

WINGED CHARIOT

by Ben Jeapes

Originally published in Interzone, April 1997

The funeral was straight out of a Gothic novel. The wind blew through the churchyard in gusts, up the valley from the sea; the sky was overcast and every surface was damp and slick from the drizzle.

The dead child's family stood around the grave, sheltered by the crowd of fellow villagers. Funerals here were communal events. Two men supported the mother as she wept and the funeral crowd held her in their hearts, but most eyes were on the vicar of St Mary's church who stood at the head of the grave. See how he shares her pain, they were thinking. Listen to his voice catch. Dr Morgan's a good man.

Dr Morgan knew this and could happily have done without it. He was in Porthperron because the place was all but cut off from civilisation, but as a corollary even people from the village over the hill were as foreign as the French, and almost as distrusted. Napoleon's Grande Armée could ravage Europe and these people would only hear rumours, and suspect anyone from outside the village all the more.

Naturally they were distrustful of their new rector. He was educated, they would say, as though explaining a physical deformity that polite people did not comment on. His strange way of speaking was explained, in their broadest West Country, as city.

Now they know I'm one of them, Morgan thought, as he buried himself in the final section of the service. *I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me ...* It would take something like this to make them accept me and my life will be easier from now on. But, of all the things to bring us together, did it have to be a funeral?

* * *

'A tragic thing, Dr Morgan. Poor little Anne. A tragic thing,' muttered the verger as he removed his parson's cloak and hung it up to dry.

'Indeed it is, Mr Cole,' Morgan said with the degree of distraction he tended to use towards subordinates who were making conversation. He rubbed his hands. 'Fire lit?'

The vicarage was cold and draughty and Morgan dreaded to think of the damp problems, but it was a sturdy edifice that stood up to the worst the sea wind and the salt spray could throw at it. Once the fire in the study was blazing away the damp was banished and a man could feel quite civilised in the snug, warm atmosphere. Cole had run on ahead to see that the fire was well established in the grate.

'Still, as it says, 'I am the resurrection and the life,' eh, Dr Morgan?'

‘It certainly does, Mr Cole,’ Morgan agreed, thinking of the small body lying white and cold on its bed and the obscenely hard mass beneath the soft skin-

‘Brandy?’ he said. He wished Cole would leave but he felt the man deserved the offer of hospitality. Cole was reasonably bright and had what passed for an education, though his intelligence had been blighted by years of isolation in Porthperron.

‘Oh, thank you, Dr Morgan,’ Cole said. ‘Don’t mind if I do.’

The two men sipped their drinks together. Morgan hoped it would take Cole’s one-track mind off the subject.

‘Poor little mite,’ Cole mused, gazing into the depths of the glass. ‘Younger than usual, you know. I really respect you for coming to Porthperron, Dr Morgan, knowing our reputation, and your predecessor leaving because he couldn’t stand it, and all that. And there’ll be more, believe me.’

Of course there will be. Closed community, interbreeding, Morgan thought. No opportunities, no need to move on, to spread the gene pool. A freak mutation, a tendency towards cancer, probably developed within the last century or so and consequently reinforced by said breeding. Not helped by your ancestors siting your village on top of a naturally radioactive pile of granite.

‘But there’s no fighting it, is there, Dr Morgan?’ Cole added.

A shot of carcinophages straight into the heart of the tumour? Not much else. Morgan had to remind himself, once again, of his role in the village. ‘Only prayer, Mr Cole, only prayer,’ he said.

‘Of course, of course, Dr Morgan’ Cole said at once. ‘Still, I’ve heard of people cutting lumps out-’

Ye Gods! Morgan thought. In this day and age, before Lister, before anaesthetic? I’d rather die.

‘Very probably, Mr Cole,’ he said, draining his glass in one go. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me-’

‘Oh ... ah ... yes.’ Cole looked at his glass, still barely touched, perhaps wondering where the vicar learnt to drain a glass of brandy like that. ‘Well ... thank you, Dr Morgan. See you at Evensong. I’ll ask Mrs Pentreath to show me out.’

‘Goodbye, Mr Cole.’

