

UNDEATH OF THE COOL

I'd love to tell you that this story begins in some upscale nightspot, the kind of club which you see in architectural magazines, designed by a reclusive Swedish genius and extruded as a single piece of white plastic. I'd like to be able to say that I stepped off the stage to a smattering of polite applause, my bow-tie rakishly loose, a Grey Goose martini waiting on the underlit bar. But that would just be so much bullshit, self aggrandizing pulp, and you don't *look* like an idiot. Not from down here.

It all starts down in the gutter, of course. My wake-up call was a trickle of watered-down sewage, and a shatterburst of neon lights in the steady rain. Another night on the town with yours truly, MacArthur Price, face-down between the asphalt and the chipped concrete on Calliope Road.

I started out with all the good intentions I could scrape together – a little jaunt downtown to hear a local combo belting out covers of Coltrane and the Duke, in the only kind of dive that still caters to the jazz crowd.

A crowd of about three or four, of whom two are probably appreciating it ironically.

As for me, well, I've got little choice. Synthepop makes me want to puke, and the thought of being mashed into a trendy club, another node in a mélange of drugged-out wall-to-wall flesh is my idea of HELL.

Oh, I'm no preacher, don't worry about that! It's drugs that got me into this mess, and got me into this gutter, too. Let he who is without sin sell you a trip to rehab, buddy, coz Mac Price has been, and it's no Club Med.

The drugs all have the names of cheap Chinese fireworks these days – Floating Chrysanthemum and Jade Haze and Laughing Dragons – chemlab cookouts shunted into the back streets care of a tangled mass of Black Pharm tongs. Trying to find a bag of pot is like ordering Moët in an Alabama roadhouse. But your friend MacArthur is no connoisseur – I'll tell you that for free. And I needed something to take the edge off after I heard those bums mangling the classics with their headwired instruments and their back-alley neural plugs.

No amount of code can turn a no-talent little shit into a jazzman. I swear, they could core out that bass-jockey's entire head and replace it with silicon and he'd still make *Birth of the Cool* sound like elevator music.

Lucky there was a pusher from the Vex Clan lurking in the shadows, and that I had a few bucks in my pocket.

I staggered through the strobes to the bathroom, and it was 'Take two of these and don't call me in the morning, Jack' – some kind of thin plastic discs called Velvet Night. Then a back-row table and evil thoughts, swelling up inside me like tumors, riding the sizzling crest of the chemical wave and knocking back paint-stripping moonshine like there was to tomorrow.

Once again, I was wrong.

Dawn was spilling across the sky, cut up by a web of wires and cables when I woke, spitting filth and feeling like a dried-out turd had taken up residence in my throat.

Calliope Road was closing for the coming day, steel chainlink rollers coming down over the bars and brothels and clubs like machine eyelids slamming shut. Soon the rentacops would be rolling in, smug and fat behind the bulletproof windows of their

streetcrawlers, paid off by the local aldermen to wipe up human messes like old MacArthur.

Just for the record, it's not for the General, although that would be a nice little nugget of macho bullcrap. It was the name of the urban refugee camp where I was born, raised and educated, before Big Government sold it off to the Zaibatsus, and *they* sent in the bulldozers. They still called it a *park*, right up until the moment that the first hogjaw blade hit the first rusted-out Kombi, but I have no idea why.

It was more like a little enclave of the third world across the street from the Skygate Arcology – part live-in performance art, part drug supermarket, part historical re-enactment. That's where I first heard the music – an old LP of Charles Mingus' *Changes II*, and where the disease took root in my impressionable little brain. From there on it's a logical progression down the years, through the Pacific Coast Urb, down to the gutter in Calliope Road.

No, no - I don't want your pity, or your small change. Save it for the veterans, bub – those poor stiffies who've had their arms and legs repossessed, the kids who signed up for Operation Enduring Tyranny and came back old at seventeen. I'm here to tell you about the *music*, because I'm the last of a dying breed. I'm a musician.

For real – check the dome, there – no plugs, no wires. I breathe music through an old piece of brass they used to call a *Tenor Sax*, and that's why nobody in the Urb – not even out on the grimy fringe – will give me a gig.

They tell me that it would be like watching some medieval hump weaving straw – a museum burnout, not for the modern crowd. I say they've *lost the love*.

It's all patched up DJ noise, machine-extruded beats, cutout A.I. vox these days. Pure spun-sugar crap. Of course, I'm as guilty as sin, dirty by association; I make my Standard Yen selling samples to the big synth engines at Capitol and Sony.

But a brother's got to eat, and it's that or the dreaded nine-to-five. About all my parents left me was a trailer full of century-old CD Roms, hour after hour of smoked-out jam sessions scrawled onto plastic down in the Park.

