

THE THING ABOUT NEVILLE

A disturbing tale.

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With thanks to Mal and Cam, who where there at the start.

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Chapter 1 - Neville Goes To Work

The rusty broadsword crashed down on the brittle skull of the were-pig. Its edge was dull, but it was heavy and made a serviceable cudgel. The pig dropped in its armour as its brain exploded out of its cranium.

Neville the Warrior turned just in time to block the overhead swing of the were-pig's partner. His hands went numb with the vibration of the bare metal hilt of his sword. The creature grunted at him and formed hideous words through its mouthful of cruel tusks. "Thot yed eshcap duh dunnels of Pain? Ah will ead yer mead fro' yer bonesh!" The tunnel shook and a roaring sound approached rapidly, causing Neville to stagger backwards and drop the sword amongst the bones where he had found it. The pig creature winced and looked around nervously, its tiny eyes glittering under its ridiculously tiny helmet. Torches flickered and started to go out in the rushing wind which surrounded them, evidence that something, something huge and terrible, was approaching. .

Neville opened his eyes.

He sat crammed into a corner of the back seat of the bottom deck of the morning train plunging into the tunnels at Central station. Lights flickered as they accelerated. Neville staggered to his feet, nearly pitching over the seat in front of him, and his novel dropped from his lap to the floor. Flopping back into the seat, he leant forward as far as he could manage, and fished around with flailing hands. One clutching claw managed to close on paper, grabbed and pulled. The creased cover ripped off and the thick block of paper dropped back to the floor. He convulsively dived after it, crushing the pulpy pages in his hands as though it might grow legs and scuttle away. As he came up for air he turned and met the disgusted face of the passenger sitting beside him, and realised that the tight feeling down the side of his chin must be a trail of dried drool which had formed while he slept. Also, he realised that his favourite ball-point pen, the disposable blue Pilot he had been using for months and which was almost out of ink, had fallen from his shirt pocket to the floor.

Neville debated trying to rescue the treasured pen while the passenger studied him. He had a familiar face, one he saw every day on the platform of Merrylands station. Neville's habitual feeling of misery and embarrassment yawned and became a bottomless pit of shame. His face, always choleric from high blood pressure, turned plum red as he contemplated pushing past this stern young-buck businessman in his angular pale grey suit and perfect new leather briefcase. Who he would see tomorrow, and the day after, and forever more, every time remembering another stupid mistake, another embarrassment. The natty suit glanced down and smirked at his ruined novel, "Through the Mountains of Hollowness", its lurid cover depicting a demon battling a warrior on a craggy mountain peak.

They roared from the tunnel and along the underground platform of Central station. Like a crippled robot controlled by a buggy but urgent program Neville lurched to his feet again, wincing as his truss pulled on his abdomen. He attempted to shuffle out from his corner, and his heel came down hard on the instep of the businessman. Muttering an automatic "sorry" he continued to slide sideways, highly conscious of his enormous bum passing in front of the faces of the businessman and the other passenger on the bench, a school girl. She giggled cruelly at him, or at least he thought she did. A wave of unbearable hatred washed over him and he turned to glance at her as he carefully rotated his body in the narrow corridor, hitting random passengers with the backpack he held in front of his swollen belly. She glanced up and met his steaming, boiled little eyes, as red and crazed as the were-pig he had killed in the dungeon only seconds before, and shrank back in her

seat. Neville smirked and trudged up the stairs to the foyer of the train. Little slut, he thought.

He pushed his girth through the packed humanity and out onto the platform, joining the mass flow towards the escalators. These moments, isolated within a crowd, were actually one of the few highlights of his day. Neville could relax in crowds, where nobody could see him. His bodily smells were shared, and he could escape from his mistakes easily by just walking away. The anonymity of the crowd was his heaven. Moving with the crowd, he passed through the turnstiles, then onwards, up the flights of stairs, past the newspaper stand and beggars and out into the morning.

It was a cool spring day, but Neville sweated. He always sweated. His sweats came in many different kinds. Today it was the prickly uncomfortable sweat that felt like needles piercing his skin all across his back and smelled like a dirty towel. He wore his habitual work clothes - short sleeved white checked shirt, worn out double pleated slacks, grey vinyl zip shoes, no tie. Slung across one shoulder, a tattered nylon hamper bag bulging with stuff. He cradled the remains of his novel in the crook of his arm.

Slow as a steamroller in first gear, Neville trudged up Devonshire street, past the poster peeling walls, the diamond grid security gates, the shuttered remains of the old Encore cinema. He paused and smiled wistfully at the movie poster peeling off the inside of the glass door, Robot Monster, with its ridiculous Monster made from gorilla suit with deep diving helmet and aerials. Was it really ten years, a whole decade, since he had last seen the legendary double-bill, Robot Monster and Plan 9 From Outer Space, at this celebrated theatre? He paused and remembered how good it was, sitting in the dark with his fellow geeks, plastic bag full of cheap confectionery from Woolworths at his side, blurting out awkward callbacks at the flickering screen.

There was something odd about the poster. It appeared that another poster was superimposed across it, perhaps a 1940s serial, Radar Men From the Moon or something. He could see a woman wearing a futuristic black vest with sleeves of straps down her arms and a tight fitting helmet cap over her skull. She seemed to be glaring down at him from a parapet, as though the Queen of the Martians was passing judgement on him, a Human from Earth, who had dared to invade her planet.

Suddenly she raised her arms and pulled the curtains.

Astonished, Neville staggered back from the window, turned and looking for the source of the reflection. It was one of the warehouses across the street. The windows were mostly closed, but one was open, and the shiny black curtains still swayed. Strange, he thought. What an odd costume. He checked the entrance to the warehouse, a double-door still locked behind diamond struts of security grill, surrounded by various plaques and signs of businesses within. Mostly garment importers and clothing labels, which was normal for the area.

People were pushing past him now, so he turned to follow them, rocking from side to side as he stomped up the hill. He paused to pull out a limp hanky to wipe the sweat from his eyes, taking exaggerated care to stand back from the sidewalk so as not to block the path of the other pedestrians.

Two blocks further and he approached the large glass doors of a dingy 60s style brick office building. Tatty display of today's headline posters in wire frames on the street outside: PEDO MENACE IN OUR DAY CENTRES and HONEST BATTLERS DOOMED BY RATE RISE. Here he worked, in the offices of The Media, "Australia's Newsiest Paper".

Inside he shuffled through the dusty marble lift lobby, still stained with nicotine from the years when cigarette smoking indoors was possible. The concierge, a fresh young model with luscious falls of pale blonde hair and pore-less skin, standing behind a desk of the same marble as the walls, pointedly ignored him, staring don at her camera feeds. Neville kept his eyes mostly fixed on the floor when he was inside the office, to avoid confronting glances, so he never noticed.

He approached the lift bank with trepidation. His stomach knotted and growled, which made him wince. Nervously he stroked his lower abdomen, where his truss irritated him, a gesture which disgusted anyone who saw it because it looked exactly like he was fondling his genitals. There were several other staff standing around in exaggerated bored postures, looking at watches and staring at the dials above the lift doors. The antique needles turned as the lifts rose and fell. Neville's stomach growled again, and he winced again as he imagined farting in the lift.

A lift arrived and the people surged forward. He missed the first, and the next, but managed to squeeze into the third. Those trapped behind him shrank back in horror at the thought of touching, and the rank odour of his body filled the tiny room. They squeezed past gingerly to exit at their floors as though he was a poisonous nettle.

If there was a bright blessing of Neville's life, it was the fact that he worked alone in his own cubicle on the top floor of the building, where the server room was, close to the aircon and as far as possible from the management offices on the second floor. It was a storeroom that once held memo pads and green celluloid eye shades and other extinct accoutrements of the newspaper trade. The IT staff had cleaned out these things (selling them on Ebay for a nice profit) and given him the space, mainly to hide him from their sight, and contain his smell. He had a desk, liberally covered in dust-powdered Beanie Babies and other monitor toys. There was a plastic dragon that walked, and a number of painted lead figurines of warriors and wizards. He kept a spare dice bag, made from chain mail, in case he forgot his main bag at home. In the bookshelf, a spare set of D&D manuals, comprising only the classic TSR Dungeon Masters guide, Players Handbook, and Monster Manual. Normally he wouldn't need them, bringing his customised and annotated books from home on days when he gamed with "the club", but he occasionally forgot. He used to have a few posters and cards pinned to the partition walls, mostly blowups of his favourite comic characters from the Gold Digger series. But, sadly, he noticed people sniggering at them, especially the were-cheetah Brittany, so he took them down.

Neville dropped his bag and book on the desk, and raced for the toilet. His luck was in - they were deserted. He squeezed into a stall.

Ten minutes later he emerged and returned to his desk. As he lowered himself into the chair he noticed his empty water bottle, and sighed lugubriously. Since his troubles with the kidney stones, the stupid doctors had been nagging him to drink more water. He insisted that the problem was not caused by his water intake, pointing to online articles about stones: how they were not necessarily caused by calcium buildup; but sometimes resulted from chemicals called ghibbelins, contained in onions and vegetables, binding protein and calcium together in mineral deposits. But, the doctors persisted, pointing out that one couldn't grow a crystal in a dilute solution. That annoyed him; he hated when someone used scientific logic to prove him wrong. Usually he felt that science was on his side against the numbskulls of the world. Still, it worked. He hauled himself upright, wincing as his parched joints and muscles complained, and headed for the kitchen.

Gregory the sysadmin was already there, making tea. Neville loathed him. A surfer, a British tourist on an extended working holiday, Gregory appalled his sense of justice by combining unquestionable

geek credentials with blonde good looks and extreme fitness. For his part Gregory ignored Neville as much as he could. Neville appalled him because he seemed to believe that having poor hygiene and no social skills made him a geek, when he had only the most basic technical knowledge.

"Hello, how are we?" Gregory muttered as he turned and drifted toward the door.

"Hmmm, not too bad I suppose."

"Good, good. Don't forget, the servers are being rebooted at midday."

"Oh. Okay."

"Yes." Gregory turned and studied him. "So. That means, if anyone calls about a problem during or after that time, it could just be the server."

"Yes."

"Right." Gregory knew that Neville didn't really understand, but he also knew he couldn't do any more to explain. He had already sent around the usual bulletin, but there didn't seem to be enough room in Neville's exception buffers for more than one thing at a time. He once caught Neville telling customers that their problems were being caused by a change which had been finished weeks before, leaving them helplessly waiting for their issues to resolve themselves, losing sales and money. But, ultimately, it wasn't his problem. His surfers Buddhism kicked in and he shrugged - either Neville misinformed one too many customers and got discovered and fired, or he didn't and kept his job.

His duty done, the water bottle filled, Neville returned to his desk and logged into his computer and phone. His official title was Technical Support Technician for Tab-Vend, a system for running automated newspaper vending machines. Tab-vend was a franchise, set up by a consortium of publishers. The machines were leased by the franchisees and set up in various public places. They were absurdly simple to manage, far easier than a regular vending machine which offered a variety of products, but many of the customers were pensioners or devotees of get-rich-quick schemes which promoted "multiple income streams", and none of them were bright. It was a regular if tedious job.

The phone rang. He picked up the handset. "Welcome to the Tab-vend support help-desk emergency line. My name is Neville. How may I help you?" he recited in a lugubrious voice. He was quite proud of his spiel - he had composed it himself. It was meant to discourage customers from calling and confuse those who did, so he would have the upper hand in the battle of wills each call inevitably became.

It never worked, though, it almost seemed to extend each call, as the nervous callers were so worried about burdening him with their woes that they had trouble following his instructions and made their problems worse.

This morning it was an old lady in country Victoria. Her Tab-vend machine was in a train station. She had no mobile phone, and had crossed the tracks to call him on the pay phone on the next platform. She just had time to tell him this before the line was drowned out by the sound of an antique steam train full of school children on excursion pulling into the station. Neville winced as the train vented steam. "Hello? Hello?" he repeated over and over, as the confused customer tried to

make herself heard over the sound of the shrill steam whistle and the cheering children. He pulled the handset from his ear and stared at it as though he couldn't believe that such an annoying sequence of events could happen to him, then glanced around to see if there was anyone near his office he could impress with the difficulty of his life. The programmers working near his cubicle refused to make eye contact, averted their faces and frowned at their monitors.

Late afternoon. Neville crouched at his desk, staring at his phone. Once, long before, he had been given quite lenient instructions for his job, that he could log off and leave "around 4.30". After awhile his managers had noticed that his daily report email came as early as 4.10, and had asked him about it. When he defended himself by saying that 4.10 was "around" 4.30, they realised their mistake, and gave strict instructions that he had to leave at 4.30 on the dot.

Each day Neville extracted his call report at about 4.15, and composed the email. It was a tense situation. The risk was that the phone would ring, and he would have to take a call, and then compose a new report. To avoid this he went for a leak, a fact the other staff were grateful for. His regular habits meant they could avoid the acrid fumes of his poisonously strong urine that filled the bathroom. He then returned to his desk and waited, finger on mouse, staring at the phone, praying for it to not ring. He never checked the voicemail for any calls received during his absence. He knew that, if he left them overnight, they would solve the problems themselves.

The system clock on his computer finally clicked over from 4.29 to 4.30 and he convulsively clicked the Send button.

Quickly he gathered up his bag, zipped tight over the bulk of his damaged novel and all the other junk it contained, and charged for the lifts. The programmers and sysadmins at their desks looked up briefly as he trotted past, leaning forward as though fighting a stiff head-wind, his tattered dignity forgotten in his desire to leave. They were patiently working through the days problems, each in their own world, headphones on or talking quietly over their charts and printouts. Their world was fundamentally different to his. To them, his job was a dazed nightmare of ignorance and stupidity, as he randomly walked from procedure to procedure, following instructions written years before, never understanding what he was doing. When something worked he rarely knew why, or how. The programmers understood everything, but they were humble in their knowledge, patient and slow. They shook their heads and smiled at each other and bent to their work again.

Outside the building he gasped with relief as he slowed to a walk and ambled down Devonshire street towards the station. The mysterious woman he had seen in the morning rose in his memory. He was on the other side of the street now, and he paused outside her building.

The plaques fixed to the wall were mostly for clothing wholesalers and importers, but there was one other which drew his attention. In gothic script on a copper plate it read simply "The Tartarus Club". Neville smiled. He knew exactly what this meant.

In D&D, Tarterus was the Hell of Neutral Evil beings, a seven-levelled realm also known as Carceri. Each plane of Tarterus was darker and more hellish than the last. The central plane was a void, with a floating planet of black ice. The only noise there was the occasional fracture of the ice and the moans of those trapped inside. They had misspelled the name but he felt sure it was the same thing.

It was unusual for a D&D club to be so professional as to have an engraved plaque, let alone permanent digs. His own club used to meet in a garage belonging to one of their grandfathers, before they were banned for clogging up the toilet. That was Neville's fault. He had been on a diet, again, and he had tried to eat a surreptitious half a cheeseburger in there. His friends suspected what was going on, and before he could eat a single bite they started pounding on the door. He dropped the whole burger into the bowl and flushed. Now they used the basement of a scout hall. Much to the consternation of the parents of the scouts, who disliked the bristly-moustached, sweaty-eyed men, who lurked around outside waiting for their elderly mothers to give them lifts home.

As a matter of fact, it was games night tonight! Neville smiled and leant forward against the straps of his backpack like a horse in harness, trotting to the station. Games night! He was in the middle of a stint as dungeon master, and his party was in a particular bad place. Tonight was make or break time. He smiled grimly as he contemplated the many ways he could destroy this expedition.

Neville sat at the large rough wooden table in the middle of the darkened basement. He had his privacy board propped up and he was rolling them like a pro. There were muffled thumps from above as the scout troop sprinted back and forth across the wooden floor, playing Rover Cross Over. They hated using the basement on scout nights, but after leaving the door unlocked one night the place had been vandalised, and now the scout masters wouldn't let them have a key.

In the game, the party of five adventurers were exploring the badlands in a forbidden desert. The tangle of gullies and gulches made a maze very like a typical dungeon, but populated with monsters only found in the great outdoors. It was a tense situation; the players were disorientated, and most of the monsters could fly over the little mesas and buttes that separated the channels they were stuck in. Neville had spent weeks luring them to this place.

"Which way do you go?" he asked Daniel, the party leader, raising what he hoped was a handsomely inquisitive eyebrow over his cardboard shield. It looked like Bells palsy. He was picking his nose, as usual, hoping they wouldn't notice because of the shield.

"Ummm." Daniel hedged for time and frantically pored over his scrawled mud map. They had been deep inside the maze before they realised they couldn't climb the walls and get out, and needed to start mapping in earnest. In truth, they were lost. A blue dragon in the open desert had attacked them, and according to Neville it's electric breath had demagnetised their lodestone. The sky was whited out by dust, there were no shadows, the wind was still. Daniel, old campaigner that he was, considered his options. His neatly clipped ginger moustache was damp with sweat and tasted salty when he sucked it, which he did often.

"Just pick a direction and take it, it's all the same." announced Gerrard. He leaned back in his chair, bored and bitter. He could see how they were trapped. It was all a big pile of shit. "Just say a direction and lets get it over with."

"South, then." Daniel looked up hopefully to meet Neville's narrow stare.

"Noooo. You have no way of telling direction, remember. You have to say, left, right, forward or back."

"Well... forward then."

"The brown dragon sitting on top of the mesa in front of you attacks, acid sprays from it's mouth. You all need to roll." Neville announced triumphantly.

"That isn't fair!" exclaimed Nambo. "I cast Detect Evil last turn and didn't find a thing. We keep telling you we observing the surroundings. Even if that thing was flying in from the other direction the spell would have told us. The spell-book clearly states Detect Evil is a scrying spell that can detect future events!"

"So sorry, my oriental friend, but the monster was here all the time. The fact is, your spell didn't work, and neither will any other. The Mana in this region is depleted."

"Perhaps you could explain this in more detail." drawled Gerrard. The oldest of the troop, and most patient if most embittered, his face was set in a contemptuous scowl like a clenched fist, with sprouts of whiskers poking out through the knuckles.

"Certainly." Neville practically wriggled with glee. These were the moments he lived for. "This desert was once a fertile land, but there was a magical war. During the war one side attacked the other with a Warlocks Wheel. Ever hear of that?"

"Sure, Larry Niven came up with the idea. It destroys all the Mana." replied Plastic Man, a seasoned SF buff.

"Yes, well. That's right."

"But if that's the case, wouldn't the mana depletion be strongest up on top of the mesas, where that dragon is sitting? We're in the eroded gullies, far underground from where the old surface level was. That dragon, with it's magical metabolism, should be pretty sick by now to be squirting acid all over the place."

Neville's eyes widened in panic.

"Uh, no, that's not right..." he began, but his voice trembled and lacked conviction. It wasn't working out as he had planned. Daniel looked down at his map, embarrassed for his sake. Gerrard remained angry; but now he grinned with wicked glee, enjoying Neville's agony as his trap blew away. Nambo looked bored now, wishing he was at home rearranging his figurines. The only reason he attended these games was because his mother worried he was an otaku and would lose his job and totally withdraw into himself. Plastic Man, for his part, leaned back in his chair and grinned at the ceiling. It was really just a game to him. Nobody would let him lead a party - he would march them into the nearest swamp just to see what the Dungeon Master would do.

Junior, bored, wondered what was going on, but it wasn't worth the effort asking. The others all thought he was retarded, and they'd just shush him up. He mainly came for the pizza. Which reminded him, it was nearly time to break for tea.

