

Ghostwritten

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Extract

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Okinawa

Who was blowing on the nape of my neck?

I swung around. The tinted glass doors hissed shut. The light was bright. Synthetic ferns swayed, very gently, up and down the empty lobby. Nothing moved in the sun-smacked car park. Beyond, a row of palm trees and the deep sky.

'Sir?'

I swung around. The receptionist was still waiting, offering me her pen, her smile as ironed as her uniform. I saw the pores beneath her make-up, and heard the silence beneath the muzak, and the rushing beneath the silence.

'Kobayashi. I called from the airport, a while ago. To reserve a room.' Pinpricking in the palms of my hands. Little thorns.

'Ah, yes, Mr Kobayashi . . .' So what if she didn't believe me? The unclean check into hotels under false names all the time. To fornicate, with strangers. 'If I could just ask you to fill in your name and address here, sir . . . and your profession?'

I showed her my bandaged hand. 'I'm afraid you'll have to fill the form in for me.'

'Certainly . . . My, how did that happen?'

'A door closed on it.'

She winced sympathetically, and turned the form around. 'Your profession, Mr Kobayashi?'

'I'm a software engineer. I develop products for different companies, on a contract-by-contract basis.'

She frowned. I wasn't fitting her form. 'I see, no company as such, then . . .'

'Let's use the company I'm working with at the moment.'

Easy. The Fellowship's technology division will arrange corroboration.

'Fine, Mr Kobayashi . . . Welcome to the Okinawa Garden Hotel.'

'Thank you.'

'Are you visiting Okinawa for business or for sightseeing, Mr Kobayashi?'

Was there something quizzical in her smile? Suspicion in her face?

'Partly business, partly sightseeing.' I deployed my alpha control voice.

'We hope you have a pleasant stay. Here's your key, sir. Room 307. If we can assist you in any way, please don't hesitate to ask.'

You? Assist me? 'Thank you.'

Unclean, unclean. These Okinawans never were pure-blooded Japanese. Different, weaker ancestors. As I turned away and walked towards the elevator, my ESP told me she was smirking to herself. She wouldn't be smirking if she knew the calibre of mind she was dealing with. Her time will come, like all the others.

Not a soul was stirring in the giant hotel. Hushed corridors stretched into the noontime distance, empty as catacombs.

There's no air in my room. Use of air-conditioning is prohibited in Sanctuary because it impairs alpha waves. To show solidarity with my brothers and sisters, I switched it off and opened the windows. The curtains I keep drawn. You never know whose telephoto lens might be looking in.

I looked out into the eye of the sun. Naha is a cheap, ugly city. But for the background band of Pacific aquamarine this city could be any tentacle of Tokyo. The usual red-and-white TV transmitter, broadcasting the government's subliminal command frequencies. The usual department stores rising like windowless temples, dazzling the unclean into compliance. The urban districts, the factories pumping out poison into the air and water supplies. Fridges abandoned in wastegrounds of lesser trash. What grafted-on pieces of ugliness are their cities! I imagine the New

Earth sweeping this festering mess away like a mighty broom, returning the land to its virginal state. Then the Fellowship will create something we deserve, which the survivors will cherish for eternity.

I cleaned myself and examined my face in the bathroom mirror. You are one such survivor, Quasar. Strong features, highlighting my samurai legacy. Ridged eyebrows. A hawkish nose. Quasar, the harbinger. His Serendipity had chosen my name prophetically. My role was to pulse at the edge of the universe of the faithful, alone in the darkness. An outrider. A herald.

The extractor fan droned. Somewhere beyond its drone I could hear a little girl, sobbing. So much sadness in this twisted world. I began shaving.

I awoke early, not remembering where I was for the first few moments. Jigsaw pieces of my dream lay dropped around. There had been Mr Ikeda, my home-room teacher from high school, and two or three of the worst bullies. My biological father had appeared too. I remembered that day when the bullies had got everyone in the class to pretend that I was dead. By afternoon it had spread through the whole school. Everyone pretended they couldn't see me. When I spoke they pretended they couldn't hear me. Mr Ikeda got to hear about it, and as a society-appointed guardian of young minds what did he take it upon himself to do? The bastard conducted a funeral service for me during the final home-room hour. He'd even lit some incense, and led the chanting, and everything.