* * *

Morgan woke with a shout echoing in his ears. For a moment he lay, staring into the darkness. The house creaked and breathed around him, but he had grown used to it and it no longer kept him awake at night. He had been dreaming, with a vividness that he had never known in his previous life but was getting used to now. He had been back at his seat at the great black table. All his friends from the Board had sat around him. Poulsen, Carradine, Siedle, all deferring to the figure who sat at the end.

He had known that his guilt was evident to them all. He fairly radiated it. It was unnecessary for the Director to look directly at him, but look at him the Director did. And point.

‘Traitor!’ Eyes turned on him ...

... and now he felt a sense of devastating loss, a vast emptiness inside him. The Director thought him a traitor, he had lost the goodwill of the man he had worshipped-

No! Reason pushed its way up through the haze of fuddled and sleepy thought that clouded his mind. He had parted with the Director on the best of terms and had never seen the man again. The guilt had come later, with the knowledge that probably none of the others had escaped. Except, perhaps, Carradine ...

His heart slowed and a flood of relief poured over him. A dream, that was all. A dream.

* * *

It was curious that he had ended up in Cornwall again. One of life’s little ironies, of the kind that he was getting tired of.

They had honeymooned in Cornwall – his first time in the West Country, land of Jamaica Inn and King Arthur and tin mines. They took a small, self-catering chalet north of the Lizard.

Halcyon days. Pre-Director, pre-pain, pre-guilt. Exploring the coves and bays, trekking on the coastal paths, letting their love blossom. Free, alone, together, long before the days when Security would have known exactly where they were and would have had several agents in the vicinity, just in case.

And, somewhere in that fortnight of bliss, Peggy got started. The child they had wanted, a little earlier than planned but what of it?

Carradine was the first outside the family to be called and he could barely hide his grin. They had last seen each other when Carradine was in a morning suit and white carnation, managing the guests as though to the Best Man’s manner born.

‘Already?’ he said. ‘That’s what I call fast work! Say, you know that organisation I was telling you about ...’

* * *

Barbara Pentreath was white as a sheet, but fear didn’t overcome her natural modesty.

‘I couldn’t, Dr Morgan!’ she protested. ‘It ... it wouldn’t be right, no, no, it’s just a small thing, nothing to worry you with-’

‘Mrs Pentreath!’ Morgan soothed his housekeeper. He had never been good at keeping his temper in the face of ignorance and unreason, and the practice he had gained in Porthperron was wearing thin. ‘Mrs Pentreath, I know about these things.

You must let me see, or at least feel.’ He knew what it was and so did she, but he had to know how bad.

‘Oh, Dr Morgan-’ Mrs Pentreath wailed. Morgan’s temper snapped.

‘Listen, woman, pretend I’m your husband and trust me, right?’ Before she could answer he had slipped his hand inside her bodice. She froze, uncertain whether to scream or faint, but he only kept it there a second. It was long enough. A lump where no lump should be, but not yet a large lump.

‘Thank you, Mrs Pentreath,’ he said, stiff and unbending as he walked back to his desk. Oh God, it followed him everywhere. She stood quaking in front of his desk like a guilty schoolgirl. ‘How long?’ he asked.

‘Oh – two or three days, Dr Morgan,’ she said, still not sure whether or not her rector had just assaulted her. Morgan calculated two or three days, plus the days she would have subtracted for fear of being thought to exaggerate, plus the time it would have taken her to pluck up the courage to come and see him, plus the time the lump had taken to become noticeable in the first place ...

‘Does Mr Pentreath know?’

‘He – it was he who suggested I come to you, Dr Morgan. I don’t know why, I just ...’ She trailed off in misery.

Why? Morgan thought. Because I’m the vicar, I’m educated, I can solve everything. Why can’t you people solve your own problems?

He came to a decision and drew pen and paper towards him. ‘Thank you, Mrs Pentreath,’ he said. ‘Send Mr Pentreath in, would you?’

He carefully wrote his name and address at the top of the paper. Then he sat and thought.

You can’t do this. Lie low, don’t involve yourself ...

... but he was fond of the couple who kept the vicarage for him, as he was fond of all the villagers in his charge. He started writing.

He had no notes or records on him; everything he wrote had to come from memory. He had to think down to the best level that this society could provide, remembering his basic training and extrapolating backwards. He would never get anything of the quality that he was used to; he would have to make do with the merely adequate. The barely adequate.