Neville's finger shot up his left nostril and began rooting around furiously like a maggot in a carcass. His eyes were so hot and sweaty they practically steamed like kettles.

Daniel broke the silence. "I guess... If this battle was a long time ago... perhaps we are in the

depleted region. Perhaps the eroded layers were deposited here since then. They were built up, and then eroded away again. That way, the dragon is safe up there where the mana is strong, but our spells don't work down here... I guess."

The other players groaned and shoved him, and Neville grinned hugely.

"An extra slice of pizza for the wonder boy!" he announced, and reached for his phone. Junior looked interested for the first time that day. Neville sent him up to brave the hordes of scouts and the withering glare of Akela and wait outside for the delivery, then dialled and ordered their standard fare; 5 Supremes with double cheese.

"I hate that sound" muttered Gerrard, gesturing to the ceiling.

"Same." said Plastic Man. His nylon tracksuit rustled stiffly as he stood and walked back and forth in the filthy chamber, stretching his back. The walls and floor were cement, damp and mouldy. There were shelves of old backpacks and tents made from canvas, which were no longer used since the scouts never went on camps. They couldn't afford the insurance. "Pity about leaving the door unlocked, or we could be here on our own." He glanced at Neville, which was unfair. Neville had locked up that night, but Junior had filled the bolt hole with a wad of paper during his pizza run that day. He came back later that night with some skater friends he was trying to impress, and they had tagged the place up.

"Oh, that reminds me, I know where there's a club of gamers I never heard of before." Neville described his discovery of The Tartarus Club, the strange woman, the plaque. "It would be an awesome clubhouse. Quiet, secluded, probably clean." At this last he heard Gerrard and Plastic Man snigger. "What's so funny?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothing." sniggered Gerrard. "It's just... why do you say it would be clean?"

"Because of the girl. She would keep it clean." Neville gaped innocently as both Plastic Man and Gerrard doubled over laughing.

Plas staggered over and reached out to slap him on the back, but changed his mind at the last moment.

"You're a card Nev! Of course it would be clean. Clean as a whistle!"

"Do you know them?" asked Neville, wondering what he was missing now.

"No. But it sounds interesting. You should front up there and find out what games they play."

"Yeah." Gerrard agreed. "We could do with a change of scene."

"Okay, I will" said Neville, just as Junior staggered down the stairs with a stack of boxes under his chin, a garlic bread under each arm. "Nev, your old lady's up there. She says it's an emergency."

"Oh *damn*." Neville staggered to his feet, gasping, and began to rapidly gather up his books and maps and other gear. "Of course she comes just when the food arrives. I bet she was waiting up there."

"Yep. Can I have your one?" Junior asked.

"No. Not unless you pay for it." Neville dashed for the stairs, escaping before they could argue and force him to pay for food he would never eat. They shouted but he ignored them. He knew what was fair. Sucked in, he thought, now they would have to go home, or wait for their own Mothers to pick them up. He congratulated himself for once again turning a loss into a win, and grinned like a toad.

The scouts eyed him warily as he emerged from the stairs and shuffled across the bare wood floor towards the main door, his arms full of maps and books. They had been warned so many times not to talk to the strange men downstairs that each and every one of them thought he was a murderer. The parents were finding it harder and harder to persuade their precious offspring to attend scout meetings; they screamed and cried in terror as they approached the hall with the scary men down below. Akela rented the basement to make some extra money, but that was proving to be a short-sighted idea.

Outside the hall, he charged obediently towards the battered cream Holden Commodore idling at the kerb.

Safely in the back seat of his Mothers car, Neville allowed his eyes to unfocus and drift, so he wouldn't have to meet her cold gaze in the rear vision mirror. She started the car and jerked away into the passing traffic. A taxi swerved and braked behind them.

"Indian. Of course." she said. Mother spoke with the clipped and proper accent of a graziers wife addressing the local blackfellas, keeping her words clear and distinct so she couldn't be blamed for any misunderstandings.

"Yes Mother."

"It's always an Indian or an Asian. Terrible drivers. Deadly."

"Yes Mother."

"So." She favoured him with a lumpish stare. Crouched behind the wheel, she looked small and weak. She wore her house dress, a robin egg blue felt dressing gown with yellowed lace along the hem and pockets bulging with dirty hankies and pills. "I suppose you were going to eat all that pizza the Asian delivered on his motor bike?"

"No Mother."

"No? Was it for the cubs then?"

"No, Mother, it was for me and- my friends and I."

"Your friends." Mother had a certain skill with words. Somehow she could charge this phrase simultaneously with withering contempt for his "friends", and also doubt that he could ever have such things as "friends" at all. "I don't understand why you insist on behaving in this ridiculous foolish manner, staying out late at night with your friends all the time, making me worry." It was

8PM.

"No Mother."

"Well I just don't like it. This whole dungeons business. It's not healthy. At least Carolyne has worthwhile hobbies." Carolyne, Neville's sister, was into making babies with an endless stream of hapless losers. She had three so far, the youngest was 5. However, Mother was actually referring to her scrap-booking. An expensive hobby that involved pasting photos into large folios with as many expensive sticky-backed frames, corners, labels, marginal doodads and saccharine quotes written in ornate fonts as would fit on each page. The result was a hideous pastiche that was supposed to be far more "special" and creatively fulfilling than a regular photo album. Neville remained silent - he quite liked her scrapbooks. He wanted to make a spell book using the similar materials sold at his game supply stores, but he knew he would be attacked and mercilessly hounded for copying her if he did so.

"Oh, I don't know. It's mental exercise." Neville stared unseeing out the window, mind in hibernation.

"I suppose you're wondering why I had to come and fetch you?"

"Yes."

"There was a terrible thing on Today Tonight. Just terrible. Lawless young people, roaming the suburbs preying on helpless women home alone. They were breaking in, and you always leave the house unlocked. I found the back door unlocked last night, and it wasn't me!"

"What do you mean, they were breaking in?"

"They were. On the TV. It was dreadful! Idle young people in gangs, attacking law abiding citizens in their own homes!"

"I locked it anyway."

"The deadbolt was not locked! It could have been forced! You should take better care of us. We look after you, it's not easy, you know. The least you could do is try and be responsible for your own actions. I don't know where I went wrong with you!"

Neville's eyes reflected the passing cars. A smell rose from his overheated flesh, of sweat, of grime, of a metabolism struggling to cope.

As he expected, Mother insisted he eat the large baked dinner she had cooked for him. It was standard fare, a rolled lamb roast with baked vegetables and boiled peas. As always, he accidentally-on-purpose cut the elastic stocking on the meat so that it shot across the table. Mother had had enough antagonism tonight, so he aimed it at Sis. She responded with an angry tantrum, knocking over her chair, raising her arms to heaven, making her sons cry in their high chairs. It was all normal, and Mother and Neville merely frowned and ignored her histrionics. "I can't help it if I'm *evil!*" he said.

As soon as they finished bolting down the grey meat and salty stuffing, Neville scuttled from the kitchen under cover of a particularly loud outburst from his still livid sister. The silence of the staircase was soothing, with the timeless smell of Brussels sprouts and fried potatoes which had been infused into the walls. He trudged, wincing, up the old wooden stairs, automatically avoiding the extra bendy ones where the wood was soft with dry rot, and being careful not to tread on the loose brass rods. On the landing he turned and ambled towards his sanctuary, his bedroom, where he had lived his entire life.

Here was the centre of his life. Here was the entirety of his being. Here, in the timeless familiarity, he had stolidly ignored and avoided the passage from childhood to adulthood.

The room was large and square. The door and fixtures were stained oak. A hot water radiator stood just inside the door, but it had been disconnected when he was very young. Once, in a rage, he had kicked the pipe free and flooded the house. There was a large wooden desk under the window, which looked out on the upper branches of a liquid amber tree. The room was lined with bookcases and shelves, the walls between them were plaster painted with a tan wainscoting.

Most of the shelves were solidly loaded with heavy rows of comics. The shiny edges of their mylar envelopes gleamed like fish scales. They were organised firstly into publishers, separated by manila dividers; characters, separated by title cards; runs, separated by Post-it notes; and then story arcs, separated by sticky book marks. Neville had spent many hours pondering his filing system, trying to solve such puzzles as, how to file crossovers, where a Marvel character like Spider Man teamed up with a DC character such as Batman? The recent forking and braiding of the story lines of some of the characters, the "Crisis on Infinite Earths", where the publishers had created whole alternate universes to contain the inconsistencies, had disturbed his filing system so much he actually stopped collecting them. Instead he had switched to the more recent titles like Gold Digger, which were also more satisfying in that their main characters were cute and sexy were-cheetahs.

There were many "real" books as well, and shelves entirely devoted to models. He had lead cast figurines from several games, Napoleonic soldiers, dragons and mages, cavemen in furs, armed with spiky clubs, spacemen with ray guns.

He stored most of his gaming equipment and books in their own bookcase. On the top shelf he proudly displayed a steel helm and a pair of short swords on a stand, from the time he thought he might try LARPing. But, Live Action Role Play turned out to be too sweaty and physical for his tastes, and besides, there were too many girls involved, and they kept trying to tell him what to do. They wouldn't respect his decades of experience in the fantasy genre, and Mothers dreams of his finding a girlfriend were once again dashed.

Neville still slept on the same single bed he had slept in since the age of five. It had a hard wood base, sagging in the middle in a way he found infinitely comfortable and which would have horrified his doctor. The sheets and blankets were always musty, because Mother refused to launder them and he couldn't be bothered. It didn't matter anyway. He quite liked the smell.

Beside the bed stood the large blue and white mass of his breather unit. Neville suffered from obstructive sleep apnea. For much of his adult life he had slept with a pressurised mask over his face, and a mandibular splint in his mouth. The splint kept his tongue from flopping back into his larynx and choking him, and the pressure forced the air past his fat tonsils. His current machine was a nice VPAP, which produced Variable Positive Airway pressure, monitoring his breathing and increasing the pressure when he was trying to inhale. Much better than the old machine, which

simply blew a steady stream of moist air at his face through the night. He still had coughing fits and constant low-level throat infections, but they were caused mostly by the fact he didn't bother to sterilise the splint each day.

On the desk stood his computer, a tower PC running Windows XP. The interface was a nightmare of skins. He had spent hours customising, and now each window was bordered by a cruel hedge of curving black talons and alien doodads. The system furniture had all been re-labelled - the Start button was now Cranial Interface, and was a metal grill containing a glowing green miasma, surrounded by organic machinery, and the printer was now the TransMat Device. The background textures looked like oil smeared steel, and the contrast was so low it was difficult to read text.

Most of the time the computer functioned as a high tech space heater. Apart from elaborately customising the interface, Neville rarely did anything with it. Although he tried to cultivate an image of geekiness, he was actually terrified of computers, terrified of their unforgiving insistence of accuracy, their unbending need for correct input. He liked to open occasional files in a hex editor and leave them on the screen so Mother would see what a clever IT wizz he was, but really he was mostly clueless.

Later, furiously wanking under the sheets, VPAP switched off so he could hear approaching footsteps, he thought about the lady he saw in the window. For some reason she excited him, although he couldn't manage any fantasies involving her. Most of Neville's masterbatorial fantasies were confused hideous jumbles of cute Manga girls and disjointed violence. Her face, staring down, had punctuated his day in a way he didn't understand. Suddenly there was a future, a promising future, with change he could look forward too instead of fearing. It was a strange feeling.

Chapter 2 - Neville Noses Around

Habit pulled Neville back into deeply worn channels of behaviour. He forgot to check out the potential club for almost a week.

One day, Peterson, his manager, annoyed at the amount of time he spent reading his pulpy fantasy novels between calls, and worried his own superiors would pull due diligence on him, carried a box full of software CDs into his cubicle. With great care, he explained that he wanted Neville to insert each one into a pre addressed envelope, and stamp them with the companies return address stamp, before putting them in the outgoing mail. After the lengthy lesson, which involved several detours and misunderstandings before Neville claimed he understood, he turned to leave, then decided against it. Prior dealings with Neville had taught him well and he stayed to watch a few practice runs.

Neville began by removing the plastic strip from the sticky glue of a dozen envelopes. Immediately the paper flaps folded down again and sealed them. Neville picked up a CD and an envelope; then, realising the envelope was sealed, put down the CD and ripped the flap back, taking almost a minute because he had completely bitten the nails from his round fingers. Strips of laminated paper hung from the glue, and the remaining patches of stickiness grabbed and held the disk case as he attempted to shove it in. Peterson watched, fascinated and disgusted, as Neville puffed and blowed and, several times, slumped forward as though about break down and cry at how difficult the job was.

"Why don't you remove the strip after the disk is inside the envelope?"

Neville glared at the desk, his face flushed red with rage.

Peterson demonstrated, picking up an envelope and slipping the disk inside, then peeling out the strip from the flap with a dramatic flourish and smoothing down the seal.

Slowly, reluctantly, Neville complied, and had soon lined up 5 sealed envelopes with disks inside. Now he picked up the address stamp, raised it high in the air, and brought it down with a distinct crunch on each envelope, smiling at a job well done.

Peterson felt a strange frisson of fear, as though standing on the edge of a cliff.

"Neville, do you think you could stamp them a little softer, you're damaging the disks inside?"

"Oh, sorry. I used to stamp the mail when I worked for the railways with this big brass franking machine. It took a lot of force."

"Yes, but this is a small plastic stamp, and the disks are brittle. You need to stamp... differently, now."

"Okay." Neville grumbled. He turned to his desk once more, raised the stamp slowly high into the air, and, like a young child landing a toy rocket on the moon, brought the stamp down. Peterson watched in mounting disgust as he stamped each envelope in slow motion, slowly raising the stamp, slowly lowering it, then turning to the stack of envelopes and just as slowly stuffing some more.

The phone rang. Neville raised it slowly to his ear. "Welcome to the Tab-vend support help-desk emergency line. My name is Neville. How may I help you? Hello, hello, hello?!" Peterson twitched, shook his head and then abruptly turned and stalked out of the cubicle.

Peterson was responsible for hiring Neville. It had been an act of simultaneous desperation and pity. His advertisement for the position (ARE YOU A PEOPLE PERSON? DO YOU HAVE THE IT SKILLS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPERIENCE TO SUPPORT AND DEVELOP? IS EDI YOUR SECOND LANGUAGE?) had brought in the usual suspects - several ambitious young lads with fresh Microsoft System Certificates in hand and murder in their eyes; an aging Spanish woman with good English but a strong accent, who had once used a primitive EDI system to maintain the inventory of a plumbing warehouse; and Neville.

He had to acknowledge that Neville's patent brand of public-service-style unhelpfulness had reduced service costs. He suspected that a lot of the customers were calling each other for advice now, rather than call the support line. Neville was like a genie in the Arabian Nights - if you phrased your wish ambiguously he would always interpret it to your detriment.

Lunchtime arrived. Neville was halfway through raising his stamp in the air at the moment he glanced at the clock on his monitor and saw it was 1:00 PM. He carefully put it down again, and shoved the unstamped envelope back into the pile.

Neville was on a diet. It was a metabolism diet, from one of Mothers magazines. Every day she packed his cooler bag with roughly 1 cubic foot of food. There was a baked fruit bar for 9.00 AM. There were a couple of plastic tubs of tinned fruit that he would rip open at 10 and slurp down without a spoon. There was a yoghurt. He would rip the lid off and rapturously lick the yoghurt from it each day at 11.30, before sculling the rest of the tub with a loud slurp that turned the stomach of anybody close enough to hear.

The lunch itself usually consisted of meatloaf sandwiches, the meatloaf cut into inch-thick slices between dark brown bread. Neville ate these mechanically, shoving half a sandwich into his mouth as though he was measuring the distance to his tonsils. When the phone rang as he was masticating one of these heroic bites, he wouldn't let it go to voicemail. He would leap at the phone and proceed to choke out a muffled greeting, spurting crumbs of food deep into the mouthpiece where they accumulated and festered until it smelt like a rancid sock.

While eating his lunch he usually browsed the web. It was against office policy, but he didn't care. He didn't know it, but because of all the journalists in the newspaper offices downstairs, they couldn't easily block access to the web, or even monitor it. There were legal issues to do with liability and sources of information. It was advantageous for the company to not know what the journalists were doing online, so they could deny any responsibility for their facts. Being on the same network as they were, Neville shared in their unfettered access to the net.

Usually he started with Slashdot, which he regarded as essential for a "geek" such as himself. Neville loved to mention articles from Slashdot when he cornered one of the techs. He believed it reinforced his cachet in the office. "Did you see that article on Slashdot? The one about SCO." he would gush eagerly to the skinny unix maven washing out a cup in the kitchenette, not realising that the man was the local SCO admin and that the printer servers all ran the companies OS. He

especially loved anything to do with java, because it gave him an opening to mention that he was a java programmer. Which he wasn't - he once knew how to embed pre-written java applets in web pages, but he affected to not know the difference, and anyway, he had forgotten most of his HTML knowledge now.

Neville owed his computer skills, and a lot of his health problems, to an accident he had suffered years before, when he had been a line technician for the railways. He drove a service truck out to isolated stretches of rail line and walked along them, examining the power infrastructure. Usually it was easy work. Sometimes he would need to climb a pole, to add or remove weights from the counterbalances which held the lines taut. That was easy enough; with his climbers belt and crampons he could work his way up a wooden pole in a minute. It was nearly as easy as climbing stairs, and the only real danger was attack by the magpies who thought he was after their nests.

One day, a day like any other, it all went wrong. He was scaling a pole to check the tension on some signal wires. There were permanent foot pegs driven into the sides of the pole, like fish bones on a spine, but to use those he would have to leave the crampons below and shimmy up the first few feet, gripping the pole with the soles of his shoes. His legs just weren't strong enough to do that, so he kept the crampons and avoided the pegs.

While he was tapping the glass insulators with a rubber hammer, to see if they were loose, one, and then the other, of his crampons splintered out of the wood. Normally he would have slipped down the pole to the bottom, accumulating some large splinters in the process, but none the worse for wear. This time, the foot pegs gashed and tore his left leg, and he fetched up like a squid on a jiggling hook, 12 feet off the ground and bleeding freely.

He couldn't remember much of the incident. When he didn't respond to a radio call to the truck, the supervisor went out to look for him. He suspected that he was hiding in the bush "reading his dragon books again". Instead he found the truck, and Neville nearby, hanging like a ham in a deli, limp and unconscious, blood running down the pole.

Neville woke up in hospital with a line of stitches down his leg like the zipper on a pair of jeans, Mother sitting by his side looking grim but oddly satisfied, and next to her, a lawyer. Through the haze of dissipating anaesthetic he listened while the ambulance chaser outlined his plan of attack. The rail department were in for a serious payout, he said. They had forced him to work in an unsafe environment, without proper backup. Also, it was clear Neville had been coerced into rushing his work, recklessly endangering his life for the benefit of his superiors.

The court case passed by in a haze of drugs. The lawyer hired a cosmetician to fix Neville's face and hair, tone down his ruddy complexion, and fill his gaping pores. She was a genius - she painted his fingernails with a chilli based varnish, marketed to stop children from biting their nails, which prevented him from picking his nose during the trial. The tears of pain caused by his stinging nostrils were highly persuasive. The only complication was, the workers comp insurance policy mandated that he must continue to work for his previous employer, the rail service. Which meant a desk job. Which meant, being trained to use a computer.

He took a 2 year TAFE course: Diploma of Computers and Certificate in Website Production. He sat in a classroom full of puzzled grandmothers and dope-addled long-term unemployed mugs

doing Work Start training. It was difficult. Every day he had to fight to overcome his urge to brag about his computer skills, which would have been disastrous because he really didn't have any.