Before His Serendipity lit my life I was defenceless. I sobbed and screamed at them to stop, but nobody saw me. I was dead.

After awakening, I found I was tormented with an erection. Too much gamma wave interference. I meditated under my picture of His Serendipity until it had subsided.

If it's funerals the unclean want, they shall have them aplenty, during the White Nights, before His Serendipity rises to claim his kingdom. Funerals with no mourners.

I walked down the Kokusai Dori, the main street of the city,

doubling back and weaving off to lose anybody who was trailing me. Unfortunately my alpha potential is still too weak to achieve invisibility, so I have to shake trailers the old-fashioned way. When I was sure nobody was following me I ducked into a games centre and placed a call from a telephone booth. Public call boxes are much less likely to be bugged.

'Brother, this is Quasar. Please connect me with the Minister of Defence.'

'Certainly, brother. The Minister is expecting you. Permit me to congratulate you on the success of our recent mission.'

I was put on hold for a couple of moments. The Minister of Defence is a favourite of His Serendipity's. He graduated from the Imperial University. He was a judge, before hearing the call of His Serendipity. He is a born leader. 'Ah, Quasar. Excellent. You are in good health?'

'On His Serendipity's service, Minister. I always enjoy good health. I have overcome my allergies, and for nine months I haven't suffered from—'

'We are delighted with you. His Serendipity is mightily impressed with the depth of your faith. *Mightily* impressed. He is meditating on your anima now, in his retreat. On yours alone, for fortification and enrichment.'

'Minister! I beg you to convey my deepest thanks.'

'Gladly. You've earned it. This is a war against the unclean myriad, and in this war acts of courage do not go unacknowledged, nor unrewarded. Now. You'll be wondering how long you are to remain away from your family. The Cabinet believes seven days will suffice.'

'I understand, Minister.' I bowed deeply.

'Have you seen the television reports?'

'I avoid the lies of the unclean state, Minister. *For what snake would willingly heed the voice of the snakecharmer?* Even though I am away from Sanctuary, His Serendipity's instructions are inscribed in my heart. I imagine we have caused a stir amongst the hornets.'

'Indeed. They are talking about terrorism, showing the unclean foaming at the mouth. The poor animals are almost to be pitied

— almost. As His Serendipity predicted, they are missing the point that it is *their* sins being visited on *their* heads. Be proud, Quasar, that *you* were one of the chosen ministers of justice! The 39th Sacred Revelation: *Pride in one's sacrifice is not a sin but self-respect.* Keep a low profile, none the less. Blend in. Do a little sightseeing. I trust your expense account will suffice?'

'The treasurer was most generous, and my needs are simple.'

'Very good. Contact us again in seven days. The Fellowship looks forward to welcoming our beloved brother home.'

I returned to the hotel for my midday cleaning and meditation. I ate some crackers, seaweed snacks and cashew nuts, and drank green tea from a vending machine outside my room. When I went out again after lunch the unclean receptionist gave me a map, and I chose a tourist spot to visit.

The Japanese naval headquarters was set in a scrubby park at the top of a hill overlooking Naha, to the north. During the war it had been so well hidden that it took the invading Americans three weeks after they had seized Okinawa to stumble across it. The Americans are not a very bright race. They miss the obvious. Their embassy had the effrontery to deny His Serendipity a residence visa ten years ago. Now, of course, His Serendipity can come and go where he pleases using sub-space conversion techniques. He has visited the White House several times, unhindered.

I paid for my ticket and went down the steps. The dim coolness welcomed me. A pipe somewhere was dripping. There was one more surprise waiting for the American invaders. In order to die an honourable death, the full contingent of four thousand men had taken their own lives. Twenty days previously.

Honour. What does this frothy, idol-riddled world of the unclean know of honour? Walking through the tunnels I stroked the walls with my fingertips. I stroked the scars on the wall, made by the grenade blasts and the picks that the soldiers had used to dig their stronghold, and I felt true kinship with them. The same kinship I feel at Sanctuary. With my enhanced alpha quotient, I

was picking up on their anima residue. I wandered the tunnels until I lost track of the time.

