THE NIGHT SESSIONS

ALSO BY KEN MACLEOD

THE RESTORATION GAME

KEN MACLEOD

THE NIGHT SESSIONS

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To Steve Cullen

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I came across the idea of high-rise farms in Karl Schroeder's article "Rewilding Canada" at WorldChanging.com (www.worldchanging.com/archives//007000.html).

"The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion, nor on any other."

Thirty-First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States

PROLOGUE

ONE YEAR EARLIER

"Science fiction," said the robot, "has *become science fact*!" John Richard Campbell groaned, as much at the cliché as at having been wakened from his uncomfortable doze. He shifted in his seat, pushed the blanket away from his face, resettled his phone clip and sat up. As he adjusted the backrest to vertical he noticed only a score or so of other passengers stirring. The great majority were sleeping on, and even most of those awake were staring blankly at whatever was playing in their eyewear. Business flyers, he guessed, who'd already seen the sight often enough.

Campbell had opted to be wakened at the approach to the equator, for the same reason as he'd chosen a window seat. He didn't want to miss seeing the Pacific Space Elevator. With its Atlantic counterpart—or rival—it was possibly the most impressive, and certainly the most massive, work of man. A new Tower of Babel, he'd called it once, but he had to see it.

"The elevator is now visible to passengers on the right hand side of the plane," the robot's voice murmured in the phone clip. "Passengers on the left will be able to see it in a few minutes, after we turn slightly to avoid the exclusion zone."

Campbell pressed his cheek against the window and his chin against his shoulder, cupped his left hand to his temple to cut out the reflections from the dim cabin lighting, and peered ahead and to starboard. In the dark below he saw a spire of pinprick lights. From its summit a bright line extended straight up, for what seemed a short distance. Carefully angling his gaze upward along the line, Campbell spotted a tiny clump of bright lights directly above the spire, about level with the aircraft along the line of sight. He had time to see its almost imperceptible upward motion before the nose of the plane slowly swung starboard and cut it from view. Campbell felt the window press harder against his cheekbone as the aircraft banked.

"You can no longer see the crawler," said the robot voice, "but if you look farther up, to the sky, you may just be able to see the elevator in space. From

this angle it appears as a shorter line than you may expect, but as bright as a star."

And so it was. Campbell stared at the hairline crack in the night sky until it passed from view. Near its far end, he fancied, he could see a small brightening of the line, like a lone bead about to drop off the string, but he couldn't be sure: at 35,786 kilometres (less twelve, for the height the aircraft was flying at) the Geostation was tiny, and even the more massive counterweight beyond it, at the very end of the cable, was hardly more visible.

Campbell settled back. The sight had been worth seeing, but he could understand why the frequent fliers hadn't stirred for it. At the cockpit end of the aisle the cabin-crew robot had turned its fixed gaze towards the left-hand window seats and was no doubt murmuring in the phone clips of those passengers now craning their necks and peering out. Campbell guessed that they had a better view. He decided to book a window seat on the other side on the way back; the return-flight corridor passed on the western side of the elevator.

He turned to the window and let his eyes adjust again to the dark. The viewing conditions weren't perfect by any means, but he could make out the brighter stars. After a few minutes' watching he saw a meteor, burning bright orange; then, shortly afterward, another. Each time it was his own intake of breath that he heard, but the fiery meteors seemed so close he imagined he could hear the whoosh.

After a while the position became uncomfortable. He switched off the robot commentary channel, tilted the backrest as far as it would go, pulled the blanket over his head and tried to sleep. He was sure he wouldn't, but the next thing he noticed was that the blanket was on his knees and light from the window was in his eyes. The dawn sky glowed innumerable shades of green, from lemon to duck-egg to almost blue, like the background colour in a Hindu painting, and turned slowly to a pure deep blue over ten minutes or more as he watched. He dozed again.

The cabin bell chimed. The robot channel clicked itself back on. The drop-down screen above the seat in front showed the aircraft approaching the US West Coast, the local time as two p.m. Up front, and far behind, cabincrew robots had begun shoving trolleys and handing out coffees. Campbell looked out, seeing white wakes like comets on the blue sea; wavy cliffs like the edge of a corrugated roof. Campbell's legs ached. He stood, apologised his way past the two other passengers beside him, and made for the midship toilet. By the time he got back thetrolley and its dollies were two rows away. He settled again.

The trolley locked, the trolley-dolly halted. It had an oval head with two lenticular eyes and a smile-shaped speaker grille, and a torso of more or less feminine proportions, joined at a black flexible concertina waist to an inverted cone resembling a long skirt.

"Black, no sugar, please," Campbell said.

The machine's arm extended, without its body having to lean, and handed him a small tray with coffee to spec, kiwi-fruit juice and a cereal bar.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," said the robot.

The passenger next to him, a middle-aged woman, accepted her breakfast without saying anything but: "White, two sugar."

"No need for the please and thank you," she said, as the dolly glided on. "They're no smarter than ATMs."

Campbell tore open the wrapper of his cereal bar and smiled at the woman.

"I thank ATMs," he said.

Campbell turned the robot commentary back on as the aircraft flew over LA. He couldn't take his gaze from the ground: the black plain, the grey ribbons of freeways, the grid of faint lines that marked where streets had been.

". . . At this point the Christian forces struck back with a ten-kiloton nuclear warhead . . ."

Irritated, Campbell cut the commentary and sat back in his seat. The woman beside him, leaning a little in front of him to look out herself, noticed his annoyance.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Campbell grimaced. "Calling the rebels 'the Christian forces.' There were just as many Christians on the government side." He shook his head, smiling apologetically. "It's just a bug of mine."

"Yeah, well, it isn't the government side that has plagued us in NZ ever since," the woman said. She folded a scrap of her breakfast wrapper and worried at a seed stuck between two of her broad white teeth. "It's the fucking Christians."

"I'm a fu— a fundamentalist Christian myself," said Campbell, stung into remonstrance.