Now and then I hear a hook or a line or just a single note coming out of the clubs or the malls, and I feel like Judas fraggin' Iscariot. But it buys me time. Time to practice with the big piece of brass – and that's something beyond price. Ask anyone in my Hab – I need all the practice I can get.

That and all the free booze, twist and stim I can lay hands on. Case in point.

There I am, drenched, drugged-out and dirty, in the gutter at dawn with a head full of bad Velvet comedown and a mouthful of the truly unmentionable. The sound of synthe jazz is in my blood like a disease – curse those talentless bums unto ten generations!

I need to get up and out of here before the Rentas come rolling in – them or the Ghouls, the kidney-thieves in their silent electric vans, the backs taped up with black garbage bags . . . you've heard of them before, right? Just a late-show legend from out on the edges of the Urb? Do yourself a favor and *never find out*.

That's when *the hand* comes down into my field of vision.

It got my eyes open, and no shit! I'm scrabbling backwards up out of the gutter before I can even think about moving, images of bonesaws dancing in my head. It's a black glove, the hide of some oily-bright reptile, linked to an arm sheathed in tight-fitting suede. And for a second, as the residue of Velvet Night slops back and forth in my skull like steaming ethanol, I see the little gap between the glove and the coat.

And I pray that I'm having a comedown twitch, a hallucination.

There's no skin there, no servo either, no steel or plastic or rubber. If this guy was cybed out I wouldn't have looked twice.

Oh no, bub – this is where you start to think that old Mac Price is crazy. Because, look – there's nothing but a mess of writhing black worms there where a wrist should be – slippery, many-legged things coiling and knotting around each other, dripping from the cuff of the coat, questing blindly into the tight-stuffed glove.

My eyes swiveled upward, up the shuddering, pulsing arm, to a neck wrapped in a thick woolen scarf, half expecting to find a face like the mandibles of a giant cockroach – or worse!

I swear one of the writhing, skittering little bastards popped out of the guy's sleeve and scuttled off down the gutter, eight inches of bible-black chitin and innumerable legs. . .

But his face was . . . just a normal face. The relief washed over me like cool water, slapping up against the last of the Velvet Night and extinguishing it with a long, sizzling hiss.

Chill it, MacArthur – it's just some sarariman offering you a hand up. Not a monster, not a cop, not a chop-shop ghoul. I hazarded a brittle little smile and closed my hand around his black-gloved fingers.

Just a momentary tremor – a skincrawl as I imagined a nest of knotted worms in there - but his grip was warm and strong, and his eyes were twinkling with amusement.

"Sorry if I frightened you, friend," he said in a reedy, high pitched voice.

"I've woken up in places like this too many times to count, and I couldn't just leave you here for the 'Rentas'!"

The quote marks slammed down on each side of the word like cuffs; like it was somehow new and suspicious.

I blinked several times, trying to clear the haze from my aching eyeballs, scrunching up into a squint.

Now that the comedown had faded out I could see that this fellow was nothing special, nothing sinister. For one thing I topped him out by a couple of inches, and probably weighed in fifty pounds heavier. The thick black scarf which mummified his neck came up partway over his face, covering his mouth and chin, but his curiously pointed nose and deep-set, laughing eyes made him look like some kind of comical goblin.

A broad-brimmed hat about thirty years out of fashion perched atop his head.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught him screwing his hand back up into his sleeve, though. Something dark, liquid black glistening . . .

Good intentions aside, I was time to leave this stiff cold and hit the road.

"Well . . . thanks, thanks a lot sir." I slurred, still finding it tricky to control my aching body. "Sure a hell of a lot better to get picked up by an honest citizen than by the Ghouls!"

The little man's laugh was like the piping and chittering of night birds, a sound which set my teeth on edge.

"Oh, for sure, much better than *that*! At least I don't want to sell your lungs and liver down on the waterfront! But I must admit I do have an ulterior motive, Mister Price. We are two of a kind, you see."

Mister Price! Mister fraggin' *WHAT did you say!*?

That was just about as creepy as a suit full of black worms, right there.

I might as well admit, if we're already past the tipping point of *crazy* that your

friend Mac Price has a few creditors as well. My mind went back to the little guy's suspiciously strong grip, to the vision of threshing, groping worms – or WIRES! A bloody Cybe debt collector! And for whom, I didn't want to ask. My landlord would only want money, or the satisfaction of stomping up and down on my precious Sax.

But there were others . . . others who shouldn't have known my real name. Chem pushers, I'll admit. The kind who took fingers and toes as collateral.

"Hey . . . back it up, man!" I said, rasping and wheezing where I had wanted to bluster. "Yeah, I'm MacArthur Price, but I'm on the books, and I've got until next Tuesday to sort that shit out with Gianni and Harmsworth's boys. They know I'm good for it . . ."

Again that echoing laugh bounced around the inside of my skull, and in on its bizarre wavelength rode a vision of slippery dark worms working the man's rubber face from within, hooked together tail to pincer, meshed together into a snarl of false muscles and tendons . . .

