

Ultra=Violet

A techno=fantasy
(Chapters 1 to 7)



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Ultra-Violet



Ultra-Violet Chapters 1-7 by Allen Varney
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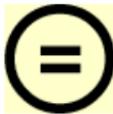
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Ultra-Violet: A Work in Progress!

As I release this excerpt from *Ultra-Violet* in August 2003, I am working away on the rest of the story. Please check my home page on the Web, www.allenvarney.com, for updates and new sections as they become available.



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I: Bloodshow: Fungus Caves of Leppor

WAAAAAAAY back when Edwin went up the Rainbow Kromes, the whole world was this wretched, brutal, teeming, feverish, heartkiller turn-down-the-contrast monochrome RED.

Surveillance swarms of Verminax bugs buzzed the scarlet sky over fields the color of raw sirloin. Ruby-skinned human slaves chopped with garnet chainscythes at ruddfruit bushes (Watch it! Hit the lower antebrachial nerve cluster straight on, or the razor-root erupts straight for your heart!), then heaved each bitter fruit into a trundler's leg sacs. (Trundler? Verminax, 30 tons, 60 legs, IQ 10. And, yes, red.)

Planner caste overseers, bossy whiny insect guys, kept the gangs within weapon range of the Plasmodium. In the center of the landscape the Plasmodium spiked straight up, 300 floors of pure ugly, a sky-stabbing termite nest of red slime and neon, topped with scabby clouds and the cardinal spike of Leppor's Lookout Stalk.

Leppor, the big boss, was a giant sphere of dark crimson. He perched atop his Lookout like a jewel in a clasp, seeing and hearing and lording it over everyone. He ruled indomitable, or at least only rarely domitable.

Land, sky, people, Leppor—everything in this piddly little one-note dimension, this krome, showed the color of muscle and blood. The name fit: Bloodshow.

Of course, any Bloodshow harvester slave who wanted relief from all this red could just face the horizon, any direction. There at the edge of reality, *may* too close, loomed

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- the Null, a seething pink/gray/no-color wall stretching
- straight up to twice infinity. By minutes and hours, finger-
- and arm-lengths, acidically, the Null ate away at the krome.
- “Relief”! Right.

- Leppor had created this entire krome out of the Null.
- Using a small, incomparably valuable device called a
- realizer, he had pulled Bloodshow into existence with a spray of liquefied Reality. The krome emerged from the fog fully landscaped, with a complete ecosystem and built-in history. Quite a bargain, in theory. But Bloodshow was the last of six kromes created from the Null, and by far the most debased. To keep it around, to fend off the ever-devouring fog, Leppor had to shore up his krome with frequent sprays of newly liquefied Reality. He could only collect new Reality by pressing it out of living beings. For instance, human slaves.

Slaves knew little about Leppor, and nothing of the kromes. Slaves, in fact, knew hardly anything. Leppor wiped their memories when they arrived. But in Bloodshow, slaves learned one lesson over and over: how to survive. After a hardscrabble life of stepping soft, sleeping light, bolting food, testing floors, and kneeling jerks, any Plasmodium slave knew a hundred tricks to cheat everyday ordinary death, never mind Leppor’s Reality pressor. Life under Leppor made them hard as anodized razor blades, slippery as fractionated fullerene-doped planner spit.

(Chase a sewer rat down grates and around pipe bends, track it crosstown with sonar and satellite infrared, run it ragged with bloodhounds in four-dog relay teams, and trap it in a titanium mesh cage under halogen floods. Now ask the rat what it’s thinking. The rat will say, “If I had moves like those Bloodshow slaves, you’d never have got me, you creep.”)

I: Bloodshow: Fungus Caves of Leppor

So take this old fugitive slave woman and her nephew, fleeing through the tunnels of Heartsick, the Plasmodium's deepest ultrasubterranean corescraper caverns. These two runners, Elinor and Edwin, kept looking behind, shying from every little flickfly, gasping hoarsely, and wondering if maybe the Null had good points after all. When these amped-up cornerfighters got so spooked, it meant just one thing: On their trail walked the most dangerous man in Bloodshow. ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ □

They were in no shape to fight him. Years in Bloodshow had aged Elinor like decades in other kromes. True, her ruby eyes still gleamed witchily. Her straggling hair held its maroon color, and she moved with a sensei's lean hickory poise. Other harvesters loved Elinor, in the shifty sidelong Heartsick way that passed for love. They trusted her to get things done. A Bungee Village wirefight oddsmaker on Mount Gild—another krome, not important right now—might have pegged Elinor as “shrewd sturdy oldster, nice moves, feisty infighter, 40% strange.” Lavish praise, aside from the high strangeness wildcard. But against a maxellid, she'd never get better than 334:3.

The nephew was just a kid—wiry, big eyes, mop hair, likable, sharp as a whipvine. But physically? Kind of a sprat. Whatever his age, he looked too small for it.

Both runners had harvester caste barcode tattoos snaking along their left cheekbone. Both wore hackcloth slave tunics, ragged where they had torn out strips. Both wore the strips as bandages on their forearms, bloody where they had torn out Leppor's tracking squealers.

Heartsick: huge and humid tunnels of intestinal smoothness. Thumbscrew-size hotterbugs skittered along the ceiling, bits of concretion sludge in their mandibles,

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■ building wavy cooling vanes that kept the fervid Plasmodium unbaked.

■ Neon pipes, fungus-grown, branched down the walls like veins. Here and there TV screens blossomed.

■ Elinor stumbled, stopped, and leaned hard against a wall. “All right, Edwin, I’ll stop telling you to go back to the barracks. But at least hang back and hide. They want me, not you.”

Hiding his fear, Edwin managed a brave-soldier bluster. At his age he thought bluster sounded good. “Getting the Reality back to the slaves is too important, Aunt Elinor. I won’t let them stop you.”

She stared, panting. “And what can you do? Crazy kid!” But she rested her shaking hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

Far behind them squeaked a shrill styrofoam voice: “*There! A-downtunnel! I spy now both stu-u-upid humaaans!*”

Elinor froze without turning. “Tell me that planner isn’t in this tunnel. It was an echo.”

Edwin craned to look, then ducked. “It’s crawling up the wall back there. It’s looking this way!”

“Right.” She sighed. “You don’t see two *other* stupid humans?”

“We’d better run!”

They ran: toy soldiers in a storm drain.

A theremin *eeeeeeeeeeeee* wailed behind them, and Edwin and Elinor sped up. After them raced a slither of three Devouring Maxellids, Verminax millipede warriors that filled the tunnel like writhing subway trains.

□ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

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From a safe distance, Verminologists have long thought the maxellids smooth, like earthworms. Recently the Zur Panlectica researcher Ostrop Murillo disproved this.

Murillo fed seven hagbear carcasses doped with Ritingo-Bauzer Laboratories' SNOR® brand polyethyl-n,n-synthemorpheolene to a mature maxellid (subcaste *devour*), then examined it during post-prandial torpor. “Fine, fractally serrated, subdermally rooted scales, evidently cartilaginous, closely lapstraked,” he radioed to his grad students, following seconds later with observations of the brevity of maxellidary post-prandial SNOR torpor, and ending with muffled yet heroic notes about the edentate palate and upper digestive tract.

This publish-and-perish discovery—which forced Ritingo-Bauzer to pay Murillo’s widow a settlement so large that she opened Devour Me, a popular theme restaurant—explains the creatures’ eerie wail. Maxellids in a slither entwine around one another while crawling, and their rubbed scales resonate like champagne glasses.

Riveting stuff, but not while you’re running for your life. Edwin and Elinor hit the next tunnel two seconds ahead of the lead maxellid. Elinor spent one second to point out a low bolt-hole, shout “Go!” and turn to face the giant millipedes in noble sacrifice. This left Edwin the second second to grab her noble sacrificial rear and jump in the hole, jerking her backward head-between-ankles.

Now some Verminax, like spywasps, can brake and reverse twice an eyeblink. Edwin once saw a slave stumble over a low cliff edge, and while she started to fall—while he took his first step toward her to help—a wasp swarm buzzed in from all sides (any airborne slave being fair game), zip!zop! sucked her dry as a scab, then scooted out from under as the body hit and crumbled.



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- *Some* Verminax. Not Devouring Maxellids, headlong
- megabugs managing 30,000 legs. “Maxi-tough, size advan-
- tage, aggressive, tops in tunnels“ (more bookie analysis
- here) “but zero strange, not team player, slowboat turns,
- inertia problem.” The first inertia problem hit the bolt-hole
- like a rudderless cargo jet, and two more crashed on top.

□ The slither’s prey had vanished. So, being Verminax, they bickered. Train wheels screeching on rusty axles: “*Think you aaas we go a-down hole? Paaath is more small, for make of humaaan, crossleg mouter!*”

“Naaay, slave-bind, you run a-front of I!”

“Lie you both a-top of I, squirming gorgers! Lift, separaaate!”

In a chamber beyond the bolt-hole tunnel, the two slaves crouched to listen. When yattering complaints became shrieks and thuds, Edwin exhaled. “They’re starting on each other. We’re clear.”

“Stay focused. Bugs aren’t our main problem—*he’s* still after us.”

Edwin nodded. A thought chilled him: “The vial.”

“I’ll check it.” From within her tunic Elinor drew a hackcloth parcel. As she unwrapped the tube within, a lustrous glow suffused the cave. Elinor and Edwin, the rock around them, and even the darkness itself went flat, like mere phosphor images projecting through the pyroglass vial to a truer world inside. Woman and boy looked, yearning, on the priceless liquid Reality.

Elinor read the tiny field gauge. “The magnetic bottle is still holding.” The light faded as she rewrapped the vial reverently. “A whole vial! If we get through this alive, Skeet and Willa can create enough land for all the runaways.”

Runaways, slaves who had escaped Leppor’s gangs, always fled to the deep tunnels. They never got far. They had nowhere to go, for the Null ate at this small krome’s

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edge, below as above. But now, at lethal risk, Elinor had sneaked this vial of Reality from Leppor's guarded stockpiles. They hoped the bottled Reality could drive back the Null and create a sanctuary for their runaway friends—and themselves.

Edwin felt excited, and not just because Devouring Maxellids were currently thrashing each other senseless ten steps away. Seeing Reality always thrilled him. “Never mind the new land, I'd like to use that stuff on Leppor. Turn him into a flickfly and smooch him!”

Elinor scowled. “Edwin. Our people—who knows how many?—got pressed to make this Reality. Show respect.”

Edwin hung his head. After a moment the old woman reached out and gently rubbed his ear. That was her dehydrated spirit's closest approach to affection.

She looked around the chamber. “What's down there?”

With boulders like broken teeth lining the floor and ceiling, it was way too easy to imagine this small cave as a big mouth. The roof, lit with a tracery of neon veins, sloped sharply down into a dark throat. Bulb fungi clustered on an epiglottal ledge across the gap, and there, in place of uvula, Edwin spied a crawling worm, fat as a ripe cherry.

He pointed. “A tastelium! For once, good news.”

Slaves considered this rare slime mold lucky, which shows Bloodshow's sad idea of luck. A colony of starving tastelium spores, each no bigger than a rice grain, would congregate to form this worm. The worm-colony crawled to a new food source, then extruded a kind of gun barrel and sprayed forth its slimy innard denizens, restarting the cycle. Eaten just before gun stage, the vitamin-rich worm tasted like buttered mushrooms.

Edwin eyed the narrow gap, looked around, saw nothing dangerous, and (Elinor: “Wait!”) jumped for the ledge.



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- Edwin's leap was not dumb, just unconsidered. Many a
- Bloodshow harvester, however careful, might have made
- the same mistake. But when the far ledge proved totally
- fungal and crumbled under his toes, Edwin had no fallback
- plan except to, well, fall back. Elinor grabbed his arm, she
- slipped on the oozy ground, and both slid downslope like
- oiled toboggans.

Tumble skid spin tumble slide. Two final dead-bug bounces threw Edwin and Elinor into a pile of fungal muck. What a rancorous stench! Spoiled eggs frying in rancid butter over burning hair in a pesticide mill.

The tastelium worm, perched on Edwin's forehead, spasmed with joyous hunger and blew up.

As powdery spores settled over them both, aunt stared piercingly at nephew. The boy muttered, "I *almost* got it."

"Edwin, the way you just zoom along by impulse, I wonder how you ever—"

"Hey, I see a sprayline! Can we clean up?"

They both looked like paprika-coated trundler drop-pings, so Elinor postponed her latest lecture. They crept down another gut-smooth tunnel to a water vein hung low on the wall. Turning the valve, they rinsed in spray that smelled of acetone. Then the two followed the vein further down. They saw piles of iron slag, regurgitated by Verminax rockeaters eating out this tunnel.

Soon Elinor and Edwin reached their goal: Farm 119, Heartsick's lowest fungus cavern. Here, rumor said, Leppor's security monitors had not yet budded.

In this steamy cave, fungi flourished. Sprays of neon pipes lit countless tree-size mushrooms in drifts marbled like cellulite thighs. Some crowns spread wider than a man; some grew high and thin.

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At the feeder arteries along the walls, flickflies circled in the sewage stink. Children inched all-fours across the canopy and, in the shadows beneath, edged through thickets of stems striated with prune-pit wrinkles. The kids hunted gougeworm pests. Bleeding notches in their fingertips showed that the gougeworms hunted them too.

Men and women with chainscythes moved among the fungi. When a harvester revved his curving blade and cut deep, the stem's fibers seemed to splay and grasp and wrap with tentacular fingers. Caustic vapors shot from the core like a mist of battery acid. But they had to be cut. The Plasmodium used everything but the odor:

- *Human-edible crowns*: stew (for the harvester and maker castes), mushsteaks and gravy (for hunter and pitboss castes, and larvandals), sludgy leavings (hated caste)
- *Verminax-edible crowns*: served whole (maxellids, trundlers, rockeaters), sliced (planners, breedrones), pureed (spywasps, nestors, hotterbugs)
- *Inedible crowns*: distilled for thacosene fuel and fungoplastic, residue dried for slaves' bed matting
- *Stems*: hackcloth, acid, fibercore scaffolding for Reality pressor and Slime Train trestles, compost for neon pipes
- *Spores*: lubricant, tattoo ink, torture drugs

Here fungi flourished—fungi, and more. Like Leppor's other caverns, Farm 119 fed the slaves' queasy suspicion that they didn't belong here. Not on this farm, not inside the Plasmodium, not anywhere. Sure, sweatshop hours of grinding servitude discourage patriotism, but this alienation grew in a deeper reach. It thrived in the dark of lost

- memory, and bore pale fruits of listlessness, paranoia, and
- despair. Only the runaways could bring hope.
- Elinor and Edwin sidled along the wall, behind rows of
- giant morels with hoods like folded umbrellas. They saw the
- prearranged rendezvous, a storage depot off the main
- cavern. The slaves scouted carefully, then stole into the
- depot through a narrow archway.