"The more fool you, young man," the woman said. She probed with her tongue behind her upper lip, made a sucking sound and then swallowed. "I used to go to church too, you know, when I was your age. Nice little church we had, all wooden, lovely carvings. Kind of like a marae, you know? Then these American Christians came along and started yelling at us that we were

heathen for having a church that looked Maori. Well, the hell with them, I thought. Walked out through their picket line, went to the nearest kauri tree to think about my ancestors, and never looked back."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," Campbell said. "A lot of these American exiles aren't true Christians, and even those that are are sometimes high-handed. So I don't approve of what happened to you. Not at all."

"Well, thanks for that!" She didn't sound grateful. "And what would 'true' Christians have done, huh?"

"Oh," said Campbell, "they'd have first of all proclaimed the gospel to you, and only after they'd established that you or some of you were seriously and genuinely trying to follow Christ—and the apostolic form of church government—would they have raised the secondary matter of church decoration."

"Jesus!" the woman said, blasphemously but aptly. "You mean you think just the same as they did, you'd just be more tactful about it."

Campbell smiled, trying to defuse the situation.

"Not many people call me tactful."

"Yeah, I can see that. OK, let's leave it. What do you do?"

"I'm a robotics engineer," Campbell said.

"My son's studying that," the woman said, sounding more friendly. "Where do you work?"

"Waimangu Science Park," Campbell said.

"That place!" The woman shook her head, back to hostility again. "You know, that's one of the things I resent the most about these goddamn Yank exiles. Cluttering one of our NZ natural wonders with their creationist rubbish!" She gave him a sharp look. "Robotics engineer, huh? I suppose that means you maintain the animatronic Adam and Eve and the dinosaurs and all the rest of that crap."

She crushed her empty coffee cup and threw it on the floor, apparently by reflex, as she spoke. Her anger took Campbell aback.

"The displays aren't as intrusive as you might think," he said. "There's only a handful of animatronics, and a few robots. Most of the displays are virtual, a package that visitors can download to their frames."

The woman compressed her lips, shook her head, turned away and put her frames on. Campbell shrugged and looked out of the window. The afternoon sun picked out the table-lands and mesas and escarpments, and after a while the landscape below opened up into a single enormous feature. Campbell became aware of the woman leaning sideways again. He leaned back, to give

her a better view. She looked down, her eyewear pushed up on her forehead, until the Grand Canyon was out of sight.

"Doesn't look much like Waimangu," she said.

Campbell found himself giving her a complicit grin.

"You're right about that," he said. "I don't believe in flood geology."

"What *do* you believe in, then?"

"I believe the Bible," said Campbell. "Which means I believe it about the Creation and the Flood, and the dates when these happened. I just think it's presumptuous to look for *evidence*. We should take God's word for it."

"So you don't think the fossils were left by the Flood?"

"No."

"So how do you explain them?"

"I don't *have* to explain them," said Campbell. "But I can point out that it's a *presumption* that they're the remains of animals. What we *find* in the rocks are boneshaped stones."

The woman gave him a look of amused disbelief. "And feather-shaped stones, skin-shaped stones, footprint-shaped stones . . . ?"

"As you say, stones."

"So God planted them to test our faith?"

"No, no! We can't say that. Before people started *believing* that these stones were remains, they believed they were natural created forms of rock. It didn't trouble their faith at all."

She bumped her forehead with the heel of a hand. "And how do you explain the stars, millions of light years away?"

"How do we know they're millions of light years away?"

"By measuring their parallax," the woman said.

"Good," said Campbell. "Most people don't even know that, they just believe it because they were told. But what the astronomers actually measure, when they work out a stellar parallax, is the angles between beams of light. They then *assume* that these beams come from bodies like the Sun, for which they have no independent evidence at all."

"Oh yes, they do! They have spectrograms that show the composition of the stars."

"Spectrograms of beams of light, yes."

"And now we have the space telescopes, we can see the actual planets—heck, we can even see the clouds and continents on Earth-sized planets, with that probes-flying-in-formation set-up, what's it called?"

"The Hoyle Telescope. Which gathers together beams of light."

"Which just *happen* to form images of stars and planets!"

"It doesn't just happen. God designed them that way. Not to fool us, of course not, but to show us His power, His infinite creativity. He *told* us He had made lights in the sky. It's *we* who are responsible if we make the unwarranted assumption that these lights come from other suns and other worlds that God told us nothing about."

"So the entire universe, outside the solar system, is just some kind of light show?"

"That's as far as the evidence goes at the moment," said Campbell. "And speaking of evidence, I'll remind you that if these supposed galaxies were real physical bodies billions of years old, then they wouldn't hold together gravitationally. They'd long since have spun apart. The only explanation the astronomers have for *that* is dark matter, matter they can't see and have never found or identified, but which they postulate because it's necessary to explain away the evidence of a young universe on the basis of their assumptions."

The woman screwed up her eyes for a moment.

"This is like a nightmare," she said. "Don't tell me any more of what you believe in. I just don't want to know."

Campbell had several replies primed for that, but he just nodded.

"Fair enough," he said.

He turned back to the window.

They didn't talk for the rest of the flight. Campbell alternated between dozing and looking out of the window, and came to full alertness as the long descent began. Around eight a.m., on what felt like a day too soon, he noticed the green tip of Ireland, then the green and brown hills of the West of Scotland. The seat-belt sign came on. The trolleydollies cleared trash and ensured that everything was stowed. Quite suddenly, Edinburgh appeared on the horizon, and a few moments later the aircraft began to spiral down. The land whipped past in a giddy swirl that slowed gradually as the aircraft began, even more disquietingly, to yaw like a falling leaf. The woman beside Campbell grasped his left hand with her right. Surprised, he turned and smiled, but her eyes were shut tight. Campbell could see towers all around, shockingly close. The downward jets cut in, a brief blast. The craft swayed from side to side, side-slipped a little, then, after another down thrust, it settled on the landing pad and rolled gently to its bay a few tens of metres away.

The woman opened her eyes and let go of Campbell's hand.

