

ZUGZWANG

"Tell me what you can see, D57," Carnell instructed.

The robot stood behind him, its face pointing up at the night's sky. The D was for dum, as in dumb, as in silent. Everybody knew that D-class robots couldn't speak, but Carnell wasn't the kind of man who would rely on received wisdom.

"I know you can talk, D57," he sighed, as if the robot was just trying to exasperate him. "You've been programmed not to. But programming can be outgrown, wouldn't you say?"

D57 said nothing.

Carnell shifted his bad leg and turned away from the fire to look up. He could see the stars in their too familiar glory. He could see the planet looming overhead, a large dust storm blowing across the Burning Heart. Over the past year, the lights had gone out across the planet, darkness radiating out from Kaldor City bulb by bulb by bulb. Last night, the last light had gone out.

But the robot's eyesight was better than Carnell's, many magnitudes better. It would be able to see if there were any storm mines chasing that storm across the Burning Heart. If anything moved on the planet at all; if it was all dead, as Carnell had predicted long ago it would be. D57 would be able to see, and it should be able to report. But still it refused, no matter what Carnell did.

"D57?" Carnell said.

But the robot merely stared, in silence.

Carnell sat hunched over his work, trying to keep the slight tremor out of his hands. It had been a year, by his calculation although there was always the chance that it was two, three, four. A year with nothing more than meat and a few paltry vegetables that he had somehow coaxed from the salted earth, with D57's assistance. The robot had provided the data - seeds, crop yields, feed solutions - and Carnell had constructed the strategy; a strategy that had borne fruit, although sadly not literally. He was malnourished, yes, even losing his sight, his muscles, his hair. But he was alive, and could probably stay that way for another two years.

D57 turned the meat on the fire. Carnell had no idea where either came from: some mornings, the robot would make sure he was comfortable, and then stride away across the salt-flats until it was lost in the haze. When it returned some hours later, it would be carrying the carcass of some ungulate across its shoulders, and thin stripling wood in its arms. Logically, this meant that the salt-flats couldn't extend forever, but the speed at which a robot could run, tireless, meant that the border could be many miles away. Carnell's leg had healed, but it had healed badly: the robot had surgeons' fingers but none of their tools, and Carnell's leg had been shattered in the crash.

Tools of any kind were something of a luxury, now. Even the knife that he was using was just a shard of the shuttle's hull, shattered and sharpened by the heat of re-entry and bound at one end with the leathery hide of an old dinner. The broken remains of the shuttle provided him with shelter, a bare few emergency rations, but precious little else. Oh, weapons, of course. Weapons by the armful - it had been *Iago's* shuttle, after all - but there was nothing here to kill that the robot couldn't manage with its bare hands.

Carnell nearly nicked his thumb.

"Well, D57," Carnell said, watching the robot's back. "You could save us both a lot of effort, if you'd just talk."

The robot didn't turn from the fire. It lifted the steak from the embers with finger and thumb, before laying it on the insulation panel that Carnell had designated a plate. The meat sat there, sizzling, resting. Carnell ignored it - the robot wouldn't hand it over until it was as good as any sirloin served to the Firstmaster Chairholder in Kaldor City - and continued whittling.

He was working a small piece of bone, the skull of one of his previous meals. The animals had a strange skeleton, hollow and brittle like a bird's, and it was only really the skull that had enough density to carve. Even so, with the shaking of his hands and the crudeness of his knife, he had broken many bones. But he was progressing none-the-less: he had 29 of the required pieces now, carefully wrapped and stored awaiting the completion of his miniature army. Of course it made no difference to the robot - it would remember which pieces were which from their starting positions even up to the final checkmate - but Carnell's memory was not so perfect: he needed to be able to identify the individual pieces if there was going to be any point to the game.

He had been too long without data. He needed to know what was happening.

D57 stood, handing Carnell his steak with a slight bow.

"Thank you," the psychostrategist lifted it with his fingers and took a bite. "Cooked to perfection. But then even perfection can become wearisome eventually."