In this shadowed chamber, corded stems rose to the high ceiling. Heaps of fresh-cut crowns towered like mottled monster-truck tires. They smelled of acetylene.

Elinor whispered, “Skeet? Willa? Hello?”

Aunt and nephew searched among stem heaps, spore kegs, spare scythe chains, acid flasks made of trundler shell, and chips of broken chitin. As the silence lengthened, the two drew back toward the archway, turning back to back.

Edwin said fearfully, “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

On every wall, pink static flared! From nested fungal petals, giant television blooms blared a gargling high-bandwidth babble—the noise that made sense only to Leppor’s goons.

“Monitors!” Elinor pushed Edwin toward the archway. “Run!”

From the stacks overhead, half a dozen dark shapes rapped down on nestorsilk ropes. Toothed blades on double-handed chainscythes sputtered, then revved up to an ear-raking ragged-rip-roaOAARRRRR.

Elinor and Edwin looked back and forth. On all sides, tall stick-men ran at them. The soldiers wore chitin breastplates embossed with the Throat Ripper company emblem, helmets of hollowed breedrone heads, and—the give-away—bulging bug-eye lenses.

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“Larvandals.” Elinor took fighting stance. “Hit the ground and crawl for the door.”

Was she stupid, announcing tactical advice with the enemy watching? Not to speak ill of these brutally effective shock troops, but they had maggots for brains. Leppor had taken them from their human mothers in squawling infancy and fed them brainworms. The tiny worms consumed all neurons and replaced them with high-efferent surrogates.

Grownup larvandals developed tremendous speed and, more important, absolute loyalty to Leppor and the Verminax. But overdrive metabolism made them flyweights, and they had twitchy espresso reflexes. Also, brainworms coped badly with optic nerves (too much data compression). Larvandals compensated with a clumsy front-end fix: pyroplastic 90-lens eyeball covers anchored deep in cheekbone and brow ridge. Through these lenses they saw the world multiplex, 180-fold, about enough to make sure they got it.

Two Throat Rippers swept their chainscythes at Elinor, one high from the left, the other lower right. In younger times she could have jumped between. Now she had to duck right and step within the second soldier’s swing. With a touch she helped its whirring blade along, straight into the first soldier’s neck. She twisted the weapon away and rammed it backward under the second’s chin, then raised it crosswise just in time to parry two more attackers.

Edwin, who had hit the rocky floor as ordered, watched with growing unease. As he reached cover he thought, *She’s getting slow.*

Even in his short life he’d seen Elinor in better form. Once at Farm 86C a gang of trusty-slaves ran a racket extorting food from the harvesters. The Verminax planners did nothing, of course, so one sleep-shift Elinor snuck over.



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- She drugged the nestor guards with illicit roanwood bugnip,
- then moved through the slave barracks like a buzzsaw's
- shadow. It took her over an hour, that systematic seek-and-
- destroy. In the morning, the trusties were gone. The
- Verminax never did figure out how the farm's compost
- heaps got so big.

□ Glory days. Now Elinor had to fight smarter: no useless moves, fingers claspng exactly the right joint, pushing just so. A graceful step, one sharp twist, and a third larvandal fell with a broken arm. She kicked the grounded warrior on the armor straps under its armpit, not hard but just right, so the ribs snapped in sequence *kek!kek!kek!* like cancan dancers.

But (Edwin cringed) she was already gasping.

Then the fourth Ripper grabbed Elinor's tunic and (Edwin winced) swung her off-balance.

The cloth parcel fell out! The exposed Reality vial rolled free across the floor! In its glow the fungal stacks seemed to quiver like a canvas backdrop.

For a breathless half-second everyone in the depot watched Reality roll.

Then Elinor, Edwin, and the three remaining larvandals all leaped for the vial. One soldier arrived first; Edwin slipped neatly under his legs, snatched the vial, and ran; the other troops raced after him. But Elinor stretched her leg just so, and somehow both men tripped into each other and fell.

As they hit the rock, Elinor called, "Get out, we're pressed!" She engaged the last soldier while Edwin reached the archway. Then, too soft-hearted, the boy stole one glance back at Elinor.

In that instant a huge hand darted from beyond the arch and seized the vial. "Get out, we're pressed," a bass voice quoted. "Yes, soon enough, for you are not righteous."

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At the entry stood the Seeker-of-Evil. Oh, great.

Heartsick's short, blubbery pitboss wore a maraschino-red caftan, festooned like a breedrone nest with crystals, bug shells, comm handsets, and assorted goony bits. On his chieftain headdress glittered mosaic designs in spywasp chitin, highlighting an earpiece receiver and adhesive throat mike.

Edwin cried out and lunged for the vial, but Elinor ran to the boy and stopped him short. She knew that the Seeker-of-Evil, a small-minded shovel-jawed demagogue windbag coward, never took risks without a backup. He always meant trouble—annoying, sanctimonious, often lethal trouble.

Slaves in Bloodshow didn't know the word "sociopath," so they just said "like the Seeker-of-Evil." Leppor, sure he truckled to Leppor, oh indeed glorious master. And the Doctor, of course. Anyone else, the Seeker-of-Evil would cut their wrists just to watch the blood spurt, then explain why it was *for their own good*.

"Truly you walk a path of error," he said through plump and pursy lips. "Heed the sad example of your contacts, the runaways Skeet and Willa. My soldiers have already removed them."

Staggering over from the fallen larvandals, Elinor snorted. "Oh, 'my soldiers,' right! You'd check with Leppor before you ordered anyone to take a deep breath."

The Seeker-of-Evil stiffened and rose to his inconsiderable height. "If you had learned proper respect for me, your pitboss, you surely would never have fallen. Now you must meet the same sad fate as your friends."

"And what's that?"

"They will soon be pressed—or, to speak properly, distilled." The pitboss gently shook the vial. Elinor looked



■ past the Seeker-of-Evil and saw no guards. She tried to grab
■ the vial.

■ But the pitboss was ready. “Tut!” he said primly, and
■ thwacked her wrist with his scepter of office, a remote
■ control. This macho fungoplastic fetish had so many
■ buttons, it could have opened every garage and switched
□ every channel across a large suburb.

The Seeker-of-Evil held the remote high and thumbed a rocker switch. Across Farm 119, neon pipes flickered and TV blooms crackled. Listless harvesters gathered at the monitors. Pink static strobed onscreen.

As the Seeker-of-Evil pressed more buttons, a warbling, wabbling soundtrack blared from every screen. Edwin understood none of it. But when the workers turned in unison to face him and Elinor, he saw that same pink static bleaching their dead eyes.

The people marched straight at them, zombie-like.

Edwin tried not to panic. “Do we fight them too?”

Elinor looked like she was sizing up the Seeker-of-Evil for a double eye jab and a nice snap of the clavicle. But his thumb hovered over those buttons, and his smug expression said *Make me do it*.

“No,” she said. “It isn’t their fault, it’s his. And Leppor’s.”

“You speak from depraved ignorance. Of course, you may try to convince them.” When the pitboss pointed the control, the crowd moved faster, jostling, stumbling, and then running. Straight at them. “But remember: *I have the remote.*”

Elinor and Edwin fled. The mob stampeded after them. Fondling his remote control, the Seeker-of-Evil went tch-tch.

■ They slid under the first coils of wire, just as the mob
■ caught up. Even zombified, the harvesters still drew up
■ short.

■ The Seeker-of-Evil caught up. He frowned in frustra-
■ tion. “Fugitives! You have no chance. Why squander your
■ lives down here, when your Reality could serve the people
□ you have so pettily rejected?”

“Blah blah blah-di-blah,” Elinor muttered, then yelped as a low coil cut her hip.

Hotterbugs, noticing the intruders, sent out pungent alarm pheromones. As Edwin and Elinor shinnied forward, the tiny Verminax gathered around them. Then the scent drifted downtunnel, rousing the burrow of rockeaters from their torpid gnawing. They thrashed left and right, then turned, agile as bulldozers, to face the tangle.

Edwin gulped. “Uhh—what was that about troubling rockeaters?”

“You won’t believe this, but—” Elinor edged over to cover Edwin. “—We’ve got worse problems.” She braced as the hotterbug swarm grew to a solid seething ring. A moment later, they attacked. Moronic, but effective in huge numbers: a metaphor for the whole Verminax experience.

The slaves slapped and brushed and crushed, but managed only to slice open their arms. Amid the clack of hungry mandibles, Edwin screamed.

“Stay cool.” Elinor kicked and rolled, crushing hundreds of bugs, which unfortunately released more alarm scent. Acid steamed off the agitated rockeaters. Still Elinor kept calm. “Look on the upside. If they kill us, they can’t press us for our Reality.”

Edwin said, “That’s the upside?”

Just as things were getting gory, a new voice rang out: “Stop!”

I: Bloodshow: Fungus Caves of Leppor

The crowd shied back as a tall figure stepped forward, graceful as a spider.

Elinor looked back and sagged. “Oh no. Oh no.”

Under her, Edwin twisted to look. “What? Who is it?”
“Him. Doctor Injecta.”

Every slave in Bloodshow felt a curdling fear of Doctor Injecta, because Leppor forced them to watch this man at work. Routine thugs like the Seeker-of-Evil would cut you up, break some bones, yeah okay. But Leppor’s sole lieutenant had a more surgical imagination.

Dragonfly-thin, Doctor Injecta had a skull like an inverted teardrop, big-brain-long-chin. Fine rust hair swept back from his high forehead, and his left eye gleamed like a cochineal beetle.

The other eye? Gone. Doctor Injecta had replaced his right eye orbicular—socket, temple, zygomatic bone, the whole works, scooped out of his skull like a tremendous bite—with a medical reflector. The shiny cavity arced from beside his nose back almost to his ear. An odd red orb glowed in its center. When Doctor Injecta faced you, WHAM just like that you were under interrogation.

Injecta’s smock, darker than cinnabar, hid grisly stains. Under neon it looked black, as did his pants and jackboots. Likewise his belt, where he carried his personal armamentarium of hypodermics, lancets, suture needles, curettes, drills, and diathermy electrodes.

Yet his skin shone pale, pale... No one knew where Doctor Injecta had come from, but obviously not from around here.

Scoping circumstances at a glance, Injecta murmured to the little planner Verminax perched across his shoulders. The knobby-legged planner chattered, “*Ekinameverax! Off now do you move, off of a-top they! Kanivexaterak-k-k!*”

- At the planner's shrill datapulse squeals, the hotterbugs
- swarmed off Elinor and Edwin. The rockeaters cooled off.
- Of all the humans in Bloodshow, only Injecta could talk
- to planners. Through them he could command the
- Verminax. That itself, never mind the rest, made Doctor
- Injecta dangerous.

□ He spoke quietly, yet his graveled voice carried easily to the fugitives. "Elinor, I commend your determination. However, this particular game has ended. Come back, and I promise we shall resolve matters quickly."

Elinor wriggled forward again, protecting Edwin from the hanging coils. "We're halfway there," she whispered. "Almost. Call it a third."

Injecta could never manage a cajoling tone. He sounded like a general offering terms of surrender. "You know we all must sacrifice to preserve our beloved homeland from the Null. Your resistance—"

Elinor, still crawling, called back, "It's not our homeland. Humans don't come from here!"

Injecta's single eye glanced sidelong at the mob. The harvesters were blinking and scratching their heads. Their eye static flickered.

The doctor's pale skin flushed. "Nonsense. There is nowhere else."

The Seeker-of-Evil spotted his cue. "Nonsense!"

Elinor halted at a dense thicket of wire. Edwin wondered at her confusion: "No. I'm sure. I—I can't remember, but—"

Injecta exhaled. "The woman's unhinged. Perhaps we'd best expose her to—Reality."

From the Seeker-of-Evil he took the hackcloth bundle. The pitboss held on *almost* too long. But that skull reflector shining down, that merciless eye—oops! here you go sir.

I: Bloodshow: Fungus Caves of Leppor

With the planner chattering nervously behind his neck, Injecta unwrapped the pyroglass vial. He held it high, where its potent glow bathed the walls in ruby light.

The world went flat. Neon dimmed and static guttered.

As the slaves gazed in waking wonder, the pitboss tried to rezombie them with his remote. Fat chance. Press the usual buttons, thumb every power switch, shake shake shake that big commanding thing, doesn't matter. All the pitbosses, deputies, aides, overseers, recruiters, bureaucrats, whips, distributors, secretaries, vice principals, junior attorneys, second lieutenants—the jealous middle-manager hatchets, the balloonhead bottleneck blowhard hirelings with their near and petty power—shove 'em under the spotlight of big-R Reality, and hey, where'd your chevrons go, *boss*? Funny, now you look like one more slave.

While the Seeker-of-Evil cringed like a blindsided cockroach, Doctor Injecta appeared taller. He loomed. He seemed more deeply scary, a threat not only to soft organs but to hard convictions.

Or maybe not. Weird, suppressed, baseless yet undeniable notions—visions of power, terror, limitless possibility—bottled Reality brought them out.

Even under tanglewire, the two exhausted fugitives couldn't turn from that light. Edwin wondered if that red Reality came from the very runaways they'd wanted to meet.

Injecta snapped open his belt pouch and drew out—

(WHOOOAH!!!)

—the realizer.

Yes! *Leppor's* realizer.

Think of it: this little lose-it-in-a-handbag unit—this quirky calculatoroid form factor with its puny touchscreen and eccentric blank pushbuttons that would never ever mar the sleek streamlined masculine superbness of a pitboss



- fetish remote—this oddball gimcrack had created
- Bloodshow. By keeping back the Null, this same doodad
- now preserved the whole krome.

- In fact, Leppor’s realizer was certainly worth far more
- than all of Bloodshow together, though no one said this
- where Leppor could hear.

- Edwin had never seen the realizer. Now he got one glimpse, and his eyes bulged. Just for an instant he’d seen a bright line of, of—he had no words. Growing up in Bloodshow, he knew no colors but red.