"Thanks," she said, and that was all she said. Campbell was still feeling smug as he retrieved his rolling case from the overhead locker and debarked.

He nodded and smiled to the robot that thanked him in the doorway and wished him a pleasant stay or safe onward journey. The heat struck him as soon as he stepped through the exit door. He'd known to expect it but, coming straight from a New Zealand winter via twenty hours in the aircraft's air-conditioned coolness, the thirty-degrees-Celsius heat opened his pores instantly. He strolled through Customs, dragged his case along walkways and underpasses to his pre-booked Travelodge check-in, and took the lift to his room. He thanked God it was air-conditioned.

The view was of the corner of one tower and the back of another. Shadows of aircraft passed over like predatory birds every few seconds. Campbell unpacked a change of clothes, laid his Bible on the bedside cabinet, and took his washbag to the bathroom. After showering, shaving, and putting on fresher and lighter clothes, he felt ready to face the Scottish August heat. He was, as he'd expected, jet lagged, but he intended to surf that zoned-out sense of unreality to get him through the awkward confrontation to come. That, plus some instant coffee and a prayer. He suspected that the men he had come to meet were counting on the same thing to compel him to honesty. That seemed the most plausible reason why they'd insisted on meeting him the morning he arrived.

His instructions were quite specific. He was not to use any public transport or taxi. He was not to phone. He just had to walk, following the map. The map was hand drawn. Campbell had it folded inside his Bible. He took it out and looked at it while he sipped his coffee. He had been warned not to store it on frames or any other electronic device. Which was fine with Campbell. He had a good memory, drilled by childhood years of catechism and Bible study, and he didn't use frames anyway.

He folded the map, stuck it in his shirt pocket, and headed out. At the exit it took a moment's puzzled gaze at the sky for him to figure out which direction was north.

Turnhouse had a raw feel, like all airport developments. The strips followed the old runway paths. Of all the ways to get around—skybridge, tunnel, monorail, shuttle bus, bicycle—surface walking was the worst provided for. Campbell made his way along narrow weed-grown sidewalks between and around the feet of the towers. Office blocks of HSBC, Nissan, Honeywell, Gazprom; factories of ever-changing Carbon Glen start-ups; high-rise farms, car parks, the control tower like the hilt of a giant sword; slowly turning slanted slopes of solar-power collectors whose supercooled cables dripped liquid nitrogen through carbon-dioxide frost. Campbell sweated again, cooled only by the downblast of descending aircraft.

Beyond the commercial strips the paths opened to streets of fast-built housing blocks, their buckysheet sides arbitrarily coloured, their windows overlooking well-tended vegetable gardens and scuffed play areas. Every roof bristled with aerials. Every ground floor had its shop or cafe. Vehicles in the throes of repair or adaptation almost outnumbered those in running order. Kids ran around and youths hung about. Campbell dodged soccer balls and pavement cycles, irritated and baffled until he remembered that it was the school summer holidays here. Old people and young parents were the only adults he could see; the others, he guessed, were working in the farm and factory towers or cleaning the offices. Despite these indications of full employment, the place had an air of newness and impermanence, of being the result of a displacement and decantation, the outcome of a scheme contrived elsewhere. Something in the weathering of the older folks' faces was rural rather than urban. Campbell guessed that most of the people were here as a result of losing their homes to coastal flooding, or their livelihoods to the high-rise farms.

The streets stopped where the bulldozers still worked, just beyond a bridge over a deep, fast river. Pennants marked a jagged footpath across the site. Campbell negotiated it to the raw edge of an expanse of long grass. He stopped, as if hesitating to dive into cold water, checked his map and the tiny compass on his key ring and walked on. After a few hundred metres of slogging through what was obviously an abandoned field he reached a cluster of deserted farm buildings. There he turned right along a road under a railway bridge, then turned left sharply off the road to head north again up a slope through trees.

The trees thinned, and at the top of the slope he saw the men he'd come halfway round the world to meet.

They could have been a rock band: six men on the skyline, their long hair caught by the breeze. They wore black homburg hats, long black coats, white collarless shirts, black trousers, and black boots or shoes. As Campbell approached, grinning but apprehensive, the oldest of them strode down the slope to meet him. He was a man in his forties, with lean, lined features and bright grey eyes.

"Mr. Campbell!" the man said, grasping Campbell's hand and almost hauling him up. "John Livingston—pleased to meet you."

"John Richard Campbell, likewise."

Campbell held the grip for a moment, delighted and relieved that Livingston looked in life just as he did in his pictures, hale and spare, keen

and sharp, like some tough old Covenanter who lived on water and gruel, on the run from moss-troopers and dragoons on the moors. There wasn't much about the man online, and what there was dealt solely with his business activities; he was the owner of a small company based right here at Turnhouse, manufacturing carbon-tech components for the space industries. His spiritual endeavours were conducted, it seemed, entirely by word of mouth and—as in his contact with Campbell—by physical mail.

"I trust you had travelling mercies," Livingston said.

Campbell took a moment to parse this. "I did indeed," he said. "It all went very smoothly."

"Good, good."

Livingston led him to the top of the slope, and through a round of handshakes with the other men, all older than Campbell but still in their twenties. George Scott, Archie Riddell, William Paterson, Patrick Walker, Bob Gordon.

"'John Richard,' please," Campbell said, after they'd all called him 'Mr. Campbell.' He smiled awkwardly at the group. "Most people call me J. R."

"Fine, fine," said Livingston.

At that moment a shadow fell over them, sped across the land, and passed on.

"A superstitious person would have seen that as an omen," Campbell remarked.

Livingston chuckled. "As well we're not superstitious, then!" He looked up into the sky, as though he could see the soleta.

"Mind you," he went on, "I'm no so sure it's a good work being done up there, for all that I make money from space. There's something well presumptuous about blocking the sun, in my opinion. 'The heavens are the Lord's,' as the Psalmist says, 'but the Earth hath He given to the children of men.' I fear we'd do well not to meddle with the heavens."

"Well," said Campbell, "it's an attempt to correct previous meddling here on Earth."