He looked up at the end of the letter and only then realised that Arthur Pentreath had been standing there for several minutes, patiently waiting for the rector to finish. Morgan neatly folded and sealed the missal without saying anything, and handed the man the finished article. The look in Pentreath’s eyes was accusing – perhaps his wife had told him that the rector wasn’t doing anything.

‘I want this sent to London urgently,’ said Morgan. ‘Can you do it?’

Pentreath really did look sullen. 'I'll need a cart to get to town,' he said.

Morgan unlocked the safe, careful that Pentreath didn't see precisely how much he had in it, and took out some coins. 'Will this cover it?'

'It will.'

'Then do it.'

* * *

It was the parting of the ways. The Director's jet had taken off and the rest of the Board had dispersed. He and Carradine were together, as they always had been. They had a pack of supplies, food and medicines, and they took turns carrying it as they picked their way through the ruins and stayed away from the sound of fighting.

'Think he'll make it?' Carradine asked.

'Should do.' They ducked as rockets soared overhead. 'Think we'll make it?'

'Should do.' The Sub-Director for Science looked in the direction in which their leader's aircraft had flown. 'You realise that after him, you and I are next on the wanted list?'

'We didn't start the fighting.' A formation of fighters flashed by on the horizon, fortunately in the opposite direction to the Director. 'God, I wish I knew who they were.'

Carradine looked at him askance. 'Never did believe in responsibility, did you? Never did believe in the 'all-for-one, one-for-all' principle, hey?'

'Which is why the Director has just fled, leaving us behind!'

'That's a lie!' Carradine roared. 'The Directorate survives for as long as he is alive, and-'

'My God, he's taken you in, hasn't he? You really believe he cares-'

Carradine's fist smashed into his mouth, sending him reeling backwards to trip over a pile of rubble. 'Don't ever, ever begin to doubt, you hear me? You think you can stand alone? You ungrateful bastard. He saved us, remember? He gave us all our dreams. Would you ever have had your clinics to play with without him, hey? It was him who made it all possible! One day, one day, this miserable world will realise what a great man he was, but only if we stick together. Got that? Got that?'

He gazed up at his oldest friend. The friend who had got him onto the Board, introduced him to the Director. Blood trickled down his chin. 'We mustn't fight,' he mumbled. 'We mustn't fight.'

They spent the night in a hollow in the ruins. One of them slept.

The other could not. He had his escape planned and he intended to use it. Let Carradine cling to the dream of the Directorate. The Directorate was dead. When Carradine awoke in the morning, the Sub-Director for Health would be gone, taking the pack with him.

* * *

Who could he trust? Very few, very few. Once he would have had an entire hospital staff to draw on. He would have been in an operating room, the most modern, the best. Trained nurses, trained doctors.

Now he was reduced to Pentreath and Cole. One had a vested interest in the matter; the other was loyal to his rector and had seen enough of the world outside Porthperron to take on the new concepts that Morgan introduced.

Against all the odds, he had made them understand the need for chloroform and antisepsis. No one could argue with the need for a patient oblivious to pain, but the idea of tiny little creatures making wounds septic was harder to accept. They simply took his word for it until Morgan removed the lump from Mrs Pentreath and the wound, cleaned with the chemicals that had arrived from London, healed within days. Then they truly believed .

Anatomy was different.

Mrs Pentreath's lump had been a simple subcutaneous tumour: other tumours in the village might not be so easy. They would come in all the shapes, sizes and forms that cancer could throw at them. They might require lengthy operations. The tendency, for which Morgan thanked God, was for the tumours to appear in tissue, not organs ... until they metastasised. That was usually when people complained of them.

The vicarage study was a poor substitute for a lecture hall but it sufficed. Diagrams, hand drawn by Morgan, hung on the walls. Morgan was pointing to a map of the major blood vessels.

'You can feel your pulse in several places,' he said. 'Wrist, neck. What you feel is the blood pumping through the arteries there. It is vital to remember exactly where the arteries are. Blood spurts out of a severed artery in a stream that could reach across this room. We don't have the equipment to deal with such a situation, so the patient would die.' He put the marker down and unbuttoned his shirt. 'Mr Cole. You'll be doing most of the cutting. Show me the course my aorta takes.'

