

---

# THE ROBSON STRAIN

by Ben Jeapes

*Originally published in Interzone, July 1995*

---

‘Evening, Robson.’

‘Evening, Dr Jones.’

The scientist, white coated and bustling as though in deliberate self parody, was already disappearing down the corridor in the direction of his lab and Alan Robson spoke to his receding back, but he didn’t mind. Alan had become a fixture in Number Three Block of the vast Quantum Cultures complex, patrolling in his laser tailored blue uniform: boots gleaming, cap the precise angle, stunner holstered at his side. And even the great Dr Jones knew his name! It was the happiest time of his life.

\* \* \*

The laser field showed a vast field of corn, gently waving in the breeze to the sound of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony. The smooth, confident voice of the presenter carried on:

‘Quantum Cultures leads the planet in the production of engineered food to feed the starving millions of the Third World.’ The scene changed to a blue underwater seascape and dolphins flashed by the camera, ripples of white sunlight playing on their flanks. They were moving around an underwater construction. ‘The symbiotes developed in Quantum Culture’s world-famous Sirius lab are already being used to great effect in enhancing the native intelligence of humanity’s most faithful allies in the animal world.’ Again the scene cut, this time to the panoramic shot of QC that had started the show, and the presenter concluded with a spiel about the firm’s great contributions towards humanity being only the beginning. The picture faded, the lights came up and the trainee Alan Robson was left with a sense of awe that he should be doing his bit for this great organisation.

The biotech giant whose glittering glass headquarters took up the whole industrial estate outside the town had always been there in the background for as long as Alan had been alive. He had left school as a minor prodigy, a boy who had turned his back on the gangs and got educated, and in theory he had had the whole European Union in which to find a job. Or maybe he could have emigrated to one of the sea colonies.

In reality he had known it would be in his home town, and if it wasn’t to be a waiter in a fast food restaurant, or an odd-job man, it would be with the people who actually kept the town in money; the people who dominated the place, who took all the talent into their bosom. It was so inevitable, it wasn’t even depressing.

The training had been dull, but he had got through it, and that unfortunate little incident with the dogs had merely resulted in a dry comment in his file that he was not suited for the canine division. It was long and boring work, but it paid well. It didn't matter that Quantum Cultures was vast and impersonal. He served it well and it looked after him.

He was told, by the people around him and by Cultured People, the company magazine, that biotechnology was the new thing, helping clean up the spills and spoils and excesses of the twentieth century. QC was making the world better to live in, and he was a part of it. He was on nodding terms with doctors, professors, scientists, who had come to know and like him; a decent, quiet, discreet type, who in a bygone age might have taken elocution lessons and risen to be a gentleman's gentleman.

Oh, there were video cameras, robots ... but cameras could be blanked by intruders, robot could have their software scrambled. The late twentieth century flirt with electronic technology was over and now QC's philosophy was to rely on human beings. They had found that the right type of human rewarded trust with loyalty, and Alan was a prime specimen of the type.

\* \* \*

He had first heard of Jones on his third day on the job. It was 8:30 in the morning and he and a party of guards had been ordered to the front gate.

They heard the shouts well in advance of their arrival; there was a demonstration going on outside. Alan strained to read one of the placards, though it was jiggling up and down as its holder was jostled in the crowd. GOD'S CREATION. He had heard of these people and already gathered that 'God's Creation' was a phrase it was best not to mention at work.

There were others: NAZIS OUT. What was the relevance? Another one: *SOMETHING GO HOME*. He spelt out the first word silently. M-E-N-G-E-L-E. He pronounced it Mengeel to himself and wondered what it meant.

There were other placards, biblical quotations which meant nothing to him. Orders were shouted. He and his fellows were to link arms and make a secondary line of defence some thirty yards inside the gate. The perimeter men, dogs barking angrily and straining at the leash (huge great brutes, too – he eyed them nervously), were making a very effective first line. The gate was open, hence the need for guards: they were expecting someone.

At last the cause of all this trouble arrived – a sleek, armoured limo that made its way through the jeering, angry crowds; through the gate and past the guards, who opened up their line for it. Alan later gathered that this was a daily occurrence when the car's occupant, Dr Nicholas Jones, arrived for work, and normally it was quite routine.

Then the engine stalled.

The crowd pressed forward with a roar once it realised that its prey was helpless. It was a second ahead of the guards who collapsed at the sudden surge. Then the protesters were around the car, rocking it.

Alan was already running forward. His stunner was still too new a fixture about his person for him to think of drawing it as the old rumbling instincts took over. He heard the smash of a car window as he came to the first of the protesters. A blow to the man's kidneys made the fellow shriek and collapse.