"Oh, Mister Price, we will have our little jokes, won't we? he sighed, flicking away a tear from one eye with a single gloved finger. Was I still ripped, or was that little drop of liquid oily black?

"I know about all that . . . *unpleasantness* – and rest assured, I'm here to help you sort it out. When I say we are two of kind, I mean, of course that we are both *musicians*."

Now this was getting weird.

I might have been known about the seedier parts of town as a sample peddler, a bottom-feeder in the so called *bizz*, but my own music was as secret and furtive as – well, as a thirteen year old kid's book of angsty poetry. When I went out to canvas for gigs I felt like I was offering to *strip*. You see, I was painfully aware (from the cursing and wall thumping, mainly) that I wasn't especially good. My act would be a novelty, not a virtuoso performance. And here was this little black-clad goblin man, who knew my name and *who knew* what other dirty information, wise to my secret vice. It was like being approached by a stranger in the park who tells you that he, too it keen on leather and spikes and whips . . .

His hand moved like nothing I'd ever seen before, then – fast, so goddam fast, but *rippling* through the air, like a chameleon's tongue. It was like watching a snake strike through heat-haze.

Into his coat.

That's about when I thought my number was up, buddy. He could have packed anything in there – a Viralcaster, a Brainjam Rod, even some kind of antique *firearm*. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, two, waiting for the pain. It never came, so I cracked the left open just a slit.

The goblin man's slick black hand was poised right in front of my face, and it was holding nothing but a plain white envelope. I hinged the right open, rusty and slow, paranoia slithering around in my head as I stared at the creamy smooth paper. Drug fear buzzed down to my cuticles.

My heart was going like a jackhammer as he reached out and popped it in my top pocket, giving me a little avuncular pat on the shoulder. I swear I felt those fingertips writhing and curling against me, as something inside tried to burrow into my flesh . . . "There you go, Mister Price. A little gift, from one *artiste* to another. You'll find my card inside, if you like what you hear. And when you call me, we can talk further about your career."

He gave me another stiff, out of practice smile then, his mouth still lost beneath its swathing of black wool but his skin crinkling up around his button eyes like worn leather.

“And now, I’m afraid that I’m a trifle late for work. Don’t be too long in getting back to me, Macarthur.”

I was about to grab him, shake him until his teeth cracked, spew obscenities until my lungs burst. But something . . . perhaps the last scrapings of self preservation in my pureed brain stopped me cold.

When my mouth hinged open all that came out was:

“Th . . . thank you sir. I’ll . . . uhhhh, be sure to call you soon.”

Then there was a squeal of electric brakes, the hiss of hydraulics, and a yellow cab slid in between us, its gull-wing door already swinging up and open.

The last I heard of the strange little man was his mind-grating chuckle, rife with overtones of panicked birds. Then I was sprawling across the cracked vinyl of the overstuffed cab seat, a hot prison which smelled in equal parts of vomit and ammonia. “You MacArthur Price?” asked the driver through his scratchy intercom, safe behind an inch of bulletproof glass. “I gotta call says you going home, one-nine-nine Jaquard, Scottsboro Building. Yeh?”

I must have mumbled some kind of answer, because the electric motors kicked in, and the rocking motion of the little cab put me under as quickly as a handful of trunks.

The last thing I saw of that dawn on Calliope Road was the black-clad stranger waving goodbye, nodding under the immense brim of his hat.

And I’m sure – *more* than sure, bub, before you call the psychwagon – that I saw something come dripping and questing and bulging out of his beaklike nose, a slimy few inches of many-legged, segmented madness which hung there, weaving back and forth like the tentacle of an anemone.

And still waving bye-bye with one hand he carefully, almost *lovingly* extended a long black finger on the other and *fed the worm back up into his head*.

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How I got from the front step to my Hab-cube I’ll probably never know. Who paid for the cab . . . well, I had a fair idea. Not that I really wanted to think about *why*. I woke up around sundown, feeling like Gianni Vex and his steeldogs had been working me over while I slept.

Never, ever again would I partake of Velvet Night, I swore to myself as the room spun and dipped, heaving in and out in time with the throbbing in my skull. Thankfully, that left about four or five hundred other Chinese-firework names in the catalog for me to sift through.

I rolled over, mainly to keep my eyes off the whirling ceiling. A ruptured cushion spewed a tangle of plastic fuzz into my mouth, wet with what I hoped was drool.

That was when I felt the pain in my chest – a sharp edge pressed into my flesh. And the events of that horrible morning crystallized in my head, a blur of goblin-esque features, sewage stink, and crawling, knotted black worms.

It was the envelope, there in my top pocket. A very real, very unwelcome piece of evidence that it hadn’t been a drug-ripped hallucination.