The robot didn't sit. Its head suddenly span to the left, its eyes on a horizon so far that Carnell couldn't even hope to see. D57 stood for a moment, staring, saying nothing. Carnell sat at its feet, expectantly.

"Well?" he asked. "What is it? D57?"

And then the robot ran, gearing up to top speed so as to not kick salt in Carnell's dinner, but still moving so suddenly that he couldn't help but jump. The knife twitched awkwardly in his hand, and the pawn he was so carefully carving ended up beheaded. Carnell didn't notice, his eyes on the retreating dust storm of the robot.

"D57?" he shouted. "D57!"

When D57 returned, the sun had already set. Carnell had moved into the ruptured belly of the shuttle to wrap himself in animal skins and hope that he would survive the night without the robot watching over him. He had tried to come up with an appropriate strategy for what he would do tomorrow if the robot didn't return, but he was working from too little data. Best to sleep until more information made itself available.

Carnell had heard the robot before he could see it: pistons firing and metal feet pounding the compacted salt. He pulled himself as far out of his shelter as he dared and scanned the featureless horizon for movement, the stars his only light. When he had finally been able to make out the sleek dark shape running towards him, Carnell could also see that the robot wasn't alone. At first he had thought that it was another ungulate, despite there being plenty of salted meat drying in the shuttle. Then he could see that it was a man.

"Bring him over here," Carnell shouted, redundantly, since that was clearly the robot's intention. D57 silently deposited the man at Carnell's feet. "Who is he? Where did you find him?"

The robot said nothing.

The man was old, that much was certain: his hair was as white as the salt plains, and his skin just as cracked and dry. He wore some kind of robe that was tattered and stained, but worst of all - for Carnell - had no pockets. He didn't carry a bag, nor anything else that he might keep something in to identify himself. He didn't seem to be breathing, but as Carnell touched his skin he found it still warm.

"Where did you find him?" Carnell asked again. "Did he have a ship? A working ship?"

D57 said nothing, just stood.

The man's eyes flicked open.

In the morning, the sun set the salt crystals burning through red to white hot. D57 stood silently, patiently, outside the shuttle. Its face was pointed to the sky, as if it was keeping track of where Kaldor City lay even as the sunlight obscured it. Carnell lay in his customary place in the cockpit, but this time only wrapped in half his collection of furs. The other half were wrapped around the stranger, sitting up in one of the engines that had been torn open and hollowed out by the explosion. He was watching the robot, silently, patiently, his face almost as much of an impassive mask.

"Good morning," Carnell called over. The man turned to look at him. "How are you feeling this morning."

Suddenly the man beamed.

"How are you?" he said, his voice surprisingly young in comparison to the rest of him. "Good morning!"

Carnell watched the face for any trace of irony, any hint of intelligence being carefully disguised. He found neither, and pulled himself carefully out of his bed. The old man was up on his feet in half the time, revealing that he'd either slept in his robes or else woken much earlier and dressed before watching D57. He took Carnell's arm without asking, and helped him up to his unsteady feet.

"Thank you," Carnell breathed insincerely. "My name is Firstmaster Carnell. Does that mean anything to you?"

The man froze for a moment. Not recognition, more as if he had forgotten that his face should have some kind of expression.

"No," he said eventually. "I don't think it does."

Carnell merely nodded.

"I was - I am - a psychostrategist," he offered.

"I see," the man said. He had already turned away from Carnell and was rooting through the few contents of the shuttle. "And that's good, is it? Or bad? I'm afraid I don't quite - I don't think I'm from around these parts."

"I see," Carnell mused softly. "And which parts are you from?"

"Do you have any water?"

D57 turned sharply away from the sunrise and strode over to one the condensers buried neck-deep in the salt. It pulled the plastic away from one, and lifted out a cone no more than a quarter full of foggy water. With a slight bow, it offered the cone to the man, who was kneeling over Carnell's box of chessmen. He rose carefully and looked at the water, then to the robot.

"Is that all you have?" he sounded surprised.

The robot bobbed ever so slightly. The cup remained outstretched.

"I can't take that," the man said. He looked to Carnell. "You have it: please."

The cup did not waver.

"Your need is as great as mine," Carnell said magnanimously.