Next. Someone was just turning to face Alan. A fist into the man's stomach, another into his face as he doubled over. Two down. The third loomed in front of him and both Alan and the other froze.

'Al?' Rick was a lot taller now, of course; more muscular, confident in the protection of his old mate, and all of a sudden the veneer of respectability, even thinner than the fabric of Alan's uniform, was torn away and they were on the same side again, working the streets. 'How's it-'

Alan put all his weight behind the blow, feeling the skin on his knuckles rip as Rick staggered back into the crowd with blood spurting from his nose. For a moment, a brief moment, Alan had been terrified that they were on the same side again, that all his efforts of the last ten years had been for nothing, and it was that terror which drove the blow. That was for his past. Alan carried on into the crowd.

They had Jones out of the car now; Alan could hear his yelling – enraged, not frightened. Alan was surrounded; arms and hands were grabbing hold of him. He dimly heard a cry from one of the other guards, outside the throng:

'Robson! Stunner!'

And he remembered.

A fist came flashing towards his face; he moved his head to one side to let the blow pass. His right hand was pinioned but he managed to reach over with his left and grab the stunner at his hip.

He let the first man have it at point-blank in the chest. The man arched over backward to be caught by his companions, quivering spastically. Another shot, and another. Alan had the stunner in his right hand now and he fanned it to and fro, working his way towards the now prone Jones. The attackers were already scattering and the guards had regrouped for an all-out charge. Jones was left alone and Alan helped him up.

Jones was a gangly man with a balding, pointed head. He already had a swelling black eye and a gash on his forehead, but he managed to smile.

'Thank you, Horatius,' he said, 'very noble.' He took a step and winced, and Alan had to catch him. 'Help me to the guard house, will you? They've got a first aid kit there ...'

\* \* \*

Naturally, Jones was too high up, or too busy, or both, to express his gratitude in person but the Head of Security called Alan to his office to congratulate him. One of the cameras over the gate had caught it all and the Head played it back for him. Alan was quite impressed, despite himself.

‘You were in the gangs, weren’t you, Robson?’ the Head said, looking not at Alan but at his laser image viciously kneeling one of the God’s Creationers in the groin.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘What happened to get you out?’

‘Nothing, sir.’ Well, quite a big thing – big enough to make him renounce his old life and strive for respectability – but he had shut that memory away and had no intention of calling it up again.

The Head looked at him thoughtfully. ‘Well, you’re on the right side, I suppose that’s what counts. You may have gathered Dr Jones is a big name here, Robson. This could be quite a break.’

\* \* \*

There had been one slightly puzzling sequel as well. Alan had been walking round a corner and quite innocently bumped into Dr Thompson. Thompson was also a big name at QC – almost, but not quite, as big as Jones, and that ‘almost’ rankled. Alan apologised quickly as Thompson staggered back.

‘Ah, the newcomer!’ Thompson said, recovering. ‘The local hero! Forgetting us ordinary mortals already, eh?’

‘Sir?’ Alan said, baffled.

‘On the old patrician’s guard, eh? Don’t worry, Robson. Jones takes good care of everyone hanging onto his coattails and once you’re there you can well and truly forget how mere humans act. You’ll soon forget that the laws of normal social decency ever applied to you.’

And he went off down the corridor, with Alan looking after him in frank bewilderment.

\* \* \*

At twelve he was the youngest and smallest of the Street Eagles, and so naturally he was chosen. It was his initiation.

‘Go into that house,’ Rick, the chief, said casually, ‘and open the front door for us.’ The other two, Steve and Olly, looked on, impassive.

It was a nice house in a nice part of town. The Street Eagles thought big – Rick’s philosophy was that the people around here took such precautions against marauding gangs and full-size rumbles in their district that they would never notice a small group of four boys.

‘Might be wired,’ Alan had said.

'Might be,' Rick had agreed, holding Alan's gaze. He had slapped a small plastic box into Alan's hand. 'This'll help.'

So Alan had done it.

The window at the back had indeed been wired, but there were ways round that which he had been taught long ago. Once he was in he made his way slowly – very, very slowly – through the house, navigating by sense of direction and feel. An aerosol spray showed the laser lines that he had better not break; the magic box in his hand sent signals to the house computer that overrode the panicked warnings of the motion detectors and pressure pads on the floor. Rick's dad moved in an elevated criminal stratum and had access to such toys.

The hall was well-lit by the streetlamps beaming in through the windows around the door, and so the last stretch of Alan's journey to the front door was easy. He opened it and waited for the others. They slid across the lawn like ghosts.

'Cool.' Rick threw a playful punch to his shoulder. Steve just grinned as he went in to the house. Olly stopped to ruffle his hair.

