



IMPLIED SPACES

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WALTER JON WILLIAMS DELIVERS A STUNNING NOVEL OF THE SINGULARITY.

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(AN EXCERPT)

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10

It was past noon by the time *Fathom Deep* eased into its berth in Myriad City. As he left the port Aristide detected a slightly frantic quality to the metropolis, as if the great city had somehow sensed it was already at war. Road traffic had a sullen, aggressive quality, and those traveling on foot seemed uncertain when they weren't rushing along in furious haste. Even the gliders that floated overhead seemed in a hurry to get somewhere.

Aristide and Daljit managed to avoid being trampled by the relentless mob of pedestrians as they walked to the nearest trackline station. She was going to Fedora's lab, and from there to her regular work at the Institute. Aristide intended to visit a pool of life, to dispose of the Franz Sandow body and return to the body with which he'd walked across Midgarth.

He supposed he would have to make a concession to the modern world and accept an implant.

His capsule hissed up to the platform. "See you tonight?" he said.

"Sure."

"Where shall we meet?"

"Come to my apartment after work hours. You know where it is."

The small capsule had filled with impatient people glaring at him. He waved goodbye and stepped inside, where he had time to grab a strap before accelerating smoothly away. Two minutes later the car stopped at the Medical Center, and as he exited Aristide was almost trampled by rushing medical personnel.

Moving at a more refined pace, Aristide walked past the two glowing holographic balls that marked the station entrance—each was blazoned with a caduceus, as those of the port station had been marked with an anchor—and then he strolled to the annex that contained the pools of life.

2 • WALTER JON WILLIAMS

While waiting his turn he called Commissar Lin on his implant.

“I can’t talk for long,” Lin answered. “I’m about to go into a meeting with Coy Coy.”

“Who’s Coy Coy?” Aristide asked.

“General Tumusok,” said Lin. “It’s what his friends call him.”

“You’re his friend now?”

“I have that pleasure, yes.”

“Felicitations,” Aristide said. “I thought I’d call to let you know I have returned to the city, and to offer my services to you or to the general.”

Lin’s tone was distracted. “I imagine you’ll be formally debriefed within the next few days. But as you have no official standing—”

“War is a matter for officials?”

“At present, yes.”

“You know,” thoughtfully, “that isn’t my experience of war at all.”

“I’m sure that once things get under way, your presence would be of great value on committees and other consultative bodies.”

Aristide was vexed. It seemed to him that he had earned a place on Coy Coy’s council of war.

“Let’s hope so,” he said, a bit pointedly.

“By the way, I’ve heard from my opposite numbers on Hawaiki. They were wondering about your weapon.”

“Beg pardon?”

“What did you use to take off the big one’s leg? They said microsurgery couldn’t have been neater. And a part of the boat was cut away as well.”

“Was it? I don’t remember.”

“Did you use some kind of laser?”

“Something like that,” Aristide said. “If you’ll excuse me, I see that it’s my turn for a pool of life.”

Lin excused him. Aristide, who had not in fact been summoned for anything, sat in the waiting room and considered for a long moment the features of the ongoing war. How would the other pockets be alerted safely? The others of the Eleven? How many of Courtland’s population had been converted to the cause of the Venger? Possibly Coy Coy knew the answers, but Aristide didn’t.

Vast and important things were happening, and he was not a part of it. Though he was willing to admit that the Domus had a point in not making use of him, he resented being kept in the dark.

He had been through this kind of war once already. He wondered if Coy Coy could say the same.

When his turn came, he went to the pool of life. A few hours later, he rose a new man. Franz Sandow’s clothes did not fit him well, and he used

his implant to order new clothing to be delivered to Daljit's apartment.

For a moment he considered whether or not to pick up the new Bitsy, who had been created but was currently deactivated, waiting in storage. He decided that as he planned to spend the night with Daljit, and she wasn't fond of Bitsy, he'd return on the morrow and activate Bitsy then.

