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**Opening Extract from...**

# Surface Detail

Written by Iain M. Banks

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SURFACE DETAIL



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## One

“**T**his one might be trouble.”

She heard one of them say this, only ten or so metres away in the darkness. Even over her fear, the sheer naked terror of being hunted, she felt a shiver of excitement, of something like triumph, when she realised they were talking about her. Yes, she thought, she would be trouble, she already was trouble. And they were worried too; the hunters experienced their own fears during the chase. Well, at least one of them did. The man who'd spoken was Jasken; Veppers' principal bodyguard and chief of security. Jasken. Of course; who else?

“You think so . . . do you?” said a second man. That was Veppers himself. It felt as though something curdled inside her when she heard his deep, perfectly modulated voice, right now attenuated to something just above a whisper. “But then . . . they're all trouble.” He sounded out of breath. “Can't you see . . . *anything*

with those?” He must be talking about Jasken’s Enhancing Oculenses; a fabulously expensive piece of hardware like heavy-duty sunglasses. They turned night to day, made heat visible and could see radio waves, allegedly. Jasken tended to wear them all the time, which she had always thought was just showing off, or betrayed some deep insecurity. Wonderful though they might be, they had yet to deliver her into Veppers’ exquisitely manicured hands.

She was standing, flattened, against a flat scenery. In the gloom, a moment before she had spread herself against the enormous backdrop, she had been able to make out that it was just painted canvas with great sweeps of dark and light paint, but she had been too close to it to see what it actually portrayed. She angled her head out a little and risked a quick look down and to the left, to where the two men were, standing on a gantry cantilevered out from the side of the fly tower’s north wall. She glimpsed a pair of shadowy figures, one holding something that might have been a rifle. She couldn’t be sure. Unlike Jasken, she had only her own eyes to see with.

She brought her head back in again, quickly but smoothly, scared that she might be seen, and tried to breathe deeply, evenly, silently. She twisted her neck this way and that, clenched and unclenched her fists, flexed her already aching legs. She was standing on a narrow wooden ledge at the bottom of the flat. It was slightly narrower than her shoes; she had to keep her feet splayed, toes pointing outwards in opposite directions, to stop herself from falling. Beneath, unseen in the darkness, the wide rear stage of the opera house was twenty metres further down. If she fell, there were probably other cross-gantries or scenery towers in the way for her to hit on the way down.

Above her, unseen in the gloom, was the rest of the fly tower and the gigantic carousel that sat over the rear of the opera house’s stage and stored all the multifarious sets its elaborate productions required. She started to edge very slowly along the ledge, away from where the two men stood on the wall gantry. Her left heel still hurt where she’d dug out a tracer device, days earlier.

“Sulbazghi?” she heard Veppers say, voice low. He and Jasken

had been talking quietly to each other; now they were probably using a radio or something similar. She didn't hear any answer from Dr. Sulbazghi; probably Jasken was wearing an earpiece. Maybe Veppers too, though he rarely carried a phone or any other comms gear.

Veppers, Jasken and Dr. S. She wondered how many were chasing her as well as these three. Veppers had guards to command, a whole retinue of servants, aides, helpers and other employees who might be pressed into service to help in a pursuit like this. The opera house's own security would help too, if called on; the place belonged to Veppers, after all. And no doubt Veppers' good friend, the city Chief of Police would lend any forces requested of him, in the highly unlikely event Veppers couldn't muster enough of his own. She kept on sliding her way along the ledge.

"On the north side wall," she heard Veppers say after a few moments. "Gazing up at varied bucolic backdrops and scenic scenes. No sign of our little illustrated girl." He sighed. Theatrically, she thought, which was at least appropriate. "Lededje?" he called out suddenly.

She was startled to hear her own name; she trembled and felt the painted flat at her back wobble. Her left hand flew to one of the two knives she'd stolen, the double sheath looped onto the belt of the workman's trousers she was wearing. She started to tip forward, felt herself about to fall; she brought her hand back, steadied herself again.

"Lededje?" His voice, her name, echoed inside the great dark depths of the fly carousel. She shuffled further along the narrow ledge. Was it starting to bend? She thought she felt it flexing beneath her feet.

"*Lededje?*" Veppers called again. "Come on now, this is becoming boring. I have a terribly important reception to attend in a couple of hours and you know how long it takes to get me properly dressed and ready. You'll have Astil fretting. You wouldn't want that now, would you?"

