



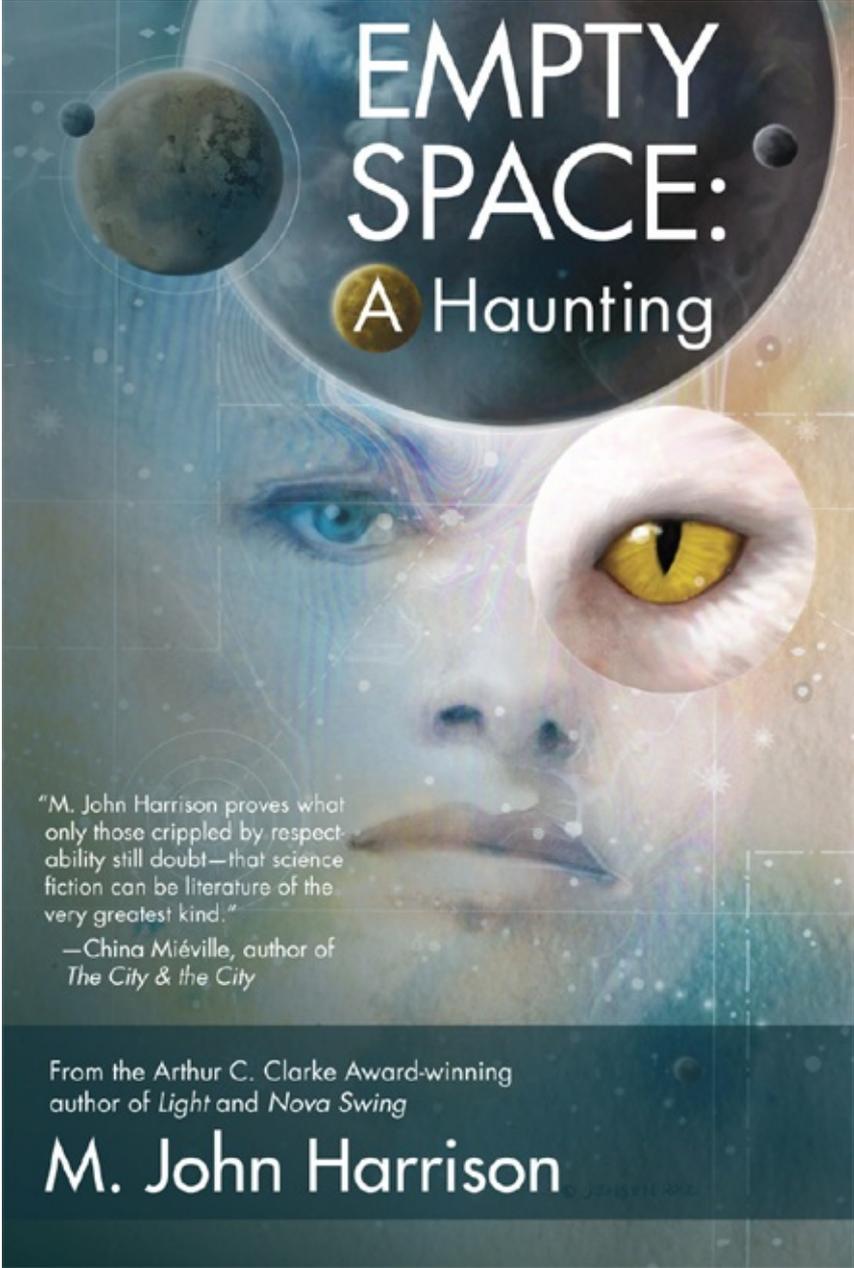
EMPTY SPACE: A Haunting

"M. John Harrison proves what only those crippled by respectability still doubt—that science fiction can be literature of the very greatest kind."

—China Miéville, author of
The City & the City

From the Arthur C. Clarke Award-winning
author of *Light* and *Nova Swing*

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Praise for M. John Harrison

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—*The Review of Contemporary Fiction*

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Empty Space

EMPTY
SPACE:
A Haunting

M. JOHN HARRISON

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SAN FRANCISCO

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To Forced Ent

“No point is more central than this, that empty space is not empty. It is the seat of the most violent physics.”

—*John A Wheeler*

“Our instruments have limits. Since knowledge of physical reality depends on what we can measure, we will never know all there is to know...Much better to accept that our knowledge of physical reality is necessarily incomplete...”

—*Marcelo Gleister*

“In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times.”