Not that this was Neville's first contact with computers. As a tender young man of 24, he had been a member of a roleplaying club at a university. They had played table-top Napoleonic war games, moving lead figurines around a map. Most of the other members were computer science grads who had just taken delivery of one of the first micro-computers, an Altair, and were busy expanding it and fitting it with a terminal screen and printer and a timesharing OS. They often talked about these things while playing, and Neville listened in with interest. Once they even took him up to the lab and showed him. It was disappointing. The Altair CPU was nothing more than a small metal box with rows of switches, plus a murky character based screen and teletype keyboard. Users had to type slower than one key stroke per second, so it had time to register their input. It was nothing like he had expected, but at least he found it useful to claim he had been "a member" of the computer club and "used" an Altair, even though it was only for 5 minutes.

It was a running joke amongst the other staff at the office to get Neville reminiscing about his past in the early days of computers. "I had a devil of a time on that one job" he might begin, leaning back in his dangerously creaking office chair and caressing his truss. "It was around 1989 and I was running a Linux server, trying to get it connected to the Web. I tried 3 ISPs but they all had firewall proxies on their T1 lines." The programmers chortled and egged him on, compiling their scores of impossibilities later in the day (Linux was started in 1991, Berners-Lee was creating the Web protocols in 1990, T1 lines were an American standard, unknown in Australia, and the nascent ISPs in 1989 wouldn't have known what a firewall was). In the end it was a hollow joke and they soon stopped.

As the day drew to a weary close and the big hand approached 4, Neville remembered the strange face in Devonshire street and decided that this would be the day he would investigate the potential new clubhouse. "Ready to fire, captain!" he muttered to himself as he readied his daily email report. "Fire!" Quickly he packed his cooler bag and bulging knapsack, winced and moaned as he raised his bulk from his seat, and waddled quickly from the cubicle to the lift foyer. It was empty as usual; the programmers were still busy at their desks, and those who had the luxury of an early finish usually avoided leaving at precisely that time so they wouldn't share a lift with him.

Outside, squinting in the sunlight and the cool fresh air, blown in on the breeze known as the Bondi Doctor, he started down the hill towards his quarry. He was nervous; charging into buildings and confronting strangers, even other gamers like himself, was not a normal occurrence for him. "Brave heart Tegan" he muttered as he crossed the street and neared the entrance.

There were rounded black marble stairs leading up to a foyer paved with small hexagonal black and white tiles, many missing, the holes filled with cement. There was a bank of old brass mail boxes, with thick lines of verdigris where the polishing cloth didn't reach. The doors were heavy glass and wood. One pane of glass had been broken and replaced with a steel plate. The security grill was detached at the top hinge and leaned at a drunken angle.

Inside all was cool and dark and quiet. The floor was made of slick black lino, highly polished, with reflections that emphasised the slight humps and bumps in the padding beneath. He cautiously shuffled past notice boards and service cupboards deeper into the building, towards a large elevator,

the antique kind with hand operated doors.

Nice place for a game of Call of Cthulhu, he thought, as he entered the lift and pressed the round white button for the first floor. The ancient motors whined as the cage shuddered into motion.

The first floor corridor was lined with close-spaced doors. Offices, and small shops selling items too specialised to require a street frontage. He passed a boutique hair product shop, full of industrial size bottles of peroxide and lacquer and large antique tins of brilliantine. There was a vitamin therapist with a faded ornate certificate written in Norwegian hanging in the window. Also many garment assemblies, sweatshops and ateliers. Listening carefully in the quiet he heard the random bursts of sewing machines and overlockers from within. Some had dismal dirty hand-lettered cardboard placards hanging outside; "Lucky Fishy Clothing" and "Sun Lee Workshops"; others had funky bright painted art-school signs; "Arbeit Macht Kleid GmbH" or "Happytime Funjoy Bra Making Place".

No sign of Tartarus though. He returned to the lift and tried the second floor. It was the same, only slightly seedier. There were holes in the linoleum, the rough weave of the underlying jute fabric showing through. A door opened and a gaggle of young asian women emerged, chattering happily. They spotted him and were immediately silent, filing past with stone faces. An elderly, very pale western man with a shock of white hair and pince nez on his bony nose poked his head around the door. "Waddaya want?" he asked in a furious Brooklyn voice.

"I- I'm looking for the Tartarus club." gulped Neville.

"Oh, wanna dose, eh?" He winked. "Third floor. Around the corner." The door slammed shut.

Neville returned and waited for the lift to return from the ground floor. He rode up one floor, sweating freely with nervous tension. It was all starting to seem very unfriendly and dangerous here.

The third floor was different. There were fewer doors, and they were mostly unmarked, and all on the righthand side of the corridor. The floor was immaculate, polished to a high lustre. The woodwork well lacquered, the plaster walls painted dark green. His feet clacked solidly as he walked towards the window at the end of the hall, bright with afternoon light.

He turned the L shaped corner at the end of the corridor and stopped, facing solid wooden door. The panels were bordered with subtle raised carving of ropes and chains. There were twin brass handles, and brass viewing slots in both wings. No sign or plaque. The slots watched him like a pair of eyes.

"Brave heart Tegan" he muttered, before stepping forward and knocking. His well-padded knuckles made no sound on the solid wood doors, so he extracted a coin from his pocket and used it on the brass surrounding a slot.

The door swung open with a disappointing lack of creaking. A short, thickset woman wearing a plain black sacklike dress stood just inside, smiling a broad, red, salacious smile. Neville momentarily ogled her breasts, which were large, pale, bulging slightly above the di_u½colletage of her severe dress.

"Hello young man!" she purred. The sweat of stress and exertion broke free and started to trickle down his spine into the small of his back. He shuffled, sniffed nervously, and suddenly became

aware of an agonising need to fart.

"Ah, hello, I was wondering, about the club, the Tarterus club. I'm a gamer too!" he stammered.

"A gamer?" she enquired, raising one eyebrow. Her face was pale, and powdered even paler, framed with dark, lustrous masses of burgundy-red hair. She possessed a broad Irish nose, and her eyes were half closed under lazy lids, but their gaze pierced right through him in a way that reminded him uncomfortably of Mother.

"Yes! Mainly D&D, although I used to be into table-top war games with figurines, and some historical map battles. Oh, and Warcraft 40K, before that became too expensive!"

"So, how did you find us?" she replied. "Did someone tell you this was a D and D club?"

"Oh no, it was the sign. Tarterus. Although you did spell it wrong. The seven-layered hell. I once played a campaign there."

"Do tell." Neville grinned nervously. He wasn't used to women, especially not talking to women about D&D, and it just wasn't what he expected. This cool, beautiful, older female with an air of command and decadence made him feel sick with nervousness. His hands fluttered automatically to check if his truss was showing, and he blushed deeply.

The lift gate crashed open at the other end of the corridor and booted heels tapped briskly towards them. Neville turned and cringed as though expecting to be attacked. Suddenly she was there - the Galactic Queen he had seen reflected in the window. She wore a floppy-brimmed black felt hat on a shiny helmet of lacquered black hair. Her makeup was even more garish now; green and blue eye shadow, plenty of kohl, and streaks of rouge to accentuate the already cavernous cheeks. She wore a black and white striped blouse under an embroidered black bolero jacket, and stiletto boots under a straight skirt. She towered over Neville by at least a foot.

"What have we here Frazanne? Is he selling something? Are you selling something?"

"No. He plays "D and D". He wants to join our club."

"Oh, well, that's wonderful." The giantess smiled down at him as though she would be delighted to eat his face off. Her voice was a rich contralto. "We're always looking for fresh members, especially experienced ones. How long have you been playing D&D?"

"Oh, for years and years. Since they first brought it out."

"Of course, that was back in the early eighties, wasn't it?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, you must be an expert then! Know all the rules by heart? Don't need your, your Monster Manual and Dungeon Masters Guide now, do you?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that!" Neville almost shivered with joy at this exuberant reception, and relief at the first sign of recognition. "I do still need to consult them from time to time. For the tricky obscure rules, that is."

"I'm sure that isn't very often. Well, it's not every day that such a valuable potential addition to our little club turns up on our doorstep, so why don't you just step inside?"

The shorter lady led the way into a small room which was obviously an extension of the corridor. It was furnished in incredible opulence. There were thick black velvet drapes hanging from just beneath the ceiling to where they trailed across the floor in luxuriant folds. There was an enormous ink-stained wooden desk, originally from the office of the headmaster of an exclusive boys school. It crouched on gnarled wooden claws on the thick burgundy carpet like a spider about to pounce. The tall one indicated that Neville should sit in the high-backed wooden chair front and centre before the desk. She meanwhile perched on the corner of the table, while the shorter woman dropped herself bonelessly into the opulent gilded armchair behind.

"This is Phallia" the short one began, "and I'm Frazanne. Would you care for some wine?"

"Er, no."

"Don't you drink, Mr...?"

"No. Neville."

"Well, my dear Mr. Neville, or perhaps Mr. No, welcome to the Tartarus club. Do you like our club?"

"It's very nice. Very dark though. Is it meant to be spooky?"

"Of course!" laughed Phallia. "We enjoy the atmosphere, the sense of danger. It adds spice to the game. Don't you agree?"

"Yes. My friends and I play in the basement of a cub hall. It's very spooky too. Except when the cubs are there."

"Fascinating." Phallia and Frazanne exchanged glances.

"Tell me," asked Frazanne, "why do you wish to join our D&D club? And do your friends wish to join also?"

"I don't think so. They laughed when I told them about this place. But I'm tired of playing in a cub hall. It's dirty."

"I can well imagine. Are you sure you wouldn't care for some wine?"

"I never drink, sorry."

"No, don't be. But I'm parched."

Frazanne, sitting quietly in her armchair, suddenly bellowed "Wine!" in a harsh loud voice. Neville froze. There was a clatter from the other side of a double door he hadn't noticed, to his left. One pane swung open, and a girl stepped through, balancing a silver salver on one upraised hand. It was loaded with a pewter bottle and two goblets.

The girl was young and fair. Pale as they all were, but she wore no makeup. Long wispy blonde hair swept back over her shoulders. She wore a long black robe with a row of close-spaced round buttons down the front. Her eyes were blue, with blue-tinged whites of a young child, beneath a broad, peerless forehead.

Her face was dominated by a terrible scar, a hare-lip that twisted her mouth into a travesty. Her chin receded in a smooth curve like a chimpanzee.

She approached the table carefully, eyes downcast, gracefully kicking out the hem of her robe so she wouldn't trip, balancing the bottle with its narrow base. She lowered the tray and poured out two goblets of claret. The other women watched with smiling approval as she handed them each their cup, then picked up the tray and backed away from the table before retreating through the door and closing it behind her, never raising her eyes from the floor.

When he finally tore his gaze away from the closed door Neville found the two women gazing at him with unfathomable expressions, calculating and thoughtful.

"That was Angela." said Phallia in a mocking tone. "Pretty, isn't she?"

"I guess so."

"Well, I have work to do, but I trust we can count on your attendance at the next meeting of our club." said Frazanne. "Which will be at 12 midnight on Thursday."

"Oh..." pondered Neville. "So late..."

"Well, don't come then. We won't force you."

"No, no, I'll be there." Neville summoned the shreds of his willpower, stood, swung his overstuffed backpack over his shoulder, and stumped mechanically out of the little room. The ladies drank their wine and smiled.

Chapter 3 – Neville Goes On An Adventure

Mother could always sense when Neville was keeping something from her. The frequency of his nose-picking increased, for one thing. He spent a considerable portion of his life with a finger firmly seated in a nostril - it was mostly unconscious, and he was prone to begin picking in the most inappropriate of social situations - and it was a useful barometer of his mood. When he was under some kind of stress he couldn't help himself. No matter how hard he tried to remember, his fingers were irresistibly drawn towards his nose.

Sitting at the kitchen table, she watched from the corner of her eyes as his thick fleshy index finger rotated and gouged in his giant elastic nostril. Whenever he realised she was watching, he would casually withdraw the digit and rub the bulbous tip of his nose as if to say "just a bit itchy, I wasn't picking it really, no sirree." He did this now, then glanced at her.

"What?"

"I want to know what you were thinking."

"Oh. Well." He pondered the question. It was a common trap, usually leading to a fight later in the evening. Considering his plans, this could be a good or bad thing. He decided to try and trigger the trap and then use the resulting conflict as an excuse to stay out late.

"I was thinking that dinner wasn't very good. The vegetables were overcooked, you always boil them so they're as soft and mushy as an orc's brain. I wish you wouldn't do that, this isn't a hospital after all."

Mother recoiled sharply and drew a shuddery breath, but instead of launching into a tirade on how ungrateful he was, she paused. Her instincts told her something was up. He was challenging her. She decided on a different tactic.

"I'm so very sorry. I keep forgetting. I won't do it again."

Neville froze in horror. Did she know? He tried again.

"You keep saying that, but you never do. I think you're getting too old to cook. Maybe you should let Sis take over!"

This should have had her ranting incomprehensibly at the top of her lungs, but she just sighed. Neville's blood ran cold.

"Perhaps you're right. I'm not getting any younger. I'm worn down from looking after you, and your sister. I never have any time for myself!" She started to cry, her face twisted up into a hideous scrunch of self-pity.

Neville stood, wincing, hands fluttering at his waist.

"I'm going out tonight." he announced. "I found a new game club, in the city. It looks a lot better than the cub hall."

"Ohhhhh!" wailed Mother. "You don't care about me! No responsibility in the world, me doing all the work in the house!"

"That isn't true, I do plenty of chores!"

"Sweeping! When I remind you, ten times no less, and even then! And now you want to go to another club! Well, you just go. Go, and forget about me." She slumped back in her chair and covered her face with her hands, sobbing piteously.

Custom demanded that, at this point, he should comfort her, smooth oil on her wounded ego, and retreat into docility. Instead, he stood and left the kitchen, trudged up the stairs and disappeared inside his room.

It was already 10 PM. He looked at his clothes in the spotted old mirror, still hung at the right height for a 6 year old boy, bending his knees in a painful crouch to see his checked shirt. It would do, he decided, not too many food stains. There was a gravy smear, but it was close enough to the buttons to be okay. He didn't have any black shirts though - they seemed to wear a lot of black. At least his pants were black, or they had been once. Not too frayed.

Turning to his bed, he emptied out and rapidly repacked his backpack, with manuals, dice, pads and pencil case, a stuffed Tux penguin, some New Scientist magazines and plenty of other odds and ends. Neville's theory of socialising was to bombard his new chums as rapidly as possible with evidence of how cool he was. A kind of fusillade of geek toys and symbols, to try and overcome their reluctance to talk to him. He kept a Y2K Bug Beanie Baby on his monitor at work for this reason, a little red stuffed insect toy, which he liked to take down and stroke when a geek was around, in the hope they might ask him what it was. Of course they rarely did, but he stuck by his theory. The programmers in the office never told him how lame it was. They wanted to preserve his innocence, as though he was a child who still believed in Santa Claus.

Zippering up his grey vinyl Hush Puppies and slinging his bulging nylon pack over his shoulder, he opened the door to reveal Mother standing just outside.

"You aren't going anywhere!" she hissed at him. "I'm not feeling well! You upset me tonight with your rude comments about my cooking. I might need to go to the hospital. My heart feels very unsteady..." She wavered on her feet, expecting him to rush forward and try to catch her before she fell. Instead he stood and stared.

"What is it? What's wrong? What's happened to you?" she begged in a quavering voice.

"I need to go."

"No you don't! Stay here and look after me. Please?"

"I need to go." He lurched forward and tried to slip his bulk past her, but she grabbed hold of his arm.

"Let go, you're hurting me!" Neville whined, trying to shake her claw loose. Mother staggered back and collided with the old wooden banisters. She waved her arms wildly in the air, leaning back as though just about to pitch over the edge and fall to her death. Neville roughly grabbed the front of her dressing gown and pulled. She staggered past him and collided with the wall, falling to her

knees and clutching her forehead.

"Oh my god, you nearly killed me! How could you? I need to go to hospital."

"Sis!" bellowed Neville as he charged down the stairs. Already alerted by the noise, she emerged from her room, blinking and rubbing her eyes. From within the room he heard her youngest son start to cry.

"What?" she demanded, planting herself fully in his path so he couldn't leave. Although she was younger than him her face was so pulled down in frowning lines of disapproval and rage she looked much older. A dirty Loony Tunes tee-shirt stretched around her rotund body.

"Mother." Neville feinted, made to pass her on the left. She took a step to block him, he darted past her right with skill a gridiron player would envy, and made for the front door and freedom.

The deadbolt was locked. He fumbled in his tight pants pocket for the keys. Sis started up the stairs behind him.

"Mother, are you all right?" she yelled.

"Stop him! Stop him!" called Mother.

"Oi!" Sis turned and advanced on Neville, her face contorted in righteous outrage. "What have you done?"

"Nothing. I'm just going out, and she doesn't want me to go."

"I don't believe you." she bellowed and lunged for his keys. Too late. He slammed the door key home, turned, opened and darted outside. Sis roared with rage. Mother sobbed feebly behind her.

Neville shambled down the front path, being careful not to slip in the decaying drifts of leaves that rotted on the cracked concrete. He reached the car just as the stream of light from the front door was blocked by the two women. He turned. Sis was enjoying the game, supporting Mother who leaned on her as though she could barely stand. She held up her other hand. Neville squinted, and realised his sister was showing him the keys, which he had left in the door. The door keys, and the car keys!

"Come back." pleaded Mother.

"You bastard!" hissed Sis.

Like a wounded animal running from predators, he shuffled past the car, an old Kingswood with rusty panels, and down the street. He barely made it halfway to the corner of the block before he heard the detuned engine roar to life behind him. He turned just in time to see the car rocket backwards from the drive, swerving out of control. The headlights flicked on. Sis was at the wheel, Mother riding shotgun.

Panicking, he darted into the driveway of the neighbours house. Their lights were on and he could hear the musical strains of Dancing With the Stars inside, along with peals of laughter. Crouching like a GI on patrol, he trotted up their driveway, past the house and into their yard. Their dog, a stinking matted golden retriever they kept tied to their shed with a frayed rope, began to bark

hysterically. The outside lights flicked on, and he saw the car stop across the end of the driveway behind him. The car door swung open.

Cursing, he dodged behind the shed. The dog barked and slathered at the end of its rope, trying to reach him. He was trapped in a blind alley - the shed abutted the side fence so he couldn't squeeze out.

Desperately he kicked at the fence. A couple of palings, rotted from years in the rain, fell out and clattered into the old dunny alley that ran behind the houses. Laughing now, Neville kicked out more palings, then stepped through the hole and trotted down the alley. He heard voices behind him.

The alley emerged on another empty street. Television flickered, eerily synchronised, in the windows of the houses. The alley was silent behind him now, but he could just hear the sound of the old Kingswood starting up again. He slumped back against the fence and started to cry.

A car approached, the headlights red through his closed eyelids. Looking up, he realised that he was saved. It was a taxi, yellow indicator light on, returning from a job, looking for passengers as it headed back towards civilisation. He staggered out into the road and frantically waved it towards him.

The taxi swerved and skidded to a stop. Its driver was a young Sikh, with immaculate trimmed black beard, freshly starched blue uniform shirt, and bejewelled orange turban. Neville hauled the door open and slumped into the seat, gasping, rubbing his face on his shirt sleeves to wipe the tears.