She indulged a sneer. She didn't give a damn what Astil, Veppers' pompous butler, thought or felt.

“You’ve had your few days of freedom but that’s over now, accept it,” Veppers’ deep voice said, echoing. “Come out like a good girl and I promise you won’t be hurt. Not much anyway. A slap, perhaps. A minor addition to your bodymark, just possibly. Small; a detail, obviously. And exquisitely done, of course. I’d have it no other way.” She thought she could hear him smiling as he spoke. “But no more. I swear. Seriously, dear child. Come out now while I can still persuade myself this is merely charming high spirits and attractive rebelliousness rather than gross treachery and outright insult.”

“Fuck you,” Lededje said, very, very quietly. She took another couple of shuffling, sliding steps along the thin wooden band at the foot of the flat. She heard what might have been a creak beneath her. She swallowed and kept on going.

“Lededje, come on!” Veppers’ voice boomed out. “I’m trying terribly hard to be reasonable here! I *am* being reasonable, aren’t I, Jasken?” She heard Jasken mutter something, then Veppers’ voice pealed out again: “Yes, indeed. There you are; even Jasken thinks I’m being reasonable, and he’s been making so many excuses for you he’s practically on your side. What more can you ask for? So, now it’s your turn. This is your last chance. Show yourself, young lady. I’m becoming impatient. This is no longer funny. Do you hear me?”

*Oh, very clearly,* she thought. How he liked the sound of his own voice. Joiler Veppers had never been one to fight shy of letting the world know exactly what he thought about anything, and, thanks to his wealth, influence and extensive media interests, the world – indeed the system, the entire Enablement – had never really had much choice but to listen.

“I am serious, Lededje. This is not a game. This stops now, by your choice if you’ve any sense, or I make it stop. And trust me, scribble-child, you do not want me to make it stop.”

Another sliding step, another creak from beneath her feet. Well, at least his voice might cover any noise she might be making.

“Five beats, Lededje,” he called. “Then we do it the hard way.” Her feet slid slowly along the thin strip of wood. “All right,” Veppers said. She could hear the anger in his voice, and despite

her hate, her utter contempt for him, something about that tone still had the effect of sending a chill of fear through her. Suddenly there was a noise like a slap, and for an instant she thought he'd struck Jasken across the face, then realised it was just a handclap. "One!" he shouted. A pause, then another clap. "Two!"

Her right hand, tightly gloved, was extended as far as she could reach, feeling for the thin strip of wood that formed the edge of the scenery flat. Beyond that should lie the wall, and ladders, steps, gantries; even just ropes – anything to let her make her escape. Another, even louder clap, echoing in the dark, lost spaces of the carousel fly tower. "Three!"

She tried to remember the size of the opera stage. She had been here a handful of times with Veppers and the rest of his extended entourage, brought along as a trophy, a walking medal denoting his commercial victories; she ought to be able to remember. All she could recall was being sourly impressed by the scale of everything: the brightness, depth and working complexity of the scenery; the physical effects produced by trapdoors, hidden wires, smoke machines and fireworks; the sheer amount of noise the hidden orchestra and the strutting, overdressed singers and their embedded microphones could create.

It had been like watching a very convincing super-size holo-screen, but one comically limited to just this particular width and depth and height of set, and incapable of the sudden cuts and instant changes of scene and scale possible in a screen. There were hidden cameras focused on the principal players, and side screens at the edge of the stage showing them in 3D close-up, but it was still – perhaps just because of the obviously prodigious amount of effort, time and money spent on it all – a bit pathetic really. It was as though being fabulously rich and powerful meant not being able to enjoy a film – or at least not being able to admit to enjoying one – but still you had to try to re-create films on stage. She hadn't seen the point. Veppers had loved it. "Four!"

Only afterwards – mingling, paraded, socialising, exhibited – had she realised it was really just an excuse and the opera itself a side-show; the true spectacle of the evening was always played out

inside the sumptuous foyer, upon the glittering staircases, within the curved sweep of dazzlingly lit, high-ceilinged corridors, beneath the towering chandeliers in the palatial anterooms, around fabulously laden tables in resplendently decorated saloons, in the absurdly grand rest rooms and in the boxes, front rows and elected seats of the auditorium rather than on the stage itself. The super-rich and ultra-powerful regarded themselves as the true stars, and their entrances and exits, gossip, approaches, advances, suggestions, proposals and prompts within the public spaces of this massive building constituted the proper business of the event.