'Well done, little bro,' he said.

'Don't call me that,' Alan said. Olly grinned and went on in, and Alan shut the door.

\* \* \*

Three years after his first meeting with Jones, Alan was on the night shift, patrolling the dimly lit deserted corridors or keeping a close eye on the banks of monitors in the guardroom.

The Sirius lab was a hive of activity at one in the morning; it usually was. Alan sometimes wondered when Jones and his staff slept. He thought he would stroll over and pay his respects; remind Jones et al. that they were in good hands.

His hand was on the door when pandemonium erupted within – people shouting, and the most terrifying screams that Alan had ever heard. He pulled his stunner out of its holster with one practiced movement and burst in through the doors.

'Catch her!' Jones bellowed. Alan was so taken aback that he forgot to shoot.

He could have sworn that a small, hairy dwarf was running at him, and he yelled. It had been making for the door, pursued by Jones and his lab team. Alan's sudden appearance and shout startled it as much as it had startled him, and it changed direction.

It had taken one second. Reality and Alan's perception of it aligned themselves properly, and Alan saw what was happening. The dwarf was a chimpanzee, and it was the one doing the screaming. It was one of the lab animals and it had escaped. It was almost comical.

Maybe not. It had jumped up on to one of the benches and was running along it, knocking equipment on to the ground with heart-rending crashes.

‘Over there!’

‘Stop her, for God’s sake!’

Alan’s most obvious contribution was still in his hand. He aimed it with care at the chimp, but the humans were in the way now and the auto-aim, programmed to target a man-shape, was confused. Alan flicked it off and aimed again. Jones, who seemed to be the calmest one present, saw him out of the corner of his eye.

‘Half power, man!’ he called. ‘She’s not a human!’ Alan blinked and adjusted the setting.

The chimp had reached one of the ladders leading up to the catwalk above and was swarming up it. One of the men started after her and Jones grabbed him.

‘No, don’t do that.’ He turned to Alan. ‘Get her, Robson.’ Alan aimed carefully and pulled the trigger. The stunner buzzed and the chimp convulsed with one last scream. Then she fell gracelessly into the waiting arms of the men below her.

Jones took time to come over. ‘Well done, Robson. Good shot.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ Alan felt emboldened to ask, ‘what happened?’

‘Oh, we got the strength wrong,’ Jones said enigmatically.

‘Caused quite a mess, sir,’ Alan said sympathetically. Jones looked around, seeing the extent of the damage for the first time.

‘Christ almighty,’ he moaned. Alan guessed it wasn’t just a case of tidying up and giving the floor a good vacuum.

‘Dr Jones!’ One of the technicians was standing by a rack of smashed glass implements. Jones bellowed and ran over to it. Fluid was dripping onto the floor.

‘Gone?’ Jones said, as though the one word was causing him physical pain.

‘Every one, sir,’ the tech said. The others gathered round and stared at the wreckage. Alan was familiar enough about the lab work to know that the rack was important. He had several times seen Jones shout at someone who gave it even a jostle.

‘The cultures,’ Jones was wailing. ‘The cultures.’

It was as though every man had suffered a bereavement. They stood and stared hopelessly; every now and then, one of them would move as if to say something.

‘All because we thought the bloody animal was ready for it,’ Jones said.

‘We still have the other batches in the safe,’ someone said.

‘Yes, yes, yes, but ... oh, sod it, we’ll have to write this lot off, and that means revising-’

‘Or getting another volunteer,’ a man said.

‘Yes, but it takes hours for the imprinting to take effect. We’d need someone now..’

He trailed off. Alan waited innocuously a short distance away from the group. Then, as though they were puppets, they turned to him and smiled. Alan’s hackles rose.

‘Robson, old chap,’ Jones said, ‘how would you like to do your bit for Quantum Cultures?’

‘Me, sir?’

‘You! Do you know what we’re doing here, Robson?’

‘Ah – not really, sir.’

‘I’ll explain.’

Maybe what followed was an explanation. The words ‘virus’ and ‘intelligence’ and ‘symbiote’ popped up a lot. It was something to do with artificial minds, in a dish. Jones’ viruses formed their own network in a mammalian brain: chemical signals passed around it and simulated the firing of neurons in the mind. Introduced into an animal’s brain, these viruses would work with the creature’s own instincts with the effect of apparently enhancing its intelligence. Alan thought of the dolphins in the induction video, the chimps that you often saw helping construction crews nowadays ...

‘The thing is, Robson,’ Jones was saying, ‘the viruses on their own don’t know what to do. If we just pumped them into the creature’s brain then they would form their own random paths and the creature would go mad, or have its brain short circuited. They need to know how to grow, like a neural network in a computer – they aren’t programmed so much as trained. And for that the viruses need to be ... um, kick started, as it were, by a human mind.’