As I left that memorial to nobility a coachload of tourists arrived. I took one look at them, with their cameras and potato-chip packets and their stupid Kansai expressions and their limbless minds with less alpha capacity than a housefly, and I wished that I had one more phial of the cleansing fluid left, so that I could lob it down the stairs after them and lock them in. They would be cleansed in the same way that the money-blinded of Tokyo had been cleansed. It would have appeased the souls of the young soldiers who had died for their beliefs decades ago, as I had been ready to do only seventy-two hours ago. They were betrayed by the puppet governments that despoiled our land after the war. As have we *all* been betrayed by a society evolving into markets for Disney and McDonald's. All that sacrifice, to build what? To build an unsinkable aircraft carrier for the United States.

But I had no phials left, and so I had to endure those unclean, chattering, defecating, spawning, defiling, cretins. Literally, they made me gasp for air.

I walked back down the hill under the palm trees.

●

In the palm of the left hand there is an alpha receptor point. When His Serendipity first granted me a personal audience He held my hand open and gently pressed this receptor point with his index finger. I felt a peculiar buzz, like a pleasant electric shock, and I was later to discover that my concentrative powers had quadrupled.

It was raining on that most precious day, three and a half years ago. Clouds marched down from Mt Fuji, an eastern wind blew across the undulating farmland around Sanctuary. I'd enlisted on the Fellowship Welcome Programme twelve weeks before, and

on this morning I had completed some business with one of the under-secretaries of the Fellowship Treasury. I had signed the papers releasing me from the prison of materialism. Now the Fellowship owned my house and its contents, my savings, pension funds, my golf membership, and my car. I felt freer than I had ever believed possible. My family – my unclean, biological family, my skin family – predictably failed to understand. All my life, they had measured every last millimetre of failure and success, and here I was snapping their rule across my knee. The last letter I ever received from my mother informed me that my father had written me out of his will. But as His Serendipity writes in the 71st Sacred Revelation, *The fury of the damned is as impotent as a rat gnawing a holy mountain.*

They never loved me, anyway. They wouldn't know of the word's existence if they hadn't seen it on the TV.

His Serendipity came down the stairs, accompanied by the Minister of Security. The light whitened as he neared the office. I saw his sandalled feet and his purple robes first, then the rest of his beloved form came into view. He smiled at me, knowing telepathically who I was and what I had done. 'I am the Guru.' And he permitted me to kiss his holy ruby ring as I knelt. I could feel his alpha emanations, like a compass feels magnetic north.

'Master,' I replied. 'I have come home.'

His Serendipity spoke cleanly and beautifully, and the words came from His very eyes. 'You have freed yourself from the asylum of the unclean. Little brother. Today you have joined a new family. You have transcended your old family of the skin, and you have joined a new family of the spirit. From this day, you have ten thousand brothers and sisters. This family will grow into millions by the end of the world. And it will grow, and grow, with roots in all nations. We are finding fertile soil in foreign lands. Our family will grow until the world without is the world within. This is not a prophecy. This is inevitable, future reality. How do you feel, newest child of our nation without borders, without suffering?'

'Lucky, Your Serendipity. So very lucky to be able to drink from the fountain of truth, while still in my twenties.'

'My little brother, we both know that it was not luck which brought you here. Love brought you to us.' Then He kissed me, and I kissed the mouth of eternal life. 'Who knows,' said my Master, 'if you continue your alpha self-amplification as rapidly as the Minister of Education reports, you may be entrusted with a very special mission in the future . . .' My heart leapt still higher. I had been discussed! Only a novice, but I had been discussed!

In the coffee bars, in shops and offices and schools, on the giant screen in the shopping mall, in every rabbit-hutch apartment, people watched news of the cleansing. The maid who came to clean my room wouldn't shut up about it. I let her babble. She asked me what I thought. I said that I was only a computer-systems engineer from Nagoya and knew nothing about such matters. Indifference was not enough for her: outrage has become compulsory. To avert suspicion, a little play-acting will be necessary. The maid mentioned the Fellowship. It seems that the leprous fingers of our country's detestable media are being pointed, despite our past warnings.

