Perhaps there was intoxicant in the drink. Neither of the young men had taken more than a sip so they forced themselves to laugh, then read the document, which seemed to be exactly as Ishbel had said, so they signed and returned to their seats.

‘Back to business,’ Ishbel bellowed, clearly on a power-fuelled high.

Augur raised his fist.

‘You’ve got a problem Augur?’

‘I still don’t understand this NumbaCruncha thing,’ Augur said petulantly. ‘I can’t get my head around the fact that you can transport living things through solid rock. It has to be a trick.’

‘Think of it like this,’ Peteru explained. ‘When you send a fax, the instructions pass wirelessly through walls until they reach a machine that turns intangible waves into an identical copy.’

‘Yes, but it’s only a copy—the original remains.’

‘So are we copies—but identical copies. It’s important to remember that humans are made of the same basic stuff as every other thing in the universe. As a poet once wrote, we are but stardust. Everyone in this room has now been transported. That means every tiny particle of which we’re made has been analysed digitally, disassembled and converted to a formula that was sent, using neutrinos as the carrier, to a receiver—the enseemats—which assembled an exact copy.’

‘Assembled out of what? That’s what I don’t get.’

‘Out of ‘stardust.’ Out of the energy from which every element in the entire universe is made. Literally out of the air. It’s simply a question of how this energy is arranged.’

‘What happens to the old body?’

‘Nothing. Once disassembled, the energy released is used to transfer the neutrinos and assemble the copy, it’s an energy neutral system, which means it’s very cost effective.’

Their questioner sat down to digest this indigestible idea in silence.

‘And if we do it, everyone will be going around starkers,’ Elbert muttered thoughtfully. ‘It’s lucky we’ve been selectively breeding for the last few hundred years—at least everyone including Vassals are as physically attractive as it is possible to breed. The secret is symmetry,’ he added to no one in particular. ‘You see, symmetrical bodies are more economical because they’re more powerful, less prone to faults, problems and...’

‘Yes, yes, Elbert,’ Augur interrupted rudely. ‘You’ve been very clever, but praising you for your clever manipulation of genes is not what we’re here for.’

Yes, everyone in Oasis is beautiful and handsome—apart from you disgustingly ugly Mages, Uretep wanted to scream, only preventing himself by biting hard on the inside of his cheek.

‘That’s true, Augur,’ Ishbel said impatiently, ‘but it has to be admitted that Elbert’s technicians have been especially successful with these two beguiling specimens.’ She turned to the young men. ‘Have you donated sperm yet?’

‘No.’

‘Then you must.’ Her smile was prurient. ‘I’ll take the samples myself.’ After a nauseating burp she slurred, ‘I’m exhausted. Nell, you take over.’

Nell, the adolescent girl who had shoved the Vassal to the dogs, sat up straighter and yawned. Peteru couldn’t remember what she’d looked like naked, but at least she wasn’t fat. Her voice matched the face; high pitched, querulous and with a slight nasal whine. As if aping the adults she sprawled back in her chair and asked if the young men had any questions before she started outlining the city’s problems.

‘What’s the history of Oasis?’ Peteru asked. ‘I mean, where do we come from? How long have we been here? What’s beyond all those huge plants over there? Is it true that we’re shipwrecked aliens on an inhospitable planet, doing very well despite the odds?’

‘So many questions, the answers to which are lost in time,’ the girl replied indolently. ‘The truth, if there is ever any truth, has been modified by myths concocted by the unbroken line of Mages to quell riots and maintain order. However, it is true that we are shipwrecked aliens from a greater planet, but unfortunately all the old records have been destroyed or are in an unrecoverable form. Life in Oasis hasn’t been a smooth ride, and the depredations of time and civic unrest over the

last thousand years have taken their toll.’ She lapsed into silence and closed her eyes as if lost in thought.

A warm breeze caressed their skin and strange small noises filled the air—natural sounds totally different from the mechanical hum that was the constant background to life inside. A mournful cry emitted by a great black creature gliding overhead had the two young men ducking in fear. The others laughed immoderately.

‘A crow,’ a weak and tired fellow muttered. ‘Nasty brutes, they chase away other birds.’

‘It’s flying!’ Peteru exclaimed. ‘How? What are birds?’

‘Flying rats!’ snapped Nell, waking from her trance with an irritated shake of her head. ‘Try to concentrate on important things. Now, where were we? Old stories.... Ah yes. There’s always some truth in myths,’ she stated as if it were a threat. ‘It seems that a very, very long time ago, before we arrived, this world was inhabited by an intelligent life form with highly developed technology. Then the seas invaded and drowned just about everything, followed by a catastrophe that caused the air, water and earth to become poisoned with chemicals and radiation. Not long afterwards, that race of whatever they were called, became extinct.

‘Then our ancestors arrived and built Oasis, where we now live, far from wild seas and protected from poisons and radiation by burying deep into granite and covering everything with a protective dome. Over time, our numbers slowly increased and Oasis has been enlarged from a relatively insignificant outpost of civilization to its present size. Unfortunately, some of the additions were excavated with less care than others,’ she sent a baleful stare to Ishbel before continuing, ‘and we are now reaping the problems.’ She took a sip of her drink.

The two young men risked a look around. Everyone else seemed to be asleep.

‘When we first started this place,’ Nell continued, ‘we foolishly embraced the notion of individual rights and equality—with the inevitable result.’ She paused and shook her head in disbelief.

‘What result? Surely that’s the right thing to do?’ Uretep asked.

‘Always, when everyone is permitted to hold and express whatever views they like, conflict ensues. Ideas, you see, are like a disease, they spread and take hold, and the holders of these opinions begin to imagine their ideas are natural laws that everyone should obey. From there it’s but a short step to imprisoning, torturing or killing everyone who disagrees with your idea of how things are or ought to be.

‘Oasis was almost destroyed by such schisms many centuries ago. Our recovery from the brink of extinction, “The Renaissance Miracle”, was due to the creation of the myth of Domino and Domina—sibling gods whose copulation created the universe. The worship of these two gods to the exclusion of all others is now compulsory for all citizens—although this is not enforced on Aristocrats. This religion and its holy laws were the creation of Nom Ueid, a wise man who understood that most people need to believe in powerful supernatural beings that take a personal interest in them. The smartest part of the dogma is the gods’ promise that if people obey their laws unquestioningly, then they will live forever after death in a perfect land beyond the reach of suffering. Once the religion was fully established, all notions of an individual’s right to personal beliefs and thought was abolished and the present caste system implemented to ensure stability.’

She paused as if inviting questions and took another, larger sip of her drink.

‘Caste system?’ Peteru asked. ‘I know everyone has different jobs and responsibilities, and Aristocrats, Freemen and Vassals don’t mix socially, but surely everyone has the same rights? When we first worked in a large laboratory with other scientists, they had Vassal and Freemen assistants that I imagined they treated them the same as they treat each other. I suppose their apartments aren’t as luxurious as ours, but I thought they’d have the chance to work up the ladder, to improve their lot...?’

The amused incredulity on the faces of the listeners who were awake unnerved him. ‘I’m ignorant of just about everything outside my work,’ he added hastily, ‘so I hope you’ll forgive my stupidity. I wasn’t taught anything about the social structure of Oasis when I was a kid—I started

work in the lab when I was four and until today I haven't given anything apart from our research much thought.'

'You're only sixteen now, so it's perfectly natural,' Ishbel interrupted with a patronising smile. 'Don't beat yourself up over it. In theory, you're correct. As someone once wrote, "All people are equal, but some are more equal than others." Oasis society can best be imagined as a wide-based, shallow cone. The lower half of the cone, seventy-five percent of the population, is composed of Vassals. Half the remaining height, twenty percent of the population, are Freeman, and the remaining five percent are Aristocrats. We Mages are not part of the cone—we're outside it—literally.' She laughed at her joke, smugly accepting nods and noises of encouragement before continuing.

'These three groups only meet professionally, never socially. Oasis is headed by a constitutional Emperor and Empress, both of whom are elected by popular ballot every five years. One is always a Freeman, this year the Empress, the other a Vassal, the Emperor. Although they obviously don't know each other before their ascension to the thrones, our popular rulers appear to live as a contented and happy couple, graciously attending functions, opening shows and festivals, and most importantly, informing the people of the wishes of the Mages in day to day matters. They're immensely popular and highly visible and a welcome distraction from the sombre reality of most people's lives. They have no power, of course, but the fact that they were voted in to office encourages the masses to believe that everyone has a say in the running of Oasis. A hopeless, but harmless belief, I'm pleased to say.'

'What happens to the Royal couple after their five years are up?'

Loud laughter greeted this question.

'We could hardly send them back to their miserable cells when they know the workings of the state,' Justinian, the once-only lover of the current Emperor managed to reply between giggles. 'He and his wife are promised a life of luxury and given a sumptuous farewell party before descending the exit chute in great style.'

More laughter.

With great difficulty Peteru and Uretep concealed their disgust behind masks of amusement, while Nell took several large sips of her drink before continuing as if the whole social structure was nothing but a huge joke for the benefit of the Mages.

'The top Aristocrats, called Entrepreneurs, ensure the smooth running of Oasis by organising and managing the multitude of services that, under the supervision of a Mage, keep the place functioning smoothly; things like surveillance and punishment, maintenance of open spaces, buildings, population and breeding, education, water and food supply, waste disposal and energy supply. They are immensely wealthy, of course, and manage their responsibilities with the assistance of Freeman and an army of Vassals that they own and can use or abuse as they see fit.

'Just below the Entrepreneurs are the divisions of social researchers, thinkers, scientists, health professionals, philosophers...people like you who share the wealth, luxury and other benefits of Aristocratic living in this module of Oasis.

'On each side of the Aristocratic module—joined but not interconnecting—are the modules of the Freeman caste. Small businessmen, supervisors, overseers and executive assistants of the various service departments, as well as shopkeepers and private tradesmen. Their quarters are comfortable, although not of the same standard as ours. They have as many Vassals as they need, and may use them as they will. However they must worship the gods and are subject to more personal curbs on their freedom than Aristocrats who are, in practice, considered above the laws.

'All the rest of the people in Oasis, as Ishbel said, exactly seventy-five percent, belong to the Vassal caste. They do all the repetitive, boring, dirty and dangerous work of maintaining the machinery that's required to keep half a million humans alive. Their reward is food, clothes, minimal lodging and a little pocket money to spend on minor luxuries. They are usually too exhausted to cause problems, but if they do they're exterminated immediately and replaced from the pool.' Nell sat back as if exhausted. 'Any questions?'

'What's the pool?'

‘That’s my department,’ Elbert piped up. ‘I oversee the Aristocrats who run the breeding program that produces nearly perfect physical specimens, intellectually geared by Xanthippe’s education program to their future employment. Thus Freeman are intelligent but not prone to questioning, while Vassals are not much smarter than imbeciles and totally incurious, as you’ll see when you meet the Emperor. Sperm and eggs are removed from suitable, healthy candidates, genetically modified, then used to breed slightly more specimens than projected replacement numbers, in case of accidents such as that stupid slave breaking the goblet. She and the eight Freeman volunteers for NumbaCruncha that we disposed of yesterday, for example, will be replaced tomorrow from the cryonics store.’

‘Cryonics?’

‘Freezing living specimens and then reviving them when needed. Children are bred and raised in crèches and nurseries until they reach a certain age, depending on their future use, then stored cryogenically until needed. You were revived at the age of four; Vassals required to do heavy manual labour are kept till they’re about the age you are now.’

‘Interesting,’ Peteru muttered then asked. ‘I noticed the clumsy Vassal was very dark skinned, almost black, but the Freeman are dark gold. The little I’ve seen of the bodies of Aristocrats indicates they’re sort of cream, and Mages are almost translucent white. Why’s that?’

‘So no one can pretend they belong to another caste. So the enforcers know who they’re dealing with. Oh, lots of reasons, many of which are historical.’

‘Uretep and I, on the other hand, are darker than Freeman but not quite as dark as Vassals. Shouldn’t we be cream like other Aristocrats?’

‘Good question. We’d been trying to breed a sure-fire genius for over a century, but had no certainty of success until someone accidentally included a gene for Vassal skin colour in the mix. The first dozen or so products were pure geniuses every time, like you two, but feelings among the Aristocracy were so opposed to letting them live or even work in the Aristocratic apartments, they were terminated before they could do anything useful. Since then we’ve been able to persuade the Aristocrats to tolerate you, and the results have been better than expected.’

‘So that’s why we’re ignored, spoken to rudely and avoided. It may sound silly, but that’s been a good thing. If they hadn’t treated us like that we’d never have been able to create NumbaCruncha.’

‘Why not?’

‘If we’d had to work with those tunnel-visioned Aristocrat cretins in the general laboratories, we’d have accomplished nothing because of their interference. Being left totally on our own, in our own laboratory for the last five years has allowed us to think creatively.’

‘Makes sense,’ Elbert mumbled thoughtfully.

‘Enough of that, snapped Ishbel. ‘Anymore questions before we get down to the main issues?’

‘How do you make everyone do as they’re told?’ Uretep asked.

‘That’s my concern,’ Fabien growled, glaring at them from under heavy eyebrows.

‘Aristocrats obey us because it’s in their interests to do so, and they’ll disappear if they don’t. Everyone else does as they’re told because they believe we are the voice of the twin gods. It’s a benign fraud but I’m sure you’ll agree that fear of eternal retribution after death for everyone who doesn’t obey while they’re alive, is a less messy way of keeping Vassals and Freeman passive than constantly beating the shit out of them. It’s also a hell of a lot cheaper.’

The menace in his voice sent a tremor of fear through Uretep who quickly thanked Nell, Fabien and Elbert for their explanations. ‘I’m sorry we seem so stupid,’ he said as if ashamed of his ignorance. ‘But the only people we’ve had conversations with are the few Aristocrats who are prepared to do more than bark orders at us. There aren’t many guys our age and we don’t seem to have much in common with those who are.’

‘Finding friends you can trust or share interests with is an eternal problem, because humans are naturally selfish and untrustworthy,’ Ethel, the neatly coiffed, plucked, painted and slim Chief of Energy explained with the air of disappointed experience. ‘It’s even more difficult for people

belonging to tiny minorities—like us. We continue to hope the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.’

‘I can see that, and I’m not complaining, it’s just that I think our lack of a social life explains our ignorance.’

‘Ha! You’re no more ignorant than the usual Aristocratic social butterfly. Don’t sell yourselves short.’

‘So, if Vassals and Freeman do all the work, I guess they also maintain the algal beds, make the food, supply the kitchens and cook the food.’

‘Correct.’

‘But how do the power, water and other services keep functioning on days when the whole population is in the Arena, sometimes all afternoon and into the evening?’

‘Everything’s automated.’

‘That’s amazing!’ Peteru enthused, eyes wide in admiration. ‘That explains why it all runs so smoothly, we’ve never had to wait even a second for our food, the lights always work, the chutes...you guys really know how to organise.’

Uretep cringed. Surely the Mages could see he was being facetious, laying it on so thick. ‘If it’s all automated, what does everyone do then?’ he asked to defuse suspicion.

‘Humans do what the machines can’t. Odd repairs and maintenance, replacing parts and checking for unusual malfunctions, wipe up spills...all the dumb jobs.’

‘I’m impressed. I never realised Oasis was so automated...that you Mages were so...brilliant!’ Peteru was at it again, seeing how many compliments they could absorb before realising he was taking the mickey.

‘Why do we enter at different Arena gates and sit in segregated areas?’ Uretep asked nervously. ‘Would it be wrong to socialise with some of the other castes?’

‘What would be the point?’ Justinian drawled. Vassals have nothing in common with Freeman, and neither have anything in common with Aristocrats. Mages have nothing in common with any other social group. You two don’t count, being freakish mutations.’

‘All casts have been mentally conditioned to think only about their work!’ snapped Elbert. ‘They know nothing, and desire nothing more than what they do. Have you been bored? You’ve had the best scientific education, the use of pleasure areas, gymnasium and swimming pool; you’ve been entertained with concerts and healthy activities. Thanks to the brilliance of my breeding program you have Peteru, and could have used Freeman and Vassals to assist with your research and maintain your apartment if you chose—which you didn’t. Well? Have you been bored?’

‘No, I’ve had a great life doing exactly what I want, when I want...and yet...suddenly I realise there’s so much I don’t know about Oasis. I’ve heard of the two gods, of course, but I don’t remember being told their laws.’

‘You haven’t been told the gods’ laws, because the gods don’t exist!’ Ishbel interrupted impatiently. ‘As we explained before, we indoctrinate Vassals and Freeman with fear of retribution by the gods, to keep them in order. Like everyone else in Oasis, both you and Peteru are the product of carefully selected genes, but even more importantly, of careful education that inculcated right attitudes to the work to which you were assigned. You have been deliberately designed as a totally compatible and complementary pair for use in scientific research, just as Aristocrat entrepreneurs have been bred by selecting the right genes. Elbert’s breeding centre and Xanthippe’s educational indoctrination are two of our most successful enterprises, kept extremely busy maintaining the right number of suitable people for each caste.’

‘So the skin colour, intellect, appearance and ability of every inhabitant are decided by Elbert, Xanthippe and their teams of geneticists and indoctrinators?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why are the Mages white?’

‘We are the only humans on the planet that have not been deliberately designed.’

‘That makes the rest of us not quite human.’

‘Or super-human, take your pick.’

‘Why weren’t you designed?’

‘We are the sole survivors of the wrecked space ship, and the builders of Oasis. We are the ‘progenitors’ of every inhabitant—including you. We are, therefore, everyone’s parents, the owners of Oasis, and perfectly qualified by experience and descent to rule.’

‘You’re telling me you’re a thousand years old, and every one of the five hundred thousand inhabitants of Oasis are descendants of you thirteen Mages?’ Peteru’s tone verged on the insolent and Uretep kicked his leg.

‘Yes.’

‘Impossible! You’re all too young!’ Peteru blurted rudely.

‘No more impossible than your NumbaCruncha. We are exact clones of the original survivors. Our identical copies are raised, educated and taught everything they need to know until the age of fifteen, then kept in cryonic storage until we are ready to rest. When that time arrives our brains are connected, our personalities and all our knowledge are transferred to the new version of us, and in the process the old one stops living. I am in every respect, except for my knowledge of intervening centuries, the same person who arrived on this planet so long ago.’ Ishbel pointed at the blonde fifteen year-old girl. ‘Nell was resurrected overnight. Today a beautiful young girl, yesterday a decrepit old hag in purple.’

‘Thanks, Ishbel, I’ll return the compliment one day,’ Nell snapped.

Ignoring her, Ishbel ploughed on like an exasperated parent tired of her offspring’s endless questions. ‘Education has always been restricted to things that will be essential for your work, so you were not taught about us, the gods or social history. What people learn is always determined on a strict need to know basis.’ Her voice had taken on a hectoring tone and she appeared irritated, as did everyone else at so much impertinent questioning. Mages were to be obeyed, not questioned, and the atmosphere had become charged.

Peteru took a breath preparing to argue the stupidity of such a restrictive system, but Uretep placed a warning hand on his arm. ‘Thanks, everyone,’ he said with great sincerity. ‘It’s obvious that you’ve all done a great job and I can’t tell you how grateful we are to have had the opportunity of working on what interests us most. I feel much more secure now I know this. You Mages have just so much experience. I’m..I’m humbled.’

Intuitively, he had said exactly the right thing. Faces relaxed, heads nodded and the air lost its tension.

‘Thank you, Uretep. It’s always a pleasure to be appreciated,’ Ishbel said with the slightly prissy sniff of someone who always feels she deserves more gratitude and recognition than she gets.

‘Everyone appreciates you, Ishbel,’ several Mages muttered, ‘it’s just that time’s running out and...’

‘I’m not a fool, Ethel, I realise there’s no time to lose,’ Ishbel snapped. She turned to the young men. ‘Further history lessons will have to wait, because the future of Oasis now sits squarely on your shoulders. We need the considered suggestions and criticism of two intelligent minds unpolluted by politics, to give us a fresh perspective.’ She turned to the only person in the room who had not yet spoken, a harassed looking, middle aged woman with hooded eyes, a large nose and short cropped hair that made her look mannish. ‘Angie, bring the young men up to date.’

8: Problems

Angie should have been in bed. Nauseating, phlegm-filled snorts accompanied her exhaustive catalogue of the problems requiring urgent attention. Suddenly choking on a particularly large gob of mucus, she coughed violently, spraying her two listeners with malodorous slime before scuttling back inside.

No one took any notice.

Not daring to wipe Magus mucus from their bodies, Peteru and Uretep conferred softly until Ishbel impatiently demanded to know what they thought

‘The problems are daunting, but stimulating,’ Peteru said thoughtfully, itemising them on his fingers. ‘Oasis power generators are no longer up to the task; most other services are run down; buildings are crumbling due to age and a series of minor earthquakes over the last year; malfunctioning negrav chutes are dropping people to their deaths; air-conditioning plants need an upgrade; there’s been a noticeable rise in average temperature and increased humidity and air pollution, with a corresponding increase in lung infections over the last two years. Vassals are becoming difficult because of food shortages due to disease in algae beds; the mines beneath the city are exhausted, and toxic waste has filtered into the deep drinking-water wells. In other words, Oasis is on its last legs and it’s a case of rejuvenate or perish. How am I going?’

‘You’ve grasped the essentials.’

‘Your solution is to construct a new Oasis.’

‘Exactly. In fact the replacement is already completed, and plans for the construction of three new Oases are underway.’

‘That’s astonishing!’

‘Yes, and it’s thanks to me,’ an oleaginous little Mage with slicked down red hair, moist fat lips and very little in the way of chin, announced proudly. ‘I’ve always had the tools, but for centuries have asked in vain for a workforce. Eventually, twenty-eight years ago I persuaded Elbert to start a breeding program that produced enough Vassals to fell the forest that used to extend right up to this terrace. After clearing we blasted a gigantic hole in the nearest granite outcrop, then brought in trained Vassals to finish the work by laser-carving replicas of Oasis modules into the walls; the ideal design for a city state as I’m sure you’ll agree.’

Peteru nodded.

Uretep had been watching his friend with growing alarm and interrupted before he could raise objections. ‘So there is a totally new empty city just waiting to be populated?’

‘Yes.’

‘Aren’t the Freeman and Vassals that built it living there?’

‘Of course not! Apart from the fact that having built the city they know it’s safe to live outside, they’ve been worked to death and were needed as starter fodder for the algal beds.’

‘So the city is completely uninhabited?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

Everyone cast accusing looks at Elbert.

‘He hasn’t even started to breed the Vassals, Freeman and Aristocrats that will be required to inhabit the cities,’ sneered Job.

‘Untrue!’ Shouted Elbert. ‘You know damn well that all the spare incubators have been out of commission until recently. I’m doing everything I can but...’ his voice trailed off and he stormed over to the railing, affecting interest in the distant forest.

‘Now you’ve offended him,’ Nell sniggered.

‘It’s not funny,’ Fabien yawned.

‘It certainly isn’t,’ Ishbel said with a sigh. ‘Elbert fucked up. He relied on continuous power and didn’t install back-up generators so the frozen multitudes who should have been living in the new city rotted in their capsules during several power failures.’

‘Even if that hadn’t happened, you had no way of moving them to the new city without them discovering it was safe to go outside,’ Nell said with a sly wink at red haired Job. ‘That’s why you’re so interested in NumbaCruncha.’

‘Where is the city?’

‘Not far—you can see it from here. Come and look.’

They followed Job to the rail.

‘There,’ he pointed.

It wasn’t surprising they’d missed the large dome that barely protruded above the rough plain. It was the same colour as the soil, and partially hidden by intervening scraggy shrubs.

‘How far away is it?’

‘About three kilometres.’

‘How were you intending to move everyone between the cities?’

‘Tunnels.’

‘But?’

‘But although the surface is solid enough to support moving the workers and equipment when it’s been dry for a while, we discovered while tunnelling that a few metres beneath the crust is quicksand. In fact after the rainy season, just jumping on the surface turns everything into a quagmire. We lost several transporters that way. We knew the granite outcrops in which we’ve built were the product of ancient eruptions, but didn’t know they were originally islands in a vast inland sea that had silted up. Our glorious engineer didn’t think to test.’ He directed a venomous glare at Ishbel who pretended she hadn’t heard.

‘Enclosed trains on well-cushioned rails?’ Peteru asked.

‘During the wet season even the slightest vibration turns it into a slurry.’

‘I reckon you’re going to a great deal of trouble to avoid telling people what they have the right to know—that the planet isn’t a death trap.’

‘We decide what people have the right to know, and you’ve been told why that is not one of them,’ Ishbel snarled.

‘Well, this puts NumbaCruncha even more at the centre of things!’ Uretep quickly interrupted, seeing irritation on several faces. ‘Instant transport between the cities means no one will be required to go outside.’ His enthusiasm seemed perfectly genuine, but a quiet, pale woman sitting at the back whispered into her notebook then looked the young man in the eyes.

‘You’re a smooth talker, Uretep,’ she said softly, ‘flattery will get you just about everywhere.’

Uretep laughed easily. ‘Thanks ah...’ he paused as if embarrassed at not knowing the woman’s name.

‘Alice.’

‘Luckily, Alice, I’m already exactly where I want to be, thanks to you Mages.’

Peteru, belatedly realising he might have aroused suspicion, became suddenly enthusiastic. ‘A new city is fantastic, and three more on the drawing boards. After they’re finished will there be more?’