As Aristide left the Life Annex, he saw crowds surging around the entrance to the main hospital building. The air had a smoky tang. Aristide asked his implant what was going on, and was told that there had been an explosion at the Stellar chemical plant. He felt a degree of relief—his nerves were keyed to war, and they were eased by the reminder that accidents, too, could cause casualties.

He walked to the trackline station, and immediately a sleek capsule, all windows and streamlined composites, drew up and disgorged a mob of chemical plant employees coming to be checked for contamination. Though none seemed to have injuries, they all seemed angry, and shouted at each other as they barged past Aristide toward the hospital entrance.

Aristide stepped into the capsule and asked it to take him to Daljit's apartment. Apparently he was the only person in the trackline system who wanted to go there, because the capsule didn't stop to pick up anyone else en route. Aristide left the capsule, took the escalators to the apartment lobby, and was challenged by the building's AI—which, after scanning his biometrics, let him pass. Daljit must have told the AI to expect him.

Daljit's apartment was on the forty-ninth floor, with a view of the River District. He heard soft tones sounding inside the apartment as he approached the door. When Daljit opened the door, she looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"Just as I was getting used to you being blond," she said. She gestured at a pile on the floor of the hall. "Here's your stuff. I wish you'd warn me when you're having crap delivered here."

She evaded his kiss and withdrew to the kitchen.

The scent of frying onions filled the apartment. Aristide looked ruefully at his new clothing in the paper delivery bags that Daljit had first torn open, then dropped in the hall when she realized they weren't meant for her. He picked up his belongings and withdrew to the bathroom, where he changed. He wrapped Franz Sandow's clothing in the torn remains of the bags and placed them on the small table near the door, then stepped to the kitchen door, where Daljit was furiously chopping vegetables with a Chinese cleaver.

"Are you cooking dinner?" he asked. "That's liberal of you."

Daljit slapped spices with the flat of her blade. There was a sudden scent of cardamom and cloves.

"I'll make *badaami murgh*," she said, "if I can just get some peace."

"There was an explosion at the Stellar plant," Aristide said. "Some casualties, apparently, since the hospital was very busy."

She looked at him with anger in her eyes. Light glittered off the cleaver. "I'm trying to *concentrate*," she said.

"Sorry," Aristide said, and withdrew to the front room.

One wall of the apartment was polarized glass, currently set to darken the room. Aristide told the glass to lighten, and then stepped forward to admire the view, Myriad City's wild architectural profusion in brilliant crystalline light. He opened the door onto a terrace and stood for a moment with his hands on the smooth curves of the shining composite rail, the sharp wind ruffling his hair as he considered the contrast in Daljit's mood between the morning and the present.

The barque of the previous evening, with its cargo of poetry and delight, seemed to have run aground. He did not hold out much hope for a rescue.

Daljit had clearly reconsidered her connection with Aristide. Perhaps the ardor of the previous evening had been the result of overstimulation—Tumusok had been her first murder, after all, and passions had been high. But in the cold light of day, she had seemingly reconsidered. Perhaps she had decided that they had been correct to end their first relationship, those long decades ago.

And this on top of Ashtra's rejection. Aristide wondered if he had finally reached the age when his life experience, his birth on Earth, and the great weight of his experience had finally made it impossible for him to relate to anyone born in the centuries since humanity had abandoned its birthplace.

A shame. It was desire that kept him human. The limbic system hadn't failed him yet.

He looked down at the sound of a siren. On Rampart Street below a police car slithered through traffic like an eel, computer guidance giving it an uncanny ability to weave through moving vehicles with a clearance of millimeters. Ahead was a fugitive car, the fact that it was caroming off other vehicles providing clear evidence that its own computer guidance had been sabotaged—normally the traffic AI would seize control of a vehicle seconds after an accident, and steer it to a safe stop.