I went out in the middle of the afternoon to buy some more shampoo and soap. The receptionist was sitting with her back to the lobby, glued to the set. Television is unclean lies, and it damages your alpha cortex. However, I thought just a few minutes wouldn't hurt me, so I watched it with her. Twenty-one cleansed, and many hundreds semi-cleansed. An unequivocal warning to the state of the unclean.

'I can't believe it happened in Japan,' said the receptionist. 'In America, yes. But here?'

A panel of 'experts' was discussing the 'atrocities'. The experts included a nineteen-year-old pop star and a sociology professor from Tokyo University. Why do Japanese only listen to pop stars and professors? They kept playing the same footage over and over again, a scene of the uncleansed running out of the metro station, handkerchiefs smothering their mouths, retching, scratching furiously at their eyes. As His Serendipity writes in the 32nd Sacred Revelation, *If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out*. Pictures of the cleansed, lying still where their cleansing had

freed them. Their skin families, sobbing in their ignorance. Cut to the Prime Minister, the bushiest fool of them all, swearing that he wouldn't rest until 'the perpetrators of this monstrosity were brought to justice'.

Is this hypocrisy not blinding? Can't they see that the real atrocity is the modern world's systematic slaughter of man's oneness with his anima? The act of the Fellowship was merely one counterattack against the true monster of our age. The first skirmish in a long war that evolution destines us to win.

And why can people not see the futility? A mere politician, one more bribe-taking, back-stabbing, under-the-table cockroach whose mind cannot even conceive of the cesspit it flounders in: How could such unclean lowlives ever hope to coerce His Serendipity into doing anything? A bodddhisarva who can make himself invisible at will, a yogic flier, a divine being who can breathe underwater. Bring Him and His servants to 'justice'? *We* are the floating ministers of justice! Of course I still lack the alpha quotient to shield myself with telepathy or telekinesis, but I am many hundreds of kilometres away from the scene of the cleansing. They'll never think of looking for me here.

I slipped out of the cool lobby.

I kept a low profile all week, but invisibility might attract attention. I invented business meetings to attend, and from Monday to Friday walked past the receptionist with a curt 'Good morning' promptly at 8.30 a.m. Time dragged its heels. Naha's just another small city. The Americans from the military bases that plague these islands strut up and down the main streets, many of them with our females draped off their arms, Japanese females clad in nothing but little wraps of cloth. The Okinawan males ape the foreigners. I walked through the department stores, watching the endless chain of wanting and buying. I walked until my feet ached. I sat in shady coffee shops, where shelves sagged under the weight of magazines of mindtrash. I eavesdropped on businessmen, buying and selling what wasn't theirs. I carried on walking. Workaday idiots gaped in the rattling vacuity of pachinko machines, as I had once done in the days before His

Serendipity opened my inner eyes. Tourists from the mainland toured the souvenir shops, buying boxes of tat that nobody ever really wants. The usual foreigners selling watches and cheap jewellery on the pavements, without licences. I walked through the games arcades where the poisoned children congregate after school, gazing at screens where evil cyborgs, phantoms and zombies do battle. The same shops as anywhere else . . . Burger King, Benetton, Nike . . . High streets are becoming the same all over the world, I suppose. I walked through backstreets, where housewives put out futons to air, living the same year sixty times. I watched a potter with a pocked face, bent over a wheel. A dying man, coughing without removing his cigarette, repaired a child's tricycle on a bottom step. A woman without any teeth put fresh flowers in a vase beneath a family shrine. I went to the old Ryukyu palace one afternoon. There were drinks machines in the courtyard, and a shop called The Holy Swordsman that sold nothing but key rings and camera film. The ancient ramparts were swarming with high school kids from Tokyo. The boys look like girls, with long hair and pierced ears and plucked eyebrows. The girls laugh like spider monkeys into their pocket phones. Hate them and you have to hate the world, Quasar.