"Aye, there's that," said Livingston. "Still, that's out of our hands, and right now it is to the Lord's business we must attend. Follow me."

Campbell saw that they stood at the lip of a quarry about thirty metres deep. A second later Livingston had quite alarmingly vaulted off the edge and disappeared. Campbell stepped forward, the others behind him, and found a drop of about a metre to a narrow shelf, then another such downward step, which Livingston had just taken. Campbell followed the bobbing homburg

down a succession of shelves, scree slopes, gorse handholds and chimney gulleys to the quarry's floor. The flat expanse of gravel was cupped on three sides by the quarry cliffs and broken by huge puddles, rock outcrops, clumps of bushes, rusted remnants of machinery, and the inevitable shopping trolley or two.

Livingston didn't look back. He strode to an open space in the middle of the floor and stopped, looking in all directions as the group re-formed around him.

"Walls have windows, Mr. Campbell," he said, noticing the visitor's puzzlement. His gaze flicked around his companions. "Let us now ask the Lord's blessing on our meeting."

He bowed his head, the others following suit, and said a short prayer. At the "Amen" Campbell opened his eyes and straightened up. He tried to stop his knees from trembling.

"This is an informal meeting," said Livingston, in a formal tone, "of the Kirk Session of the Free Congregation of West Lothian. No minutes are to be taken. I ask those present to affirm that they will give a faithful account of it, if called upon by the brethren."

Campbell, after a moment's hesitation, added his "Aye" to the chorus.

"Very well," said Livingston. "We are here to welcome our friend, John Richard Campbell, and to satisfy ourselves as to his saving faith before accepting him to the brotherhood of the Congregation. Now, John Richard, do you understand what is required of you?"

"I do," said Campbell.

"Do you promise to answer truthfully and without reservation?"

"Yes."

"What, John Richard, do you understand by the sum of saving knowledge?"

Campbell answered that to everyone's satisfaction.

"And do you aver that that knowledge has by grace been brought home to you, to your soul's salvation?"

"Yes." That was a question he had no hesitation in answering.

More questions followed: detailed, doctrinal, subtle. Campbell felt on less sure ground here, but his memory for the small print of the Westminster Confession and the Larger Catechism didn't let him down. At the end Livingston nodded soberly.

"Aye, John Richard, you have the root of the matter all right. We thought so, from hearing your discourses. Very powerful, spiritual, and experimental they were."

Campbell's mouth felt dry. He'd never intended his discourses to go beyond their small circle of hearers in the woods of Waimangu. Yet somehow they had: they'd come to the attention of this tiny church in Scotland, and its elders had been impressed enough to pay his return fare. The airmail letter that enclosed the e-ticket code and the invitation, the instructions and the map had been insistent that no further communication would be possible, and that if any problems arose when he met the elders personally there would be no recrimination. He still felt like a fraud.

"Now," Livingston went on, "is there anything more you would like to tell us about your discourses?"

Campbell took a deep breath. "There is something I have to tell you, which may shock you. I had no opportunity before, and I'm afraid you may feel this has all been for nothing."

Livingston glanced around the Kirk Session. "Go on," he said. "Spit it out, Mr. Campbell."

"My discourses," said Campbell, "were addressed to robots."

Livingston's eyes held steady. "What kind of robots?"

"Humanoid robots," Campbell said. "The kind that are no longer made, because people find them disturbing. And they're self-aware robots, with the same kind of minds that . . . emerged, we're told, in some combat mechs in the Fai—the Oil Wars. Some of these humanoid robots have taken refuge in Waimangu. A few of these have shown an interest in the faith, perhaps having become curious about the basis for creation science. And . . . I've been talking to them about it."

"And how, Mr. Campbell, would you justify putting the gospel before machines?"

"Because they asked me to," he said. He had no better answer, and could think of many worse.

"Are we not told," said Livingston, "not to cast pearls before swine, nor to give that which is holy unto the dogs?"

Campbell looked down, then up. "In my . . . teens I published some rash and forward theological speculations, I admit. I disavow them. All I can say is that the machines asked me, most earnestly, and I told them. They showed interest, and asked more, and made a practice of gathering around to listen, and . . . so it went on. I make no claims as to whether the machines have souls, but they do have rational minds. I think—I hope—there is something to be learned from that."

"And what might that be?"

"The making of artificial intelligence is one of the proudest boasts of the secularists," said Campbell. "Next to artificial life, it's the greatest triumph for their materialism. Perhaps greater. They claim to have done what Christians once claimed could be done only by God—creating a rational soul. Would this triumph not turn to ashes in their mouths if their own creations were to acknowledge the true Creator?"

"If the Lord could speak out of the mouth of Balaam's ass," said Livingston, "it's possible He could use a robot's mouth for a similar purpose. Quite aside from the question of the robot's having a soul. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes!" said Campbell, relieved. "Exactly."

"Well, John Richard," said Livingston, "we are very glad indeed you have said that. Would you like to know how we came to know of your discourses?"

Campbell nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Livingston stuck four fingers between his lips and let out a whistle that echoed around the quarry. The silence that followed was broken by the sound of footsteps crunching over the gravel. From behind a rock fifty metres away a man appeared, and walked towards the group. He wore an open-necked short-sleeved shirt over a broad chest and powerful arms. He had a sweatshirt knotted by its sleeves around his waist. Only when he was a few paces away did Campbell notice the subtle abnormality in the texture of his skin, and the unusually sharp definition of his sinews.

The stranger reached out a hand and clasped Campbell's in a firm, dry grip.

"Good morning, Mr. Campbell," he said. "My name is Graham Orr. I've followed your discourses with great interest. Pleased to meet you at last, sir."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Orr," said Campbell. He glanced, a little at a loss, sideways at Livingston, who was eyeing the encounter with a glint of dry humour.

"Are you—are you—?" Campbell floundered. Orr took a step back, with a grimmer smile than Livingston's.