As Aristide watched, the fugitive driver made a mistake, hit another car, and his vehicle spun off the road in a cloud of dust and blue tiresmoke. The car struck the stanchion of a streetlight and crumpled. A wheel bounced free and leaped down the road in a series of high, exuberant bounds.

By the time the driver fought free of his safety gear and left the vehicle, the

police car had already stopped, and its uniformed driver had disembarked. The renegade driver saw the officer approaching, and turned to run.

The police officer shot him. From his position on the terrace Aristide could hear the distinct *pop-pop-pop* of the officer's sidearm. The renegade driver fell.

Aristide stared in complete surprise. He hadn't thought the police in Myriad City were armed.

The police officer walked up to the prone driver, fired a finishing round into her victim's head at close range, then returned to her vehicle. Aristide turned and returned to the kitchen.

"I saw the most amazing thing," he said. "A police officer just shot someone."

He ducked as a bowl of raw chicken clanged into the wall above his head. Lemon marinade splattered his face. Pale pieces of chicken fell limp to the floor.

Daljit's lip curled. "You might have the *courtesy*," she said, "not to *interrupt* me when I'm working on something *important*."

"I—" Aristide began, and then cold certainty froze him.

"*Now you've wrecked dinner!*" Daljit shrieked into the silence.

Aristide ordered himself to remain calm. He took a step away from Daljit.

"I apologize," he said.

Daljit looked terrible. She was flushed. Her eyes glittered. Sweat glued strands of hair to her forehead, and she panted for breath.

He hadn't been paying attention when he'd first spoken to her. He hadn't seen the signs.

"Daljit," he began carefully, "I would like to suggest that you're not well."

"*I'm* not well!" She gave a bitter laugh. "You have a lot of nerve, coming here and saying *that!*"

Aristide tried silently calling for help on his implant. A polite voice echoed in his head, telling him that emergency services were busy right now but that he could dictate a message into their memory buffer and they would respond as soon as possible.

That told him all he needed to know.

"*You!*" Daljit snarled. "*You're* the one who wanders around primitive pockets with a sword and a rag on your head," she said. "How healthy is that, if you'd be so good as to tell me?"

"I would like to suggest that the enemy's agents have spread a zombie plague in the city," he told Daljit. "I think you caught it."

"*Me?*" Daljit said. She sneered. "I think you're fucking mistaken, is what

I think.”

But behind the denial, behind the fevered eyes, Aristide thought he saw a puzzled, anguished lucidity, a moment in which her mind tried to grapple with the idea he'd just handed her.

“My god,” she said. “I—”

Her words failed. A tremor ran through her jaw muscles. Then she shook her head, and Aristide could see the last vestiges of sanity vanish as her mind crumbled beneath the onslaught of serotonin, adrenaline, norepinephrine, dopamine, and testosterone that the plague was pouring into her bloodstream.

She gave him a red-eyed feral look, and he felt his own nervous system turn to fire as he remembered the exact same look in Antonia's eyes.

The moment of shocked recognition almost cost him his face as Daljit hurled the skillet of frying onions at his head. As he dodged he stepped on one of the chicken pieces and fell, landing hard in the hallway. Hot oil stung his hand.

“*Stupid fuck!*” Daljit shouted, and threw an empty bowl at him. It bounced off his warding hand. Aristide scuttled out of range, palming himself backward toward the front room.

Pop-pop-pop. The sounds came through the open terrace door. The police, or someone, was shooting again.

Aristide rose to his feet just as Daljit came out of the kitchen with a gleaming kitchen knife in one hand.

“*Get out!*” she cried. “*Get out get out get out!*”

It was useless to point out that she stood between him and the only exit. Aristide cautiously circled to his right and put a sofa between himself and Daljit.

He reached for Tecmessa and hesitated. He didn't want to banish Daljit to Holbrook, a place he reserved for enemies whose crimes were committed while in their right minds.