Holding the realizer firmly in one slender hand, Doctor Injecta unstopped the Reality vial. A meaty odor leapt forth. As if handling nitro, Injecta oh-so-carefully poured a sparkling dram into the leftmost of the realizer’s seven side intakes. Capping the vial and handing it to the Seeker-of-Evil, Injecta pushed a button and touched a screen field. The realizer beeped, chimed, deedle-dummed. Everyone watched. (But why did Edwin stare so stone-still?)

The device’s case bulked out. It opened two thin side panels and extruded a handgrip and barrel. Targeting flanges sprouted. In seconds Doctor Injecta held a brand-new superheterodyned double-pulse-chamber recoilless spazzer pistol.

“Uh-oh.” Elinor crawled faster, pulling Edwin, trailing droplets of blood.

“Heeyaaa! Now do stu-u-upid humaaans a-shaaake they, and now rattleroll!”

Elinor began, “I *wish* that thing would sh—”

Injecta fired. The spazzer beam, visible only as a trembling of the humid air, struck the tanglewire close by. The near side of each strand instantly vibrated at gigahertz frequency, leaving the far side still. Wire shattered and flew out in an expanding shrapnel cloud.

I: Bloodshow: Fungus Caves of Leppor

A dust of blades showered over Elinor. Despite her efforts, one fell on Edwin, slicing his scalp. His cry got drowned by the stamping of the nervous rockeaters.

Injecta called, “Remarkable, isn’t it? I’m told one drop of Reality gives 50 shots. And I’ve the whole vial left.”

Elinor whispered, “How bad are you hurt?”

Edwin: “I’m all right, don’t go back. Keep going!”

Another shot, another explosion. Before the debris settled, the panicked rockeaters slammed through the tanglewire. Their shell carapace, thick as vault doors, turned aside the blades, but piston legs split and acid ichor spilled. The wire field, already shaking in waves, steamed and twisted and, with a tortured screech, snapped.

Wounded rockeaters stampeded around the tangle, toppling mounds of concretion fungus. As coils of wire hurtled by, the mob shied back, pitboss rearmost.

Doctor Injecta, though, stood like an obelisk. “Forty-eight shots left, Elinor.”

Bloodshow slaves could find three ways out of a block of cement. But as Elinor sized up the situation—tanglewire, hotterbugs, spazzer blasts, rockeaters, acid vapor—and Injecta—she gritted her teeth. “I’ve slipped tighter spots than this.” Another blast. Shrapnel cut her arms. “Wish I remembered when.”

She shouted to Injecta, “If you let my nephew go, unharmed, I’ll surrender.”

Edwin tried not to cry. “No! Please!”

The doctor’s words echoed through the tunnel. “That boy with you? Of course. I give you my word.”

Elinor snorted. “For what that’s worth.” She gripped Edwin’s hand tightly, and they crawled back toward the mob. She muttered, “Always another chance.”



I: Bloodshow: Fungus Caves of Leppor

While the pitboss worked his remote to calm the crowd, Edwin impulsively reached down and found a small hurl fragment. His gaze on the pitboss's headdress, he threw.

The stone, a porphyric agglomerate with veins of pure nickel and titanium, had a specific gravity not far short of a depleted uranium bullet. It would have hit the pitboss's scalp squarely—but he happened to turn, so that the rock hit the Reality vial. Pyroglass shattered, the magnetic field failed, and syrupy liquid shimmered as it splashed across the pitboss's big belly.

The smell of red Reality washed through the tunnel: gamy, nauseating.

Edwin filled the silence with a word. "Oops."

As the liquid seeped into his skin, the Seeker-of-Evil blew his cool. "Aah! What's happened?"

Doctor Injecta's eye showed a faint disappointment. "Oh, dear. My poor man, you've been drenched with pure Reality. A dreadful, colossal waste." He scrutinized the pitboss as he would a breedrone larva on a slide. "Still, this may be interesting."

"Wh-why? What does it do?"

"It makes you more like what you really are."

With rubbery squeaks, and whining every second, the helpless pitboss began to change. Who knew that rolls of fat could ooze like lava, bulging forth fold on fold? That fingers could distend like inflated surgical gloves? Could stretch further, submerging arm and belly and neck? Where now, that oozing obelisk?

"Mwaaah..." Through wide melting lips the Seeker-of-Evil blabbed, though with a putty head quickly flattening. "Heeeuuup!"

Doctor Injecta gazed in fascination. "Tut, man. Look on it as a learning experience."

- The pitboss became a squat oval globe webbed with
- pulsing arteries. Continents of leathery hide grew and
- joined. As they engulfed his arms, he dropped the remote.
- Its fungoplastic housing cracked. The slaves, freed from
- control, shied far back.

- Doctor Injecta calmly stepped back, spazzer ready. His
- planner Verminax sputtered and queeped.

No one noticed Elinor pulling Edwin uptunnel. She whispered, “Always another chance.”

From the polar crevasse of the Seeker-of-Evil’s mouth there slathered forth a razorstrop length of tongue. It flopped left and right until lost under the cancerously spreading hide.

Under Doctor Injecta’s piercing gaze, the globe—
—the *egg*—

—tore open. Leather flaps flew back as one four-clawed limb slashed free. Another, a third, a fourth knobby limb emerged, then two giant housefly wings. From the fleshy inner lining crawled a major revision of the Seeker-of-Evil, smaller (not much left but belly fat), uglier (those four arching spider legs, yeesh!), head more bullet-like, eyes bulgier, jowls jowlier, what a simpering twerp—

Zbrrriipppp! With ratcheting clicks the head whipped around on its spindle neck. On the skull’s other side, a second face had compound fly eyes, steaming nostril slots, black antennae, and teeeeeeeth, what a rack of teeth! Fangs bright with saliva, jutting incisors big as a hand, overbite so horrendous that when the bottom row sliced your nose, the uppers scraped the nape of your neck.

The slaves got one glimpse of this bad dream and they were *gone*, racing uptunnel so fast the wind rattled the tanglewire. When the thing fluttered its wings and lurched upward, even the rockeaters ran.

I: Bloodshow: Fungus Caves of Leppor

Injecta held off the Seeker-monster with controlled spazzer bursts.

The inglorious two-faced head spun twerpside. A barbed tongue slithered out. “Helllb!” Then back turned the hideous mouth-face.

One eye against a thousand, Injecta stared it down. “I’ll see what I can do. First, get that woman.”

The Seeker-of-Elinor rose higher and buzzed away uptunnel.





2: Bloodshow: Base of the Plasmodium

Pyroglass Smelting Facility 44 had once grown from the Plasmodium's lower slope like a boil, a big brutal blocky brick boil. A while back some nattering nester had let a boiler get too hot. The explosion had been awful. But this kind of thing happened all the time, and the whole slope already looked awful, so no big deal.

Downslope from the wreckage, past the shattered limekilns and trundler-size mounds of vitreous rubble, Elinor and Edwin crawled out an access conduit and stood under a clouded red sky.

They ran to a ruddfruit bush and pinched the trunk nerve to prevent attack. Hidden by its thick leaves, they lay panting.

A buzz from a nearby tunnel exit. The Seeker-of-Evil flew out and made clumsy passes overhead. Dumbstruck, the slaves watched its rotating faces scan the ruddfruit field.

After the thing flew out of sight, Edwin looked at Elinor. "Did I do that to him?"

"Don't think of it like that. It's Reality." Shivering, Elinor rose and picked her way down the slope. "I doubt he saw us. He never had the smarts to trick us when he was human."

Edwin followed. "Where are we going?"

"They caught Skeets and Willa. We have to rescue them at the Ambit before they get pressed. You up for a trip?"

2: Bloodshow: Base of the Plasmodium

“Yeah.” Edwin’s stomach rumbled. “Do we have time to eat?”

“Maybe. Follow me.”

They climbed down, swatting at ulcerflies. When the bites of these little gnats swelled, others would swarm to bite the same spot. With each bite they laid eggs or fertilized those already there. The wound would fester until the eggs hatched and newborn gnats chewed their way out.

The Plasmodium towered overhead. Think of a beehive where every bee had its own definite ideas about proper comb construction, or a wasp nest built by feuding architectural schools. From here, past its tumorous bulges, weird side platforms, and grotesque scaffolding, Edwin could just make out the Lookout Stalk and, perched on top, a dotlike sphere.

Seeing that sphere—Leppor!—Edwin shivered. With the Null all around, he felt trapped. “Why did we run away? There’s nowhere to go.”

Elinor helped him over a rash of dung fungus. “That can’t be true. I can’t remember, quite, but I know—we’re from somewhere else, all of us. Leppor brought us here to harvest our Reality, just the way we pick—ah, here we are—mushrooms.”

She rapidly plucked breadmolds the size of dinner loaves. “Maybe we have no more chance against Leppor and Injecta than these mushrooms. But we must keep resisting. It’s the right thing to do.”

Edwin held his tunic apron to catch the moist fungi. “No argument there.”

Elinor paused to size him up. “You’re a sharp one, Edwin. When your folks passed on, I promised them we’d all raise you right. I’ve always said a clever child, raised right,



- can change the world. And you turned out clever. Leppor's
- screens can't control you. I'm proud of you."
- Anywhere but Bloodshow, aunt and nephew would hug.
- Elinor the fighter fidgeted, looked away and back, and
- finally punched his shoulder. Go team.
- Even this standoffish love-tap warmed Edwin's heart.
- But when he looked back up at the sphere atop the Lookout Stalk, that chilled him all over again. He hated the slave's life of fear, the grinding, hand-to-mouth duck-and-dodge rockscrabble struggle of daily existence.

Why did Bloodshow have to be this way? Because of that stalk, and that sphere.

Edwin clenched his fists. "We could steal more Reality and a fungicide sprayer, get them all at the pressor: Leppor, Doctor Injecta, the Verminax—"

Elinor smiled. "Nothing can hold Reality, except the magnetic vials. And that realizer. Besides, Leppor's already saturated in it. Maybe you're too clever by half—too headstrong. That'll get you in troub-"

She froze. Edwin looked around, saw nothing, and whispered, "What?"

Elinor's jaw worked, but words caught in her throat. Her eyes rolled down.

Looking at her feet, Edwin cried in shock. Elinor had stood still too long, and from the mushroom patch a leechvine had quietly crept up her bare leg. Now the plant had reached the base of her spine and paralyzed her. The thin vine pulsed as it sucked her blood.

Horried, Edwin pulled at the vine. No luck; leechvine glue held up half the Plasmodium. Without thinking, he cried, "Help! Help here!"

A spazzer blast struck the vine, exploding it almost under his fingers. Elinor collapsed in his arms, gasping.

2: Bloodshow: Base of the Plasmodium

Doctor Injecta stood behind her, backed by the hovering Seeker-of-Evil and a dozen Verminax nestor guards.

Injecta smiled. “Indeed. I can help.”





3: **Bloodshow:** *Slime Train*

Fastest route to the Ambit short of teleportation (and nobody but Leppor could do that so never mind), the Slime Train track curved down from Plasmodium Terminus station like one immense mandible.

Bony guiderails bounded twin tracks of gelatin. Every so often a two-slimecar train slid down the outbound track. With a shell like a streamlined periwinkle and a muscular foot, each car looked slow as a snail. But no! Outbound trains moved as fast as a snail dropped from a roof.

Return trips crawled. At the train's tail, electrodes twitched the track galvanically, jerking the cars uphill. Everyone complained, but not where Leppor could hear.

With half the workshift left to go, the Terminus colonnade waited empty, windy, dead as a midnight airport. Leppor had envisioned Plasmodium Terminus as a bustling nexus, a cheerily frenetic ganglion of activity. What did he get? "Gee, Mister Leppor sir" (gulp), "nicest fifty-acre square of crumbling asphalt we've ever seen!" Rows of pillars, big arcing shards of trundler shell, stood in parallel like a giant ribcage. The tracks' weedy stench wetted the air.

Doctor Injecta, gripping the realizer/spazzer, hustled Elinor toward a car. Behind him, alongside the fluttering Seeker-of-Evil, one nestor guard casually carried Edwin tucked under its two right arms.

The guards, bred twice the size of ordinary nestor workers through pre-hatch larvacosteroid injections,

3: Bloodshow: Slime Train

towered even over Injecta. They looked sort of like him, actually. Not the thorax with mottled shell, nor the four arms, nor the triangular mantis head with long arcing antennae. But they were thin like him, with knobby joints and an even gait.

Nestors didn't usually hurry. But this time, with Doctor Injecta setting the pace, they all hit the departure platform double-time. Edwin noticed that Injecta stole a glance at the horizon, where the Null had encroached close to a high, shapeless hill. Edwin, who didn't get aboveground much, had not seen that hill before. With all the scaffolding and gaping pits, it looked like a construction site.

Whatever it was, Injecta sped up. At the track circle he spoke sharply to the slave gang leader, a pitboss. "Ready a train. Now, or I'll have you all pressed!"

The pitboss thumbed his remote. His slaves, untouchables of the hated caste, raced to pull the next two slimecars onto the outbound rails. Just down the rails, hated children scraped up track secretions with bone gleaners. The stuff made ointment for anklerot.

Elinor had recovered from the leechvine attack. "Doctor, you don't want to press my nephew. He's too small to make much Reality. Why not just let him go? I won't try to escape."

The Seeker-monster (hit with Reality, *still* a small-minded twerp) gurgled. "Ga-a-argh! Thith boy hath wuined me! Bress him!"

Injecta considered the boy. Edwin felt like an insect, with Injecta deciding whether to slap or just wave him away.

"How tedious." Injecta sighed. "This child cost me an entire vial, the same vial you stole. I should make him an example to the rabble... Here is our train. Inside."



- Two slimecars made sucking and splorching noises as
 - the hateds gang-handled them onto the track. Both pairs of
 - doors slid back. Injecta gestured Elinor and the nestors into
 - the front car.
 - The guard holding Edwin bent its head to pass through.
 - Its antenna dipped down, and in that moment Edwin
 - grabbed and pulled. In a convulsion of pain the nestor
- dropped him. He hit the platform running.

Elinor started to follow, but Injecta's spazzer pistol targeted the knife-thin bridge of her nose. "No," he said.

Two nestors grabbed Elinor. She didn't waste energy struggling, but she shouted to Edwin, "Find Willa and Skeet!"

Injecta's smile, a one-corner mouth twitch, made him look even weirder. "They're at the Ambit, awaiting the pressor. You'll see them shortly. Wouldn't you rather call the boy back?" Then, to the guards: "Inside."