Very well, Quasar. Let us hate the world.

The only peaceful place in Naha was the port. I watched boats, islanders, tourists, and mighty cargo ships. I've always enjoyed the sea. My biological uncle used to take me to the harbour at Yokohama. We used to take a pocket atlas to look up the ships' ports and countries of origin.

Of course, that was a lifetime ago. Before my true father called me home.

Coming out of an alpha trance one day after my noon cleansing, a spoked shadow congealed into a spider. I was going to flush it down the toilet when, to my amazement, it transmitted an alpha message! Of course, His Serendipity was using it to speak with me. The Guru has an impish sense of humour.

'Courage, Quasar, my chosen. Courage, and strength. This is your destiny.'

I knelt before the spider. 'I knew you wouldn't forget me, Lord,' I answered, and let the spider wander over my body. Then I put him in a little jar. I resolved to buy some flypaper to catch flies, so I could feed my little brother. We are both His Serendipity's messengers.

Speculation about the 'doomsday cult' continues. How it annoys me! The Fellowship stands for life, not for doom. The Fellowship is not a 'cult'. Cults enslave. The Fellowship liberates. Leaders of cults are fork-tongued swindlers with private harems of whores and fleets of Rolls-Royces behind the stage set. I have been privileged to glimpse life in the Guru's inner circle – not one girl in sight! His Serendipity is free of the sticky web of sex. His Serendipity's wife was chosen merely to bear his children. The younger sons of Cabinet members and favoured disciples are permitted to attend to the Guru's modest domestic needs. These fortunates are clad only in meditation loincloths so they are ready to assume *razen* alpha positioning whenever the Master condescends to bestow his blessing. And in the whole of Sanctuary there are only three Cadillacs – His Serendipity well knows when to exorcise the demons of materialism that possess the unclean, and when to exploit this obsession as a Trojan Horse, to penetrate the mire of the world outside.

To deflect suspicion from the Fellowship, His Serendipity allowed some journalists into Sanctuary to film brothers and sisters during alpha enrichment. Our chemical facilities were also inspected. The Minister of Science explained that we were making fertiliser. Being vegetarians, he joked, the Fellowship needs to grow a lot of cucumbers! I recognised my brothers and sisters. They gave me telepathic messages of encouragement to their Brother Quasar through their screen images. I laughed aloud. The unclean TV news hyenas were trying to incriminate the Fellowship, not noticing how the Fellowship was using them to transmit messages to me. The Minister of Security allowed himself to be interviewed. Brilliantly, he defended the Fellowship from any involvement in the cleansing. *One can only outwit demons*, His Serendipity teaches in the

13th Sacred Revelation, *if one is as cunning as the lord of Hell.*

More disturbing were the television interviews with the blind unclean. The apostates. People who are welcomed into the Fellowship's love, but who reject it and fall again into the world of shit outside Sanctuary. In his infinite mercy His Serendipity permits these maggots to live, if 'living' it can be called, on condition that they do not defame the Fellowship. If they ignore this law and sow lies about Sanctuary in the press, the Minister of Security has to license the cleansing of them and their families.

On television the faces of the blind unclean were digitalised out, but no image-doctoring can fool a mind of my alpha quotient. One was Mayumi Aoi, who joined the Fellowship in my Welcome Programme. She paid lip-service to His Serendipity, but one morning, eight weeks into the Programme, we awoke to find her gone. We all suspected her of being a police agent. Hearing the lies she told about life in Sanctuary, I switched the television off and resolved never to watch it again.

A week after my first call I telephoned Sanctuary. I was answered by a voice I didn't know.

'Good morning. This is Quasar.'

'Ah, Quasar. The Minister of Information is busy this morning. I am his under-secretary. We've been expecting your call. Have you seen the growing hysteria?'

'Indeed, sir.'

'Yes. Your cleansing operation was almost *too* successful, it might appear. His Serendipity has ordered me to tell you to lie low for a couple more weeks.'

'I obey His Serendipity in all things.'