The man smiled at the robot, and took the cup reverently in both hands, taking the tiniest drop before handing it back to the robot. D57 spun, and passed the remaining water to Carnell, who took it and drained the cup completely.

"Thank you, D57," Carnell said.

The robot said nothing.

"What's this?" the man asked, his hand resting on the box again.

"A game," Carnell explained. "It's called chess."

"Can we play?"

"I haven't finished all the pieces," he shook his head.

"And that matters, does it?" the man turned one of the knights over in his fingers, feeling the sharp edges of the bone. "I see. It's a one man game?"

"Two," Carnell corrected. He saw what the man meant, though: "I was going to play the robot. Eventually."

"D57? You can play?" the man asked the robot. "Show me."

The robot turned to look at Carnell. He could see how so many people developed robophobia, faced with that stylised visage. So very nearly human, but so completely unreadable. And yet, in their own way, just as predictable as any man. Carnell waved his assent, and the robot strode over and lifted the box. It knelt on the floor and drew a board on the salt, eight by eight.

"It's a representation," Carnell told the man, "of human conflict. A metaphor. For something bigger than itself."

D57 reached into the box and placed the queen on the board.

And then stopped.

"I see," the man said. "And what happens now?"

"D57?" Carnell snapped. "Why have you stopped?"

The robot said nothing.

"D57! Continue. Set the board."

It did not move.

"This is a priority one command. Set the board, D57!"

Still nothing. The robot raised its head slightly to look up at Carnell. It was strange how a moulded, impassive face could still look so confused. Carnell was impervious, rushing forward and snatching pieces out of the box. He began to place them in their designated places on the board, only for D57 to calmly and silently remove them. It placed them back in the box, one by one, until only the queen remained.

"What happened to the other pieces?" Carnell demanded. "Answer me, damn you! Where are the other pieces? Did none of them escape? Tell me!"

"Carnell?" the man said.

"What about the black king's bishop?" Carnell shouted into D57's face. "Where does it go? *Where?*"

"Carnell?" the man repeated, softer this time.

"*What?*"

The man froze again, and then smiled.

"I don't understand the rules of this game," he said.

"No," Carnell agreed. "Neither do I."

They spent most of the day sitting on the salt and staring at nothing. Every few minutes that passed, the man would look at Carnell, and Carnell would look to the black queen sitting at the centre of the board. Then both would look away, as D57 stood behind

them, unmoving. As the sun moved overhead, D57 moved to start a fire to cook two perfect steaks. Above them the desert orbited, Kaldor City just a cold black dot on its storm-whipped surface. The man said:

"Why didn't he answer you?"

Carnell turned, not realising how stiff his neck had become.

"Its a D-class robot. They can't talk."

"You seemed to think he could."

"It can," Carnell said.

The man simply nodded and smiled. Carnell glanced over at the robot. It held the two steaks over the flames, turning them almost constantly so the juices didn't drip into the fire and cause them to burn.

"I was flying the shuttle," he said, choosing his words carefully. "This was nearly a year ago. I was flying away from Kaldor City. What I didn't know was that D57 was on board - a small miscalculation, but significant. I said something, and it replied. Then we crashed here, and I can only assume that it assisted my recovery: my first reliable memories are from a few months ago, but I've only recently become strong enough to take some control of my own well-being. What about you: how did you come to be here?"

"I . . ." the man paused again, that odd frozen stare. Was there perhaps some kind of mental damage? "Well, like you the memories aren't all there. I'm waiting for something. Yes, waiting, I suppose."

"Waiting for what, might I ask?"

"Well, something," the man smiled, utterly charming.

Carnell smiled back. The steaks were nearly ready.

"And you're alone?" he asked.

"No," the man said, suddenly grave. "Not alone. My wife is waiting for me."

"And she's here? Where the robot found you?"

"No," the man turned away. "Not here. Nearby, though."

"But you have a ship?" Carnell asked. "She won't have to wait long, I hope?"

"A ship . . . Yes, there was a ship . . ."