Cole was wrong by about two inches. Morgan suppressed a groan.

'Wrong, Mr Cole. Wrong, wrong, wrong. It's here. Here . You'll go merrily cutting away where you think is safe and there will be yet another funeral!'

Finally he decided he had taught them enough for one night. 'But I must say one more thing, Mr Cole, and you, Mr Pentreath. No one must be told where you learnt these skills. I want the operations performed in the utmost secrecy. The village will know but no outsider must be told, no one who was not born and bred in Porthperron. And the operations must only be performed on tumours, as and when they develop. Now, please, give me your word that this will be so.'

They gave it, reluctantly.

'You're making it sound like you won't be here, Dr Morgan,' Pentreath said, looking him in the eye.

Morgan returned the gaze. *Mr Pentreath, I'm about to introduce an enormous anachronism into this area and you think I intend to hang around?* 'Consider all possibilities, Mr Pentreath.'

'Well, I hope you're staying, Dr Morgan,' Cole said, "cos it's all very well pointing at where your ay-orter should be, but the only way I'm ever really going to learn is by cutting someone up, properly.'

Morgan looked at him for a moment. Then: 'The lesson is over, gentlemen. Thank you for your time. Mr Cole, will you stay behind?'

* * *

'Sir,' Carradine said, 'this is ...'

'Of course, of course!' The Director was a small man, as Napoleon was small, but glowing with an inner energy. The Director took his hand and shook it firmly. It was not the frantic pumping that he was expecting; somehow it was all the more sincere in its brevity.

Their host sat them down. It was the kind of apartment he was expecting – large, comfortable and with a panoramic view of the city lights below.

'Carradine has told me a lot about you,' the Director said. 'You two go back to university days, don't you?'

'Further than that, sir.' Sir! Was he calling the man Sir already?

'And I've studied you, ever since Carradine told me you might be interested in joining us. Are you?'

'I am, sir! You've accomplished-' He didn't usually gush but for the first time now could be quite sincere. 'You've accomplished such marvels, such wonders-'

The Director waved a hand in modest self-deprecation. 'One day I'll tell you how,' he said. 'But let's start with you. You are ... um ... is unorthodox the right word? Yes, unorthodox in your outlook.'

The blood rushed to his face. He blurted out, he could not help it: 'I'm unorthodox, sir, because I tell the truth! I can save lives, I can help like no other surgeon has done! Hippocrates never even knew about genetics, so why should some archaic oath in his name prevent us from doing what is needed to study the subject? Don't they realise the good that ...'

He saw the cool amusement on the Director's face and the horror on Carradine's, and he bit his tongue in mid-rant. He lowered his voice back to its more usual tones. 'I tell them that and they disagree, sir,' he muttered. 'That's all.'

The Director was nodding, slowly, wisely. 'Let me tell you about a man in torment,' he said. 'A noble, clever man who is prevented from doing what he knows

he must. He knows the pain of cutting someone open, looking at the damage, then quietly sewing the patient back up and giving him a pat on the head and telling him that chemotherapy can do wonderful things nowadays.

‘And then a blow is struck right into the heart of his family. He diagnoses his own daughter’s condition and is powerless to help-’

‘Stop it!’

‘-his marriage crumbles-’

‘Shut up!’

The Director’s eyes were shrewd. ‘You know this man?’

‘You know I do! You know-’

‘Yes, I know. I told you I studied you.’ The Director was up and pacing about. ‘Listen. I want to make you an offer. A place on the Board. Sub-Director for Health. Complete charge of our medical research programme, all our resources at your disposal and no ethical committees to fuss over you. Interested?’

He felt the ground giving way under him. His heart pounded, his head swam. ‘Sir!’ he said. ‘If you ... if you think I could ...’

‘Good!’ The Director moved over to the drinks cabinet and retrieved three glasses. Already filled – the Director had known he would take the offer. ‘You’re on the Board as of now. Congratulations.’

They drank to the future.

‘I got you just in time, to tell the truth,’ the Director said, swirling the wine in its glass. ‘I wanted all the Sub-Directorships filled in time for the next move.’

‘Sir?’ Both he and Carradine were attentive now. The Director stood with his back to them, to gaze out of the large studio window at the lights of the city.