I hesitated for a second, remembering the dark, sinuous shape struggling blindly out of the little guy’s nostril. But it could be money in there, right? And he had sort of dropped a hint that he might have a gig for me . . . so what if he was a bit of a freak. Yours Truly ain’t no squarejohn either, right?

I collapsed backwards into a pile of unwashed laundry as I slit the paper open with one fingernail, chewed to a ragged edge. The contents spilled out in a flash of silver. It was a Compact Disc.

I was probably one of about twenty people in the whole sprawling, filthy Urb who still owned a CD player – and the others were all museum curators and antique computer nuts. But somehow he had *known* . . . and sent me a little sliver of twentieth century tech that most people would have mistaken for a shiny beer coaster. Scrawled across the plastic face of the CD was a single word – ‘Zann’.

I was almost so shocked at seeing a new, unscratched compact disc that I missed the little card which came with it. *That* was thoroughly modern – a wafer-thin slip of smoky grey plastic imprinted with silver.

“Ignatious Hound” it read “Musical Procurer to the Throne.”

Alright – a kooky job title for a bona fide freak. There was a mobile number stamped under Mister Hound’s name, one with a long and expensive extension tacked on in front. I hoped that if I felt like talking to him again he’d accept a collect call. I turned the little card in my twitching fingers, feeling the room around me solidify, its spinning and heaving coming to a grinding halt. Scratch modern – this was a top-flight chip of executive self-promotion – a pocket holo.

As quick as thinking, the back surface of the card fuzzed into a wrack of static, throwing up a grubby halo of light. It congealed into a three-inch figure I recognized all too well – black suede suit, immense woolen scarf and all. Mister Hound perched atop the tiny dark surface like a startled insect, his goblin face peering up at me, intent.

“Ahhh . . . MacArthur Price! How nice to see you again! I expect you have yet to hear the delightful music I sent you, but please, don’t delay on my behalf. You may not have heard of my dear friend Zann, but he is a true virtuoso. I have tried to play the more complex measures to the best of my ability, but forgive me if there are any little mistakes . . . “

Now you know as well as I do that a pocket holo isn’t like a mobile. It’s got to be pre-recorded, and each one costs so much to make that they usually run to the terminally bland and generic. Y’know – “Hi there, potential investor! I’m Senior Account Comptroller Smith, from Omniglomulantcorp . . . ”

If Ignatious Hound had put together a bespoke holo just for me he must be as rich as he was creepy.

“Go on, go on, Mister Price!” urged the tiny simulacrum, wagging a black-gloved finger at me petulantly. “Time is more than just money, you know!”

I gingerly placed the little card on the corner of my computer desk and fished the CD out of my mountainous laundry heap.

Luckily I didn’t have to get up to switch the old mess of circuits on – all it took was a well-aimed kick to bring it stuttering to life. Parts of my moldering computer system were a century old, welded and soldered and taped together by three generations of obsessively hoarding geeks. There wouldn’t be many people alive who still associated the Windows logo with *software*; it’s been the flag of the NoCal Autonomous Corporate Republic for decades!

I could feel the eyes of the little holo boring holes in the back of my neck as I dropped the disc into its slot, tiny pinholes punched through reality. The hairs on my nape were quivering at attention.

Hound laughed again as I slammed my thumb down on the enter key, a sound which filled the claustrophobic hab cube with twisted birdsong, ripping up and down the scale like diamonds over glass. He was leaning forward, hunched like a vulture

over a carcass, actually wringing his hands together in anticipation. But before I could reach out to flip the card over and squash him like a bug against the table the first strains of the music came sifting out of my speakers and drove themselves into my brain.

It began with violins; skirling, rippling waves of melancholy, a hot wind through my skull. And then the saxophone came in over the top, misty and soft, as dark and oily as the single tear I had seen on Ignatious Hound's face.

The two instruments wove and coiled their music around each other like the chitinous worms which had haunted my nightmares. Next came the drums; the dry whisper of a brushed snare, the subterranean pounding of some immense bass kick. They picked me up, entranced, and the sound settled around me like spider silk, binding and twitching, guiding my fingers toward my own instrument. The walls of the hab cube seemed to expand, then, falling away into a dim and hazy distance, as though the squalid little place was too small to contain such daemonic, divine music.

The tiny figure of Hound joined in as I puppet-walked past him, hands outstretched and clenching uncontrollably. In his hands was a device which may have been a sax – but one devised by alien minds bent on otherworldly drugs. It was pale bone white, studded with silver and tiny blue gems, twisted around and *through* itself in ways which seemed to defy all earthly geometry. *This* was the instrument which the incomparable Mister Zann composed for; one which could blast out an entire combo, one which bypassed the ears and slid notes into your soul like slivers of glass.

By the time I had staggered over to my own saxophone the room seemed as huge as an open stadium, the ceiling black and crazed with stars. The music in my head built up and up, a towering wave, the notes of an upright bass the size of a skyscraper shimmering behind it like velvet lightning.