‘Many more,’ Xanthippe purred. ‘A great many more; and larger. Properly handled, population increase will be exponential. I’ve calculated that within twenty years as far as the eye can see all the forests will be replaced by cities with a total population of at least five hundred million. With the technology at our disposal there’s no limit to our expansion... if Elbert gets his arse into gear.’

‘I assure you it is well and truly in gear!’ Elbert growled as he sauntered back, softly adding as he sat, ‘Impatient bitch.’ Turning to the inventors he almost smiled. ‘We recently stopped adding chemical sterilisers to foods and fluids, and tests indicate that females have already started ovulating, so the Empress has had to teach them about menstruation.’

‘Males are also doing well; sperm is viable and copious, thanks to the continuing health and vigour of most people.’ Justinian added morosely.

‘Nice of you to wake up, Justinian. If you stayed awake more often we might have avoided many of our problems.’

‘It seems clear to me that Oasis can’t be repaired while its full of people,’ Peteru interjected thoughtfully, ‘so I reckon the first thing to do is make the entire population familiar with NumbaCruncha, then we can send everyone to the new city, leaving a crew here to make repairs.’

‘I was on the point of suggesting that,’ Fabien muttered. ‘As you’re so smart, how do you suggest we introduce Vassals and Freemen to these things?’ indicating the enseemat. ‘Not to mention the bloody Aristocrats.’

‘You’ve also been asleep!’ Alice snapped. ‘We decided at the meeting last night that Ishbel will announce at the next Arena Gathering that she has met with the gods, Domino and Domina, who instructed her to remove all laws restricting sexual activity, and sexual activity is now a requirement of faith. Furthermore, those who copulate with as many different partners as possible, as often as possible, in as many places as possible, will be the most loved by both Domino and Domina.’

‘Exactly,’ Ishbel interrupted. ‘That’ll be followed immediately by an official demonstration of NumbaCruncha by the Emperor and Empress, who will be transported instantaneously across the Arena and copulate in front of the entire population—in case anyone should think the gods are not serious.’

‘*You* can’t be serious! The fellow’s not interested in females.’

‘A trip by NumbaCruncha will at least make him randy, we’ll threaten him with castration if he doesn’t fuck the bitch.’

Peteru scowled.

‘That’s brilliant, Ishbel,’ Uretep gushed to prevent Peteru saying something critical. ‘Seeing the Emperor and Empress doing it will put the seal of approval on everything. It’ll remove any residual shyness that might have prevented success.’

Ishbel smirked disgustingly.

Holding a large handkerchief to her nose, Angie wandered back onto the terrace. ‘And to facilitate conception,’ she announced with absurd solemnity, ‘I will ensure that the protein content of food is increased.’

‘I will also inform the masses,’ Ishbel said in primly pious tones, ‘that Domino and Domina have decreed that it is the bounden duty of every woman over the age of fourteen to bear children in their honour. Pregnancy, and the natural birth of a child to every woman will result in the blessings of the gods.’

‘As you said yesterday, Ishbel, it almost makes you believe in divine intervention,’ Xanthippe laughed. ‘We thought it was going to be difficult to sell free sex and pregnancy after centuries of religious prudery, sexual guilt and artificial breeding. Now it looks as if it’ll be a breeze.’

‘All we’re waiting for is enough enseemats and control boxes,’ Augur said peevishly. ‘Have you any idea how long it will take?’

‘Plans and specifications are ready for mass production,’ Peteru told him.

‘That’s my field,’ Ishbel announced. ‘I’ll get the engineers onto the problem as soon as you give me the plans.’

‘We can only guarantee the results will be foolproof, Ishbel,’ Uretep said politely, ‘if Peteru and I are totally in charge with no restrictions, no interference, and no pulling of rank by other scientists who will want to take over. It’s incredibly complicated so absolute precision is vital. We don’t want people to arrive with bits missing—or not arriving at all!’

‘Obviously,’ Ishbel agreed. ‘Therefore I’ll issue an edict that whoever interferes, gets in your way or irritates you will be tossed down the exit chute.’

Peteru nodded seriously. ‘We’ll not abuse our power. As long as everything’s done properly it’s perfectly safe because we’ve designed plenty of intermediate testing programs to ensure every stage is flawless.’

‘Of course.’

‘Has anyone considered that in nine months children will be popping out all over?’ someone asked. ‘Have we thought about what the mothers are going to do with them? They won’t know who the father is and the nurseries won’t be able to cope.’

‘It is unlikely that all maternal instincts have disappeared,’ Xanthippe snapped. ‘Instructions will be given by the Empress for delivery, and Justinian will arrange for birthing assistants.’

‘It’s going to be interesting,’ Ishbel added with a laugh, ‘to see how people react to the idea of squirting children out from between a woman’s legs!’

‘The worrying aspect of this program is the uncertainty,’ said Elbert. ‘What will the offspring be like? Will they be amenable, or will they refuse to accept the roles demanded by their caste? Until now, building a stable citizenry has been a predictable science; anonymous donors, eggs and sperm genetically modified, labelled according to caste and potential usefulness, then stored until needed.’

‘Rubbish!’ snapped Xanthippe. ‘It’s my brainwashing that does the trick. We’ll just make a few more education headsets the mothers can apply to the infants once they’re relocated in their new apartments. No problem.’

‘Can you get the entire enseemat system up and running within nine months?’ Fabien asked.

‘Given a free hand and all the technicians and equipment we need, it’ll be ready well before then.’

‘Excellent. That means we can ship everyone off to the new, sterile city before they give birth.’

‘There’s going to be a problem with men demanding to know which child is theirs,’ observed a quiet, heavy woman with an incipient moustache.

‘Not if we tell them the child is conceived solely by the mother, and the only function of the male is as a catalyst to precipitate pregnancy by inserting his penis and ejaculating,’ suggested a tiny young woman with a curly mop of black hair and bright blue eyes.

‘Excellent idea, Ruby—why didn’t I think of that? Ignorance is bliss, as someone once wrote. That way they’ll just fuck and won’t even think about the consequences,’ Ishbel laughed. ‘And every pregnant female and whoever her partner happens to be at the time, will be required to commit to support each other and the child until it’s old enough to work.’

‘As I’m responsible for accommodation,’ Ruby announced proudly, ‘when the pregnancy is confirmed I will guarantee, as a reward for their commitment, that both adults and their infant will be transported via NumbaCruncha to their modern clean new quarters in the new Oasis.’

‘Ha! That’s good, considering they’ll be going anyway.’

‘And will we tell them they’ll have to work and live in the same way there as they do here, maintaining us and the Aristocrats in the style to which we have become accustomed?’ Job asked dryly.

The laughter was genuine.

‘And then we’ll continue building more and more Oases until we’ve covered the planet in Vassal states,’ Peteru enthused with barely a hint of irony.

‘You don’t approve?’ Job asked softly.

‘What’s not to approve?’ Peteru responded seriously. ‘We are the pinnacle of all life; the planet is ours for the taking, so why shouldn’t we use it as we see fit?’

Silence.

‘Although the best use for NumbaCruncha is going to be travel for Mages and enforcers between the cities,’ Peteru continued brightly, as if unaware of his audience’s growing distrust, ‘the replacing of energy-gobbling negrav chutes with enseemats that will transport everyone to and from work instantaneously so they can work longer, can’t be discounted. It will free up enormous amounts of energy for other purposes. And instead of a dozen workers having to make a dangerous climb to a high place to repair something, only one would have to climb with an enseemat, then the others can be transported.’ He nodded happily as he considered other possibilities, unaware of suspicious glances between the Mages who were becoming increasingly distrustful of these strange

young men. Why were they so excited about new things, but unimpressed with their elevation to the status of Mage. They had to have an ulterior motive—but what could it be?

An awkward silence lasted several long minutes until Ruby asked if they would like to be shown to their new apartments on the Mage level, where they would have access to the exterior as well as the rest of Oasis. They should also meet their Vassals.

The offer of an above ground apartment was very tempting, but the young men respectfully declined; they needed to remain where they were until NumbaCruncha was fully installed and running without problems. All their experiments and work were laid out in their laboratory apartment and much too complicated to move. Instead, they arranged to meet for a conference with the Mages every day after the third meal, and to meet with the Aristocrat engineers and Ishbel in two hour's time with the plans.

An even more loaded silence greeted their refusal of this unprecedented offer. There was definitely something very suspicious going on. Both young men had been so enraptured at their discovery of the pristine, clean wide world outside Oasis, it made no sense that they'd refuse to live above ground. Ishbel exchanged a furtive nod with Fabien. Surveillance would have to be increased.

Affecting unconcern at their refusal of luxurious accommodation in the same space as the Mages, Ishbel insisted with more than her usual force that they were not to tell anyone working on NumbaCruncha the true purpose of the work —not even the Chief Scientist. Instead, everyone was to be told that this was a new individual health analysis and diagnostic tool.

As if responding to an inaudible signal, the Mages levered themselves out of their chairs and wandered back inside, leaving the two inventors on the deck. No one thanked them, offered to shake hands or gave any other indication of appreciation. After a couple of minutes indecision, Peteru and Uretep returned to the living room where the Mages sat in silence, staring at them. Embarrassed and wondering what they'd done, they stood together on the enseemat, pressed their wrists and vanished.

The silence lasted only seconds before erupting into acrimonious disputes between those who trusted the two young men and those who insisted they were planning to take over the city and replace the Mages as overlords. It was essential, they insisted, that both young men were eliminated the minute they had handed over the plans.

'How did those two escape your brainwashing?' Ethel shouted at Xanthippe.

'Don't shout at me you venomous vixen,' Xanthippe snarled. 'If you read the briefings instead of screwing every male Vassal you can lay your scrawny claws on, you'd know that as part of the experiment to create super inventive scientists we decided to waive the mind-bending in case that was affecting imagination and creativity. The results speak for themselves. Those two are geniuses. Fortunately, they don't realise it. I agree they're potential problems, but they're not irreplaceable. We've several clones of them in storage so once this is over you can do what you like with them!'

A compromise was reached. Until the complete system was up and running perfectly with trained technicians to ensure maintenance, the inventors were to be given the freedom of Oasis like any other Mage.

'Always wait until the goose has laid the last golden egg before eating it,' said sly, soft-spoken Melvyn. Everyone nodded, albeit reluctantly, and retired to their apartments.

Forty-one floors beneath the Lords of Oasis, the two young geniuses shook their heads in despair.

9: *Production Gets Underway*

Ravenous, it being several hours since breakfast on the Mages' terrace, Peteru and Uretep ordered their usual lunch of algal steaks, toast and coffee. Removing it from the service bay they couldn't help wondering if remaining in their old apartment had been a sensible decision. The food looked similar to that served at breakfast, but there the resemblance ended. Bland and insipid were not qualities to tempt anyone to eat more than necessary.

'Probably a good thing,' Peteru muttered. 'If we ate like them we'd soon look like them.'

'You never know, a pot belly, pimples and love-handles might suit you.'

Peteru pushed his half-eaten plate away. 'They're suspicious,' he muttered abstractedly. 'I can sense it. Did you see the look Ishbel swapped with Fabien?'

'Yes. He's a nasty piece of work that one. And this had better be the last time we speak about any of this. He's not head of enforcement for nothing. We'll be under constant surveillance from now on, so button your lips. You really have no idea of diplomacy, have you?'

'What do you mean?'

'Every time you open your mouth you put your foot in it—either critical or over the top praise. You are so transparent!'

'Mmm. Sorry. Lucky you're there to smooth troubled waters.'

'I don't think I soothed anything at the end. They just left us out there!'

'Too late now. Get the stuff, mustn't keep the luscious Ishbel waiting—she fancies you.'

'Please tell me you're kidding!'

'She was drooling in lust while offering to take your sperm sample. Do you think you could screw her?'

'Have to find the hole first. Stop it, I feel sick. Come on!'

Ishbel's decision to keep all the engineering staff ignorant of the true purpose of what they were building was based on long experience. Even the most reliable and intelligent engineer is tempted to offer advice and even secretly make changes to plans if he knows the purpose. Too often an inventor's concept is corrupted by a would-be genius convinced he can improve on the design. However, when he has no idea what he's making he's forced to follow the plans to the letter.

Back in Ishbel's apartment, Peteru and Uretep entered drawings, plans and specifications into the central engineering computer. As Chief Engineer she wanted to maintain overall control. When everything was completed to Peteru's satisfaction, they descended to the engineering level and Ishbel introduced them to the Aristocrats in charge of the project—short, pale, pinched Alger; and chunky, stolid Begum whose face gave as little clue to her sex as her body.

'Alger and Begum have the joint responsibility of organising the workforce, procuring all materials, and following your orders during the life of this project which has temporarily replaced every other undertaking of the engineering department. At all times they will unquestioningly obey you both and follow your instructions and plans with one hundred percent accuracy,' Ishbel announced gravely before turning pokerfaced to her head engineers. 'No questions. No mistakes. Your life and that of everyone who works for you is on the line.'

Both bowed slightly. 'Yes, your Worship.'

'There is no limit on the numbers of people you may employ, or the amount of equipment you may use if it furthers the project and speeds up completion. Peteru and Uretep will oversee your work. Theirs will be the final word in any question or dispute no matter how trivial. You will not offer advice; only follow instructions. Do you understand the significance of that?'

Another bow. 'Yes, your Worship.'

Alger's blue eyes studied the young men coolly; Begum was unable to hold her tongue.

'But, your Worship! They're Vassals! You can't expect us to listen, let alone pay heed to their nonsense.'

Ishbel's smile was calculated to curdle blood. 'They are not Vassals.'

'But they're black! I can't...I really can't...'

'They are not black—they are dark brown and if you can't...' her sigh was theatrical, 'then so be it...you can't. There are several people ready to replace you—literally!'

Literally shaking with both fear and dismay, Begum threw herself on the floor at the Mage's feet, kissing them and grovelling until her face was thrust away with the toe of Ishbel's less than pristine sandal.

'How do we address these...people?' Alger asked in an attempt to divert his Chief's anger.

'By their names,' Ishbel grunted before turning and leaving them to it.

Tears were streaming when Begum hoisted herself upright, avoided her new bosses' eyes and left the room. Thoroughly chastened, Alger politely suggested they meet the rest of the team and start work.

Feeling slightly sick, Peteru and Uretep followed the engineers. They'd never met them before yet even in front of Ishbel they'd treated their new bosses with contempt, proving what they'd recently realised...they looked like Vassals. Scientists who had known them their entire lives considered them not worthy of respect, and now engineers who'd never met them were doing the same. Such is the power of childhood indoctrination.

For the next three hours Alger, Begum and a dozen Freeman technicians studied the plans, nodded at explanations, and discussed every aspect of constructing the apparatus that would mass-produce the chips, mats, main computer and wireless terminals. Eventually Alger stood, grudgingly conceded it looked OK on the plans, and after a short consultation with Begum asked if it would be OK to start setting up the system first thing in the morning. Uretep and Peteru agreed and promised to be there.

It was too late to start visiting the rest of Oasis but too early to go to bed. They didn't want to be entertained. They wanted to *do* something. For the first time in years they had nothing to do because NumbaCruncha was temporarily out of their hands.

'Let's check for surveillance bugs,' Uretep whispered in the corridor before returning to their apartment.'

Silently, they scanned every nook and cranny, and discovered fifteen new vidspots that would cover ninety percent of their rooms. Ten minutes later interference programmes that would show a silent, empty room were disrupting any attempt to spy.

Satisfied they were safe for the present, and curious to test the Mages' story about their origins, Uretep cast caution to the ether and allowed himself to be persuaded to join Peteru on a visit to the virtual archives to see for himself the origins of their world.

Comfortable, on body-form divans they pulled soft black caps over their heads. Senses intertwined, darkened, then awareness of a vast, dim cavern hewn from the bedrock, walls lined with what were probably primitive electronic devices.

'These are what the Elite reckon are ancient toys brought by the first arrivals to keep their offspring quiet on the long voyage.' Peteru's thoughts were as clear as speech. 'Instead of humans coming from a less hostile planet in another galaxy and getting trapped here, the records in these gadgets prove the opposite. Everything's in chronological order and simple to hack into once you understand the process. Just focus your attention on the one furthest to the left and we'll soon skip through them.'

They focussed. Peteru unlocked the code and images flooded brains at speeds beyond comprehension—well beyond their power to process. An hour later they surfaced with barely enough energy to remove their caps. Levering themselves off the couches they went out, remotely turned off the vidspot interference and then re-entered the apartment. Lying on their bed in a semi coma that looked as if they were sleeping, their brains processed the information.

After regaining consciousness they wolfed down a snack of algal nuts and fruit, then pretended to leave the apartment, remote starting the vidspot interference as they closed the door. Re-entering, they relaxed once more on their divans. With eyes closed and electrodes attached they shared and compared the sounds and visions unfolding in their heads as the history of their world was revealed.

An incandescent sun blazed in a transparent blue sky as they swept over forests and water...

An hour later Uretep dragged off the electrodes and sighed softly. 'You were right. Humans evolved on this earth—but we destroyed the environment in the vain hope of creating a better, safer, easier world. This life isn't natural—it's as unnatural as it's possible to imagine.'

10: How the Other Half Live

At ten am on the sixth day Begum ran tired fingers through her blond hair, nodded and allowed herself a self-satisfied smile. The work had required meticulous attention and skill, and contrary to expectations the design was so complex they'd been pleased to have both inventors constantly hovering over them; checking, testing, thinking.

'The bulk production module is ready to produce the pads,' she informed Peteru proudly. 'These are the first dozen samples. We can start churning them out once you give your approval. Then we'll begin on the computer.'

'Thanks Begum, that's brilliant. We'll take these up to the Mages now to demonstrate their effectiveness. We've no idea how long we'll be, so take a break, then after lunch, make a start on the computer. We'll be down as soon as possible to assist.'

'Fucken slave driver,' Begum muttered.

Peteru chose not to hear.

The Mages had been summoned to Ishbel's apartment where the wrists of four very nervous Vassals were implanted with the chip. Each stepped onto a mat, whispered into the terminal, touched their wrists and reappeared on the mats twenty metres away looking excited and aroused. Unselfconsciously, they began to touch themselves, stopped, took one look at the glowering Mages and threw themselves onto the floor and grovelled silently.

'Stupid beasts,' Xanthippe snorted. 'They're worried we'll kill them for being naked and feeling sexy.'

'A justifiable fear,' Fabien yawned. 'Those four fellows were making a nuisance of themselves during the religious service last week. I've been waiting for an opportunity to administer justice.' He waved an airy hand and two burly Vassals appeared. A wordless signal was enough for the four cowering men to be led unprotesting from the room, followed by the Mages who laughed and made bets as to which would last the longest. Dumped over the handrail the young men had scarcely time to sprint ten metres before great claws fastened on their necks dragging them to the ground where fangs ripped open their throats. At least a dozen huge dogs arrived to share the feast.

'These wild beasts are excellent security, don't you agree?' Fabien asked a glowering Peteru.

'Excellent,' Peteru replied softly. 'But they're not far below. What's to stop them leaping up here?'

'A laser fence that vaporises anything interrupting the beam,' Fabien replied, casting a sly look at his young questioner. 'So I'd advise against going for a walk.' The menace in his voice was palpable.

The sound of excited yelps, deep growls and crunching bones accompanied them as they traipsed back inside.

'How long before we've enough enseemats, and the mainframe that will run everything,' Ethel inquired calmly as she sat down; the spectacle she'd just witnessed having had no more effect than if she'd been watching goldfish nibble on bread.

With commendable self-control, Uretep stilled the tremor in his voice. 'A month at the outside, probably much sooner. Then another week to make all the wireless terminals. Alger and Begum are excellent engineers—their knowledge of electronics is formidable, so if it's OK with you we'll leave them to get the basic work done on the main frame computer while we look around Oasis to check where enseemats have to be positioned, how many we need and so on. We also need to visit the new city for the same reason. As you've probably realised, if the mats are installed as they're produced, people will get used to seeing them and curiosity will make the final 'sell' easier.'

‘Do as you think fit, go wherever you please,’ was the response, which sent a nervous shudder through both young men. Such easy agreement meant either they had won the confidence of the Mages, or they were nearing the end of their usefulness so it didn’t matter what they discovered. The second scenario seemed the most likely, which put them even more on their guard.

For a full week Peteru and Uretep made a meticulous survey of every space in Oasis so they could plan the position of ensemats, calculate how many were needed and foresee all problems. The city was many times vaster than they’d realised. Without the negrav chutes they’d have been old and infirm before completing their task. As it was, the repetitive nature of the construction [they continued to think of it as a construction instead of an excavation] made their task easier. What was needed for one segment would be needed for all.

Three-quarters of the living quarters in the massive circular edifice were reserved for Vassals, but they occupied only a quarter of the available space for dwellings. Three hundred and seventy-five thousand bodies were housed in stone cubes measuring two and a half metres along every edge. Five surfaces were blank; the sixth was open to the corridor. There was no sexual segregation so every floor contained more or less equal numbers of both sexes and all facilities were unisex including toilets and shower rooms. Although each Vassal was allocated a cell, there was nothing personal in them, merely a bed a chair and a hook on which to hang their work overall. Inside the building no one wore any clothing, which seemed sensible, as the air was very warm and slightly moist.

Vassals worked twelve-hour shifts, so there were always people in the dining rooms, ablution areas, exercise rooms, entertainment halls or other public spaces that were scattered throughout the complex. As there were no doors anywhere in the residential modules reserved for Vassals, Peteru and Uretep were able to see that few people slept alone. Occupied bedrooms usually had at least two men, or women, or mixed couples entwined on the narrow bed—sometimes as many as four. Usually sleeping, seldom doing anything that could be described as sexual. Despite the crush, the air, although warm and humid, had no perceptible odour, probably because the Vassals’ high standard of personal hygiene was well catered for with excellent showers and washing facilities. Plenty of sleep, exercise, food and cleanliness ensured their health, fitness and ability to work long hours. All the Vassals were physically attractive with very dark skins, symmetrical powerful bodies, and open faces.

Although they wore nothing while inside their module, that didn’t mean they were prepared to do the same outside or at work. When asked about it, both males and females said that would be a terrible thing to do—a dreadful sin. If pressed on the issue they became suspicious and angry, muttering prayers to Domino and Domina to ward off such evil thinking. Simple questions such as where is the nearest negrav chute? Where do you work? Where is the dining room? When is the next meal? How often do you shower? Have you a special friend? received straightforward responses with no suspicion of ulterior motive.

When reporting on this, and the Vassals’ universal friendliness, Xanthippe sneered and explained it was due to Peteru and Uretep’s dark skins. Had they been light skinned the Vassals would have cringed and fawned and done everything they could to confuse them. She warned them not to imagine the Vassals’ simple natures indicated gentleness and an egalitarian desire for peace. ‘They’re like trained animals, well behaved when the master’s around, but some days and nights the place resounds with screams and wails of victims hunted down in pecking order skirmishes.’

‘Do Fabien’s enforcers do anything about it?’

‘Of course not. No one gets seriously hurt. We encourage the letting off of steam because it gets rid of frustrations, and that’s of inestimable value in maintaining order.’

‘Surely they’re more than animals? They seem so...I don’t know...so civilized.’ Peteru was having a hard time remaining pleasant.

‘Ha!’ Xanthippe sneered. ‘Try asking them what they think about affection, interests, hopes, fears, the future...topics that require thought and the expression of an opinion, and see if you still think they’re human.’

The following day Peteru and Uretep gently asked several Vassals such questions, but Xanthippe’s education program had taught them from their earliest years that wrong answers would result in painful punishment, so their response was always the same; silence while handsome faces became pinched, and powerful hands bunched into frustrated fists of fear.

Back in their apartment the two young researchers studied plans, calculated how many enseemats were needed and where they should be placed for the greatest efficiency, all the time thinking about the strange dual nature of the Vassals.

‘We know we are the products of Elbert’s genetic manipulation; a successful attempt to make us inventive and creative’ Uretep said as they were shutting down their recording pads.

‘Yes, that’s why we have dark skin.’

‘So Elbert says. But surely the greatest barrier to fresh thinking, creativity and invention would be mind control—brainwashing of infants?’

‘You mean?’

‘Exactly! What Elbert and Xanthippe deliberately didn’t tell us was that we’ve *not* been indoctrinated with all the crap that keeps everyone else liking and hating and doing exactly what the Mages want. And that’s another reason we can’t be allowed to live once we’re no longer essential. We don’t believe in supernatural gods and monsters. We’ve no feelings for or against any group of people. We don’t care if they’re black, brown or white—all we care about is that they’re pleasant.’

‘You’re right. That’s why you’re the only person I like in this place. Everyone else thinks their caste is perfect and every other caste is expendable. There’s something very wrong when every human on the planet except us seems devoid of compassion. The way those Vassals threw the four guys who tested the mats the other day over the rail to the dogs without any change of expression...it really upset me.’

‘And the way the victims just accepted it. It was the same with the girl whose throat Ishbel slashed. To everyone except us she was nothing but a piece of meat.’

They shook their heads in silent confusion. ‘

But I’m pretty sure the Mages haven’t been brainwashed, Peteru. How come they’re so heartless and cruel...tossing those brave Freemen who tested the enseemats that first day down the ‘exit’ chute to their deaths as if they were nothing. Making a joke of it.’

‘I guess being a few thousand years old might make the Mages somewhat bored and looking for kicks. If not, then it means...’