“Enough of this melodrama, lady!” Veppers shouted.

If it was just the three of them – Veppers, Jasken and Sulbazghi – and if it stayed just the three of them, she might have a chance. She had embarrassed Veppers and he wouldn’t want any more people to know about that than absolutely had to. Jasken and Dr. S didn’t count; they could be relied upon, they would never talk. Others might, others would. If outsiders had to be involved they would surely know she had disobeyed him and bested him even temporarily. He would feel the shame of that, magnified by his grotesque vanity. It was that overweening self-regard, that inability to suffer even the thought of shame, that might let her get away. “Five!”

She paused, felt herself swallow as the final clap resounded in the darkness around her.

“So! That’s what you want?” Veppers shouted. Again, she could hear the anger in his voice. “You had your chance, Lededje. Now we—”

“Sir!” she shouted, not too loudly, still looking away from him, in the direction she was shuffling.

“What?”

“Was that her?”

“Led?” Jasken shouted.

“Sir!” she yelled, keeping her voice lower than a full shout but trying to make it sound as though she was putting all her effort into it. “I’m here! I’m done with this. My apologies, sir. I’ll accept whatever punishment you choose.”



“Indeed you will,” she heard Veppers mutter. Then he raised his voice, “Where is ‘here’?” he called. “Where are you?”

She raised her head, projecting her voice into the great dark spaces above, where vast sets like stacked cards loomed. “In the tower, sir. Near the top, I think.”

“She’s up there?” Jasken said, sounding incredulous.

“Can you see her?”

“No, sir.”

“Can you show yourself, little Lededje?” Veppers shouted. “Let us see where you are! Have you a light?”

“Um, ah, wait a moment, sir,” she said in her half-shout, angling her head upwards again.

She shuffled a little faster along the ledge now. She had an image in her head of the size of the stage, the sets and flats that came down to produce backgrounds for the action. They were vast, enormously wide. She probably wasn’t halfway across yet. “I have . . .” she began, then let her voice fade away. This might buy her a little extra time, might keep Veppers from going crazy.

“The general manager is with Dr. Sulbazghi now, sir,” she heard Jasken say.

“Is he now?” Veppers sounded exasperated.

“The general manager is upset, sir. Apparently he wishes to know what is going on in his opera house.”

“It’s *my* fucking opera house!” Veppers said, loudly. “Oh, all right. Tell him we’re looking for a stray. And have Sulbazghi turn on the lights; we might as well, now.” There was a pause, then he said, testily, “Yes, of *course* all the lights!”

“Shit!” Lededje breathed. She tried to move even faster, felt the wooden ledge beneath her feet bounce.

“Lededje,” Veppers shouted, “can you hear me?” She didn’t reply. “Lededje, stay where you are; don’t risk moving. We’re going to turn on the lights.”

The lights came on. There were fewer than she’d expected and it became dimly lit around her rather than dazzlingly bright. Of course; most of the lights would be directed at the stage itself, not up into the scenery inside the fly tower carousel. Still, there was

enough light to gain a better impression of her surroundings. She could see the greys, blues, blacks and whites of the painted flat she was pressed against – though she still had no idea what the enormous painting represented – and could see the dozens of massive hanging backgrounds – some three-dimensional, metres thick, sculpted to resemble port scenes, town squares, peasant villages, mountain crags, forest canopies – hanging above her. They bowed out as they ascended, held inside the barrel depths of the carousel like vast pages in some colossal illustrated book. She was about halfway along the flat, almost directly above the middle of the stage. Fifteen metres or more still to go. It was too far. She would never make it. She could see down, too. The brightly shining stage was over twenty metres below. She tore her gaze away. The creaking sound beneath her desperately shuffling feet had taken on a rhythm now. What could she do? What other way out was there? She thought of the knives.

“I still can’t—” Veppers said.

“Sir! That bit of scenery; it’s moving. Look.”

“Shit shit shit!” she breathed, trying to move still faster.

“Lededje, are you—”

She heard steps, then, “Sir! She’s there! I can see her!”

“Bugging fuck,” she had time to say, then heard the creaking noise beneath her turn into a splitting, splintering sound, and felt herself sinking, being lowered, gently at first. She brought her hands in, unsheathed both knives. Then there was a noise like a gunshot; the wooden ledge beneath her gave way and she started to fall.