—*A E van Vogt*

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1: Organs

Anna Waterman heard two cats fighting all evening.

At ten o'clock she went out into the garden and called in the family tom. A decade or so ago, her daughter Marnie, age thirteen and already unfathomable, had named this animal "James."

Late summer displayed a greenish afterglow at the bottom of a sky full of stars. Anna's was a long garden, perhaps fifty yards by twenty, with lichenous apple trees in unmown grass and a leaning summerhouse which looked like something from a 1970s Russian film—falling apart, surrounded by overgrown flowerbeds, filled with those things you discard but don't throw away. The flowerbeds had an unhealthy vitality. Every year, tended or not, they produced dense mixtures of indigenous weeds, wild flowers and—since the warming of the mid-2000s—exotics with large petals and fleshy leaves, blown in as seeds from who knew where.

"James!" Anna called.

James didn't respond, but neither were there sounds of him killing or being killed. Anna was encouraged.

She found him in the base of the hedge at the end of the garden, where he had something cornered among the roots and dry earth. He was nosing it about, tapping at it with a front paw, purring to himself. She stroked him and he ignored her.

"You old fool," she said. "What have you found now?"

Some gelid bits and pieces loosely scattered with soil. Except for the size and colour, they looked like internal organs. They had the swelling curve of pig's kidney. There was a faint glow to them. Anna picked one up and dropped it immediately—it was warm to the touch. The cat, delighted, sprang upon it and knocked it about.

"How disgusting you are, James," Anna told him.

Later she put on Marigold gloves, slid two or three of the objects into a plastic bag and carried them back to the house. There, she emptied them into a glass dish. Slumped on the worktop they looked like any offal, unused to supporting themselves in the world. Their colours resembled the flasks of liquid you could still see in the windows of pharmacies when Anna was young—blues, greens and a rich permanganate—now faded and a touch acidic under the halogen lights. Anna removed her best Wusthof knife from the block and then, nerve failing her, put it back again. She stared at the contents of the dish from different angles, then went to telephone Marnie.

“Why are you calling?” Marnie said, after five minutes.

“I suppose I just wanted to tell you how lucky I’d been. In all sorts of things.”

At a glance, Anna knew, this seemed absurd. She had been anorexic throughout her twenties; twice a failed suicide. Her first husband, Michael, who wasn’t much better, had walked into the sea one night off Mann Hill Beach south of Boston. They never found his body. He had been a brilliant man but unbalanced. “He was a brilliant man,” she would tell people, “who took things too much to heart.” But since then she had remarried, borne Marnie, lived a life. She had made quite a nice life with Marnie’s father, first in London and then in this quiet, expensive house near the river. It wouldn’t have suited Michael. Living had to be an effort for him; a kind of punishment.

“Neither of us knew how to live,” she said now.

“Anna—”

“He had some difficulties.”

Marnie received this in silence.

“You know,” Anna said. “Sex difficulties. Your father was much better at that side of things.”

“Anna, that’s more information than I need.”

Marnie had been conceived out of both guilt and relief at losing Michael—literally, misplacing him—that night on Mann Hill Beach. Confused, Anna had flown home to London and fucked the first kind person she found. That was the only way to put it, especially from this distance. She had no regrets, although at times the memory made her feel she ought to be especially nice to Marnie. Now she had a sudden surprised recollection of Michael leaning over her in the dark, and one of them saying something like, “Sparks! Sparks in everything!”

“Anna? Anna, I have to go now. It’s late. It’s midnight.”

“Is it, dear?”

“You’ve got Dr Alpert tomorrow,” Marnie reminded her.

“I’m afraid I’ve lost the details of that appointment,” said Anna in a vague but mutinous way.

“Good job I kept a note of them, then.”

Anna, suddenly overwhelmed with anxiety and love, said, “Oh, Marnie, I do hope you enjoy sex. I’d hate to think of you missing out on something so lovely.”

“I’ll drive you to the station in the morning. Goodnight, Anna.”

Why was I phoning? Anna asked herself. When no answer came, she went to the kitchen door and looked out. Mist had pooled two or three feet deep in the rough pasture between the garden and the river. Above it, she could just make out a line of willows. She called the cat; offered him rabbit-flavoured food; took herself to bed, where her dream woke her as usual at ten past four in the morning, soaked to the skin and with a kind of leaden buzzing in her ears. It was less a sound, as she often tried to explain to Dr Alpert, than a feeling. “It’s a feeling from the dream,” she would say. It was a physical sensation. “I’m not even sure it’s me who’s feeling it.” She struggled out of bed, weary and ill, and went downstairs to get water. Grey light was creeping in round the edges of the kitchen blinds. She thought she might have another look at the organs—or whatever they were—in the dish, but they’d gone. James could easily have jumped up on the counter and eaten them, but Anna felt they’d simply melted away.