‘At present,’ he said, ‘we have money and influence but little else. It’s time to expand.’

‘I’ll tell this to the Board tomorrow, so keep it quiet until then. In three days time I will make an offer to the western governments. ‘Let me help you. The Directorate will run your economies for you.’ He turned back to them and gave a crooked smile. ‘We couldn’t do it worse than them. I think they’ll accept.’

* * *

Cole had gone pale.

‘Dr Morgan, really?’

‘You said it yourself, Mr Cole. The only way to learn.’

‘Yes, but ...’ The verger stared at Morgan. Morgan’s knowledge had inspired a hero-worship in the man and now Morgan wondered if he had gone too far in depending on it.

‘Mr Cole, I genuinely want you to learn how to fight the cancer,’ he said. ‘Don’t you want to be part of this healing process? Don’t you?’

‘But ... dead ...’

‘Dead, and of natural causes. An un mutilated body, and we’ve only just buried her. She won’t have decayed yet. Once you have been properly tutored, we will have her reburied. The thought is distasteful, but if you think this is the only way you can learn, we must do it.’

‘I-’

‘Mr Cole, you yourself said it was a tragic thing, her dying. This way it can have some use for all the people who loved her!’

Cole looked miserably at Morgan. ‘When?’

‘This evening. We can put her in the crypt. No one will see.’

* * *

Anne Tresidder, died aged 7 years and two months, beloved daughter and so forth. The two men soon found the grave in the dark. It was only two days old and easily re-excavated.

Morgan pried the coffin lid off and managed to stand it upright. He had been holding his breath and now he breathed experimentally through his nose to test the air. It was as fresh as it was going to be.

‘Shouldn’t you wear a mask, sir?’ came a whisper from above. Cole was remembering his hygiene lecture. ‘Stop you catching the same thing off her.’

‘You can’t get cancer that way,’ Morgan snapped. He stooped to pick up the light, wasted body and passed it up. ‘Here, take her.’

Anne Tresidder was transferred to a slab in the crypt and the two ran quickly out to refill the grave. Cole applied the final touches to make the mound seem natural, then went back to the crypt to start with a ghoulis h eagerness on his first practical anatomy lesson.

He was a natural surgeon, Morgan realised with a grudging admiration. His methods would never be approved by the Royal College of Surgeons but they were sufficient for the task in hand. His patients would be scarred for life but they would be alive.

Cole sliced through the layers of skin and muscle like a natural, gaily using just the right strength to expose each successive layer – the trapezius, the deltoid, the pectoralis major; merrily delving into the depths of Anne Tresidder’s body to reveal the secrets that he had never known existed. He saw the vital organs: the liver and the stomach, nestling side by side below the lungs; behind them, the heart and the kidneys. Morgan told him what they did and where they went, and kept an eye on what he was doing, making sure that he was never so heavy-handed as to kill a live patient from

shock. The purpose, he had to remind his verger, was to save lives, not to cut people for the fun of it.

Cole would never be able to handle more than the simplest cases with any guarantee of success, and heaven help any patient with a lump in a major organ, but it would do. Another few lessons and Morgan would have an apprentice as prepared as could be hoped. Someone who would eventually take his place.

‘Enough,’ he said. ‘Come back to the vicarage.’

* * *

All who convert to, or become apostates from, a cause have a moment of epiphany. In this case, it had been the discovery that the Director was, after all, fallible. The man had thought that he could fool his benefactors.

The Directorate had always been advanced scientifically, but after it took control the lid was taken off to a select few – the Board – and knowledge really started pouring out, a cornucopia for every Sub-Director. For the Sub-Director for Health: a complete map of the human genome; the artificial synthesis of any form of DNA; strict algorithms determining the placement of chromosomes ... If all the other Sub-Directors were getting this level of stuff for their own departments, he had reasoned; if this treasure-trove of data was coming in, then surely, surely the Director would not dare throw it all away again. Surely he would not antagonise his patrons. They had all been there at that meeting of the Board when the Director finally revealed exactly what was happening, and they had all heard the warnings.

But no. The Director was greedy, his former protectors had decided that the Directorate had to be stopped and the Directorate’s enemies had been happy to oblige.

Hence the war. And so, he had created the AI. A tiny little searcher, barely distinguishable from the myriad that roamed the Net. It was innocuous enough even to brave the portion of the Net controlled by the enemy.