She heard Jasken shout something.

She twisted, turned, stabbed both knives into the plasticised canvas of the flat, holding on grimly to each handle as she pulled herself in as close as she could, her gloved fists at her shoulders, hearing the canvas tear and watching it split in front of her eyes, the twin blades slicing quickly down to the foot of the enormous painting where the jagged remains of the wooden ledge sagged and fell.

The knives were going to cut right through the bottom of the canvas! She was sure she’d seen something like this done in a film

and it had all looked a lot easier. Hissing, she twisted both knives, turning each blade from vertical to horizontal. She stopped falling and hung there, bouncing gently on the torn, straining canvas. Her legs swung in space beneath her. Shit, this wasn't going to work. Her arms were getting sore and starting to shake already.

"What's she—?" she heard Veppers say, then, "Oh my God! She's—"

"Have them rotate the carousel, sir," Jasken said quickly. "Once it's in the right position they can lower her to the stage."

"Of course! Sulbazghi!"

She could hardly hear what they were saying, she was breathing so hard and her blood was pounding in her ears. She glanced to one side. The now broken length of wood she'd been sidling along had been attached to the bottom of the scenery flat by big staples sunk into the double-folded hem of the giant painting; to her right, just under a body-length away from her, some of these still held. She started swinging herself from side to side, her breath whooshing and hissing out of her as she forced her arms to stay locked in position while her legs and lower body pendulumed. She thought she heard the two men shouting at her but she couldn't be sure. She swung wildly to and fro, moving the whole rippling extent of the scenery flat. Nearly there . . .

She hooked her right leg onto the ledge, found purchase and detached one knife, hooking and stabbing at the canvas above her, keeping the blade horizontal. Flat, angled down behind the canvas, the knife held; she hauled herself up until she was about midway between prone and upright. She brought the other knife out and swung it up too, still higher.

"Now what's she—?"

"Lededje!" Jasken yelled. "Stop! You'll kill yourself!"

She was upright, hanging by the two embedded knives. She swung up and out, stuck a blade in still further up. Her arm muscles felt as though they were on fire, but she was pulling herself upwards. She'd had no idea that she possessed such strength. Her pursuers controlled the machinery, of course; they could rotate the whole vast apparatus and could lower her as they wished, but

she'd resist them to the last. Veppers had no idea. He was the one who still thought this was a game; she knew it was to the death.

Then there was a deep humming sound, and with a low, moaning noise, the whole scenery flat, and all the others around, above and below it, started to move. Upwards; hauling the scenery flat up into the dim heights of the enormous carousel. Upwards! She wanted to laugh, but had no breath for it. She was feeling for the knife holes beneath with her feet now, finding them, using them as footholds, taking some of the strain off her protesting arm muscles.

"That's the wrong fucking way!" Veppers screamed. She heard Jasken shouting something too. "That's the wrong fucking way!" Veppers bellowed again. "Make it stop. Other way! Other way! Sulbazghi! What are you playing at? *Sulbazghi!*"

The gigantic carousel continued to turn, rotating the sets and flats like a vast spit-roast. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that, as the whole assemblage rotated, lifting the backdrop that she was climbing away from above the stage itself, it was getting closer to the next flat, all of the stacked sets pressing in towards each other as they came to the horizontal limit of the space. The set closing in on her back looked plain and smooth and lacking in features; just another painted scene with a few thin supporting cross-beams and as hard to climb as this one. Above, she could see more complicated, three-dimensional sets, some boasting lights that must have come on when they'd turned on all the rest. She put her face against the canvas, stared through the knife hole she'd just made.

A very convincing olde-worlde rooftop scene greeted her; oddly angled gutters, quaintly tiny dormer windows, steep-pitched slate roofs, wonky chimney pots – some with real pretend smoke just starting to come out of them – and a net, a tracery of tiny blue lights strung right across the width of the set and for twenty metres or more above the chimneys and ridge tiles, impersonating stars. The whole thing was sliding gradually closer, edging slowly downwards as the carousel continued to revolve.

She ignored the still-shouting men, slit a hole in the canvas big

enough for her to slip through and once on the far side launched herself at the rooftop set. The canvas flat she'd thrown herself from moved away as she kicked back at it; she started to fall, heard herself scream, then half her body from the waist up thudded into the fake slates. Winded, she found both her knives had gone and she was holding on with both hands to a set of flimsy-feeling railings in front of a tall set of windows. Something clattered far beneath her; the knives, she guessed.