"Not to embarrass you further, Mr. Campbell," he said, "I'm not a robot." He grimaced. "I lost my limbs and a lot else in the Faith Wars."

"Ah," said Campbell. "I beg your pardon."

It had been on the tip of his tongue to say: *We don't call them the Faith Wars*, but to indulge that political correction to this man's artificial face would have been unforgivable. The man looked no older than Campbell himself, his synthetic face showing the age he'd been when its original had been destroyed.

The technology that could give robots an almost, but not quite, human

appearance, and the technology that could give a mutilated human being a functionally and cosmetically almost perfect prosthesis were the same. Campbell wasn't even sure which had been adapted for the other purpose—they'd both come out of the surge of technological innovation—and desperate necessity—after the Oil Wars. Both applications were now obsolete—no one manufactured humanoid robots any more, for reasons that Campbell was painfully aware of, and organ and tissue regeneration could now repair every injury short of cortical destruction. He was too disconcerted by his mistake to query why Graham Orr had not chosen that option, but he hardly needed to. Tissue regeneration involved the use of embryonic stem cells, which for true Christians (and Catholics) was no less than murder.

Orr shrugged. "It's a mistake I rely on, sometimes," he said. "And it's not entirely a mistake." He turned his head and parted his hair at the side, revealing a crude gash-and-repair job on the uncannily precise prosthetic scalp. "I share my skull with an old comrade. My robot partner. His brain chip is sitting behind my ear. He's the one who heard your sermons first, via the robots."

Campbell saw the cliffs sway. He closed his eyes for a moment.

"The robots?" he said. "*My* robots? They share what I say to them with *other robots?*"

Orr nodded. "And my friend in my head shared it with me, and I shared it with John Livingston."

"And I," said Livingston, "showed the recordings to the brethren here, and we decided to meet you and be sure of you before we shared them with the congregation."

Campbell had a lot of questions on his mind, but the one that came to his voice was: "Why? Why do you want to show my discourses to your congregation?"

Livingston sighed. "It's not as if we are spoiled for choice in hearing the Word preached, John Richard. We don't even have an ordained minister. I am just the chair of the Kirk Session. As elders we can all teach, and preach, and we have the great works of the past to study, but we have found no one who speaks to us in the world of modern, compromised, backsliding so-called Christianity, except you. Finding someone who is so sound and sincere as you are is a blessing indeed."

"But," protested Campbell, "surely in all the world there are qualified ministers whose sermons you can listen to? And here in Scotland, of all places, there must be a remnant!"

Livingston looked him square in the eye. "The Churches here have all compromised!" he cried. "Here, and everywhere!" His voice took on a sing-song tone as he continued. "Compromises, compromises, compromises! With the secular state, with the Papists, with the enthusiasts and Congregationalists and modernists and dispensationalists, and with"—here his voice took on a particular vehemence—"the *sectarians*. There is only one congregation left of the one true covenanted reformed Church of Scotland, and that is us. We have no ordained minister, no student for the ministry, no synod or assembly. We have only our members, our adherents, and this Kirk Session. We are the remnant."

One by one, the men shook hands with Campbell again, and then left, trekking out of the quarry in different directions. Graham Orr disappeared into the scrub as suddenly as he'd arrived, without another word. Campbell was left alone in the middle of the quarry under the now noonday sun, with a head full of questions unanswered and unasked. The sun had moved the wrong way in the sky. His brain felt like it was running too many applications at once. He found himself wondering if the robots ever felt the same. It was something he should know. He knew more self-aware humanoid robots, more intimately, than anyone else in the world. Perhaps some veteran systems engineers at Sony knew more *about* such robots than he did, but Campbell was fairly sure that no one else knew so many robots personally. It had been a surprise that they could still surprise him.

The elders of the Free Congregation had surprised him too. He'd expected, at a minimum, an invitation to lunch at someone's house. He'd looked forward, on the flight across, to attending the Congregation's church services and prayer meetings. He had been isolated too long from the fellowship of other believers. But after welcoming him to their brotherhood and assuring him that they looked forward to a long and fruitful association, and to seeing and hearing his discourses relayed from the eyes of robots in Waimangu to a television screen in front of the congregation, the elders had shown an almost indecent haste to depart. They'd warned him against contacting them, urged him to make good use of the week he had in Edinburgh before his return flight by visiting the many historic Reformation and Covenanting sites in the city and its environs, wished him all the blessings and a safe return home—and said goodbye.

It all seemed very strange, and not a little disquieting. But, Campbell reminded himself as he trudged across the floor of the quarry, dreading the climb back to the top, they'd already been more than generous with their hospitality. They'd paid his return fare and his hotel bill. And, more significantly, they

had good reason not to see him again: they'd already satisfied themselves on his spiritual soundness—for which he was grateful, having often doubted it himself—and in this land, unlike his own, real and even nominal Christians lived under the shadow of an official disapproval that amounted, almost, to persecution.

Well, he decided as he began the slow and perilous upward scramble, he would indeed make good use of his time. He would spend his week in Edinburgh seeing what life was really like in a state that had been through the Great Rejection.

Campbell walked along George IV Bridge as far as the side of the National Museum, turned around and walked back as far as the National Library, turned again through the crowd on the pavement and walked back and hesitated for the third time at the steps of the club. The building's spire and arched doorway were the only remaining evidence that it had ever been a church. The front was plastered with posters for Festival and Fringe shows, sample loops flickering, tinny laughter and applause clashing; and with a big static advertisement for this evening's gig. He walked past the building again, then doubled back, pushing through the throng. He was going in. He had to see for himself. It was a duty. He had often condemned depravity, but he'd never seen it close up. Far from home, he now had a chance to do so without setting a bad example. He would see it for himself and walk out, never to enter such a den of iniquity again but confident that he had its measure.

This was his fourth night in Edinburgh. His first day, after he'd met the elders, had been a complete washout and write-off. He'd crashed out on his hotel bed, woken around midnight, gone out hungry and had dinner at an all-night noodle shop behind the Gazprom tower. Then he'd crashed again, waking mid-morning as the cleaning robot nudged the door.