‘What?’

‘That’s what humans are like—caring only about themselves and stuff everyone else.’

‘If it is, then I don’t like humans.’ He grunted a laugh. ‘Except for us of course.’

‘But are we human? Are Vassals, Freemen and Aristocrats human? Everyone’s had their brains scrambled and genes rearranged in the womb. How much change has to occur before a human stops being human? None of us have been conceived in the normal way; genetically modified sperm cells introduced into genetically modified ova then incubated and educated by a machine.’

‘A sobering thought. And the Mages have been cloned so many times who knows how many errors have crept in...’

‘There’s no point in wondering about things we can never find out. We’re here, we’ve a job to do and, who knows, we’ve not had any personal contact with Freemen yet, perhaps they’re different.’

‘Unlikely, considering they’re between Aristocrats and Vassals, but let’s hope so.’

11: Plans Progress Apace

The cells of Freeman were relatively large compared to those of the Vassals, but relatively small compared to Aristocrats. Every apartment housed two people, sometimes of the same sex, sometimes opposite sexes, there appeared to be no rule. Privacy for the couple was available with doors to every room and space. Each apartment had a tiny but well-appointed bathroom to maintain personal hygiene, a relaxation area with a Vid Screen and two comfortable chairs, and a tiny eating nook in which meals that had been ordered and delivered from the kitchens could be eaten if they didn't want to go to the public dining rooms. A small bedroom with one double bed and a closet for clothes, which were worn everywhere—there was no nudity—completed the accommodation.

The large public dining rooms were similar to those of the Vassals—cavernous spaces where Muzak accompanied noisy eaters and soft golden light made food seem more attractive. The few cells with windows facing the parkland were reserved for those in positions of authority. All other cells were, of course, windowless, bathed in soft golden light during the day and dim at night; usually reasonably well air-conditioned—although recently there had been some serious failures resulting in asphyxiation of both Freeman and their Vassal servants, who seemed to be everywhere.

Obesity wasn't a problem for anyone who wasn't a Mage. Despite clever preparation, colouring, texturing and flavouring, the consumption of food made from algae was not as popular an activity as excreting it. Defecation provided a trip to one of the many attractive Evacuation Centres dotted throughout both the Freeman and Vassal accommodations. These were well-lit, well ventilated, popular unisex places where friends could meet, enjoy a game of draughts, or simply meditate while evacuating their bowels and bladders. Equally popular were the recreation rooms, libraries, cinemas and small concert halls that were sprinkled throughout the Freeman complex.

During their visit, Uretep and Peteru were treated with cool suspicion and a distinct lack of respect, due, Xanthippe informed them, to their skins being much darker than a Freeman's. All straightforward questions were answered straightforwardly, but as with the Vassals, their otherwise symmetrically handsome features transformed when they were asked for their opinion about life in Oasis. Invariably, eyes narrowed, mouths compressed, and the body tensed as if preparing to fight. Instead of replying, they turned and walked abruptly away.

Several times on both days in the Freeman quarters they heard angry shouts issuing from closed apartments, usually high pitched followed by low growling. Three times in the corridor they saw men being attacked by women hurling abuse, screaming and clawing at them until the men slapped them callously to the ground and walked away in contempt. When one woman got up and hurled herself onto the fellow's back, he ran backwards and slammed her against the wall, winding her. She fell off and several people gathered to watch impassively as her victim kicked her viciously in the head.

They never learned the cause of so much anger and argument, but it was always between males and females. Crowds invariably gathered to watch without interfering, dispersing silently when the battle was over, leaving the cleanup to Vassals who had been waiting patiently. Their efficiency at cleaning blood from the floor and walls was remarkable. As was the businesslike manner in which they disposed of the unlamented body of the woman whose head had been kicked in.

Nowhere in either the Vassal or Freeman apartment modules did they see an enforcer. When they asked Fabien about it, he shrugged and said enforcers only exacerbated problems within the residence modules because both Freeman and Vassals were happier sorting out their own affairs. As for the occasional violent arguments and fights they'd witnessed, he reminded them that sex-depressant chemicals were no longer added to the food and water, so females were coming into heat before the males were interested, and were venting their frustration. He predicted that such episodes

were likely to disappear when sex became a religious obligation and travel by NumbaCruncha increased everyone's libido.

Later in their apartment as they planned the number and placement of ensemats in the Freemen quarters, Peteru sighed in confusion.

'Would you like to be the rulers of these people?'

'No way! Nothing makes sense. What fun can the Mages have living like this? Their stupid regime ensures they have no social equals apart from the original thirteen.'

'Why don't they breed?'

'They did, and everyone in Oasis is the result, remember?'

'Ah yes. Even us. Makes me ashamed. I guess they don't want to have natural children who might turn out like themselves, because they're worried their progeny will be inferior to that of the other Mages.'

'They'd start a war over that I reckon. And I can't imagine any of them willingly surrendering any of their power to their offspring. If this is what humans were like before whatever it was wiped most of them out, I'm glad I didn't live then!'

'Me too. But what makes me angriest is that they're building more of these places! It has to stop.'

'Shush, Peteru. Not so loud. After what we've seen I'm becoming paranoid. We haven't checked for new bugs today. How do we know the interference signal's still working? Instead of seeing us sitting here quietly, talking about nothing in particular, they might be seeing the reality.'

'You're right. We're getting careless.'

A thorough check revealed nothing new, but in case whoever was watching had become suspicious about their lack of other activity, they turned off the blocker and spent the rest of the evening working and exercising as usual, even giving a commendable demonstration of their physical affection for each other.

During the following three days they made an inventory of public and work spaces and, as before, the more they learned the less they liked the place and the organisation.

The behaviour of Aristocrats to Freemen and Vassals had long angered both young men, who reckoned their fellow humans deserved consideration and respect. It was even more upsetting to witness the vile treatment of Vassals by Freemen. Beatings, verbal abuse, overwork. A Vassal's life was ignominious slavery of the worst kind as there was no hope of improvement no matter how well they worked.

In the interests of what the Mages cynically called social cohesion, attendance was compulsory for every inhabitant at biweekly events in the vast Arena. There were exactly enough places for the entire population and each individual was allocated a specific seat. Naturally, the best seats were reserved for the Aristocrats, the next best for Freemen, and Vassals made up the remainder of the audience. A quick check was enough to determine if a seat was empty, and as every seat was allocated, it was easy to discover the identity of the miscreant. Religious meetings involving breast-beating, chanting and singing, followed by an address from the Emperor, alternated with sporting tournaments and circus-like entertainment.

When the Arena was full, the vast circular city was empty. Every space, including the private quarters of the Aristocrats, was spied on by computer-monitored surveillance cameras that peered into every nook and cranny, twenty-four hours a day. Facial and body recognition software ensured that if an individual did not appear on a camera somewhere for more than five minutes, an alarm sounded and he or she was retrieved, castigated, retrained or disposed of.

Far from objecting to constant surveillance of even intimate activities, most inhabitants welcomed it as a guarantee of their security. Citizens of Oasis appeared to have no concept of privacy.

'If I'd realised we were being watched all these years, I'd have gone mad. And despite our blocking devices I'm getting a neurotic about the current surveillance.'

‘Me too. I guess that’s because we haven’t been programmed to accept it. But it seems we have no option.’

‘When this is over, I’m out of here.’

‘And I’m coming with you!’

At regular intervals the pair returned to the Engineering workshops to check progress on the mainframe computer that would coordinate up to four million ensemats. While the attitudes towards the two inventors of both Freeman technicians and Vassal assistants had warmed appreciably, that of the Aristocrats had hardened. Thus it was a surprise to be warmly greeted by both Alger and Begum when they arrived to view and test the Mainframe and terminals, and sign acceptance forms relieving the engineers of further responsibility.

Glowing with pride from the lavish compliments, the two engineers offered Peteru and Uretep a drink, which they accepted gratefully.

‘This work we’ve been doing for you is the most interesting and demanding ever,’ Alger said.

‘That’s for sure,’ Begum agreed. ‘But don’t tell me all this fantastic electronic stuff is just a new health diagnostic tool.’

‘OK, we wont.’

Smiles dropped.

‘We’re not being cagey,’ Uretep placated, ‘we’ve been threatened with extinction if we tell anyone before Mage Ishbel decides it’s time.’

‘Come on, guys. We’re mates—you can tell us. Don’t you trust us?’

Peteru studied them carefully ‘We’re really sorry, but we can’t.’

Both faces clouded, eyes shrank to slits.

‘You’re exactly what we thought,’ Begum sneered. ‘Stinking black Vassals whose empty heads have been filled by the Mages with enough stuff to convince anyone else. But I wasn’t fooled. I could tell by the foul odour when you arrived you were just dirty stooges without a brain to share between the two of you.’ She spat contemptuously on the floor and stalked out, followed by Alger.

‘Well, well, well...’ Peteru said with a shake of his head. ‘And here I was thinking I’d found a couple of humans who were a bit like us.’

‘If its any consolation they had me fooled too. Lucky we didn’t tell them.’

‘Lucky indeed. Will you call Ishbel? This computer cannot be left alone. It has to be moved immediately to its secure spot. It wouldn’t surprise me if our charming engineers were considering a little sabotage now we’ve signed that we received it in perfect working order.’

‘Mmm, that would demote us from genius to algal food in no time flat.’

Two hours later, the computer, several hundred ensemats with their wireless terminals, and all the Mages were assembled in the circular Council Chamber in which NumbaCruncha had been first unveiled. A dozen floors up, ensemats had been placed in a multitude of locations throughout the Mage apartments. Every mat had been programmed, and a complicated system of moves planned to demonstrate the versatility of the system. As Mage’s Vassals were both deaf and mute and never left the apartments, even to attend events in the Arena, they were no security risk and were used to test the system.

It had been agreed [albeit reluctantly by some Mages] not to punish the Vassals for any indications of pleasure or sexual gratification—after all, Uretep reminded them, It would be a nuisance to have to train new vassals at the present when there was so much else to do.

Everything worked faultlessly and the Vassals enjoyed themselves possibly for the first time in their lives. As a result, it was decided to begin setting up the Oasis-wide system immediately because the automated production system was so efficient there would be a stockpile of mats if they waited any longer.

When all evidence of the trial had been cleared away, Alger and Begum were summoned. Self-satisfied expressions evaporated when on entering they saw Uretep and Peteru sitting as equals

among the Mages. Panicked glances were exchanged. Clearly, they assumed their behaviour towards the two inventors had been reported and they were to be disposed of. As one, they threw themselves on their knees and grovelled unintelligibly.

Profoundly irritated, Ishbel boomed, 'Get up on your feet you stupid people! You act as if you've guilty consciences! Have you?'

The two miserable engineers scrambled upright and stared at Peteru and Uretep who gave almost imperceptible shakes of the head. Relief flooded pale faces and they managed to stutter apologies and excuses about being overcome at having an audience with all the Mages at once. It was too great an honour.

As always, flattery did its work and they were congratulated for working so well with Mages Uretep and Peteru, and for accomplishing everything required of them.

When asked about progress on the enseemats, they modestly assured their overlords that work was progressing apace, every mat was automatically logged in wirelessly with the Mainframe as it came off the assembly line, and the entire order would be completed and ready to distribute within four days. The tiny chips too were ready; enough for every inhabitant as well as a thousand implant tools so health workers could start work straight away on implanting them in the entire population.

'What about terminals? Mats and implants aren't any use if there's nothing to give instructions to!'

'There's a wireless computer terminal for every mat, ready to be affixed in a suitable place when the mats are placed in their final positions.' Flushed with pride, Begum bowed deeply. 'The Mages are to be praised for going to such enormous trouble to ensure the health of everyone in Oasis.'

'Thank you—but it is merely our duty,' Ishbel smiled, refusing to be drawn.

Everyone nodded sagely.

'Your work pleases us—for the present,' Augur announced pompously. 'You may go.'

Peteru and Uretep took their chance while the Mages were still in a good mood to ensure they still had permission to visit the new city to check for possible problems installing the next set of mats.

'What's the rush?' Melvyn demanded truculently. 'We've got to re-educate the masses and accustom them to using the things first.'

Profoundly irritated, Justinian, Ruby and Job, shouted that he was an ignorant inconsiderate fool. Didn't he realise they were desperate to clear Oasis at the earliest opportunity before the whole place collapsed?

'The air conditioning is breaking down; there's an epidemic of lung infections, and the weather isn't going to hold much longer!' Justinian snapped.

'So many apartments are in disrepair I can't accommodate everyone!' Ruby shouted.

'Every day there are new emergencies ranging from failing negrav chutes to dimming lights, faulty security cameras, lack of fresh water, putrefying food...If we don't clear everyone out and completely rebuild Oasis very soon, we're done for.'

Silence.

Ishbel turned a serious face to her two saviours. 'What are your plans?'

'We'll need an escort the first time to avoid being eaten by the dogs.'

'Of course.'

'We'll take fifteen enseemats and terminals, so from then on we can simply NumbaCrunch there and back. You people each have your own mats and terminals now, so you can also pop over if you wish.'

'Good.'

'And I suggest you immediately begin the assembly of another set of mats and terminals for New Oasis. The current Mainframe will be able to handle them with ease.'

'We'll start immediately,' Ishbel agreed.

After receiving the numbers of their personal mats and of the ones Peteru and Uretep would be taking to New Oasis, without even a cursory nod of appreciation all thirteen Mages pressed their wrists and vanished, leaving smelly bundles of bejewelled robes.

‘That was a little too easy.’

‘Indeed it was, and that reinforces my conviction that they don’t care what we do now we’re approaching our use-by date. Probably the less time we spend wandering around Oasis with the potential to infect others with our heresies, the happier they’ll be.’

‘Mmm... you’re probably right. I felt sorry for Alger and Begum when they came in. Terrified when they saw we really were the Mages’ pets.’

‘You’re a soft touch. They imagined we’d complained about them. How insulting is that?’

‘It’s what they’d have done. But forget them, let’s get everything ready for tomorrow.’

12: New Oasis

The sun had just risen when a boxlike structure moving on large soft rollers, rounded the corner and stopped directly below the balcony in front of Ishbel's apartment. Wearing borrowed Mage cloaks, Peteru and Uretep climbed over the railing and dropped through a roof opening onto comfortable seats, then reached up to take two bundles; a small one containing fifteen enseemats and their terminals, and a large basket containing thirteen sets of Mage vestments so they'd have something to wear if they visited the new city.

Ishbel leaned over the railing. 'How are you planning to enter New Oasis,' she asked with a sneer. 'Surely you don't think we'd leave the place open to wild birds, bats, possums and dogs?'

They exchanged embarrassed glances. 'We never thought about it. How stupid is that?'

'Very stupid! But it's nice to know you're not perfect.'

'We never thought we were.'

'Here, use this.' Ishbel dropped a small gold disc into Peteru's lap. 'It's a universal key that opens everything, and if you need to contact us it grants direct vidcom access to our suites. Everything's working over there, so help yourselves to food and stuff.'

'Thanks, Ishbel.'

'Make sure you're back in three days! You will be needed at the presentation of NumbaCruncha.'

'We won't be needed, Ishbel, everything is programmed. The Mainframe needs no more instructions; every mat's been logged in, the chips are all pre-programmed, all you have to do is have them inserted, place the mats and terminals where we've indicated, ensure they're vandal proof, and number them clearly so everyone knows where their nearest one is and the numbers of the places they want to go to. As we wrote in the instruction notes, there must be an information screen beside every mat with a map showing every place people with that mat are permitted to go, and its corresponding number.'

'Nonetheless, you will be here! I want you two to instruct the Royal couple in their role as demonstrators.' Her face was swelling in annoyance.

'Of course we'll be here, Ishbel. Don't worry. We're your abject objects.'

The joke fell flat.

Her voice too was flat, as well as menacing, and there was no smile in the eyes. 'That's exactly what you are, and don't forget it!'

The pilotless solar powered vehicle was directed wirelessly from Augur's Transport bureau. The trip was uneventful, if a little bumpy, and on arrival at the equivalent of Ishbel's deck, they unloaded and the car immediately returned.

The gold disc worked and it was with some awe that they realised they were the sole inhabitants of the vast structure. They wandered around the luxurious quarters that would one day be Ishbel's, eventually arriving at windows facing the immense circular interior of the city. Hundreds of metres below, the concourse stretched into the distance. Unlike the original Oasis, the air was transparent, but distant apartments on the far side were still too tiny to make out details, which increased their awareness of the size of the place.

The soft hum of heat pumps and other energy generators permeated the structure. Hallways were illuminated and, according to Augur, the negrav chutes were working.

'Dare to try them?'

'No way. It wouldn't surprise me if Augur thought it would be a joke to turn them off while we're here.'

'We ought to go down and look around.'

'Why?'

‘It’s what we said we’d do.’

‘No, we said we’d check the place out. Well, I’ve checked, and now I want to go for a walk.’
Uretep looked at Peteru and laughed loudly. ‘So do I!’

But first we’d better put the Mages clothes and wigs in neat piles...can’t have them getting angry at having to do anything for themselves.’

‘It’s funny that they can’t accept being bald. As if a mouldy wig makes them look any better.’
‘I’m surprised they didn’t send over a few Vassals with us to prepare the place.’

They placed a mat for themselves on the floor of a small cupboard-like room down the hallway from the lounge, then spread thirteen mats and their terminals around, ready to receive the Mages if they decided to come. The last one they placed in a small backpack along with the original miniature terminal, a bottle of water, the gold disc and some algal biscuits they’d brought with them.

‘I’ve just thought of something.’

‘Mmm?’

‘If we use the mat to return here, we’ll leave our clothes and pack in the forest. We’ve no spare clothes, so how do we explain it if the Mages pay us a visit?’

‘They probably won’t, but it’s an important point. We leave our clothes here then?’

‘Yes. I don’t think they’d approve of us taking a wander in the forest.’

‘And if they arrive when we’re not back?’

‘We say we returned to our apartment in Oasis to check on something.’

‘Brilliant!’

They stripped, leaving their clothes in a heap beside the mat in the small room as if they’d been transported.

Back on the balcony they closed the door to the apartment, which locked automatically, then checked for wild dogs. Seeing none they dropped easily over the edge and set off across scraped bare earth towards the forest, a five minute jog away.

Barely fifty paces into the trees they stopped, already too awed to speak or think; scarcely daring to breathe. After several minutes in which the atmosphere began to feel less alien, more neutral, they dared to whisper.

‘It’s huge!’

‘And green.’

‘And alive.’

‘And I want to cry...it’s so...impressive...majestic...I can’t take it in.’

‘These things...plants...trees! They’re so tall! So massive! It’s so cool and dim and...’ Peteru ran out of words.

‘And inspiring.’

‘And look at the rope things...vines I think they’re called! So thick we could climb them.’

‘And up there! Red things...flowers. Look, look, look! This coloured thing flapping in the air! It’s fantastic—I want to stay here forever.’

‘Birds...hear them? There must be millions...all different noises. And there’ll be animals and... Argh!’ Peteru slapped at his thigh. ‘Blood...this worm thing was sucking my blood!’ He tore a thick slug-like creature as fat as his finger from his leg. ‘It’s bitten a hole!’

‘We sure aren’t alone. Dare we go further?’

‘Try to stop me. But let’s keep an eye on each other as we go to check for any other nasties that fancy a bit of our flesh.’

‘It’s lucky we don’t have to worry about losing track of where we are, I’ve already lost all sense of direction.’

‘Me too. It’s actually a bit nerve-wracking, isn’t it? So much space, no walls...I...don’t know if I can go much further...sorry to be such a wimp, but...’

‘Yeah. I feel pretty much the same. But it’d be stupid to have got this far and then quit don’t you reckon? Tell you what, let’s make a quick trip back to check if NumbaCruncha really does work outside Oasis, and if it does then we’re safe no matter what happens.’

‘Excellent. I feel braver already.’

‘Better take the disc in case we have to open a door.’

‘Right.’ Uretep popped it into his mouth while Peteru placed their mat on the ground. They stood on it, pressed their wrists and were instantly back where they came from, in the cupboard-like room. Complicit grins of relief plastered their faces. Courage replenished, they returned to the rainforest, picked up their mat and pack and continued bravely forcing their way through increasingly dense and sometimes thorny undergrowth.

13: The Forest

The two explorers stood and gazed in disbelief. Thirst, tired muscles, biting insects, scratches and bruises forgotten. They'd emerged from the trees at the crest of a grassy slope that descended to the most perfect sight any man can see...a lake. Pristine. Sparkling in the sun. Reflecting the dense surrounding forest, the sky and clouds. Water...the liquid of life.

Strenuous tramping outdoors through the heat of the day was very different from using fitness equipment in an air-conditioned gymnasium. They'd developed a raging thirst and had already drunk their scant supply, so the urge to race down and check if it was potable was strong. However, a primeval caution overtook them. Like all creatures that enter a new, possibly hostile environment, they remained still and silent, carefully scanning the scene, hands shielding eyes from the glare of a sun that was already past its zenith and shining into their faces.

'Can you hear it?' Uretep whispered.

'What?'

'Music. Singing...'

'Yes. More like chanting. Where?'

'There!' Uretep pointed to a small sandy beach.

Several men were standing waist deep in the sparkling liquid holding long slender sticks. One plunged his into the water and retrieved a wriggling object.

A hundred metres below the watchers, Jar frowned in concentration, hurled the spear, smiled and waded in to retrieve it. Back on shore he removed the wriggling trout, dashed its head on a rock to kill it, and tossed it into the woven kit bag with the others. From the corner of his eye he thought he saw a movement among the trees further up the slope. The air shimmered in the heat. A bird trilled a warning. He focussed on a spot just inside the shadows at the edge of the forest. Yes. Something moved. No. Two things. Standing on their hind legs, staring down. Kangaroos? Too lean. He called softly to the others. They joined him, sharing his disquiet. There were few things unknown to them in the area.

'They're men,' Seb stated. 'Strangers. Come on.'

Dropping their spears they sprinted up the hill.

'We've been seen! They're coming after us!'

Fear forced Uretep and Peteru back into the forest where they lay flat on their bellies under a densely leafed, ground-hugging shrub. Hoping they were invisible, they remained utterly still while studying their pursuers through slitted eyes with increasing astonishment. The men were like robust editions of themselves—naked, hairless, wiry and lithe with obviously powerful but not excessive musculature. Strong, lean legs and taut firm buttocks. Skins ranging from shiny black to mid brown. Eyes, heads, posture, alert. Nostrils quivered slightly. One tilted his head as if to listen. The fugitives scarcely dared breathe, although for some inexplicable reason their stalkers didn't seem dangerous.

One of the hunters sniffed. 'I smell fear.'

The man who'd been listening, pointed, and seconds later the bush concealing their quarry was surrounded by a dozen bare, brown, tough-looking feet that had obviously never worn shoes.

'It's OK. We're friends. Come out.' The words clipped as if the speaker wasn't in the habit of wasting his breath. The voice was deep, setting up a vibration in Uretep's chest.

Shamefacedly, Uretep and Peteru scrambled to their feet, unaware of blood from new scratches, some of which were quite deep. They dusted themselves off and approached, self-

consciously aware of the difference in their bodies. They'd thought they were fit, but beside these broad-shouldered, powerful gods they felt like runts.

The deep voiced man stepped forward and stood facing them, gazing into their eyes alternately as if in search of something. So close they could feel his body heat. Suddenly he reached out both arms and firmly cupped each young man's scrotum in large callused palms. A reflex attempt to retreat was painfully arrested when the other fellow remained still. Continuing to gaze into their eyes he slid coarse fingers along the smooth skin between scrotum and anus.

'Sapiens,' he announced with a dismissive shake of his head, releasing his grip and turning back to his friends who muttered among themselves.

'Where are you from and what are you doing here?' asked one of the men whose skin was as black as the deepest shadow. 'Speak honestly.' He said this calmly, but two hearts hammered in alarm nonetheless.

Attempting to keep encroaching panic from his voice, Uretep said as clearly as he could manage, 'We are from the underground city in the large clearing about three hours walk from here.'

'Three hours? You're either lying or you've been walking in circles. It's no more than a ten-minute jog. Tell the truth!'

'We are! It took us three hours, but we didn't know where we were going...it's hard to go in a straight line. Honestly, this is the first time we have ever left Oasis so we didn't know we weren't allowed here. We're not enemies!'

'So you say,' said a tall man with amused eyes. 'You'd hardly tell us if you intended to slash our throats.'

'We wouldn't...'

The man who'd been first up the hill stepped forward and stared into their anxious eyes for several long seconds. 'I'm Jar,' he said coolly, before stepping back and indicating the other five men with a broad sweep of his powerful arm. 'Now show yourself to the others.'

The two visitors gazed for several seconds into the eyes of each of the fishermen, feeling each time as if their deepest secrets were being extracted. In that environment filled with the sense of untamed, natural life, it seemed an instinctive yet oddly rational way to greet a stranger.

Inspection over, Jar studied the captives. 'You're both bleeding—scratches—nothing serious, but you'd better get cleaned up before infection finds them.'

'Hungry?' the questioner was the man with the deep voice who'd spoken first; an attractive, friendly face with a permanent smile

'Yes! And thirsty.'

'Come on then. I'm Seb.'

'I'm Uretep and he's Peteru.'

'Clones?'

Overtaken by a nervous desire to please, Uretep began a detailed response. 'Different eggs and sperm, but the same donors we think. We've had identical genetic modification so that's probably why we look similar and...' His voice trailed away in embarrassment.