The two men below were still shouting; it sounded like half at her and half at Dr. Sulbazghi. She wasn't listening to either of them. Veppers and Jasken couldn't see her now; part of the rooftop set was hiding her from them. She hauled herself up on the phoney wrought-iron railings, the plastic bending in her grip and threatening to break. She found more handholds on hoax gutters, dummy window ledges and counterfeit chimneys.

She was at the top, trying to make her way along the ridge through the cold fake smoke issuing from the chimney pots, when the carousel came grinding to a stop, making the whole set judder. She lost her footing, slipped and fell down the far side, screaming.

The tracery of tiny lights, the pretend star field of a clear night sky, caught her, entangling her in their chilly blue embrace, the net bowing and stretching but not breaking, the hard wires conjoining the lights seeming to wrap themselves around her and tighten as she struggled.

"Now!" she heard Veppers shout.

There was a single crack of rifle fire. An instant later she felt a blindingly sharp pain on her right hip, and then, moments after that, the little fake blue stars and the drifting smoke that wasn't real smoke and the whole insane edifice all just drifted away from her.

Manhandled. She was being manhandled.

Now she was being laid down on a hard surface.

Her limbs flopped around her, feeling somehow disconnected. If she'd had to guess, she'd have hazarded that she had been gently placed here rather than just thrown down; that was a good sign.

She hoped it was, anyway. Her head felt okay; not nearly as sore as the last occasion.

She wondered how much time had passed. They had probably taken her back to the town house, just a few city segments away from the opera house. She might even be back in Espersium; runaways were usually returned to the great estate to await Veppers' pleasure. Sometimes you had to wait days or even weeks to discover the full extent of your punishment. One of Jasken's tranquilliser rounds usually knocked you out for a good few hours; there would have been time to get her anywhere on the planet, or off it.

It struck her, as she lay there hearing muffled words spoken around her, that she was thinking a lot more clearly than she'd have expected. She found she could control her eyes, and opened them as narrowly as she could, peering through the lashes to see whatever was around her. Town house? The estate? Interesting to find out.

The surroundings were dim. Veppers was standing over her, all perfect teeth, radiantly elegant face, white mane, golden skin, wide shoulders and dramatic cloak. There was somebody else there, more felt than seen, doing something at her hip.

Dr. Sulbazghi – grizzled, brown, square of face and frame – walked into view, handing Veppers something. “Your knives, sir,” he said.

Veppers took them, inspected them. He shook his head. “Little bitch,” he breathed. “Taking these! They were—”

“Your grandfather's,” Sulbazghi said, voice rumbling. “Yes, we know.”

“Little bitch,” Veppers said, and almost chuckled. “Mind you, they were her great grandfather's before that, so you can see . . . But, still.” He slid both knives into his waistband.

Dr. Sulbazghi was squatting down now, to her left, looking at her. He put a hand to her face, wiping away some of the pale, millimetre-thick makeup she'd applied. He wiped the hand on his jacket, leaving a pale streak. It was very dim around her, dim above Dr. S, too. And their voices hardly echoed at all, as though they were standing in some enormous space.

Something didn't feel right. There was a tug at her hip; no pain at all. Jasken's pale, lean face came into view, made insectile by the Oculenses. He was squatting by her right side, still holding the rifle, the tranq dart in his other hand. It was hard to tell in the dim light with the lenses obscuring half the man's face, but it looked like he was frowning at the dart. Behind him, a scaffolding tower reached up to an enormous roofscape hanging in the dimness, its roofs oddly angled and foreshortened, its comically askew chimneys still leaking pretend smoke.

Great God, she was still in the opera house! And quickly coming to, almost undrugged, by some miracle.

"I think her eye just flickered," Veppers said, and started to lower himself towards her, cloak belling out around him. She closed her eyes quickly, shutting out the view. She felt a tremor run through her body, she half-flexed her hand and fingers and sensed that she would be able to move now if she wanted to.

"Can't have," the doctor said. "She ought to be out for hours, shouldn't she, Jasken?"

"Wait," Jasken said. "This round hit the bone. Might not have fully . . ."

"What absurd beauty," Veppers said quietly, his deep, infinitely seductive voice very, very near to her. She felt him wipe at her face as well, removing the makeup she had applied to hide her markings. "Isn't it odd. I rarely just . . . look at her this close, as a rule." *That is because, she thought calmly, when you rape me, sir, you choose to take me from behind.* She sensed his breath; a wave of warmth on her cheek.