Two nestors bughanded Elinor into the slimecar. The other Verminax and the Seeker-monster made a start after Edwin, then belatedly looked back to Injecta for orders.

So they didn't see a slim figure dart behind a distant pillar. Only Injecta saw it—a figure like nothing else in the Plasmodium.

A figure that was not red.

Injecta's eye widened. He called back the pursuers. "The boy makes no difference. We're short of time." To the gang pitboss he called, "Never mind hitching the rear car. We leave now!"

Injecta waved away the Seeker-of-Evil. "Too cramped for you. Ride on top." Grumbling from both mouths, the Seeker-monster settled onto the slimecar roof.

A fading *shbbluurp* marked the first slimecar's slide into the distance. Elinor looked back longingly from a side

3: Bloodshow: Slime Train

porthole. Injecta, too, stole a few backward glances. (What was that expression in his eye? Not fear, that's crazy. Then what?)

Watching from hiding, Edwin wondered what to do. Follow in the second car? He had no idea how to run it. Already the pitboss was whipping the gang to pull it offtrack.

Would the slaves help Edwin or capture him? He set his jaw and started toward them....

Suddenly a thin figure, a young woman, darted past him. He stared, breathless. He could not name the colors of her hair or clothing.

Just seeing her made Edwin's world brighter.

The woman jumped into the slime-car. Moments later it gave a sickening squelch and oozed free of the hated gang. Amid the pitboss's angry shouts, mingled with yelps from freshly slimed slaves, the car started to slide.

Without thought—wow, what a surprise—Edwin raced for the departing slime-car. Leaping, he barely caught the whorled shell by its extreme caboose-end, the apex.

The car hit the downhill grade and accelerated. Hanging by his hands, Edwin watched the shiny track slip away below. The shell felt too smooth, his grip too loose.

He thought the same thought he had often thought after acting without thought: *Ummm. Now what?*

Electrode housings at the shell base offered a foothold. Against a strengthening wind Edwin clambered up to the apex, then (ceasy...) over the shell whorl to the roof.

Safe for the moment, with hot gusts drying his sweat, he looked out at Bloodshow. He shuddered.

Edwin's real horror of this place transcended the Plasmodium. Granted, a grotesque tumorous Verminax-infested cone deserved a few shivers. So did its foothills,



- blanketed by overgrown ruddfruit fields so they looked like
- flayed carcasses. Even the red sun looked ugly, fixed at
- perpetual noon yet dim as a neon pipe. And, of course, the
- Null threatened oblivion at every moment. Granted.

- But what freaked Edwin was that Leppor *liked*
- Bloodshow. He had wielded Reality to create land, sky,
- Verminax, and slaves for his empire. To be able to create
- anything, anything at all, and to come up with this? Ugh.

Now, how to get inside? Should he call out to that strange woman? Even Edwin thought that risky.

Then again, he had to move fast. Ahead of the speeding slime-car lay one of Leppor's rattletrap construction projects, New Horizon Bridge. Slaves called it Nearly Horizontal Bridge, thought not around Leppor's spies. Built on fungus stalks stiffened with concretion cement, the teetering, treacherous trestles squittered as the car hurtled onto the bridge.

That hot wind sweeping up. That garbage stench. Edwin said, "Uh-oh."

He looked down. He regretted that. First the ground, then some lower ground, the ground a bit lower still, then *whoosh* the car was OUT THERE, rocketing into a gulf of empty air. There in Overbrink Chasm, in an abyss stretching down to vanishing point, the curbless bridge felt like a tightrope.

Cringing shellward, Edwin peered down at the gooey webwork that spanned Overbrink. A million antacid-pink strands splayed in all directions like the blast from a megaton glue-bomb.

No bomb, though. Those spiders, skating the strands, wove this web for their living.

Though he had never seen them, Edwin knew about trashspiders. The heated air in Heartsick's lowest reach blew

3: Bloodshow: Slime Train

through unknown deeps, carrying the Plasmodium's crumbs, trash, dead hotterbug husks, and assorted kipple. The wind blasted up from Overbrink Chasm. Trashspider colonies scavenged whatever hit their communal web, and wallclimbing slave families recycled (stole) the best trash. Deep in the canyon walls, wallclimbers said, lived four bloated spider queens, sisters who waged endless wars for trash and territory.



Leppor praised the spiders as “star workers, examples for us all,” presumably because they never rested, never bothered him, and were dumber than lumps of mud. Wallclimber slaves called them “those stupid spiders,” no cute slangy names because why waste the effort?

Edwin knew all that. What he didn't know: Every trashspider endured a swarming entourage of flickflies. The Overbrink wind caught a mere fraction, wafting them high into the crimson sky. Just imagine the flickflies' experience: *Wow, awesome trip, man! Yeah, and scope this kid we're blowing by now. Yum, I could use a quick bite...*

A chattering cloud of flies blew onto Edwin and chomped with enthusiasm. Parasites from Leppor's star workers eating a slave—confused symbolism, but the boy had no time to ponder it. Slapping, thrashing, he slipped from his precarious perch.

Edwin hung by one hand from the speeding train over Overbrink Chasm. The bugs maddened him. The wind pulled at him. A scream rose as his grip began to give—

Suddenly the parasites jumped away. Edwin could think again. He thought, *Finally, good news!*

The Seeker-of-Evil hit him like a load of bricks.

Slammed against a hard shell by a flying two-faced bug!
True hurt!

- However, (A) the vengeful but ungainly pitboss had hit
- the boy from below, unwittingly showing him higher up the
- shell, and (B) the collision did the transformed pitboss no
- good either, Reality having played up its thick skull but also
- (oops) its thin skin.

- The stunned Seeker-monster fell back, ichor droplets
- trailing from its wounds. Edwin scrambled for his perch,
- but only managed to stand awkwardly on the upper casing
- of a porthole. No handholds—he'd have to climb down
- and open the window—

Too late. The Seeker-of-Evil shook its head, swivel swivel, and buzzed up over the slime-car. With a righteous “Brebaaare to suvver by wevenge!” (or something like that), it started its dive-bomb run at the helpless boy.

Under Edwin's feet the porthole slid aside. He looked back and down to see a slender hand reach out. The woman's empty right hand clenched, with her thumb straight up and her index finger pointing at the Seeker-thing.

She just pointed. Like saying, “I'm watching you, buster.”

The Seeker-of-Evil turned human-face-out. It shrieked in—was it fear? Edwin watched, bewildered, as the bug-man fell away like a bee from a hive, arced over the chasm, and raced ahead toward Injecta's car.

The woman's hand withdrew and the porthole slid shut. Edwin wondered if she'd even seen him.

At that moment the car crossed onto solid ground. Here the track angled up, and the car slowed. If he fell, he'd hit safely on hillocks of red sweatgrass.

What to do? Approach the woman directly? Errr...

Too weird, Edwin thought. He squirmed down, stood on a maintenance runningboard at the slime-car's base, and

3: Bloodshow: Slime Train

peeked through the window.

The woman sat on a hard bench grown from the inner shell. Her un-redness fascinated Edwin. Where had she come from? Her fine short hair—never mind the not-red color, no one in Bloodshow could keep hair so clean. And how could that sleeveless doublet cling so gracefully to her thin frame? Ordinary hackcloth clung like a sack.

The shirt had an oddly high collar that completely covered her neck. Her neck—long, muscular, but what was that strange rectangular bulge?

On the woman's lap rested a not-red strongbox that looked like metal. The box's temperfoam insert had six large slots. Several were empty, but Edwin's jaw dropped to see the rest.

She was sorting three large, fist-sized vials of red Reality. How many lives, whether people or Verminax, had gone through the pressor to make that much?

The woman painstakingly opened one magnetic bottle and poured the precious liquid into some object in her hand. What object? Edwin couldn't tell, but he frowned. No one should waste Reality like that.

(Important: Only bottled Reality could hold back the Null and keep it from consuming Bloodshow.)

Whup! The train jerked to a halt. Edwin slipped and stumbled across a patch of dirt—well, “patch of dirt” to anybody but Leppor, who called it the Ambit Primary Transit Nexus.

Leppor had reclaimed this area not long ago, by spraying Reality to push back the Null boundary. Yet like all reclaimed land, the Ambit's mammoth boulders looked old, as alien as anywhere in Bloodshow. Edwin saw it the way a tiny hotterbug sees a heap of crushed cinderblock. Lift a mountain knee-high, then drop it.



■ The slime-car door slid back, and the woman dashed out
■ at top speed. She skidded when she saw Edwin, sized him
■ up, dismissed him, and kept running. She headed up a ramp
■ between steep rock walls.

■ Edwin spotted a glyph of parallel lines carved beside the
■ ramp. Every slave knew that symbol: the Reality pressor.

□ Spooked, Edwin chased after the woman.

The path ran narrow between high slanting walls, open to the sky. A bend, another, a turn—and the woman was waiting. Edwin almost collided with her.

She had large eyes, a thin face, and a round chin. Nothing was red. Despite himself, he stared.

She spoke sharply, like a gang pitboss, but her vibrant voice thrilled him. “Who are you?”

With a choice of many sensible answers, Edwin instead asked, “What colors are those?”

“Quit tagging me, kid.” With thumb held high, she pointed her index finger at his head. “Fly off, or you’ll sorry up fast.”

Edwin watched, baffled. “Is your finger supposed to scare me?”

“This is a digital weapon.”

“Oh, right. Look out, she’s got a finger! And she’s not afraid to use it!”

She fired. No projectile, no beam, just pa-KOWWW!

Edwin looked at the superheated crater in the wall beside him, then at the steam swirling from the woman’s fingertip. He threw up his arms. “Sorry! I’m scared now.”

Without a word or backward glance, the woman ran down a side path.

Edwin decided to head elsewhere. Seeing a ramp up, he followed the chatter of many Verminax voices.



4. Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

The Null consumed not only space—land and air and life—but also history and knowledge. When something disappeared into the Null, everyone forgot about it, forgot it had ever existed. Ultimate annihilation.

Sometimes people could imagine what they'd lost, because the Null left strange, creepy backtraces. Deep inside the Plasmodium lurked a few doleful outcast Verminax with inflatable leg bladders, obviously adapted for swimming. Yet Bloodshow had no lakes or rivers. So, the planners speculated, the krome had once had a lake. But the Null took it, and the memory of it, leaving only those pathetic obsolete swimmers.

Ominous Example 2: Many Verminax had oddly shaped scars like bites. Something bit those bugs, *something* with a mouth (beak?) shaped like a trowel, if trowels were lined with serrated teeth. Once the Verminax had lived in lethal fear of *something*—presumably. But then it vanished into the Null, so no one remembered it.

Planners feared that as they pushed back the Null, they'd meet *something* again.

So: the Ambit, Bloodshow's current boundary. Until recently, when Leppor started his big drive to press trundler-loads of Reality and drive back the Null, the Ambit hadn't existed. But now that it did—follow closely here—everyone remembered that it always had.

- When memory went one way and understanding
- another, the Null hung between.
- Entering the Ambit through a narrow rock passage,
- Edwin saw many slaves in chains and manacles—Leppor’s
- prisoners. They were facing away, looking down like a
- grandstand crowd.

□ Among the shackled gawkers he spotted Willa, a tall bony woman under a wild billow of hair. Beside her, fidgeting, stood Skeet, all wiry strength and kill-me-now attitude.

Seeing a crevice in one wall, Edwin slid in and wriggled forward. (Well, why *not* crawl between enormous unstable boulders? What could go wrong?) The channel curved around, and in moments he stuck out his head right behind their shoulder blades.

They heard him with time to spare, of course. To sneak up on a Bloodshow slave, you needed foam rubber sandals and maybe a white-noise generator. But Skeet and Willa kept cool.

“Bad news, kid, bad news,” Skeet whispered sidelong. “What I’m telling you is, we got a situation here, a situation. Get gone.”

Edwin couldn’t judge the danger from Skeet’s voice. Skeet was always edgy, a nervous human jackknife, but Edwin still liked him. “Where’s Aunt Elinor?”

Willa checked for eavesdroppers, then risked looking back. Edwin suppressed a shiver. One glance from Willa felt like a long tense stare from anyone normal.

“At the head of the line,” she hissed. “Injecta wanted to make her an early example, teach the crowd a lesson. If I could get at Injecta with his own scalpels, I’d make him a lesson. You couldn’t tear your eyes away, I’d teach my lesson so good.”

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

When she turned forward again, Edwin exhaled in relief. Willa was a loyal friend to him and Elinor, but still. Bloodshow had put Willa through so much, and she had done so many terrible things to survive, that she now knew herself better than anyone should. Slaves who didn't know her thought she was ready to snap. Willa had already snapped, and then snapped back. Now stretched tighter than a caffeinated rubber band, she would do whatever it took to protect friends and loved ones. *Whatever it took.*

Edwin craned his neck to look past Willa and Skeet. He saw:

The Ambit: An open arena paved with flat stone. Single boulders rising like sheer cliffs all around.

- Construction trestles, sawhorses, barrels, ramps. Smells of tar and rock dust. Everything looked new-built.
- Small, freshly opened monitor blooms, staticking pinkly.
- At one end, the Null, a swirling foggy nothing-wall. Way too close!
- At the opposite end, Leppor's Reality pressor.

Leppor's Reality pressor: An elevated platform. Behind it, inlaid in the sheer rock wall, a bank of six rough-cut shafts faced with transparent pyroglass.

- In each shaft, a ruby piston, shrouded in a magnetic field and poised to press the material wretch trapped under it.
- A stone housing at the base of each shaft, to hide the awful details.

Ultra•Violet

■ **Verminax:** All around the arena, swarms of spywasps and a few sluggish breedrones, clinging to the upper walls. Constant buzz-buzz. Down in front, dozens of little jumpy planners. Edwin had never seen so many planners together.

■ **Slave audience:** Arrayed in formation, maybe a thousand people, work gangs, separated by caste and mesmerized by monitors.

- A dozen fat pitbosses pushing them around with official high-status I'm-the-big-man remote controls.
- A few squads of larvandals, standing around, fidgeting, waiting for something to kill.

■ **Prisoners:** Lined up by the pressor, wretches waiting to be shoved under the Reality pistons. Ten or twelve chain-gangs of six slaves each. First slave in each gang anchored to the rock floor. Willa and Skeet in the last bunch, close by Edwin.