Seb frowned and shook his head slightly as if distracted, then led them down to the lake where the proximity of so much clear water sparkling in the sunlight had them transfixed in astonishment.

'Not going in?' someone asked with a grin. 'I'm Leo.'

'It seems too perfect to pollute. My body's so scratched and dirty.'

'It's self cleaning so you can also drink it, come on!' Leo raced past them and dived cleanly into the water, not surfacing until he was about fifty metres out. Both Peteru and Uretep had used the pool in their gymnasium, so could swim, but they'd never been out of their depth. With a shout of delight they hurled themselves into the limpid liquid, leaping up immediately.

'It's cold! It's refreshing! It's perfect!'

Only the irresistible odour of fish roasting on the fire was able to extricate them from a bliss they'd never dreamed of. Weightlessness in water so clean and fresh it was drinkable. Never before had they tasted anything like it.

‘To drown in this lake would be a pleasure, not a punishment,’ Uretep laughed as he shook off the water and joined everyone around a small fire where the smell of roast trout introduced the ecstatic visitors to a sensation they hadn’t realised humans possessed—the joy of eating unadulterated fresh food in a totally natural environment—not an artificial object in sight.

Hunger and thirst quenched with succulent fish, wild herbs and clear spring water, cuts and scratches rubbed with the glutinous sap from long leathery leaves that grew at the edge of the lake, they sat in a circle while the fishermen plied them with questions.

Imagining, because of their apparently simple life, that these wild and powerful men would be mentally simple like Vassals, the two visitors spoke slowly and used uncomplicated words to explain everything; failing to notice the sly smiles.

‘So, You live in a big hole in the ground...who with?’

‘A large number of people—very, very large.’

‘Are they all like you, or are some of them educated enough to explain where you come from?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do they understand technology and can they use big words?’

The six men burst out laughing at the perplexed expressions on their visitors’ faces.

‘We’re educated. We’re probably the best educated people in Oasis.’ Uretep and Peteru were becoming nervous. There was an edge to their hosts’ laughter that warned them not to take their situation too lightly.

‘What are you hiding?’ A command, not a question.

‘Nothing! We’re...’

‘Then why are you prevaricating? We may have asked a simple question, but that doesn’t mean we want a simple answer. Why are you spying on us!’

‘We’re not spying. We didn’t know you existed until we saw you from up there. We thought we were the only humans on earth.’

‘What’s in that bag?’ Seb put out his hand.

Reluctantly Peteru handed it over. ‘Please be careful.’

Seb opened it. The black enseemat, tiny computer, gold disc and empty water flask fell out.

‘What’s this?’ Seb held up the mat.

‘You wouldn’t understand.’

Jar’s face was unrecognisable. He grasped Uretep by the throat and snarled, ‘Sidestep a question once more and you’re dead, along with your mate. Answer the question!’

While Uretep massaged his aching throat, Peteru explained the exact nature and purpose of the mat. Instead of faces blank with incomprehension and disbelief, the six listeners nodded and allowed Seb to place it carefully on the ground.

‘Show us your wrists.’

They did so. Everyone fingered the tiny sliver of metal that protruded.

‘Demonstrate.’ Seb snapped. ‘You return to wherever you came from, and then come back here. Uretep stays with us.’

‘But...’

‘Go, Peteru. These men aren’t the enemy, and even if they were there’s nothing we could do about it. Just go!’

‘Peteru looked around, took a deep breath, stood on the pad, whispered into the terminal, touched his wrist, and disappeared.’

The silence lasted twenty seconds.

‘Impressive,’ someone remarked when Peteru reappeared on the mat sporting a proud erection. ‘What’s the reason for your arousal?’

Uretep explained.

‘Do you guys enjoy sex together?’

‘Yes.’

‘And that’s OK back in your underground city?’

‘Yes.’

‘Because you’re randy or because you love each other?’ The questioner was unsmiling and Uretep wondered if it was safe to tell the truth.

Bravely he thrust out his chest and said clearly, ‘Both.’

Smiles all round.

‘Love is good,’ Jar said softly. ‘Perhaps you aren’t planning on exterminating us after all.’

‘No! No. We think you’re wonderful! Honestly. Sorry about the misunderstanding, it’s just that...’

‘Yes, thanks. That’s enough. We get the message. You’re both good guys.’

Deflated, Uretep turned to Peteru. ‘Were the Mages there?’

‘No, everything was undisturbed. I reckon they won’t visit today.’

‘Good, because we need you to remain with us for a while—we have a few more questions,’ Jar announced firmly, his face disturbingly inquisitorial.

14: Where the Men Live

The atmosphere was becoming uncomfortable so Uretep nervously suggested that although they'd love to stay and answer questions, it was getting late and they didn't want to outstay their welcome...so they'd better be getting back.

The six men got purposefully to their feet and encircled the visitors, staring down thoughtfully. 'We need to know a great deal more about these guys,' a tall wiry fellow with a large hooked nose said brusquely, 'but if we stay here any longer we'll be returning in the dark. There's no moon till later.'

'Sash is right. You'll have to come with us. What's the range of your mat?'

'No idea, but we think at least five times as far as we've come.'

'Good, then you'll have no trouble finding your way home.'

'Are you sure we won't be a nuisance—you guys are so fit and strong. We'll hold you back.'

'Not if we give you a swift kick up the bum when you lag behind,' someone laughed.

'Strangers are as common as hens' teeth around here, so you have curiosity value,' a relatively short, stocky fellow remarked sardonically. 'And as we and the others back at the rocks are insatiably curious, we're not letting you get away just yet.'

Nervousness kept Peteru from asking what hen's teeth were.

'Strangers from the underground city could be a threat to us, so we have to be careful,' Seb explained solemnly. 'Fee and Bel are not threatening *you*—they're protecting *us*.'

'Everyone needs to hear what you know about the place you call Oasis,' Fee said in a tone that brooked no refusal. 'So you are coming whether you like it or not.' He turned to the swimmer. 'Leo, relieve our guests of excess baggage.'

Leo picked up the enseemat, gold disc and tiny computer, placed them carefully in the backpack and slipped it over his shoulder. 'What'll I do with this?' he held up the water bottle.

'Take a look at it Sash,' Jar said. 'What do you reckon?'

Sash peered down his long hooked nose and examined the object. 'It's some sort of plastic.' Turning to Peteru; 'Biodegradable?'

Peteru shook his head. 'Designed to last a thousand years.'

'Bring it, Leo, and I'll dispose of it later.'

'That mat,' Fee asked peremptorily. 'Is it sending a code? Are you being traced?'

'No! It's like we said, we just decided to see for ourselves what the world was like. No one knows we're here—if they did we'd be killed.'

'You'd better be telling the truth,' Fee grunted, turning back to assist with cleaning away the remains of their fire. Uncooked fish were strung on fine vines, spears were shouldered and, humming a tune similar to the one that had drifted up to the watchers above the lake, they set off at a smart trot into the forest, leaving the beach as clean and natural as it had been on their arrival. After a few minutes the humming ceased and silence enveloped them.

There was no discernible track, merely a twisting line of slightly less dense growth. Uretep and Peteru lost all sense of direction. They seemed to be passing the same large trees and small clearings and leaping repeatedly across the same narrow creek. The men were silent, the forest wasn't. Noises were everywhere...a soft rustle of leaves they brushed past, occasional scurrying of unseen animals, bird calls in the canopy high above, sudden bursts of loud cackling laughter, a high whine and crack of a whip, were only a few of the strange sounds that begged to be investigated. But the pace was relentless, their hearts pounded, and questions would have to wait.

They paused for a few seconds in a glade while the fishermen cupped hands behind their ears and turned slowly, listening intently. A million tiny bells seemed to be tinkling. Then a pure, flute-like tone soared above all others, repeating a heart wrenchingly brief melody. A harsh cackle like a curse brought them back to earth.

‘We haven’t been followed,’ Fee whispered, looking sideways at the captives. ‘Perhaps they are telling the truth and really are alone.’

‘And perhaps they aren’t; they’re sapiens, remember! Keep constantly on guard. There’s too much at stake.’

The journey resumed at an even faster pace. Following the man in front became increasingly difficult as they practically sprinted along the almost invisible track. Soon, all Uretep and Peteru could do was concentrate on putting one foot safely in front of the other. Losing all sense of time, no longer able to appreciate the sounds, smells and wonders of the forest, they wound deeper and deeper into a gloom alleviated by occasional flashes of colour as birds, butterflies and raucous parrots flashed across their path.

Through this mysterious world the eight men padded on silent feet; the breathing of six too soft to hear; the panting of their captives loud enough to startle. Trees grew even larger—giant specimens tens of metres tall, and the undergrowth less dense, making running easier. The captives, too exhausted to feel cuts on the soles of their soft feet and grazes from rough branches, plodded gamely on, determined not to admit defeat. At least their lungs, used to the thick recycled atmosphere of Oasis, rejoiced at the ease with which they could breathe the clean, pure, slightly scented air.

Suddenly they stopped. Seb held up his finger and sniffed.

‘Boar,’ he whispered, turning to Uretep and Peteru. ‘Get up that tree, now!’

They scrambled and the others split and dissolved silently into the forest in six different directions. All was still. The harsh screech of what they supposed was a bird, then silence. Without warning a large dark brown beast hurtled into view and stopped beneath their tree, sniffing the air while emitting short grunts. A wild pig fully a metre high. Two long curved tusks like scythes. Bristles erect along its back. Sensing danger but unsure from where.

A slight swish announced a spear that buried itself in its neck. The boar screamed, threw itself onto its back and thrashed around snapping off the handle. Blood oozing, he righted himself and charged at Leo who remained slightly crouched in full view as if challenging the monster, his insanely slender spear firmly horizontal. The slaving beast attacked. Leo rammed the almost invisible weapon deep into one nostril before leaping agilely aside as the boar charged past. Abruptly it stopped, wobbled, turned, swayed, regained balance. Before it could decide what to do, Jar appeared from behind and belted it across the head with a log of wood. It dropped. The others appeared as if by magic. Sash produced what looked like a small knife and slit the beast’s throat.

By the time Uretep and Peteru’s nerves had settled, the beast was skinned and eviscerated, and the men were plaiting vines and preparing a pole to which they tied it’s legs. Seb and Bel hoisted the trophy onto powerful shoulders and, no one having uttered a word the entire time, set off at the same fast trot as before, this time up a long steep slope. At the top they halted at the edge of a vertical drop. The view was breathtaking. Forest-shrouded hills receding in criss-crossing diagonals. Deep greens of the nearest trees fading to pale misty blue in the distance. Horizontal shafts of golden sunlight light illuminated one side of the vast valley, leaving the other in sombre shadow apart from the tallest trees whose tops shone burnished gold. Around the small clearing in which they rested, ancient forest giants dripped as the evening mist descended. Perspiration evaporated and the two visitors shivered.

‘That’s where we’re headed,’ Jar said softly, pointing down the almost vertical cliff towards the setting sun, which shone directly into a blind canyon a hundred metres below, setting ablaze a small waterfall leaping from rocks into a pool beside a clearing containing a number of large boulders.

‘Someone’s singing,’ Uretep whispered. ‘It’s beautiful. All sorts of harmonies.’

‘It’s the rest of our mob,’ Seb said carelessly. ‘Watch your footing.’

In single file they descended a steep zigzag track into the shadows, arriving ten minutes later at the edge of the clearing where a group of similarly lean and fit men were relaxing on boulders arranged in a circle around a fire. The singing had given way to soft chatting and laughing. They greeted their six friends with easy good humour, admired the boar, congratulated the hunters, and eyed the strangers with suspicion.

With increasing alarm the two young men stood quietly as ten lean, fit, powerful and obviously tough men roused themselves and enclosed them in a ring of hard flesh.

‘Uretep and Peteru have paid us a visit,’ Jar announced without expression. ‘From the underground city.’

As with Jar, Seb and the others, scars and other superficial evidence of active, natural and dangerous lives enhanced the aura of free spirited, animal power in their hosts.

‘We wish you no harm,’ Uretep said nervously, increasingly and embarrassingly aware of his physical, and possibly mental, inferiority. He turned to Peteru, who nodded and frowned in perplexity. What could have gone wrong? Seb, Jar and the others had seemed friendly. Perhaps it had been a trap! Perhaps they were destined to be enslaved...eaten!

No one spoke or introduced themselves, merely nodded and stared, leaving their visitors feeling increasingly nervous.

‘Peteru and Uretep have agreed to tell us all they know about the underground city. But first, let’s cook these fish and get the boar onto a spit—I’m hungry.’ Leo turned to his guests and pointed to the perimeter of the circle. ‘Go and sit over there.’

They huddled together on a smooth boulder and watched three men preparing a spit for the boar while others cooked the fish on hot, flat stones in the fire. Everyone was busy at something useful. No one spoke. It seemed as if they communicated wordlessly. An emptiness ached in their chests.

‘I’ve always wanted to be part of a group like this—you know, accepted as an equal, no questions asked.’

‘I know what you mean. It makes you realise what a solitary existence we’ve had. I can’t even imagine what it would have been like without you.’

‘Neither can I. Makes you wonder why isn’t it like this in Oasis. Why aren’t the other scientists friendly and easy with each other like these guys? We know why they don’t like us, but even among themselves there’s always fear and suspicion.’

The light was fading and the murmur of deep voices, harmonious atmosphere and balmy, scented air, set their minds adrift. They lay back on the rock, still warm from the sun, and let unwelcome images of Oasis slip from their consciousness. Taut muscles relaxed, stress dissipated and, gazing up for the first time in their lives at a black sky in which uncountable stars twinkled, they felt totally at peace. Also for the first time in their lives, and despite everything that had happened and their uncertainty about the future, they felt they were in the ‘right place’.

Having only read about stars they never imagined there could be so many! More stars than dark space were casting a faint cool light on everything outside the glow of the fire. Why they should feel so comfortable in the middle of a strange forest with a group of naked wild men was a puzzle, but not one they felt any desire to solve. As they relaxed, a startlingly luminous gibbous moon slowly hoisted itself above the cliff they’d recently descended, its pale gold light revealing rocks and trees while deepening the shadows; adding yet another level of mystery.

Meal preparations complete, they accompanied everyone to the stony-bottomed pool below the waterfall where everyone swam, laughed and sported like playful seals before washing themselves thoroughly. Refreshed and clean, they shook off excess water and jogged back to the fire and food.

The visitors were handed a pad of leaves containing a whole cooked fish and a lump of roast pig, several mushrooms, a few edible green leaves and a red fruit. Following the example of their hosts they used their fingers, finding the food delicious beyond anything they could have imagined, even better than that provided for the Mages.

Having disposed of the 'plates' by tossing them onto a heap at the edge of the forest, the men returned to the fire, added more fuel, then took a handful of translucent greenish paste from a hollowed out stone and smeared it over their bodies.

'Help yourselves,' Jar offered.

'What is it?'

'Insect repellent made from the crushed leaves of a forest plant. It stinks a bit, but better than being sucked dry by mosquitoes and ticks, or chewed by beetles.'

Once everyone was protected and had arranged themselves comfortably in a semi circle, Seb took Peteru and Uretep to a flat stone in front, where they sat until their audience stopped chatting and gave them full attention.

'How many people live in your city; how is it organised; do you have leaders, and if so what are their plans for the new city that at present is lying empty?'

Taking it in turns, Peteru and Uretep related everything they knew about Oasis. Their audience totally silent, concentrating, occasional questions suggesting they understood everything. When they heard of the Mages' plans for expanding their empire an angry hum erupted.

The night was more than half gone, but they wanted to know about the enseemats; all the possible uses they could be put to and, most importantly, why Uretep and Peteru had come into the forest.

These questions were easily answered, but the next sent confused emotions of duty and guilt coursing through their veins.

'So far,' a very tall fellow said clearly, 'you've given us facts. Are you also willing to tell us your true feelings about the place you call Oasis, and how do those compare with your impressions about what you've seen so far of us and the forest?'

Peteru and Uretep stared at each other and nodded nervously. 'We'll do our best,' Uretep said cautiously.

'Good. What is your honest opinion about life in Oasis, the Mages, their treatment of Vassals, Freeman and Aristocrats?'

The young men filled their lungs with fresh, scented night air and smiled genuinely for the first time since their arrival. A great burden of which they'd been hitherto unaware seemed to lighten with the realisation that here they were free to tell these people about things that seemed to have troubled them since birth, but never dared admit to anyone except each other.

As if a vast reservoir of loathing had burst inside their chests, a torrent of fears, aversions, frustrations, difficulties and horrors that was life in Oasis poured forth. With a contempt they'd not realised they harboured, they condemned the slavery, vile punishments, genetic and mental manipulation, lies about the reality of the real world that kept everyone imprisoned in the city, and above all the empty lives of the repulsive, regenerating Mages.

'OK, that's a pretty good summary of your feelings about the organisation; now briefly summarise your feelings about the individuals in Oasis.'

'The individual Vassals and Freeman we met seemed pleasant, but they treat each other badly. They're quite beautiful although mentally dull and somewhat brutish. But they do think about things, albeit slowly. They fight among each other sometimes, but surely that's natural in the circumstances. We feel sorry for them—although they don't feel sorry for each other—but we can't dislike them. All Aristocrats, although intelligent, seem vile. The Mages we despise with no qualifications.'

'I gather you aren't very happy about the Mages proposal to build many more underground cities?'

'We didn't think much about it before discovering how wonderful it is outside Oasis. We thought it didn't matter if the forests were destroyed and replaced with cities.'

'And now?'

'Now we think it's evil—if there is such a thing.'

'And yet you're part of the ruling class, your lives will be easy and comfortable.'

Peteru frowned and looked ready to interrupt.

‘OK, we get it. There are loads of things you dislike, but surely you’d prefer that to living hand to mouth like us in an uncaring, frequently dangerous environment?’

‘Before we came to the forest and met Seb, Jar and the others, we had only an unfocussed idea that there’s something very wrong with manipulating human genes to make slaves for a few wealthy people; treating them as if they’re worthless, using and abusing, murdering, torturing them on a whim.’ Peteru shook his head in despair and found he couldn’t continue.

Uretep took up the thread. ‘Remember, we didn’t know until a few weeks ago that it was safe to live outside the city. Only fifteen people in the whole place know that! The Mages and us.’

‘Come on,’ someone interrupted, ‘we’ve seen hundreds, if not thousands of workers building the new place, blasting the holes, drilling and carving the inside, so they all know.’

‘That’s the terrible thing, they don’t! Their reward for all that hard work was death. To keep secret the truth about the outside world, the Mages disposed of them.’

‘Disposed of them? How?’

‘Back in the old Oasis they throw them to wild dogs to be mauled to death, or toss them down special chutes into algal vats in the deepest part of the city where they become the nutrient on which algae feed, that then feeds everyone else. The workers you saw have all been used to feed the algal beds in the new city, ready for the new population. Not one has survived.’

‘What about the police who were guarding them; shooting those who tried to escape?’

‘Police? Oh, you mean enforcers. We don’t know anything about that, but they would have been disposed of when they returned. Enforcers are only Freeman, you see.’

A murmur of disgust ran through the listeners.

‘You asked about our feelings...well today is the first day I’ve realised I’m alive—that I’ve *felt* alive, that I honestly *want* to live,’ Uretep said passionately. ‘The trees, the birds, the clean air, the clean fresh water, the space the...the everything!’ He placed his hands over his eyes to conceal tears that streamed at the realisation of all that he and everyone else in oasis had been denied.

‘It’s good to cry. It makes you worthy of respect. Not to cry at the fate of others, and the fate of those still living in such an environment would be callous indeed. Without imagination and empathy, a person is nothing.’

Murmurs of agreement.

‘And that’s why we don’t want there to be any more Oases!’ Peteru stood and shouted. ‘If I could, I’d destroy both of them!’ Years of repressed anguish and frustration erupted from the depths of his being, leaving him empty, exhausted. He slumped back onto the rock clasping his head in his hands. Uretep sat beside him, stroked his neck and whispered into his ear.

‘If you’re speaking the truth, then your sentiments do you credit and we have at least something in common,’ Seb said softly.

‘What do you think of us?’ Sash demanded, breaking a short silence.

Uretep cleared his throat, but a huskiness remained. ‘Although I know nothing about you, I feel as if I know you. I want to live with you, be part of your group or whatever you call it. I never ever want to return to Oasis.’

‘And you, Peteru? Do you feel the same?’

‘Yes,’ was all Peteru could manage through tears that seemed to choke him.

After a short silence a deep voice said clearly, ‘We need to think about this. I’m inclined to believe you both. However, we who live with the forest are individuals and all must agree on actions that affect us all. Day is breaking and if your Mages decide to visit, you will be in trouble. Return now. Tomorrow evening, visit us again and we will tell you about us. Then, if we believe you to be truthful, together we will consider the options.’

Peteru and Uretep nodded. Almost beyond exhaustion Uretep placed the gold disc in his mouth, they stepped onto the enseemat, wrapped arms around each other, pressed their wrists and disappeared.

15: The Mages Remain True to Type

A raucous squabbling, grunting and thumping galvanised the young men awake. Imagining they'd left the door to the terrace open and wild animals had somehow found their way into the apartment, Peteru crept out of the tiny cupboard in which they'd slept, stealthily tip-toed down the passageway and peered into Ishbel's new reception room. He was almost right, but the beasts were human. Daylight streaming in through wide open doors illuminated a scene that a week earlier would have merely sickened him. This morning, after a day spent with Seb and his friends, his entire being was revolted. Naked Mages clawing at each other in a frenzy of noisy, stinking sexual lust were defiling not only the morning, but also Ishbel's pristine new salon. He crept back to Uretep and warned him to be careful. They dressed and managed to creep unnoticed to an alcove beside the nearest negrav chute. They had only just concealed themselves when...

'Where are those two black bastards!' Fabien shouted as he wandered down the corridor, stark naked and alarmingly aroused. 'I'm going to ream their cute little arseholes till they beg for mercy.'

'You'll split them open,' Augur snapped. 'We need them alive until they've finished setting up this thing. As soon as everything's fixed you can do what you like with them—and I'll watch,' he added with a slimy laugh, taking the Chief of Enforcement by the arm and leading him back to the lounge.

From their concealment Peteru and Uretep could scarcely breathe. Cold fingers clutched at entrails and spine. 'What'll we do?'

Uretep took a deep breath. 'Wait till they've calmed down then wander in breezily pretending we've come from the negrav chute.'

'What if the chutes aren't working?'

'They will be, because as we've just heard, these debauched creatures need us. Come on, we're smarter than them and as long as we have our computer and an enseemat they can't get us.'

'OK, but we must never let each other out of sight!'

'Never!'

After a very long half hour the cacophony subsided and, hoping everyone had dressed, they wandered noisily along the hallway into a room full of still naked Mages draped unappetisingly over the armchairs. The aura of bestiality had been replaced by loathsome self-satisfaction. Twenty-six predatory eyes fixed on the young men. Fabien licked his lips. Xanthippe scratched lewdly between her legs. Augur fondled himself and Agnes caressed her long nipples. No one smiled.

'Where've you been!' Ishbel presented an awesome figure. A pale mountain of flab literally quivering with rage. Sweating and stinking—as were all the Mages the young men discovered as they approached, relieved they'd put on their clothes.

Maintaining a realistic smile while trying not to retch was difficult. 'We've just been to take a look at the Arena and workshops... you were right as usual, Ishbel, everything's exactly the same here as at home so there'll be zero problems.'

Irritation unappeased by the flattery, Ishbel reached forward and slapped Peteru with all her considerable force on the side of his head, knocking him off his feet, rendering him temporarily deaf. 'You're needed,' she snarled, hands on hips, massive legs astride his startled, prone body.

He looked up in shock, having understood nothing.

'This'll teach you to be there when I need you!' she screamed, releasing a stream of urine. 'You have to check the latest enseemats and wireless terminal placements, then rehearse the Emperor and Empress in their role—they're as thick as a couple of mattresses, so if anything goes wrong you'll pay for it!'

Peteru was too busy shielding his face from the hot stinking liquid to hear or understand anything.

‘Yes, your worship,’ Uretep said humbly, ‘we will make sure everything is to your satisfaction.’

‘You’d better!’ Giving a kick to the cringing body beneath, Ishbel stomped over to an armchair and flopped into it.

Peteru slithered away and sat against the wall, not daring to even wipe his face while Uretep kept trying to calm the Chief Mage down. ‘Were there any problems with your NumbaCruncha trip here?’

‘Does it look like it?’ she snarled, heaving herself to her feet and raising a massive fist ready to strike.

Uretep stepped back in alarm.

‘Never forget, you creepy black maggot, that Mages have superb self control.’ Her voice was lethal. Low and sibilant. The hiss of a venomous serpent considering whether to strike. Deciding not to bother she dragged her fingers between her legs and flicked drops of urine at her genius inventor before turning to her smirking entourage. ‘There’s still only that bloody algal muck here and I’m starving. Everyone assemble in my apartment in one hour.’ She stepped haughtily onto a mat, whispered a number into her tiny computer, popped it into her mouth, touched her wrist and disappeared, followed by the others. Only their stench remained.

It took several minutes before Peteru stopped dry retching and was able to join Uretep in a shower where they scrubbed themselves raw.