Sulbazghi took her wrist in his chubby hand, gently probing for a pulse.

"Sir, she might not—" Jasken began.

Her eyes flicked open. She was staring into Veppers' face, immediately over hers, filling her field of vision. His eyes started to widen and an expression of alarm began to form on his fabulously smooth and perfect features. She pushed herself up and twisted her head, opening her mouth, baring her teeth and aiming for his throat.

She must have closed her eyes at the last instant but sensed him pulling up and away; her teeth crunched closed on something and Veppers shrieked. Her head was shaken back and forth as her teeth remained tight around whatever she had bitten and he tried desperately to pull himself free. “Get her off me!” he screeched, his voice strangled and nasal. She bit harder with the last of her strength and forced another anguished scream from Veppers as something tore free. Then her jaw was clamped from beneath, an iron grip causing astounding pain, and she had to let go. She could taste blood. Her head was forced back down to the floor with a painful thud and she opened her eyes to see Veppers staggering away clutching his nose and mouth; blood coursed down over his chin and shirt. Jasken was holding her head down, hands still clamped round her jaw and neck. Dr. Sulbazghi was rising from her side to go to his master.

There was something hard and grisly in her mouth, something almost too big to swallow. She forced it down all the same, gagging and sputtering; whatever it was it hesitated as it passed down her throat beneath Jasken’s clamping hands, and he might have thought to stop her swallowing, but didn’t. She grabbed a tight, wheezing breath.

“Has she—” Veppers sobbed as Sulbazghi came up to him, teasing the taller man’s hands away from his face. Veppers, staring down, cross-eyed, took a sudden breath too. “She fucking has! She’s bitten my fucking *nose* off!” he howled. Veppers pushed Sulbazghi away, sending the older man staggering, then took two steps to where she lay, held down by Jasken. She saw the knives in Veppers’ hands.

“Sir—!” Jasken said, taking one hand away from her throat and raising it towards his master. Veppers kicked Jasken aside and straddled Lededje before she could even start to rise, pinning her arms to the floor. Blood was flowing freely from his nose and spattering all over her face, neck and shirt.

*Oh, not even the whole nose, she had time to think. Just the tip. A fine, ragged mess, though. Try laughing that off at your next diplomatic reception, Prime Executive Veppers.*



He plunged the first knife into her throat and slashed sideways, the second into her chest. The second knife hit off a rib, bouncing away. Upper arms trapped, she tried as best she could to put her hands up as her breath bubbled out of her neck. The taste of blood was very strong and she needed to breathe and to cough, but could do neither. Veppers batted her hands away as he looked down and carefully aimed his next thrust a finger-width further down from the one that had been deflected. He briefly lowered his face to hers. “You little *cunt!*” he screamed. Some of his blood fell into her slackly open mouth. “I was supposed to appear in *public* this evening!”

He pushed hard and the blade slid between her ribs and into her heart.

She looked up into the darkness as her heart thrashed and jerked around the blade, as though trying to clutch it. Then her heart spasmed one last time and fell back to a sort of faintly trembling, pulseless calm for a moment. When Veppers jerked the knife out, even that ceased. A weight infinitely greater than that of just one man seemed to settle on her. She felt too tired to breathe now; her last breath fluttered from her torn-open windpipe like a departing lover. Somehow everything seemed to have gone very quiet and still around her, even though she was aware of shouting and could feel Veppers rise up and off her – though not without giving her a final slap across the face, just for good measure. She could sense the other two men were moving quickly to her side once again, touching, feeling, trying to staunch, to find a pulse, to plug her wounds.

*Too late now, she thought, . . . Meant nothing . . .*

The darkness was moving in remorselessly from the edges of her field of vision. She stared up into it, unable even to blink. She waited for some profound insight or thought, but none came.

High above her, the simulated sceneries and architectures stacked within the giant carousel swung slowly back and forth, all slowly going dim. In front of the hanging roofscape above her she could see a flat, tattered-looking mountain scene; all soaring, snowy peaks and ruggedly romantic crags beneath a cloud-dotted

sky of blue, the effect somewhat spoiled by rips and tears in the fabric and a broken lower frame.

So that was what she'd been pressed up against. Mountains. Sky.

Perspective, she thought woozily, slowly, as she died; what a wonderful thing.