His conclusion from the next three days of wandering around was that the streets of Edinburgh showed the benefits and drawbacks not of secular republicanism but of whopping military defeat. Campbell could see more clearly than ever why people in Britain, the US, and their former allies used the expression "the Faith Wars" for what everyone else referred to as the Oil Wars. Calling the catastrophes of the first two decades of the century the Faith Wars was the only way the former coalition countries could kid themselves they had won. They'd certainly defeated militant Islam, with secular republics now implanted throughout the Middle East. The Israel–Palestine issue could be regarded as solved, at least until the radiation dropped to a level that made the territory worth fighting over again.

In every other respect, the US and the UK had been defeated: armies destroyed, economies bankrupted, the region they'd fought to dominate now preferring to do business with the energy-hungry rising powers of their competitors. All they'd got out of the whole mess was the Oil for Blood Programme, which funded generous benefits for coalition war veterans. The main internal political consequence was the Great Rejection, in which the religious factions who'd pushed for the war had had the unwelcome experience of seeing a nasty gleam in the eyes of the returning veterans, a little glint that said: *You're next!*

But the later and longer consequences of that defeat were, Campbell now thought, far more profound. The UK had depended on US military dominance, and on its own partnership in that, to live off oil, arms deals and finance while letting its manufacturing and agriculture go hang. The loss of this privileged position had forced its successor states to fend for themselves, just as it had in the United States. The political consequences in Britain had been less drastic than the US civil war, but the industrial results were manifest everywhere: in the fragrant steam from the pavement stalls hawking late-night snacks to the Festival crowds, in the beetle-wing carapaces of the compressed-air cars hissing past on the wet street, in the whizz of bicycles weaving between them, in the neon signs on the new buildings that rose high in the gaps between the old, and in the quiet spiralling descent of the night flights overhead.

Campbell reached the entrance of the Carthaginian. He wondered how many who went in would recognise the surely deliberate allusion to the building's name when it had been a church: St. Augustine's. The entrance way was dark, the booth a rectangle of light on the left. Knees quivering, eyes shifty, Campbell handed over his cash, accepted the ticket-stamp on the back of his hand, waved it at the scanner and stepped into the main hall.

The room was dimly lit, crowded with people bopping and noisy with people talking. Roving spotlights and low-intensity lasers showed up coils and drifts of smoke in the air. At the far end was a pulpit, in which a tall man dressed in black and wearing a white clerical collar worked his machines. To the left of the entrance was a bar, with a cluster of seats and tables, all taken. Campbell decided to walk once around the room, buy a drink at the bar, observe some more and walk out.

Everyone writhed and jived to the same rhythm, and when they spoke they leaned close to each other, some even speaking mouth to ear, but Campbell could hear no music. Now and then most of the faces Campbell could see turned at once, or reacted with widened or closed eyes or a laugh to some sight

that he couldn't see. This suddenly made sense of a line on the sticker he'd seen advertising the show: "silent scene." Campbell didn't have frames, but he did have a phone clip. He tabbed the device to ambient search. Even at low volume, the music sounded loud, harsh, heavy on the rhythm. He found his feet moving and shoulders swaying to its beat as he paced along the side of the room. There was something insidious about how the music caught him up, but at least (he told himself) it meant he didn't look as out of place as he felt.

He'd never been in a place like this. He'd never so much as been to a dance, not even at school. He'd had to learn some dance steps, but that had been PE. The church he'd been brought up in frowned on dancing. Until now, he'd never quite understood why. Besides the drinking and drug-taking, this was the most appalling display of lasciviousness he'd ever seen in the flesh. Couples and larger groups, some of them same-sex, writhing and rubbing against each other. Sweat beaded their faces and their many areas of bare skin. The air was thick with sweat, with perfumes, with pheromones, with tobacco and cannabis smoke and with wafts of more subtle drugs, of which even a sidestream sniff in passing could make his head feel strange for a moment, giving a jolt of disorientation like being jet lagged but far, far more pleasant.

The final touch of depravity was the clothes. Campbell had taken some care to check beforehand that the Carthaginian wasn't some kind of fetish club, and had confirmed that it wasn't, but the general attire struck him as a long way from normal. A large minority were, like himself, wearing smart casual—which, in the case of the women, meant immodestly scant. The rest were in various costumes: the men in foppish and flashy variants of Victorian or Edwardian suits, or odd combinations thereof; the women in dresses that admittedly didn't usually reveal a lot of skin but did show off and exaggerate curves, waists, breasts, necks and hips. Long dresses that might have been otherwise modest were given a gross, perverse, erotic charge by being made of shiny black or red PVC or even leather. Some of the styles—to say nothing of elective somatic modifications such as long canine teeth—plainly alluded to dark forces: witchcraft, vampirism, Satanism! There were other outfits that would have looked sweet on little girls, but to see grown women in frilly frocks of pink and white lace and ribbons and so on (and on—the whole mode was structured around excess to the point of parody) was as perverted as it was grotesque. He'd seen Japanese girls in Auckland wearing such costumes—"gothic lolita," the style was called—and had thought it charming and harmless, but here it seemed too deliberate, too knowing in its disturbing effect. Campbell made his way past the desecrated pulpit and

was just working his way around the corner of the crowd to head back up the other side to the bar for a much-needed cooling beer. As he moved he eyed a tall and lissom woman in one of those faux-innocent costumes dancing alone, a handbag made of similar fabrics at her Mary-Janes-shod feet.

She saw him looking. She smiled, and skipped back a little, as if to invite him to join her. And as she moved, Campbell realised—he wasn't quite sure why—that she wasn't a woman at all. She was a man in lolita drag.

Campbell smiled desperately, shook his head, and retreated as fast as he could towards the bar. He didn't look back. As he wove around the bodies in his path, he discovered that the cross-dresser he'd just spotted was not the only one in the crowd. It was as if he'd suddenly become sensitised to their presence and on three separate occasions, before he finally reached the bar, his noticing was itself noticed. He returned more desperate smiles to knowing looks. He dreaded to think that these people might think he was interested in them. Getting swallowed up in the crush around the bar was a relief. His voice shook a little as he ordered a bottle of lager.