When at last they felt clean, Uretep took a deep breath, held it as long as he could then exhaled loudly. ‘That was terrifying. After pissing on you she looked so furious when I asked if she’d had any problems with her NumbaCruncha trip I honestly thought she was going to kill me. That’s the fear all her Freeman and Vassals live with night and day. I can’t go back there! Let’s just escape to the forest and if the Men don’t want us, we’ll try to live on our own.’

‘You call that terrifying? You weren’t nearly drowned in her stinking piss! It was so hot!’

‘I’m so, so sorry Peteru, are you all right? Can I do anything?’

‘How do I smell?’

‘Like fresh air. Was it very terrible?’

‘Hot and foul. I was too busy not letting it get into my mouth and eyes to think.’

‘I couldn’t help you.’

‘You distracted her, that was plenty.’

‘So, shall we go away now?’

‘I thought you wanted to destroy Oasis?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! How can we?’

‘I’m certain Seb and the others want the same thing. He said we had that in common. Surely we have to return and give them more information? We can’t just wimp out.’

Uretep sighed. ‘Yes, of course, you’re right. Sorry. You’re so brave. And she hit you too, are you OK?’

‘I was deaf for a while, but I’m fine now. You know, it’s the first time I’ve been hit. I had no idea how demoralising it is. I was completely unmanned! It’s nothing like verbal insults—those you can rationalise and dismiss, but being physically abused with impunity! No one has any mental defence against that. Suddenly I realised they have total power over my life and death. I have no rights, nothing. In their eyes I *am* nothing! No wonder everyone else including the Aristocrats is so pathetic—they’ve been brainwashed with the fear of Domino and Domina as well as the Mages. So we have to at least try to get rid of them.’ He took a deep breath, shook himself and grinned bravely. ‘Let battle begin.’

Back in their room they breakfasted on tasteless mush, wondering how to explain their scratches and scars.

‘Ishbel’s room isn’t well illuminated, they probably won’t notice.’

‘But if they do?’

‘We’ll say we had a fight.’

Ishbel’s room was darkened when they arrived. Several Mages, still naked, were loudly complaining of headaches. No one noticed the minor abrasions of a pair of very temporary honorary Mages. Xanthippe, who was wearing her wig and nothing else, told them what would be expected from the royal couple at the public demonstration, and gave them the text for the Emperor to learn.

‘This is a very delicate and important propaganda exercise I hope you realise,’ Melvyn announced pompously. ‘The success of the enterprise depends on a convincing performance by the Emperor and Empress. They aren’t the easiest people to get along with, and dumb as shit—which they even look like...’ he waited successfully for a laugh.

‘If it’s so important, why are you entrusting it to us?’

‘Because you’re as black as them.’ He yawned and lay back, caressing a potbelly that seemed to have grown overnight.

‘You’ll need your universal key,’ yawned the teenage Nell who had recently been rejuvenated. ‘It gives you entry everywhere, even the royal suites. But make no decisions outside your expertise! Use the vidcom to ask the appropriate Mage if you’re even slightly unsure what to do!’

‘You’d better wear these,’ Xanthippe waved a hand and two Vassals appeared with tunics and cloaks similar to the ones the Mages wore in public. ‘As Melvyn said, this is too important to get wrong. Wearing these you will be treated like gods.’

Before they could respond Ishbel interrupted irritably. ‘Off you go, then. Inspect the engineers’ work on mat and terminal placement, and tell them to hurry everything along. Things are more desperate than we realised, according to Ruby and Justinian. After that, go and teach their Royal Highnesses how to use NumbaCruncha, and then make him learn his lines by rote. Let me know when you’ve been successful.’

Relieved at their summary dismissal, the two inventors returned to Alger and Begum’s office wearing their new cloaks. Both engineers welcomed them with cool but distinct respect, unable to conceal the gnawing irritant of their curiosity while holding out their wrists to show their silver implants.

‘Everyone, including every Aristocrat, now has one of these things imbedded in their wrist,’ Begum whined. ‘They’re all curious—some are very angry and threatened to kill the implanter until he threatened to call a Mage. There are mats everywhere, screens that show maps and numbers and those terminals to speak into. The whole city is going crazy with curiosity and,’ her voice took on a hectoring tone, ‘we think it is time you told us...’

‘Freemen and Vassals are neither curious nor impatient,’ Peteru interrupted curtly. ‘They do as they’re told without curiosity, just as Aristocrats must. I am certain Mage Fabien will be interested in the names of any Aristocrat who is being unnaturally curious and impatient.’

Begum reddened and Alger plucked nervously at the sleeve of her gown. Suddenly panicking, she gazed in horror at the Mage cloaks as if she’d just realised who they really were, and threw herself on the ground, whimpering apologies. The two novice Mages turned on their heels to hide grins, and went through to the main workshop, removing the hoods of their cloaks.

The assistants greeted them like old friends. They complimented everyone on the excellent protection provided for the public enseemats, the user-friendly maps and number lists, and the astonishing efficiency with which everyone had been implanted and an enseemat and terminal had been placed in every Aristocrat and Freeman apartment. The Vassal’s mats would be completed within the day. With great pride the head technician informed them that the automated manufacturing process was so efficient that New Oasis too would be fully set up within the next two days, with everything controlled by the designated Mainframe computer in Computer Central.

Peteru could scarcely contain his delight. ‘You guys are really fantastic!’ he beamed, spreading his arms to include Alger and Begum, who had followed the Mages into the workshop. ‘You all deserve medals. I’d no idea there was so much talent in Oasis.’

Furious at being included in praise given to Freeman, the Aristocrats asked to be excused.

‘Certainly, you must have plenty to do,’ Uretep said sweetly.

As the door closed behind them the atmosphere relaxed and Peteru and Uretep took the extraordinary step of shaking hands with each of the Freeman whose efforts had been so remarkable. At first shocked at being touched in friendship by someone so powerful, they nervously smiled and thanked and complimented the two inventors. Unfortunately, Alger returned and threatened everyone with extermination if they weren’t back at work instantly.

Alone in their room, Uretep sighed. ‘They could be redeemed, don’t you think? The Freeman?’

‘No. They responded to kindness, but once that stimulus was removed, they reverted. Childhood conditioning is permanent. No change is possible. Are you ready to meet the Emperor?’

‘Can’t wait.’

16: The Royal Couple

The gold disc allowed access to the negrav chute that ascended directly to the royal suite where a Vassal conducted them to a large, impressively furnished reception room. Despite their new robes and hoods they couldn't help feeling a trifle nervous when an internal door opened to admit the most handsome man either had ever seen. In his early thirties, he was about twenty centimetres taller than his visitors, perfectly proportioned, flawless skin like burnished blue-black ebony, wearing a short sleeveless tunic of a coarse material that barely reached mid thigh. He padded forward on bare feet and stood a metre in front of his guests, mutely questioning. A perfectly symmetrical body exuding power, health and vigour. Only the eyes appeared lost, vague and unsure.

'They told me you'd be coming.' The voice was rich, deep, and sad. The smile slightly bewildered. Childlike. Nervous. 'Please don't hurt me. I've been as good as I can.'

On a sudden impulse Uretep threw back his hood and wrapped his arms around the Emperor in a friendly hug. Recollecting himself he stepped back, unsure if he'd transgressed some protocol that might jeopardise their plan. His worries were groundless. The Emperor's nervous smile became a wide grin of delight. He enveloped Uretep in powerful arms, then did the same to Peteru who had also discarded his hood.

'Why have you never visited me before?' he asked, excited as a child. 'No one ever hugs me or is nice to me, they're all stiff and boring and tell me what to do all the time and I don't like them.' Placing hands on both their shoulders as if frightened they'd go away, he continued excitedly, 'I thought you'd be like the other Mages, but you're nice! I can tell by looking at you that you won't hurt me.'

'You're nice too, Emperor,' Peteru smiled gently, 'and we certainly will not hurt you. In fact we were worried you'd be difficult to talk to because you're so important.'

'My name's Calisto,' he said modestly. 'Please don't call me Emperor. I wish I'd never been elected. It's horrible.'

'What about the Empress?'

'She's the most horrible. She hates me because I'm a Vassal. Calls me dirty names. I'm glad she lives in her own palace.'

'But when you're together you both look so happy.'

'That's because if we don't we're punished.' He turned and lifted his tunic to expose recently healed scars across both buttocks. They did this to me because I wouldn't do something...I forget what it was. They used a hot iron thing.'

'But that's terrible!' both young men were horrified.

'The worst thing is being lonely. I miss my best friend. I've no one to talk to and laugh with and...' tears streamed down the handsome cheeks.

'What's the name of your friend?' Peteru asked.

'Philo.'

'Where's your vidcom?'

Calisto pointed.

The gold disc ensured instant connection to Melvyn. 'What do you want?' he snapped.

'Melvyn, you're the bloke in charge of propaganda, so I turn to you for assistance. In the interests of a happy resolution to the Emperor's speech at the unveiling of NumbaCruncha, I need the Vassal Philo sent to the royal apartments immediately. Thanks.' He disconnected before Melvyn could ask questions.

The Vidcom bleeped. 'Don't you hang up on me you...' Melvyn's face was purple.

'If you can't do it, then I'll try Ishbel,' Peteru said pleasantly.

Melvyn disconnected, and three minutes later a servant shoved into the room an extremely nervous, rather ordinary looking Vassal of about the same age as the Emperor, dressed in stained overalls. Without looking up he fell on his face and whimpered.

Calisto raced forward, pulled him to his feet and wrapped him in his arms. 'Philo, it's me.'

Philo looked up. A smile of astonished relief split his face. 'Calisto!'

'The Emperor grinned and nuzzled at his lover's ears, nose, eyes and lips, unfazed by the presence of the two Mages who had replaced their hoods.

Suddenly realising what was happening, Philo pulled back in alarm and threw himself at their feet. 'Forgive me, your worships. I am just so happy to see my friend I...'

Uretep pulled him upright. 'Philo, it pleases us to see you both happy.'

'Can he stay?' Calisto asked without much hope.'

'Do you love each other?' Uretep asked, trying to sound as cool as Seb when asking him the same question in the forest the previous day.

The Emperor's eyes glazed as if confused, then as if daring the Mages to do their worst, said simply, 'Yes...if what I feel is love.'

'Then he can stay, but he can't be seen with you in public.'

'Why can't he be the Emperor's bodyguard?' Peteru suggested.

'He's already got one.'

'I hate him. He fucks the Empress and tells her everything about me.'

'Then that's settled. You can dismiss him.'

Learning the short speech that would explain NumbaCruncha to the multitudes took less than ten minutes. Calisto only had to hear a sentence twice before it was committed to memory. When complimented he seemed surprised. All Vassals do that; we can't read, so we remember. Philo will have remembered it too.' He turned to his friend. 'Come on, Philo, show them.'

Shyly at first, then with increasing confidence Philo repeated the entire speech word perfect with identical emphasis.

'What do you think the people will say, Calisto?'

'About what?'

'The contents of the speech.'

'Oh...I've only learned it, I haven't thought about what it means.' He turned to Philo. 'You're cleverer than me at understanding things. Tell me what it's about.'

Eyes wide, Philo looked as if ready to run. 'I...I can't! The gods will kill me.'

'They won't, Philo. We are the representatives of the gods and, as the Chief Mage will explain at the Arena, this message comes directly from them. Come on, what's it about? In different words though, not the ones you've memorised. Imagine you're Calisto.'

After a deep breath and a stuttering start, Philo spoke slowly and carefully. 'The Chief Mage has just told you that Domino and Domina have given us a new way to move around Oasis. It is safe and happens at once and will make everyone very happy and feel sexy and you'll also be naked. But that's OK because the gods don't want us to wear clothes any more. Also, men and women have to fuck every day, because when a man puts his rod into a woman's hole and pumps until it squirts, it causes her to grow a new person in her belly, and the gods want us to make as many babies as we can.' He stopped, confused. 'Calisto and I squirt into each other's holes sometimes, but we don't have babies.'

'That's a different hole. Women have a third hole in the middle, so only they can have babies.'

'But most men I know squirt into women sometimes and they haven't had babies.'

'That's because Domino and Domina prevented it from happening. But please go on, you haven't finished explaining Calisto's speech.'

'Sorry.' Philo visibly collected his thoughts. 'Then the Empress and I will show you all how to use the new way of moving around Oasis, and then I will put my rod into her and fuck, pumping

until I squirt so everyone can see that it is the right thing to do.’ Philo stopped and thought. ‘Ah yes, then he says, Domino and Domina be with you.’

‘Excellent, Philo.’

‘Calisto was frowning. ‘I’m worried I won’t be able to do it. I don’t like the Empress, she’s always bossy and rude and tells me I’m useless because I can’t get stiff with her.’

‘You only have to do it once to solve a huge problem the Mages have. You see, as the most important person in Oasis, you are the only person who can help them.’

‘I don’t want to help them.’

‘Yes you do.’

‘What’s their problem?’

‘Convincing ordinary people to believe they have to be naked everywhere and have sex frequently. As you know, it’s always been forbidden in public. But if they see the Emperor and Empress naked on the stage having sex in public, then they will believe it is the right thing to do. It is your duty as Emperor to show the way for your subjects. They elected you and admire you. Trust me—no one else in Oasis could do it.’

Calisto’s chest swelled visibly at the thought of having such power. Then he frowned. ‘But my rod never gets hard with her! That’s why she hates me.’

‘Believe me, it will get hard, and you will feel like doing it with her.’ Let me show you the new way of moving.

Uretep placed two mats at one end of the room and a second pair at the other, a good twenty metres away. Then he and Peteru stood on the mats, whispered a number into their terminals, touched their wrists and before their cloaks and tunics hit the ground they were standing on the mats at the other end. Calisto and Philo were staring in astonishment at the now empty mats.

‘We’re here,’ Peteru called.

Their audience turned, speechless.

‘Now it’s your turn.’

‘You’re naked!’

‘Yes, it feels much better. More natural.’

‘And your rods are hard.’

‘Yes. And it feels great. Come on. Give me your wrists.’

To disobey two Mages who could fly invisibly through the room was unthinkable, so they both accepted the implant, stood on the ensemats, whispered the number into the computer held by Uretep, touched their wrists and appeared at the other end of the room. After gazing for at least two seconds in astonished lust at each other’s arousal, they sank to the floor and caressed, kissed, fondled and eventually brought each other to orgasm.

Touched by such a captivating expression of love, Uretep and Peteru also took pleasure in each other’s bodies, amused when they surfaced to see Calisto and Philo squatting in front of them, shaking their heads in wonderment.

‘We didn’t know Mages were so beautiful. And you also love each other.’

‘Yes, that’s why we understand you. So, did you enjoy the experience?’

Calisto heaved a great sigh and failed to wipe off the silly grin. ‘Yes.’ He rubbed his hand over his head. ‘Where’s my hair? You too!’ he shouted at Philo. ‘We’re both bald. Down here too,’ he whispered looking down. ‘You didn’t tell us about that.’

‘Does it worry you? Your hair was so short I can hardly see the difference. What about you, Philo?’

‘I don’t care about anything if I can be with Calisto.’

‘You’re still feeling sexy, I see.’

Calisto giggled boyishly. ‘He’s always feeling sexy with me. Is it like this every time?’

‘Yes, so if you and the Empress transport at the same time, she’ll also feel sexy and you’ll easily be able to shove your rod into her.’

He frowned. ‘But she won’t want me to.’

‘I guarantee she will. Come on, let’s go to her apartment so she can hear your speech and get used to the idea, then I’ll teach her how to use the new transportation, and you can both make the crossing together like you did with Philo, after which you will shove your rod into her until you’re satisfied.’

‘Can Philo come too?’

‘He’s now your bodyguard, so of course.’ Uretep turned to Philo. ‘As long as you don’t get jealous when you see Calisto with the woman.’

‘Of course not,’ Philo said with a frown. ‘Calisto is only doing his work.’

‘Very sensible. And don’t tell her you’re lovers because she will tell everyone she sees and that will spoil Calisto’s image as a potent Emperor.’

‘OK.’

‘Now, we must all put on our clothes; something impressive for you Calisto, and Philo in whatever a bodyguard wears. Oh, and wear hoods or hats so she doesn’t get suspicious about your lack of hair. Definitely don’t tell her you’ve already transported.’

Empress Agnes was a striking, big-bosomed, narrow-waisted woman in her thirties with bleached blond ringlets and small eyes that seemed too close together. An elaborately embroidered gown exaggerated her tiny waist and generous hips while exposing a cleavage deep enough to burrow into. In an effort to look as pale as a Mage, Agnes had painted all her exposed skin deathly white, as if she’d been suffering a severe nausea attack. A large and powerful bodyguard in a rough tunic stood protectively behind the chaise longue on which she reclined in exaggerated languor. She extended a hand as if expecting it to be kissed.

The two Mages in their cloaks of power drew themselves up with assumed anger. ‘On your feet, woman!’ Peteru snapped. ‘Kneel and kiss my sandal.’

Astonished, the woman leaped to her feet and prostrated herself.

‘We have a message from Gods Domino and Domina,’ Uretep intoned. ‘Sit and listen carefully to your Emperor who will repeat to you the speech he will deliver at the next grand assembly.’

The Empress sniggered.

‘If you wish to be alive tomorrow, I suggest you show your Emperor the respect he deserves,’ Peteru snarled with such venom that the woman burst into tears, kneeled and begged forgiveness. ‘Shut up, woman, and listen!’ He nodded to Calisto who cleared his throat and declaimed his speech with all the majesty one would expect from a grand seigneur.

At the conclusion the poor Empress looked even paler than before.

‘Naked!’ she screeched. ‘Forgive me your worships, but surely that cannot be? The Empress can never appear naked before her people.’

‘You can and will. Furthermore, to demonstrate to your people that the gods are serious, you and the Emperor will have sexual intercourse in front of the entire population.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Not with that Vassal...’

‘Silence woman unless you want your reign terminated immediately! That is not all. Before the public sexual act you and your Emperor will demonstrate the new transportation system.’ Peteru signalled to Philo who placed mats at either end of the large room.

‘Agnes,’ Uretep said gently, ‘I am going to implant a tiny piece of silver in your wrist to enable you to use the new transportation. It is totally painless. Give me your arm.’

‘Please... no,’ she wailed.

‘Your body guard will tell you it is painless,’ he said quietly, beckoning to the guard who held out his arm as if uninterested, and didn’t flinch.

Rigid with fear, eyes staring in horror, Agnes watched when it was done to her, relaxing slightly when it didn’t hurt. Uretep then led her by the hand to the far ensemats where Calisto joined her. As soon as Peteru told them what to whisper into the computer, they touched their wrists, disappeared, and materialised at the far end of the room.

The bodyguard shouted in alarm, stared around wildly, then stared in mute astonishment at his mistress. Without the ridiculous hair, dress and makeup, Agnes was a very attractive woman—

warm brown glossy skin, pert posture and a lustful look in the eye. Calisto, although aroused, remained abstracted until Agnes dragged him on top of her on the floor, legs wide and high—a funnel for lust that led the Emperor's rod straight to the target. After less than a minute of vigorous thrusting he growled deeply, arched his back shot his load and clambered off, returning to Philo.

'More! More!' Agnes whimpered. 'I need more!'

Peteru led her bodyguard to the far mat, and two seconds later he was doing his best to satisfy his mistress.

The Emperor, his lover and the two Mages quietly left them to it, preferring not to be around when the Empress discovered she was bald.

'Do you still doubt your ability to perform with Agnes in front of the entire population?'
A satisfied grin. 'I can't wait to do it.'

'All done,' Peteru said cheerfully on returning to Ishbel's apartment. 'The Emperor is word perfect and impatient to demonstrate both NumbaCruncha and his sexual prowess in front of the multitudes whenever required.'

'You have a way with these lower castes, don't you? Quite the diplomat.' Ishbel said as if delivering an insult.

'I guess we have more in common with them than our skin colour,' Peteru said a little too sharply.

Ishbel's colour rose; she did not like her insults to be parried. 'When will everything be ready?'

'Book the announcement and demonstration for directly after midday in four day's time. Everyone will have an implant in their wrists by then, all enseemats and number directories are already in position, and by tomorrow every seat in the Arena will be ready and allocated. All that's left to do is ensure everyone knows the number of their home mat so that once the Emperor's speech and demonstration is complete, they can transport themselves home.'

'But will they continue to use it, or just go back to the negrav chutes? They're creatures of habit, you know.'

'To reinforce the lesson, we could order the entire population to assemble two hours later in Central Park, and temporarily shut down the negrav chutes to make sure they use NumbaCruncha. After that, I'm sure they'll always use it, in the process lowering the city's energy consumption.'

'Do you think one demonstration in the Arena will be enough though?' Ishbel appeared oddly insecure.

'No, I think we should have one other couple, preferably Aristocrats.'

Ishbel's laugh was genuine. 'I was thinking of you and Uretep.'

'Sure, no worries,' Uretep agreed, to Ishbel's surprise. 'If you think it's a good idea to promote two black men having sex?'

'Of course not! We want them to breed!'

'Like I said, what you really need is a couple of Aristocrats. Everyone knows the royal couple are a Vassal and a Freeman, so the Aristocrats could become rebellious unless one of them is also seen to transport and then enjoy the pleasures of the flesh.'

Ishbel's lip curled in amused suspicion. 'I presume you have someone in mind?'

'How'd you guess? Let's reward Alger and Begum. They've been in command of the project, so it's fitting that they should be rewarded for all their hard work by proving that Aristocrats also can fuck like cockroaches.'

'Were they very objectionable?' Ishbel asked innocently.

'At times.'

'Then so be it, will you tell them or shall I?'

'The honour would be greater coming from you, your worship.'

Ishbel burst into hearty laughter. 'That's the first time I've laughed properly for what seems like years. I'm growing to like you two.'

'And we like you too Ishbel,' Peteru responded, deciding that as she was obviously deranged and dangerously violent it would be unwise to remind her that she'd been urinating on him only that morning. 'But we've had a gruelling day, so we'd like to turn in early if that's OK with you.'

'It's only mid afternoon! But I suppose compared to me you're both still babies. Maybe it is a sensible idea to get a good rest, in case there are problems to solve between now and the grand unveiling.'

Back in their own apartment Peteru shook his head in frustration. 'I'm feeling sorry for Calisto and Philo. They're excellent men. I can't bear to think that in a couple of years they'll be tossed down a chute like garbage.'

'Perhaps we can arrange something less horrible?'

'Were you thinking of...?'

'I imagine so. But its getting late and we have a rendezvous.'

17: The Men Tell All

The place was deserted when Peteru and Uretep arrived beside the flat boulder on which they'd sat the previous night.

'Smell the air,' Uretep whispered. 'I feel so alive!'

'I feel randy.' Peteru grinned lecherously. 'I thought I'd got used to arriving somewhere with a hard on, but this is different.' He pulled a very willing Uretep onto the smooth mossy ground between the boulders.

'The Men might come back.'

'Do you think they'll mind?'

'Don't care if they do'

Their lovemaking was gentle, passionate, and totally absorbing—a release from tensions that had been mounting for weeks, so it was a surprise on resurfacing to realise the Men had arrived on silent feet and were gazing down speculatively.

'Welcome back,' Bel's deep voice said softly with the hint of a smile.

The two visitors sat up in consternation. 'Sorry... we...'

'Nothing to be sorry about.'

'We were only...'

'You were only expressing your deep and eternal friendship,' Bel interrupted with a cheeky grin. 'We had a meeting this morning to discuss you, your information and your situation.' He paused dramatically.

'And.?' The nervous fear that seemed to have accompanied Peteru all his life came surging back, drowning his newfound joy in living. Didn't these Men take him seriously? Was it all just a joke to them?

'And we have decided to take the risk of believing you for the present.'

Both young men's shoulders sagged in relief. 'That's excellent!'

Seb nodded brusquely and continued. 'It is not a risk we would normally take; our rule is to prevent all sapiens from leaving their settlements and entering the forest. If your enforcers, as you call them, hadn't murdered the people who tried to escape, we would have killed them anyway.'

'We understand.'

'Do you? I hope so. Are you hungry?'

'No, thanks, but we'd love a drink of water.'

'There's a calabash beside you.'

'How thoughtful.'

'The air's very hot and dry. That makes you thirstier than you realise, and that's dangerous. Drink while we settle, help yourselves to anti-bug paste, then ask your questions.'

They drank the delicious cool water, applied insect repellent, conferred for the few minutes it took everyone to get seated, then Uretep asked, 'What risk do sapiens pose?'

'They are unable to live sustainably. To preserve the natural environment, we use only handmade tools from naturally available materials, eat only what we gather and obtain by hunting, use no energy but our own for all tasks, and maintain our population at a level that can be sustained by the environment. Some sapiens might want to live like that, may even try, but their evolutionary conditioning will never allow them to succeed. When the going gets tough—drought, difficult hunting, severe weather, looming starvation...they'll gather in ever larger communities, start agriculture, make war on competitors, and revert to the same natural wasteful, destructive behaviour as all the other animals that evolved alongside them—setting off another destructive cycle that will probably destroy all life, turning the planet into just another sterile rock hurtling through space.'

‘Depressing picture. But I don’t understand why agriculture is bad.’

‘It requires the destruction of natural systems. Monoculture encourages disease. Evaporation from irrigation wastes precious water. Pesticides and herbicides poison everything. The list of evils is long and damning. Suffice it to say that agriculture is the number one destructive force, followed by medical advancements that allow the weak to survive. Without those two things and their tools, sapiens populations would never have gotten out of control.’

‘Surely they can learn from their mistakes?’