There was a drop of liquid left. It looked enough like ordinary water to be tipped down the sink. She decided not to use the dish for food again.

Every night since Michael walked into the sea, Anna had gone out to call in a cat, fetch a chair from the lawn to save it from the damp, look up at the stars. Wherever she lived it was the same. Each night it had been the same dream.

She thought: I was phoning for someone to talk to.

Next morning she truanted on Dr Alpert, changed trains at London Victoria and made her way down through the postal codes until, the other side of Balham, she thought she recognised the way the streets curled and dovetailed across the swell of a hill. “Orchid Nails,” read the signs outside the station: “Minty Pearls Dental Clinic.” Anna descended from the train and wandered thoughtfully along, staring into the windows of empty houses. She had no plan. She favoured quiet residential avenues and a particular kind of four-bedroom mock-Tudor, with laurels and a slip of driveway to one side of its front garden. The shabbier a place looked, the more likely it was to hold her attention. By mid-afternoon she thought she might be in Sydenham Hill. She had covered miles under the enamel light, trespassed on the hard standings of a dozen middle-class homes. She was exhausted. Her ankles hurt. She was lost. It wasn’t the first time she had done this.

Sydenham Hill turned out, in point of fact, to be Norbiton, a place named after the suburb in an Edwardian novel. Anna sat down with a cup of tea in the station café and emptied her bag on to the table. It was full of the usual silt—ends of make-up, a single glove, an address book bloated with the names of people she never saw anymore, her phone with its flat battery. There were receipts folded into very small squares, foreign coins and coins no longer in circulation. There was an old outboard computer drive: this, she took up.

It was perhaps two inches by three, with curved, organic-looking edges, its smooth dull surface interrupted at one end by a line of firewire ports—one of those objects which, new and exciting in its day, now looked as dated as a cigarette case. Michael had left it with her, along with some instructions, putting his warm hand over Anna’s—they were in a railway café just like this one—and urging her:

“You will remember, won’t you?”

All she could remember now was being afraid. When you’re afraid of everything, especially each other, you have to walk away; consign each other to the world.

Anna had arrived in Norbiton between trains. She drank a second cup of tea and stared out with vague good will at the empty platform, where everything had a thick fresh coat of paint. After about twenty minutes an old man was helped into the café by some railway staff. He had outlived himself. His bald brown head seemed too big for his neck; his underlip, the colour of uncooked liver, drooped in exhausted surprise at finding himself still there. They sat him at Anna’s table, where he banged her feet and legs about with his stick, shoved the contents of her bag carelessly across the table towards her, and, as soon as he was settled, began eating salmon sandwiches directly from a paper bag. His hands were rosy with veins, the skin over them shiny and slack. He ate greedily but at the same time with a curious lack of interest, as if his body remembered food but he didn’t. As he ate he whispered to himself. After some minutes he put the bag down, leaned across the table and tapped Anna’s hand sharply.

“Ow,” said Anna.

“Nothing is real,” he said.

“I’m sorry?”

“Nothing is real. Do you understand? There are only contexts. And what do they context?” He gave Anna an intent look; breathed heavily a few times through his mouth. “More contexts, of course!” Anna, who had no idea how to respond, stared angrily out of the window. After a moment he said, as if he hadn’t already spoken to her, “I have to get on the next train. I wonder if you would be kind enough to help me?”

“I wouldn’t, no,” Anna said, collecting up her things.

It was almost dark when she arrived home. Marnie had left irritable messages on the answerphone. “Pick up, Anna. I’m really very cross with you. It’s not the first time you’ve done this.” Anna made herself an omelette and ate it in the kitchen standing up, while she rehearsed what she would say to Marnie. The last of the daylight was fading out of the sky. James the cat jumped up on to the kitchen top and begged. Absent-minded with guilt, Anna gave him more of the omelette than she had intended to.

“I forgot to go,” she repeated stubbornly to herself. “Marnie, I simply forgot.”