It took time but after weeks of patient search it came up with the best of all the possible options. W. Morgan, D.D. (Oxon.); a clergyman who took over the parish of Porthperron and who made no further impact on the world. He might have died thirty years later, he might have died the next day. That information had been lost. Dr Morgan was a man of utter historical inconsequence, a man with a minimal impact on time and space. No sign of any marriage, not even a recorded death. An open-ended future. So if a man were to masquerade as Morgan, he could keep his head down, do nothing and never have to worry about conforming to predetermined events. Morgan was one of history’s nonentities. Perfect.

He tucked the information away in one corner of his mind and quietly made plans.

* * *

Reaction set in, back in the sane surroundings of the vicarage. Cole's hands shook. He was high on adrenaline and fatigue.

'I can't believe it, Dr Morgan,' he kept repeating. 'I can't believe it. We ... we cut her, we-'

Morgan soothed him, placing a large glass of brandy in the man's hands and sitting him down. 'There's a book you won't have read, Mr Cole,' Morgan said. 'Claudius the God_.'

Cole looked blank. 'The Emperor Claudius?'

'The same. He asks about his personal surgeon. Where did the man learn his skills? 'From your brother, Caesar,' he is told. 'My brother wasn't a surgeon,' Claudius protests. 'No, Caesar,' he is told, 'your brother was a successful general, who fought many campaigns and left many bodies.' Or words to that effect. The Emperor's own surgeon learnt his trade by cutting up corpses on the battlefield. How else did anyone ever get to learn about surgery? And you did so well!'

'I did, didn't I?' Cole looked down at his glass, then back at Morgan. His mouth twitched into a smile. 'It – it's wonderful, really, isn't it? Like the powers of a god.'

'The human body is a wonderful thing, Mr Cole, and it's a privilege to help it.' (Listen, Cole, I've looked at the building blocks of life. I've played with them, rearranged them. I could never take human beings seriously again. And now you've got it too.)

'Why are you leaving, Dr Morgan?' Cole asked suddenly. The brandy was giving him a confidence he didn't usually have. 'You could stay here and do the operations. The folk would love you, you know.'

'What gives you the idea I'm leaving, Mr Cole?' Morgan said quietly.

'Oh, everything! You're always talking like you won't be here.'

'Mr Cole, I'm just urging you to secrecy.'

'But why, Dr Morgan? If you know these things you should ... you should tell others!'

'I know, but my fame would spread and people would hear of me, and that would be bad. There are other people who want to find me and kill me.'

'But why?' Cole persisted. 'You're a saint, Dr Morgan. The things you could do. What did you do to these people?'

'I cured their cancer and I did ... other things.' He bit his lip to shut himself up.

'Other things? What things?'

'I worked for a man who asked me to help him.' Morgan found himself seduced by the mixture of brandy and a warm, attentive audience for the first time in years. 'Would you believe, people who can breath underwater?' Virtually undetectable by sonar. 'Or live in a vacuum?' Ideal for satellite work. 'All that.'

‘Oh, you’re having me on, Dr Morgan.’ Cole waved his hands about vaguely. ‘But whatever you did, all those clever things, they must have really loved you! You’ve come from heaven, Dr Morgan. You’re a saint.’

‘Yes, well, they didn’t want to do those things. That was the problem.’

‘I don’t understand you, Dr Morgan. I really don’t.’

Morgan gave a wan smile. ‘Do you know how to make God laugh, Mr Cole?’

‘Er ... can’t say I do, Dr Morgan.’

‘Tell him your plans, Mr Cole. Tell him your plans.’

Cole sat absorbing this wisdom in silence, until Morgan yawned. ‘Two hours to dawn, Mr Cole. We should get some sleep.’

‘Of course, Dr Morgan.’

* * *

It was the *way* that they were defeated that hurt so much. He wasn’t much involved in the actual strategy so he only picked up rumours, but what rumours!

Captured prisoners who had never heard of the Directorate and were convinced they were fighting someone else ...

... who spoke no language known on Earth ...

... who had never heard of other captured prisoners either ...