If he'd returned Tecmessa's blade to the hilt, he might have a chance of subduing Daljit with the flat of the blade. But the hilt still contained the wandlike AI, which on its own was not very useful as a weapon.

Aristide picked up a floor lamp and assumed a guard stance.

“*Put that down!*” shouted Daljit. “That's mine!”

“I'll leave,” he said, “if you'll let me get to the door.”

“Oh, I'll let you leave all right,” she said, and licked her lips. She flashed the kitchen knife at him, and laughed when he reacted, jerking the lamp awkwardly in the direction of the threat.

He wished she'd kept the cleaver. It was a more vicious weapon, but a less flexible one.

Deception was beyond her now, and when she lunged for him she telegraphed the move in half a dozen ways. Aristide thrust the lamp at her face. She fell back, frustrated, then screamed and came on again.

Again he thrust the lamp at her face. She grabbed the lamp and tried to wrench it out of his grasp. She was surprisingly strong. She slashed at his hand and he pulled it back and lost control of the lamp. She laughed in triumph and came over the sofa at him. He punched her in the nose, feeling a crunch of cartilage under his knuckles, and her reaction gave him enough time to dance away. A slash of the knife cut lint from his sleeve.

Aristide looked for another weapon and saw a metal-framed chair on the terrace. He lunged for it, brought it up in the guard position, and held the terrace door with his improvised shield. She came after him panting for breath, and her knife drew sparks from the chair legs. Blood ran freely from her broken nose.

If he circled to his left, he thought, he could draw her out onto the terrace, then pin her against the rail with the chair. It might give him enough time to break away and escape into the apartment, or perhaps even to defeat her in some way.

He took the step to his left, and in her frenzy she was unable to resist the opening and jumped onto the terrace. Before Daljit could settle herself for another attack he was attacking himself, thrusting with the four legs of the chair, driving her back. She snarled and slashed with the knife. He ducked the first slash, then caught her wrist on the backswing. He leaned all his mass into the chair and drove her by sheer weight onto the terrace rail.

He jerked his head back as her teeth snapped within centimeters of his ear—her bite was almost certainly contagious. While Aristide pinned her to the rail with his weight, he got both his hands on her wrist and began to exert steady pressure on her knife hand, bending the wrist inward. She punched to his face with her free hand, but her arm had to bend awkwardly around the chair and her strikes lacked force.

Daljit gave a cry of despair as her fingers lost strength under Aristide's pressure, and the knife dropped with a carbon-steel clack to the surface of the terrace. Aristide kicked it over the edge. Her feet flailed his shins. She tried to bite his wrist and he jerked his hand back. With his other hand he palmed her broken nose and she wrenched away from him, blinded with pain—partly turning her back, which is what he wanted. He grabbed her shoulder with both hands and hurled her face-first against the rail, in the corner where she had no opportunity to move left or right.

He fully intended to strangle her. Bear down with his superior weight and get an arm across her throat, if he could do it without being bitten. Once he had choked her into unconsciousness he would find some means

to tie her, then call emergency personnel and wait for rescue.

But Daljit reacted quickly. Once in the corner, with both hands on the rail, she kicked back with both feet and connected with Aristide's midsection. He lost his wind and took a deep step backward. Daljit fought free of Aristide and the chair and swung herself feet-first over the rail, pivoting on one arm like a gymnast on a pommel horse.

Her feet made contact with the rail, and Daljit rose to a crouch, balancing on the rail with uncanny ease. On her bloody face was a wild grin of malicious triumph as she prepared to dive atop Aristide with her hands clawed.

Aristide remembered the same expression on Antonia's face.

Aristide swung the chair backhand, and watched as Daljit overbalanced and went backward off the balcony, toward the pavement forty-nine floors below.

He didn't watch her fall. Instead he dropped the chair to the deck and sagged against the frame of the terrace door.

He could hear emergency sirens wailing through the city.