Later, she thought she saw a glimmer of light in the summerhouse. Thin river mist had lapped up past the garden hedge and now hung between the apple trees. The grass was damp. Everything smelled sharply of itself, including the cat who—his faith in the generosity of the world confirmed—ran ahead of Anna with his tail up until he found something to interest him in the hedge. Anna pulled at the summerhouse door. Junk lay about in the dark: two leather chairs, Marnie’s old Cambridge bicycle, a carpet someone had brought back from India. Rooting about under the window, she burst a cardboard box, from which spilled a quantity of ornaments, photograph frames, bits of china and silk, shellac records—family stuff of Tim’s going all the way back to the 1920s, stuff she had been meaning to clear out since he died. Each generation, she thought, leaves itself scattered in a kind of alluvial fan across postcodes and sideboards, inside wardrobes, jukeboxes, second-hand shops and places like this.

“Titanium,” Michael had said as he closed her hands round the computer drive: “Today’s popular metal.”

All those years ago she had promised to return it to a colleague of his in South London. She remembered the man’s name: Brian Tate; but though she remembered what his house looked like, she couldn’t really remember where it was. If she saw it she would recognise it. Something awful had happened, or was about to happen, the last time she was there. We never went back, she told herself. I know that. We were too afraid.

2: Hard Goods

One piss-wet night in Saudade City a broker called Toni Reno made his way down Tupolev Avenue to the noncorporate spaceport, out of which he ran his small but successful operation.

Toni didn't mind walking in the rain. He could always turn up the collar of his Sadie Barnham work jacket, or, if that sensation got old, flag down a rickshaw. When he looked up between the buildings there were already gaps in the cloud cover, revealing part of the Kefahuchi Tract opened like a map of the city across clear wet sky. The rain would stop in half an hour, the streets would dry out fast in an offshore wind. Meanwhile Toni could enjoy the feeling of weather. He could enjoy the way the monas laughed past him on Tupolev, on their way to the bar they called the Tango du Chat, huddled up in their short fur coats, stepping out bravely in those inappropriate shoes they loved. Nothing new, nothing old, people believed in Toni's time of the world: everything in that thin yet endless tranche of sensation between the past and the future.

Waiting for traffic at Tupolev and 9, he got a dial-up from his loader, a woman called Enka Mercury who'd been on the Beach longer than Toni was alive. The pipe was poor and Enka sounded as if she was calling from outer space.

"Your goods you wanted are in the yard," she said.

"That's good, Enka."

"Is it?" she said. "The fucker spoke to me, Toni."

Toni laughed. "What did it say?"

"Mind your own business. I hope you know what you're doing here."

"Hey kid," Toni said: "You tell me."

You knew Toni Reno without ever having seen him before: the usual thirty-year-old hipster with a girlfriend in middle management, he was unconnected, young to be in business on his own. Five per cent earned him a refurb townhouse in the Magellan Ladder and quality off-the-shelf tailoring from a contact he had at Preter Coeur. At that time, which turned out to be his life's high point, he was brokering cargo from all across the Beach, taking a significant tranche of his profit off interplanetary tax gradients, which—steep, complex and subject to sudden variation—caused him inevitable sleepless nights. For the times he wasn't working, he and his girlfriend maintained a rewarding but controllable tank habit, an experience called *Brass Arm* they shared with their cohort all across Saudade.

“Fucked if I ever saw anything like this,” Enka said. “You’d think it was—”

At that point the pipe went down.

“Call me if you need to,” Toni Reno said into the air, in case his loader could still hear him. “I’ll be with you in ten.”

Toni rarely looked at a shipment. Live produce from Perkins Rent or Peterburg, alien cultural items from Port Ferry, cold-stored indentured cultivars from Silicon New Turk, they were all the same to him. But he was interested to know what would unnerve Enka Mercury, a woman who had seen it all, so he hailed a rickshaw. The rickshaw rattled off down Cobain with Toni in it, then hung a fast right, trailing ambient music and ads that resembled soft-focus moths in shades both pastel and neon. The rain had stopped but to Toni there still seemed to be plenty of water on the road.

He found the cargo where he expected it, in a long, otherwise empty shed down by the port’s south fence.

It was perhaps twelve feet by three, a sealed tube not quite circular in section, with a porthole at one end over which someone had recently welded a thick plug of different material; and a panel of lights, broken. Left to itself, it tended to float waist-height above the dusty concrete floor, the air immediately around it flickering in a way that made Toni nauseous but which didn’t impede him from touching it. He walked around it. Its surface was dull and ablated as if it had spent time in empty space. It struck him as old, rotten, guilty. In the bills of lading—downloaded from an FTL router thirty-five lights along the Beach—it was logged as “hard goods”; but the object itself, though unlabelled, had illegal artefact written all over it.