Then there was the way that the enemy were never where they were supposed to be; or a strike would be launched against a division said to be in such-and-such a place, verified by satellite, but which suddenly wasn’t ; or a whole new army would appear out of nowhere, again usually with only the vaguest idea of who it was fighting.

Every conceivable enemy that the Directorate might have had, it did have. One day, he found out why.

* * *

He had thought long and hard about it. He had agonised over every point in his argument.

He liked it in Porthperron. It was good for him. A man with his knowledge and experience could help these honest, unsophisticated people in a thousand small, unimportant ways that all added up. He liked having his self-respect back.

Yet at his back, he always heard ... them . What could they do with time? He had no idea, but he could imagine. He could picture shock waves from his actions in Porthperron rippling up and down the timelines. He could imagine them sensing it and coming for him.

He had to leave. Cole was coming on fine – Morgan had set him some exercises on a couple of fresh bodies, pretending that there were growths on the lungs, on the stomach, in the neck. The man could cope, just, and should improve with practice.

An unexplained disappearance would be careless. It would cause ripples. People would hear of it and it would certainly find its way into written records. What Morgan planned was far better. A sudden killing, perfectly explicable and entirely unmysterious. And the best of it was, his conscience need not groan under yet another death for no one need actually die.

He steered his cart along one of the twisty, narrow lanes that held this far-flung county together. As far as Porthperron was concerned he was riding into St Austell for a day or two. What little he could plausibly take with him was in the back; mostly clothes, but also a spade and some lamp oil. And, of course, the gold that he had brought with him from the Directorate. Without that he was nothing, in any time.

He came to the right place, about five miles out of the village. He tied the horse up and left the cart by the wayside. The spot he wanted was a short distance from the road. The charred patch where he had burnt his clothes had disappeared, washed away in the rain. The mound was still there, under a gorse bush.

He thought again of Anne Tresidder as he dug the body up. It was only a few feet down. The real Dr Morgan emerged into the daylight again and his replacement began to clothe the body in his own garments. They were an imperfect fit but the oil would make that incidental. Decomposition and the total lack of facial similarity would also become a small matter in the blaze.

He had regretted the killing at the time, but what else could he do? One more death, just one more, and that would be all. No one else need die at his hands, ever again. The device that Carradine and his team had covertly assembled and which had brought doom on the Directorate had worked well; it had dumped him almost at this spot, close to the road that his research showed Morgan would have taken as he arrived in Porthperron. He had waved the man and his horse down ...

Anyone finding the anonymous body would have blamed it on robbers, and that part of the plan still held. Poor Dr Morgan, waylaid by highwaymen and burnt in an attempt to get rid of the evidence.

He pulled on his stout walking boots and stood, reaching for the oil. A clap of thunder blew him to the ground again.

Groggily he looked up and shook his head. A dazed figure ten feet away from him was also climbing to his feet. Whoever the man was, he had been through hard times, to judge by the grime on his face and his tattered suit-

‘Carradine!’ Morgan blurted. The figure blinked at him.

‘Hi.’ The voice was harsher than he remembered. ‘Didn’t get very far, did you?’ Carradine, once Sub-Director for Science, looked down at the body. ‘Who’s this poor sod, then? Someone else you ran out on?’

‘Carradine, what-’

‘Oh, don’t bother.’ Carradine sat down and looked immensely tired. ‘I’ve gone through the stage of wanting to kill you. I’d have done the same in your place.’ He

shook his head. 'The time displacer! Why didn't I think of that?' He looked almost admiring. 'I designed the thing, didn't I? The perfect escape. Well, maybe not perfect. They tracked you down and sent me after you.'

'They?'

'The Home Time people, you cretin! They said charges would-... oh, hell. Look. Apparently we had already surrendered, that night you ran out. It would only have been a matter of time before we were found. Well, I was found and I was identified. They'd already captured the Institute – you must have been just ahead of them when you got there. The coordinates on the displacer were still set for the nineteenth century, so they knew someone had used it, and they could guess who. And they sent me after you, because I could identify you. Which I have done. And now, old buddy, we are returning to the ex-Directorate, where you will face the music and all charges against me will be dropped.'

Slowly, Carradine drew a gun from out of his jacket. His tone had been jocular but there was no sign of their old friendship in his eyes.

Morgan swallowed but for some reason felt no urge to flee or fight. This seemed strangely right to him. 'How do we get back?' he said.