He needed to lock the doors, he thought, against any more maniacs who might infest the building. Then get into the shower and wash himself thoroughly, in case he'd got any of Daljit's blood or saliva on him.

But he couldn't bring himself to move. Instead he remembered Antonia lying still in the garden, a murdered maenad spattered with her own blood.

He thought about all the people he had killed over the centuries, and wondered why so many were those he had loved.

11

The sound of nearby shots shook him out of his contemplation of eternities. Aristide took his shower, and dressed in another set of his new clothing, items that had remained in their delivery bags while Daljit was on her rampage, and which hadn't been touched.

Images of Antonia and Carlito and Daljit rose in Aristide's mind, then bled crimson into one another.

"Pablo?" Endora's voice echoed suddenly in Aristide's implant. Her delivery was faster than normal and sounded strangely like panic.

"Yes?" Aristide replied. "Where have you been?"

Endora chose not to answer the question. Her voice returned to its normal fussy precision.

"You're in Daljit's bedroom. Good."

"Not really," he said. "She got the bug and—well, she's dead."

He spoke aloud, rather than mentally dictating into his implant. The latter would have taken far too much of his scattered concentration.

Endora's voice was suddenly all business.

"Did you get any blood on you?"

"No," he said. "But I'm sharing the air that she's breathed."

"It's unlikely you'll catch it that way. You should want to wash your hands and possibly take a shower."

"Already done." Aristide heard running in the corridor outside the apartment, and a thump on the door, followed shortly thereafter by a greater thumping in his chest. He made certain Tecmessa was within arm's reach.

The running footsteps receded.

"What's the situation?" he asked.

"It's difficult to tell. We're having a bandwidth crisis, and that's keeping

me from getting a clear picture.”

“*Bandwidth?* Your bandwidth is *immense*.”

“But not infinite. Not only am I receiving millions of distress calls from victims, I’m being swamped by messages from every wrecked car, every broken window, every damaged bit of plaster. None of us ever anticipated how many inanimate objects would call for help during a major crisis. On top of all that the zombies have sabotaged a lot of the communications grid—apparently they don’t *like* voices in their head telling them they’re ill.”

The scent of ghee and fried onions floated into the room from the kitchen. Aristide closed the door.

“Is the government responding?” Aristide said.

“It’s beginning to. But a lot of police and emergency workers have been infected, and they’ve got access to weapons. And a great many of the infected are blaming the government for their problems, and are launching attacks against government installations.”

“Well.” Aristide lifted Tecmessa, the little ineffective wand mounted in the businesslike hilt. “I should offer help.”

“I would advise remaining where you are, in relative safety.”

Aristide considered the prospect of being locked in a small room with his memories, and decided against it.

“I was backed up only this afternoon,” he said. “If I become a casualty, I’ll lose only a few hours—and,” he added, “there’s nothing in those hours I wish to remember.”

“As you wish.” Endora knew him well enough not to dispute his decision.

“Where will I be most useful?” he asked. He began going through Daljit’s drawers, and found a scarf he could wrap around his mouth and nose, and a floppy hat he could pull down over his forehead to minimize his exposure to flying blood and spittle.

“Police and police stations are being attacked,” Endora said. “So are other government buildings such as offices, jails, and courthouses.”

“It’s after office hours, so I expect the offices and courthouses are mostly empty.”

“True.”

“And if the police can’t defend themselves with their firearms, I don’t imagine I’ll be able to help them. What of the higher branches of government?”

“The Prime Minister was at a dinner when the outbreak occurred, failed to reach Polity House, and is besieged at the Haçibaba Hotel along with elements of the Guard. The President was infected and his current where-

abouts are unknown. The Chambers of Parliament are being attacked, and my understanding is that the High Court has been overrun.”

Aristide reflected that he had no means of reaching any of these places. He opened the door and stepped into the hall, which he followed toward the kitchen and the foyer.

“Can you ready a car,” he asked, “and have it at the garage elevator?”