"Where too, buddy?" the driver chirped, smiling inanely. Neville slumped down in his seat as far as he could.

"Quick! Just drive on. Put the light out."

"The cabin, or the top?"

"Both! No, just the cabin!"

The driver switched off the lights and cruised away from the kerb. Neville raised his head high enough to see the Kingswood lurch from the street behind them and turn in their direction.

"Someone looking for you, buddy?" asked the driver.

"No!" Neville blurted, blushing. The driver smiled and silently drove on.

The Kingswood matched speed with the taxi, and the driver slowed down a little. Neville, terrified, froze in his seat. He heard the car pull away and accelerate ahead. The vacancy light on the roof must have fooled them, he thought.

"You can get up now." said the driver. Neville inched higher in his seat.

"Duck!" shouted the driver. Neville almost slammed his head into the glove box as he obeyed. He heard the Kingswood roar past, heading back towards the house. The driver laughed.

"They are very angry! Very mean faces. Did you steal from them?"

"I beg your pardon?!"

"Are you a thief?" The driver had a polite, British influenced Indian accent. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

Neville raised his head and looked around. "Where are we going?"

"Anywhere you want to go" said the driver. "You still haven't told me."

"Surry Hills." said Neville.

An hour later, the taxi dropped Neville outside the ominous bulk of the warehouse in Devonshire street. He winced as he climbed out of the car, and waited stolidly for his change, refusing to leave a tip. He never tipped taxi drivers or restaurants, insisting that it was immoral.

When the car had left he stood in the silence and looked up at the windows. The thick drapes had been drawn so there wasn't a speck of light. For a moment he thought they might have tricked him, sent him on a fools errand, but no. The security grill was open slightly, a crack only a foot wide, enough to squeeze through.

He watched as a silent couple of young men, wearing identical black denim jackets and motorcycle boots, approached from the direction of the station. They eyed him in silence, turned and slipped through the gate. He heard the glass door of the foyer open and close.

Neville followed them in.

The only light came from the exit signs and the indicator above the lift, which was already rising. Neville waited impatiently for it to return.

The third floor reeked of incense, something with vanilla and sandalwood. It reminded him of the flavour of hospital pudding, which he always swiped when visiting dying relatives. There was strange music barely audible through the walls; maudlin, with tubas and clarinets, somehow German.

The double doors swung open as he approached. Large iron sconces loaded with candles lit the antechamber. Frazanne sat behind the desk, before which stood the young men. Neville hung back and watched as they handed her some cash, which she deposited into a steel lockbox on the desk. Angela, wearing a red robe now, silently opened the inner door for them.

"Come, come!" Frazanne called out. Neville approached warily. "I didn't know about the money." he said.

"Oh, don't worry about that. This is your first night. Are you ready?"

"I brought everything I need." said Neville, turning so she could see his knapsack

"Good. Now, Angela, could you show the gentleman inside? Like I told you."

Angela reached out and gently took Neville's hand.

Her hand was small, cool, her fingers were narrow and somehow perfectly formed, as though the angles of their joints were the absolute ideal angle that a finger should be. They seemed to bend back somehow, as though each section was slightly sprung, flexed, evidence of their youth and suppleness. Staring fixedly at his hand in hers, Neville sadly considered his puffy flesh, his bitten nails, the skin slightly grimy from not washing, the nails grey and dead from his deoxygenated blood.

Angela gently lead him, step by sleepwalking step, towards the inner door, swung open the left hand panel, and inside.

It was a large room, full of regularly spaced wooden columns. The light was low, and there were many shadows, so it was hard to see clearly. Beneath the music he could hear a subdued buzz of conversation, strangely urgent, as though it was a party on the bridge of a battleship. Punctuating this noise, a random, staccato crack, snap and thwap.

Just inside the door stood a young woman, with long black hair, elbow length white lace gloves, and a voluptuously flowing red velvet dress. She was tending to a strange machine, a metal tripod taller than herself, the kind which Neville recognised from his days working for the railways, used for access to deep manholes. Depending from the apex of the tripod, beneath a swivel, hung a large leather bag, covered in lengths of chromed zipper. She spun the bag with her hands, patiently twisting back and forth at the waist, grasping and turning it around, working to speed it up. Neville watched it spin. Something inside it was moving.

That was wrong, so he looked away.

Nearby, a body hung from the rafters. A young man in black leather shorts, white thews sprinkled with sparse black hair, slowly turned this way and that. The only evidence he was still alive was the even rise and fall of his narrow chest. A thick hemp rope was tightly fixed around his neck in the classic hangman's noose, although the full weight of his body was obviously being supported by the complex nylon climbing harness wrapped around his torso and attached to a thin steel hawser which was anchored to a ring bolt in the wooden beam above. The aluminium step ladder he had obviously used to hang himself with was folded and leant against a pillar.

Neville's eyes were repelled from this sight like a bead of moisture sliding off a leaf. Desperately they rolled in their sockets, and he glanced this way and that, seeking normality, something that didn't appal his ridiculous sense of propriety. But it was no use, the room was full of people doing things to themselves, to each other, in groups and pairs and clusters.

A small group of Nazis caught his eye next, as pudgy and rotund as Neville himself. At least they weren't doing things to each other, he thought. He tried to move in their direction, but Angela insistently drew him away. He gazed at them, resplendent in their jodhpurs, tight woollen jackets tinkling with enamelled medals and pins. They leered at him as Angela led him away, toasted him with their tiny glasses of schnapps. Their cynical eyes gleamed beneath the bills of their caps,

and they turned and moved in a series of heroic postures, now dramatically throwing a cape back from their shoulders, now taking a couple of steps on exquisitely tight leather boots.

They stood besides three rows of church pews, complete with embroidered kneelers and brass name plaques. Seated in the rows were a small congregation of old, naked men. They chattered together like the old codgers at the local RSL, while pawing at each others limp penises. The way their slack white skin hung in folds reminded Neville of hairless Egyptian cats.

One, a professorial old gentleman with a mane of frizzy white hair, stood from the front pew and tottered over towards them. Neville recoiled, but Angela smiled and held fast.

"Hello Angela my dear, lovely to see you tonight. Hello young fella, haven't seen you here before. Have you had your cock sucked yet?"

Neville mutely shook his head.

"I did a bit earlier, it was lovely!" He grinned inanely while his eyes wandered around the room. "Good crowd tonight, but nothing really exciting. Well, toodleoo." The old geezer wandered away, scratching absently his bare buttocks. Angela tugged and they moved further on.

They were crossing the large chamber. Before them a long clear space stretched almost the entire length of the room. Near the centre, a wooden A frame reached from the floor to the ceiling. A young man, clad only in threadbare grey jockeys, hung by his lashed wrists from the apex of the A. His legs were spread, lashed securely with leather strips to either upright of the frame. Large candelabra stood to either side, illuminating the faint weals that ran across his scrawny back.

Neville, trudging in shock, almost walked into the path of the lash. Angela just managed to haul him back before it whistled out of the dark. It struck loudly but harmlessly, most of the force being wasted by the tip as it wrapped around the victims shoulder and struck the wooden uprights, before being whisked away.

The wielder of the whip approached them now. It was Phallia, imposing in a black lace corset cinched incredibly tight over a leather miniskirt that revealed disturbing lengths of angular white legs. She grinned as she coiled the braided whip and slung it across her shoulder.

"You came! I'm so glad!" she murmured, and patted Neville comfortingly on the shoulder. She stooped a little and looked him in the eye. "Welcome to our dungeon. Not many dragons, I'm afraid, but they're here, let me assure you!" and she laughed. Neville shivered a little in response. Phallia glanced past him to her victim. She straightened, approached him and, reaching around his hip, began to squeeze and knead his genitals.

"Has he said anything?" she suddenly asked Angela.

"No."

"Oh well. Put him on the bleachers and leave him there, that's a good girl. Check up on him every hour, and toss him out at three if he hasn't left already."

Angela pulled and Neville followed, staring as Phallia finished her investigation of her victims groin and returned to her position at the far wall of the room. Soon the lash was whistling through

the air once more. Now Angela led him towards a small stand of bleachers which stood roughly opposite the pews of old men. They were literally bleached from the sun, and stained with tomato sauce, and obviously once seated spectators at an oval. Neville gratefully sat on the bottom bench while Angela turned and headed for the entrance to the room.

The music changed, from German oompah to some kind of maudlin pop. A lisping male voice sang something about the strength of strings. Neville watched a beautiful girl approach from his right. She wore a striped corset and long stockings to the tops of her thighs. Her pubic hair had been shaved into a perfect question mark. Her face was obscured behind an elaborate Venetian domino mask, fringed with feathers and lines of sequins. Her hands were outstretched before her, palms down, and she moved slowly - he realised she was blinded, the mask had no eye holes.

Closer, and he could see past her shoulder to the man who urged her on. He wore a severe evening suit, with cummerbund, starched white shirt, and a diadem at the throat. His hair was brilliantined and smoothed back from a stern craggy brow, and fastened with something black and glittering at the nape. He guided his charge with white cotton-gloved hands on either hip.

They passed directly before Neville, and before he realised what he had done the girl tripped and stumbled over his outstretched leg. Her master grimaced and held her upright with great effort, before casting a smouldering glance of accusatory wrath at Neville.

"I- I'm sorry!" Neville begged, and his expression softened slightly. Neville retracted his outstretched legs, and the couple passed him, heading for a nearby rack. The gentleman began to strap his charge to the ornate brass rails of this device with soft cotton bandages.

Nearby, stern women were performing a formal ritual involving candles. They wore open leather vests and short cutoff trousers, and their skin was tanned and weather beaten. Many had large gold rings through pierced nipples. Their hair was sun-bleached and tied back with cords. With great ceremony they passed the candles back and forth across each others limbs and dripped rivulets of wax to form a mesh of congealed white. Moving slowly and gracefully to avoid shattering their creations.

Further, a thickset young man wearing nylon football shorts and team shirt leaned against a folding massage table. He wore football shoes, studs removed. Now he stood, wandered aimlessly past the women with the candles, who frowned at him. A girl in a shredded wedding gown, hair half shaved from her scalp, shook her head when he propositioned her. He circled around and approached Neville, sat next to him on the bleachers.

"Don't know why I bother. You don't look like you're having much luck either?" Neville didn't answer.

"No, didn't think so. I'm a professional, you see. I do sports massage. Footballers and cricket players. Ligaments, interstitials, cramps. Good money in it, but I get so sick and tired of only hairy men lying on my table!" He chuckled and nudged Neville familiarly. "So, I came here, but no takers! Except the guys, and that's not what I want. I'm not a sicko, not like this mob, I just like giving women massages." he nudged Neville again. "Oh well, I might go soon." He stood and wandered off, scanning the crowd for potential customers.

The music was now pounding, fuzzy, electronic rock. A woman with an angry voice sang about someone who wouldn't be happy till they killed each other. Neville spied Angela. She stopped and

spoke to a tall man in a harness covered in chrome rings and buckles, who had just lit a cigarette. He shrugged, and stubbed out his smoke in the extended palm of the pale youth he had just finished lashing to a wooden chair. Angela disappeared through a door further down the room.

A small crowd gathered around a steel surgical table, lit with actinic intensity by a hissing carbide lamp suspended above. A masked surgeon with purple gloved hands slowly embroidered a broken heart in red linen thread on the back of his willing patient. The spectators followed the thread as it was drawn through the flesh with utmost intensity, as though observing a chess game between grand masters.

The masseur returned and flopped hopelessly down on the benches. "Got any cards mate? Nothing else to do."

Cards. That was something he understood. Silently, Neville drew an enamelled tin from his backpack. It looked like a small biscuit tin, except the painted label depicted a wizard casting a spell rather than a basket of puppies.

"You know how to play Spellcaster?" he asked the masseur, who shook his head. Neville removed a deck of cards from the tin and started cutting it.

"It's not hard. There are two decks, which you need to keep separate. Each card in this deck is a spell. First I'll deal us each some spells, then I'll start cutting the Adventure deck to work out a scenario." The masseur looked puzzled. "It's like a computer game, only with cards." Neville explained.

"Oh, I dunno. I play solitaire sometimes on the computer at the gym but I don't-"

"Don't worry, I'll explain everything." Soon Neville had a game set up to his liking. The melee was standard: orcs and tunnels, and he was generous with the spells. He showed the masseur, whose name was Terry, how to work out which spells were appropriate to the scenario, and explained some finer points of strategy. With a little help and advice they made it through the first and second rounds of an interesting mini-campaign, and started on a third. Of course, Neville won each hand, but that was expected. He always enjoyed playing novices at games he knew intimately.

During the fourth round a couple of Nazis wandered past and joined them. Neville dealt them in and soon the party was deep in combat against an owl-bear. The Nazis were good players. Some of them were even familiar with the game. Neville had to strain his skills to beat them, but he won. Despite their leather watch caps and high-collared military jackets they reminded him of his friends in the game club at the scout hall.

They played on, and the night progressed, as it had so many times before. The exquisitely dressed gentleman and his masked slave finished their performance in a flurry of rapid fire slaps of the paddle. A film of perspiration barely moistening his brow, the gentleman sadist untied his love, and poured her a chilled glass of Chablis from a bottle he brought in a crocodile skin case. They chatted urbanely with some of the battle-scarred lesbians, who took turns removing the fragments of wax from each others hair as they talked. The crafters meanwhile tenderly snipped and extracted the cotton from their subjects back, sprinkling her wounds with black pepper, which closed them

scarlessly with its astringent power and didn't even sting.

The music was sadder, more final, now. A lean, clear girl's voice sang about watching the stars go out. Phallia tired of wielding her lash; the strokes were starting to go astray. She relented and abandoned the young man who hung in his traces like a tired horse. There was a sense of accomplishment, a sense that they had worked together and reached a destination. Where they had arrived was a matter for conjecture, but arrive they had, at somewhere different yet familiar.

But this satisfaction was tainted. There was something amiss. Angela looked around the room, her clear blue eyes lingering on each tableau and scene of suffering, familiar and reassuring to her. It was the rowdy sound of man's voices. It was the lads playing cards, dealing spells on the bleachers. She approached, closely followed by Phallia, who had sensed it too. They stood side by side, watching the game. Neville dealt another hand, expertly keeping track of the rules as he went.

"That's a psionic spell, I can tell by the colour, you should save that, the monster isn't intelligent. Okay, that's four, five, four, and you lost the last melee so you get nothing, you're unconscious under a sleep spell. Sorry, it's the rules." He looked up and was pinned by the forceful gaze of Phallia.

"Interesting game." She stepped forward and took a fan of cards from an unresisting Nazi. "Is this your D&D?"

"No... this is Sorcerer cards. It's simpler, easier to learn. I... hope you don't mind?"

"Mind? I don't mind. Do you mind?" She gestured around the room. Neville took in the chains, the straps, the racks and benches and all the dramatic panoply of pain.

"Well, I don't really... that is, it isn't... I didn't know."

"So now you DO know, do you mind?" she insisted.

Neville hesitated. He hated critical moments.

"No."

"So NEXT time you come, what pleasure would you like to try? What new experience can we offer you? This is a house of pain, not a social circle. It's not a men's club full of Italian papas in hats, playing baccarat." Neville cringed beneath her stormy glare.

"Well, I guess I won't be coming back..." he mumbled at the floor. Phallia turned and stomped off, her boots clacking loudly on the unsealed timber floor. Silently he gathered the cards from the sheepish Nazis and sorted them into his tin.

The Nazis, grumbling, stood and prepared to leave. There was a rustle at his side and Angela sat down on the bench, picking up a card from the floor. It was a spell, depicting a harpy wreathed in lightning bolts hovering above a man in armour. Plus two when used on a paladin, Neville remembered. A thin line of drool ran down her receding chin from the cleft in her lip. She silently handed him the card.

"If I came back, next week, would they let me in?" he asked.

"Yes. If you pay." she lisped quietly.

"Will they whip me and tie me up?"

"If you let them. If you want it."

"Does it hurt?"

Angela stood and drifted away, as though his question had embarrassed her.

Neville shoved the painted tin of cards deep in his crowded backpack and stood, wincing and hissing. Like a golem from his own game, he began slowly shuffling towards the door.

In the antechamber Frazanne lounged behind her desk. She watched him leave with a mou of disapproval. Good riddance, she thought. What a creep. She returned to counting the nights take as the regulars filed out past her. Angela drifted through the antechamber, wearing overalls now, with a bucket of antiseptic and sponges for wiping down the gear. Good girl, thought Frazanne. She never had to be asked.

Neville expected a fuss when he arrived home, but in this he was pleasantly disappointed. Usually when arriving home from a night out he headed straight for the kitchen, but tonight he had no choice. Without his keys he had to break in, by jumping the French doors around the rear balcony out of their tracks. Remembering previous times when he had dropped a cake tin or a glass and summoned the harridan for a heated argument, he decided to creep up the stairs and head straight for his room. Besides, he remembered, there was an unopened packet of Christmas toffees hidden in his desk.

Lying in his grubby bed, surrounded by sticky wrappers, cheeks packed with sickly sweetness, he reflected on the night. It had a dreamlike texture, the memories felt strangely foreign. Is this what other people feel like, he thought?

Chapter 4 – Neville Carries On

On Monday Neville's immediate manager Peterson found himself in the position of having to give Neville a performance review. It wasn't strictly necessary; the quality of his work only had to be good enough to avoid complaints finding their way to the members of the board, and his performance was either that good, or the customers were too lazy and static to bother complaining. However, the management software the company used insisted, and it had already sent him 3 emails with successively more demanding reminders that it was time to upload Neville's review, so it could forward the document to the board members for them to ignore as usual.

Consequently, he had scheduled a meeting in the boardroom on the third floor. The room had just been refurbished, with plasma screens set into the walls and sleek black conference phones with individual microphones and speakers at each place. At the time allotted by the resource management software, Peterson ushered Neville in, and he immediately wandered towards the control centre, seemingly attracted by the buttons and dials.

"Turn the lights up a bit." Peterson said. Neville furrowed his brow and studied the panel. He stabbed wildly, then cursed as the lights faded out and the big screen glowed blue. "This thing is badly designed." he muttered, staring at the keys, his eyes unfocused and steamy behind their smudged lenses. Peterson gently pushed him aside and fixed the lights. They sat down on opposite sides of the head of the table, Neville hissing and blowing like a steam train entering the shed after a long run, gingerly lowering his capacious backside towards the seat as though he was prepared to abort this manoeuvre at the slightest sign of failure in any of his various malfunctioning parts.

Finally he was down, but there was no relief. His hands danced strangely in the air, in a manner that Peterson always found immensely disconcerting. They seemed to display evidence of independent will. Peterson had a theory that Neville could only control one hand at a time, like Doctor Strangelove, only instead of Nazi salutes, the "free" hand would instead seek to bury its index finger in his nose, pick his frayed shirt collar, transfer ink from a leaky pen to his nose, or in some other way undermine any dignity the main mass of Neville possessed. As though reading his mind Neville raised his right hand slowly and seized his left, which was spastically clawing at the air, and seemed to force it to the table top and pin it there, twitching feebly.

"Now, how do you think you are doing in your position?" began Peterson, unfolding his compendium and clicking his Mont Blanc pen. Neville's face assumed a thoughtful expression so grotesquely manufactured it reminded Peterson of a Greek theatre mask. His right hand, obviously released from conscious control, rose into the air like a fish rising from a coral reef and began gently nibbling at his facial warts with thumb and forefinger.