‘You mean the animal would think like me?’ Alan said, awed despite himself.

‘Oh, that’s an old wives’ tale,’ Jones said impatiently. ‘No, it won’t. But it will have your instincts. Do you have a favourite piece of music? Then the animal will react to it, though it won’t know what music is. It will be like you were if you were a new-born baby. Your instincts and the animal’s, combined.’

‘Why me, sir?’ Alan asked.

‘We’re still calibrating,’ Jones said. ‘The cultures for this batch have had all our own minds imprinted on them and I don’t want to use the same old data. I want a new mind.’

‘Ah, Dr Jones?’ One of the others had a hand raised and Jones looked at him with wary patience. It was Dr Thompson, and there was just a hint of polite disdain in the man’s voice. ‘Ah, Doctor, with respect, Mr Robson is a random element. We don’t know him or his mind-’

‘For pity’s sake,’ Jones snorted, ‘he’ll have been screened when he joined the firm and his psych profile will be on file with all the others. It’ll just be in a different place, that’s all. Look, I’ll show you.’

‘Come to think of it,’ Jones added as he sat at the nearest terminal, ‘I don’t know why we didn’t think of this before. Why on earth were we profiling all our volunteers when the firm’s already done it for us? Can’t see the wood for the trees. See, Robson? You’ve already made a contribution to science.’

Alan smiled weakly.

It took a while because none of them were familiar with accessing the personnel records – and none thought to ask Alan – and only Jones, as a director, had the authority to get the information they wanted anyway, but eventually Alan’s psych profile was displayed for all to see.

‘See?’ Jones said. ‘We have all the calibration data we need. He’s a well-balanced, ordinary chap.’ He grinned at Alan. ‘Wouldn’t you say so, Robson?’

‘Um-’ Alan began.

‘With,’ said Thompson, still studying the display, ‘a pathological fear of dogs.’

For the first time Alan felt a stab of anger. He didn’t like being discussed like a lump of dead meat and the incident with the dogs was something that still made him sweat.

‘Hmmm?’ Jones looked at the display again. His eyes darted along the lines of text on the display and his lips moved as he murmured, ‘When asked to take the leash of one of the German Shepherds, the subject froze and would not move. His vital signs indicated severe panic. The subject is unwilling to discuss this fear of dogs and it is therefore recommended . . .’ Hmph. Don’t blame him. They’re loyal servants, but whoever coined the phrase ‘nice doggy’ was a fool. The brutes only serve the pack ... blow that, Thompson. He’ll do.’

‘And prone to nightmares,’ Thompson continued, as though relishing the words on the display. Alan could have hit him.

‘He’ll do!’ Jones said.

‘And ... dear me, a number of minor convictions.’ This was now open enjoyment. ‘Petty theft, assault, suspected-’

Jones favoured the display with one last glance. ‘The last of which was when he was fifteen!’ he said. ‘Robson will do, and that is the end of the conversation!’

‘Yes, Dr Jones.’ Thompson acceded, making no secret of his triumph. Jones put a hand on Alan’s arm.

‘This way, please, Robson.’ He sensed the slight resistance. ‘Come on, man, it’s completely harmless.’

‘Really, sir?’

‘Really. Even easier than giving blood. You give blood, don’t you?’

Alan didn’t have time to reply that, no, he had never had the chance. He was sat down and small pickups were attached to his temples. His eyes widened in alarm. It was too much like the horror videos he had been so fond of as a youngster.

‘Five seconds, that’s all,’ Jones said. And it was. There wasn’t even a buzz, or a flashing generator, or any of what Alan thought of as the standard paraphernalia. ‘There, didn’t hurt, did it? Did you get the recording?’ The last question was addressed to someone behind Alan.

‘Yes, Doctor. Perfect.’

‘Good! Imprint a new culture, we’ll get a good night’s sleep, and when we’re ready for work again the culture will be ready for us. Thank you, Robson, you’ve been a great help.’ Jones lent forward to remove the pickups.

‘Than-’ the words dried in Alan’s mouth. For a brief moment, as Jones loomed over him, his head was silhouetted against one of the ceiling lights. His features vanished and there was just a dark shape. A pointed head with big ears.

Alan was in a daze as they bade him goodnight. He could hardly bear to turn his back on them to walk out of the lab. He strove to be nonchalant as long as he was in their view. His grin was agonisingly fixed.

Once out in the corridor again, he could allow himself the luxury of thought. It couldn’t be, couldn’t be-

That silhouette had been lurking at the bottom of his mind all this time and now the banished horror of that night welled up out of his memory.