- Among the human prisoners, a few malformed or injured Verminax nestors. The Verminax routinely pressed their own weak.
- Right beside the pressor, Elinor, alone, chained but standing tall.

■ **The realizer!:** Plugged into a little slot in the Reality pressor, at the bottom of that whole huge bank of shafts. It looked insignificant. But all six shafts narrowed and converged into thin pipes, ready to pump their Reality through the realizer.

Edwin could hardly stop staring at the realizer. Trying to focus, he whispered to Skeet and Willa, “How can we rescue Aunt Elinor?”

Skeet and Willa exchanged a look. “Uh, not to make trivial objections, kid,” Skeet mumbled back, “but first off,

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

taking in the whole situation I mean—” He rattled his chains.

Willa looked up and around. “Spywasps above. Pull back, Edwin. What I’d give for a chainscythe...”

Edwin never found out what price a chainscythe would fetch, nor how Willa planned to use it against spywasps. At that moment Doctor Injecta stepped onto the pressor platform. The audience fell deathly quiet.

“Loyal citizens,” Injecta began, with the faintest smirk. “You have all worked hard on this second Plasmodium, bringing our glorious leader’s vision to fruition. Now these traitors will do their part. When you watch me collect their Reality—when you see me spray it on the Null boundary—remember these traitors. Remember how Leppor can turn their betrayal into still greater glory.”

Injecta turned his reflector gaze across the audience. “With the Reality we harvest today, our land’s boundaries will grow like our mushrooms: large and fast. Then, from his high Lookout Stalk, great Leppor will send forth the germs of new gardens, the eggs of new Verminax colonies for this new Plasmodium.”

Chattering cheers from the Verminax planners.

With the merest wave of a scalpel, Injecta brought silence. “Soon you may expect company. I shall visit other kro- other places—” (Edwin thought: *What other places?*) “—to recruit new citizens for our newly enlarged realm. New citizens like these.”

He gestured at the pressor, and six victims screamed inside the shafts. In the leftmost shaft, the victim leaped up. Edwin saw a maimed Verminax nestor, thin, broken-winged, yet otherwise ordinary. That wasn’t a new citizen. But in the other shafts....



■ Edwin glimpsed human hands and arms. He wasn't sure,
■ given their helpless thrashing, but they definitely looked
■ not-red, like that woman he'd seen. "Other places." Hmm.

■ Meanwhile, the Verminax nestor in the first shaft
■ scrambled desperately at the pyroglass. To everyone's
■ amazement, it actually clawed its way up the smooth glass
□ walls. (It helped to have a dozen arms.) It chattered,
"Balatta-kakka-rattanerak-k-k."

The piston filled the shaft—almost. With dull bug-minded persistence the injured Verminax squirmed, slithered, writhed up through a hand's-width gap. Screeching and shedding limbs as it went, it left smears of ichor down the glass.

The bug never spoke an intelligible word, yet the humans began to cheer as though hearing a campaign platform: Air! Freedom! Piston-Free Life! When Injecta frowned at this display, the pitbosses pushed buttons to quiet the slaves.

The wounded Verminax had now reached the shaft's top vent. It hooked its last remaining arm over the lip of the opening, about to struggle free. Gathering the nestor guards, Injecta prepared to dispose of this embarrassment.

But then....

An arc of shadow darkened the pressor. The wounded Verminax gabbled in terror, "*Eeee-yakka! Nattablattamak!*" and fell back into the shaft. Below, Injecta smiled, while his planner and everyone else—even Elinor—cowered.

The ground vibrated. The air throbbled with a bass feedback pulse.

Overhead, in a gulf of sky gone flat with haze, a giant sphere moved forth to block the sun. It floated there, a jewel, darkly crimson like bloodpools in a cave. And then it grew, it loomed, in slow unstoppable descent.

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

This was Leppor.

In its—in *his*—crystalline depths, silent flares of lightning traced myriad fractal flaws.

Leppor's shadow dwarfed the audience and shriveled their spirits. Reality supersaturated Leppor; even his shadow looked more vivid than they. A fog of potential surrounded him, where unsettling virtual things almost flashed into existence, then vanished.

Like all the slaves, Edwin had seen Leppor many times, and it always made him queasy. Leppor was a living warp in existence. Around him, strange thoughts lanced through onlookers' minds. Now Edwin thought, *This whole world is Leppor's stage, and we're just his spear carriers*. But Edwin had never seen or heard of a spear.

These weird insights gave shutterflash glimpses of Leppor's mysterious life before Bloodshow. They confused Edwin, but he still kept his own mind. How did he know? Because he was defiantly thinking, *I'm more than his spear carrier!*, even with no notion of why spear carriers lacked status.

Sunbursts in the jewel's heart. Leppor spoke.

“ALL IS GOING—”

(Yow! High volume! Edwin slapped his ears.)

“—most pleasingly well here. You are indeed showing your leader true and genuine respect.”

From deep within Leppor, a beam of bright light shone down. When it struck the crowd, many shrieked in panic. But it was a harmless spotlight—this time.

Leppor's light played over the crowd, picking out starved youths and wretched children. “I see new faces here, a new generation of new young workers. By showing me respect, young ones, you show your legacy, your blood—the great heritage of the older generation, who also have labored



- loyally to achieve my vision. With your service I will lead
- Bloodshow to new peaks of greatness.”
- With perfect literal-mindedness Leppor drove his point
- home by flashing his light to the jagged summit-in-progress
- of the new Plasmodium. The crowd spotted the applause
- cue and attempted a cheer.
- “Yet we must remain vigilant,” Leppor continued, “against the scheming traitors in our midst.” The light turned to Elinor.

The cheering died as if strangled.

As Leppor spoke, the monitors flashed anew. “These insidious ingrates say you live in a sterile, worthless, savage land. A prison. Do not think that.”

Pitbosses, laughing haw-haw-haw at this ludicrous notion, turned the slaves toward the monitor static. No, no, everybody, don’t think that.

“Now these betrayers suffer the penalty for their lies. But our punishment of these conniving conspirators is not petty vengeance. Do not think that.”

Static on monitors, static in eyes. Don’t think that.

“No, now we turn these disloyal betrayers to our own good purposes. Let the fate of these treacherous renegades remind you all, especially those new young people I have already praised, of the importance of loyalty. Of respect.”

Your basic Leppor speech: aimless blather, oil and acid in all directions. It never made much sense. But he controlled the monitors, so it didn’t have to.

Now the big moment arrived. Leppor moved down to the pressor, and Injecta nodded to a pitboss. The portly middleman flourished his remote, raising a clamor from—well—

Picture three dozen slaves toiling on harvest detail. They’re nervous wrecks, trying not to hit the ruddfruit

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

bushes' nerve cluster so the razor-root won't pierce their heart. They duck so many daily dangers, their lives resemble a prolonged assassination. And while these desperate sweat-damp workers strain to lift a fruit twice their weight, up waddles an obese headman. He drafts them out of the fields to, get this, sing,

Now came their debut as Leppor's newest brilliant idea, the badly misnamed Harmonious Effort Choir.

Poor yokels! Hold thirty unwilling fungus-farm slaves at spazzerpoint and shout, "Sing or die!" or "Crochet tablecloths or die!" or even "Mold, glaze, and fire elegant porcelain bud vases or die!" and you can't expect much spontaneous creative joy. Still, the shattering bud-vase crockery might sound better than Harmonious Effort's hopeless singalong gang-yammer.

But never mind the performance. What wretch invented those ghastly pentatonic adagios? Did anyone seriously think solemn major chords, creeping in single file like hearses, would inspire patriotism? What social-climbing pitboss's grotesquely untalented mind produced lyrics like, like, urrrgh!

*Pour forth your heart
Press from your lungs the air
To give full voice in praise
Of him we hold the first
In all our hearts
The hearts we now pour forth...*

...And another lap round the track. That was Bloodshow's culture, if you could call it that: perpetual praise of leaders. Disagreement, or any hint that things weren't fully tiptop, equalled sedition. Bloodshow lacked laws and prisons, so traitors always got the same punishment.

- They stood quiet, those “traitors,” awaiting the Reality
- pressor. Many were runaways like Elinor, others invalids,
- and some had just griped aloud where a pitboss could hear.
- Ordinary folks in that line might have cried, or begged
- forgiveness, or collapsed. But these slaves took their cues
- from Elinor. Like her, they stood poised, watching for
- openings, testing their chains.

No silent poise for the victims already in the pressor, though. Hidden behind the column housings, they shouted for help. They made offers. They said the strangest things:

“Hey, you, Leppor! Fifty thousand zurins from Central Govbank, guaranteed untraceable! Yours, jacks! Just call this off.”

“My tribe isn’t gonna like this, you big red bubble!”

“Excuse me. Excuse me? I’m pretty sure there’s been some kind of, uh, mistake?”

“Sir, please think of the loss to *science*....”

“Your Excellency! I require immediate release and safe transport under Section 9.9.2 of the Interkromal Diplomatic Conventions!”

“*Mhakkarannikitakk-k-k!*”

Leppor ignored them all. He set to work.

In the sheer face of the cliff above the pressor, there yawned a deep round depression. Into this hole Leppor floated, snug as a ball bearing in a giant drill.

The air that had hummed with power now began to sing with it, drowning the caterwaul of Harmonious Effort. The ruby pistons pressed, and the victims screamed as their Reality flowed free.

What did that feel like?

If a Verminax bit off your index finger, you’d miss the finger, but you’d still be *you*. Fingers, limbs, belly, heart—they’re important, but they never touch that declarative

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

sense-dot self behind your eyes. Now imagine crushing the idea of your index finger, so you forget you ever had it. Think of the Reality pressor shattering your template idea-body, deleting your mind's design spec.

You're still present, still feeling that piston grrrrrrind you down slowly. But all the you-hooks to materiality are snapping like string. Goodbye, hands (SNAP)—did I have hands? How many? Bye, legs (SNAP), if that's what they were called. The bones of my skull SNAP I feel them go SNAP leaving only...?

The crowd, and Edwin, watched in morbid fascination. As the victims' screams died away, bright liquid flowed from the base of each column's housing. The realizer automatically generated pyroglass vials, complete with magnetic bottles, to catch and contain the Reality.

That liquid drew every gaze in the arena. You couldn't *not* look at it. Edwin watched red liquid drain from the Verminax worker's shaft. Then—hey!

The Reality trickling from the other five shafts wasn't red!

Like the woman he'd seen, the five new colors dazzled Edwin. He knew no words to (*orange*) to describe the sight of (*yellow*), of these spectacular visions (*green*) and the effect (*blue indigo*) they—wait, hold it.

Once again, strobing glimpses of Leppor's past were flashing through Edwin's mind. Now, somehow, he could name the colors. But where did they come from? How did these strange victims produce those Reality colors?

Ruby pistons hit bottom. Six colors trickled through the realizer and filled six Reality vials. The pressor and choir halted together.

At the base of one shaft, in deafening silence, something drifted through the housing.



■ It moved like a ghost, transparent to matter. It floated
■ like a soap bubble, shimmering and bobbling. Within the
■ bubble, twin indigo eye-dots looked around in consterna-
■ tion.

■ Injecta frowned. “Drat. We need to recharge the
■ containment field.”

□ Flipping end-for-end in the air, the bubble creature
looked down at itself. In loud despair it cried:

“Oh no, I’m a nub!”

The pressor didn’t kill its victims. A dead body would not give up its Reality, for nothing is more real than death. But draining a live victim’s Reality left the unreal residue of its mind. That ghostly mental pattern survived as a nub.

But did the nub like it? Not this indigo bubble floating over the audience, nor the others—orange, green, yellow, blue—drifting out after it. “Waaahh!”—“I’m sure this will set back my research.”—“Can I at least go home now, please?”—“Now I’m definitely gonna complain, you jerks!”

Last came the Verminax nub, a small blob of bright red. Edwin noticed the thing was wobbling and stretching. With rubbery balloon squeaks the bobbing blob was bloating back to its original form.

Doctor Injecta noticed too. “Master Leppor!” he called. “Catch the native victim before it reabsorbs its Reality!”

Bright light flashed in Leppor’s interior. A static charge built, elevating hair on nearby heads and forearms. As one, the whole audience thought, *Ub-oh*.

A beam of fire lanced from Leppor toward the red nub, missing it by an antenna’s width. The blast struck the stone floor of the arena, melting the rock. The air itself burned with an ozone stench.

This was Leppor’s Scorching Agony Beam. Even this, the weakest of Leppor’s three internal weapons, brought

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

terror. Verminax flew and slaves ran.

Everyone feared the Scorching Agony. Not just for its immeasurable power, but also because Leppor was, in fact, a poor shot. His energies defied tight control. Taking aim at the side of the Plasmodium, Leppor might hit an innocent bystander in a ruddfruit field over the next hill. Nobody joked about this, because anybody could be that bystander.

Amid the chaos, Edwin saw Elinor and the other slaves in the pressor line getting ready to bolt. But! There stood Injecta, calmly holding them at spazzerpoint.

Leppor let fly with Scorching Agony over and over, shattering construction trestles and brick hods. The Verminax nub yelped with every bob and dodge. With every second it was sprouting legs, vestigial wings, and looking more like its old self. “Quickly, Master!” Injecta called.

Their rush baffled Edwin. Why weren’t the other nubs reforming too? Nobody seemed concerned about them reabsorbing Reality—only the Verminax.

And Injecta had called it “native.” Weren’t the others native? Was there somewhere else to be from?

Did the not-red woman come from there?

As Leppor’s beams flew wild, the crowd panicked, even while the pitbosses tried to steer their gazes to the static monitors. (A dozen headman hearts quivered with a single thought: “*What is this? They do not obey my mighty fungoplastic scepter!*”)

Scorching Agony finally hit home. Dispersing the Verminax nub like a flamethrower through gelatin, the blast cratered just beyond. The explosion took out some slow-moving breedrones and, oops, the Seeker-of-Evil.

Injecta, Verminax, and slaves looked at the black smear that had been a headman, a bug-thing, a petty Plasmodium power. Oh, how the Seeker had preened and postured! How



- he'd gloried in his middling-high status! Now how would his
- survivors assess his legacy?
- Injecta shrugged for them all. "If we may continue."
- He passed his spazzer pistol to a nestor guard. "The
- distillation should soon be—ah." A pressor panel went *ding!*
- The first batch of six Reality vials was ready.
- Injecta solemnly took down the first one, the red vial. He pulled the realizer from its docking slot and plugged it into the vial.