'In addition, you are ordered to proceed to a more remote location. Purely as a precaution. Our brothers in the unclean police have told us your details are being circulated. We must act with stealth, and guile. Officially, we are denying complicity in your gas attack. This will win us more time to strengthen the Fellowship with new brothers and sisters. This tactic worked for

our cleansing experiment in Nagano Prefecture last year. How easily misled are these dung-beetles!

'Indeed, sir.'

'In the event that you are arrested, you are to assume full responsibility for your attack, and claim that you had acted entirely on your own volition, after being expelled from the Fellowship for insanity. You would then be teleported out of custody by His Serendipity.'

'Naturally, sir. I obey His Serendipity in all things.'

'You are a great asset to the Fellowship, Quasar. Any questions?'

'I was wondering if phase two of the great cleansing has begun yet, sir? Have our yogic fliers been despatched to the parliament building to demand the integration of His Serendipity's teachings into the national curriculum? If we leave it too long, then the unclean might—'

'Quasar, you forget yourself! When was it decreed that your responsibilities included advocating Fellowship foreign policy?'

'I understand my error, sir. Forgive me, sir. I beg you.'

'You are already forgiven, dear son of His Serendipity! No doubt you are lonely, away from your family.'

'Yes, sir. But I received the alpha-wave messages sent from my brothers and sisters through the news broadcasts. And His Serendipity speaks to me words of comfort in my exile as I meditate.'

'Excellent. Two more weeks should be sufficient, Quasar. If your funds run low, you may contact the Fellowship's Secret Service using the usual code. Otherwise maintain silence.'

'One more thing, sir. The apostate Mayumi Aoi—'

'The Minister of Information has noticed. *The sewers of the blind unclean shall for ever be sealed.* The Minister of Security will act, when the present scrutiny subsides. Perhaps we have shown too much mercy in the past. We are now at war.'

I walked to the port in the stellar heat of mid-afternoon, and collected boat schedules from a rack. I pulled open my map. I have always preferred maps to books. They don't answer you

back. Never throw a map away. The islands beckoned, imperial emeralds in a sky-blue sea. I chose one labelled Kumejima. Half a day away to the west, but not so small that a visitor would stand out. There was only one boat per day, departing at 6.45 a.m. I bought a ticket for the next day's sailing.

I spent the rest of the day sitting on the quay. I recited all of His Serendipity's Sacred Revelations, oblivious to the flow of lost souls passing by.

Eventually the sun sank, crimson and wobbling. I hadn't noticed it grow dark. I walked back to my hotel, where I told the receptionist that my business was concluded and I would depart for Osaka early the next morning.

The subway train in Tokyo was as crammed as a cattle-wagon. Crammed with organs, wrapped in meat, wrapped in clothes. Silent and sweaty. I was half-afraid some fool would crush the phials prematurely. Our Minister of Science had explained to me exactly how the package worked. When I ripped open the seal and pressed the three buttons simultaneously, I would have one minute to get clear before the solenoids shattered the phials, and the great cleansing of the world would begin.

I put the package on the baggage rack and waited for the appointed minute. I focused my alpha telepathy, and sent messages of encouragement to my co-cleansers in various metro trains throughout Tokyo.

I studied the people around me. The honoured unclean, the first to be cleansed. Dumb. Sorry. Tired. Mind-rotted. Mules, in a never-ending whirlpool of lies, pain, and ignorance. I was a few inches away from a baby, in a woolly cap, strapped to its mother's back. It was asleep and dribbling and smelt of toddlers' marshiness. A girl, I guessed from the pink Minnie Mouse sewn onto the cap. Pensioners who had nothing to look forward to but senility and wheelchairs in lonely magnolia 'homes'. Young salarymen, supposedly in their prime, their minds conditioned for greed and bullying.

I had the life and death of those lowlives in my hands! What would they say? How would they try to dissuade me? How would

they justify their insectoid existences? Where could they start? How could a tadpole address a god?

The carriage swayed, jarred and the lights dipped for a moment into brown.

Not well enough.

I remembered His Serendipity's words that morning. 'I have seen the comet, far beyond the farthest orbit of the mundane mind. The New Earth is approaching. The judgement of the vermin is coming. By helping it along a little, we are putting them out of their misery. Sons, you are the chosen agents of the Divine.'