\* \* \*

The light came on.

Alan actually yelped. A man stood at the top of the stairs, a black, dressing-gowned shape against the light behind him, flanked by two large dogs. Dobermans. The four boys stood, frozen, already sizing up the opposition. Rick was pawing at his jacket for his gun: the man raised an arm and, though they still could not see his face properly, they saw the powerful-looking weapon – a standard, dom-defence handpiece typical of a middle class householder – all too well. A red spot from the gun’s laser sight glowed directly over Rick’s heart. Rick’s hand fell back down to his side.

One of the dogs growled.

‘Boys, boys,’ the man said scornfully. The boys stood their ground. Alan couldn’t take his eyes off the dogs. They were huge. And why hadn’t they barked? Why-

The man was coming down the stairs, a mobile silhouette with the dogs at his heel. Alan was reminded of Dracula – a tall, thin shape, and Alan

mentally superimposed bat wings on the protruding ears. The laser sight flickered from one boy to another.

‘Sweepings of the street,’ the man said. ‘No hoppers. Useless, good for nothings. Parasites.’

They watched him approach.

\* \* \*

A pointed head, and two big ears ...

Jones obviously didn’t recognise him. Why should he? Alan would have been just one frightened boy – a scruffy, nondescript fledgling punk.

But did he, Alan, recognise him? Jones was ... Jones was a good man, which is to say, he was central to QC, and QC’s work was good ... And Alan had only seen him – that man – once, a long time ago.

But, now that for the first time he was taking time out to recall the events of that night, calmly and deliberately, and now that he knew what Jones’ work entailed . . .

He remembered the next words the man in the house had spoken, and to whom they had been addressed.

Alone in the guardroom, Alan sat at the computer and called up Jones’ file – his security code had no problem with getting simple names and addresses. He looked at the address.

It was completely wrong. Jones wasn’t the man.

He sat back and smiled in relief. Shaking his head at himself, he decided he was obviously tired. He needed a coffee.

He was half out of his seat when he remembered. Jones had got married recently – it had been in Cultured People. Married people often moved house, and the data on file now was his current address. Anyway, the business had been ten years ago. It took a minute’s searching to get Jones’ old details out of the machine.

Alan didn’t know how long he stared at the display. When he eventually glanced at the clock, he saw that almost an hour had passed since he had left the lab. Jones had been almost leaving when Alan last saw him, and would probably be at home by now.

He had no idea what he was doing. It seemed that a stranger picked up the phone with a shaking hand, checked that vision was off, pressed ‘9’ for an outside line, and said Jones’ number out loud.

The phone rang once. Jones probably had a bedside phone.

‘Jones here.’ Alan didn’t know what to say to the familiar voice. ‘Hello? Jones here.’

‘You bastard,’ Alan said. ‘You ... bastard.’

‘Oh God, not another ... how did you get this number? I’m ex-directory.’

‘You ... you ...’ Alan stuttered.

Click.

Alan was left staring at the receiver. He replaced it ... then picked it up and spoke the number for Jones’ private line, the number of which glowed in front of him. The direct, untappable line from QC to Jones’ home.

‘Jones.’

‘You don’t get away that easily, you bastard,’ Alan said gleefully. His acquired accent was lapsing, slipping back into its street original. His ‘r’s were rolling and he was swallowing his consonants. He didn’t notice.

There was a pause while Jones digested the knowledge that someone at QC was making this call.

‘Who are you?’ Jones said flatly.

‘Ten years ago, your house in River Park. Four kids got in-’

‘Oh.’ Jones didn’t seem ready to say anything more.

‘You remember?’

‘Of course I remember. You’re referring to the outcome of the experiment? IQ enhancement, series 1?’

‘Experiment?’ Alan screeched. ‘You-’

‘I remember four street trash,’ Jones said levelly. ‘Scum of the earth. Face it, what kind of future did any of you have? By the law of averages you should all have been dead in another three, four years anyway. Congratulations on still being alive, by the way. But then, if you’re calling from QC, you must be better than I gave you credit for, eh? Better than most of the little people.’

Alan bit his tongue against the instinctive ‘Thank you, sir’ that came to mind. ‘They were sum ... simbo ... viruses, weren’t they? Your cultures, you injected them into the dogs-’

‘The word is symbiotes. Very good. If it’s any consolation, I didn’t expect them to go as far as they did. I went off dogs after that. Nasty things. And they got encephalitis and had to be destroyed. We’ve come a long way since then, learnt how to make the effect long term-’

It was a standing joke that Jones was ready to talk about his work to anyone, and apparently that even included nuisance callers. Alan interrupted. ‘Where did you get them from? People? Did you kill someone else-’

‘Oh, God, not that old slander again. No, I didn’t. The viruses were grown in cultures in the Sirius lab, quite legally. I got them imprinted from volunteers as I have always done. It was only the gutter press and God’s bloody Creation that decided I was the new Mengele, experimenting on human beings. Now, I don’t know who you are,

and I'm not going to try and find out. This time. Just think about it. Think about the favour I did you. Goodbye.'