“Yes.”

Aristide stepped over scattered onions and chicken and opened drawers to find Daljit’s cutlery. He stuck the larger kitchen knives in his belt and told the apartment, through his implant, to ping every object in the front closet. This told him of a plastic raincoat, of a type that folded into a small pouch. It was generic and would fit him.

“A strong executive is essential in time of war,” he said absently, as he sealed the raincoat. “And besides, I’m fond of my old friend the Prime Minister,” he said. “I’ll go to the PM’s aid.”

“If you insist.”

“Anyone in the corridor outside?”

There was a pause. Then, “I’m afraid that data is not available.”

Aristide wrapped the scarf around his head, then his mouth and nose. His fingers were accustomed to turban wrappings and he performed this task efficiently. He tucked the ends into the raincoat and then anchored the whole thing in place with the hat.

He realized that in this getup he probably looked crazier than the zombies.

“Send for an elevator, will you?” he asked, and reached for the door.

He realized that the addition of the raincoat made it impossible for him to reach his weapons, so he unfastened the raincoat, took out Tecmessa and a kitchen knife, and fastened the raincoat again.

“The elevator is waiting,” Endora said.

“Very good.”

He opened the door, cautious. He heard nothing. He stepped out into the corridor and moved with deliberate speed past a series of blank doors toward the bank of elevators at the end of the corridor.

A series of crashing noises came from behind one of the doors, as if someone were smashing a piece of furniture to bits. Aristide’s nerves gave a leap with each crash. He heard no screams or pleas for help, and did not intervene.

A few doors farther along the corridor, he saw a puddle of blood creeping out from beneath a door.

It was clearly too late to intervene here.

One of the elevators gave a chime, and polished bronze doors slid

open.

Aristide ran for the elevator as fast as he could.

In Aristide's youth there had been a genre of films about zombies, animated dead who preyed upon the living. In these films the zombies shambled, minds and bodies barely functioning. They were formidable only in large numbers, and as they killed off their victims their numbers grew greater.

When real zombies were brought into the world, they resembled their cinematic counterparts only slightly. For one thing, they were *fast*, their bodies responding to their pumped metabolisms. While they were unlikely to indulge in long-range planning, they retained a certain ingenuity and brutal cunning.

And, like the film zombies, they could spread their infection to others.

Aristide took command of the car, not trusting Endora's bandwidth problems to allow her to drive safely. By the time he drove into sight of the Haçibaba Hotel, the car was covered with dents, and blood streaked its sleek hood and ran in airblown trails up the front window.

"You'll let them know I'm coming?" Aristide said.

"Yes. I've told them not to shoot."

Aristide accelerated, smashed through a pair of vehicles that had been drawn across the pavement as a roadblock. Angry figures raced out of buildings. A shot cracked off the rear window. Aristide avoided another roadblock by hopping the car onto the curb, which gave him the opportunity to crash into a half-dozen zombies that had just run out of an office building to see what all the noise was about. Bodies flopped urgently at the impact. One hung grimly onto the nose of the vehicle, bashing with a hammer on the windscreen, until he slipped in the blood of his companions and fell under the wheels.

The car thumped and thudded over the bodies that lay motionless before the hotel.

Aristide hopped the curb again near the entrance to the hotel, left the vehicle, and ran into the building. Oddly, Aristide thought, the transparent doors were fixed in the open position. Guards stood in the lobby, compact rifles at the ready. Clear ballistic armor draped around them in much the same style as Aristide's raincoat. The lobby floor was a deep golden perfection, the shellac-like vomit of a species of genetically modified insect, and the guards stood on their own perfect reflections, their weapons ready. Aristide looked into a half-circle of rifles all aimed at him.

"No, really," Aristide said, pulling off his hat. "I'm on your side."

An officer lowered his weapon. "So we are told." He nodded at the rain-

coat. “Is that a form of armor?”

“A raincoat only.”