"I would say I was doing extremely well. It's a good job for a technical IT kind of geek like myself, and I'm also a people person who enjoys working with a team... I mean, as well as working alone, like this job, so I like helping the customers. And I'm learning in this environment as well, which means that I'm always improving. Not that I need to." The Greek mask rearranged itself, became Comedy, mouth puled back in a rictus smile, full of blackness.

Peterson grunted and averted his eyes. "Okay, is there anything you would change about this job if you could?"

"Nooooo." Neville's fingers worked at the facial lump, which he had cut while shaving that

morning. A drop of blood ran slowly down to his chin. "I mean, if it could be, you know, a bit... easier?" He nodded slowly. The drop of blood shook but didn't fall. "Yes, if there wasn't so many things to do each day, even someone like me with a lot of technical skills and IT experience finds it a bit tiring sometimes. There's always something new going wrong. I just wish the problems were always the same!" Comedy faded, started to shade into Anger. The hand/fish chewed at his face like a wrass munching coral.

"I would have thought a 'geek' like you would prefer to always have something new and interesting to think about? Surely if the problems were always the same you would get bored?"

"Yes, but..." The line of blood down the side of his chin glistened in the light from the office windows. Peterson wondered, in idle horror, whether he should warn Neville before it stained his shirt. Once more his sympathy for his charge, which always increased during periods of separation, drained away rapidly. He decided against it.

"I might get bored, but it would be easier." Neville tried to control his face again, managed a sickly smile. Peterson didn't respond. The drop grew. "No, you're right, I like the change. Change is good." The blood finally dripped onto his shirt and spread into a small brown patch the shape of Sardinia. Damn it, thought Peterson, I shouldn't care what he thinks. He looked down and began to rapidly tick and scribble on the form.

"You appear to have blood on your shirt." he said in a cold robotic voice. Neville surged in his seat as though he had just been goosed, and began trying to inspect his front. The frantic shaking of his head as he scanned himself threatened to shake the next drop onto Peterson, who stood suddenly and backed towards the exit. "I can't see anything." whined Neville.

"It's above your shirt pocket."

Neville pinched his shirt and pulled the fabric out to where he could see it. His entire frame slumped like a grounded blimp when he realised what he had done. "Oh darn. Mother is going to kill me."

The unreality of the situation suddenly made Peterson dizzy. He paused, pen in hand, staring past Neville's slumping shoulder at the view of the hazy smog-bound city behind him. Neville shook in his seat as his hand struggled in his trouser pocket. It was so jammed with stuff that he found himself trapped like a monkey with his hand in a coconut. He stood, sending his chair crashing back against the windows, and his fist emerged triumphantly clutching a stained and limp handkerchief, which he began scraping across his face. After each pass he inspected the fabric for evidence of fresh blood. Slowly he traced the rivulet up his face towards the wart, which had stopped bleeding. Nondetered, Neville scrubbed clumsily at the source of the river of red, successfully releasing a fresh flood, which he proceeded to mop up with great enjoyment. The handkerchief was getting heavy with moisture, and smelled like copper.

The smell dragged Neville back through time to his childhood. His Mother had been prominent in the Red Cross. She worked at the Wynyard centre as a volunteer nurses assistant, leading the donors to their chairs and making sure the supplies were kept up. Neville loved to visit her when she was staffing the recovery room, where donors were made to sit down, re-hydrate with a bottle of water, and eat a meat pie to replace their lost iron. He would catch the train in after school to grab a handful of pale soggy pies from the bain marie and watch the patrons, hoping to see one of the spectacular fainting fits brought on by the trauma of donating a pint of blood. The whole building

had a blood smell in those days, when the bottles were glass and broke from time to time. Even over the school tuck shop cooking smell of the pies you could sense it. It tickled some ancient lobe in the brain. He always recalled that smell when an adventure game strayed into violent territory and there were characters dying. He liked the idea that, of all his peers, he was the only one with any concept of what a battlefield smelt like.

Not that he ever gave blood himself. The idea of allowing his flesh to be punctured by needles terrified him. Luckily, he had a cast iron excuse. "We're having a blood drive!" Peterson had announced one day while breezing into Neville's cubicle. "I heard your mother was working for the blood bank, surely you can donate?"

"I'm afraid not" announced Neville in a lofty voice. "I have golden staph."

The poor man backed away as though he had announced a bad case of leprosy, and Neville had noticed an immediate frosting up of relations in the lunch room whenever he went there to heat his cup of stew. It wasn't fair, he thought. It wasn't like pus was dripping from open sores on his face, after all. It was just in his blood.

This line of thought brought him back to the here and now; the sopping hanky full of red, the stains on his shirt. The empty chair across the table, the empty room which Peterson had wordlessly evacuated seconds before. Neville froze for long seconds as he wondered what to do, whether he was in trouble. Slowly he shuffled around the table to the control centre. He punched the same sequence of buttons as before. Again the lights dimmed, the screen lit. Muttering curses, he turned and headed for the bright rectangle of the door.

The lift foyer was deserted, apart from the silent audience of front page photos of famous politicians and celebrities from past issues of the newspaper. Neville ran their gauntlet and pushed into the pleasantly scented executive toilets, pressing his handkerchief to his face as though trying to stem a cut artery before he bled out.

The toilets were superior to the programmers floor in many ways. The taps were unsmearred with soapy residue. The mirrors were spotless, throwing back every blemish in stark relief. There was hot water for the sinks. Neville ran a steaming flood into the basin, hunted briefly for a plug, shrugged and dropped his hanky in. The water turned bright pink as the clotted blood dissolved. He splashed the pink water on his face, causing multiple rivulets of reconstituted dried blood to run in crooked lines down the crenelations of his features and drip from his chin. Staring in the mirror, he smiled wistfully at himself. For a second it seemed he had the pronounced veins of a raging superhero. The door swung open behind him, then closed immediately. Nobody entered. He wrung out the wet hanky and drained the sink, wrapping the sopping rag in paper towel and shoving it deep into his pocket, where Mother would find it the next day. Exiting the toilets he surveyed the silent foyer, still devoid of life. Not even the concierge was there to greet visiting businessmen or the occasional nutters who managed to get past security downstairs and who wanted to get their paranoid rants published.

Back at his desk, a piece of paper waited on his keyboard, a boilerplate performance review, filled and complete. Everything satisfactory, he noticed with pleasure, before folding it small and shoving it in his breast pocket. He would show it to Mother tonight, try to stop her complaining before it began.

Neville hated getting paid a salary. Having to budget his spending for a month between pay packets was hard. Much better the old days, working for the rail, when pay came in the form of paper bills in a yellow manila envelope. When they handed you your pay packet, you knew what it was all about, and a weekly budget was much easier to handle. After all, if you spent it all in two days, you only had to borrow enough to make it through to the next week, not the next four.

Every pay-day he logged into his online bank account and refreshed the page every ten minutes waiting for the balance to change. If the company accountant didn't make the deposit before the end of the day he wasn't above calling and demanding in a hooting voice that he hurry up because of an "urgent bill" which needed to be paid.

In reality pay-day was comics day, and he needed to visit the Green Lantern for his regular fix. If there was one benefit of his job, it was proximity to this noble institution. Back in the day he would patiently catch the train to the city to buy his weekly reading matter, whereas now he just had to waddle a short distance up the road.

The Green Lantern had changed a great deal since he first started buying there, but the clientele were all the same. The same faces, aged and wrinkled now but still coming back for more. The same titles, in glossier covers. The ever branching and ramifying storylines, merging and splitting, so not even the publishers were constant, and even the colours of the costumes were different now.

Neville liked the more recent series, like his beloved Gold Digger. Written and drawn by a veteran of the first Gulf War, who concocted the storyline while on patrol in Baghdad, it combined manga graphics with a western sensibility. The storyline was novel. There was an archaeologist, who uncovered a powerful talisman while digging in Egypt, which turned her into a were-cheetah. It turned out later that her entire family had been encoded with special ancient gene lines which meant they were fated to become the defenders of the Earth from ancient gods when they awoke and threatened their former domain with destruction. The main character was also extremely hot, curvy and naked under her fur, and many of the other characters were as well. There were never any furry warthogs.

Once more Neville hung up the phone and refreshed his browser. \$18.25 became 2418.25. Bingo! He smiled and rubbed his hands with glee. It was shopping time.

Outside the building the smokers gathered to fill the air with their foul exhalations. It was one vice which he had never even considered, and it always gave him a feeling of superiority to see the hopeless addicts with their yellow fingers and lined faces. Often he would stop for a coughing fit, which they turned their backs and ignored. It was true that Mother would never have permitted him to even try tobacco - when she even smelled the scent of contamination in his clothes from passing through the cloud outside the office she would grill him for an hour on the dangers of this habit, even while frying him an extra portion of bacon and French toast for his tea.

The trip to the Green Lantern was fraught with danger. To start with, he needed to pass the sex shops, and this always posed the risk that someone might think he had just emerged from one of those darkened doorways that yawned on the footpath. Glancing from the corner of his eye, he always enjoyed seeing the patrons who emerged. They would charge straight out with a sudden twist of the shoulders, to make it seem as though they had just been passing by, clutching their

brown paper parcels under their arms.

Further up the street was another danger zone, the Korean baths. Neville had heard dark rumours of the things that went on inside, only hinted at by the large wooden tub and massage implements, like wooden rakes and spoons, on display in the shop window out front. For a moment he considered the fact that he now possessed a secret even darker than those sordid rumours, but it all seemed so unreal...

The Green Lantern. In the window, resin models of superheroes and villains, collectible vinyl figurines, robots and cars. A new Alien bust caught his eye. It was actually drooling slime! Its horrible toothy tongue was extended, and clear mucus constantly drooled forth, dripping in strings down to the base where it ran in cleverly shaped crevices to some kind of pump and back to the mouth.

Inside he nodded at the familiar faces behind the counter. They nodded back, warily. Neville was a known talker. His money was always good and he bought large, but nobody wanted to get caught in a geek-out session with him. Sometimes the regular staff would tell some casual employed backpacker what an interesting dude he was, just so they would approach him and get stuck discussing the latest plot twists in *Gold Digger* or perhaps the history of Perry Rochdale or how Arthur C Clarke was a fag.

Today there were two new issues of *Gold Digger*, one of *Universal Anger*, and a special foil-covered Superman he decided to buy. Not that he collected Supe anymore, but he did like to keep track of the latest storylines. In his experience, the specials were enough to catch up on the latest twists in the long and tortured story of the Man of Steel, especially since the Year Zero arc came to an end with those stupid Five Super-beings all dying and being recycled. And as he was wont to tell Mother when she complained once again on the money he wasted on "funny books", "It's an investment!"

Browsing the racks, he came across a new *Plastic Man* compilation, which he seized without hesitation. It was truly a golden age of reissues. Although, he didn't like reading the CD ROM versions off a computer screen, preferring to print them out on the colour printer in the office when the programmers were all occupied with a farewell party for one of their own. Compilation reissues also meant he could read his older comics without removing the precious pulpy paper from their glassine envelopes, exposing them to fresh oxygen and activating the acid content.

A copy of *White Dwarf*, a *Dark Night Returns* soft-cover, and the first issue of a new *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* comic rounded out his purchases. He smiled at the thought of TMNT coming back. He loved to tell anyone who stood still long enough that the character April, the girl reporter who knew the turtles in the original comic, had been black. She was black in the comic, and then in the animated series, movie and colour comic she was not just white but blonde! Incredible! He looked forward to seeing what they did with her in this rerun. Either way, she would serve as an opening for a geek-out.

In fact, he couldn't wait. Placing his comics on the counter, he sorted the TMNT episode 1 to the top and started flicking through. The owner of the Green Lantern, a haggard 50ish nerd in wire rimmed glasses who stayed thin through a severe diet mainly to avoid looking even the slightest bit like *Comic Book Guy*, finished his transaction with the customer before Neville, a businessman in impeccable suit and tie who was filling out a collection of vintage comics which he had once possessed in his youth and which had been incinerated by his angry father when he discovered his

son was gay and decided the tightly clad super heroes were to blame.

"Look at this." began Neville as the businessman left. He began to turn his pile of comics around to show the proprietor a full page panel of the new April.

"Yes, I know, blonde again." sighed the manager.

"Er, yes, that's what I was about to say. In the original-"

"-comic she was black, yes I know. Is this your order?"

"Yes." Neville sighed. He noticed a poster behind the counter, Wolverine in a strangely different costume, posing with his claws extended. "Is that his new costume?" he asked, nodding at the image. The shopkeeper frowned at him. "That's Faust." he growled.

"No it's not!" Neville was offended - did the man take him for a fool? He was just about to launch into a defence when he felt a sharp jab in his side.

"Hello young fella! Did you get your cock sucked yet?"

"Sandy!" The shopkeeper turned his ire from Neville to the familiar old man now standing besides Neville. With sinking heart he recognised the codger from the Tartarus club, the friendly naked pervert. He smiled and backed away to avoid further indignity. Not that he was naked now - he wore a slightly-too-large brown tweed suit with knitted tie, heavily creased shirt with a thick weave like bed linen, and a pork pie hat.

"The one and only" the wizened creature piped in his high-pitched voice. "Large as life and twice as delicious. I just wanted to have a chat with the young man here, who was at the Tartarus club just a few nights ago."

"Really?" enquired the shopkeeper, smiling lopsided at the blushing Neville. The blush turned his regular hypertension-red hue to a dark cordovan brown like a ripe aubergine. "Well I never!"

"Yes, he had a great time, as did we all."

Neville grabbed his purchases from the counter and backed away.

"Although I reckon you spent entirely too much time playing cards with the other patrons. There are better ways to spend your time at the club than playing a card game young man!"

The shopkeeper guffawed loudly as Neville backed away. This was the worst. He turned and ran.

He was so shaken by encountering Sandy in the comic shop he forgot to buy lunch. Not that he needed to, as Mothers "high intake" meant he had more than enough food. Already he had consumed a banana, which he absentmindedly peeled and shoved deep into his face. It was gone in two enormous bites, which he smacked and mumbled before gulping them down his throat with some difficulty.

At around 9.30, a plastic tub of fruit, ripping the foil top off and tilting his head far back, leaning back in his chair to glug the chunks of soft fruit down like a desiccated desert explorer gulping from a canteen. At 10.30, a carrot. A large carrot, of course, which he bit into giant chunks and crunched like a horse, loudly to annoy the programmers. At 11.30, a baked fruit bar, the kind with a jammy filling.

When it wasn't meatloaf or sausage sandwiches, Mother liked to give him a hot lunch. A Tupperware cup full of strongly-flavoured stew, say, full of mince and mushrooms and half tomatoes. This he would heat up in the lunchroom, slumped over the microwave, picking his nose and waiting for the bell to ring. Back at his desk he would spoon the savoury slop into his mouth while staring blankly at the monitor, his eyes misty, shallow pools of despair and resignation, the eyes of a prisoner tortured beyond the breaking point in some hellish prison camp, wincing slightly with each spoonful as though it was a stroke of a cane.

This diet was supposed to keep his metabolism running at a high enough level to consume calories and discourage weight gain, but Neville had a little secret. Often, before his stew, he would go out for a little walk. "Just going out for a little walk" he would tell the disinterested programmers as he trudged past their desks on his way to the lift.

The office was situated in the middle of a smorgasbord of food courts and takeaways. There were delis and milk bars selling various yeeros and wraps and other, more exotic things. Thai places full of curries of different colours, Vietnamese soups and rolls full of noodles and mint and prawns. Sushi, sashimi, and tempura chicken. Neville sneered at them all. Wog food, chink food. Smelly stinky garbage.

In between these more recent invasions of the old city were his favourites, the old milk bars and lunch counters, with their bain maries full of pies, sausage rolls, grilled bangers, fried eggs and bacon seeping fat into slices of bread, steak sarnies, and chips, the wonderful chips, cooked in brown oil and sprinkled with chicken stock powder mixed with salt. This was his delight. He usually selected a pie or roll with a cup of chips, and then waddled to the nearby park to consume them. This he did with secret delight, but remorse even as he started the clandestine feast. Not that he could help himself. Even those times when others from the office wandered past and saw him, grinning at his guilty frown when he realised he had been caught out, he would swear, never again, but would always return.

He loved winter in the city, when the salad bars of summer closed down and the speciality pie shops opened in their place, full of bacon and mushroom pies, steak and kidney, egg and liver.

This diet, three quarters vegetable roughage and one quarter English stodge, had it's effect. Sometimes he thought the real purpose of his erstwhile metabolism boosting diet was to fill his bowels with so much fibre he shat the food out before he had time to digest it.

It had already caused an employee to leave the company. Neville had originally been hired to assist his predecessor, a young pole called Jandek who was working his way through a computer science course by doing tech support. Their phones were set up so the first call went to Jandek and anyone who called while his phone was engaged went to Neville.

Often, while programming, the Pole would take his phone off the hook and allow the first call to go to Neville, so he could concentrate on a gnarly problem. Neville would experience a strong urge to

visit the mens room, and would lurch to his feet and noisily puff away. Seeing this, the young Pole would of course return his phone to service to take any calls that came in during his absence. Neville would return, creeping stealthily in marked contrast to his noisy departure. His hand, dry as dust and obviously unwashed, would suddenly appear reaching over Jandeks shoulder to lift his phone receiver off the hook, to divert calls back to Neville. Like water torture, the cumulative effect of this charade occurring dozens of times a day was terrible on his nerves, and disinfect the phone as he might, the strong bodily smell that Neville seemed to leave on everything he touched seemed to reek from the handset next time he answered. It was too much. He left, and found himself deliriously happy working for a company that maintained backup servers for Internet providers.

Peterson had learned from the experience and made sure Neville remained relatively isolated in his cubicle, although he was plainly visible to the other staff whose desks were near his door. They watched as Neville, having just finished his cup of stew, and regretting not finding a pie or sausage roll to make it a decent feast, was dealing with a string of calls which came one after the other. There had been a blackout in Adelaide, half the city centre was without power for almost an hour. Customers with Tab-Vend machines were having trouble with getting them rebooted if their systems had become corrupt by the sudden shut down.

The programmers watched as he began to perform the manoeuvre they called The Twist. Through the door of his cubicle they watched as he raised his arm high in the air, with his hand in a relaxed semi-closed position, as though grasping an orange, then rapidly rotated his hand back and forward at the wrist, as though he was a robot with a faulty actuator, for minutes at a time.

"I half expect his hand to start revolving all the way around, faster and faster, then fly off trailing wires and cables across the room in a shower of sparks." Geoffrey whispered to his desk mate, a young Indian in a suit who was redesigning their H&R interface.

"I have been watching." the Indian designer whispered back. "At first I thought this was a nervous tic, because he started doing it when he particularly busy. But it seems to be more from the strain of holding a phone handset to his ear for more than a few minutes at a time."

"I think he has poor circulation, but as usual I'm scared to ask, he would doubtless unleash a torrent of unasked detail about some horrible congenital or self-inflicted sickness."

"His blood is probably too thick and sludgy to flow through his extremities without being forced at high pressure!"

"Of course! That would explain his bloody shaving wounds, have you noticed? They're probably tiny nicks, but the blood pressure necessary to force his unwholesome ichor up through his neck is so great they jet blood like arterial punctures!"

"Oh god. Those lumps were once shaving cuts, and they grew and grew and grew..."

"Why doesn't someone get him a headset?"

"He had one, but he couldn't hear anything. He kept shouting and telling customers he couldn't hear the, so now he just uses the handset."