‘Have your Mages learned after a thousand years? The sad truth is that sapiens, like all evolved animals, are not able to override their evolutionary imperatives.’

‘But we’re different. We’d be able to live like you.’

‘What’s different about you?’

‘I reckon our evolutionary imperatives were deleted during our genetic makeover. And we haven’t been brainwashed to believe any one thing is good, bad, right or wrong. We’ve been left to think for ourselves with no preconceptions. We’re the only people in Oasis who are able to look at things dispassionately, think about them and change our minds when new facts emerge. We bear no resemblance to the Mages! After comparing your life with life in Oasis, we understand that yours is the only way to live that will not destroy nature.’

‘Not indoctrinated eh? That’s a first—if it’s true. Sapiens have always indoctrinated their offspring with irrational dogma because it’s an efficient means of controlling them. If the controllers had been wise and good it might have worked, but they’ve always been even crazier than the people they want to lead. If you brainwash people so they can believe the unbelievable, then they have no hope of extricating themselves from problems their beliefs have caused—such as the notion that Earth’s resources are inexhaustible.’

‘That’s so obvious I can’t believe anyone has ever thought anything so stupid.’

‘It’s the sole reason for the collapse of their civilization. But if you haven’t been indoctrinated there may be hope for you.’

The novelty and pleasure of discussing and talking about their ideas with other intelligent and articulate men dispersed all the visitors’ remaining nervousness.

‘You call us sapiens,’ Uretep said. ‘I guess you mean *Homo sapiens*. That means you aren’t. So what are you and where do you originate?’

‘About a thousand years ago some very smart geneticists made substantial genetic changes to carefully selected foetuses and produced a new species, which they called *Homo novus*, new man. But as we’re no longer new, we simply call ourselves Men. It will be up to whatever intelligent species follows us, if there is one, to give us a more descriptive name. Calling themselves *Homo sapiens* was the height of arrogance, and totally erroneous. *Sapiens* means knowing or wise, but nothing less wise has ever evolved. We call them sapiens as a sick joke.’

‘What would you call them?’

‘*Homo toolmaker*. Their sole claim to fame is making ever more complicated tools to destroy the environment in which they evolved. Your NumbaCruncha is just a tool to make travel easier and faster. Metal knives are just tools to make cutting easier. Wireless is just a tool to speed up communication. Their greatest inventive efforts were spent on tools to murder, maim and destroy other humans in their eternal wars. The brains of *Homo sapiens* remain geared to the identical survival instincts of all other animals. They breed copiously and pay no heed to the environmental damage they do when building shelters, defending their territory, finding food, feeding, drinking, excreting or keeping themselves clean. Urbanised sapiens behave identically to caged animals; they neglect their young, foul their nests, pick fights, get depressed and sick. Not much wisdom in that sort of behaviour.’

‘I agree. But you used spears and knives to kill and cut up the boar—they’re tools.’

‘The spears are sharpened wooden sticks, hardened in a fire we made with friction using our own muscles. Several species of birds and primates use such simple tools. Our knives are sharp stones, also used by some birds and primates. Unlike other animals, however, we take great pains not to disrupt the environment. You saw us extinguish the fire and put everything back as it was

before we arrived. That's because we are aware of our effect on the planet and try to minimise it, while they are not troubled by such notions. If we have to rely on our own strength and energy to survive, then forests, rivers, seas, animals and birds are safe from destruction.'

'Yes...I can see that,' Peteru said dreamily. 'The Mages couldn't have destroyed the forest and blasted gigantic holes to house Oasis without their tools, so they'd have died out long ago.' He nodded to himself and remained silent...thinking.

Uretep continued the questioning. 'As you know, we've also been genetically modified, but we're still sapiens. What's the difference between you Men and us? We look the same.'

'We're dual sexed—male and female in one body.'

'Why?'

'What is the most powerful natural urge of every living thing?'

'To live?'

'To procreate.'

'Of course you're right...I wasn't thinking.'

'The female sapiens has to be protected and provided for when she is incubating and nurturing a child, which will need protection for many years. To ensure this, both males and females obey overpowering instincts to provide shelter and food, no matter the cost. To avoid failing in this essential requirement, sapiens have not been provided with a mental 'switch' to turn off these evolutionary imperatives. The result is that sapiens breed till there's standing room only, eat till they die of obesity, and accumulate goods until all resources are exhausted and the planet is unable to support them.' Seb paused to drink from a calabash.

Murmurs of agreement and serious nodding heads were clear indications that all the Men were very concerned about Oasis and its hordes of sapiens.

Leo took up the story. 'Uncontrolled evolutionary imperatives like that don't matter with other animals, because without clever tools they are the prey of accidents, disease and other large animals. That means there's a limit to how much they can accumulate and store, and how many other species they can eliminate. These limits ensure there's a seesaw balance of both plant and animal species, and thus the huge variety of essential environmental conditions that permit the evolution of new species, will remain.'

'The problem is the way sapiens brains are wired,' Seb continued. 'There have always been a few wise sapiens able to see the error of their ways and who have done their best to spread ideas about how humans should live, but they've never been listened to. Childhood brainwashing by religions and schools have seen to that. Even when disaster loomed and their civilization began crumbling they couldn't comprehend the notion that more than enough is too much, let alone translate that idea into actions that might have saved them. Evolved instincts have always prevented them from acting on self-evident wisdom. Instead of living with nature they increased the use of powerful tools powered by fossil fuels, to eliminate all competing species of plant and animal and reshape the face of the planet. It took them only a couple of centuries to release into the atmosphere billions of tons of carbon that had taken hundreds of millions of years to be tucked away as coal, oil and gas. This had the effect of returning the atmosphere to its ancient state of violent storms, floods, droughts, permanent instability and great danger for all life.'

'Is it still like that?'

'Of course. It's going to take millions of years, not a mere thousand to restore some climatic stability. You've been fortunate to have visited us during one of the quiet weather patterns.'

Peteru sat forward abruptly. 'Maybe it wasn't so odd. The Mages must know about the weather, that's why they're in such a rush to move everyone across, severe storms will further damage the already weakened structures.'

'Mmm... sounds plausible.'

'So... you're not solely the product of evolution; you were modified by geneticists. But someone very wise must have had the idea—it means there were some humans who weren't too bad. Was he also a scientist?' Uretep's mind remained fixed on the conundrum of whether he was Homo sapiens or something else, and if he should feel ashamed if he was.

‘No, they were simply two sensible, down to earth men—Sebastian and Jarek; two of the few Homo sapiens who deserved the species name. Determined to do something about the problem of human irrationality, they consulted other wise people and decided to engineer self-fertile hermaphrodites with a “stop switch” that could override evolutionary imperatives. To achieve this, they funded a well-equipped secret laboratory, and invited the best geneticists and technicians they could find. After several years, our progenitors were created.’

‘Why would they do that?’

‘To save non-human life on the planet from extinction. To stop earth becoming a barren rock, like Mars. Sapiens may have failed last time to destroy all life on Earth, but given a second chance they’d have succeeded. Those wise and brave men entrusted us with ensuring Homo sapiens never again became top of the pecking order. For the last thousand years every time it seemed as if there might be a resurgence of Homo sapiens in any area, we Men prevented it.’

‘In the light of what we’ve recently learned, that was wise.’ Peteru said thoughtfully. ‘There’s a saying I learned somewhere...soft doctors make stinking wounds. Homo sapiens has behaved like a disease—a plague that must be exterminated.’

‘What exactly is this ‘stop switch’ you mentioned?’ Uretep asked.

‘The ability to override instinctive reactions and reflexes if they get in the way of rational decisions. Reflexes are vital if we’re faced with sudden danger, but they’re a problem when there’s time to think. Sapiens can never override the primeval urge to breed, store, and increase their possessions. Our brain is different, and can override ‘gut feelings’ or instincts if they’re no longer necessary, leaving us free to base our actions on reality, facts and observation. We not only understand the principle that more than enough is too much, but base our lives on it.’

‘How much is enough?’

‘Excellent question! We can easily make or find shelter that’s adequate. We have few problems hunting and gathering enough food, and there aren’t many dangers we can’t cope with or escape from using only our own strength and simple tools. That means our own strength is enough. If we’re warm and dry, that’s enough. And as we can work out how many Men are able to live off an area of forest or plain without upsetting the balance, we maintain a stable population that is enough and no more.’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ Peteru repeated softly to himself before looking up with a huge grin. ‘Like you said, the problem is the way sapiens brains are wired! Yes! That’s it! It explains why the Mages are determined to cover the planet in cities like Oasis. They certainly have no ‘stop button’ when it comes to food and sex and desire for power. And they are determined never to die. Horrible.’

‘What are the Mages like when they’re together?’

‘They’re insane! Always bickering and arguing. Not surprising I guess as they’ve been living together for about a thousand years.’

‘And everyone else? Are they also sex mad and greedy?’

‘No chance of that when for hundreds of years everyone’s been medicated to chemically sterilise them and lower their sex drive. They only have sexual intercourse occasionally, and then mainly out of friendship or boredom, according to what we’ve recently learned. Every Vassal and Freeman dresses the same, works long hours, is fed a minimum balanced diet and shares ablutions, so they don’t have the opportunity to consume more than what’s required to keep them alive. The Mages have sex with their slaves all the time, they’re sex mad.’ Peteru shook his head in disgust. ‘You should see them after they’ve been transported by NumbaCruncha! No, on second thoughts, you shouldn’t, it’s nauseating.’

‘Do males and females get on well together?’

‘Recently, since the sex-suppressant drugs have been withheld, there have been flare-ups between them.’

‘Probably long suppressed evolutionary desires for babies are emerging and females are seeking mates. They can be aggressively competitive, apparently.’

‘But you guys have none of those tensions I suppose,’ Peteru asked.

‘Right again,’ Seb grinned. ‘With both sexes in the same body, tensions disappear. The male is also the female so there’s no worry about support for a child. There’s no wife to egg her man on to gain more money and a better a bigger house; no competition and jealousy among wives about who has the most powerful husband, or among husbands vying for the most attractive wife. We are our own husbands and wives and therefore can be satisfied with enough.’

‘Not only satisfied,’ someone said clearly. ‘Contented.’

A murmur of agreement ran through the Men.

‘How many of you are there,’ Peteru asked suddenly.

‘Here? Eighteen. In general? A dozen fewer than the environment they are living in can support, in case fire or drought or floods deplete the food supply. Usually, we only replace ourselves. This forest looks lush, but the weather’s fickle and we have to share everything with all the other animals. Unlike us, they can’t stop breeding if times are good, so when things are bad they starve. We want to avoid that unpleasantness, so we keep our numbers down.’

‘I can see your male genitals are like ours, can we see your female parts?’

‘Of course.’ Seb turned to a tall, very lean Man with visible, rope-like muscles. ‘Sim, everyone reckons you’ve the most beautiful vulva, come and show our guests.’

General laughter as he lay calmly on the flat stone and spread his legs.

There was just enough light to see everything clearly.

‘So that’s why you felt between our legs,’ Uretep said with a laugh. ‘Sim’s is the first female sexual organ I’ve had a good look at. How fascinating. But...how do you make a baby?’

Sim demonstrated.

‘It’s amazing; you can pull your penis around and insert it completely in. It looks painful.’

‘It’s uncomfortable, but not painful.’

‘If you ejaculated now, would it be pleasurable? Would you have a baby?’

‘No and no. We have to ejaculate into our vagina every day for a week to trigger the production of an ovum. Then it takes another couple of weeks of daily insemination to ensure the egg is fertilised. If it isn’t, it is ejected and we have to start again. Because no eggs are produced without the stimulation of sperm, we don’t have the unpleasant monthly womb-shedding of female sapiens.’

‘And because it isn’t pleasurable, there’s no incentive to do it unless we really want a child,’ added Leo.

‘Do you always make your own child or do you also have another man’s? And do you have sex with other Men, Sim?’

‘Always our own child, unless there’s been an accident and we can’t inseminate ourselves. But that’s rare. As for sex with others, of course we do, in my case mainly with Leo, my partner, but also with the others if the desire’s mutual. It’s good for social cohesion if all members of a group occasionally enjoy sexual pleasure together as well as eating, talking singing, dancing and exercise. There’s no jealousy because we’re our own spouses—if that makes sense.’

‘Yes, it does...sort of. But if there’s no pleasure in it I don’t see...’

‘It’s only when we inseminate ourselves that ejaculation isn’t much fun, with others it’s wonderful.’

‘But won’t you have a baby if someone else has sex with you?’

‘No, because I’m the only one who uses that orifice. All social sex is done the same way you two were doing it when we arrived.’

‘So that’s why you weren’t shocked.’

‘We are not insane. Only a madman could be shocked by behaviour that gives pleasure and does no harm.’

‘Do you feel like two people, Sim? Do you think of yourself as we, or me?’

‘Me, of course. I am a complete being.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Seventy-four, Leo is seventy-two, Cos is fifty-two, Seb is twenty-eight, Jar is...forty isn’t it, Jar?’

‘Forty-two.’

‘But! That’s impossible. You all look the same age...not much older than us.’

‘That’s because one of our genetic modifications prevents the telomere from losing bits of itself. That means our DNA doesn’t forget how to replicate and repair cells perfectly, so we don’t age. But we’re not immortal. We can’t grow a new eye, arm or leg, or repair serious trauma. Depending on how hard our lives have been we drop dead between the ages of sixty-five and seventy-five—I’m due to pop off any time now. To ensure continuance, we have our child when we’re around fifty-five, to give us time to teach him everything but not overpopulate.’

‘Do you have a son, Sim?’

‘Yes, he’s nearly twenty. He and Leo’s son are hunting a few days hike from here. We’ll join them in a week—providing I don’t kark it before then.’

‘Does the idea of death worry you?’

‘No more than the absence of life worried me before I was born.’

Uretep turned to Leo. ‘Will you be sad when Sim dies?’

‘What’s the point of being sad about the inevitable? I’ll have memories...and all the other Men. Without death, Uretep, there cannot be life...it would be stasis. It’s the knowledge that this is the one, short life I’m going to have that makes it so precious.’

‘Yes...I can see that, but I don’t think I could go on living if Peteru died.’

‘That’s understandable, considering your active years are so short and you’ve no one to replace him. You would be totally alone. With us, although everyone has a different character, we all share the same values, hopes and desires, and we have sons who share many of our genes...so we are never alone.’

‘Sounds wonderful,’ Uretep said with a soft sigh.

‘Is getting rid of Oasis why you’re all here?’ Peteru interrupted.

‘Yes,’ Fee admitted. ‘Men have been coming here for centuries, trying to work out how to get rid of that place.’

‘And have you worked it out?’

‘No, Peteru, we haven’t. We have no protection from the laser shield that guards the Mages in their apartments. We’ve seen it zap and incinerate large wild animals that strayed too close, also a couple of fugitives that dropped off a balcony in the hope of making a run for the trees. We wanted to poison their water or air supply but the water’s so far underground we couldn’t access it and the packs of wild dogs they encourage by tossing them their unwanted slaves make approaching the old city too dangerous, even if it wasn’t for their weapons. We hoped they’d eventually begin to leave or explore so we could pick them off one by one, but you’ve told us that is never going to happen now that they’ve got your NumbaCruncha. We’re stumped, unless...’

‘Unless?’ Peteru prompted.

‘Unless you and Uretep are sincere in what you said yesterday, that you’d like to destroy Oasis.’

The two young men searched each other’s faces for a few seconds before nodding decisively. ‘We were sincere.’

‘And do you program the computer that runs the enseemats?’

‘Yes, and we might have a plan. But we have to discuss it together first.’

‘On that note of hope I declare it’s time for food,’ a deep voice called.

Everyone got up, stretched, raced to the pool, swam and returned to eat cold meat and vegetables that had been prepared earlier. To the visitors it was as delicious as the previous meal.

Back at the boulders the only light came from a fire that shed a soft, flickering glow, conjuring images of mysterious creatures that usually appeared only in dreams.

18: More Information

During the next two hours Uretep and Peteru discovered that this group of Men, or ‘mob’ as they called themselves, were one of a dozen similar sized groups that migrated up and down the land. Because of the precarious nature of their food supply, they couldn’t remain in one place too long. It wouldn’t take much over fishing or hunting to wipe out a species, especially as very unreliable weather already made survival a lottery.

Roughly nine hundred years earlier, their forefathers had observed the arrival of a small group of Homo sapiens in gigantic motorised vehicles filled with scientific equipment, tools, earth moving machinery and every implement necessary to rebuild their former lives. An underground bunker was the first thing they built, in which they managed to avoid the worst of the catastrophes that eventually killed off most of their species. The new arrivals were so well guarded and armed, there was nothing the Men could do but watch as they expanded their city.

Rising temperatures, wild seas, destructive storms, cyclones, floods, droughts, insect plagues, and diseases made life difficult for every animal and plant. Violence, insurrection, civil wars, hunger and disease destroyed the few human settlements remaining. Only their mobility and adaptability had so far prevented the Men’s extinction along with so many other species.

‘As we said earlier,’ Fee said with a smile, ‘you’re lucky you visited us this month. In a couple of weeks, if the weather’s the same as it’s been for the last century or so, we can expect floods, hail, lightning strikes and a typhoon or six. That might change your mind about joining us.’

‘It sounds exciting.’

‘How about giant bloodsucking flies, swarms of wasps, battalions of biting beetles and leeches that can suck a healthy man dry in a couple of hours?’ A sleek cautious looking man introduced himself. ‘I’m Ari. You will find life with us often uncomfortable and dangerous, and perhaps boring.’

‘Nothing could be as boring as Oasis! Anyway, if we stay there we’ll be dead as soon as we’ve completed the installation of NumbaCruncha. But I’m amazed about the weather, we had no idea it was so changeable and dangerous. Down in the city every day’s the same.’

‘Dull but safe,’ Rez said wryly. ‘Think carefully before you dump that for a precarious life with us.’

‘We will,’ Peteru replied with a grin. ‘What beats me is that although you’ve rejected all technology—no books, computers or records—somehow you know all these facts, dates and figures? And you’re able to understand everything! Even NumbaCruncha didn’t faze you!’

‘We do what humans did for hundreds of thousands of years before they became addicted to permanent written records,’ Rez explained. ‘We use our memory. The human brain has almost unlimited capacity to visualise, calculate, think, reason, remember and recall. All the important happenings and doings of the last three thousand years is passed from father to son, and updated as we live and learn more.’

‘That’s amazing!’

‘Not at all. It’s a natural, inbuilt mental program that every human has and can use unconsciously. It was no effort for you to tell us thousands of facts about Oasis from memory, and I’ll bet you could build your NumbaCruncha from scratch again without plans.’

‘We could remember the plans and calculations, but we’d have to draw them again to make sure...’ Peteru considered what he’d said. ‘No! I reckon you’re right. If we had the equipment and materials, we could build one again from memory. Couldn’t we Uretep?’

‘Possibly, but I don’t want to.’ He turned to Rez. ‘Tell us about the end of sapiens civilization. We’ve a rough idea from some old videos, but...’

‘OK, but it’ll have to be short. It’s getting late,’ Zen interrupted. ‘Where to begin? Just over a thousand years ago technological and medical advances allowed Earth’s population to increase until twelve thousand million people were fighting for food, water and living space. The by-products of industrialisation changed the climate, and urbanisation gobbled up arable land. Forests were replaced by food crops, whose toxic run-off killed the fish. Crops failed. Millions starved.

‘Urban waste and seepage of lethal radiation from nuclear power plants destroyed water supplies. Dust storms spread toxic airborne particles. The Greenland and Antarctic icecaps slid into the sea creating tsunamis that wiped out whatever remained on the coast. Only the obscenely wealthy one percent of humans, whose greed had been the primary cause of the problems, found refuge in fortified enclaves such as your Oasis.’

‘But how could it have happened? Didn’t they see it coming?’ Peteru asked in bewilderment.

‘They saw it coming, but chose to listen to sloganeers who promised technology would solve all problems, as long as everyone consumed more and had more children. Sensible people who advocated the opposite were ignored. When things failed to improve, wealthy countries sent their airplanes to bomb, invade, slaughter and pillage the food from poorer countries, so they could live a few years longer.

‘Religious leaders added to the chaos by insisting the world’s problems were caused by mankind’s failure to please the gods. All pretence at democracy disappeared and survival depended on how cold-blooded and vicious someone was. Opponents were tortured or burned to death. Life for the non-elite became a living death, and nowhere was safe.

‘Eventually, every coastal city, ninety percent of the food-producing flood plains and deltas, and all the lands at or below sea level were reduced to poisoned salt marshes or inland seas. Millions caught diseases, starved, or were murdered for their food. Cannibalism became the norm.’

‘It sounds dreadful!’ Peteru whispered.

‘It was utter insanity. *Homo toolmaker*’s childish refusal to share the planet with other species ensured their own extinction; taking with them nearly all other life on the planet,’ Jar replied sadly. ‘For a while, ragged groups of humans eked out miserable existences on useless land; fighting, worshipping their malevolent gods, punishing dissidents—carrying on as humans always have. Poor nutrition meant fewer live births; then even these stopped about three hundred years ago.’

Jar stopped talking and the forest seemed to creep closer. Threatening. A reminder, if one were needed, of the tenuous grip all seemingly robust organisms had on life.

Bel took up the story and explained that the once vast continent was now a long, relatively narrow strip of mountains and valleys stretching from sweltering wet tropics to the slightly cooler, drought stricken south. To the West, seas had invaded from both north and south, triggering gigantic earthquakes and creating a vast shallow sea dotted with rocky outcrops. According to rumour, about a thousand kilometres away on the far side was a chain of rough hills facing a wild sea, but this couldn’t be verified as in all their years of wandering up and down the Men had met no one who had crossed and returned.

Vast toxic swamps blanketed in a miasma of noxious gasses that paralysed then killed, were all that remained of the once extensive coastal cities, and all life in a radius of hundreds kilometres had disappeared. Fish poisoned anyone foolish enough to eat the foul smelling flesh.

Inland towns decayed, leaving rotting concrete carcasses. In most of those places too, a careless visitor could stumble into a foetid bog and be overcome by poisonous fumes.

It had been two centuries since any sapiens had been sighted, apart from Oasis. In the past, when Men had come across refugees they’d followed secretly, leaving them to die naturally. If it looked as though they might succeed in establishing themselves, however, the Men had ensured they didn’t.

A thoughtful silence descended as if everyone had been mesmerised by the smoke and fluttering pale moths swirling lazily up from the fire. The only sound a low buzzing emitted by large brown and green beetles flying through the flames as if it was a game.

‘Thanks...its been incredibly interesting,’ Uretep said thoughtfully, rubbing at his eyes. ‘I know it’s getting late, but what about children—how do you have them, care for them, teach them...we’re ignorant because no sapiens in Oasis has given birth for hundreds of years.’

‘There’s nothing complicated about having children,’ Leo said casually. ‘We carry the developing embryo in our bellies for two hundred and seventy days, then contract our muscles and he pops out the same orifice the sperm went in. We wash him and carry him on our backs or bellies in a sling made of woven plant fibre, feeding him with milk produced by glands in our chests that’s excreted through the nipples, which enlarge for the period of lactation, then resume normal size—like our bellies.’ He pounded his own rock hard abdomen to prove it. ‘About three hundred days after birth the child can walk and is eating the same food as us. By two years he’s able to follow us everywhere. He is educated from birth till death by experimentation, making mistakes, observation, example, teaching and advice.’

‘You guys are so wise, it makes me feel...useless.’

‘We’ll all be useless if we don’t get some sleep. You two can stay with us if you like,’ Leo said nonchalantly as he walked towards the forest.

The other men dispersed silently in different directions while Peteru and Uretep nervously followed Sim and Leo about a hundred metres into the forest to the base of a large tree. A loop of thick vine hanging a metre from the ground was the route to a platform high above the forest floor. After hoisting themselves up, the young men collapsed onto a springy floor of woven palm fronds.

‘My shoulders,’ Peteru wailed, ‘they feel as if they’ve been torn out. I’ve never climbed like that before. Lucky it’s dark or I’d never have dared. How’d you make this? How high are we? And why?’

‘It’s made of branches lashed between forks. We’re about forty metres up because mosquitoes and other night-flying bloodsuckers usually remain closer to the ground where they can avoid the little bats that eat them. Wild boars, wild dogs, poisonous centipedes, scorpions and ticks also remain nearer ground level. Up here we’re safe from a flash flood, and fine unless there’s a cyclone.’

‘Was the smoky fire to discourage pests?’

‘Yes.’

‘What about rain?’

‘Palm fronds keep off most rain; if it’s a deluge everyone gathers in a cave high in the side of the escarpment.’

‘Why don’t you always sleep there?’

‘Eighteen Men, no matter how mentally and physically attuned to life together, need privacy and time alone with their partners to re-establish intimacy, allow their minds and bodies to catch up with recent events, and prepare for another day. A life spent in constant social contact is emotionally and intellectually draining and soon ends in arguments or worse.’

‘Makes sense. Uretep and I would never have survived if we’d had to live a communal life like the Vassals. But how come this nest is large enough for four?’

‘We built it twenty years ago when we had our sons. There were four of us until they moved out last year.’

But you’re only here for a few weeks each year, how come it’s in such good condition?’

‘Everyone makes repairs to their nests each time we return. It’s no fuss.’

‘It’s really good of you to invite us.’

‘No it isn’t. We miss our boys so it’s like old times to have a couple of young men sharing—for a while.’