No point of origin was on record.

“Enka!” he called. “Where the fuck are you?”

He thought he heard a shout from somewhere out on the windy hard standings in the dark, too far away to be an answer, or to be anything to do with him.

Toni Reno’s percentage always generated itself in a financial space far removed from the physical transaction itself. It was a given for everyone in this kind of arrangement that they never knew how their part of it related to any other. In this case, the paperwork advised him, his responsibility ended when the goods were stowed in the hold of a freighter named the *Nova Swing*. So when he discovered he could move the object just by pushing it, he decided to load it himself.

It was hard work, like manhandling something in water. Once he manoeuvred it out of the shed, there were six or seven hundred yards to cover. The arcs were off in the whole south sector of the port, the rain coming on again. One moment clouds filled the sky, the next they had passed over and the Tract cast down a bluish light. Reno would push a while; stop and call out, “Enka!” or try to dial her up; then bend down to get his hands and forearms underneath one end of the tube, almost embracing it. That was the position to push from, the embrace. Each time he pushed, the tube dipped and rocked a little on its long axis before moving forward in a slow, oily way. One moment it had more inertia than you expected, the next a breath of wind was enough to send it off course.

The boat they called the *Nova Swing* stood up against the night sky among all the other shorthaulers—tubby, three-finned, brass-looking. Her cargo cradle was out. A

man known around the port as Fat Antoyne sat on the cradle rail drinking from a pint of Black Heart, his unzipped leather pilot jacket and oiled pompadour flapping in the wind up there. When he saw Reno he waved. The lift descended its eighty feet slowly, with whining servo noises, and jolted to a halt; at which Reno put in one last embrace and shoved the goods aboard.

“Hey, Fat Antoyne,” he said.

Fat Antoyne said hey. He said, “What’s this?”

Reno brushed down his Sadie Barnham coat. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

He felt rain cooling the back of his neck and his scalp. It darkened the surface of the tube, the way rain soaks a little into any porous surface; which he somehow didn’t expect. You didn’t think about this object—which he now saw had faint remains of moulded features, worn down to bulges and vague crockets long ago—as being subject to weather. The two of them contemplated it for a moment, then compared paperwork in case that helped. Fat Antoyne had “mortsafe.” “You know what a ‘mortsafe’ is?” he asked Toni Reno.

Reno admitted he had never heard that word. His lading bills had “hard goods,” that was all.

Antoyne chuckled. “Hard goods is right,” he said. “I’ll sign off on that.” Close up, you saw his chinos, tailored for comfort in some kind of twill, had grease stains down the front. He was on his own tonight, he said. His crew were getting rest and relaxation in a bar they liked, he wasn’t so keen himself. He offered Reno a drink, but Reno regretfully declined.

“You take care,” Reno told him.

When Reno had gone, Fat Antoyne put the cap back on the bottle and put the bottle in his jacket.

“Asshole,” he said.

He hoisted the tube up into his number one hold. “Mortsafe,” he said, and chuckled. That was a word he could get used to. When he touched the tube, it was cold. He knelt down and carefully passed his hands underneath, feeling the faint resistance you feel when you try to press two magnets together. He studied its surface with the help of a loupe designed to operate in three different regimes, making a clicking noise with his tongue as if he was thinking. Then he shrugged—because what did he know?—secured it, and left. After the arcs went off in the hold, and Fat Antoyne had closed the hatch, and his footsteps had gone away inside the ship, the tube seemed to settle a little in its restraints. A few minutes went by, then a few more. A couple of lights flickered suddenly on the panel up by the porthole.

When Reno got back to the warehouse to have one more look for his loader, he found her hanging some feet in the air above the place where the artefact had been. She was turned towards him as he entered, her face presenting upside down, her back arched as if he had caught her in the middle of a suspended moment of jouissance, a sort of unpremeditated back-flip. She was naked.

“Christ, Enka,” Reno said. He wondered if she had been there all along.