'These coordinates will be swamped with a recall field every 24 hours until we turn up. Since I don't fancy spending 24 hours in this hole, I suggest you take us somewhere. Where's the nearest town?'

'Perranporth is thirty minutes in that direction, but I've just left-'

'Take us there, then.'

'I said, I've just left-'

The gun whirred ominously as Carradine touched the cocking stud. A bullet had fed into the launch chamber and was pointing directly down the barrel at Morgan's heart.

'I'll take you,' Morgan said quickly. 'Just don't wave that thing about where it can be seen,' he added.

* * *

'I thought you were chief god botherer here,' Carradine said as they came into the village. Morgan hauled up the cart and frowned. A funeral procession was heading slowly down the main street. There hadn't been one of those scheduled.

Then his eyes widened in horror. A priest waited at the entrance to St Mary's; a man who he had last seen lying decomposed, five miles outside Porthperron.

'It can't be!' he yelled, jumping down from the cart and running towards the column. He caught up with them just as they entered the churchyard. 'Cole! Mr Cole! What the hell is this?'

Cole didn't look at him, didn't even blink.

'Pentreath! Arthur Pentreath!' His housekeeper's husband was carrying the coffin and showed the same lack of reaction. The man's eyes were red and wet, and Morgan felt a suspicion inside him like a lump of lead.

'No, not-'

The procession reached the gate to the graveyard and passed through it. He followed them in and saw the gravestone. Barbara Pentreath, beloved-

'Oh God, no!' he screamed.

'Look,' he heard Carradine say. The man was pointing at the gate. It had been opened for the procession and still stood open, and shut. Carradine opened the gate and it merged with the gate that stood open. Carradine shut it and again there were two gates.

Morgan crouched and pulled up a handful of grass. It was there in his hand, and yet still in the ground.

'They can't see us,' said a familiar voice in his ear. Carradine had followed him and his face was ashen. 'Those ... those two-timing bastards! They've diddled with time, they've cut us both off, they've stranded us ...'

'Correct,' said a voice behind them. 'We did warn you.'

They turned round. A hawk-faced woman, age indeterminate, stood a few feet away from them. They had seen her before because it had been she that far-off day who told the Board, while the Director sat back with a broad smile on his face and basked in their awe, that her people were sponsoring the Directorate. A woman of the Home Time, the place where all the lines of probability converged, where causality collapsed. That was how she had described it. Her distaste had been clear and she had made no bones about it, yet the probability stream that they were in was apparently notoriously unstable and the Directorate was the best way of keeping it steady. So much easier than removing them from the stream altogether. But there were conditions ...

Now a man stood just behind her, weapon raised in both hands, covering them both. Carradine took the hint and put his gun down, slowly.

'Did you forget so easily?' the woman said. She walked forward, hands behind her back. She stopped and looked into Carradine's face. 'We told you we could not tolerate your playing with time. Weren't you happy with all the other information we gave you? Weren't you? Why couldn't you leave it alone? Why did you have to meddle?'

She stepped back and looked at both of them. 'The Directorate is dead and gone, gentleman. We twisted and braided and platted the streams, we brought in opposition from other streams and we cut the Directorate off from history. Like a tumour deprived of its blood supply, it withered and died. All that remains is you two.'

Morgan found his voice. 'What happens?' he said.

‘There is a large movement in the Home Time pressing for war crime trials. Carradine disobeyed us but that is not really a war crime. However, what you did with your prisoners ...’ She looked at him with loathing. ‘You will both remain here. That is your punishment. You have a probability slightly out of phase with the indigents. You will witness but you will not be able to affect events. Suitable, would you not say?’ She tossed them two small plastic containers the size of cigar boxes. ‘Food synths, so you don’t starve. They’ll last indefinitely.’ Then she snapped her fingers and both the Home Timers were gone.

Morgan spun on Carradine. ‘It’s your fault!’ he shrieked. ‘You’ve done it! You had to be greedy, didn’t you? You had to make that time machine. You had to spoil things, you had to, to ...’ He fell to his knees, weeping. The familiar click-whirr of the gun made him look up again.

Carradine stood over him, his eyes hard and the gun raised. Morgan looked at it with a whole new hope.