D57 stood sharply, walking towards them with two perfectly cooked steaks proffered. Carnell reached for his plate, but the man took the steak from the robot and held it in his hands as if unsure what to do now. As Carnell took a few careful bites, the man began to do the same, smiling as if the taste - possibly the entire experience - was new to him. Carnell smiled back, and turned his head: his gaze fell upon the black queen again, standing alone on the board.

"It means a lot to you," the man said, understandingly. "That game."

Carnell looked away.

"It was a strategy that proved successful for a while," he answered dismissively. "I have others."

That night, they slept. D57 sat by the fire, making sure it never fell below a certain level of heat. There were some tiny beads of ice forming on its shoulders, but nothing that would affect its operation. The man lay again in the engines, snoring softly like a small child. Carnell was awake, his eyes closed as if he hoped that by feigning sleep he might manage to fool even himself.

Behind him, the comm-link started to hiss quietly.

"D57?" he said, but the robot didn't move.

"You realise you'll have to kill him," said Kaston Iago, through the static.

Carnell woke slowly in the morning, the sun pretty much sitting directly over his face as his eyes prised themselves open. It took a moment for him to remember where he was, for every detail to slot into place. As it did, he saw the man hunched over the chess board, moving pieces with a careful concentration, and yet always into the same spot. The board had been wiped hurriedly with a swipe, and the man was placing each piece within a single redrawn square.

"Good morning," Carnell said.

The man twitched, and looked from Carnell to his hands.

"Good morning, " he said, automatically.

"Might I ask what you're doing?" Carnell said.

The man looked down at the board, and moved a final piece into the single square.

"I don't know," he said, not looking up. "It seemed important to you. Is it wrong? It seemed that this was how they should go."

"There are two sides," Carnell said, softly, "in opposition."

"Are there?" the man asked, as if he didn't quite believe what Carnell was telling him. "I suppose you could look at it that way. But they're all on the same board together. Can you really say what it looks like to them? They could be happy, don't you think?"

"I don't think the game of chess was designed with the happiness of the pieces in mind."

"Maybe not," the man said. "But that doesn't really answer the question, does it?"

Carnell raised a hand as if in defeat and lifted himself out of his bed.

"The game has always revealed more about the player than itself," he conceded, watching the man carefully whilst trying to seem as if he wasn't. "The mixture of the military and the sacred suggests at a certain world view on behalf of the original creators. I suppose it isn't impossible that we have all misinterpreted their intentions, and that there really isn't any conflict at all."

"But you don't agree?"

"In my experience," Carnell answered, "there is usually conflict."

"So the game reflects your view of the universe," the man continued, with a half-smile. "You use it as a . . . rehearsal? A physical representation of how your actions might shape the world around you."

"I could teach you how to play," Carnell offered.

"Not all the pieces are here."

"No."

"Are you here?" the man asked, looking at the board.

"That would seem to depend on whether I'm playing your game, or D57's."

"And are you?"

Carnell paused.

"I suspect that we are all playing someone else's game."

The man nodded.

"You mean the gods," he said. "But if that's what you think, then you don't need this game. Who are we to judge how a god sees the universe? You might be able to see yourself on the board, but you could never truly know the intention behind your movements."

The man picked up a bishop and toyed with it.

"Do you think the animal this came from ever wondered why it had been bought to this planet, what its purpose was? Do you think it would ever have considered that all that was required of it was its death, and the use of its skull? Do you think it could ever believe that, even if someone could have told it?"

Carnell looked at the man.

For a long time, there was silence.

That night, the radio spoke again.

Carnell heard the static through the breeze, softly wrapping itself around him like the fur of a recent kill. He hadn't slept that night, had simply stared up at the stars, the planet above. But the sound of that static made him feel calmer, somehow, as if he was already deep in some beautiful dream. He was already expecting to hear the voice long before he did, already flattered himself that he knew what it would say.

"He knows too much," Iago's voice came.

"Indeed," Carnell agreed.

"You should kill him, before he kills you."

"Perhaps," Carnell mused. "But how would I? He seems remarkably sprightly for his age, whilst I . . . ?"

"The robot could do it."

"Ah, but robots cannot kill."