Neville switched hands, and his free hand burrowed into a pocket, emerging holding a key ring. He selected a stubby locker key, inserted it into his ear, and began carefully scraping his auditory canal,

regularly inspecting the metal tine for any debris it might have accumulated.

"It makes me sick." whispered the Indian. "Why do we have to put up with this? Why doesn't anyone have a word with him?"

"Peterson did, several times. It never works. He stops, for awhile, but he makes sure everyone knows it's a terrible strain, like it's almost impossible, and pretty soon he just starts doing it again. I guess some habits are just too hard to break."

"I wonder what goes on in that mind? Do you ever wonder what he's thinking?"

"Yes, but it started to make me sick so I stopped. His inner dialog is either a screaming hurricane of self loathing, or silence, and I don't know which is more frightening."

The party of adventurers were deep underground. The walls dripped sickly green slime, which was corrosive enough to damage their armour, especially anything made with leather. Dungbreath the Wicked had almost been completely divested of his scale mail when he had absent mindedly leant against the wall while contemplating which direction they should take through the maze. Occasionally another plate would drop to the ground with a chink like a bad coin.

"That better not get noticed!" exclaimed Borgul, their dwarven archer. He flicked the ragged decaying hem of Dungbreath's mail shirt with his bow. "I say take it off or you'll wake the next monster before we get near him."

"But I still get 1 hit point advantage, for attacks to my upper body!" Replied Dungbreath.

Mouse, the thief, scowled and folded his hands. "One hit point isn't enough to risk it. You should strip off the remaining mail and leave it here."

Dungbreath complied, reluctantly. The party decided to move north, where an ornate arch suggested there might be treasure of some kind.

Beyond the arch, the corridor ran due north for 10 squares, before turning right. They noticed that the walls were uncommonly clean, at least to a height of about eight feet. There were coins in each square, small value coppers and silvers which seemed to have been dropped randomly.

Ten squares past the turn, they heard a scraping sound.

"It's a bloody gelatinous cube!" Exclaimed Plasmodium, the wizard, in a tone of disgust.

"Really?" asked Mouse sarcastically. "I mean, I'm sure there are lots of monsters which can clean the walls of a tunnel up to a straight line exactly eight feet off the floor. A lich armed with squeegees for example. Perhaps it will ask us for change to do our windcreens."

"Personally I've never been in a dungeon with such a poor monster-to-loot ration as this one." complained Dungbreath. "We'll probably spend days fighting this cube only to discover the 'yellow disks' visible in it's flesh are nothing but bus tokens or something! Really, it's getting on my nerves."

The scraping suddenly stopped, only to be replaced by a hissing sound.

"Gas spores." opined Mouse. "It was scraping the ceiling."

"Well, are we going to check it out or what?"

"Lets send Dildo in" drawled Dungbreath, looking at their unfortunately named barbarian swordsman.

"No way! Why not get Plas to use a spell or something, astral walk or far seeing or something? I don't want to get spored again."

"You've got a sword, you can cut the spore and run away. You only got spored last time because you forgot to run away."

"No, you cast a spell."

"Alright, alright, I'll waste a perfectly good farsight spell just because you're a big coward!" Plasmodium shrugged off his knapsack and fossicked through the bundle of scrolls he carried. He drew out a tightly rolled parchment and unfurled it. The letters of runic script blazed with eldrich light as he read the spell, before fading to nothing in the usual way which prevented the spell being used again. Finished, he dropped the scroll and looked up, eyes white with power.

"You see a large open hall, 15 squares across, 25 long. It is lined with valuable tapestries and regalia. There are 5 long crumbling wooden tables, with benches. The tables are covered in pewter plates and goblets. There are exits east, south and north"

"There is a big cat with tufted ears curled up on a pile of gold coins in the north-east corner of the room. There are also three kittens dragging some bones back and forth, making the scraping sound."

"A lynx. I hate lynxes. Does it have any weapons?" asked Dungbreath.

"No, but it's eyes show that it is very intelligent."

"It's a mage or something. Probably loaded with spells. Fight to the death to protect the cubs. I reckon we should just warn it and walk through, if it lets us."

The disparate adventurers discussed their options and decided to try and get past the lynx without fighting it. They had four torches and several bundles in reserve - if it tried to attack them they reasoned they could ward it off with fire, despite it's intelligence, and go on their way. They would leave the room by the south exit.

"What's the worst that could happen?" reasoned Dildo. "It scratches us or something? A female with cubs would fight to the death to defend them, but it's next priority is to look after the young, so it won't follow us as long as we don't present a threat."

The party entered the room cautiously, brandishing their torches before them. The lynx snarled and glared at them with yellow eyes. They hugged the west wall until they reached the corner, and then edged along the south wall to the exit.

Neville rolled his dice.

"Too bad - the lynx attacks."

"No way!" exclaimed Plastic Man, unusually upset at this turn of events. His grubby face darkened like a storm cloud as he half stood from his chair to scowl at Neville over the map shield he slumped behind. "What reason? You have to justify it."

"No I don't. The monster has a one-dee-twenty chance of attacking you each round, and it just happened."

"But it hasn't taken us more than a round to make it through the room." said Gerrard. "Why didn't it attack us when we entered?"

"It just didn't." Neville smirked. "It's a magical attack too. A freeze spell. The lynx is a level 18 wizard. You all take one-dee-six damage."

"Fuck me dead, that is so aggravating!" raged Gerrard. "We might as well be back in the desert!" Then, "Oh no, my armour! I'm down to six points without my mail. Roll me first!"

"Okay." Neville rolled the cubic dee-six dice and his eyes narrowed with glee. "You're a gonner, I'm afraid. Dungbreath freezes solid."

"Bullshit, let me see!"

"No!" Neville's flabby arms moved with surprising speed as he grabbed the dice shield and slammed it down across the maps and manuals and dice before him. He glared at Gerrard guiltily, and his lips trembled and worked in stress. "Not only are you frozen, but your stuff is frozen too. The others won't even be able to salvage your gear. You're out until Plasmodium finds a resurrection spell." His eyes smiled savagely like creases in kneaded dough.

"Shit! Shit shit shit! You are a total dork, you know that. A good dungeon master keeps the game going. This is bullshit."

"He's right." said Plasticman, rising from the table and stretching his arms. "I know you think you're a shit hot DM but you like to kill the players too much. If there's one thing about table-top play that makes it worthwhile it's the quality of the AI behind the game, and your AI isn't very I."

"So? I'm evil. Eeeevil! Hee hee hee." Neville cackled in melodramatic glee.

Plastic Man paused in disgust, then stooped and picked up his sports bag. Zipped it open on the chair, swept his papers and books in, zipped it shut.

"I really, really don't think this game is going anywhere. What do you all think?" and his eyes begged the others for support.

The frantic feet of the scouts thundered from one side of the ceiling to the other in their everlasting game of Rover Cross Over, punctuated by occasional blasts of a whistle when Akela wanted to freeze them and check some fallen soldier for injury. Nambo looked down, as usual, unwilling to

commit His freckled bumpkin face frozen, immobile. Gerrard nodded over and over again. He obviously agreed, but then he would. Junior was away, nobody had heard from him.

Finally Gerrard stood. "Either someone else takes over or I'm leaving too. Nambo's my pick for DM. I reckon he should take over straight away."

Neville trembled in his seat and the sweet stink of his fear sweat filled the air, but his face twisted with triumphant cunning. "Nambo doesn't have the manuals! Last time he DMed he borrowed mine."

"So? I'll buy him what he needs. I'll buy the whole party what we all need. We've been dealing with your shit for long enough anyway, as a proper club it's about time we had communal equipment."

"Junior will just steal it. That's what happened last time." said Daniel.

"Junior isn't here, and I don't think he should be. Bit funny, hanging out with a kid like that anyway."

"Oh, well, whatever." declared Neville breezily, to hide the fact that his world was crashing down. Their club had lasted for close to a year, a record, and he couldn't imagine life without it. It was a disaster.

In his confusion, his perpetual foggy delirium he spent his life hiding within, he decided to do something. He decided to try bluffing. Groaning and wheezing, catching repeatedly like a badly oiled crane, he rose to his feet and contemplated the fallen dice shield before him sadly as though it was the wall of a ruined castle.

"I think. I think that... I reckon I should leave."

Silence.

"Leave." he repeated, as though they hadn't heard him. "Go. You don't want me, and you don't appreciate me. Why should I stay, when there are much better clubs who would welcome me with open arms?"

Nambo smirked. "Where? Last thing I heard, you'd pissed off nearly everyone else in the whole Sydney gaming scene. Except maybe the Christians!" It was a joke: there was a Christian D&D club at UNSW, but they were notorious. Every character had to be a lawful good cleric. They argued endlessly whether dragons were actually demons.

"No. The Tartarus club!"

"Oh." Gerrard smirked. "You mentioned them."

"Yes, I did. I checked them out last Thursday. Very cool, very cool indeed. They'd love me to come back."

"Well, shit!" Daniel had had enough. Mild mannered Daniel pushed his chair back, picked up his meagre collection of dog-eared manuals, handed his campaign map to Gerrard, turned and strode across the room to the mildewed whitewashed brick walls of their dungeon-like room. He lifted the

lid of the battered old paper recycling bin under the stairs and dropped his gaming materials in with heartbreaking nonchalance, then strode up the stairs two by two. They heard the noisy game above their heads pause and wait for his long adult strides to cross the wooden floor, before resuming.

"That's torn it." grumbled Nambo. "Perhaps we can all join this Tartarus club. Not much use continuing the game with only three in the party."

"No, they only want me, not you" blurted Neville.

Plasticman shouldered his bag. Gerrard crumpled the campaign map into a ball and drop-kicked it towards the bin. Nambo sat frozen, and Neville leant far sideways to try and catch his eye.

"I could stay, though. There's no need for this, really. I could just re-roll the turn."

"Now that's the first time I've ever heard you say anything like that, and at this point, I don't care." Nambo stood as well, picked up his carefully indexed folder of papers. He strode towards the stairs, then paused, and snatched up the balled map. He left without looking back.

"You're a real loser, Neville." announced Gerrard over his shoulder as he and Plastic Man headed for the stairs. "I honestly don't know why we put up with your shit so long."

"Have fun with the bondage freaks." Plastic Man muttered under his breath, and they were gone. Sitting frozen, Neville heard them clomp towards the door to the scout hall. The scouts or cubs or whatever they were had stopped running, now they were probably tying knots or boiling billies, he thought. He could hear the voice of Akela, sternly ordering them to turn around and stop staring.

I wonder if I can get back the money from the rent, he thought. I wonder why everyone always hates me? Why do they treat me like this? Is it because I'm smarter than them? They don't even pity me, for my truss, for my leg, for my sleep apnea and my weight. When I tell people about these things, they should feel sorry for me. They should realise how much better they have it, and how much luckier than me they are. They should be kinder. I tell them, and they ignore me. They behave as though I was just the same as them.

He thought about the Tartarus club. Maybe he would go back. It was dirty, but they didn't throw him out. They were doing sex things. Mother wouldn't like it! He tried to imagine what Mother would do if she ever found out where he had been. She would probably die! Actually, she would probably pretend to die, and then have another breakdown like the one she had when he injured his leg and had to stop working. Every time she came to see him in hospital she had had a screaming fit when she saw him in his bed, leg raised in the traction frame, and she rolled and stumbled around the room babbling and crashing into the other patients beds. It happened so often there was a nurse delegated to follow her and immobilise her as soon as the display began. Then she would curse them and accuse them of torturing her son, and once she had tried to drag him free of the frame and nearly busted all his stitches when she wrenched at the bandages around his thigh.

Chapter 5 – The Return of Neville

The idea of deliberately visiting the Tartarus club leant an unexpected frisson of excitement to Neville's day, something he hadn't experienced in years, something he was almost unable to cope with. His nervous ticks grew worse, became a disgusting blossoming of vileness, and everyone in the office suffered.

In between calls he sat at his desk, staring fixedly at a page of his favourite web forum, concerning the minutiae of the Warhammer 40K universe, where vast armies of hybrid cyborgs and sentient ships bristling with cannon powerful enough to fire a shell across the galaxy, fought for supreme domination. Usually he would also be pecking away in Wordpad, painstakingly composing a reply to someone else's post, correcting a minor mistake in their understanding of the capabilities of a sentient tank or a sub-light missile, but today he couldn't focus.

Every minute his hand rose to his face with the deliberation of a hydraulic actuator, smoothly inserting his index finger into one nostril, where it would be twisted slowly back and forward. After a minimum of three twists it would be withdrawn with a peculiar pinching motion, as though he was trying to extract a thread or hair or something tensile from his nostril. His eyes would flicker from the screen down to examine his fingers for any sign of debris, before returning, and his face would contort in a strange sneering motion as he curled his upper lip and wobbled his jaw, reminiscent of the late Charlie Chaplin bristling his moustache in a silent one-reel comedy.

The ritual was only half over. In the second act, the hand would smoothly glide down to his pants pocket where it would extract his handkerchief, a limp dead scrap of well-worn linen with frayed seams. Over and over this would be twisted into a disgustingly sharp spike, then driven back into the offending nostril and twisted at least three times. Withdrawn, inspected, the face would again contort as the hand returned the well-used cloth to the pocket.

Stressed, he repeated this cycle around once every five minutes. Each motion in the performance was so worn in and habitualised it was quite hypnotic to watch, and the programmers nudged each other and circulated emails where they calculated the number of times he had picked his nose since morning, based on the frequency.

Suddenly, the phone rang! Neville convulsed as though electrocuted, lunging towards the phone in a desperate attempt to answer as soon as possible. It was completely unnecessary, as nobody bothered to monitor his performance in any way, but he liked to pretend he was under pressure to answer rapidly, and it also gave him the opportunity to fish for sympathy from the customer.

Especially when he had a coughing fit, as he did nearly every time he answered the phone. Before he even got to recite his special greeting, he would suddenly buck and heave in his chair as though being suffocated. Frantically he would attempt to stab the mute button, while clawing at his pocket for his limp and well-used handkerchief.

Once found, the snot-rag would be flipped into a folded pad, and he would either hawk the clot of sputum into it with a vast and terrible wrenching sound, or if he had already coughed it into his own mouth, he would purse his lips and deliberately expectorate the mucus into a fold. Then he would pause and examine the effluvium closely. Once satisfied that it was the right colour and texture he would carefully fold and put it away, then finally speak.

"Welcome to the Tab-vend support help-desk emergency line. My name is Neville. How may I help you? What? I beg your pardon?" He never left time for a customer to explain themselves. "Oh, I was just choking to death. It happens sometimes." He loved to interject terribly forced geek jokes when on the line with a customer, who was usually an old geezer who had poured his meagre life savings into a Tabvend machine as a last ditch effort to avoid retiring and having to sell off his beloved possessions because their value as assets prevented him from receiving the government pension. "Good thing I have a resurrection spell. A resurrection spell. You know. Oh, I guess not. It's from a game I like to play. It's called Dungeons and Dragons. Sorry, I can barely hear you." Since most customers called from the site of their problem, on cheap mobile phones, which they hated and barely knew how to use, it was often very difficult to understand them. Neville loved to make them repeat their words over and over until he could no longer claim not to understand them. "I'm sorry, what did you say?" he would repeated, with escalating tones of incredulity and frustration, as they struggled with the hated technology and fished for words to explain what had happened.

Neville had several software tools for diagnosing problems with user accounts. He could tell whose machine had connected, and when, and what they had sent and received. He could spot several common problems instantly he ran their report, but he hated these systems and did everything he could to avoid using them. His manager constantly reminded him to save time by proactively running a report before the customer had even had time to begin explaining what they thought was wrong, but this offended Neville's sense of persecution. He far preferred to punish them for any mistakes in their terminology or jargon by talking them through long and risky procedures to disassemble and reconnect their machines, before even checking to see if they were connecting and were uploading and their problem was merely a panic attack because they couldn't read their own screens properly.

The call would often end when a frustrated customer hung up with a curse and called their son or nephew to come and look at the machine. Neville's hand would return to his pants pocket, withdraw the limp and noxious handkerchief, fold and flip it into a pad, and drag it across his eyes in a wiping motion reminiscent of a fly grooming itself, slowed down to normal human speed.

It was 9PM, and Neville had not been home. His mobile phone nestled in a pocket of his overstuffed backpack like the weight of guilt itself, switched off and not taking calls. He shuddered to think what he would find on the message bank when he finally switched it back on. Either it would be full of alternately begging and pleading messages from Mother, with backup from Sis playing the part of a long-suffering good child, or it would be nothing, which was almost worse.

On shuffling out of the building, debating in his head whether to return home and then come back to the city, thinking about the drama last time he went out late at night alone, he decided to look for some cheap food. In the afternoon, as the day shift leaves the cities and the sandwich bars and salad counters and delis close, they try and shift the remaining stock. They put up discrete signs, small tables stacked with plastic boxes of noodles or pasta, wrapped sandwiches, lettuce turning yellow, ham limp and pale, and they flog what they can to the workers heading home, dreading the chore of cooking their lonely dinners.

Luckily for Neville a pie shop, freshly opened on the site of a failed fruit juice bar, had a stack of cold meat pies for sale, half price. He bought three before the charity van arrived to scoop the rest, and consumed them in peace in a nearby food court, watching the stream of commuters heading for

the subway station.

Full of cold grease and pastry, he shuffled aimlessly up George street. The street was full of young kids, hard faced urchins, running between the game parlours, hanging around the popular machines in big crowds, silently watching, rarely playing, shoving each other and daring the police who cruised through the crowd in threes and fours to try and question them. He felt a hazy unfocused scorn for these people, for anyone who played computer games really. Whenever he heard a conversation about a game at work he would butt in with his opinion that they were pale ghosts next to the imagination-boosting, intellect-strengthening power of table-top role-playing games. The kids eyed him and nudged each other. They sauntered past and flicked their heads as though spitting, and celebrated when his footsteps stuttered and he turned away.

Reaching the crest of George street, he found himself outside the cinemas. He stood there for several minutes, staring at the marquee, trying to decide whether to see a movie and, if so, which one? There were several animated children's movies that looked cute, he thought. Perhaps he could claim to Mother that he had just decided to see a film?

Pondering this question, he drifted into Micky Ds and lined up at the counter. Around him raced dozens of sugared-up children, eyes hard and cold in their smooth tanned faces, hair cut in the traditional western suburb style, a short fuzzy crop with a thin tightly-braided rat tail at the back. Their parents, as fat and ungainly as he was, glared at him, their eyes beaming the constant unspoken accusation: "Pedo! Pedo!" Tough looking dads, hairy legs and cement-stained shorts, called their wild children to them, whispered and looked at him. Neville sweated under their inspection, his face crawling with nerves and despair as a sense of fatal error rose in his guts. He knew it would be a mistake to see children's movie, the parents would probably call the management and get him kicked out. Better to just wait somewhere. Read, maybe.

He ate three quarter pounders, stolidly munching the food as his eyes crawled over the ceiling, the floor, the table before him, smeared with grease from the rag the tweeny staff ran over it between customers. Every figure that walked in off the street seemed to send an electric charge through him, as he nervously checked if it was someone he knew, someone from work, from the club, his Mother even, before immediately trying to nonchalantly look away to make sure they didn't think he was staring. His eyes rolled in misery when he imagined that his intentions for the evening were written on his face in some way that could be read by everyone in the world apart from himself, a mark of Cain. The heavy food helped somewhat, and by the time he finished the last burger he had attained some semblance of determination, as the rush of calories worked their magic.