Hound, too had grown, stretched out tall and thin, no longer a little goblin of a man but a stilt-walking skeletal thing, a parasite attached to his instrument. He was no longer light but flesh, and he winked at me with one bright button eye while his long fingers flew over the gems and silver stops like water.

Then the reed was between my lips, and my hands were on the cool brass, and I *played*.

Now, I told you before that I'm no great master. I've got a hell of a lot more passion than proficiency. But right then, with the music moving through me like God through a mad prophet, I poured my hammering heart and twisted soul into the sax – and what came out was . . . cataclysmic.

It seemed that my swirling riff, spiraling into the music like milk into coffee made something reach critical mass. The hab could no more contain such a pulsing, living beast of sound than it could a nuclear explosion. Fine cracks of white fire shot through everything – through the sparking, whining computer on its desk, through the beat-up old couch, through the threadbare carpet floor and the posters on the walls. Still I played on, spinning, ecstatic as I erased the tawdry cage of my little life, blazing pale fire from the sax as if it were some kind of alien weapon. The crescendo was coming, building higher and higher, towering up like an affront to God, shaking the atoms of the world apart.

When it came it fell like monsoon rain, a clap of thunder which seemed to shift the bedrock, and then a deluge of tiny notes like falling shards of crystal. My eyes were closed, my fingers sweaty against the brass which almost burned in my hands. When I opened them again, the world was gone.

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Space doesn't surprise anyone, anymore.

Hell, we've all been at least once or twice, right? Even if it was only a school trip up to the Corporate Arks, to show you how the other half live, and convince you of the rewards of capital success.

I'd been up two years ago, after a three-second soundbite off one of my antique discs got woven into a sports shoe advertisement.

But this wasn't space. It was like – the *absence* of space, like being trapped inside some kind of mirrorball of smashed, glittering shards. The stars were so close-packed they almost touched one another, hazing out like a billion milky ways woven together, wrapped around to form a diamond-gauze sky not made for human eyes. Black vacuum zigzagged between the overpowering light in hairline cracks.

Slowly, carefully, afraid that all at once I would shatter like brittle clay, I took stock of my situation.

There was the saxophone, there were my hands . . . so far, so good. There was a smoking chunk of my computer and my desk, razored away in a neat arc as though something immense, hungry and mathematically precise had taken a bite out of it. There was gravity, and air, and silence. The floor here was copper, pitted and scored, spattered with pale teal verdigris. There was no music – the silence seemed to pull at my mind like an immense black hole. The sense of loss was staggering; without that glorious sound, without even the *memory* of it (for none existed in my sizzling brain) how could I *live*?

And then . . . there was Mister Hound, his scarf fallen away across his skeletal shoulders, his coat hanging open, that alien instrument of his hanging loose from a woven silver strap.

Let me tell you, it was *everything* that I had feared.

Even the Velvet Night comedown had been too kind. I could feel the madness welling up in the back of my throat like bile as he stood there, *revealed*, basking in the glow of what I knew to be his own, otherworldly sky, under his own scrawled, meaningless constellations.

The worms flowed off him like water, out from around his skinny torso, unwrapping themselves from around his stickman arms, his pencil neck. Like slow molasses, glistening obscenely in the light of a million suns they flowed, lugubrious black shot through with oily iridescence, down into drains set in the copper floor. His clothes too, unraveled, each tiny thread a worm in its own right, creeping over his true form like a shadow, down his scaly legs and into the bowels of this strange, spaceborne place. It was all I could do to watch his face crack and peel away like dead skin, leaving only those black button eyes to anchor on.

The transformation was complete.

It was obvious that Hound had needed all those vile creatures just to bulk himself out. The thing before me now was more than eight feet tall, but mantis thin, spiked like a predatory insect, its limbs studded with too many joints, its fingers and toes like nests of writhing tentacles. Strangely, its face was much the same as the one I had seen on Calliope Road – now skinned in blue-green scales like beaded jewels, but still dominated by a hooked and beaky nose, still built around a pair of searingly black, birdlike eyes.

"How can you live without the music, eh?" he asked, in that same reedy voice. He had plucked the thought right out of my head, as easy as reading notes off a stave.

“A very, very astute question, MacArthur Price. And how wonderful that the transition here did not break your mind.”

Other details were coming in as I staggered to my feet, clumsy in the heavy gravity.

This place was some kind of city – not the kind you see when you look out the window in one of the Urbs, though. It was as if someone had rebuilt all the palaces and temples and ziggurats of antiquity out of bronze and brass and rusted iron and welded them together blind. It curved up and away in the distance, tier upon tier, tower upon tower, until it loomed over in a vast arc, joined high above. That explained the gravity – this alien city was built on a great ever-revolving ring, grinding ponderously through space with its cargo of shrines and statues and rust. It was one of many.