In those last few moments, as we pulled into the station, His Serendipity fortified me with a vision of the future. Within three short years His Serendipity is going to enter Jerusalem. In the same year Mecca is going to bow down, and the Pope and the Dalai Lama will seek conversion. The Presidents of Russia and the US petition for His Serendipity's patronage.

Then, in July of that year, the comet is detected by observatories all over the world. Narrowly missing Neptune, it approaches Earth, eclipsing the Moon, blazing even in the midday sky over the airfields and mountain ranges and cities of the world. The unclean rush out and welcome this latest novelty. And that will be their undoing! The Earth is bathed in microwaves from the comet, and only those with high alpha quotients will be able to insulate themselves. The unclean die, retching, scratching out their eyes, stinking of their own flesh as it cooks on their bones. The survivors begin the creation of Paradise. His Serendipity will reveal himself as His Divinity. A butterfly emerging from the chrysalis of his body.

I feel into the perforated sports bag, and I rip open the seal. I have to flick the switches, and hold them down for three seconds to set the timer. One. Two. Three. The New Earth is coming. History is ticking. I zip the bag shut, let it fall to my feet, and shunt it surreptitiously under a seat with the back of my heel. The compartment is so crammed that none of the zombies notices.

The will of His Serendipity.

The train pulls into the station, and—

I hear the noises under the manhole cover, but I dared not, dared not listen to its words.

If the noises ever become words – not now, not yet. Not ever. Where would it end?

I entered the current that flowed to the escalators, and away from there.

Over my shoulder, the train accelerated into the fumey darkness.

•

The palms of my hands were pricking and sweaty. A seagull strutted along the window ledge and peered in. It had a cruel face.

'And your name, sir?' The old lady who ran the inn grinned the grimace of a temple god. Why was she grinning? To make me nervous? She had more black gaps than stained teeth.

'My name's Tokunaga. Buntaro Tokunaga.'

'Tokunaga . . . lovely name. It has a regal air.'

'I've never thought about it.'

'And what business are you in, Mr Tokunaga?'

Questions and questions. Do the unclean never stop?

'I'm just an ordinary salaryman. I don't work for a famous company. I'm the department head of a small computer business in the suburbs of Tokyo.'

'Tokyo? Is that so? I've never been to the mainland. We get a lot of holidaymakers from Tokyo. Though not off-season, like now. You can see for yourself, we're almost empty. I only go to the main island once a year, to visit my grandchildren. I have fourteen grandchildren, you know. Of course, when I say "main island", I mean the main island of Okinawa, not mainland Japan. I'd never dream of going there!'

'Really.'

'They tell me Tokyo's very big. Bigger even than Naha. A department head? Your mother and father must be so proud! My, that's grand. I've got to ask you to fill out these dratted forms,

you know. I wouldn't bother with it myself but my daughter makes me do it. It's all to do with licences and tax. It's a real nuisance. Still. And how long will you be with us on Kumejima, Mr Tokunaga?

'I intend to stay a couple of weeks.'

'Is that so? My, I hope you'll find enough to do. We're not a very big island, you know. You can go fishing, or go surfing, or go snorkelling, or scuba-diving . . . but apart from that, life is very quiet, here. Very slow. Not like Tokyo, I imagine. Won't your wife be missing you?'

'No.' Time to shut her up. 'The truth is, I'm here on compassionate leave. My wife passed away last month. Cancer.'

The old crone's face fell, and her hand covered her mouth. Her voice fell to a whisper. 'Oh, my. Is that so? Oh, my. There I go, putting my foot in it again. My daughter would be *so* ashamed. I don't know what to say—' She kept wheezing apologetically, which was doubly irksome as her breath reeked of prawns.

'Not to worry. When she passed away, she was finally released from the pain. It was a cruel release, but it was a release. Please don't be embarrassed. I am a little tired, though. Would you show me to my room?'