With a few button-pushes and some dial-turns, Injecta got the device to open a side panel and extrude a metal spray nozzle. He went to the Null boundary and tried an experimental squirt.

A fine aerosol of Reality flew out, hit the Null, and dissolved it like fog under a hairdryer. The dissipating Null revealed a bite-shaped chunk of land. Edwin saw a tall thin mushroom stalk, or just the base actually, at the edge of the new land. The Null still hung beyond it, roiling.

As the pitbosses pushed their buttons, the slaves dutifully gasped an impressed gasp. The sight stirred Edwin deeply, but he also felt a pang of disappointment. He hadn't known that driving back the Null required—

(Important!)

—driving back the Null required the realizer. You couldn't just throw a vial of Reality. You needed to channel the stuff, shape it. *Nothing could shape Reality except the realizer.*

Edwin's disappointment turned to frustration. Elinor had gone to such trouble to steal that vial, yet the runaways could never have used it. She was about to be pressed, all for a big zero.

Injecta stepped deeper into the reclaimed area, spraying on all sides. The Null didn't pull back, for it never appeared to move. It just... wasn't at that spot. (In the observers'

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

memories it suddenly never had been, but they had gotten wise to sudden memories.)

The mushroom stalk emerged by hand-widths, taller, its crown still lost in seething nothingness. Injecta peered at the shiny crimson stem. “I believe we may be recovering a new species,” he said pleasantly, spraying higher, looking for the crown.

A glowing mist of Reality reached the top of the stalk, revealing—

A knee.

Very few sights fazed Doctor Injecta, but this counted. Seeing the flanged insectile joint, the chitinous femur reaching into the Null high over his head, the Doctor stared dropmouthed, while his planner made helpless fumfuh sounds.

Then the leg twitched.

Injecta dropped the realizer and ran. All the Verminax with sharp reflexes turned and flew, or hopped, or skittered.

The prisoners, almost as fast, began screaming. Skeet and Willa jerked at their chains. “Get us loose! Let us go!”

Last on the uptake, the pitbosses frantically prodded their remotes. Hit by a hundred wild signals, the monitors blew. The slaves, those who weren’t chained, turned and ran after Doctor Injecta.

The huge leg moved. Out of the Null, its feet hammering the stone, *thok-thok-thok*, ran the most fearsome bug Edwin had ever seen—the *something* that left those evil bite scars in various Verminax.

At once he recognized it: a Nefarious Biter. He had always known that, except when the Null stole the knowledge.

In a krome that defined ugliness, the Nefarious Biter presented a good shot at total unrivaled Hideous. The



Ultra•Violet

- misshapen assassin bug had a bloated maroon thorax,
- armored underneath. Topside, weird pulsing growths
- adhered to its shell. The Biter's toothy garden-trowel jaws,
- actually mandibles, clacked at the end of a long sharp snout.
- Double ranks of compound eyes (small above, big below)
- rotated independently like radar dishes.

□ But on the bright side: For once, people were actually glad to see the spywasps.

An entire patrol swarm, flying in perfect Inverted Pyramid Formation B-2, plunged at the Biter. These Verminax spywasps—living hypodermics, long as your arm—could barrel-roll through a corkscrew backwards. They zeroed in on eyestalks, on leg joints, on gaps in the armor plates, and bored straight in.

And promptly got stuck. As everybody had always known for the last ten seconds, the Nefarious Biter had muscles inside its muscles. Get through its carapace, and it could just cinch up its guts and trap you tight. Maybe the spywasps hadn't quite internalized their recently revived Biter memories, or maybe they were just dim. Spywasps thought at lightspeed, but had definite learning-curve issues.

Hanging by their broken needlenoses, the spywasps swung like tassels while the monster rampaged among the larvandals. Everyone had always known, for going on 12 seconds now, that the Biter kills by crushing. Guards died screaming under a harsh descending thorax.

Leppor, overhead, must have taken offense at this flouting of his supreme authority. He fired Scorching Agony, but couldn't hit the fast-moving Biter. The bug, ignoring him, crushed another few slaves. On the bright side, this snapped the anchor chains, and the surviving prisoners hobbled for cover. Some panicked, but Willa and Skeet kept their heads.

4: **Bloodshow:** Ambit Reality Pressor

“This way!” Skeet gestured toward the ramp with chained arms. Willa turned to the wall and said, “Edwin, pull back—Edwin? Where is he?”

Now Leppor was clearly piqued. Pale pink lightning flickered in his depths, as the air’s rumble rose a notch. A few people in the arena had heard that modulation and lived. They shouted, “Pulverizer!”

The prisoners hit the dirt. When Leppor prepared to let fly with the Pulverizer, #2 of his three internal weapons, nobody stayed upright.

Well, nobody sensible.

With the Biter kicking up broken chains, sending them spinning like chopper blades, Edwin dodged through the bug’s legs on a duck-and-run path toward the Null—and the realizer. Far away by the Reality pressor, Elinor looked up in time to see him. “No!” she shouted, and then a warning—not “Watch out for the Biter legs,” a point already uppermost in Edwin’s mind, but about the bigger danger: “Pulverizer!”

Leppor fired. A lightless line of curdling energy struck the Biter’s third portside leg. In half a second the Pulverizer shattered apart the molecular bonds among the leg’s octillions of component atoms. Edwin dived for cover as the leg exploded into gas.

The Nefarious Biter shrieked, staggered, and turned a dozen eyes to scan the stub of its vaporized leg. It sniffed the air, unwittingly retrieving a few thousand lost atoms. Then, as Leppor warmed up another charge of his second-best weapon, the killer bug stumbled up the Ambit ramp and fled for the ruddfruit hills.

Leppor didn’t follow. He was a vain blowhard, but he always kept his priorities straight. “BRING ME THE REALIZER!”



- But no one stood near the edge of the Null, where
- Doctor Injecta had dropped the device—no one but
- Edwin. As he caught it up, the box flowed to fit his hand as
- if custom-shaped. For an odd moment Edwin felt like his
- hand had been shaped for the box.

- The realizer had six tiny windows along one edge,
- showing liquid Reality in six colors. Fresh-pressed Reality had flowed through the realizer into the pressor's magnetic bottles, and these six thimblefuls were the residue.

Edwin stared worshipfully. He didn't notice the five surviving nubs until they floated up to him. The nubs were wavering little soap-bubble spheres with limpid dots for eyes. The largest, colored indigo, said in a deep officious voice, "Quick, boy, turn us back!"

Edwin checked the many small knobs, dials, and switches. "Uh—how?"

Too late! Leppor's planners and breedrones were homing in. Not that these Verminax presented much threat—planners could only talk you to death, and breedrones (dome-shaped beetles with sharp senses and stupid singlemindedness) barely stayed awake outside the Plasmodium's egg chambers. But they could swarm over one harvester boy and bring him down by sheer weight.

With this writhing sheet of Verminax scuttling toward him, Edwin surprised himself. He randomly turned dials on the realizer, and a panel opened on one side. With a *whirr* the box extruded a raygun nozzle.

Most Bloodshow slaves would have dropped the thing and run, but for Edwin this was an invitation. He pushed a button.

From the nozzle shot a brilliant beam of crimson light, *brrrr-zapp!* It hit the leading line of Verminax, stodgy breedrones the planners had prudently shoved to the front.

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

Breedrones grew about waist-high to Edwin, but when the beam hit, they imploded, just shrank down to hotterbug size so fast the air rushed in after them, *thup*. They milled around, bewildered, on an area about as big as Edwin's footprint.

The planners—50 times smarter than all other Verminax together – stopped dead, instantly saw the unpleasant implication of “footprint size,” and promptly scattered.

Edwin looked down at the realizer in drop-jawed wonder. From deep in his heart the boy said, “Wow.”

“No gawking!” the indigo nub cried. “Get the rest!”

Edwin thumbed the button, and again the beam leapt forth. He played it over the fleeing planners, and they all shrank: *thupthupthup*, popcorn in reverse. For the first time in his life, Edwin was enjoying himself. “Yeah! Take that! You too, crawly! Weeeooo!”

“Crazy kidlet,” the blue nub said—a young woman's voice. “Up, up, Leppor's on your apex!”

The air grew crisp, more real, as the giant jewel loomed overhead. Edwin's new exhilaration rapidly gave way to the old familiar uh-now-what? Bringing up the realizer, he fired again.

It was impossible to miss. The beam pierced the globe's veneer, flickered in its dark depths, and vanished.

The nubs wailed. “Useless!” — “Come on, run!” — “I wanna go home!”

But Edwin held his ground. Was he figuring tactics like Elinor? Thinking, “Leppor won't try Scorching Agony, let alone Pulverize me, for fear of hitting the realizer”? No. He wasn't thinking at all. Now that he had the realizer, Edwin just felt he'd rather die than turn it loose. He fired again, longer.



- The beam struck, sank, vanished.... Lightning in many
- colors flashed within Leppor, and the hum in the air faded
- like an engine losing power. The great jewel halted, hovered.
- Edwin shouted, “Get away, or I’ll shoot again!”

- A long assessing moment. Then Leppor shrank—no—
 - he rocketed straight up. Overhead, space itself ripped open,
 - a bright warp into a rainbow tunnel beyond. Leppor
- plunged into the warp and vanished. No exit line—that wasn’t his style.

The warp closed without a trace.

The smallest nub, an orange bubble with a child’s thin voice, said, “Did you do that? Did you kill Leppor?”

Edwin stared upward. “No. He just ... disappeared.”

The indigo nub sniffed, “He left this krome. An excellent idea.”

“What do you m—?” Edwin began, but then he looked to the Reality pressor. “Aunt Elinor! Watch out!”

She’d used the Biter’s fallen leg to pry open her manacles. But just as the last chain fell free and she started toward Edwin, a crimson hypodermic with a monofilament needle drove deep into the rock floor before her. Doctor Injecta took a smooth step forward, scalpel shining bright. He said, politely, “Surrender.”

A Bungee Village oddsmaker would size up the battle in two seconds. Seeing the raw welts on Elinor’s wrists and ankles, he’d say, “Seasoned oldster, scrappy up close, great improv, munged stems.” Yet Injecta, though he’d lost the realizer, still had his belt pouch, the armamentarium that gave slaves nightmares. “Champ spooker, prefers range, major gear, maximal strange.”

Verdict? “Even; no bet.”

Elinor flung the Biter leg at Injecta’s own legs. He sidestepped easily, smirked—and got a faceful of chain. His

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

scalpel went flying. That feint had saved Elinor's life many times in the fungus caves. She followed it now as before, with a lunging kick to the side of the enemy's knee.

But Doctor Injecta had tricks Elinor had never heard of. The fungus caves taught ways to handle larvandals and Nefarious Biters, but Injecta worked on another plane entirely. Elinor fought opponents; Injecta ran an empire.

The doctor's long lab coat hid many secrets. Elinor's kick hit true, right on his knee—and on his double-hardened duranium-alloy exosheath. This powered armor could stand a grenade blast, never mind a kick. Crying out, Elinor fell back, favoring her injured foot.

Motion inside the lab coat drew her gaze. Her kick had torn it, revealing the shiny crimson armature protecting Injecta's limb. As she watched, tiny mechanical bugs swarmed the edges of the tear. Crawling in precise formation, each bug deposited drops of saliva that hardened to plasticene. In moments the tear healed.

Elinor stared. Every Plasmodium slave knew bugs—but not machine bugs. She looked up, to see in Injecta's eye-reflector her own dumb shock.

“Congratulations,” Injecta said. “Only a few slaves have ever seen these little AntRoids. The other witnesses didn't live long either.”

He swiped at Elinor with a bonesaw wand, a long rod tipped with a small whirring sawblade. In younger days she would have snatched the wand from Injecta's hand in mid-swing. Now the old woman jerked back, barely in time; the blade drew a line of blood across her cheek. Yet Elinor could still think fast. She ducked in past his arm, flipped open the catch of his armamentarium pouch, reached in, and grabbed.



■ Injecta rammed his exosheathed elbow under Elinor's
■ chin. She fell, rolled, and rose to a crouch, triumphantly
■ brandishing her stolen treasures. She scowled to see only a
■ handful of pink plastic ampules. She started to throw
■ them—

■ From above, Injecta's planner fell on her arm. Its weirdly
□ human mouth-parts latched onto her knuckles and bit. Big
deal—what could a planner do, gum her to death? No, but
as Elinor shook off the Verminax, she reflexively clenched
her fist. The ampules burst.

A thick mist clouded the air. Elinor coughed and turned
away, too late. Part sedative, part crowd control, the
somnia gas hit her, dazed her, dropped her. She
collapsed against the pressor wall, under the Reality bottles.

Injecta stood over her. From his pouch he drew another
syringe.

“No!” Edwin cried. He raised the realizer and pulled the
trigger. Shrink Injecta, turn him into a flickfly and smoosh
him—

Injecta heard him and ducked. Edwin's shrinking ray
missed Injecta and hit the Reality pressor's magnetic bottles
behind.

But you can't shrink pure Reality; you can't do anything
to Reality. Edwin shrank only the pressor and the magnetic
bottles that held the Reality. A disaster.

Pyroglass shattered as Reality in six colors burst from
the squeezed bottles. Shrapnel wrecked the pressor. A liquid
rainbow drenched both Elinor and Doctor Injecta. The
planner scurried back, yammering and shielding its nasal
patches from an assault of strange new smells.

The nubs wailed. Edwin cringed, remembering what one
tiny vial of redness had done to the Seeker-of-Evil. “Aunt
Elinor!” he yelled, running to her.

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

The largest nub called after him, “Never mind her, what about Injecta?”

Edwin spared only a glance at the doctor, who lay unconscious and already swelling. But Elinor crawled to her feet and leaned hard against the wall. Glowing rivulets coursed like centipedes over her body, never mixing, then sank in and vanished.

She looked the same. But her eyes, the eyes that had stared coolly at pitbosses, Verminax, and Doctor Injecta—her eyes now showed the terror of pure unshielded Reality. She trembled.

Edwin tried not to cry. “What is it? Can I help?”

At his words, Elinor jerked upright. Seeing the boy as if for the first time, she pulled him close and held tight. “Oh my dear—it’s too—I can’t—” She drew a deep breath. “This is it.”

“This is what?”

She pushed him gently back. Her gaze showed calm sadness. Tendrils of color raced across her eyes, faster and faster, and then blazed white. Now, finally, Elinor began to change.