Outside again in the cool air and crowds, he allowed his instincts to guide him, send him scurrying away from the brightly lit thoroughfare of the entertainment and residential centre of the city, back down the creepy streets, past porn shops and backpacker hostels and brick walls plastered with layers of posters, to Central, to the steps of the building opposite the Tartarus club itself. There, with a Big Gulp coke and ice from the 7-11 store down the road, he settled in for the long wait, out of sight of the passers by, unknowingly disguising himself as another street person, perhaps a beggar with a cardboard sign invisible in the dark, doubly invisible behind the mental barrier all city dwellers erect to protect them from the constant barrage of disturbing sights on the streets.

He watched the nightlife trickle by. Well dressed businessmen, on their way to one of the high class brothels in the district. Skinny young PDBs heading home to their designer warehouse apartments from their day jobs CADCAMing yachts and coffee tables. Carrying their indian takeaway to heat up in their micro-kitchenettes before heading out for a night of clubbing on Oxford. Old taxi drivers

walking from the station to the taxi rank to swap over with the daytime drivers when the shifts changed. The original locals, factory working old men, heading for their rundown terraces, now worth 50 times what they paid for them in the 60s but they won't sell because they don't want to move away from their favourite pub.

The hours passed in agony. Not least because he finished the coke within 20 minutes, and spent the last hour of his vigil, to 12AM, desperate to pee. The alcove he sat within had obviously been used as a urinal more than once, but when the time came to stand and make his way across the road, he couldn't bring himself to follow suit.

The first trickle of patrons were entering the building, filing through the narrow gap in the iron grate, clopping down the shiny black lino towards the antique lifts. Neville tagged along meekly behind a trio of smartly dressed middle-aged men in patent leather jackets and laundered jeans with knife creases from the dry cleaners press. He darted into the lift behind them, almost colliding with the heavy brass grate the tallest of the men was slamming across. He frowned as Neville crowded into the corner and fiddled with his pack.

"I bought fifty thousand of GOOG for a customer today." one of the men announced brightly. "Then I persuaded them to go for five thousand of XCIT."

"Not bad, good work!" The tall man was reluctantly impressed. "I've been keeping my eye on them. Our holders are too conservative to go for it, but I put a thousand from my nut on them too."

"EDI is a growth industry. You can't keep swapping data by getting secretaries to email Excel spreadsheets to each other forever. There's a growing demand to automate that sort of thing."

"Yep." The lift jerked to a stop, the tall one bunched his shoulders and slammed the brass grill back. "It'll grow." They marched down the corridor towards the entrance to the club. Michael followed, mouth acid and filthy with nervous sick.

Inside the entrance hall he waited while the lads paid their fee with crisp new green fifties from their eel-skin wallets. They slapped each other on the back like football players about to go on the field as they stepped through the inner door. Roseanne stuffed the cash in her tin, then turned her laconic gaze on Neville.

He stepped forward, clawing deep in the pocket of his grey drill trousers for some money. At last he dragged forth a tightly folded fifty and dropped it on the desk. Roseanne silently reached out and picked it up between thumb and forefinger, as though it were a spider she wasn't sure was dead. Carefully she tweezed the folds apart, while Neville fidgeted from foot to foot, his legs still tingling from his long sit on the cold marble.

Suddenly the door banged open and again Phallia barged into the antechamber, seeming to radiate heat and irony in equal measure.

"Oh dear, back again are we? The boys from the stock exchange told me there was someone odd in the lift, but I didn't think it would be you. Listen, Neville, isn't it? Neville, why are you here?"

"Can't I just come in and watch?"

"Oh no. This isn't the movies. It isn't even Being There, is it! No, you can't watch."

"Oh." Neville sagged in seeming despair, but he didn't leave. "What about the Nazis?" he asked after a long pause.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The guys in the German uniforms? They just watch. I saw them. They stand around and watch."

"The Nazis are in costume, did you notice that? They do more than just watch! They make the scene. They belong here... although personally I prefer the Weirmacht era, much more in line with the aims of our club, but they didn't have any decent uniforms and they don't generate the same interest as a snug-fitting SS jacket and peaked cap!"

"Oh... do you want me to go home?" mumbled Neville.

"No, no, I don't want that. The question is, what do you want?"

"That's all right... Do I get my money back?"

"No, no, you don't understand." Phallia approached, towering over the bowed head and hunched shoulders. "Let me ask you again. What. Do. You. Want?"

"I did want to go in but you want me to go so I'm-"

"I do NOT want you to go!" Phallia was puzzled. "I want to know what it is that you actually want. After all, you came here of your own free will."

"I didn't want to come here, but I told my friends that I would. I didn't want to come, but I had to. I told them."

"Bullshit! And now you seem to want to leave?"

"No... you want me to leave..."

"Oh, you just won't take responsibility for your own actions will you? I do not want you to leave. What I really, really want is for you to have a good time, if that is in fact possible."

"Forget it." interjected Roseanne. "Look at him, he's a lump! He sure as shit doesn't belong here. It was a mistake from the beginning, on his behalf, then ours." She glared at Neville. "I think you should go. There's something wrong with you."

Neville turned and shuffled away. "At least I don't let people tie me up and hit me..." he muttered under his breath.

"STOP!" yelled Phallia, stomping towards him on loud heels. "What was that?"

"Nothing." Neville muttered even more softly, looking at the floor like a schoolboy caught with a slingshot, but there was an amused twist to his strangely feminine lips, a wry ghost of a smile, that enraged Phallia.

"I heard. You think you're better than us, don't you? You think you're better than everyone. Don't you? Answer!"

Neville didn't answer, but he couldn't stop himself smiling. He turned away from her, trying to conceal his rictus grin behind a raised shoulder.

"I think we should let him in."

Roseanne shook her head and her rich black hair rippled against the fabric of the embroidered armchair. "I'm against it." she said in the tired drone of someone who already knows they have lost the argument before it has even begun. "I don't think he's right in the head, there's something I don't like about him and it isn't just the smell."

"Now, you go inside and sit on the bleachers, okay? Sit on the bleachers and we'll have some fun later, is that alright?" said Phallia. "I order you to go inside!"

"If you say so." grunted Neville, and waddled through the inner door to the main room of the club, still smiling at his feet.

"Mistake." said Frazanne.

A sweetly tinkling bell instantly silenced the quiet muttering of the crowd as they pursued their disparate perversions. Heads wrapped in bizarre pig-snouted gas masks, featureless black hoods, spiny iron crowns and sweat-sodden hair turned and waited. Neville, seated on the topmost bench of the rack of bleachers, looked around nervously.

Phallia turned in the centre of the room, watching to make sure all eyes were upon her.

"Bring forth Neville."

Glia climbed to the step before him, her hand outstretched. He almost yanked her into his lap as he hauled himself upright. Before he could grab his backpack she lead him away, down the steps of the bleachers and towards the centre of the room. He gazed around uncomprehending at the various figures they passed. The Nazis, standing in a scrum, mockingly bowed and saluted. At last they stood before Phallia, who had changed into a midnight blue ball-gown with long gloves and casque.

"So, Neville, are you ready?"

"I guess." Laughter from the crowd, who pressed slowly closer to see.

"You don't guess here. You need to be sure of your desires. You need to own your actions. I don't think you've done much of that in your life, and I don't think that's healthy. We need to do something about this."

Phallia slowly circled Neville where he stood.

"Now, no guessing. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" More laughter.

"To admit why you really came here tonight. Neville, why did you come?"

"I already told you!" Neville blurted in frustration, temporarily seeming to forget the audience. "I just wanted to watch."

"Well, that isn't what I think. I think you came back because you enjoyed your first visit, despite the fact we were not playing childrens adventure games. I think you enjoyed your visit because you look down on us, because you think we are nothing but perverts and being in our presence makes you feel surprisingly normal, am I right?"

"NO!" Neville, incensed, flushed red and frowned. For a moment Phallia wondered if this was all a mistake, if Frazanne was right and he was more trouble than he appeared, but she pressed on.

"Yes, because people look down on you, don't they Neville? They make fun of you, they mock you, and why? Is it because they don't understand? Is it because they held you back and confused you and made you act weird by making fun of you?"

The florid colour leached from Neville's face and he deflated slightly.

"Many of us present here know your sorrow. Our own pasts are littered with cast off personalities as pathetic as your own. The moment we admit our own desires and give in to them, we find out what we are capable of. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Slowly, surely, Neville began to cry. Burning hot tears of shame seared their way down his cheeks, and his nose ached as it filled with snot. His entire body convulsed as though electrical discharges were passing through his flesh. His face crumpled like a piece of paper, like the campaign map in Gerrards hands.

"But we grow and change, and part of that change is learning to submit. Are you ready to learn to submit?"

Neville nodded silently, and scrubbed the tears and snot from his face with swipes of his arms, leaving dark damp patches on his shirt sleeves.

"Good!" Phallia stood directly behind him now. She seized his shirt collar and expertly pulled, so the buttons gave way off in a rapid volley of pops and the shirt slid down his arms and away. His globular body was exposed, wrapped in the obscene complicated webbing of his abdominal truss. The texture of his flesh was like an old wax candle, or milky frosted glass with a shadow on the other side. The assembled crowd drew closer and muttered their approval.

"My shirt!"

"Don't worry. I'll get Angela to sew them back on for you." Indeed, Angela was already moving through the audience, collecting the scattered buttons where they lay. Phallia hung the limp shirt from a standing candelabra and, placing her hands on his shoulders, pushed Neville backwards step by step until he stood directly before the massive A frame which dominated the centre of the room.

"Raise your arms and turn around!" she barked at him. Obediently he spun, the arms went up as though drawn by invisible strings, and she lashed them above his head, winding the hanging strips of leather expertly around them, knowing that his arteries ran through the joint of the wrist and wouldn't be tied off by the pressure. His exposed back was a map of gently rolling white sand dunes punctuated by the bright red outcrops of his boils. The thin leather belt he wore cut into his love handles, and his truss had rubbed grey stripes into his skin like faint tattoos.

"Spread your legs!" Neville reluctantly shuffled his feet apart, then stopped. He stiffened, but he couldn't prevent the long, squeaking fart which set the whole room giggling. Phallia, mugging for the crowd, dramatically filled her lungs with a deep breath before pursing her lips and stepping in to bind Neville's ankles to the base of the uprights. When she surreptitiously drew breath she almost gagged; it was foul, sour and dank, as though a great quantity of baby vomit had been collected and allowed to ripen in a pile. Those standing too close began to edge away and complain.

"Alright Neville, listen good." she whispered into his ear once she had finished with the binding. "There is a thing called a 'safe word', okay? It's a word you say if you want me to stop. If you say 'help' or 'stop' I'm not going to stop, because that might be part of your fantasy. But if you say the safe word, I'll stop. Okay? Your safe word is 'rhubarb', got it? Rhubarb."

"Rhubarb." repeated Neville in a hollow whisper.

"Okay." Phallia stepped back and gestured - Angela expertly slipped a riding crop into her hand like a nurse in a surgery. The crop was a springy handle made from willow switch, bound with leather and ending in a thick leather loop. It was designed to make the loudest noise while inflicting the minimum pain - the leather loop was like a spring that would absorb the force of the impact, while the slap of the leather loop closing would echo throughout the room. Phallia raised it dramatically above her head. Neville twisted his head this way and that, trying to see behind him, but his arms were in the way.

"And now... welcome to Tartarus!" Phallia brought the crop down in a careful stroke across his back, directly between the shoulder blades where the flesh was soft and receptive. The sound of the smack seemed to hover in the air, round and complete, the quintessential sound of leather on meat.

Neville screamed. He dropped, and his entire weight hung from the wrist straps, which began to tear where the leather was perished from years of salt sweat. The scream filled out, grew and spread like the smoke from a fire. His entire body arched, his head thrown back, his eyes rolled up so they seemed to stare at the floor directly behind him, he screamed. A vast cataract of urine flooded from both legs of his trousers, and as the scream shuddered into a long indrawn breath, the distinct molten sound of explosive diarrhoea filled the room.

Phallia, stunned, stepped back and dropped her crop. The long rattling indrawn breath emerged as another scream, angrier this time, as Neville jerked forward in a mighty lunge that broke the fitting that held the A-frame upright. It tottered for seconds as he thrashed back and forth, wrenching at the bonds that held him, roaring now, shouting in wordless fury, before tilting backwards and falling full force on his flabby carcass.

The assembled crowd stared as Neville struggled beneath the fallen frame. Phallia, stunned, slowly crouched and started tugging at the bonds that held his wrists. "Here!" Angela frantically darted forward and handed an open ceramic hunting knife to her. She stared at the blade in her hand for a second before realising what she need to do, then, she began to work the blade under the leather

strips.

"Hold still, hold still" she barked as Neville continued to thrash back and forth, not shouting now but panting like an animal. Just as she was about slice him free, Neville twisted his wrists and crossed them, bringing his inside wrist up against the razor sharp blade. Phallia realised that he was watching, while he struggled; his glaring eyes, red as blood now, were coldly watching, and he was deliberately trying to cut himself on the knife.

She twisted the blade around and cut the other way. His hands fell free.

"Hold him down!" A pair of beefcake muscle boys, faces like frightened school boys, stepped forward, one on each side, and grabbed his arms. Phallia quickly dealt with the ankle straps and they lifted the A-frame away. Neville rolled back and forth, free now but unable to turn himself over. "Pick him up!" They grabbed his arms and hauled him to his feet. He trembled and stank. The shit had leaked out of his waist band and stained the floor and halfway up his pale back. His eyes were red with blood. The room buzzed and chattered with the amazement of the crowd.

Roseanne pushed her way through the circling throng and stood besides Phallia.

"I thought something like this would happen. You should know better."

"What should we do with him now?" Phallias ironic cool was destroyed. She glanced this way and that as though looking for an escape route.

"Shove him in the shower, of course. Look at him! Oi, you boys, put him in the shower."

The beefcake hauled Neville backwards through the crowd, towards the far side of the room, dragging his heels. Angela was already there, propping open a large steel door with a glass porthole. As they tried to shove him through the door Neville grabbed hold of the sill and bellowed again, wordless as a bullock. One of the muscle boys placed his foot firmly in the centre of his concave chest and pushed. His fingers slipped from the steel door frame and he collapsed backwards on the white tile floor.

Phallia slammed the door and the water pounded down, warm and cleansing. A long queue of rubbernecks formed, waiting to peek through the glass porthole and watch as the showers slowly washed Neville clean. He lay with his mouth open and eyes rolled back, and Phallia worried that he might drown, until she caught a flicker of movement as he glanced at the door. Faking again. She turned the shower cold and watched as he struggled to his feet and darted for the driest corner of the room. She knocked on the glass to get his attention, then pointed to his trousers.

"Take them off!" she yelled through the thick glass. "They're full of shit! Take them off!"

Neville clutched his waist band with both hands and shook his head. Phallia smiled. It was the first action of sentience since he had exploded on the rack. He would be okay, if she could get him out of the club.

Suddenly she felt someones breath on the back of her neck, and realised what a large audience she had. They surrounded her, chatting and weaving their heads back and forward as they tried to find a good angle for peering through the porthole at the caged animal within. "All right, back off unless you're gonna help me get his pants off and get him cleaned up!" she announced. They drifted away,

casting guilty glances back over their shoulders. Oh well, she thought, just me then.

Her evening gown dropped to the floor in a rustle of silk and she stepped out, already peeling off the gloves and carefully hanging them over a nearby gymnastic horse. Her shoes, her garter belt and stockings. She unhooked her bra, revealing her angular chest, quite bare of breasts, the ghost-white skin scattered with sparse black stubble. Finally, discarding her silk panties, she flung back the bolt and stepped inside.

"Don't touch me!" Neville, wide eyed, sodden as a drowned rat, backed into a corner and stared at her crotch.

"Oh, believe me, I don't want to. Just take off the pants and wash yourself clean and I won't lay a finger."

"You're a man!" announced Neville in dazed wonder.

"Whatever. Just drop the dacks and get clean and we'll look after you."

"No. Get out. I'll do it if you get out. And don't watch."

"No problem!" Phallia was relieved. Perhaps he was returning to his senses. She stepped out and closed the door. Roseanne and Angela were waiting. Roseanne handed her a white terry robe.

"This is gonna come back to bite us."

"Oh shut up. Go back to the front desk, we can do this."

Neville, tired, stripped off his trousers and dropped them near the door, before retreating into the steam and falling water. Seeing this, Phallia hauled at the door, dragged them out with her toes, and bagged them in a bin liner before handing them to Angela. Peering through the porthole she saw Neville standing in the corner, where the showers didn't reach, as dejected as a horse in a stall on a rainy day. She pulled at the nozzle control - it had once been a hydrotherapy shower in an insane asylum - and chased him back and forth with the streams, until the water ran clear.

Glia arrived with another towel robe. Phallia hauled open the door and threw it to Neville. It fell at his feet. "Pick it up and put it on!" she demanded impatiently.

"His clothes are in the washer." Angela lisped. "I'll have them dry and ready in about ten minutes."

"Good girl! So, what do you think about all this? Roseanne is furious!"

"I feel sorry for him."

Phallia glanced down at her in surprise and amusement.

"Don't. He's a sneaky little shit. Playing the victim like a pro. Hopefully we won't hear any more from him after this is over."

Neville, wrapped in white, stared at the ground as Phallia lead him through the depleted room towards the antechamber. About half the revellers had left, wary of getting caught up in the

unfolding drama, and those remaining were there only because of the scandal and wanting to see what happened next.

She pushed him through the door of their Interrogation Room, the featureless and well soundproofed prop for police and spy interrogation scenarios. He sat and waited in the merciless glare from the argon spotlights until Phallia, now wearing her ball-gown and heels again, and Angela entered. Angela carried his shirt, buttons repaired, and pants, now fully laundered and still hot from the dryer. He stood and grabbed them. His overstuffed nylon wallet and jangling key ring were there, his threadbare hanky crisp and ironed on top. Angela shrugged his blocky backpack off her shoulders and dropped it on the table.

"What are you gonna do to me?" Neville asked in a quavering voice.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. You can get dressed and go. Just don't come back, okay? You don't want to come back, I'm sure of that, so don't. Just forget about it, and we will too."

Neville's face twisted and rearranged itself, from a caricature of abject fear to one of gleeful mastery. "You're in trouble. I'll call the police!"

Phallia laughed, a liquid contralto singsong trill that had taken a lot of practice to get right. "Darling, do you know how many cops are in there? You want a cop, I'll get one in here right away. And what are you going to tell them, that we dragged you in off the street?"

"I never asked to be beaten. You made me get tied up. You ripped my shirt off. I didn't want to do that."

"Bullshit. There were hundreds of witnesses. I don't have to listen to this shit any more. here's your clothes, get dressed and go home."

They left the room. Angela peered back at him with a sympathetic expression before she closed the door. He slowly climbed into his pants and shirt. His abdominal truss was still damp against his skin, squeaking in the buckles whenever he moved. He was buttoning up his shirt when he realised that the wall-length mirror must be a one-way window like on a cop show. Just as he was buckling his belt the door banged open again and Phallia stepped in.

"Ready?"

She opened a hidden door, camouflaged with sound-proof tiles, and they stepped out into the corridor Phallia roughly seized Neville's elbow and marched rapidly towards the lift. Neville expertly tripped and stumbled a dozen times, but she matched his expertise in keeping him upright and on track.

"Stop shoving me!"

"Stop trying to fall down."

"You can't do this to me!"

"You can't stop me."

She shoved him into the lift and punched the button for the ground floor. Neville tried to stop her closing the gate, but her wiry muscles were much stronger than his. He kicked the gate petulantly as the car descended.