The ring cities interlaced like the components of some ungodly astrolabe, meshing across the vast starlit gulf, seeming to pass through each other, interlocking and splitting in ways that were torture to look upon.

“What . . . *where* is this place?” I croaked, barely holding onto my sanity. If I wasn’t the veteran of several high-on legendary drug trips the sights before me would probably have melted my poor human brain right out of my ears.

As it was, I was just able to cling to the hope that this was all an elaborate chemical fantasy, a prank by the mercurial Mister Hound.

“This is the silent ring, MacArthur.” he said, reaching out one utterly alien hand to steady me. “Circantrate of the Word, demesne of the Unspoken One known as the Horned Eye.”

Oh yes, I could see that he was going to be a *lot* of help.

“But I sense that you mean more *generally*. And of course, you have every right to know. After all, this is your new home.”

“My WHAT?” I asked, almost choking as my gaze roved over towers surrounded by hovering, spinning pentacles, domes like soap-bubbles covering pyramids of gold and steel, great cathedrals woven out of copper mesh . . . anything to keep from looking into his eyes. “This . . . this is some kind of joke, right? A full-immersive game, some kind of hallucinogen . . . please . . .”

Those black, soulless eyes found me, then, and pinned me writhing to the back of my own skull.

“No, Mister Price, I’m afraid that this is *not*. It is all very real – far more real, you will find, than your own smelly little world. This is the Cage, and we are the keepers of the Dreaming One.

We . . . and now YOU, MacArthur Price. It is a job with a future; indeed, it is a job that ensures that there IS a future.”

His face had taken on a look of rapture, of *fanaticism* I had only seen aped by threedee-vision evangelists. He was a true believer.

“Look up, to the centre. THERE!”

With that the creature I had known as Ignatious Hound wrapped his tentacular fingers tight around my head, his grip like that of a hydraulic vise. I could hear tortured bone creaking in protest, threatening to splinter. But I could no more resist that alien grip than I could wish myself back to the Pacific Coast Urb. A tiny part of me - a part that had always been with me - was delighted. *There was no going back.*

For at the centre of the Cage, wrapped in a gyre of spinning ring-cities, sparkling against the mad starfield was the Throne.

When I saw it written on his business card I thought Hound was just being grandiose and pompous – there are any number of little kingdoms in the wilds of the

old United States, and a veritable plague of minor Kings and Queens. But this throne was not one from which any human monarch ruled.

It was a cube – and not a cube. The number of sides shifted and blurred before my eyes, warping and twisting, grinding through changes which defied logic. Each surface was the seat of a great stone chair, some chased with gold, others inlaid with bones, yet others picked out in lapis and turquoise, jet and ivory . . . always turning, in and out of itself. The monolithic backs of the thrones slid in and out of the geometric blasphemy of the cube like tongues of stone, rune-carved and obscene.

Ah . . . yes, if only that were the worst of it.

On every surface lolled and oozed and slumped the bloated body of the Dreaming One. How he – it? – could spread itself across all the shifting facets of the Throne was beyond my comprehension, but he was as mutable and fluid as his ancient seat – a thing stitched together from the faces and arms and tentacles, flippers and eyes and antennae of a billion species, most like none recognizable of Earth.

It slept, this monstrous, bloated thing, twitching and hissing and sighing in its slumber. I would probably have screamed myself to death had I seen it *awake*.

“That is our charge, MacArthur.” said Hound as he gazed almost tenderly on the abomination which squatted on the sky like a black toad. “He dreams the universe, and we keep him asleep. Because if he wakes . . .”

The gesture he used was universal, a single tentacular claw drawn across his long, thin neck.

“But . . . why me? Why, out of all the worlds, out of all the living souls . . .?”

“Because you are a *musician*! Because you played the song of Erik Zann, and you knew where the missing notes had to fit in! Because for the last fifty years not a single one such as you has been found anywhere on the Earth!”

The look in Hound’s eyes was one of dark triumph, the look of a serious collector sliding a silver pin through the dried corpse of a rare butterfly.

“Come with me, then. A little further, and you will know it all.”

Then his crawling, cold hand was on mine, and I felt an echo of the music race up my spine, through every nerve and pore and cell of my body.

There was a feeling of being stretched across vast, howling gulfs.

There was a feeling of snapping back like a rubber band, a whipcrack sensation which left my bones humming like tuning forks.

Then we were right beneath the throne, and the music was all around us.

This wasn’t the song I had heard back in my little Hab cube. If that was the sound of an alien jazz combo, this was a full orchestra; music coiling and twining, rising and falling in waves. It was the horror of a thousand mind-bending songs writhing up against each other orgiastically!

The sound seemed to press down on me like a weight, bringing me to my knees.

And like a fool, I looked up.