The patch of air around her was dark and bluish, despite the lights being on, and in it the shadows fell at wrong angles both to one another and to the shadows in the rest of the shed. This gave Enka an effect of being snatched from the world inhabited by

people like Reno to another, colder, more complex regime, as if in seeking release she had exchanged one set of predictabilities for another. Her arms and legs were still moving slowly. Although that action caused her to rotate a little, it seemed to make no difference to her position in the air; or to her essential plight. Her expression was one of understanding, the slow understanding that will lead to panic in another moment. At an undetermined point before this understanding set in, something had inserted itself powerfully at a diagonal from her left armpit to the lower part of her ribcage on the opposite side. A long triangular flap of tissue was hanging down, but it was a white and fishy colour unsuited to a human being. If he stood on his toes and extended his reach, Toni could catch the end of it, but it had a rubbery touch made it hard to hold, and when he got sufficient grip to pull on it nothing seemed to happen. If her new state shared enough of the boundary conditions of the normal to anchor her there, it was also different enough for Enka to be unreachable by Toni Reno.

Toni couldn't think how it happened.

"Fuck you, Enka," he said aloud. "For getting yourself into this."

As if in answer a voice said: "My name is Pearlent and I come from the future."

The shed was empty under the arcs. Enka swam backwards towards him through her new reality, like someone suspended in a low-grade hologram.

Toni ran out the shed, past the *Nova Swing*—now closed and dark—and across the noncorporate port in the wind. He would have run all the way home to his refurb in the Magellan Ladder if a woman—or what he thought of as a woman—hadn't come at him in a side street off Tupolev. She came at him very fast and at an odd angle out of the shadows—as if before Toni arrived she had been lying down in the shadows at the base of a building—and took hold of him round the upper body. Toni's tailoring was state of the art, but a millisecond or two after it cut in, her tailoring somehow switched it off again. Toni was ramped—nerve propagation speeds were up all over his body, his haemoglobin structures were retuning themselves in the picosecond range—but he never landed a punch. He felt as if he had run into a brick wall. He was behind the action. He was still seeing her come up from the pavement when she wrapped her left arm almost lovingly round his head and pushed the barrel of a weapon up into his armpit.

"So what do you want to do next?" she asked him, in a voice which seemed really interested to know.

When Toni moved his head fractionally to be able to speak, she pressed the trigger and that was that. A couple of b-girls on their way back from a night at the Ivory Coast found him very early the next morning. Apparently he was surrounded by black and white cats. "We're knee deep in them," one of the b-girls explained to the police detectives. "So cute. But then we find this guy." When Toni's girlfriend heard later how suddenly he died, she said it was the way Toni would have liked it. He dug his existence in this world but he didn't cling to it. Toni's belief, she said, was that if you could get your life down to a nanometre thick it would stretch out forever.

She added: "As far as you were concerned, obviously."

3: Swimming with Eels

Saudade, Friday, 4 am: Two agents and a wire jockey were in a holding cell in the basement of the old SiteCrime building at the corner of Uniment & Poe, servicing a client.

It was a small cold room, with a retro-medical decor of cracked white tiles and large, complex overhead lighting. Straps confined the client to a stainless steel table; there were tubes in many of his orifices. They had run the wire up into his brain, and by moving it about drew from him a few warm, puppylike yips and yaps, also some twitching of the limbs. No one expected much. It was a calibration period. Every so often the wire jockey leaned back from the green felt eyepieces of his equipment and massaged the small of his back. He was tired, and he wasn't even sure what he was looking for. Meanwhile the client, a New Man with the characteristic shock of bright red hair, tried out fresh expressions each time the wire moved.

He was naked, had suffered a brief convulsion and was secreting a wide range of pheromones. He seemed eager to please. He would laugh vaguely, then wince. Or his eyes would turn up as if he was trying to look into his own head and he would say, in a tired voice he had copied from some old film: "My face is a mess tonight."

"We should call an operator," the wire jockey suggested. "Then whatever this alien knows we know it too."

The agents looked at one another.

"So you organise that," one of them said.

No one wanted an operator. It would be an admission of failure. While they were talking, they cast nervous glances at the fourth person in the room.

This woman had a fuck-off way of moving achievable only by the heavily tailored. Her white-blond hair was cropped to nothing much. She was statuesque and a frank air of sexual boredom surrounded her, as if she had come down here because there was nothing else to do in the dog hours of a Friday night. Her career had begun a year or two before, under the auspices of Lens Aschemann, SiteCrime's late, legendary investigator. Though she had never been more than his assistant, she remained in the building even after his death in the Saudade event site. Rumour had it she was connected, but no one knew who to; and on the present occasion none of the agents understood why she was in the basement with them. They were happy enough to defer to her; but they didn't like the amused way she stared into the bright light and polluted air above the client's head, so they were relieved when after an hour she got a dial-up.