For the second time, the phone went dead on Alan. He didn't try a third time.

\* \* \*

The moment Alan put the phone down he broke out into a sweat. How stupid could he have been? To have called Jones on the QC line in the middle of the night, when security would know exactly who had been in and who hadn't ... Jones had only to ask ... shouldn't be too difficult ... and it would come down to him, Alan Robson, golden boy of the security division.

But if Jones complained then he, Alan, could say what he knew ...

He could prove nothing ...

So why should Jones complain? ...

It still boiled down to the fact that Alan Robson was a bloody idiot. He stuffed his fingers into his mouth and wailed.

\* \* \*

He spent the next couple of shifts lying low, as best he could, trying to avoid Jones. Just in case ... But at every idle moment his thoughts returned to the matter, thrashing out the pros and cons to the satisfaction of his subconscious.

He felt no sympathy – not any more. This was a conclusion that Alan reached after several bouts of insomnia, and it surprised him. He felt no sympathy, indeed, for any of the Street Eagles who had raided Jones' house that night, including the twelve-year-old Alan Robson. They were strangers. He had begun to see them in much the same way as Jones. Losers. No hoppers. Scum. What had Jones said? 'Little people.'

It was too much to take in, and Alan never had the time to think it all through properly.

\* \* \*

The disappearance made minor news, but the police knew better than to look too deep. All four Street Eagles already had records and their type vanished all too often, usually when they offended someone they shouldn't have. It happened. The only way to avoid it was to keep well out, and the boys were all well in.

Alan was made to swear, using the Street Eagles' most terrible oath, that he would keep quiet. It didn't stop him from calling the police anonymously and saying he had seen four boys go into the house that night, and only three leave. After all, there were other reasons why a boy could disappear and gang war was just one of them; another common reason for vanishing was close enough to decent society for the police to take an interest. Alan dropped just enough hints, and the police investigated.

Alan made sure he just happened to be passing the house when the police arrived – two, in a semi-armoured police cruiser. One of them walked up the path and rang the bell, and Alan heard the dogs inside barking. The door opened and the man came out. He was too far away for Alan to make out his features. The two chatted while the dogs played on the lawn. The policeman was invited in. He came out half an hour later, shook hands with the man and rejoined his comrade in the car. They drove off, and that was the end of the police investigation.

\* \* \*

It was three weeks later. Alan had gone back to day shift for a fortnight and now was back on nights again. As usual, Jones and his team were working late, and Alan was still avoiding the lab as much as possible. The few times he had seen Jones since, the scientist had been positively jovial – almost friendly. Alan was not apparently under suspicion. Had Jones actually meant that bit about not trying to find out?

He was in the Block Three guardroom when the alarm went off – a hideous screeching that shocked him to his feet and had him running for the door in a moment, along with the two other guards present. A voice was bellowing out of their radios.

‘Major security breach. Repeat, major security breach. Intruders are past the perimeter in sector three and heading for the main complex. Believed to be armed.’

The security division wasn’t trained or equipped for all-out assaults, and this was more than the usual ragtag bunch of God’s Creationers. They had assembled outside the fence and burst through by sheer strength of numbers. Sometimes a guard got close enough to use his stunner but by that time he would be well within range of the far more effective firearms that the attackers carried. The much-vaunted dog division had been wiped out.

Half way there, Alan and his group met a group of guards coming in the other direction. The Head of Security was with them.

‘We can’t push them out of the grounds,’ he said. ‘The police are coming but we’ve got to hold on in here. We’re sealing all exits and windows. It’s a cert they’ll be heading for the Sirius lab. You lot, take the west side of level four. I’ll send reinforcements up. Shoot at any non-QC personnel you see, ask questions later and don’t be too picky about stunner settings.’

The block was set into the side of a hill and level four was actually at ground level. Alan found himself part of a group of ten running towards the glass-sided gallery that ran along the entire west side, but they were too late. They heard the smash of glass as the attackers gained entry.

They burst into the gallery to face a group of twenty or thirty strangers, dressed in black with masks over their faces. The strangers opened fire even as they were

pulling their stunners out. Two men were cut down immediately and the other guards, Alan among them, beat a retreat back into the corridor.