He smiled grimly. “Too bad for you.”

“How is the Prime Minister?”

“Well, but rather busy at the moment.”

“Here they come!” someone called.

The violent spectacle of Aristide’s arrival had stirred up a fury among the besiegers. A swarm of zombies came running out of nearby buildings, weapons in their hands. Most carried clubs or knives, but the few who had firearms shot wildly as they ran. The bodyguards stepped forward and presented their rifles through the open doors.

Rifles cracked. Aristide readied Tecmessa. The guards fired single, aimed shots, and each shot dropped a zombie to the pavement.

Tecmessa proved unnecessary. The zombie tide broke a few yards from the entrance, and the survivors fled, uttering howls of rage. Once the zombies had retreated, the guards drew back out of sight.

“Nicely done,” Aristide said.

“Thank you,” said the officer. “Securing a building this large is difficult with so few men, but at least it has good fields of fire. We’ll do well as long as the ammunition holds.”

“And how is the ammunition supply?”

There was a slight hesitation.

“We’re taking care not to waste it,” the officer said.

“I don’t suppose you could loan me a weapon.”

Once again the officer offered his grim smile. “Our attackers have dropped a number of firearms in the street outside. You are welcome to search among the bodies.”

Aristide looked at the kitchen knife in his hand.

“Perhaps I will bide here.”

“As you think best.”

Time passed. The guards passed it efficiently, exchanging few words, remaining in a state of alertness. They had already provided themselves with snacks and coffee from the hotel restaurant, and they shared their refreshment with Aristide.

No zombies made their appearance on the street, though the crashing sounds that echoed down the street demonstrated that they were passing their time in vandalism. The sound of shots indicated that combat was taking place elsewhere.

The guards did not seek out the enemy, or aid whoever was fighting the zombies, but remained true to their calling as guards, and continued to shield the head of state.

Aristide, overheating, took off his scarf and raincoat.

Overhead, the sun of Topaz flickered, shimmered, and died. A few remaining streetlights flickered on. Buildings, aside from those on fire, remained dark.

Emergency lights flashing on nearby buildings heralded a new arrival. This was followed by a grinding, thundering noise, as of a roadblock being battered to pieces. This was followed, in turn, by a volley of shots.

Aristide quietly resumed his raincoat and scarf.

A pair of vehicles rolled into sight. First was a large earthmover with a blade on the front and emergency lights flashing from atop the crew compartment. The other was an autobus, with the windows knocked out to permit those inside to fire freely in all directions.

The guards' leader ordered his men forward, rifles leveled to give covering fire.

The earthmover and the bus halted on either side of the hotel entrance but left the field of fire clear. It was well that they did, because the lights and noise attracted another wave of zombies, all of whom were efficiently killed or driven away.

A group left the bus and came trotting up to the doors. Some were dressed as police, and some were not. The bodyguards fell back to let them enter.

The newcomers' leader, a brown-skinned woman in the uniform of a police lieutenant, saluted the Guard officer.

"We're from Meg Town," she said. "The plague didn't hit there, and we came as soon as we could."

"We're very relieved to see you."

Both turned their heads at a volley of shots from the bus, followed by the harsh screams of a zombie, cut short by a final shot. There was no further noise, and the two leaders returned to their conference.

"I understand you've got Prime Minister Ataberk here?" said the lieutenant. Her fighters moved into the lobby, their eyes searching the darkness.

"We were caught here by the outbreak," the bodyguard answered.

"We can take the PM away in our vehicle and return to Polity House or any designated emergency headquarters."

"That won't be necessary. I understand that transport is laid on for later—"

"*Look out!*" Aristide shouted, and threw himself to the floor. As he skimmed along the smooth golden surface on his slick raincoat, the newcomers raised their weapons and opened point-blank fire on the bodyguards.

On each face was an expression of perfect love. The adoration of their

master they at last felt free to express.