She still looked old. Age was her truth, and nothing could change that. But she stood tall, and Leppor’s barcode tattoo under her eye vanished utterly. Her hair grew long, full, like a mane. She stared into the sky, as if seeing very far, and then back down at Edwin.

“Oh, my sweet child—” she began, in a resonant voice, firm yet tender. “I never had it in me to call you that before, to say I love you. Sweet child, I don’t know what will become of you. You would have died six times a day without us. Me, and your folks, and their friends—we protected you from yourself. But they’re gone, and now I’m going. And that thing—”



■ Her lolling gaze dropped to the realizer. “That thing has got you, and no one can protect you.”

■ “Why? Is it dangerous?”

■ “The realizer is what you make of it. The trouble is, you become what it makes of you. Remember: If you improve the world, the world will improve you. I love you dearly, Edwin. I hope I’ll see you at Liminus.”

□ “Liminus?”

The light in her eyes dimmed, and her mouth gaped. From it flew a flickfly—no—a white moth, the only spot of white in all Bloodshow. It fluttered briefly around Edwin, then flew up and vanished in the reach of the sky.

Edwin watched it go until tears blurred his view. He’d never felt so alone.

Yet not for long; the nubs floated over. “I suggest,” said the large indigo bubble in a tone of command, “that you dispose of Doctor Injecta while he’s incapacitated.”

The green nub said gently, “Please show the boy some compassion.”

The blue one spoke more sharply. “Yeah, stuffy, the kidlet just lost his aunt!”

Beady indigo eyes enlarged to show affront. “Yes, yes, I’m sorry and all that. Do you suppose Injecta will show the same respect?”

Still sniffing, Edwin looked at the platform. Elinor’s body stood deserted. Beyond, Injecta’s swelling body had turned into a cocoon of flesh, engulfing his garments and equipment. Along one of its many folds Edwin could still see a line of lab-coat buttons. From inside the cocoon came a low papery rustling.

Edwin fired his shrinking ray at the cocoon. Nothing happened.

4: Bloodshow: Ambit Reality Pressor

“He’s saturated with six kroma-distillates,” the green nub said. “Changing him would take more Reality than you have in that realizer, I’m sorry to say.”

“But all the Reality is gone!” The little orange bubble’s voice quavered. “He and that woman soaked it all up, so we can’t change back, right? I don’t wanna stay like this!”

“Better this than dead,” said the yellow nub meekly.

“Speak for yourself,” the blue nub answered. “I feel like I’m not even here.”

The yellow sphere bobbed up and down—a nod.

“That’s what I mean. I always wanted to feel like that.”

Edwin wiped his eyes. The squabbling nubs had one thing right: There was no time for grief. Turning away from Elinor’s body, he said, “I’m sorry about losing your Reality. If we could find more, somewhere—”

The indigo nub shook side to side. “This Reality pressor was the only source in this krome, until you absentmindedly destroyed it.”

A flash of movement on the Ambit ramp, and this time Edwin could name the colors: a sleeveless coverall of blue, yellow-blond hair, hazel eyes. “That woman!” Edwin cried. “She has some Reality, I saw it!” He ran toward her, with the bewildered nubs bobbing after.

The not-red woman saw him and pointed her index finger, as she had before. Edwin leapt for cover, then peered out in time to see her point straight up. Her finger was spinning in place. No—some kind of blades were rotating around it, faster and faster, tracing a blue circle with her finger in its center. That was all Edwin could make of a Kromintel ROTO4-6000 HoverBlade Personal Digital Transport Unit. Even that was pretty good for a kid who’d just learned the word “blue.”



- The young woman rose slowly into the air. Edwin saw
- that with her finger pointing up, she couldn't fire it at him.
- Her other hand held the case of Reality he'd seen before.
- He thought: *Great!* Just as her feet left the ground, he ran
- and tackled her, arriving just above her ankles.
- "You again." She tried to shake free. "Hands away!"
- "Give us that Reality! We need it to hold back the Null!"
- "Drop off, kid!"

Clinging tighter than a breedrone, Edwin found he was, in fact, flying off. He was still low enough to drop without harm, but then he'd lose the case of Reality. *Umm—now what?*

He shut his eyes and held on. After a while she stopped trying to kick him off, and then he knew they must be high enough for the fall to kill him. Overbrink Chasm—he stopped thinking about Overbrink Chasm.

Carefully looking straight up, he opened his eyes. The woman hung by her finger under a blue disk, looking like an orator dramatically making a point. From the altitude of her shin, Edwin once again noticed her high collar and the strange bulge it covered.

She smiled the thinnest of smiles. "Well, now you're stuck. Happy?"

A stern voice behind him—the indigo nub. "Don't drop now, boy! We'd lose the realizer!"

Edwin looked back to see all five nubs floating after him. Below yawned the bottomless gulf of Overbrink Chasm. He shut his eyes tight. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

What had Elinor said? "*You would have died six times a day without us.*" Edwin had already made that quota, and he had a scary feeling this day was just getting started.



5: *Bloodshow: Plasmodium Summit*

Above the apex of the Plasmodium, a rough peak surrounded by tanglewire, she finally shook him loose. Edwin fell into a pile of fungal goo at the base of Leppor's Lookout Stalk, a simple red spike shaped like a crowbar. Thousands of these smelly pits pocked the summit like sores.

The woman loomed overhead, looking annoyed. Edwin looked around for help, but he was alone. The nubs trailed behind, far below.

The woman extended her free hand. Would she fire another finger-weapon? Edwin hunkered down in the goo.

But she only checked a readout on her wrist. "You all right?" she asked.

Edwin rose, filthy but unhurt. "Give back that Reality! It's not yours!"

"Sorry, no. Orders." Floating there with her index finger up, she looked righteous. Her blond hair shone against the crimson sky. "How'd that pressor get torched? I didn't see it. Not good."

"I, uhh—" No point in confessing that he himself had blown up the pressor. "Why 'not good'? What will happen?"

"You can't produce more Reality, that's what. The Null will move in and zero out Bloodshow." She whirled in the air, scoping out the landscape. "I've heard worse ideas. What a sump."

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- Edwin knew she had a point. Steaming hills, piles of
- ruddfruit brush, swarming formations of spywasps—clean
- up the place, and all you'd have is a dressed-up sump.
- Brainwashed mobs had chased him and Elinor—Elinor
- died, because of him—really, why not wipe the whole
- show?

□ But he remembered Skeet and Willa. They never, ever gave up. And what did Elinor say? *If you improve the world....*

“No!” Edwin cried. “Think of all the people who live here. We have to fix the pressor!”

Her tone, for once, was kind. “Don’t worry, we’ll rescue your people. But the pressor’s not my call. I’ll try to requisition an emergency replacement from senior staff. Meanwhile, this is the center of this krome, so it’ll go last. Stay in place. I expect everyone will retreat here. If we can’t slot in a new pressor soon, we’ll evacuate from the summit.”

“Senior staff”? Who are you, anyway? Where did you come from?”

Her finger chirped and spoke. “*Meep meep*. Charge low.”

As she looked up at the rotor, her high collar slipped, exposing a shiny corner of the strange box at her throat. “Great. You’ve run down my batteries. Gotta hit home.” With her unrotored hand she flipped open her gold belt buckle and thumbed a button.

The air went cold and still. Above the Lookout Stalk, the sky rippled. (Here’s what it looked like: In a clear pool, float just beneath the surface. When something drops from overhead, look up. Circles expanding.)

A ring of sky turned liquid. It flowed down in gentle arcs, trailing streams of color. Edwin watched, hypnotized by the first true beauty he’d ever seen.

5: Bloodshow: Plasmodium Summit

A rainbow spectrum enveloped the woman, bright crimson at boot level, orange around her sheathe-like leggings, yellow at thin hips. Her clinging doublet shone emerald, while bands of blue and indigo light flickered across her shoulder epaulets. In a halo of violet, her short hair blew back as if in a high wind.

She looked down and waved, a quick sharp motion of confidence. She said, “Now you stay here!” Then she seemed to recede in the distance, smaller and smaller. The violet light reached down, all the while deepening in color. Now Edwin could hardly see the woman, and the deep purple light grew dim.

Fading, fading—there! In a finger-snap instant he glimpsed another color. Beautiful, hypnotic, it brought forth no name in his mind.

He had no time to wonder, for it flashed and vanished with a clap of thunder. The woman was gone. The air, like his heart, stood still.

As the spots faded from his eyes, Edwin whispered aloud, “That wasn’t just ‘up into the sky.’ That was *somewhere else*.” He felt a weird mix of suspicion and fear and longing.

The nubs floated up, whining. “Missed her!”—“We’re stuck in this flea-trap krome!”—“I wanna go home!”

Edwin was still thinking about the woman. That box under her collar—was she some kind of machine? He shook his head. “Huh?”

“Close your mouth, boy, a bug will fly in.”—“Did she say she’d come back?”—“What about the Reality pressor?”—“Does Leppor know you’re here?”

Edwin waved his hands. “One at a time!” But the mention of Leppor brought him wide awake. If Leppor returned after his mysterious vanishing act, here Edwin



■ would be, lounging at the base of the ruler's own observation post.

■ Edwin looked around. "Listen."

■ The nubs went silent. Their dot eyes darted warily. The green one understood first: "It's gone quiet. I don't hear buzzing."

□ Here atop the Plasmodium, a city-sized pile of millions of Verminax, there should have been a constant thrum of nestors. They would beat their wings at the neon-cruled entryways to drive hot air from the giant incubation chambers. But there was silence. Out in the ruddfruit fields, no planners screeched their commands, and no spywasps flew patrol. The trundlers wandered loose. Incredibly, they seemed even stupider than usual. Not even a flickfly buzzed the summit.

He's really gone, Edwin thought. But where?

In the hot humid air, he suddenly shivered. The Null boundary was closing in. He knew it, though memory never told that the Null had moved. And it was all his fault!

Could Leppor stop it? Edwin had no idea. Leppor commanded Bloodshow's Reality, but perhaps even he would be helpless without a pressor.

And now, with Leppor gone, the Null would certainly consume the Ambit very soon. Edwin would forget that it had ever existed; he would probably forget the word "Ambit"; if his Aunt Elinor's body still stood there, he would forget her too. And after that....

Edwin fought terror, and a guilt that burned like acid. "Once the Ambit goes, we'll forget about the broken pressor. Then the Null will take everything, and we'll all vanish. Where can we get another pressor, quick?"

"I think we have them in Zur," the blue nub said eagerly. "That's my home. Get me back there, and we'll talk."

5: Bloodshow: Plasmodium Summit

“Hem-hem-hem!” The big indigo nub floated forward and tried to clear his nonexistent throat. “Pressors are common in Indic, where I come from. If you have some means of interkromal travel—”

“Inter-what?”

“Travel from this krome up to the higher kromes. Great Reality, boy, haven’t people in this one-color trash heap even heard of other kromes?”

“Uh...”

The green nub spoke kindly. “The kromes are parallel realities, other dimensions—umm, places—like this one,” she said. “They lie atop one another, touching but invisible to each other, like pages stacked in a book.”

“Uh...”

She continued hastily, “—Or, if you don’t have books, then like, like—”

“Like things that are stacked up,” the blue interrupted. “We come from the other kromes. Not that we’re mentioning this as an inducement to *take us back*.”

The yellow nub said, “Although if you’ll do that, I could try to guide you around my krome. Not that I’m real great at it or anything.”

The little orange one sounded like a child. “I don’t wanna be a bubble. Fix me!”

“There, there, dear,” said the green. “We’ll change back if we can get home.”

“Somewhere else,” Edwin whispered. His strangest ideas were true. Other universes! He remembered Elinor’s suspicions: “*We came from somewhere else.*”

Leppor and the mysterious woman must have gone to some other krome, or kromes. Different places, probably better—he knew they couldn’t get much worse. His fear gave way to excitement and an urge to explore. “I could try

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■ to take you home and get a pressor. But that woman said to stay here, and she'd rescue us."

■ The indigo harrumphed. "I recommend against trusting the woman."

■ "Why not?"

■ "At this time I will not explain my reasons. I only say that I doubt she will return. In any case, you can take us upward under your own power."

□ "I can?" Edwin could have asked more about the indigo's strange certainty. On the other hand, the nub was saying exactly what he wanted to hear. "Let's go!"

The indigo bob-nodded approval. "To save this place, you need the pressor to make more Reality, and the realizer to shape it. You're halfway there already—you've got the realizer, assuming Leppor doesn't hunt you down and take it back."

"No one's taking it back!" Edwin surprised himself with his desire to keep the realizer. But he pushed on: "I should find that woman. She sounded like she knew where to get a pressor." At least, that sounded right. Maybe.

He had to try. If he didn't, Bloodshow and everyone in it might vanish into the Null. Because of his own impulsive act.

"All right," he said. "How do we get to these other kromes?"

"Climb."



6: **Bloodshow:** *Leppor's Lookout Stalk*

During his long dominion over Bloodshow, Leppor had cultivated his Lookout Stalk like a metal mushroom. He used a unique variety of concretion fungus that fed on blood. From the blood the fungus precipitated layers of iron atoms, along with reagents that converted the iron to red stainless steel. Even for an omnipotent ruler who practically bathed in Reality, that fungus came in handy.

Funded by steel kingpin CMYK Industries, Zur Panlectica researcher Lukor Cerullan studied the Lookout concretion fungus. Cerullan's report envisioned vast CMYK fungal bioreactor-refineries combined with citizen blood donation centers. Fourfold increases in steel output! Production costs after amortization practically zero! Board members read this report, or anyway the executive summary, and promptly started pricing condos in Lazuli Luxury Estates.

How sad, then, when Cerullan published an update. Exposure to Lookout fungus, it seemed, had unusual and deleterious effects. Of course a researcher's own health was insignificant beside the greater cause of science, but he could not in good conscience recommend exploiting a fungus that gradually coats arteries, veins, and even capillaries with high-grade steel.

Cerullan dictated this update to his wife through rapidly stiffening lips, then died. His body is polished daily by reverent researchers in the Panlectica Hall of Heroic Inquiry. Winning a liability lawsuit that bankrupted CMYK,

- Cerullan's widow moved to Lazuli Luxury Estates, which
 - she now owns.
 - Edwin knew nothing about Lookout fungus. Lucky for
 - him, Leppor had removed the fungus once the Lookout
 - Stalk grew high enough. But the height of the Lookout
 - Stalk—that Edwin knew about. Moment by moment he
 - understood more profoundly the Lookout Stalk's height,
- and specifically the outcome of falling from it.