It was a good fight – the kind of rumble that Alan could have expected if he had stayed with the gangs. The difficulty was that the guards had had no training in close quarter fighting with weapons, and the attackers had. Their machine pistols rattled in short, lethal bursts: sometimes the guards were under cover, but the enemy knew how to use ricochets to drive them back just as effectively.

The guards managed to hold a bend in the corridor: the attackers were about forty yards into the complex. Suddenly the shooting stopped.

‘What-’ Alan said, and was knocked flat by a massive explosion from around the corner. A cloud of debris and smoke blew round the bend. They picked themselves up gingerly.

‘Think they’ve blown themselves up?’ one of the others said.

‘Dunno,’ Alan said. It suddenly dawned on him, for the first time, that he was the senior guard present. The others were all looking at him. He looked back at them, then at the corner of the wall that hid whatever had happened from view, and shrugged.

‘Fuck it.’ He took his cap off and, holding it by the rim, poked it out past the bend.

Nothing happened.

He looked at the others again and replaced his cap. ‘All together,’ he said, gripping his stunner with both hands. They did likewise. ‘Count of three. One, two, three!’

As one they jumped around the bend, stunners raised and blazing. Apart from a lot of debris, the corridor was deserted.

‘Where did they-’ Alan started. Then he saw that the debris surrounded a hole in the floor. The attackers had simply blasted their way into level three – the level that gave access to the lab.

‘Bastards!’ he yelled. ‘Come on.’ They dropped down through the hole to level three, fifteen feet below. As they ran to the lab, they heard shouts and noises of destruction. It was like the night that the chimp had got free, but much, much worse.

The guards hesitated outside the Sirius lab.

‘Listen to that!’ one of them hissed.

‘We ought to get ‘em,’ Alan said.

‘They’ve gotguns, sir’, said another, respectfully.

‘Police’ll be here in a minute,’ said someone else.

Alan ground his teeth, only too aware that in the lab those filth, those animals, were attacking his beloved Quantum Cultures, destroying the work that he was meant to be protecting, and that he was cowering impotently in the corridor outside.

‘Think we could get up onto the catwalk?’ someone suggested. ‘Shoot down at ‘em-’

A particularly loud crash sounded inside and Alan saw red. His fury peaked, and before the others could react he was in through the door.

He had time to take in the group of scientists, Jones among them, cowering in the corner under armed guard, and the other attackers moving around the lab, wreaking destruction. He raised his stunner and brought one down.

Then a burst of bullets caught him full in the chest and flung him back against the doors.

\* \* \*

Darkness. Blurs of light, far above. Ceiling lights.

Pain. Immense, body wracking pain. And numbness too. Numbness to kill the pain.

Figures. Crowding round, bending over.

‘Quick! Get the equipment over here!’

‘Dr Jones, I-’

‘He’s almost dead, dammit! We won’t get another chance! Do it!’

A pointed head, and big ears. Should react. A hand holding his, patting it. ‘You poor old sod, you didn’t deserve this. You were so perfect! So perfect-’

‘Equipment’s ready, Dr Jones.’

‘Good. Bring it here ...’

Nothing.

\* \* \*

‘Hey, there’s four of us, mister!’ Olly said loudly. Alan felt a thrill of pride as his brother spoke out. ‘And you won’t shoot, and those big bowwows don’t scare me.’

‘The one in the cap,’ the man said. ‘Take him.’

The dogs pounced-

Somehow, amidst the panic and the screaming, Alan and Steve and Rick got the front door open and they were fleeing, fleeing from the ravening monsters, and Olly was lying on the floor, a mauled mess of a human being, and his blood was spurting red all over and he was howling in despair and terror, and then his voice choked into a gurgle as one of the dogs tore out his throat and he died.

The three survivors vanished into the darkness.

\* \* \*

There are people all around; he savours the smells of them. The smells are all interesting, but the part of his mind that is trained to scan everything finds nothing threatening. None of the smells, sounds or images registers as Enemy. The people get the benefit of the doubt.

The Man is standing by him, one hand absently scratching between his ears. He sits still, next to the Man, because this is what the Man wants him to do and the Man is his leader. The Man is the pack.

There is empty space all around them; ahead is what he recognises as an obstacle course. The people are in rows all around and he smells their excitement.

‘And now,’ says a loud voice, ‘Herod.’

‘Go, boy, go!’ the Man says, slipping his leash for him.

Herod goes.

The empty ground blurs beneath him as he covers it in seconds. Scattered around him are lumps of raw, red steak, enticing and tender, but Herod ignores them because that is what the Man wants him to do.