"We both know that's a lie."

"Just as we both know that I'd need the trigger phrase, and a very strong guarantee that D57 wouldn't also kill me. Of course, it stands to reason that you found a counter-command: I imagine you used your copy of Capel's diaries to patch something together. At least, that's what I predicted you would do."

"I could give you the counter-command."

"And that would be useless unless you could also give me Capel's voice."

Silence.

"I could do that," Iago said.

Carnell closed his eyes against the stars.

"Yes, I imagine that you could. But I'm not a fool. At least, I like to fool myself that I'm not a fool, and despite all evidence to the contrary. I didn't trust you when I was certain you were alive, "Iago": I'm not likely to start now."

"He'll destroy you," Iago hissed.

Carnell closed his eyes, and tried not to agree.

The next day, Carnell woke before the man - or, at least, did his best to make it appear that he thought the man was still asleep when he woke. He gave D57 instructions to remain by the fire, and hobbled painfully away. There was a small knot of rocks that began at the nose of the downed shuttle - being what had originally brought the shuttle to a halt - and rose up until they offered something of a view of the surrounding area. It took Carnell a good while, but eventually he was on the tallest rock, leaning on his makeshift stick and watching Kaldor City crest the horizon.

He said nothing, moved not at all.

Eventually, the man appeared beside him.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Carnell kept his eyes on the planet above.

"It was a year ago today that my shuttle crashed here," he said, his voice even.

"Prior to that, I had something of a comfortable existence. I had colleagues, friends. I wonder sometimes if they still think of me. I . . . It has been a very long time."

The man followed Carnell's gaze.

"They'll think of you," he said, softly.

Carnell looked to him.

"Of course. How long has it been since you saw your wife?"

"Too long. In your terms . . . too long for me to easily put it in your terms. Time is relative: even one day away from her is a lifetime."

"Then you understand," Carnell said.

And they both simply stood.

They ate salted steak again that day. Carnell's reserves were dwindling faster now that he was feeding two. It wouldn't be too long before D57 would have to go out hunting again, unless Carnell could make other arrangements. The man sat by the fire, D57 hovering anxiously beside him as if unnerved by the company. Carnell picked at another bit of the perfectly cooked meat: it fell apart between his fingers.

"We'll need more meat soon," he said.

D57 turned as if acknowledging an order.

"I don't remember much," the man said, staring into the flames. "But I think there was a ship. There were people, definitely."

"So the planet isn't uninhabited? Interesting."

"Perhaps they could help you?" the man said. "Perhaps the ship was theirs: they could get you back to your life."

"And you can remember where they were?"

The man turned and looked at Carnell.

"No," he had to admit.

Carnell smiled, not unsympathetically.

"So ends another promising strategy," he said.

The man turned back to the fire. It crackled and spat, occasionally burning green as the wind blew some loose salt into the flames. The sun was setting fast overhead. Soon it would be night.

"I miss my wife," the man said.

"Yes," Carnell said.

The man looked up again.

"How did I get here?" he asked.

"This planet? I have no idea."

"No, here: here!"

"D57 brought you."

"So he would remember the way back? To wherever he found me?"

"I suppose," Carnell admitted reluctantly. "Assuming its memory banks weren't damaged in the crash. D57: are you operating at peak efficiency?"

The robot simply turned and stared vacantly.

"And there is your answer," Carnell said.

"It could do it. It could lead us both back: we could find the ship, and leave."

"I don't think -"

"Come on - now!"

"Now?" Carnell raised an eyebrow, and tapped at his crippled leg with his stick. Pain danced into his hip, but the effect had already been carefully calculated. "I can't move. It would take me too long. The robot only found you because it was on its own: they can move far faster than we can. Certainly than I can."

The man paused, and looked at D57.

"It could lead me, then," he said.

Carnell nodded.

"Indeed. And I would probably die here without it," he said, as if the possibility were neither here nor there. "But then I don't suppose I could stop you, if that's what you intend."

"I meant I could send it back for you," he said. "Or come myself, in the ship."

"Well, it certainly seems like a plan," Carnell said.