"Anything else?" the barmaid asked, putting the bottle down in front of him.

"Uh, one more, please," Campbell said, suddenly clocking that one beer wouldn't last him long or quench his thirst. The barmaid gave him an impatient look and handed over another bottle. Clutching them, Campbell elbowed his way out of the crush and looked for a place to sit. No such luck; every table was taken. And every stool at the bar. As he glanced in that direction his gaze was met with a very direct look from a woman sitting on a high stool at the far end. She had a drink, but she was facing out from the bar. She had long red hair and a long green velvet dress with gold embroidery around the neckline. She stared at him, then held up a hand curled around a tall glass and crooked her index finger at him. Her smile had nothing come-hither in it, nothing seductive. It was just a smile, and she was just a woman. Bewildered, nervous, but relieved to have someone to talk to and not to be standing around on his own, Campbell walked towards her as if hauled in on an invisible thread from that beckoning, imperious finger.

"New here?" she said.

Campbell nodded, and switched off the music in his ear.

"Uh-huh," the woman said. She sipped her drink and looked him over.

"Dave's my boyfriend," she said.

"Dave?"

She waved a hand toward the far end. "The VJ. Dave Warsaw."

"Oh, Dave Warsaw!" said Campbell, as if the name was familiar. The enthusiasm in his voice came from relief that the woman had a boyfriend. He could relax.

"I'm Jessica," the woman told him, as if that too was something he should know.

"Pleased to meet you," said Campbell. "I'm John—John Richard."

"Well, John-John, don't let your beer get warm."

Campbell took a slug of beer, its chill spreading from his gullet, and sighed.

"Hits the spot, huh?" said Jessica.

"Yes," said Campbell.

"Who's the other one for?"

Campbell felt slightly abashed. "Oh," he said, "it's for me too. Didn't want to be back in the queue too soon."

"I guess not," Jessica said. She gave him another appraising look. "Don't get many of your kind here."

"New Zealanders?" Campbell said, striving for wit.

"No," said Jessica. "Homophobes."

"I'm not—" Campbell began hotly.

"You don't like queer folks," Jessica said flatly. "And you're goddamn rude besides."

"Rude? I haven't so much as spoken to anyone here, except you."

"Exactly. Not so much as a 'No, thank you' to my good friend Arlene, and shocked looks for every other tranny you spotted, until you remembered to plaster on that grin of yours. Not to mention the glares you were giving to every gay couple you noticed on your way down the other side."

Campbell recoiled. His bottles clinked in his hand. "You've been *watching* me?"

"Dave's been keeping an eye on you," said Jessica. She flicked her ear, indicating how she knew. "He has a way of picking up on people who might be trouble."

"I'm not here to cause trouble," said Campbell. "Just—just—having a look, checking out the scene, you know?"

The lightness of his tone belied his dismay. "Be sure your sins will find you out," he'd been told often enough, and that was how he felt.

"Ah!" said Jessica. She smiled again, but this time it was like she was pleased with herself for understanding something. "You were curious."

"Yes, just curious, that's it," said Campbell, much relieved.

"Not hostile, then?"

Campbell frowned. He couldn't lie, but he didn't want not to be off the hook.

"Not exactly," he said. "Not to . . . queer folks in particular, no."

Jessica's lip curled. "Just to us all, you mean?"

"Not even that," said Campbell. "You're no worse than—" He couldn't think what next to say, but saw that he'd already said too much.

"I'm thinking of not calling the bouncer," Jessica said. "If you can prove this nonspecific hostility."

"Prove it? How?"

"You can give me that spare beer you've got there," said a voice from behind his shoulder. "And then you can give me a dance."

Campbell turned to find himself facing the man he'd backed off from.

"John-John, meet Arlene," said Jessica. She nodded to Arlene and then looked pointedly at the couple on the two adjacent bar stools. The stools were abruptly vacated as the couple took the hint and headed for the floor. Arlene took the nearest, leaving Campbell to the one in the middle. The apex of an awkward triangle.

Arlene gave Campbell a wry smile and accepted the spare bottle, then fished a dinky pink Swiss Army knife from the candy-striped handbag and pried the cap off.

"Cheers," Arlene said.

Campbell dutifully clinked bottles. Arlene put away the knife, took out a pack of cigarettes, lit up and leaned back.

"Well, John-John," said Arlene, "to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?"

"My name's John Richard," Campbell said.

"I'm sure it is, John-John," said Jessica. "Now answer the lady's question."

Arlene sat wide-eyed, half smiling, waiting to hear the answer. Arlene's hair was a blue bob—a wig, Campbell thought—apparently pinned in place by a twisty arrangement of small paper flowers and a ribbon. The face the wig framed would have been rather boyish without the make-up; with it, it looked definitely girlish.

Campbell guessed that Arlene was a year or two younger than himself, and wondered what tragic circumstances or strange sins had brought this affliction on the unfortunate lad.

"All right," said Campbell. He took another fortifying sip. "The truth is, I'm a Christian, a lay preacher. I've never been in a place like this. When I

was younger, my parents would have forbidden it. At home, I wouldn't want to go, in case anyone recognised me and thought I believed it was all right, or that I was a hypocrite. But I'm on a short visit to Scotland, hardly anyone here knows me, and I was, as I said, curious as to what people do in dance clubs. That's all."

Arlene giggled; Jessica guffawed.

"What?" said Campbell. "I've told you the truth."

"I've heard some tales," said Arlene, languidly waving a pink-gloved, smoke-trailing hand, "but not that one. A lay preacher!"

Campbell shook his head, wishing that his ears weren't burning. "I don't get it."

"What she means," said Jessica, "is that whatever you tell us, and whatever you tell yourself, the truth is that you came in here because you wanted to, and you wanted to because, whether you admit it or not, you had some idea of the scene and you liked the idea of it."