"From the ground," he gasped, "it didn't seem—this high—" He looked down. Mistake.

"Are we there yet?" asked the orange nub.

"Just a bit further, dear," said the green. She floated near the metal surface. "The construction of this pillar is quite intriguing."

"Intriguing? Try 'alarming.'" said the blue. "What's with these ornaments?"

Rusted cages hung from chains all the way up the slick stalk. Most cages were human-sized, either adult or kid, and many held onetime occupants—full skeletons in odd shapes, or just piles of weird bones. For Edwin the cages made ghoulish handholds.

Higher up, the cages held the shells of dead Verminax. In the cage nearest the top, a bug still clung to life, twitching its twisted legs and many mandibles. Edwin had never seen this bizarre Verminax caste, and finally he understood why.

"These Verminax and these people—Leppor used Reality on them." He shivered.

"Experiments," said the blue nub. "He's quite the scientist, I guess."

The green nub sounded stern. "In my krome, Viridia, I am a scientist myself. This isn't science, it's torture. Please, set this wretched creature free."

6: Bloodshow: Leppor's Lookout Stalk

Edwin fumbled with the cage latch. Suddenly the cage shook as the bug, maddened and twisted by Reality, lurched against the gate and drove it open. While Edwin scrambled to hold on, the Verminax staggered and fell out. The nubs moved to catch it, but the bug fell through their ghostly bodies and plummeted to its death.

The nubs and the boy watched a moment in silence.

“This place is awful!” the yellow nub cried. “Every moment is like being punished, and you live here all the time! What does that do to you?”

Edwin glared at her. “I’ll tell you. I just killed my aunt, the last person left in the world who cared about me. It was an accident, and I feel really bad. But I can’t stop to think about it. I have to keep fighting. That’s what this place does to you.” He went back to climbing.

The yellow nub collapsed into silence. The others exchanged dot-eyed glances.

The blue floated up after Edwin. “Um, kid, do you want to rest a while?”

“No. Leppor could show up.” Here, near the top of the tall stalk, Edwin felt more exposed than ever. His heart was pounding, and not just with the climb.

Below him, the green nub examined the stalk wall. “Why, here’s a little door.”

Edwin wasn’t listening. His realizer shrink-gun had almost run out of red Reality. The realizer still held droplets of other Reality colors, though. Could they power the shrinking ray? Or, come to think of it, could they turn the realizer into something else?

The green nub said, “I’ll have a look inside.” She drifted like a ghost through the closed door.

Edwin didn’t notice. Remembering Leppor’s command of Reality, he climbed faster. Reality could do anything,



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- become anything. Leppor could use it to turn invisible! He
- could be waiting here at the top, right now!

- Below, a wail from inside the door: “*Noooooooo!*”
- “Yahhh!” Edwin lost his grip, hung flailing, slid (still
- flailing), and thudded onto the mutant Verminax cage,
- upside-down and squarely in front of the closed door.

- Edwin righted himself (yet more flailing) and scrambled to point the realizer. The nubs covered behind him.

Ten hammering heartbeats. No one said anything.

Then, from behind the door, a thin high voice: “I surrender!”

Out through the closed door drifted a nub. Not the green one—a new nub, smaller than the rest. Edwin had never seen its color, but he thought it the prettiest: violet. The green nub floated close behind.

Edwin kept the realizer trained on the new nub, for all the good it would do against an immaterial bubble. “Who are you?”

“A friend!” The nub’s voice squeaked with fear. “I mean, not an enemy. Prisoner.”

The blue nub whispered, “Don’t trust him.” The yellow agreed. The orange repeated his earlier wish to go home.

But the indigo’s eyedots widened. “He’s violet. Talk to him!”

His urgency (or maybe Edwin’s weapon) seemed to frighten the little nub, who darted back inside the tower.

The green nub goggled. “Is this how residents of this krome rescue a helpless prisoner?” She floated after the violet and gently coaxed it out. “Now, dear, tell us who you are and why you’re here.”

The little bubble simpered like a baby. To Edwin, that meant this nub couldn’t be from Bloodshow, where even kids had to be steel-tough just to make it from morning to

6: Bloodshow: Leppor's Lookout Stalk

dinner. Still, seeing this creature's obvious terror, Edwin's heart softened. He'd heard about slaves that Leppor took for study. When the "study" was done and the victims returned to the fungus caves, they could hardly speak a sentence.

"Awful, awful," the violet finally said. "A long time. I think it was a long time. Where is he?"

The green said, "We think he's gone."

"Oh no!" The violet shook himself back and forth. "No, no, he's never gone. I know him, he—" He broke off.

"How do you know him?" the indigo asked, but the green shushed him. She said, "Did Leppor press you for your Reality?"

"Yes. Three—I think four—several times."

"Several!" All the nubs, freshly pressed themselves, looked horrified.

"He pressed me—put it back, made me different—pressed me again—I came back different each time—" The violet turned away.

The blue spoke from her nonexistent heart. "That's *disgusting!*"

As one, the nubs floated over to offer comfort. They murmured soothingly; some cried.

Edwin felt fresh loathing for Leppor, and a new resolve to stop him. Lowering his weapon, Edwin told the violet, "I'm sorry for you. We'll bring you with us to the other kromes. Do you live there?"

This seemed to rally the little nub. In a stronger voice he said, "I come from Jacaran, the Mother Krome of all the rest."

The other nubs shot back in all directions, crying "Jacaran!"



■ Edwin looked around, raised his realizer, and lowered it.

■ He said, “Tell me.”

■ The biggest recovered first. “No one from Jacaran has travelled the lower kromes for a generation!” said the indigo. “What brought you to this odious backwater?”

■ “I had a, a mission,” the little nub began. “Important.”

□ He lapsed into nervous silence. The others asked more questions, but he started to weep.

Edwin shrugged and stepped between the nubs. “Time for that later. We have to get out of here.”

They climbed the last sweep to the top. Here the Lookout Stalk flattened, bent, and curved far into empty air. On this hook-like perch the great sphere himself had rested, like a dark jewel held in a clasp.

On a flat place at the cusp, the boy crouched and looked around. He’d never seen the world from so high. A thin cold breeze brought smells of meat and filth. Bloodshow’s red hills looked like they’d plopped from the sky in steaming piles, to be infested by fungus and bugs.

Edwin hated this place, as all the slaves hated it. The idea of an exit was the happiest news of his life. Never mind his usual headlong rush—after the most hard-nosed slowpoke calculation he would still try any foolhardy stunt to get out.

Yet he wondered where he was going. Apparently these other kromes weren’t as bad. In a way, this worried him. When he’d told the nubs about life here, they’d all gone silent. Edwin feared that this place had deformed him—that this nightmare upbringing would affect his actions forever. Wherever he went, he might be taking Bloodshow with him.

Creepy thought! But he was still determined to get out. “All right, now what?”

6: Bloodshow: Leppor's Lookout Stalk

The indigo said, "For the transit to the next krome, we must depart from the highest fixed point in this one. We're not quite there." He looked out to the far end of the hook, a fraction higher than the cusp they stood on.

"Great." Edwin took a deep breath and crawled onto the narrow perch. The nubs followed in size order: little orange, the yellow slightly bigger, then green, blue, and the largest, the indigo. The tiny violet nub ended the line like a period in a sentence.

Edwin clutched the stalk like a drowning bug. Never had he felt so exposed. If Leppor returned...

As he crept out, he seemed to hear odd sound-clips, short drifts of spoken words and Verminax chittering drifting from below. Like a receiver scanning frequencies, the Spore Tower eavesdropped on all of Bloodshow; and Leppor, resting on this curved antenna, would have spied the zeitgeist. But Edwin could hear little more than gabble, word salad, like the static from a monitor bloom. He ignored it and kept crawling.

At last he reached the far point. A flat spot offered barely enough room to stand.

Edwin looked at the long drop, looked away, looked around as if trapped. "So," he said. "Uh... you know, we haven't introduced ourselves! I'm Edwin."

"I'm Wonder!" said the orange nub.

"Tulip," the yellow said.

"My name is Tristess," said the green politely.

"Ivy, that's me," said the blue.

"For now, you may simply call me Quintal," said the indigo.

The violet spoke shyly. "I am Sixtus Duodecimus Hufandus Vergilius Drusus Magnificus. But I would be pleased if you call me Huff."



- “I think that’s a good idea, Huff.” Edwin took another
 - deep breath. “Okay, we’re here. How do we get to these
 - other kromes?”
 - “That is simple,” said Quintal. “From the highest point
 - in the krome, you step off.”
 - Edwin’s eyes bulged. “You’re joking.”
 - “No. At the edge you must extend one foot as far and as high as you can reach, then step forward. And you must keep your eyes tightly closed.”
- “I couldn’t do it any other way. But that’s not how that woman did it, or Leppor!”
- “I’ve heard there are at least a dozen ways to travel up the kromes,” said Quintal. “I myself know only four. Do you have a restricted-issue Teknikon KTD, a Kromal Transilience Device?”
- Edwin held up his realizer. “Is this one?”
- “No. What about a Heynes-Pettrey continuum collapsar portal?”
- “Uh, no.”
- “And I’ll guess you’re not carrying a 30-gigaton warp bomb, so that leaves the edge. Remember to stretch as far as you can.”
- “For a clean fall,” Edwin muttered. With eyes tight shut, he lifted one foot.
- “Wait,” Quintal said, and Edwin instantly stopped. “I neglected to mention—”
- “— the Traveller’s Goal,” Ivy finished. “I was gonna ask if you jackos have that in other kromes.”
- “Actually, I intended to mention that Edwin should hold his realizer high, so that we can ride up with him. As nubs, we cannot hold on to anything except raw Reality. But as you mention, there is the minor ceremony of the Goal.”

6: Bloodshow: Leppor's Lookout Stalk

Tristess explained to Edwin, “The Traveller’s Goal is a ritual statement we make before a major journey.”

“Great! Let’s go down and do it.” Edwin turned back.

“No, it’s just very brief. We speak aloud our reason for travel. I’ll start: I travel to get home.”

“Me too!” said Wonder, and the others echoed.

“Okay.” Edwin said aloud, “I travel to catch that woman and bring back a Reality pressor.” But he was actually thinking, “To get out of here, and beat up Leppor, and when I get back I’ll save everyone, and they won’t hate me for blasting the pressor, and they’ll have a feast.”

For one moment he also thought of Elinor. For her, too, he had to succeed. To atone.

Finally he ran out of excuses. With the realizer held high and the nubs clinging to it like a bunch of balloons, Edwin stretched his foot into empty air as high and far as he could.

He leaned off the precipice—he started to fall—

He found solid ground!

In shock Edwin almost opened his eyes. But he knew he would see nothing, and would fall to his death. He stretched further—further—

He tripped, fell an arm’s length to a hard surface, and rolled over twice.





7: **Bloodshow: *Null Boundary***

A few surviving planners and breedrones scuttled in and out of the broken Reality pressor. The Verminax looked for hideouts from the Nefarious Biter's random stampede through the Ambit.

The planners cast many backward glances at the Injecta egg. The Null, right beside it, would engulf the egg at any moment. Of course, hadn't the Null had always hung motionless there beside the egg? No no no, even a planner knew the Null's treacherous hopscotch through memory. It was just harmless fog—had never moved—so you scuttled up beside it. The next moment it moved, eradicated you, and the survivors said, “Yep” (or possibly “*yeketerrinappayep*”), “that's where the Null has always been.”

Within the egg, a sharp *rrrrrip*. The Verminax scurried for cover as the Biter thudded into the arena. Its antenna swerved, seeking the sound.

Another rip. The egg split. The Nefarious Biter lunged for it, mandibles wide.

From the egg popped a triangular head. It swiveled to face the attacking bug. Beneath its twin-lobed forehead, its reflector eye beamed bright. A ray of red energy flashed past the Biter's misshapen head.

The Biter halted. Its many eyes peered down as the fleshy eggshell peeled away—as the head rose on a long body—as all the legs unfolded. And now the Biter's many eyes were peering up.

7: Bloodshow: Null Boundary

The Biter looked over its opponent, top to bottom, leg to leg to leg. The Biter turned and ran, *thud-thud-thud* as fast as it could, straight out of the Ambit and the surrounding region.

One planner scuttled out. It squealed a datapulse screech of glad recognition and leaped onto Doctor Injecta's sharp shoulder. Doctor Injecta looked much different, but more absolutely like himself than he ever had. Any deviation from this form would somehow make him less Injectal.

"I must say, that hurt," Injecta said. "Not that there's anything wrong with that." He saw the shattered pressor; then, swiveling his head on its stalk, he gauged the Null's position. "Not much time, I think."

A flash of rainbow light at the Lookout Stalk summit caught one of his eyes. It widened in surprise. "That's the boy. Somehow he's gone up to the next krome. And he has the realizer."

Moving surely, as though he'd always had that many legs, he stalked away from the Null. He seemed lost in thought. He paused, then murmured under his breath, "Second Order."

The planner said, "*Whaaaat?*"

But Injecta did not explain. Raising his third wrist, he extruded a strange gadget, then bent back a finger to touch its button.

Around him, a spray of rainbow light. With another hand he gestured to the planners and breedrones. "We're going after him."





On the way up!

Edwin's frantic race up the Rainbow Kromes continues in the complete novel *Ultra-Violet*, now in progress on my home page, www.allenvarney.com. With six nagging nubs in tow and Doctor Injecta in close pursuit, Edwin climbs through six colorful dimensions:

- **Alizar:** Ever-shifting desert guarded by MegaDynaTek Sandblaster Mark I tanks and the occasional monster lizard.
- **Mount Gild:** Mountainous tower of crackling power, home of teleporting wirefighters and the eager bookies of Bungee Village.
- **Viridia:** The Garden Krome, where superscience cities spread across the branches of titanic Five-Mile Tree—until Leppor and Injecta arrive.
- **Zur:** The Krome of Industry, where System soldiers in many-armed Hydra fighting suits compel perfect obedience to Gladmistress Frothhite; the young Uprisers disagree.
- **Indic:** Why does the nub Quintal seem to know so much? Who is the not-red woman working for? Are they really true, those whacked-out conspiracy theories about the Teknikon and its shadowy Procurement Chief?
- **Jacaran:** Cut off for generations, the mysterious Mother Krome waits—and so does Leppor.

Edwin's heading to Liminus. Come on along!

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