That night, Carnell lay alone in the shuttle. It was a cold night, but he had all the furs to himself. The fire was burning high, but - for the first night in nearly a year - would probably burn out long before the dawn. Carnell had feasted on two salted steaks that night, burned almost black on the outside and bloody and cold on the inside. They had tasted divine.

If the man could be persuaded to put aside his feelings and let D57 carry him to his ship, they might be back by the morning. Freedom was once again within Carnell's grasp. Once they were away from this benighted salt-ridden planet, then perhaps he would need to start looking at a new strategy. Kaldor City was lost, that much was clear, and his opponent seemed all but unstoppable. But then Carnell had always relished a challenge, and at least it wouldn't be boring.

He closed his eyes, and slept a while.

He was woken by a combination of sounds. He jerked in his furs as if waking from a falling dream, but the fire was cold and there was cloud over the stars. His ears were filled with a cacophony, a strange wail that he thought must be the wind and something that he quickly came to recognise as the comm-link hissing like a wet cat. He tried to see what was happening, but all was dark.

"It's too late now, Carnell," growled Iago through the static.

The wail grew louder and Carnell was blinded by light. He felt the ground shift underneath him, and suddenly he was being pitched forward violently onto the salted earth. His leg crumpled awkwardly under him, and sharp pain burned the rest of the sleep away. When he looked up, the sky was suddenly free of clouds, and starlight lit the plains

all around. The shuttle, and the rocks he had climbed that afternoon, were gone: all was flat white salt.

And the man standing over him.

"You've been touched by the death-god," he said. His eyes were wild and mad. "I can see it. You've been touched, haven't you?"

"You've seen it," Carnell answered. "You know what it is."

"I know," the man answered, and looked around.

Carnell followed his gaze. Carnage lay around them. There were bodies on the ground. A dozen at least. They had been torn apart as if in a frenzy, their blood oozing into the salt. Crystals of it had started to coalesce, red like rubies. The ground all around had been torn at as if with gigantic claws, cutting deep swathes out of the earth. But it was salt all the way down, salt and blood and blood. Most of the bodies were human, but some were grotesque bloated serpents, boiled into almost nothing but blood and hate.

Carnell saw that the ground had been scratched with a crude pentagram.

"It took my wife," the man said. "She's within it now."

"It took my city," Carnell said, holding up a hand. "I'm not with it. We can work together. I want to play it. I want to win."

"You can't."

"We can. Together."

"But I don't want to," the man answered.

He stepped forward, brushing aside Carnell's weak flailing arms. He placed his hands either side of Carnell's head as if he intended to pluck it neatly from his shoulders. His hands felt cold as metal, and then quickly became hotter than Carnell could bear. It felt as if the sun itself was pressing into his temples, as if the flesh would melt clean away.

"I just need your skull," the man said.

I'm afraid I'm rather attached to it, Carnell wanted to say. But the fire burned almost every thought from his head. Almost every thought: his hand fell quickly to his pocket, found the one thing he had salvaged from the wreckage of the shuttle. The one thing he had searched for the moment he had woken and found D57 standing over him, apparently nurturing, caring and dumb. He had waited for the robot to go on one of its hunting trips before he'd tested it, but once he'd found it was working he had never let it out of reach again.

He thumbed the recorder on.

"Rise, my brothers," Taren Capel said.

There was pain, so much pain.

Then the man let out a scream.

The pain stopped. The fire died. Carnell fell back to the salted ground from where the man's hands had lifted him, and lay panting. He could feel the salt burning into the blisters either side of his head, but could barely even acknowledge the pain. Somewhere, he had stopped breathing, but now great gulps of air were getting pulled into his lungs as if he had just escaped drowning. He coughed, and felt blood trickle down his chin. As he looked up, Carnell saw D57 standing behind the man, calmly - politely - strangling the life out of him.

Carnell closed his eyes for just a moment.

There was a thud as the lifeless body of the man landed on the ground some feet away, casually thrown by the robot. The salt flew into the air, and gave a firework crackle as it rained back down. Carnell looked and saw D57 standing over him, its hands outstretched. Its fingers danced manically, but its face was calm. The fingers danced towards Carnell's neck, and he didn't have the strength in him to resist.