‘Don’t worry; we won’t outstay our welcome. The first thing we’ll do is build our own nest.’ Uretep peered over the edge. ‘It’s much lighter up here than down by the fire.’

‘More stars and moonlight. Now sleep. Over there against the trunk, so you don’t fall off. If you need to pee, make sure you don’t face the breeze.’

Sim and Leo curled up together on one side and were instantly asleep.

‘I don’t think I’ll ever be able to sleep,’ Uretep whispered with a soft yawn.

‘Me neither.’

They curled together, Peteru tucked in behind Uretep, and within seconds both had tumbled into a deep and dreamless sleep, not waking until Leo pushed them gently.

‘Sun’s up. We have work to do if we’re not to starve, and you’ve a planet to save from sapiens. Breakfast in ten minutes.’ Leo’s smiling head dropped out of vision, leaving his guests to stretch and stare in disbelief at the magnificent sunrise illuminating the forest canopy with fingers of gold. Then they looked down and fear clutched at their bellies. ‘How on earth did we drag ourselves up here? I’ll fall going down, I know I will, it’s too high, it’s...’

‘OK, stay there then,’ Sim laughed as his head too disappeared, and the vine swayed.

Several shoulder aching minutes later they managed a weak-kneed stagger to the pool for a refreshing dip.

19: *NumbaCruncha is Unveiled*

After a long discussion outside on the balcony of New Oasis, in case Fabien had installed spyware inside, they finalised their plan; agreeing that despite being neither fair nor just, it was the only solution to the problem and therefore the right thing to do.

Back in their apartment with consciences subdued but not suppressed, the vidcom was flashing.

‘You’re needed!’ Fabien snapped. ‘Now! In the conference room!’

‘What’s got him in a tizz,’ Uretep wondered nervously. ‘You don’t think they’ve been monitoring us?’

‘I’ve seen no evidence. It’s unlikely...Melvyn must have a propaganda problem.’

Two minutes later, respectfully apprehensive, they stood humbly in front of their thirteen bosses.

‘Where have you been?’ Ishbel snapped.

‘We went back to New Oasis to make sure we hadn’t missed anything.’

‘And stayed the night! Where?’

‘The same place as last time; in that closet at the end of the corridor.’

‘Why stay the night? You were told we might need you!’

‘Sorry, Ishbel. The air’s so much cleaner there we feel better able to think and review everything to make sure we haven’t forgotten anything.’

‘And had you?’

‘No. We’re certain it’s all going according to plan.’

The Chief Mage compressed her lips, squinted at her protégés as if wondering how to continue, then with a vague wave of the hand told them Augur had a few questions.

As if taken by surprise, the Transport Mage cleared his throat and in a voice that failed to hide his agitation, asked if they were satisfied with NumbaCruncha.

‘Totally,’ Peteru replied. ‘I told you a few days ago, it’s all ready to go.’

Augur licked his lips uncertainly. ‘As you know, transport’s my domain. I have to be certain everyone will be transported without accident to New Oasis. So as soon as you confirm it is totally safe, I’ll give the order for the mats, terminals and signage, plus the worker robots that will place them where you recommended, to be taken over by robot transporter. If anything goes wrong it’ll be your fault.’

‘We accept that responsibility, Augur.’

The Transport Chief remained nervous. ‘So...once more in front of witnesses...you don’t foresee any problems in using NumbaCruncha to transport everyone over there?’

‘None whatever. We’ve been back and forth several times and you all visited and suffered no ill effects. I’m happy to lay our reputation the line and guarantee we can transfer the entire population of Oasis to the new city in about ten minutes maximum.’

‘You have no reputation to place on any line!’ Xanthippe snapped. ‘If anything goes wrong you won’t have heads either!’

‘I apologise, Xanthippe, for my hubris.’

‘Where exactly are the mats and terminals going to be placed?’ Job interrupted. ‘I hope you’ve remembered to put them in all the work areas!’

‘In the identical spots they are here, Job. It wouldn’t surprise me if no one realises they’ve changed cities until they smell the air and see how fresh and clean everything is.’

‘Ah yes...the air. We have a problem.’

‘Several problems,’ Justinian added. ‘I’ve done my best, but the health of everyone is deteriorating.’

‘Not to mention their behaviour,’ Fabien snapped. ‘For goodness sake everyone, can’t we stop this charade and cut to the chase?’

Mumbles of agreement.

‘What it boils down to,’ Ishbel said in an uncharacteristically diffident tone, ‘is that we’re suddenly in deep shit and have to shift everyone within the next couple of days; tomorrow if possible. There’s been rioting between men and women. I’m worried about vandalism as curiosity mounts over the implants and mats. Someone is spreading rumours about imminent disasters. Cracks have been detected in the roof after last year’s tremendous storms and earthquake... we’re in danger of having the whole thing collapse. Energy production is failing to maintain a stable temperature. We’re overheating, running out of treated water and there’ve been outbreaks of respiratory disease. Do we have to test the New Oasis mats and terminals first? We didn’t want to do it without asking you in case it would interfere with the demonstration that’s been put forward to this afternoon.’

‘No problem at all. As soon as you like will be fine for the big exodus. The mats were all tested exhaustively during manufacture. Augur’s Robots should be able to complete the installation over there by tomorrow morning, so you can send the signal to start work now if you like, Augur.’

Thank you!’ Augur sneered. ‘I don’t need your permission!’

‘Sorry, Augur,’ Uretep said in suitably penitent tones, bowing his head to conceal an involuntary sneer of contempt.

‘Your job is to ensure the Emperor and Empress are ready in two hours to give the speech, demonstrate NumbaCruncha, fuck the Empress, and convince everyone of the desirability and safety of the new transport device.’

‘They will do that, Ishbel. Of that I am certain. Have Alger and Begum been instructed in the use of NumbaCruncha, so they’re ready for their demonstration?’

‘They’ve been told they’re going to demonstrate the new health system,’ Ishbel said with an unsavoury smile.

‘We didn’t think they’d be able to cope with knowing they were required to screw each other while naked in front of the entire population, every pimple projected onto a dozen giant screens,’ Ethel added with an equally malicious smile. ‘Once they’re securely on stage they can like it or lump it.’

‘If they’re recalcitrant, a prod up their orifices with an electric probe will change their minds,’ Xanthippe snarled. ‘It’s the education tool par excellence, in my experience.’

‘Pull your claws in, girls,’ Alice simpered. Begum can’t help being such a prissy cow.’

Job sighed, as if on the brink of exhaustion. ‘I’ve had a second platform built, much nearer the crowds, to receive the Royal Couple and the Aristocrats when they transport. The big screen close-ups and the novelty and excitement of watching their betters having an orgy should be enough to distract everyone from the emergencies we’re facing—at least until they’re transported tomorrow to New Oasis.’

‘Well! Off you go you two!’ Ishbel waved fat fingers vaguely. ‘You’ve one hundred and twenty minutes to get their Royal Highnesses and their guards ready and down to their usual seats in the Arena.’

Calisto and Philo were overjoyed to see their friends, and during a very ordinary lunch were excited at the plans.

‘I can’t wait to feel so sexy again,’ Calisto admitted.

‘Me too,’ Philo added. ‘Does this mean we can use the mats whenever we want?’

‘Yes, you can screw yourselves silly, if that’s what makes you happy.’ Uretep’s ironic tone failed to register.

‘It’s all I want to do,’ Calisto shouted.

‘Me too,’ Philo laughed.

‘But we thought you guys had been enjoying sex for years?’

‘We cuddled and stuff, but it was hard to get a stiff that stayed up. Nothing in my life prepared me for what happened after using that thing. I can’t wait!’

Uretep and Peteru exchanged glances of relief. Calisto was a thoroughly nice guy, but nice wasn’t enough to change their minds.

Empress Agnes and her bodyguard were as excited as Calisto, and equally impatient to again experience the ecstasy of a NumbaCruncha assisted orgasm. All inhibitions gone, they relished the idea of an exhibition to prove their prowess to their subjects. Agnes was especially pleased that her bodyguard would be allowed to follow her once Calisto had shot his bolt.

It took over an hour to get the entire population seated in the vast Arena, and the noise was deafening as everyone expounded their theory on why they’d all been summoned to assemble on a day and at a time when they were usually hard at work. Equally interesting was the giant new stage and the extra video screens. Rumours of an impending calamity had just begun to circulate when the tinkle of amplified bells signalled the arrival of the Mages who filed onto their elaborately decorated balcony above and behind the stages. Powerful spotlights caught every facet of the magnificent jewels ornamenting their cloaks. Large cowls cast deep shadows over their faces.

Ishbel stood and raised her hand. The silence was palpable. No one felt the slightest urge to giggle. Everyone trembled in fear.

‘Citizens of Oasis. I bring you good news from gods Domino and Domina. They are very pleased with you all. You have served them well, and now it is time for your reward.’ She stopped and the air was filled with the sound of lightly stamping feet to mark excited approval.

‘You have all been wondering about the small mats and screens dotted everywhere in Oasis. Well, now I can reveal to you that they are the gift of Domino and Domina. They are a new means of transport to replace the negrav chutes. You will enjoy instant transport instead of wasting time in queues. Even better than that, the Gods have decided you have earned the right to greater sensitivity of feelings; to experience the heights of passion that for so long have been denied you. From the moment you leave this assembly, Domino and Domina insist that you never again wear any clothing. Instead of shame, you must all feel pride in your beautiful bodies and enjoy the thrill of sexual congress.’

Ishbel paused to allow her audience to murmur their incomprehension.

‘If you obey the gods in this; if they see that you all take delight in the pleasures of your bodies; then they will give us a totally new Oasis in which everything is working even better than here.’

Cheers erupted, although clearly they still had little idea of what she was talking about.

‘And now, to reinforce what I have just told you, and to demonstrate the new method of transport, I ask the Emperor to speak.’

Even louder cheers burst forth as Calisto and Agnes in their splendid robes and glittering crowns, stood and accepted the accolades.

A drum roll. Hushed expectation. Calisto’s speech was impeccable. His rich voice reverberated, calmed, and was far more convincing than Ishbel’s strident hectoring. Clearly, he was loved and admired and the Vassals at least would follow him wherever he went. Agnes received a similar reception when she waved towards all the Freemen. Only the tiny group of Aristocrats appeared unmoved.

When the applause died, the Royal couple stepped onto ensemats, waved again, whispered into a terminal identical to the ones dotted everywhere, touched their wrists and...

A hundred metres away on the other side of the Arena, spotlights pulsed drawing everyone’s attention to a floodlit stage on which their naked Emperor and Empress were already clawing at each other, grunting and caressing as if in conflict.

No one knew where to look. Most women fixed their eyes on the engorged penis of their Emperor; most men stared wide-eyed at the Empress’s breasts and swollen vulva. A spontaneous

cheer erupted when Calisto tossed his wife onto her back, hoisted her legs over his shoulders and thrust himself into her. All twenty-five cameras were perfectly focussed. Not an inch of flesh, not a muscular spasm, not a single thrust and withdrawal was missed. In his passion, the Emperor's lance popped out. Accompanied by cheers of encouragement he thrust it back while microphones picked up every grunt, squeal of delight and cry of ecstasy as he arched, ejaculated, withdrew and took a bow, leaving his wife moaning for more. Two seconds later her bodyguard arrived and plunged repeatedly until even his mistress was satisfied.

The smiling trio then stood at the rear of the stage while the lights picked up Alger and Begum standing on the spot where the Emperor had recently given his speech. Both Aristocrats seemed to be protesting, but there was no sound.

'And now,' bellowed Ishbel, 'to prove even Aristocrats will be using the new transport and enjoying the delights of sex, Alger and Begum will transport.'

Wide eyed with shock. The two terrified Aristocratic engineers stood on the mats, whispered, touched wrists, and instantly appeared on the stage directly in front of the Emperor. Unlike him, they took several seconds to realise what had happened, staring at each other's nudity before running fingers across bald scalps. In what appeared to be amused delight they gazed down at hairless pubes and a very respectable erection in Alger's case—a flowering vulva in Begum's, before throwing convention and modesty to the winds. Growling like a couple of alley cats, clawing and scratching until Alger got Begum on her knees, back a deep curve, erstwhile private parts offered to the zooming cameras. Thrusting himself into the gash, he rode his partner until both achieved a corybantic, cacophonous orgasm.

Ishbel stood and silenced the crowd.

'Now, my good and faithful subjects, it is your turn to experience the joys of sex and nudity. You have all been told to remember the number of the mat in or nearest to your apartment. When I say, 'GO', I want you to whisper that number into the little terminal on the armrest of your seat, then lightly touch the silver implant in your wrist. Because you are sitting on enseemats, the correct name for the little mats that have been placed everywhere in Oasis, you will be instantly transported home. On arrival, get off the mats quickly in case others also want to go there.

After you have all enjoyed yourselves, I want you to gather in Central Park. You will find directions on the screens beside every mat. Do not use the negrav chutes—they will be turned off for the afternoon. Use your new means of instant transport! When you get to the park, do whatever you feel like doing. If you do exactly as the Gods have demanded, in a few days you will all be transferring to New Oasis—the gift of the gods. Are you ready?'

'YES!'

'GO!'

Within a few seconds a low whistle of air raced in to replace the humans, and the Arena was empty.

The Mages turned to Uretep and Peteru with strained faces.

'What's the matter?' Peteru asked, suddenly nervous. 'Was something not right?'

'We will know that,' Fabien said quietly, 'when we are sure everyone is in their rooms screwing, not floating somewhere out in space. I'm going to the surveillance chamber.'

'Can we come?'

'Yes.'

'What's the number?'

'9999.' He touched his wrist and disappeared.

Two minutes later, thirteen Mages and two probationers were scanning banks of monitors, all showing copulating couples in various stages of rapture. No red lights blinked, indicating that every inhabitant of the city had been observed.

The collective sigh roused the dust on Fabien's desk.

'I guess we should get rid of all clothes in the Arena so they don't interfere with transfers tomorrow,' Augur suggested. 'Should I shut down the negrav chutes permanently?'

‘Not till tomorrow. I have to visit a few Aristocrats to make sure the sound system’s all set up for the Exodus, and I don’t want to arrive there naked,’ Melvyn sniffed.

‘Watching those idiots screwing on stage has given me an urge,’ Fabien growled. ‘I need a fuck. Come here you!’ He grabbed hold of Uretep’s arm and, twisting it violently, forced him to his knees.

Before Peteru could intervene to prevent the rape, a fist slammed into the side of the Chief Enforcer’s head, knocking him to the ground where he lay, gazing up stupidly.

‘If you think I’m going to let you screw me after dipping your wick in a black arse hole, you’ve another think coming,’ Xanthippe snarled, pinning Fabien down, squatting and grinding herself against his face.

Spluttering and laughing in delight, Fabien wrapped his arms round Xanthippe’s hips and sat up, face still buried in her groin. To the raucous accompaniment of his fellow Mages’ cheers, he noisily sucked, chewed and licked while shy little Alice dropped to her knees and took most of his hefty manhood into her mouth.

Taking advantage of the stinking, stomach-churning distraction, Peteru and Uretep slipped away, found the nearest enseemat, and disappeared.

20: The Trap is Set

‘That settles it. They’ve got to go.’

‘No doubt about it—but which way? Quick and clean? Or messy, unpleasant and slow?’

‘For the Mages, the second. For everyone else, the first.’

‘The first, and then the second to make sure.’

‘Good strategy, but not without risk. Now for the tactics...when and where?’

‘Ideally the Mages will go first, followed by everyone else. If we can’t manage that, then they’ll have to go at the same time in case they’ve set up surveillance cameras in New Oasis so they can see from here if everyone really does arrive.’

‘That would really stuff us up! Who has access to and knows how to program Oasis Central Computer, apart from us?’

‘All the Mages and their top Aristocrat Chiefs of Departments know how to use and program it, but I think only Ishbel and her top Aristocrat Engineer have access to everything. I’m pretty sure the others only have unfettered access to their own partitions.’

‘How about the NumbaCruncha Mainframe?’

‘Begum and Alger are able to program and use it, but I can’t imagine Ishbel letting them. She could probably work out how to do everything, but she’s been so worried about Oasis collapsing and keeping the system a secret until today, she hasn’t familiarised herself with it, as far as I know. At least she’s left no evidence behind. She seems unaware of how vulnerable she is.’

‘That’s because it doesn’t enter her head that we might have the initiative to disobey her. I guess a few hundred years of being served by quasi robotic humans might make them unprepared for a pair of genius malcontents.’

‘Don’t kid yourself. They didn’t stay in power for so long because they’re stupid. Cunning is better than genius in this situation.’

‘You’re right. OK, let’s run through it again. In about an hour everyone will start arriving in Central Park, aroused and aimless. It’s lucky NumbaCruncha makes people calm and happy so there won’t be any violence.’

‘Are you sure of that? We mustn’t make the mistake of assuming everyone will react like us! The Mages certainly aren’t any nicer, calmer or less tolerant afterwards—quite the opposite!’

‘You’re right, and that’s a worry. We know that being transported by NumbaCruncha eliminates inhibitions that are merely cultural, not natural, like shyness about sex and nudity, but I never imagined the Mage’s *natural* behaviour would be so vile. Do you reckon all humans were like that before the catastrophe?’

‘That’s the only logical conclusion, and supports what the Men have told us about them.’

‘That makes me less concerned about the morality of what we’re going to do.’

‘Indeed it does. So the sooner we get it over with the better. We’ll tell Ishbel it’ll be best to summon the entire population to the Arena and send them over tomorrow morning.’

‘She won’t like that, after telling them it wouldn’t be for a couple of days.’

‘I can’t wait that long. I’m so nervous I’ll give myself away!’

‘No you won’t. But whenever it is, we have to make sure the Mages go first! Play on their vanity. Tell them how impressive they’ll look if they’re there to welcome everyone else. Luckily, they’ve each got a set of clothes over there, so that won’t be an excuse not to go.’

‘Yeah. They can stand on mats in their usual place in the Arena, say their bit, tell everyone to simply press their implant three times quickly, and that will send them to their new home, then they’ll do it, and...’

‘All our troubles will be over.’

Plans finalised, they bent with nervous relief to their final tasks, not surfacing for an hour.

‘Done?’

‘Done, except for informing Ishbel that directly she’s decided when to have the exodus, we’ll reprogram NumbaCruncha mainframe so that three quick taps on the wrist will send them to their home mat in New Oasis.’

‘Tell her now so we can relax, and then let’s go down and see what’s happening.’

Ishbel received the information without thanks.

‘She’s becoming even less charming, if that’s possible. Are you sure you want to mix it with the hoi polloi in the park?’

‘Why not?’

‘Fancy a bit of rough trade, do you?’

‘It’s my new research project.’

‘Then I’m going too. Can’t have you grabbing all the fun.’

Seconds later they were surrounded by a shouting, laughing, dancing, rutting, masturbating crowd of naked Vassals and Freemen, plus a sprinkling of Aristocrats now devoid of all inhibitions, including their previous contempt for other castes. It was hot, noisy and strangely stimulating.

A group of laughing women ran up and thrust their little pointy breasts against the two young men. Then two shouting women leapt onto their backs dragging them to the ground where they were held firmly while two Aristocrat females stood indecisively for a couple of seconds astride their prey before squatting and impaling themselves. These were soon replaced by other giggling, laughing, cheerful Vassals and Freemen. Peteru lost count, but thought he and Uretep had each penetrated at least nine women of all three castes before their manhood wilted and the women raced off in search of more virile prey.

Despite the mayhem there was no sense of danger. Exhausted, unable to sustain erections, most of the men sagged onto seats, the ground, or low walls, content to be caressed, massaged, sucked and fingered in vain efforts at arousal by cheerful women intent on achieving ever more tumultuous orgasms.

An ear-splitting whistle stopped everyone in their tracks.

‘Go to a mat. Press your wrist once. Go home! Go to a mat. Press your wrist once. Go home. Go to a mat. Press your wrist...’ was repeated over and over in a harsh voice that brooked no refusal until, with astonishing docility, both men and women, no longer in lust, wandered with tired perplexed faces to the nearest mat and returned to their apartments.

Bruised, scratched, sweaty, stinking, sore and mildly shocked, Peteru and Uretep went back to their apartment for a quick shower, then obeyed a summons to Fabien’s Surveillance Chamber where the Mages were peering into banks of monitors. An adjacent wall was lit with thousands of tiny blinking lights, most of which were green.

‘Those two red ones are yours,’ Fabien leered, rubbing soft moist hands over Uretep’s buttocks.

Deciding it was politic to ignore the caresses, Uretep smiled and asked what he meant.

‘I know when everyone is in their apartments.’ Fabien’s saliva-sprinkled whisper was laced with vague menace as well as the usual stench of rotting teeth and gastric juices that emanated from all the Mages. ‘I know a great deal about you.’

Uretep’s heart pounded and his head, already woolly, felt ready to burst.

Peteru had been watching the petting and whispered exchange with disquiet. ‘What’s the problem?’ he asked.

‘Fabien’s been spying on me.’ Uretep’s attempt at nonchalance was remarkably convincing, considering the state of his thoughts.

Fabien smiled.

‘He’s obviously in love with you,’ Peteru said casually. ‘That’s what lovers do.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ Fabien snapped. ‘I haven’t been spying and there’s no way I could love a black kid, no matter how pretty.’ He tilted his head to one side and peered at them with slitted eyes. ‘There’s something about you both, though, that makes me very suspicious. I think you have something to hide.’

‘Only what happened down in the park half an hour ago.’

‘Too late, we saw it all. Serves you right mixing with trash. How was your first fuck with a female?’

‘Boring—and increasingly painful after the first half-dozen.’

‘I’ve got to hand it to you Mages,’ Peteru said admiringly, ‘Everyone’s so well trained; Aristocrats as well as Freeman and Vassals. One whistle and a few commands and off they went like good pets.’

‘That’s all they are,’ Xanthippe sneered. ‘Well-trained pets who can remember everything you tell them. Not one person forgot how to get home. NumbaCruncha is made for idiots like them.’

‘Gather round!’ Ishbel commanded. ‘Details for tomorrow’s move need to be finalised.’

‘You told them it wasn’t for a few days.’

‘I changed my mind. We need to keep them on their toes. Surprise is the essence of good generalship.’

Peteru and Uretep exchanged relieved glances. One thing less to do. If they’d suggested going early Ishbel would probably have done the opposite to show her power.

When everyone had found a seat she outlined the program. ‘First, everyone must be seated in the Arena at nine o’clock precisely. The Emperor and Empress will be in their usual place. He will repeat what he said today about New Oasis, then he’ll tell them we are already there waiting for them. After instructing them to simply touch their wrists three times rapidly, instead of once, he and his entourage will set the example and go. It’s that simple. Then everyone will follow suit for fear of being left behind.’

‘Wouldn’t it be better for the Mages to be in the Arena to ensure there’s no trouble, then leave from there?’ Peteru asked.

‘And arrive naked? You’re joking, Xanthippe sneered.

‘The clothes we took over for you are still there, you didn’t put them on.’

‘Surely you didn’t imagine we’d be leaving all our personal treasures behind in this crumbling cave? We’re not like the plebs who have nothing, own nothing and value nothing. Centuries of history are stored in our apartments and we’re not leaving that behind in case it’s damaged by idiot robots or workers when they move in to make repairs.’ Xanthippe turned to the other Mages. ‘Are any of you leaving anything behind to be picked up later?’

‘Definitely not!’ chorused the other twelve.

‘We’d never leave our history unguarded,’ Ishbel bellowed. ‘Vassals have been loading all our treasures in the largest of the transporters for several days. It’ll be ready to go first thing in the morning, and I’m travelling with it.’

‘So am I’ announced Ethel with her usual sycophantic leer. ‘I’ve no intention of arriving naked in that place!’

‘So am I,’ echoed the others.

‘But...who will oversee the mass transfer of everyone else if you Mages aren’t there?’ Uretep asked nervously.

‘This has always been your show, Uretep and Peteru. We trust you totally.’

‘But...who will give them the signal to go?’

‘Don’t you listen! I just explained! The Emperor! Are you being deliberately obtuse? You had such success with him before, you might as well capitalise on it.’

‘He isn’t as respected as you Mages, but you know best,’ Peteru said in an attempt to calm the atmosphere.

‘Yes, young man, I most certainly do!’ Ishbel said in a manner that suggested she knew much more about her two protégés than they could ever imagine.

‘Sorry, Ishbel, I didn’t mean to question your authority,’ Peteru said humbly. ‘It’s just that you people are so impressive and respected. The Emperor will be a poor substitute, but of course he’ll manage. Then, as soon as everyone’s gone, we’ll follow. We’ve nothing we want to take with us. New Oasis has been furnished with everything we’ve got here, and as it’s new it’ll be even better.’ The conviction in Peteru’s voice was remarkable.

‘Of course it will, and as your well-deserved reward for services rendered, we intend to confirm your appointments as permanent Mages on your arrival—so make sure you land in my apartment.’

‘We certainly will, Ishbel. That’ll be...amazing. No...really. I can hardly believe we’ll be Mages.’ Uretep’s voice faded and he shook his head as if in disbelief at his good fortune. It was a remarkable performance.

‘You’ll believe it when it happens,’ Ishbel said with a slight smile. ‘And tonight you are invited to a farewell dinner to be held in the Mage Dining room. Eight o’clock, sharp! Come to my apartment as usual, and I’ll take you there.’