There was a bang, a sense of twisting in the air. A mirror shattered. Three of the newcomers vanished in a blast of air. Guards were falling.

The bodyguards were shooting back—their ballistic armor smocks had protected them against at least some of the enemy bullets. Both screams and bullets tore the air.

Tecmessa took another pair of the intruders. Then another. And then no one was left standing, but everyone on the ground, strewn over the bullet-shattered lobby.

Aristide glanced cautiously around him. All the attackers appeared dead.

“The door!” the Guard captain said.

More attackers were coming, those who had remained on the earthmover and the bus in order to keep the zombies at a distance. With bullets in both legs, the Guard captain rolled onto his stomach, and using the body of the police captain as cover, began to fire.

Tecmessa took the attackers that the captain did not. Silence reigned in the lobby for a brief span, and then a defiant howl came floating into the lobby from the street. Other voices answered, a chorus of feral anger that echoed in the city’s canyons.

The zombies were coming. Attracted by the noise of the vehicles, they had trailed behind the bus, growing in number and waiting for their opportunity.

That moment had now come.

Zombies boiled from the street, charging through the doors and bashing their way through the windows. The remaining guards fired till they were overwhelmed. Tecmessa took many, but the attack came from so many directions that Aristide had to withdraw deeper into the hotel, backing down a corridor to lure the zombies after him, Tecmessa’s thunder shaking doors and shattering glass as it devoured the enemy.

In another world, he realized, the one to which Tecmessa was the womb, zombies were even now fighting the Venger’s troops, those who had followed the police lieutenant. He wondered which side would prevail.

When the zombies stopped coming, Aristide ran back into the lobby and found a zombie bent over the Guard captain and worrying at his throat. Aristide drove his kitchen knife into the back of the zombie’s neck and severed her spine. She toppled, and he kicked her away.

Feet pounded down an interior corridor. Aristide turned to defend himself and saw a half-dozen more of Prime Minister Ataber’s bodyguards, who had been guarding another entrance to the hotel and had been summoned by their captain.

The guards immediately finished off a number of enemy wounded, and checked their comrades for signs of life. Only the captain had survived the double attack, and he waved off their aid.

"I've been infected," he said, holding one hand to the wound on his throat. "There's no point in trying to help me."

"If we could get you to a pool of life..." Aristide said.

"I'll slow you all down." He looked at Tecmessa, the little black wand fixed on the sword hilt. "That's a hell of a weapon you've got there."

"It's a secret project."

"We're going to need a lot more like it."

I hope not, Aristide thought. The captain looked at the bodies of the police lieutenant and the others who had arrived on the bus.

"Who *are* these people?" he asked.

"They're the ones who loosed the zombie plague in order to cover their attempted coup. They were here to capture or kill the Prime Minister."

"Good thing the boss is safe, then," the captain said. Aristide looked at him.

"The Prime Minister was evacuated hours ago," the captain explained. "There are utility tunnels that lead from here to Constitutional Square, and from there it's a short sprint to Polity House."

"You were here as a rear guard."

"We were here to attract anyone trying to take out the PM" The captain looked down at the police lieutenant. "Good thing we were."

"Sir," said one of the newly arrived guards. "We no longer have the numbers to hold a building this large."

The captain nodded. He had grown pale, and blood oozed between the fingers pressed to the wound on his throat.

"You're in charge. I'll report, after which you will shoot me in the head. Then you and the other units are authorized to withdraw to a more defensible location."

"Sir!"

While the Guard captain communed with his implant, Aristide ventured a probe of his own.

Endora?

Yes?

You've been following this?

Yes.

Can the recordings of Tecmessa being used vanish?

I'm afraid ongoing bandwidth problems prevented any recordings at all.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

Aristide turned away as the captain was given his quietus. Too many memories had already been loosed in the last few hours.

He took a weapon from one of the fallen and joined the surviving guards on a trek to their next fortress.

Dawn would come, he thought, in time.