Here, on what I supposed must be the innermost ring the Throne loomed in the sky like a stone thunderhead, the noisome flesh of its occupant rolling by endlessly. There was no city here, just ancient stone – a flat plain of crazed basalt smeared with moss and yellow lichen. Here and there obelisks thrust up from the stone, leaning drunkenly, twisted and gnarled like the boles of dead trees. Pale green fire flickered at their tips, illuminating the troubadours who serenaded the Dreaming One.

Once, they may have been human – or the denizens of any of a million worlds. Now they were uniformly twisted, scrawled wraith things fused to their instruments, playing in a frenzy beneath the eerie glow of the obelisks, the heavy shadow of the Throne.

There must have been thousands of them, all around the ring, all utterly concentrated on the complexities of the song. They flowed around Hound and I like water, dancing and spinning as they poured out their souls to the vast sleeper above. Oh yeah – I really mean it. I could feel the energy flowing from them, flickering up like a million candle flames. They were burning themselves out to keep the song alive - to keep the Dreaming One asleep!

“See how they do it, Mister Price!” exulted Hound, clapping his alien hands together with glee. “The best in all creation, bringing their gifts back to the source. And now, you can *join them!*”

I flinched back in horror, imagining my soul, my *essence* being leeched into the mind of that bloated thing in the sky. Of being transfigured and twisted into one of the capering, enslaved things which served the Throne.

“No!” I shouted, my voice almost lost in the gale of music which swirled around me. “I won’t be one of them! I CAN’T be one of them! I’m a human being. . . I’m just a sample pusher . . . no!”

But Ignatious Hound, Procurer of Musicians, had already slid the pin through his newest specimen. His face contorted with rage as he reached out for me with his writhing fingers.

“How dare you spurn this honor!” he spat, his eyes bulging black from his scaly face. “You and all your kind can only create, only write and paint and carve and sing through the grace of He Who Sleeps! That is why you ARE!”

He slapped me then; not an effeminate little forehead thing but the full weight of his scaled hand, powered by an arm with two elbows and miles of ropy tendons. I must have spun in the air three times before I crashed to the cold stone ground.

“Look UP, you filthy little thing! Ten rings of the greatest creative minds in the universe – and nine of them do nothing but interpret the dreams of our Lord! Bards and sculptors and dancers and light-weavers from a million worlds. Names which will be remembered when your Da Vinci and Elvis and Christ are echoes in empty space! And you WILL NOT join them?”

I could feel the blood in my mouth – and the broken teeth floating in it. So I spat, and rolled over, and looked Hound in the eyes with all the defiance I had left in me. “Damn right, freakshow. Now get me the fuck out of here, before you *really* make me mad!”

We both knew it was hollow bravado. But it gave me a little satisfaction to see the look on his face in that shocked, silent second.

“You are the last, MacArthur Price.” he said then, low and soft, almost pleading.

“The ones you called Cobain and Morrison lasted only so long. And then who will remember the Earth? *Who will make Him remember to dream you?*”

That thought almost turned my aching head inside out. And I suddenly understood the predicament Ignatious Hound was in, with me, the last scrap in the bottom of the barrel keeping his job hanging by a thread. Perhaps if his bizarre god stopped dreaming the Earth he would go into oblivion with it?

Well, I shouldn’t have paused to speculate. Because in the second it took me to grasp the slippery implications of Hound’s words he was on me, his fingers clamped around my skull, constricting, weaving together behind me in an impossible grip. I thought he meant to crush my head like an egg between those scaly hands, but what he did was *much worse*. I felt the tips of his fingers questing into my ears, writhing blindly, insistently.

I remembered the black, oily worms then, those foul symbiotic creatures which had filled out Hound’s humanoid skin. It felt as though one of them – a whole *nest* of

them – was boring and chewing its way inexorably into my living brain. There was no pain, just a slick, tight sensation – and then the music rose up in a vast crescendo, exploding like a supernova, sleeting through me like hard radiation.

They say we only use a tiny part of our brains, right? Well, that was when I learned that the rest of that grey matter is a filter, keeping out the flood of sensations which would otherwise drive us insane.

Now I was exposed to the full force of the music which encircled the Dreaming One, the blind idiot god on his prison throne. *That* sound was not made for human ears – or any organic senses, from no matter what weird and savage world. It filled my head like a hot snarl of barbed wire, and I pounded my fists impotently against the stone, against the scaly chest of Ignatious Hound as I felt it undoing my very being, re-writing my memories and thoughts and feelings as riffs and jags of burning music.

Still, there was that tiny, inviolate kernel at the heart of me which exulted. This was the music of the spheres, the accompaniment to the Word of Creation, and I wanted desperately to play along. My fingers, unbidden struggled with the silvery strap of Hound's bone-white instrument, trying to drag it to my lips. His smile loomed over me like a broken sickle moon, wavering in the visible haze of soul-fed music.

It was then that I saw my hands begin to *change*.