'Yes, of course . . . Here are your slippers, and I'll just show you the bathroom . . . This is the dining room. Come this way, you poor, poor, man . . . Oh my, what you must have been through . . . But you've come to the right island. Kumejima is wonderful place for healing. I've always believed so . . .'

After my evening cleansing I felt fatigue that no amount of alpha refocusing could dispel. Cursing my weakness, I went to bed and sank into a sleep that was almost bottomless.

The bottom was in a tunnel. A deserted metro tunnel, with rails and service pipes. My job was to patrol it, and guard it from the evil that lived down there. A superior officer walked up to me. 'What are you doing here?' he demanded.

'Obeying orders, sir.'

'Which are?'

'Patrolling this tunnel, sir.'

He whistled between his teeth. 'As usual, a muddle at Sanctuary. There's a new threat down here. The evil can only consume you when it knows about you. If you maintain your anonymity, all will be well. Now, officer. Give me your name.'

'Quasar, sir.'

'And your name from your old life? Your *real* name?'

'Tanaka. Keisuke Tanaka.'

'What is your alpha quotient, Keisuke Tanaka?'

'16.9.'

'Place of birth?'

Suddenly, I realise that I have walked into a trap! The evil is my superior officer, ploughing me with questions so it can consume me. My last defence is not to let it know that I have caught on. I am still floundering when a new character walks down the tunnel towards us. She is carrying a viola case and some flowers, and I've seen her before somewhere. Someone from my uncleansed days. The evil that is in the guise of my superior officer turns to her and starts the same ruse. 'Haven't you heard about the evil? Who authorised your presence here? Give me your name, address, occupation – immediately!'

I want to save her. Lacking a plan, I grab her arm and we run, faster than air currents.

'Why are we running?'

A foreign woman on a hill, watching a wooden pole sinking into the ground.

'I'm sorry! I didn't have time to explain! That officer wasn't a real officer. It was a disguise. It was the evil that lives in these tunnels!'

'You must be mistaken!'

'Yeah? And how would *you* know?'

As we run, our fingers lock together, I look at her face for the first time. Sidelong, she is smiling, waiting for me to get this most grisly of jokes. I am looking into the *real* face of evil.

I set off early the next morning to walk around the island. The sea was milky turquoise. The sand was white, hot and yielding. I saw birds I'd never seen before, and salmon-pink butterflies. I

saw two lovers and a husky dog walking down the beach. The boy kept whispering things to the girl, and she kept laughing. The dog wanted them to throw the stick, but was too stupid to realise that first he'd have to give the stick back to one of them. As they passed I noticed neither of them wore wedding rings. I bought a couple of riceballs for lunch in a little flyblown shop, and a can of cold tea. I ate them sitting on a grave, wondering when it was that I last belonged anywhere. I mean apart from Sanctuary. I passed an ancient camphor tree, and a field where a goat was tethered. Fieldworkers' radios played tinny pop music that drifted down to the road. They sweltered under wide, woven hats. Cars rusted away in lay-bys, vegetation growing up out of the radiators. There was a lighthouse on a lonely headland. I walked to it. It was padlocked.

A sugar-cane farmer pulled up by the roadside and offered me a lift. I was footsore, so I accepted. His dialect was so heavy I could barely make out what he was trying to say. He started off talking about the weather, to which I made all the right noises. Then he started talking about me. He knew which inn I was staying at, and how long I was staying, my false name, my job. He even gave his condolences for my dead wife. Every time he used the word 'computer' he sealed it in inverted commas.

Back at the inn, the gossip shop was open for business. The television flashed and blinked silently on the counter. On the coffee table five cups of green tea steamed. Seated around on low chairs were a man who I guessed was a fisherman, a woman in dungarees who sat like a man, a thin woman with thin lips, and a man with a huge wart wobbling from one eyebrow like a bunch of grapes.

The old woman who ran the inn was clearly holding court. 'I still remember the television pictures on the day it happened. All those poor, poor people stumbling out, holding handkerchiefs to their mouths . . . a nightmare! Welcome back, Mr Tokunaga. Were you in Tokyo during the attack?'

'No. I was in Yokohama on business.'

I scanned their minds for suspicion. I was safe.