"Aurevoir Neville, may we never meet again!" Called Phallia as she disappeared from his view, blowing a kiss from one gloved hand.

Chapter 6 - Neville's Does Something Bad

A week passed like a nightmare, with flashes of clarity embedded in murky dread. Game night came and went. Neville lay on his narrow bed, staring at the ceiling. Mother and Sis left him alone, scared of his mood, his seething rage tightly capped and pressurised by a lifetime of customary self-denial. His plans grew without conscious intervention, slowly emerging in his mind like blood seeping through a bandage, a simple design forming so slowly it seemed to have always been there.

Once again Neville sat hidden in the deeply shadowed alcove across the street from the Tartarus club, with its piss-stained marble floor and brass mail boxes. He rocked back and forth, back and forth, muttering to himself. He was going to do it. He was going to do it. Nobody could stop him. This was what people did. He was going to fix them.

By his side, a dented can, which had once been full of Golden River Canola oil. He had spotted it the day before in the alley behind a Thai restaurant a block from the office, had rescued it, and tucked it into the gap behind the waste paper bin near the loading dock of his building. Today, after work, he had retrieved it, and wandered the streets for hours in a daze, the can loudly banging against his knees.

When it was dark enough and late enough, he sidled into the service station where the taxis went, and quietly filled it from the lone petrol bowser which stood amongst the LPG pumps. The cashier smirked when he paid, assuming he was a brain damaged goon who would sniff the stuff when he dragged it back to his squat or whatever. Neville didn't notice. His eyes, usually as damp and unfocused as two raisins in pools of custard, were fixed and hard.

He watched in silence as the customers arrived at the club. They almost all wore black, and acknowledged each other with their eyes, nodding and smiling as they quietly entered the building through the barely ajar security gate.

Waiting was easy. Suddenly it was 1 AM. Mother would be dozing in her filthy armchair, infomercials blaring on the 48 inch plasma, waiting for her opportunity to castigate him when he arrived late without calling. He would trip or stumble as he crept through the room, and curse himself for a fool as she dramatically awoke, tremulously demanding to know who it was, pretending to be frightened, before instantly transforming into the harridan and launching the attack.

No more customers arrived. They were all inside, thought Neville, doing disgusting things. Doing what they wanted, with no consequence. No Mothers to stop them. Disobeying the rules, acting as though there were no rules.

How, thought Neville, could it be? How could they do exactly as they pleased and never suffer the consequences? When he made the slightest mistake, the world crashed down on his head, and they waltzed through life doing whatever disgusting things they wanted and never paid a price. It seemed obvious that his entire life he had been paying for their sins. Everything that happened to him, despite his care, despite how good he was, was their fault.

He rose to his feet in a chorus of popping joints, in hips, knees, even toes. He stooped and lifted the can of fuel, gurgling and heavy. It was too heavy to carry by the thin wire handle, it cut into his fingers. He had to hug it to his chest. Luckily his backpack offset the weight somewhat, so he was well balanced.

There was no traffic. He crossed the street and slipped through the gate.

Inside the foyer the dim light gleamed off the cracked mirror strips in the walls. Aged brown address cards peeled from the notice board. He pushed the button for the lift. It started down from above with a clash of metal, and the counterweights smoothly rose from the basement and headed skywards. Above the hum of the motor he heard the sound of footsteps, coming down the old limestone stairs which wrapped the lift shaft. He stared straight ahead as they descended, paused for a second besides him, then clip-clopped to the gate and out.

The lift arrived. He almost dropped the can as he grabbed the grill and hauled with all his strength. It creaked across, resisting him as though afraid of what he would do once inside.

Gratefully set the can down inside the lift, dragged the grate closed, and pushed the lowest button in the row of porcelain circles on the black iron plate. It was labeled G2. The lift started down.

G2 was very dark. There wasn't even the light of an exit sign to interrupt the blackness, only the dim light from inside the lift itself. Neville shrugged off his pack and dug out his phone, reluctantly switching it on so he could use the built in torch. As he shone the beam on the piles of junk and bales of old fabric which filled the space, a sequence of text messages arrived, no doubt generated by Mothers frantic calls. He giggled. If only she could see him now.

He dragged the can out of the lift and slid the cage shut. It immediately rose, taking it's light away, leaving nothing but his feeble torch to work by. Well, he thought, it would be enough.

Surveying the junk filling the room, he realised it was all from the sweatshops. There were tag ends of rolls of fabrics, bundles of crinoline and polyester wadding, entire bales of old clothes, compressed and sewn into hessian for shipping overseas, then bundled into this basement for some reason. It looked very flammable, but where to begin? Racking his brain, Neville realised that he would need to light his fire away from the lift, because he would need it to escape, wouldn't he? It seemed logical.

He dragged the can along the ground, its edge grating on the concrete floor, until he found himself in a corner, surrounded by large open-top wooden boxes full of chunks of foam rubber. Perfect.

He heaved the can up onto the edge of the nearest box. Torch in mouth, he carefully unscrewed the cap and tilted the can forward. The fuel surged out, making the dimly lit waste swim before his eyes from the fumes. Rocking the can back and forth, he managed to soak most of the foam with the splashes of petrol that shot from the nozzle.

Suddenly his fingers slipped on the small wire handle, and he frantically lunged and wrapped his arms around the can before it could fall into the box. The surging liquid rebounded and the can rocked towards him. A solid jet of petrol sprayed over his chest and soaked into his shirt, plastering it to his body and filling his nose with choking fumes. He tottered back, and the can dropped to the floor, jetting another spray of petrol over his legs, before rolling away with a loud grinding sound.

Light spilled into the room, and he realised that the lift was arriving. Galvanised by the adrenaline already coursing through his choked and narrowed veins, Neville scuttled around the box and crouched in the shadows behind it. The grate was slowly drawn back, and a figure stepped out. Short and slight, wearing a robe.

"Neville?" a small voice lisped into the silence. It was Angela.

"Neville, I know you're here. A seamstress from upstairs saw you. She saw you in the foyer. I know you're there. Come out. I won't tell Phallia."

Neville held his head in his hands and squeezed his eyes closed tightly. He silently beat his head on the wall of the box before him. His luck, again.

"Come out Neville. You have to leave. If you don't come out I'll go and get the others."

Neville plunged his hand in his pocket and pulled out the lighter, a red Bic. He reached out over the box of soaked foam and spun the wheel with his thumb. Instantly he was engulfed in flame. Dim blue and hazy, it surrounded him on all sides as the vapour cloud which enveloped him combusted at once. He didn't feel a thing, but screamed in shock, stood and darted blindly forward.

The next few seconds were a blur. He collided randomly with unseen objects, tripped, regained his feet, tried to outrun the flames which surrounded him and were only now beginning to scorch him through the cooling effect of the evaporating petrol, before the world suddenly went dark and muffled. He lashed out with both arms and felt his fists collide with something soft. There was a grunt and a thud.

He was covered with a sheet of tarpaulin, which had extinguished the fire. He shrugged it off. The room was lit yellow and flickering by the vigorous fire now burning in the box of foam slabs. The foam was mostly gone, but the wood had caught and burnt brightly and loud. Before him, half covered by the tarp she had used to put him out, lay Angela, unconscious, blood dripping from her gashed forehead and down her face, through the groove of her hare lip and over her receding chin.

Neville seized her feet and dragged her into the corner. She was so light, as though she was barely there at all. Her robe rucked up and turned inside out, covering her face and it's accusing streak of blood. Underneath she wore blue shorts and a plain white tee shirt. It reminded Neville of his sisters PE uniform, when they were young and going to school.

His back hit the wall. In the flickering yellow light he sat her limp body up, tugged the robe back down over her head. Was she alive? It was too hard to tell; the moving light made everything appear to breathe, and he couldn't bring himself to touch her, listen to her chest, for fear of being caught, fear of being accused of molesting her in her unconscious state. The blood appeared to flow undisturbed through the ruin of her lips.

Neville turned and wandered blindly through the trash and offcuts. His program had run out and there was no backup plan. He supposed he would need to escape, before someone else caught him. She might have told someone else, which would be typical. Everything he did failed.

Flames played across the ceiling, licking at the close spaced beams and between the crossed joists, crisping the paint so it fell like snow in a blizzard around him. Sparks like seeds took root in the fertile fuel that filled the room, and a dozen flames bloomed every second. They danced sensuously back and forth as they grew, celebrating their lives and the accident of their birth, their colours as various as the fuels which sustained them. He didn't notice the heat, the smoke, for wonder at the beauty of destruction. For perhaps a second Neville achieved transcendence

His foot kicked something heavy which rolled and gurgled. The can of petrol.

He picked it up by the wire loop. It was half empty now, so it didn't cut into his fingers. It was easy to carry back to the corner, to the limp body, so ungainly, the arms and legs splayed in uncomfortable angles. He poured. The fuel gushed out cold and clear, slightly pink, and soaked her gown. He watched amazed as it started to melt, synthetic fabric settling and flaking as it came apart along the weave. Weird, he thought. He noticed the red lighter, still clutched in his hand. He spun the wheel and applied the flame to her bare foot, her toe, like the fuse of a fire cracker, which glistened with fuel.

The flame whisked up her body, engulfing her in a blue halo. Her face screwed up in shock, and she opened her mouth to scream, but she only gurgled as she drew in a scorching lungful of fire. Her eyes snapped open and she jerked forward, trying to cough the flame out and breath, but it was no use. Gasping, surrounded with fire, her eyes found him in the flickering light and locked on, pleading, unable to comprehend. Pale hair shrivelled and browned. Blisters formed across her face suddenly, tiny and pale, rupturing even as they filled, so she glistened and ran even as he watched. Her pleading eyes dimmed and filmed over until they resembled nothing so much as Neville's own eyes, steamy and hopeless, staring into vistas of self loathing as he shovelled his lunch into his mouth or mislead yet another customer or suffered Mothers criticisms or endured any of the other torments his life was made from. They closed slowly and she stopped moving. Her face blackened.

Neville backed away, disgusted, almost tripping over the tarpaulin which lay where he had dropped it. He gathered it up and walked back to where Angela lay, still burning, but the fire weaker now, the fuel exhausted, only her body fat feeding the flames. He threw the material over her charred flesh and stood panting, breathing in lungfuls of the shocking pork smell. The room was now full of smoke, black coils snaking across the ceiling, vortexes of toxic gas seeking an exit. They meandered towards the stairs that coiled around the lift, accelerating as they went.

At last the ancient sprinkler system coughed into life. Rusty water rained down. It sizzled on the flaming wood and fabric, and bubbled as it soaked through the tarpaulin surrounding the tiny body. Neville watched the fires die and retreat, until thoroughly soaked, until the rivulets of water penetrated his clothes and threatened to fill his shoes.

A relay closed in his brain. He bent and scooped the small bundle up in his arms. Firmly wrapping the heavy wet cloth around his burden, he turned and stumbled towards the stairs.

In the foyer above, hundreds of half-naked bodies struggled from the staircase and pushed towards the exit, slipping on the mirror finished lino, tripping over their costumes, helping each other up and onwards, a Heironymous Bosch brought to life. The entrance to the building was so narrow (the grate had been padlocked to a ringbolt in the floor) that only a single person could exit at a time. Coils of black smoke shot from the stairs below and filled the room with a thickening grey smog.

They ignored Neville entirely as he emerged from the depths, too focused on their own survival. He spotted Phallia, towering over the throng, shading her eyes from the downpour of dirty water, scanning the crowd. Crouching slightly to avoid her gaze, he moved along the opposite side of the room, hugging the bundle to his chest.

Suddenly, the gate disappeared! It had been pulled out into the street by a chain. The crowd shot forward, streaming down the stairs. Firemen in bulky fluorescent orange jackets and yellow helmets, united in a flying wedge, forced their way inside, through the crowd towards the lifts.

Neville, head held high, stepped into their path. He thrust his burden at the first man in the wedge, who held a wrecking tool like a giant claw hammer. His experienced nose wrinkled and his face pulled back in a snarl of disgust. He seized Neville by his shoulder and towed him back through the middle of his men, who continued on into the building.

Outside, the building was illuminated as thoroughly as a stage. The lights of the fire engines were joined by several TV cam lights, as news crews arrived in their vans. The glare dazzled everyone who emerged, so they paused and peered around before starting down the steps. Flashbulbs flickered as Neville and his bundle, conspicuously stained with red, were dragged through the crowd towards the cool blue flashing light of an ambulance.

The back of the ambulance yawned open, the inviting white light spilling out reminiscent of a 7-11 store. The medics had removed the gurney and set it up, ready to receive. Neville carefully laid down his bundle, as the news cameramen swarmed around. One of the medics peeled back the tarpaulin and swore.

"Is she... alright?" asked Neville, voice choking with stress and smoke, barely audible over the sirens and yelling escapees.

"She'll be fine, she'll be fine." replied the medic, automatically lying as he and his partner wrestled the gurney around and into the back of the ambulance. "How about you, are you burnt? Did you breath any smoke?"

"I think so. I feel sick."

They assisted him into the ambulance and shut the doors. The screaming sirens and shouting evacuees faded away to a murmur. One of the medics, almost as fat as Neville himself, squatted awkwardly in the narrow gap between the gurney and the single seat and lashed Neville in with a selection of belts and buckles. Once Neville was secure, he mechanically flipped a couple of straps over the bundle and tugged them tight, before pulling back the tarpaulin enough to expose flesh. Neville ogled, shocked. Strips of bloody skin peeled from her small breasts as the medic moved his stethoscope around, halfheartedly searching for a beat.

"She's dead, isn't she?" asked Neville.

"I'm afraid so. Very badly burnt. We need to get you to hospital at any rate."

Everything receded. Neville knew the man was asking him questions, but he couldn't seem to bring himself to answer. He felt his arms being lifted as they checked his wrists for medical bracelets. He felt the needle in his elbow. It felt pretty good. He liked hospitals. He looked forward to seeing the nurses. There were bad nurses, but there were always good nurses, ones who would listen to him when he told them about his problems, and do something about them.

Chapter 7 – Neville Comes Up Trumps

The day Neville returned to work, the air was delightfully cool and crisp. He barely sweated at all as he limped up Devonshire street, and the leaves were already changing colour and getting ready to fall.

He paused and looked across the street at the building which had formerly housed the Tartarus Club, still surrounded by a barrier of blue and white police tape. It stood, mostly undamaged, still stained with black streamers where smoke had escaped from windows and the front door. The old gate was gone, now a blank wall of unpainted plywood filling the entrance, with a small door let in, like the back side of a theatre prop.

Passers by watched curiously as he stood and stared. Those who recognised him looked away, in the peculiar custom of Australians in the presence of fame. After a long time he moved on, stumping laboriously onwards towards the office at the top of the hill.

He felt the eyes on him as he entered the foyer, with its nicotine stained facade and bank of lifts. He had hoped there would be a headline placard with his name on it in the cages on the walls, but no. It was old news now, superseded by a baby panda and a federal minister who had taken bribes from some aborigines.

A small, compact knot of very large men in expensive dark suits entered the front doors, attracting attention away from him. Neville recognised the face of the largest, central man, who wore the scrum like a flowing robe of power as he cruised through the lobby. It was the CEO. Usually he left his Bentley in the underground car park and rode a private lift to the first floor offices, but today, for some reason, here he was. The crowd stepped back to let him and his advisors pass, carefully keeping their faces blank to avoid acknowledging the inconvenience this was causing them.

One of the advisors spotted Neville, whispered in his boss's ear. The CEO swung around with the gravitas of an ocean liner manoeuvring for a berth, studied Neville blankly for several seconds, gestured for him to come forward.

"I'm told you were the man tried to rescue that young girl a couple of weeks back."

"Oh, I guess. I mean, yes, but it was nothing," stuttered Neville.

"We sold a lot on that story. Do you work for one of my papers? Wish we'd've known, we could have done an interview." His brow clouded angrily.

"I work for Tab-Vend, sir."

"Oh, that!" The ring of beefy sycophants smiled and nudged each other. In their eyes Tab-vend was a legendary boondoggle, originally rolled out as a veiled threat to the newsagents to keep their heads down or they would be replaced by robots.

The lift arrived, and the small herd of businessmen shuffled in. Neville instinctively tottered forward, only to be blocked by well-placed shoulders and arms, so expertly done it didn't even seem rude. "Sorry son, next lift. See you round." And the great man beamed at him as the doors closed on his face.

Neville was first into the next lift. He had been touched, or at least spoken too, by the boss man, and a glamour was upon him. He enjoyed it. There was a space around him in the packed lift, as the other passengers attempted not to bump him. He smiled secretly as he stood in the corner, regarding himself in the scratched and dirty mirror wall. Being a hero was good.

A wave of silence spread out around him as he entered the top floor office space. Neville sauntered to his cubicle, which was clean, for once, as though someone had told the night staff to do something about the layer of grime that usually clung to every surface. He checked his treasures: all there, including his Y2K bug, sitting neatly on top of the monitor. He picked up the small stuffed creature and tickled its legs.

Peterson appeared at the door behind him, leaning into the small room.

"Hullo Neville, how are you? All better now I hope."

"Oh, I guess." Neville managed a small wheeze. It would have to do. "The doctors say I have a chance of living, if I play my cards right."

Peterson looked momentarily lost, as he attempted to work out if this was humour or an amazingly flippant admission of a death sentence. He decided on humour, but hedged his bet. "I'm sure it's not that bad. If you need anything just let me know."

"I will, I will." Neville settled into his chair with a drawn out groan like a deflating dirigible.

"It's good to have you back." said Peterson before rapidly walking away.

And now, here he was, back at work. Neville considered going home again. He could do it, he realised. They wouldn't stop him or even complain, and maybe they wouldn't count it against his sick days, which had taken a beating with his months absence. But, he decided, what kind of hero would refuse to struggle on despite his injuries? He picked up the phone instead and called the message bank.

He expected to find hundreds of messages, as frustrated and angry customers called again and again, leaving long chains of rants, promising retribution and doom unless he called them back as soon as he received their hateful blasts. This had happened before, many times, when something broke down, such as a major server failure. However, there were only a few dozen messages, and they were mostly very different.

The first few were typical, a mix of normal service calls and angry callbacks demanding satisfaction. Then, as the reason for his absence spread through the community, through the very papers they sold, the calls changed. Soft voices, conciliatory tones. Messages of hope and support. He listened to them one after another.

"...when I heard what you did, I was bloody amazed! You're a diamond and no mistake! Just thought I'd call and let you know."

"...the way they mistreated that poor girl, it's no wonder she did what she did. You did your best, that's all I can say. Not many people are willing to step in and help nowadays, not like when I was young..."

"...was very sad news, but at least they put away those monsters who were mistreating her. It's no wonder she tried to kill herself, who could say otherwise? You take care now, they said you were still not back and I thought I'd leave a message..."

On and on the calls flowed by. When they were finished and Neville had deleted the last one, he cursed as he wished he had saved them to replay later. Oh well, he thought, surely some more would come in. Although the last message had been two days old, as though the customers were reluctant to call now and trouble the hero who had tried to save the suicidal slave of the depraved torture mavens.

Neville leant back and smiled at the ceiling, fingers laced across his stomach. Finally, he was getting the recognition he deserved! He closed his eyes, and slowly drifted off into a sweet sleep, untroubled, secure in his mind, warm in the knowledge that now at last he was reaping the reward for his lifetime of obscurity and sacrifice. Soft snores rose from him and floated out into the programmers section, and they peered at him and scowled, but nobody was ready to wake him just yet.