If you've ever had a tooth pulled, you'll know the very feeling I'm talking about. That dull, anaesthetized sensation of grinding movement deep in the bone. That painless ripping and tearing of flesh which you know should come in over a wave of agony. It sounded like two slabs of cyclopean basalt being ground together deep below, but I could see that it was within me. Because my hands were elongating into talons, the skin mottling green and black as if in the grip of some terrible plague. My fingernails split and fell off, revealing beetle-wing claws. And I knew that it was *spreading*, fusing my ribs together, twisting my spine like some mad chiropractor. I only had to look at the manic troubadours around me to see how it would end. . .

I tried, I think, to scream then, one last human sound before the wave of change broke over me entirely. But I could feel my teeth welding together, my face elongating into a muzzle, my lower jaw stretching like molten glass, out and out into some kind of obscene beak.

What issued from that bony proboscis was a pure, clear note, the sound of a perfectly tuned Tenor Sax. My hands went up involuntarily to the twisted mass of bone fused to my face, and found slick, organic rows of stops and keys, some familiar to my hands, others which would no doubt produce notes beyond the range of human hearing.

Still the orchestra pounded and screamed out their eternal blasphemous hymn, and now *I could join them*.

Any thought of resistance had been burned away by Hound's gnawing worms, and the fever of the sound around me.

My hands moved haltingly at first, my mind following the pulsing skein of the song, picking out the missing notes, tracing my part. Then I was away, chasing the music down into oblivion, my entire being suffused with the rapture of the sound . . . I *connected* to the Dreaming One, a shock like jamming a knife into a wall socket, and I gave him the song of Earth. It was the dust of the wastelands and the diseased algal red of the oceans, the concrete and steel and black tar of the Urbs, the hookers and Rentacops and Pharm pushers of Calliope Road.

It was all that and everything else, man. It was *cataclysmic*.

The last thing I remembered – before about an hour ago, that is – was the face of

Ignatious Hound, smiling his razor smile as I spun away across the innermost ring of the Cage, one among thousands, pouring my gift back into the source.

At the time, I felt nothing – *could* probably feel nothing but the warp and wrack of the song. But now . . . now I want to smash that smug, self-satisfied alien bastard to steaming jelly!

Ahh, little chance of that, though. I might have spent years there among the troubadours. Time may even have twisted back on itself like a snake eating its own tail. It certainly felt that way, sometimes.

All I know is that after hours – or aeons - dancing on the edge of the spinning ring of stone, I *fell off*!

Well, I guess I did, because I woke up falling, and I only stopped when the gravity arc of the outermost circantrate-city swept me up like lint and brought me down, light as a feather.

Hound once called this place the Silent Ring; and it *is* almost as quiet as the grave, but for the endless scratching of a billion pens across a billion sheets of paper.

The things who work here have been twisted up just as I was - just as I *still am*, creeping through the streets of bronze and rusted steel with a great instrument of bone fused to my skull. They have sharp nibs of brass for fingers, and inky blood courses and drips from them eternally, ready to interpret the dreams of the Dreamer across acres of whispering parchment.

From what I can see, the stories and sonnets and plays they concoct turn up in the fevered minds of writers across the multiverse, so the message I'm sending out now could turn up in Zweig's Bookstore, back in the Urb, or it could become part of some druid tribe's mythology. Hell, it could even get rendered down into electrical pulses or pheromone potions to be told to alien creatures under bizarre, multiple suns!

But on the off chance, I have to *try*.

I know that the Sentinels will be after me, and worse – the Dreaming One might already be forgetting the Earth, and all of you who I hope to reach out to! If that happens, I suppose you'll all just fade away like a nightmare on waking – and me with you. But if this is on a page in front of you, I've shunted my S.O.S through the brain of some drug-addled hack, sweating over his dirty keyboard. So LISTEN! I have to get *out*!

And the only way I can do that is to be *replaced* . . . that's what it says on the Stelae of Statutes, here in the temple of the Horned Eye.

Cobain went back, and Morrison too – Mozart got shoehorned back into the body of a nineteen-fifties biker! So if you're reading this, and you know somebody – *anybody* – who has the least scrap of talent, tell them to *keep it up*. Don't throw bottles and rotten fruit at your neighbor when he's practicing the cello at three A.M!

Give them this number – 0623 22994 022 734 9958.

Tell them it's for a certain Mister Hound, Procurer of Musicians to the Throne. Hell, tell them there's a million dollar contract in it, baby, and he'll make them a star!

Please! Don't turn the page! Don't shut the book! If I'm the last, I'll have to do this forev . . . shit! The Sentinels! And they've got Grexxen with them! Arrrrgh . . . all those TEETH! Please! For your old buddy Mac Price, tell them to keep playing! Tell them they've got a gift!

Nnnngggghh! Get it off me! Not the hands! Those are the hands of an *artiste*, you *philistine*! Get that collar off of me! Get that d . . .

THE END