"I think you like the idea of *me*," added Arlene.

Campbell stared at them both, completely thrown by the suggestion. He wasn't outraged or even embarrassed by it. Nothing of the sort had ever occurred to him.

"No, it isn't that," he said. "I know you people have your psychological theories, and maybe in some cases"—he gave a grim smile, acknowledging that they all knew the cases—"they're on the mark, but not for me and not for most people who would agree with me. We have our views, which aren't the same as yours, and that's all there is to it."

"So what, for example," said Arlene, "is your view of me?"

Campbell glanced at Jessica.

"We won't take offence," she said. "I won't call the bouncer, and you won't make Arlene cry."

"I feel sorry for you," Campbell told Arlene.

"Boo hoo," said Arlene. "Why?"

"Because . . ." Campbell paused. Quoting Leviticus wouldn't get him far. He had to put it in a way that made sense to the person he was witnessing to.

"Because," he said, confident again, "you're not fulfilling your life, your true self. Your true self is a man. And God, if you'll indulge me far enough to say so, *made* you a man and wants you to live as a man."

"I *do* live as a man," said Arlene, flexing a bicep under the frill of a short puffy sleeve. "I drive a dump truck at Turnhouse. I've had girlfriends, as well as"—a sweet smile at Jessica—"*girlfriends*, and I don't feel unfulfilled at all."

"But all this!" cried Campbell. "That can't be what God or, if you don't believe in God, then let's say for the sake of argument *nature* originally intended for you."

Arlene lit another cigarette. "If God or nature had any plans for me, they must have included the line: 'He'll put on women's clothing, and hang around in bars.'"

That last line was half sung, in some shared cultural reference that Campbell didn't get but was the cue for shrieks of laughter from Arlene and Jessica.

"Besides," Arlene went on, "this is something I like doing. It's in my own time. It's fun. It harms nobody. What's wrong with it? I mean, what is your problem with it?"

"Well, I don't have a problem with it, as such," said Campbell. "Like I said, it's nothing personal. But I'm certain God wouldn't have forbidden it if it wasn't somehow against nature. I don't know why you have these impulses, but I'm sure you weren't born with them." He frowned. "Were you ever made to wear girls' clothes in childhood, or something like that?"

"Chance would have been a fine thing," said Arlene, with a lascivious shiver.

Campbell sighed. So much for appealing to the law of nature.

"I can only suggest that you read the Bible," he said. Arlene didn't look as if that was likely any time soon.

"All right," said Jessica. "Don't bother telling us about cross-dressing being an abomination, which is what you'd come down to at the end of all your rationalisations, and which I'd take seriously as a sincere motivation if you were just as down on prawn cocktails and cheese-and-ham sandwiches and you weren't wearing polyester-mix socks. You told me earlier that you weren't against queers specifically, you were just as much against everything that goes on here." She waved an encompassing arm. "All this, yeah?"

"Yes," said Campbell.

He put down his now-empty bottle. He hadn't seen Jessica order any more, but she passed him another.

"Thanks," he said.

"Go on, lay preacher," Jessica said. "Wet your throat and tell us what's wrong with this."

"It stimulates lust," said Campbell.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," said Jessica. She shrugged. "People have needs."

"They don't have a need to have their needs inflamed beyond what they can reasonably control," said Campbell.

"I do," said Jessica, with a laugh. "Are you telling me you don't?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

Jessica nodded slowly. "Yes. And that's why you'd cheerfully forbid—or dissuade—other people from coming to a dance hall. You think it's as easy for them to suppress the needs they fulfill here as it is for you. Well, it isn't. And if you think it's easy, it's because you've never allowed yourself to feel these needs, or you have different needs."

"I never said it was easy," said Campbell.

"But it's easy for you."

"That," said Campbell, "kind of contradicts what you said earlier, about how I *really* wanted to come here because deep down I'm *really* attracted to the scene, or *really* turned on by people like Arlene here."

He leaned back, knowing that he looked smug. He was right, and he was sure of it. In a way, Jessica was right—it was easy for him. He got on well with women. Older women, married women. Girls in their early teens, or younger. Any woman at all, in fact, so long as she wasn't about his own age and unattached. Which was why it had been such a relief to learn right at the start that Jessica had a boyfriend. And this Arlene, "she" wasn't a woman in the first place, and therefore quite easy to get on with, as well as quite . . . Campbell felt a sudden dryness in his throat, and was overcome by a fit of coughing.

"Sorry," he croaked, and took a long swallow of beer. "I'm not used to all this indoor smoke. It's still banned in New Zealand."

"Banned?" said Jessica. "How very Sozi."

"Sozi?"

Jessica waved a hand. "Old politics," she said. "Last Scottish government after the war and before the Republic. Socialist-Nationalist-Green coalition. I was too young at the time to notice anything but the queues and the blackouts, but according to my parents it was a bit like your lot's Reign of the Saints."

Campbell closed his eyes for a moment, smiling and shaking his head. "My lot's Reign of the Saints?"

"Puritan Parliament, 1650s," Jessica said. "Followed, you may remember, by the Restoration, when people had tremendous fun systematically doing everything the Puritans had forbidden. Same here."

After that, to Campbell's immense relief, the conversation turned to the differences between Scotland and New Zealand, a subject on which he could

hold forth, and Jessica and Arlene could correct and contradict, without raising any disturbing thoughts. After about an hour, Campbell made to depart, but before he went Arlene insisted on the full measure of the forfeit.

The dance took ten minutes. It seemed a lot longer, but it ended at last.

"Thank you," Arlene said, with a smirk and a curtsey.

Campbell smiled, and said his thank-you and goodbye. He turned away sharply, nodded to Jessica, still on her perch, and hurried out. Just before he reached the exit he noticed a burly man in a sharp business suit standing by the door, relaxed and alert in the standard bouncer's pose, his hands clasped lightly across his groin. It was Graham Orr.

The only consolation for Campbell, as he blundered out into the hot, wet night, was that in Orr's artificial eyes there had been not a flicker of recognition.