Surprise at the invitation lent authenticity to the young men’s somewhat over enthusiastic acceptance of the honour. Their fervent and apparently genuine delight at the prospect of sharing an official dinner triggered twitchy Mage smiles that were instantly suppressed.

Affecting not to notice, the young men maintained their state of eager excitement. ‘Who will unpack your treasures?’ Peteru sounded genuinely interested. ‘Can we help?’

‘Of course not! Vassals will do it all and travel with us. But enough chatter. I will make all the necessary public announcements tonight to prepare the way for tomorrow’s exodus, but I’ll leave the Emperor and the final departure to you both.’

‘You’ll have to remain here in the surveillance room until just before the exodus to ensure every seat is taken and no one’s skulking in their apartments,’ Fabien instructed, ‘then you can NumbaCrunch to the Mages’ balcony in the Arena. Can you remember the number of the surveillance room mat?’

‘Yes, thanks Fabien. Gosh, it’s a great honour to be so trusted.’

‘Yeah...’ Uretep seemed quite overwhelmed. ‘I promise we won’t stuff it up’

‘You’ll be stuffed, literally, if you do, young man,’ Fabien replied with such venom that Peteru’s bowels nearly loosened.

The ensuing silence was ominous. Thirteen Mages stared at the two young inventors with such intensity they felt as if all their secret thoughts were suddenly blazoned on their brows, and the duplicity in their hearts was open for all to see. Not daring to move, blink or even swallow in case it proved their deceit, they held their faces still and, they hoped, appeared calm and untroubled.

Ishbel’s harsh voice broke the spell. She turned to the other Mages. ‘From now until dinner, you’d all better check on the loading of the transporter. If your treasures are not there tomorrow, don’t come moaning to me.’ Again fixing her fat little eyes on the two novice Mages as if assessing their trustworthiness, she announced, ‘We will leave here at sunrise and arrive in New Oasis in plenty of time to welcome you all in the new Arena soon after nine o’clock. Make sure you are there!’

‘Certainly, Ishbel. We won’t let you down.’

‘I know you won’t.’ The smile was chilling. ‘In your hearts and minds you are already Mages.’

‘We are!’

The thirteen rulers of the entire human population of the country stepped onto ensemats and vanished, leaving their usual odour of rot and unwashed flesh. A handful of dead skin cells lifted in the slight breeze caused by their sudden exit.

‘That’s fantastic, don’t you reckon Uretep?’ Peteru said with commendable enthusiasm. ‘We really are going to be Mages! I can’t wait to live like them and have all that power.’

‘Yeah, me too. So we’d better not make any mistakes. First up the Emperor, he’ll have to be good if the Mages aren’t there. They command such respect they’ll be difficult to replace.’

Peteru ran his finger across his throat and mouthed, *Don't lay it on too thick*. 'OK, let's go.'

Returning to their rooms, they chatted normally while preparing the speech for Calisto. After exchanging notes written on erasable pads, Uretep went to visit the Emperor while Peteru made a quick trip to the Men in the forest, hoping at least one would be there.

He was in luck. A few minutes after he arrived beside the stone, Jar appeared jogging down the track. Spotting Peteru he came over, listened to the news, agreed with their plans and promised they'd fulfil their role.

Seconds later Peteru was standing beside Uretep and Philo listening to Calisto repeat his speech, word perfect.

'Can Philo stay with me this time. We promise not to screw in front of everyone?'

'We insist that he does. And it's no longer necessary to pretend you and Agnes are really married. Haven't you noticed how easy and relaxed everyone's become? No one will care if you two are lovers, so the new rule is, do as you want. OK?'

'Very OK! I can't believe you two are Mages.'

'See you tomorrow then, in the Arena with all your entourage on the usual Emperor's stage at exactly five minutes to nine. We will be the only Mages on their balcony because they're going on ahead to welcome everyone.'

'OK.'

'Don't forget, it is essential that every person in Oasis transfers to New Oasis from the Arena tomorrow morning at the same time. No one is allowed to go back to their room, or do anything else. As Emperor, it's important that you know the reason, so you can tell anyone who asks why we have this sudden hurry.'

Calisto gazed at Uretep in confusion.

'Oasis is falling apart, Calisto. The ceiling is collapsing and other things are also going wrong.'

'He's right, Calisto,' Peteru added. 'The whole place could collapse at any time. It's dangerous, so anyone who stays behind, thinking they will join us later, could die. Once we're all in the new city, work will start here on repairs.'

'Gosh! Thanks for telling me,' Calisto whispered in surprise. 'No one's ever told me anything before. That explains why it's getting hot and smelly, doesn't it?'

'Sure does. So we'll rely on you to tell everyone about the danger and why it's so important that we all go together.'

'Yes, of course...' Impulsively, Calisto wrapped his arms round both his new friends. 'I have been so happy since I met you two.'

'Thanks Calisto, you're an excellent Emperor and a fine friend. Take care of him, Philo. See you both tomorrow.'

Peteru and Uretep returned to their room to go over their plans once again...one mistake would ruin everything.

'It's all in the timing.'

'It certainly is...especially now! We've half an hour to take our robes to the Arena, shower, and get to Ishbel's.'

Wearing their Mage cloaks and hoods they dropped by negrav chute then headed for the Arena. A hundred metres into the open space Uretep placed a hand on Peteru's arm.

'I have a very strong presentiment that we've been invited to this dinner to test us. Fabien made it very clear that he is suspicious, and so are most of the others. They don't trust us at all, so if we do the slightest thing that suggests we're not totally committed to becoming a Mage, that will confirm his suspicions and they'll let him do what he likes with us. They don't really need us any more because tomorrow's all set up. Ishbel, Alger and Begum can replace us easily, so if we do or say the slightest thing that indicates we mightn't approve of them, they'll take the risk that nothing will go wrong, and get rid of us.'

‘Makes sense. I’m surprised they’ve let us live this long! I wonder what stomach churning delight they’ve in store. I think I’ll be able to keep my mouth shut. Now, let’s get a wriggle on.’

The Arena guards dropped to their knees in awe of the robes, making no objection to their placing the garments at the rear of the Mage’s podium, then NumbaCrunching back to their apartment to freshen up before arriving exactly on time in Ishbel’s reception room.

21: *Dinner with the Mages*

Peteru and Uretep stepped off the mat and blinked in astonishment at the glittering mountain of precious stones. Ishbel sparkled, twinkled and shimmered from the top of her wig to the tip of her perilously high-heeled sandals. In between, the billowing tent of shiny material that encased her massive bulk was studded with a myriad of diamonds, rubies and sapphires. Gold bracelets encircled chubby wrists, metres of gold chain encircled her neck, and gold thread and emeralds dragged down her earlobes.

‘Ishbel! You look beautiful!’ Peteru stated with commendable conviction. ‘Honestly, I never imagined anyone could look so...so magnificently noble and powerful.’

‘Yes. I know,’ she responded coolly. ‘Follow me.’

‘Will the others also be in their best clothes?’ Uretep asked politely.

‘Of course.’

‘Then aren’t we a little underdressed?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘We’re naked.’

‘So?’

‘Shouldn’t we wear clothes?’

‘Of course not! You aren’t Mages yet! Come.’ She sailed out and along a wide hallway to the most extravagantly ornate room the two young men had seen. A giant crystal chandelier shed flattering amber light over a room bedecked with gold trimmings and intricately framed mirrors. Wall niches boasted detailed bronze sculptures of animals and humans in violent conflict, and ostentatious, gilt-framed paintings of lakes, forests and mountains decorated the walls. Standing on a deep blue carpet in the centre of the chamber was a heavily carved oval table, replete with candelabra, silver, crystal goblets and bowls of flowers, surrounded by thirteen padded chairs with elaborately carved backs, and two plain chairs devoid of either padding or decoration.

The other Mages, dressed in similar opulence to their Chief, were standing in small groups, drinking from crystal bowls. They looked up and stopped talking.

Fabien stepped forward, eyeing them up and down with a patronising sneer. ‘I see you’ve dressed for the occasion.’

Everyone laughed. Their two guests joined in as if it was a brilliant joke.

Fabien clicked his fingers and two young Vassals appeared with goblets of wine, which they handed to the guests, then stood silently as if waiting.

‘Peteru, you’re a connoisseur of young men, which of these two Vassals is the healthiest?’

Both were good looking, perfectly proportioned, lean yet well muscled with excellent posture, so as it seemed unimportant, Peteru shrugged and pointed to the slightly shorter Vassal, whose face registered the faintest smile as if of relief.

‘An excellent choice, don’t you think?’ Fabien turned to the Mages who nodded as if it was of little consequence.

‘As you’ve chosen the meat for the main course, your boyfriend can have the pleasure of killing it. Come!’ He marched off through a doorway, dragging the unprotesting young man by his ear.

Peteru and Uretep, expressions blank to conceal their horror, waited for the Mages to laugh at the joke, but they were staring coldly, obviously waiting to see if Fabien’s suspicions were correct.

Peteru grabbed Uretep by the elbow and, forcing a laugh, said cheerfully, ‘Come on, this sounds like fun.’

As they passed through the doorway he pretended to stumble, dragging Uretep down with him. There was just time to whisper, 'The guy wants out of this, you're doing him a favour.'

The adjacent room was a large clean kitchen, with several chefs and assistants apparently too busily employed in preparing the meal to take any notice of distractions. An archway on the far side opened into a medium sized room tiled in white with a solid wooden table in the centre. Every possible type of knife, plus several saws and cleavers, were hung on a rack directly opposite the door. Several meat hooks dangled from a track attached to the ceiling. The floor sloped towards a hole under the table.

Fabien forced the young man to his knees in front of the table, then wandered casually to the wall where he carefully selected a long, narrow, double-edged knife with a very sharp point.

'Ever done this before?' he laughed. 'Of course not. The only meat you've eaten was with us the other day. Didn't realise what it was, did you? But you loved it—asked for second helpings. Well, now you know where it came from.' Grasping the front of the Vassal's overall he pressed the point of the knife into the coarse material and ripped upwards, nicking the fellow's chin and bottom lip, from which blood began to flow freely. The fabric fell away exposing the young man's smooth dark brown throat and chest.

'This is where the knife goes in,' he said, dragging the head back to expose the indent at the base of the throat. 'A good strong thrust straight down and you'll miss the ribs but slice through his larynx and possibly the aorta and then his heart. There are quicker ways, but they're less fun. I like to see plenty of blood. Understood?'

'I understand.' The blood was leaving Uretep's head and he felt cold.

'When he gives the death jerk, pull the knife out and immediately hold him upside down so the blood pours into the drain. That's to make sure the meat's nice and pale.' He placed the knife in Uretep's hand and stood back. 'Peteru, you hold him firmly. I don't want him jerking about and spraying blood over my clothes. It won't matter for you, we'll hose it off.'

Peteru stood behind and took a firm grip on the young man's arms. When Uretep looked down, the Vassal's head gave an almost imperceptible nod as if to say, please make it quick, I am happy to go.

Fury filled Uretep's head, body, heart and being. Rage against the people and system that could make death preferable to life surged into his arm and he thrust deep into the soft tissue, watched the Vassal's eyes glaze, then pulled the knife out and wiped the blood over his own chest before taking one leg and, together with Peteru, holding the surprisingly light young man firmly upside down while dying nerves caused him to flail around wildly. After an eternity, the gush of blood became a trickle.

They lowered the dead body onto the table and stared at each other, astonished that neither looked different from usual.

'OK,' Peteru said with convincing ease, 'where's that hose before the blood dries.'

Fabien's frown was proof enough of the trap they'd avoided.

'He isn't that big, Fabien. Do you think one's enough for fifteen hungry Mages?' Uretep asked as if keen to do it again.

'Quite enough,' Fabien snapped.

'I hope the water's warm,' Uretep said to his departing back.

The Vassal who had been spared uncoiled a hose from a cupboard and sluiced them down with delicious warm water, then provided them with soft towels. Checking to see they were alone, he said softly, 'Thank you for doing it quickly. That one,' he pointed to the door, 'always makes it very long and painful. Yesterday my friend took all morning to die.' Tears were streaming and he turned away to begin carving his mate into slabs of meat ready for roasting, while apologising for his weakness.

Resisting the urge to take the young man in his arms to comfort him, Uretep touched his shoulder and said softly, 'Things will change when we go to the new city.'

'I thought all the Mages' Vassals had their tongues ripped out,' Peteru said thoughtfully as they left the room.

‘Only those who know it’s OK to live outside, it seems. Peteru, I feel sick.’

‘And so you should. I do too, but we have a job to do so man up and come on.’

Dry, clean and apparently relaxed, they sauntered back into the dining room laughing at a joke.’

‘You’re in good spirits,’ Ishbel observed, ‘what’s the joke?’

‘We were just imagining what you’d say if we’d not bothered to shower and had arrived covered in blood. But then we thought of the beautiful carpet and furniture.’ He rubbed his belly. ‘That made me hungry, when do we eat?’

By the time they had consumed an entree, soup, and vegetables, the delicious odour of roast meat was wafting from the kitchen. Taking the opportunity provided by a raucous response to one of Angie’s more salacious jokes, Peteru whispered, ‘Look on it as an honour. I’d rather starve than eat one of these fat carcasses, but the thought of that Vassal becoming part of me makes me happy.’

‘Thanks,’ Uretep smiled.

The meat was indeed delicious and the young men tucked in with gusto, determined the death would not be totally in vain. The energy provided by the young man would assist them in ridding the world of sapiens—as they now thought of the Mages.

As if annoyed, several of their hosts appeared to lose their appetites, complaining the meat was tough and should have been bled longer. The party broke up immediately after the final course, everyone pleading an early rise the next morning.

Back in their room Peteru and Uretep showered again to rid themselves of the odour of vileness. Using the splashing water as cover in case Fabien had installed more surveillance, they congratulated themselves on still being alive before tumbling into bed for a disturbed night of unpleasant dreams.

22: *The Best Laid Plans*

An hour before sunrise, Peteru and Uretep used their gold disc to enter the high security vault containing both the master computer that ran everything in Oasis, and NumbaCruncha. After making a careful circuit of the place, peering into every crevice, space, cupboard or drawer large enough to conceal a human, they relaxed. But just as Uretep was reaching into his pocket for the plug-in drive they'd programmed the previous afternoon, Ishbel's face glowered from the vidcom directly above the console.

'What are you doing?' she shouted. 'You triggered the alarm.'

Concealing his surprise, Uretep looked up and waved cheerfully. 'Good morning, Ishbel. I couldn't sleep worrying that something would go wrong. This is the most important day of our lives and if it goes well we'll be Mages! So we're making one last check to quieten our nerves.'

'You're lucky I was already up. If Fabien had discovered you he'd have had you thrown to the dogs.' Her expression added emphasis to the words. 'I enjoyed last night,' she added casually. 'Fabien wasn't pleased when you proved me right.' Her smile was not pleasant. 'I like to be right. Remember that!' The wall resumed its blank state, leaving the menace of her voice hanging in the air. A tremor of fear shot through the two young men.

Peteru's hand shook. 'Two seconds later and she'd have seen you insert the drive. Quick, get it over with and let's get out before she decides to check again. She's a mind reader. A minute later they were back in their apartment taking deep breaths, unable to concentrate on anything.'

'Do you reckon Seb was able to get everything organised?'

'Of course. They're as keen on this as we are.'

'Damn the Mages for taking the transporter instead of NumbaCruncha.'

'Stop fretting. Everything will be fine.'

During the next hour, Ruby made several public announcements regarding New Oasis, waxing enthusiastic about the wonders of the new apartments everyone was going to enjoy. Fabien then filled terrified ears with warnings of dire repercussions if anyone was absent from the Arena and failed to transfer at the appointed time. He was followed by Nell, reminding them how to find the NumbaCruncha number so they'd arrive on their correct seat in the Arena.

Ten minutes before nine o'clock, Peteru and Uretep arrived, donned their Mage cloaks, sat on the special balcony directly above and behind the Emperor's stage, and turned on the surveillance screen that monitored the exact position of every citizen except Mages, in the Arena.

Seconds later Calisto, the Empress and their guards appeared below. Agnes and her guard immediately began copulating, unconcerned at their exposed position. Calisto and Philo waved up at the two Mages and contented themselves with kissing and petting.

A mind-numbing whistle sounded inside every building of Oasis, followed by a recording of Fabien's threats of eternal perdition for anyone failing to move to the Arena immediately.

A slight breeze wafted towards them as bodies materialised, filling every seat, sitting in total silence, awed by the occasion, fearful of Fabien's threats.

Peteru checked the screen. Every seat occupied.

Uretep stood, raised a hand in salutation, and then addressed the silent masses—his voice both sombre and compassionate.

'Citizens of Oasis. Domino and Domina are very pleased with every one of you. They are fully aware of the difficulties of your daily lives, of the sorrows and pains you have all endured, and of the bravery you all show in continuing to serve them so well. As the Mage's representatives here today, let me assure you that your sufferings will soon be over. You have been tested, and every one

of you has passed triumphantly. Our heartfelt congratulations to you all, and may you all enjoy your future.'

A stunned silence lasted for a long minute before the full import of Uretep's words hit them and a deep ululation filled the Arena. It was as if the misery of a millennium had finally found voice and poured forth in an anthem of sadness for tortured souls and lost lives. After several spine tingling minutes the keening slowly died to a whisper, then silence. All heads stared straight ahead, eyes streaming with tears too long repressed.

The Emperor and his entourage were no different. The stench of suffering, misery, injustice, cruelty, corruption and violence that had been thus expelled from the assembled men and women seemed to fill the Arena. Clearly, the Emperor was in no state to give his final speech, so Peteru raised both arms and said clearly. 'Go now all of you, to a better place where pain and sadness will never touch you. Sit calmly, press the silver mark on your wrists three times, and be happy.'

All eyes gazed in hope at their wrists. As if in a dream they pressed the implant thrice and, accompanied by a soft sigh as if a melancholy giant had drawn a last deep breath, the entire Arena emptied of humanity.

Peteru and Uretep sat, exhausted.

'I hope...'

'Stop that. It's too late to hope. We've only a vague idea what's happened to them, but it can only be better than what they've endured.'

'You're right. We have work to do.'

Back in the central communications suite they disabled the NumbaCruncha computer, used the Oasis Mainframe to instruct the duplicate system in New Oasis to wait one hour, then shut down all systems except for the energy generator, which they set to maximum output after disabling all the safety devices that would prevent catastrophic overheating. The Oasis computer was then instructed to begin the same self-destruction process immediately.

'How long have we got?'

'No idea. Half an hour?'

'OK, let's go.'

Placing their tiny, original transmitter on the ground beside them, they stood for the last time on an enseemat in Oasis, pressed their wrists, and seconds later materialised just inside the edge of the forest about a hundred metres from the Mage's apartments in New Oasis.

A giant transporter was parked below the balconies, and scurrying Vassals could be seen running back and forth unloading stuff, overseen by corpulent figures on each balcony.

'Welcome.' Seb's deep voice made them jump. 'Has everything happened according to plan?'

'So far. Everyone's gone, only the Mages and their Vassals here are left. It's odd; they don't seem perturbed, yet it's several minutes since they expected everyone to arrive. Where are the rest of the Men?'

'Concealed in the shadows nearby. How did you manage the disappearance of so many?'

'We instructed the New Oasis mats to accept all comers, but disabled their ability to reconstruct the signals. In other words, they received the neutron codes, but couldn't do anything with them.'

'So where are all those people now?'

'The same place they were before they were born...stardust.'

'Poetic.'

'Something's happening.' Jar appeared as if by magic from the shadows. Peteru glanced around and saw that all the Men were standing silently behind them.

'They're gathering on that balcony, waving their arms. Now they've gone inside. What do you think they're doing?' Fee asked.

'They'll be checking the surveillance system to see if anyone's arrived. I imagine they're getting very worried by now.'

'Yes, Ishbel will be having a fit. We fooled her last night, so she stopped Fabien the enforcer from getting rid of us.'

‘How did you fool her?’

After describing his role in the murder and subsequent eating of his victim, Uretep began to sob uncontrollably. Peteru took him in his arms while Leo held Uretep’s head in his large hands, tilting it to look deep into his eyes.

‘You are a brave and noble man, Uretep. We salute you.’ Growls of agreement from the Men, sick to the core at such abuse of power.

‘Ah, they’re back on the balcony, looking this way’ Bel whispered. I could race over and spear them.’

‘And they can shoot you. We know they have weapons. We wait.’ Seb paused to think. ‘Can they use the mats to return to Oasis?’

‘No, we’ve disabled them.’

So, I imagine you have a plan?’

‘Yes, sorry, I should have told you. We’ve disabled everything in both cities, except for the heat exchangers that are set to maximum with their overload switches disabled. At the moment they’ll be getting worried because no one has arrived and nothing is working and I imagine the temperature is already rising. We’ve no idea what happens in such a situation, but both cities could blow up at any time. When the Mages realise things are going seriously wrong, they’ll leave, probably take off in that big transporter. That’s when we have to stop them—keep them inside. They’d probably die in the forest, but we can’t take the chance.’

‘They’re coming out now. There’s smoke. They’re gathered on the balcony wondering what to do. Can’t see any weapons.’

‘We have to take the chance, come on let’s prod them back inside.’

‘Take these.’ Sash handed Peteru and Uretep a spear each.

‘Before we go, do you want to confront them with their crimes? Make them realise what foul creatures they’ve been?’

Uretep shook his head in astonishment. ‘Of course not! You told us the other night what Homo sapiens are like, how they evolved, how they became the dominant species. The Mages were simply true to type. It would be as crazy to tell the wild dogs that tore the Vassals to pieces and ate them that they were being nasty. They were just being wild dogs, and the Mages were simply being...’ he shrugged in resignation, ‘...human.’

‘Do you agree with Uretep, Peteru?’

‘Totally.’

‘Excellent. OK Men. They’re down on the ground and heading for that transporter. Herd them inside till...something happens. If they make a run for it, kill them.’

Ten seconds later thirteen panicking Mages and a score of apparently unperturbed Vassals were surrounded by a small but ferocious band of spear wielding Men. None of the prey recognised their erstwhile novice Mages, who deliberately avoided eye contact to avoid identification.

Ishbel began shouting that she was rich and would reward them if they left them alone. Fabien, of course, threatened. The others joined in with pleas for mercy, for assistance...

The Men, silently prodding with the points of their spears, forced the Mages and Vassals back towards the balcony.

Xanthippe and Fabien suddenly broke free and made a dash for the transporter, but hadn’t gone ten paces before both were felled with spears in their backs. The spear throwers walked over, pulled the spears out, ensured their prey was dead, and returned to guard duty. Little by little the Mages retreated, first onto the balcony, then into Ishbel’s reception room. Seb wandered nonchalantly forward as if about to speak, then slammed the doors and jammed his spear in such a way as to prevent it opening—at least for a while.

A rumbling from deep in the ground caused them to stare back at the old Oasis where a vast cloud of dust billowed into the still air. A deep boom was followed by another violent eruption of dust and smoke as if from a volcano. Then silence. A strong breeze sprang up and the thick brown cloud began to dissipate.

‘This one could go any time,’ Peteru warned. ‘Oasis’s energy pumps were on their last legs. These are new ones and, according to Ishbel, twice as effective. I reckon we ought to withdraw to the forest and watch from there.’

‘Should we put the transporter out of action?’

‘Too difficult. We can get there before they’ve crossed to it.’

They watched from the shade of the forest and prepared for the eruption, but when it came they still jumped. The ground heaved. The gigantic shallow dome lifted, smashed into a million pieces and fell back into what looked like a cauldron of boiling rocks. A second eruption threw colossal boulders out onto the surrounding grasses and shrubs. One flattened the transporter. Then just as they’d decided it was all over, a loud, long, low rumble announced the caving in of the entire structure.

Half an hour later there was nothing left but a circular depression nearly a kilometre in diameter, filled with rubble and dust.

‘If it holds water,’ someone said thoughtfully, ‘it’ll make an excellent lake after the rains.’

‘It’ll be toxic for years—centuries probably. Everything those sapiens did turned toxic. Thank goodness they’re gone.’

‘Indeed. The natural world is safer today than yesterday. OK, let’s go.’

Without a backward glance the Men set off at a fast trot into the forest.

After about fifty metres Seb looked back to where Peteru and Uretep were standing, unsure what to do.

‘Come on you two, we’ve a nest to build for you before dark.’

‘Are you sure? You said come on Men and...’

‘And what? As far as we’re concerned, you’re both Men.’

The others returned to stand beside Seb as Peteru and Uretep jogged nervously up.

‘Seb’s right. Of course you’re Men! We’ve been trying to get shot of this Oasis cancer for hundreds of years with zero success. We’d still be standing around wringing our hands impotently without you two.’

‘You proved yourselves Men when you decided to blend with us and conceal your identities instead of confronting those people. If you’d wanted any sort of revenge, then we’d have left you behind to take care of yourselves, because there’s no room in a natural world for vendettas, revenge, retribution, reprisals, recriminations, petty quarrels and all the other insanities of Homo sapiens. They’re dead and gone. Extinct—at least in this part of the planet. And you are both honorary Men until you die. You can’t have children, and can’t breed with us, so you’re the end of the line, but what a noble end. Come.’

He turned and joined the others jogging easily through the trees, followed by the two happiest sapiens who ever lived.

I hope you enjoyed reading NumbaCruncha and didn't take it too seriously.
If you feel the urge to communicate please leave a comment on the e-book site, or email me:-
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