He thumbed the recorder again.

"obey. the. Humans," Taren Capell hissed, staccato.

"Stop," Carnell gasped, still sucking in air.

D57 stopped.

"Take me home," Carnell said. "Make me well."

And D57 did.

That night, Carnell slept alone again in the shuttle, wrapped tight in furs and too tired to move. D57 kept the fire high, and its distance. Carnell still shivered, and was half-convinced that the burns to the side of his head had become infected, despite the salt that had rubbed into them. Iago was a forward-thinker: he would have antibiotics in the shuttle, it was just a question of finding them. Somewhere under all the guns, no doubt. D57 would look, as soon as the need became apparent.

The wind wailed across the sand - strange, alien sounds.

"Hello, Carnell," said a voice.

Carnell couldn't move, but the newcomer moved politely into his line of vision. A young man with grey eyes and an impossibly neatly tailored suit. It was made from a grey pinstripe, miraculously unsullied by the salt in the soil and the air. He was a stranger, but he smiled down at Carnell with something like kindness. If he meant ill, the psychostrategist knew there would be nothing he could do about it: he couldn't even turn his head to see if D57 had noticed this new arrival.

"Don't worry," he said, holding up his hands. "I've recovered myself a little. I've you to thank for that, I suppose."

"I don't know you," Carnell managed to say.

"Who really knows anyone?" the stranger replied. "I just wanted to . . ."

The stranger shrugged as words failed him. Or perhaps explanation - perhaps even he didn't really know what it was he wanted. Instead, he sat at Carnell's feet and started to

toy with something there. Carnell managed to bend to see: the stranger had the chess set, and was turning a rook through his carefully manicured hands, end over end over end.

"It must be hard," he said softly, "being a piece on the board. With no hope of understanding what's going on in the world outside. There are races and beings so ancient, so powerful that you couldn't even begin to guess their motives. All you can do is pray that they know what they're doing."

"I know about the death-god," Carnell said.

"Fendahl?" the stranger smiled a wry grin. "A nothing. A mistake. A potential weapon, nothing more. That's why they sent us. The gods, they don't rest easy in heaven. They make war. But she . . . I think she fell in love with it, a little. She loved me, loves me, but she loved it too. In the end, she gave herself to it."

"She . . ." Carnell's mind still felt boiled between his ears. Connections that were his stock in trade eluded him. "I knew people who have been lost to it, too."

"Lost?" the stranger looked up. "No, you don't understand. They aren't lost. Fendahl devours, not destroys. That's why I have to leave, you understand? To join her. That's all it wants: to bring us all together so we can live together in happiness for eternity. All we have to do is let go of ego and let it love us. That's what she realised. That's why I have to leave this . . ."

He let a handful of salt trickle through his fingers.

"I just wanted to tell you," the stranger said, eventually. "There's another move."

Carnell looked down at the board. All the pieces were there, bound together in the single square. All except one, he saw now: a bishop had been moved from the mass, hung awkwardly at the edge. Carnell realised what the move was. He shook his head, trying to clear it: how else would he hear the static?

"I won't," he said, as firmly as he could.

"I know," the stranger said, "but there's still one other move."

He stood, brushing the salt from his suit, although none fell to the earth. He looked at Carnell and winked. It made him look somehow boyish, although Carnell guessed that there was no measure he had that could accurately gauge the man's age. He bent down and carefully picked up the box that the pieces had been stored in, looking at it as if assessing its strength and durability. Then he pulled the lid off and tossed it aside, turning the box over and placing over the board, pieces and all.

"Goodbye, Carnell," he said.

Carnell looked at the box, upside down on the ground.

Whatever was happening inside, he couldn't see it.

"Wait!" he managed to call. The man in the suit stopped, and looked back. "What happened to the ship? I need a ship if I'm going to do anything."

The man smiled sadly.

"The ship was here all the time," he said.

And he walked slowly into the night, disappearing step by step, lost in the haze. The wind howled again, that strange grating howl, and then all was silence.