‘Herod has never seen this particular layout before -’

The maze. Herod’s nose follows the stream of fresh air through it, and when he emerges he knows from its noise that the crowd is applauding.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, Herod is coming to the simulated minefield. If he hits a mine then a bell will ring and he will, of course, be disqualified -’

Herod’s eyes pick out the slight disturbances in the soil and he swerves around them.

‘The next area is protected by lasers. Again, breaking one will ring a bell -’

-but Herod knows that if he breaks one of the thin, red lines then he will let the Man down, so he doesn’t.

‘The final test. You see ten volunteers, all well protected. Herod hasn’t met any of them before, but he has been shown the picture of one of them, who has been identified as bad. See what happens -’

More people are looming ahead, and Herod automatically scans their faces through his memory-

The third from the left! Something explodes in Herod’s mind; a whole new set of instructions as he throws himself at the Enemy. The Enemy is knocked to the ground as Herod leaps and his teeth are scrabbling at the Enemy’s throat. Herod is unable to understand why they don’t sink into the juicy, succulent flesh.

Then the Man is at Herod’s side, his leash is attached, he is being dragged away. Herod doesn’t understand, he is puzzled, but it is what the Man wants. Herod can smell the fear of the Enemy, who is being helped away by the others. The others have their teeth showing.

‘As you have just seen, he is completely safe except for a clearly identified target -’

‘Well done, boy, well done!’ the Man whispers, easily loud enough for Herod to hear over the roar of the crowd. ‘You’ve sold ’em. You really have.’

\* \* \*

Herod is led through the crowds back to the pens, and though he smells fear on some of the people, he knows none of them are Enemy.

Herod keeps checking. It is his purpose.

‘Excellent! Absolutely excellent! They’ll be queuing up to buy it! The Robson strain?’

Herod only registers the words out of the babble of voices around him because another voice answers it, and a rush of love goes through him. The voice that replies is on a par with the Man; though Herod is sure he has never heard it before, that voice is all that is good in the world and it is coming closer. The scent Herod doesn’t know, but the voice . . . ah, the voice ...

‘Of course,’ it says. ‘The second batch.’

‘Ah.’ Herod has their scents identified now and he smells uncertainty in the first speaker. ‘You know, Nick, there may be a bit of trouble about that if it gets out ...’

The two are almost on top of him now, the voices louder.

‘George, Robson was still alive when the police arrived.’ The loved voice is emphatic. ‘Just. He was unconscious and dying, and he was dead by the time he reached hospital. The first imprint I took off him, as a volunteer, worked so beautifully I just had to get a second imprint. He wouldn’t have minded.’

‘No?’

‘Absolutely not. I took a closer look at his psychological profile after the first imprint went so well. He was a very simple man, you know, which is why he was so ideal. Uncluttered up top. Not that bright, but competent, and he lived and breathed Quantum Cultures. We were his life and he would have given his soul to help us. You saw Herod! That dog has all of Robson’s love and loyalty for this place. We could do with more like him. And, here he is!’

Herod’s tail wags and he looks up at the owner.

*TREACHERY!*

For there is no mistaking that silhouette. The Enemy has stolen that voice and is using it. The Enemy! Herod bares his teeth and he launches at the Enemy’s neck.

Herod is choking and being dragged down to earth again. The Man has tightened Herod’s choke leash and is crouching before him, brandishing the leather handle in front of his eyes.

‘Bad dog! Bad dog!’

Herod has upset the Man and he is sorry. Herod is confused. The Enemy is there, next to the Man, but Herod has been bad. Herod doesn't understand. Herod crouches on the floor, feigning abjection, yet glowering at the Enemy, waiting for him to make a move.

'I'm so sorry, Dr Jones,' the Man says. 'He's never been like that before. He must hate you.'

'Yes.' The Enemy looks down at Herod. There is a spark of recognition and Herod knows that contact has been made. The Enemy did not know him for who he was, but now that has changed. They understand each other.

Strangely, Herod doesn't smell fear.

'Yes,' says the Enemy, 'he must.'

\* \* \*

Later, in the pens, the Man is friendlier again. Herod has been forgiven. The Man is rubbing Herod's chest, sending sensual waves through his body. The Man's tone is kind.

'Watcha do that for, you great mutt? Attacking Dr Jones like that, with the MD looking on? What were you up to, hey? Hope they don't recall the Robson strain because of you, boy.'

The Man stops his rubbing to scratch his own head.

'Nah. It's all over the Union by now, anyway. Too late to do anything about it.'

The words mean nothing, but the concept forms. Herod is one of a pack. The pack, as packs should be, is out there, waiting. It will support and help its brother. One day the Enemy will encounter another pack member. And if that fails, another. And another.

The pack will not forget the Enemy.